

‘...And catch the heart off guard and blow it open’

A critical reflection navigating grief, loss and disappointment, to illuminate ruptures between autobiography, practices and values as a critical and care oriented adult educator

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Abbreviations

FET: Further Education and Training

LDC: Literacy Development Centre

NALA: National Adult Literacy Agency

OECD: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

PIAAC: Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies

SETU: South East Technological University

WIT: Waterford Institute of Technology

QQI: Quality and Qualifications Ireland

Abstract

This doctoral study is based on extended personal critical reflection (Freire, 1996; Mezirow, 1991; Brookfield, 1990) drawing on evocative autoethnography (Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Denzin, 2014; Fraser, 2018; McCormack et al, 2020; O'Neill, 2015) using a range of writing practices including journalling, stories and poems as well as collage (Formenti & West, 2018; Elbow, 1994; Dirkx, 2006).

The purpose of the research is to consider carefully a fundamental aspect of human experience - loss - in diverse forms, such as grief and disappointment, and how this relates to personal meaning making and transformative adult education. Early in the course of my PhD, the death of my dad and sister within six months of each other plunged me into an experience of profound grief which opened a very challenging question, an existential question, of how we can we make sense of things, of our feelings and live with a sense of purpose in the face of profound loss? This disrupted a more habitual sense of who I am, where I belong and with whom I felt safe and loved, I discovered that the navigation of grief, what to do with this sense of loss and how to respond to it, was unpredictable (Butler, 2004; Wyatt, 2010; Kelly, 2003; Sands, 2010).

Confronting and working through loss led me into a deep exploration of family experience, family literacy practices, my own values, choices and dispositions and inevitably this led me to reflect upon my working life. I am a passionate and experienced adult educator but with a particular interest in animating values, good practice, and the enabling conditions that foster transformative education (Mezirow, 1991, 2003; Dirkx, 2006; Finnegan, 2019a; Green, 2023; Illeris, 2003) as well as the politics of practice (Greene, 2000; Freire, 1996, 2004; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Fitzsimons & O'Neill, 2024). These familiar and longstanding concerns of my professional life appeared in a new light. Through writing into grief I realised there were other losses, breaks and disappointments in my professional life. I also began to understand how my abiding interest in social justice, autonomy, vitality, belonging and agency in adult education were rooted in personal and familial stories and histories.

As such, this thesis troubles easy, tidy boundaries between the public and private and explores how grief and working through grief raises questions about family stories, structures of feeling and social power. Facing and reflecting on grief also brought questions about other forms of loss and disappointment especially in professional life and the conditions that engender a sense of disconnection from practice. It explores the

dilemmas and disorientation of grief and loss as biographical and professional matters and as personal and political questions. It also asks how and in what way we can reconnect to values, hopes, loved ones and generative practices through working through loss.

These experiences cannot be rendered in a traditional way as tidy and dry research questions but there are several questions that were particularly important to my inquiry that you will encounter in this thesis. They are:

- How can I make sense of and work through the experience of grief and loss generatively, to encounter the entanglement of my relational self in the personal, professional, social and political, as a way of reconnecting with loved ones in life affirming ways and revitalise my commitment to being a critical adult educator?
- How might this particular experience, allow me to better understand transformative learning processes for myself and others?
- How might I open up the inchoate and fragmented nature of my day-to-day experience as an extended critical reflection, while also remaining sensitive to the uncertain, layered and provisional nature of transformational learning?

The doing of the research raised a complex methodological question which I seek to answer here - what sort of reflective practices are sensitive and responsive enough to reconnect us with these powerful, even overwhelming, biographical experiences? This involved an experimentation with a range of writing and some arts-based practices that have been a fundamental part of the decades of work I have done in adult education classes. I took inspiration from the “writing as inquiry approach” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, 2008; Cixous, 1997), auto/biographical research on transformative learning as holistic, embodied and psychosocial phenomenon (Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Fraser, 2018; Butterwick & Lawrence, 2023; Elbow, 1994; Dirkx, 2006; Green, 2012; Hoggan et al, 2017; Formenti & West, 2018; Mälkki, 2019) as well as Heron’s (1992) ways of knowing. This has allowed me to create imaginative critical dialogues with the evocative artefacts - journal extracts, poems and stories that offer insight into, and ways of critically reflecting on tangled, layered personal experience with its profoundly relational experiences. These various elements are synthesised into an approach to research that is informed by, and contributes to, adult education. It is perhaps best described as a critical and creative adult education methodology (West, 2016; Brookfield, 1995; Gannon, 2018) which seeks to document and understand embodied transformational shifts of being.

The research locates our grief and sense of loss as human beings, as connected to our inability to live whole-heartedly in a culture where our lives are compartmentalised into the domestic, personal, social, professional and political, which separates our adult education practices from our personhood. From a position within the psychosocial world (West, 2016; Fraser, 2018; Steedman, 1986) I go beyond some of the more prevalent concerns within critical pedagogy. I examine how ideas from psychology and transformative learning theory might be relevant in helping us, not only to understand what personal oppression and fragmentation feels like in the private intimacy of our lives and relationship, but also how we might overcome some of these personal contradictions by connecting them with the social and political.

Finally, my movement between the family, classroom and my community of adult educators where I feel recognised (West et al, 2013), has allowed me to remember more of myself, and critically examine who and what has shaped me and my relationship with myself, with others and with the world. It illuminates how the work of reclaiming my core values and sense of purpose as a critical adult educator is fundamentally a deeply relational process of trying to reclaim my selfhood (Formenti & West, 2018). I establish transformational learning as a reconfiguration of certain sets of assumptions which cluster around assumptions about the self and shame as oppressor and oppressed (Kaufmann, 1992; Freire, 1997) the dynamic interaction between my past as mediated by the present and shaping the future, as well as my reconnection with my epistemology and lived experience (Lorde, 2017; Cixous, 1997; West, 2016; Mc Cormack, 2013). These communities are explored as dialogical spaces where we feel we belong and our personal and professional dilemmas are rich learning resources (O' Neill, 2015), which directly or indirectly make us finely attuned to the lives, dreams and struggles of our students, as we encounter our own, within empathetic and emotionally responsive dialogues. From reconfigured and new meanings I have a strong sense of being reconnected to those people and values that I deeply care about, and moving towards a more emotionally freer and reflexively agentic self (Finnegan, 2019a) with new possibilities of living in better alignment with who and what really matters to me.

A map for a journey without a map

The research process was difficult and complex, often at the boundary of the sayable and moving between form and formlessness. I do not want to flatten out or oversimplify the process in presenting the research thesis but nevertheless I do think a very simple overview of the thesis may help you navigate the piece and allow you to immerse yourself in it.

Introduction: This includes five sections. ‘Rendering coherence from disparate fragments of experience’ intends to prepare the reader to be able to be simultaneously immersed in the inchoate and fragmented nature of a transformational learning process while also being guided to follow the main lines of the inquiry. It includes an overview of the research, the methodology and the overlapping threads of the inquiry. It also includes a letter to the reader which lifts me out of this particularly challenging and tumultuous period of my life, to give a sense of what I have valued and aspired to live out across my forty years of practice

Part One – Eruption: In **Chapter One**, I am exploring my shifting relationship with those values, rooted in a radical and humanist tradition of adult education (Freire, 1996, Mezirow, 1991), which has sustained me across my private and public life. I create three vignettes from the beginning, middle and towards the final years of my practice that discuss the dynamic relationship between what is going on in our lives and how we live this out in practice as an adult educator. These examine how our conviction and ability to embody and continue to revitalise these values across our lives and adult education practices, are subject to all the vagaries of how we are experiencing the world and our response to it when it does not live up to our deep desire for a better world. It is hoped that this opening section will begin to convey what has been lost, and also open a conversation about a most insidious form of loss – disappointment (Craib, 1994) as I try to begin to make sense of my disconnection and lack of purpose in my life and practice as an adult educator. It also initiates a conversation about the continuous and hard work of remaining connected to what we love and value as adult educators.

Part Two: Letting Go - The following three chapters are situated within a similar timeframe which corresponds to that period of mourning, where in conversation with grief, I am searching to locate coordinates and approaches to help me find a foothold and navigate this new world where I am at sea, and lost. This parallels my search to reframe my original PhD proposal and commit instead to an exploration of my navigation of grief.

It establishes the necessity of wandering across personal, professional, private, public, domestic and political boundaries, to illuminate the holistic vision, hard work, critical reflection and extended epistemology which is needed to develop as an adult educator committed to transformational learning. While all of the three chapters are written within relatively short intervals of each other, and refer to some shared significant experiences, each chapter is puzzling over its own concerns. **Chapter Two** is concerned with personal and professional experiences of a stubborn and subordinate knowledge that has been silenced (Freire, 1996). **Chapter Three** examines how loss and vulnerability shift my relationship with my research focus and challenges me to come out of hiding, in an auto ethnographic approach (Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Holman Jones, 2008; Gannon, 2018) and respond to the role of intuition and feeling in guiding my research (Cixous, 1997; Lorde, 2017). In **Chapter Four** I lay down the coordinates of how to position, understand and support what I am calling an adult education methodology (West, 2016, Brookfield, 1995, Gannon, 2018; Heron, 1992) embedded in critical and creative reflexivity (Lawrence, 2008, Formenti & West, 2018). This involves a writing as inquiry approach (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, 2008; Cixous, 1997), to nurture critical reflections through evocative artefacts - journal extracts, poems and stories (Formenti & West, 2018; Elbow, 1994; Dirkx, 2006; Faulkner, 2020).

Part Three: Burning off the fog brings the reader into the beating heart of the inquiry. Bereavement and grief propel me to undertake a deep exploration of the assumption that all transformational learning is deeply relational and fundamentally an act of self-realisation (Butler, 2004, Formenti & West, 2018). This sets out, in the first instance, to illuminate why learning how to be and grow in the complexity of our relationships, even those that are deceased, is one of the most important, if messy dimensions of transformational learning. There is a focus on how it enables us not only to learn from each other, but also to live with each other, in our commonalities and differences. It opens up conversations about my feelings of disappointment, guilt and loss, as my progression through mainstream education and my motivation to work in adult education disrupt my sense of belonging within my family and collides with many of the practices, values and imagined expectations and futures of a more traditional working-class background. This opens an extended conversation about how our literacy practices are implicated in our ability to question, challenge and imagine a different future or holds us in silence (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Barton et al, 2007; Hamilton, 2020). There is an ambivalence towards these relationships which nurtured me. **Chapter Five** draws on fragments of documents

I have found in my dad's wallet after his death, to generate critical reflections with him and with a colleague. From this position, I untangle family stories about how it was for him growing up, his experiences of school, unmet literacy needs and employment. This allows me to explore how our social positioning as a family shaped restrained and shaped my meanings and motivation to work as an adult educator within the radical humanist tradition. **Chapter Six** illuminates richly sensory experiences and memories from my personal and professional life, extends Mezirow's (1991) model of transformational learning, into one slow embodied transformational process (Butterwick & Lawrence, 2023; Green, 2012; Mälkki, 2019; Hoggan et al, 2017). This is a process of disentangling the emerging self from shame (Kaufmann, 1992) as the oppressor within (Freire, 1996), which insidiously mediates our sense of intimacy, in our relationships with our self and family, authoritative figures of power and in my case with my colleagues and students. In **Chapter Seven**, I return again to the question of dying, but this time it is a question of how we can engage in a transformative process to move beyond the deadening grip of feeling stuck, not as an individual, but as a member of the working-class (Finnegan, 2019a) towards a life of vitality and purpose (Freire & Horton, 1990; Lorde, 2017) by reconnecting to our lived and felt experiences. This considers the dangerous and risky business of how we imagine what it is that we hope to change (Green, 2023), and what we will lose and what we might gain, in that process, in our search for love, connection and recognition.

Part Four brings a sense of arrival and setting off again by way of a conclusion. Now there is a renewed vigour, insights, questions and dreams, emerging from those concerns that were threaded through the inquiry as I move from my family, into the classroom and into my learning communities. In **Chapter Eight** I create a triptych of three scenarios, which together tell a story of coming home to myself, as a daughter, adult educator, colleague and scholar practitioner, in terms of an overall transformative shift of living in closer alignment with what I really care about. This is nurtured within the support of holistic, empathetic and critically reflective dialogues within my pedagogical communities. The first two scenarios tell a story of living, working and loving within my peer adult educator and student community as a pedagogical space, where we can resist fragmentation and demoralisation. The final story is a repositioning of my relationship with my mam and dad which brings a new layer of ease and clarity between us where the collusion with an internal oppressor is interrupted.

*...Useless to think that you'll park and capture it
More thoroughly. You are neither here nor there,
A hurry through which known and strange things pass
As big soft buffetings come at the car sideways
And catch the heart off guard and blow it open.
(Heaney, 1996, p. 70)*

INTRODUCTION

Surprise beginnings
Quivering like moss
Conceal their dark moist underbelly.

Rendering coherence from disparate fragments of experience

This inquiry was ‘lived’ over six years, and became a period of intense immersion as I followed my intuitive hunches and impulses of how to navigate this world of grief and loss. My experience of exploring my own life as the focus of research is one of swimming in deep and turbulent waters for most of this process. But there was always an inexplicable sense of conviction, that if I listened to the research and picked up on those subtle and often synchronistic clues, they would suggest what I needed to attend to next. The biggest challenge for the inquiry was gaining an overview of those puzzles that constituted the focus of the inquiry, and brought coherence to fragments of experience that did not line up into self-contained themes or lines of inquiry. I will say more about these later.

One of the more surprising and uplifting outcomes of this inquiry is the lived discovery that using creative expression to meet my vulnerable self could be trusted. By this, I mean capturing fragmented experiences from my past and present, and engaging with them as artefacts (i.e., poetry, collage, story, and extracts from reflective journals). These were often accompanied by a transformational shift of feeling less ‘stuck’, or at best, a readiness to move forward in a new and more hopeful way. There was often a sense of coming more fully into myself, which was accompanied by a feeling of being seen more completely by those who supported me through the research process. I must acknowledge the role of my supervisor, Dr. Fergal Finnegan; the National University of Ireland, Maynooth (NUIM) supervisors for the PhD peer supervision, and my PhD peers and my critical friends who created experiences of listening and responding to me. These contributed significantly to helping me to grow closer towards who I might be, if I could trust more of who I was, and where I had come from.

As I recalled and documented my experiences, I was primarily concerned with questions about how to access and represent this process as honestly as possible, and was not concerned at that time, with how it would become part of a whole. The process and the content were often interchangeable, as the process becomes the content and the content drives and shapes the process. This fusion created an ongoing struggle to find ways of holding onto this rawness and uncertainty, which does not pretend that I knew from the

outset where I was going, without rendering the text muddled and impenetrable to the reader.

I intend that as a reader you will be immersed in the immediacy and uncertainty of the chaotic nature of 'lived experience', while not losing sight of the particular conversations, which they are contributing to. Therefore, I have created this first section to help you, the reader, to see the connections and the big arc of these explorations of random experiences. I hope to give you an overview of the research, the methodology, the puzzles or knots that emerged as the component parts of the inquiry, and finally to explain what underpins my practice as a critical adult educator practitioner-researcher.

Exploring ethics as an adult education practice

This type of extended critical reflection on personal and professional experience brings up very profound ethical dilemmas, which had to be worked through on an ongoing basis. This raised questions about what is genuinely authentic, what is accurate, what is shared, what is private and the ethics of working through these and representing how I worked through them.

I found that as an adult educator the demands of working with students and colleagues in an ethical way, shared many similarities with working as a researcher. Like O'Neill (2015), I realised that as an adult educator I regarded "ethics as a practice" (p. 388), which was not too different to how we direct and make sense of our activities as an adult educator. We are used to negotiating with our core values as radical and humanistic adult educators, to make sense of how we construct, navigate and sustain our relationships with our students, as well as go about our work in general. We draw on a similar moral compass and process, in our learning spaces as well as in our research spaces. This means being emotionally responsive to the complexity and nuance of the lives we meet on a day-to-day basis and underpinning our decisions and behaviour with fairness, love, compassion and respect. This meant a commitment to embed into the whole methodological process of the inquiry, a careful balancing act between what I wanted to say, the potential harmful impact on myself and others and whether I had the right to say it. There are ongoing explicit conversations about ethical issues, woven through the entire research process within the context that they arise, as I could not regard it as a self-contained unit of the research.

Overview of the research

This inquiry takes the form of an extended critical reflection, (Brookfield, 1995; Mezirow, 1991; Freire, 1996; hooks, 1994; Greene, 2000) drawing on evocative autoethnography (Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Denzin, 2014; Fraser, 2018; McCormack et al, 2020) and a range of writing practices. My thesis explores my experience of grief, loss, and disappointment and how these processes can be understood, and productively worked through, in relation to transformative adult education.

As mentioned earlier my lifelong commitment to pedagogy and transformative education which was shaped and informed by the field, raised many questions, including questions about the complexity of how we view practitioners, good practice, putting our values into practice and the enabling conditions which support the transformative learning process (Mezirow, 1991; Illeris, 2003; Dirkx, 2006; Green, 2023; Finnegan, 2019a) as well as the politics of practice (Greene, 2000; Freire, 1996, 2004; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Finnegan, 2019b; Fitzsimons & O'Neill, 2024) for ourselves and our students. But contrary to my original intention, it resisted any attempt that I made to conduct it in a traditional manner. I discovered that the navigation of grief, what to do with this sense of loss and how to respond to it, was unpredictable (Butler, 2004; Wyatt, 2010; Kelly, 2003; Sands, 2010).

The experience of profound grief presented me with a very challenging question, an existential question, how can we make sense of things and of our feelings in the face of profound loss? This disrupted a more habitual sense of who I am, where I belong and with whom do I feel safe and loved. This set in motion a series of searching questions about how I shape and am shaped within my relationship with others, institutions and society, and how all of this informs my work as a critical adult educator. I could no longer lean on a set of cut and dried questions, tidy and ordered about the purpose and nature of transformational learning, which I had developed in a proposal, and intended to answer with my peers. Instead, the thesis seeks to evoke an intimate critical reflection on my own navigation of grief as a type of learning process that is potentially transformative.

This in turn raised a methodological question which I seek to answer here – what sort of reflective practices are sensitive and responsive enough to reconnect us with these powerful, even overwhelming, biographical experiences which do not lend themselves very readily to language and dialogue. I knew that it would not be enough to tell stories, just as an emotional release. It was essential that it should generate learning and the hope

of sparking changes that might help myself and others to live better, more compassionately and joyfully.

I adopt a writing as inquiry approach and experiment with ways of writing reflectively into on specific disorientating dilemmas (Mezirow, 1991; Freire, 1996), which appeared as 'heart-bursting moments', selected from my life and classroom. This took the form of capturing, through a diverse range of writing practices, haunting experiences that had originally intended to be captured through poetry, but as I let the research process guide me, I drew on collage, story, dreams, significant personal possessions, and dance. But these different forms of writing into experience shared my hunger to discover what I did not know, what I knew, but did not realise that I knew, or what I was trying to resolve (Holman Jones, 2016; Richardson & Adams St. Pierre, 2008; Cixous, 1997). My experience within an oppressive working-class culture allowed for a deep immersion in different ways of knowing and encountering our experience, through cycles of Freirean reflection or consciousness raising of the external forces that shape our lives (Freire, 1996; Hook, 1994; O'Brien, 2013; Heron, 1992, 2008; Greene, 2000; Lawrence, 2012; Lorde, 2017). This was complimented by drawing on psychology and transformational learning theory to embrace a wider psychosocial framework (Formenti & West, 2018; Green, 2023; Finnegan, 2019a; Mezirow, 1991; Craib, 1994; Boler, 1999; Kaufman, 1992) which allows me to make sense out of our internal lived experience as well as our experience with external reality.

On the basis that there can be no transformative learning without significant shifts in feelings and in orientation, that is "caused by challenges experienced as urgent and unavoidable" (Illeris, 2003, p. 402), it seemed appropriate to extend the more cognitive led approach of Mezirow's (1991) model of transformative learning. The spontaneous and unpredictable way in which I found myself evoking metaphors and emotionally laden images and intuitions which open me up to all of myself (my body, my conscious and sub-conscious mind, feelings and cognitive insights) (Dirkx, 2006; Butterwick & Lawrence, 2023), was one of the more surprising and unexpected aspects of the inquiry. This process eventually led me to three overlapping and inextricably linked concerns or puzzles.

- How can I make sense of and work through the experience of grief and loss generatively, to encounter the entanglement of my relational self in the personal, professional, social and political, as a way of reconnecting with loved ones in life affirming ways and revitalise my commitment to being a critical adult educator?

- How might this particular experience, allow me to better understand transformative learning processes for myself and others?
- How might I open up the inchoate and fragmented nature of my day-to-day experience as an extended critical reflection, while also remaining sensitive to the uncertain, layered and provisional nature of transformational learning?

The framing of these questions is connected with the desire to understand how we might engage with these complex questions in a way, which allows us to reduce the gap between what we value and care about and how we behave in relation to ourselves, others and our practices as an adult educator.

Reflecting on these questions strengthened my conviction, as a reflective practitioner, that the personal and professional are intertwined in complex ways, and in ways that we often do not acknowledge and which try to separate our practices as adult educators from our personhood. Therefore, these concerns emerged in a profound sense as both personal and professional. The disorientating period of grief, particularly after the death of my father and sister within close proximity of each other, marked the end of my childhood family and took me by surprise, as I experienced an overwhelming sense of disconnection and loss of purpose across all aspects of my life. It fuels a sustained interest in moving over and back, between my work as an adult educator and significant biographical experiences of being in the world, an activity that is often dismissed as irrelevant for supporting the growth and development of critical adult educators. These are the fundamental experiences of loss and grief that I embodied, while being deeply concerned by the question of how good practice can be sustained collectively in Irish adult education.

Facing and reflecting on grief also troubled other forms of loss and disappointment (Craib, 1994) within my own experience, and in my professional life. Searching to make some sense of these losses and the palpable sense of disappointment that shadowed me, troubles the easy, tidy boundaries between the public and private. This leads me to explore how grief and working through grief raises questions about family stories, belonging, social power and relationships as well as the value of empowering literacy practices. The exploration of disconnection and loss, from both the perspective of a daughter, sister and a scholar-practitioner, enables me to privilege and value a private form of practitioner knowledge, which does not often appear within the public domain. They appear in part to be connected to a sense of loss for parts of myself and my working class experiences, from

which I have unwittingly disconnected. This has echoes with a more general weariness and erosion of core values, which arose from a lifelong yearning to hold onto and embed Freire's concept of becoming more fully human as our ontological vocation, across my life and work while navigating the diverse conditions that create a sense of disconnection from practice. Therefore, it explores the dilemmas and disorientation of grief and loss, as biographical and professional matters and as personal and political questions. It also asks how and in what way we can reconnect to values, hopes, loved ones and generative practices through, working through loss.

Finally, I hope that this research will support practitioners to reconnect to what we care about in our world and in our learning spaces, and to feel inspired to continue to build our networks and communities of practice. Not only for what they might deliver in terms of valuable outcomes, but also because it is a way of living, which can allow us to flourish as human beings, with resilience, joy and compassion, and support our commitment to generating hope for ourselves and those we live and work with.

Building a methodology: Practitioner experience, experiment and scholarship

There was an ongoing struggle to find ways to encounter experience, and then to represent it in a way that did not sanitise its complexity. This meant trying to find a 'new language' through collage, poetry or story and journalling to harness my deeply embodied and intuitive ways of knowing, to represent experience that was often at the limits of language.

Throughout this doctoral study I turn to ideas of praxis (Freire, 1987), humanism (Freire, 1996), transformative learning (Green, 2012; Formenti & West, 2018; Finnegan, 2019a; Dirkx, 2006) and ways of knowing (Heron, 1996). I examine disorientating and limiting patterns of experience, as well as draw on lenses of theorists for critical reflection (Freire, 1996, 1987, 2021; Mezirow, 1991; Greene, 2000) including Brookfield's (1995) four lenses. These helped me to frame this as an adult education methodology, embedded in critical and creative reflexivity, influenced by the tradition of critical evocative autoethnography (Adams et al, 2022; Holman Jones, 2008; Tamas, 2009). My intention is to go beyond a reflection on the what of experience, to try to understand the why of what may lay behind it, in order to grasp a more complete sense of things. I had relied upon these ideas in my teaching practices, to explore with students how to generate important knowledge from our subjective experience, through critical dialogue and reflection. It seemed appropriate to draw on them to help me to examine my own life. This framework of ideas discussed

above which suggests possibilities for growth and change by renaming the world through intelligent understanding, emotionally responsive, and more satisfying connections with ourselves, others and our environment, underpinned the research process. It became an iterative process between myself as the researcher and my lived and dreamed experience as the focus of the research. Drawing on a range of embodied and emotional writing practices to burrow into experience, enabled me to examine the nature of internal and external restraints and constraints, with the hope of identifying glimpses of agency to transform my inner and outer worlds. In line with critical feminist autoethnographers (Holman Jones, 2018; Lorde, 2017; Tamas, 2009), this doctoral study explores how as adult educators we might reclaim those formative experiences located within the intimate and domestic spaces of our biography, from which we have become marginalised, silenced or disconnected, which also inform our growth and development as adult educators. Such deeply human work inevitably surfaces experiences which are often overwhelming and at the limits of language. I was therefore compelled to search for a new metaphorical language (Butler, 2004; Biffi & Zuccoli, 2016) which could disrupt my habitual response to the world (Greene, 1995, 2000). This aligned with my interest in multimodal learning, which involved a substantial amount of experimentation over many years, to integrate Heron's (1992) ideas into my practice as an adult educator. The practices and processes that emerged allowed me to hover, and move between the presentational and the propositional (Heron, 1992) to enrich my critically reflective modes of practice.

The methodology emerged by paying close attention to a series of specific disorientating dilemmas (Mezirow, 1991) which appeared as 'heart bursting moments'. I reflect on how each chapter can be considered as a method and as a methodology, as the writing practices which I develop to write into experience constitute the research, as they engage with and are informed by the ontological and epistemological questions about how we want to live in the world, and whose knowledge and ways of knowing count and can be encountered. I wanted to find a way of drawing attention to those experiences that have been silenced, distorted or are incapable of being rendered through more traditional ways of knowing.

Within this inquiry, you will find a range of different writing practices that I developed and adapted from my teaching practices. In order to deepen my engagement with these processes and heighten my reflexivity and criticality in this doctoral study, I develop reflective writing practices that can be loosely categorised as journal reflections, poetry and stories. In addition to haikus, you will find a range of poetry and stories evoked from my personal journal. As well as reflective extracts, there are imaginative recreations of stories

told by family members, composite pedagogical experiences and dialogues with composite students from my classrooms reworked imaginatively as stories. There are reflections on

which continue to surface for my attention throughout the inquiry. It is hoped that by drawing on a wider psychosocial framework, the research will not only explore the subjective, within the context of the wider historical and social practices that we are dynamically interacting with (West, 2016; Boler, 1999), but also those particularities of our own unique lives that can be held in common with others, but which we can also experience as that which holds us apart, which in this case is explored through personal disappointment and shame (Craib, 1994; Kaufman, 1992) with an interest on how we might navigate these within a transformational learning process (Green, 2012; Finnegan, 2020); Formenti & West, 2018; Mezirow, 1991; Butterwick & Lawrence, 2023). This involved trying to achieve a balance between drawing on a strong and evocative autoethnographic tradition of letting the story do as much work as possible, while also drawing on the perspective of Freirean critical reflection to illuminate the stories towards the exposure of feeling and social power. This meant going behind the immediate explanations to consider why we are doing what we do, who is gaining and losing from these attitudes or actions and why we make the choices that we make.

Therefore like West (2016), I am drawing on the spirit of Mills, and linking “big historical trends with the most intimate of experience, the institutional worlds we encounter with the dynamics of families and inner worlds, structure and structuring processes with moments of agency” (West, 2016, p. 44), while also providing some new ways to think about grief and our relationship with those whom we have loved and lost.

The research also goes beyond the foregrounding of the rational and analytical in Mezirow’s model of critical reflection and extends it by using our imagination which allows us to encounter our subconscious through a language which is mediated not by the rational self but by one’s imagination; it is constituted by “feelings, fantasises and emotion-laden images” (Dirkx, 2006, p. 31) which gives us other ways of learning about ourselves and our teaching.

This ongoing, dynamic interaction between experience, feelings, intuitive insights, images and critical reflection were essentially one integrated process, for helping me to find a vantage point, from which I could get past the stranglehold of grief and begin to gain an overall grasp of what could be learned from this process across my personal and professional life.

I hope that this methodology can be drawn upon pedagogically by adult educators, who wish to delve into how generating poems, collages, metaphors or stories can serve to

(re)connect them to significant life experiences and the experience of their learners as part of critically reflective and sometimes transformative learning. I know that when I embarked on this project, I relished and drew heavily on those writers (Hunt, 2001; Lorde, 2017; Cixous, 1997; McCormack, 2014; Fraser, 2018; O'Neill, 2015) who dwelled on the precarious and obscure nature of knowledge making.

What are the central threads of the inquiry?

- How might I open up the inchoate and fragmented nature of my day-to-day experience as an extended critical reflection, while also remaining sensitive to the uncertain, layered and provisional nature of transformational learning?

The focus of my PhD took an unexpected leap, when I realised that my personal journaling about my recent experiences of bereavement, was inextricably linked to my journaling about the loss of meaning and purpose in my professional life. I do not want the reader to lose sight of the reality, that this inquiry was exploring real dilemmas that I cared deeply about. This meant following the pace and process of a transformative learning journey, lived in a real-time framework over six years, including two bereavements, and an international pandemic, with incremental shifts of discovery and awareness, which are commented upon as they are being experienced in that moment of time.

The decision to explore my navigation of grief meant that I was opening up my biography, including the whole inchoate and fragmented nature of day-to-day experience as a potential focus for the research. This raised a number of challenging questions about how to manage this process. One of the initial concerns was about what experiences, or aspects of experience, I should pay attention to and what I should ignore, if I wanted to get an overall sense of how I was moving forward, backwards or stagnating. I discuss a process of letting go of more cognitively led approaches for planning, and instead opening myself up to a process of trust which invited me to remain alert to feelings intuitions and synchronistic clues which sign posted those generative experiences which aroused my curiosity and created entry points for the inquiry. The journey towards meaning involved paying attention to the emotional and cognitive micro-shifts, which suggested new perspectives and new questions about troubling problems, which gradually began to deepen and connect as one conversation.

One of the more challenging aspects of creating the thesis was a struggle with how to create a structure which was an inquiry into a living process in real time, but which moved continuously between the present and the past, through the imagination. The thesis is written within a temporal space where there is hope that the future may become a set of possibilities, when the present has been unlocked from the fixed narrative of the past. This raised tricky issues about temporality, as one self is in conversation with a self that is trying to emerge from the past. This creates what Bochner (2000) refers to as the “tale of two selves; a believable journey from who I was to who I am” (p. 270). This created new questions about how to organise this organic process as a coherent whole, while also remaining sensitive to the uncertain, layered and provisional nature of transformational learning that is unpredictable, if it occurs at all.

True to the nature of transformational learning, glimpses of insight or meaning are not introduced, explored and tidied away in a manner that suggests that they have been sufficiently dealt with. Many of the themes and experiences, for example my experience of shame within an academic community, or my experience of writing poetry as a way of knowing, will be returned to throughout the research, as I deepen my understanding of how these individual moments of insight become connected, to create a more coherent focus of inquiry which weave my personal and professional life together. This is not to be mistaken for unnecessary repetition, but instead tries to capture the process of coming into knowing, which is not in a static state and does not arrive fully formed, like a shaft of light from heaven. Instead, over time it begins with a coming into awareness and then is revisited in different social and relational contexts, from different perspectives, to continue to reveal new meanings and connections.

The complexity of trying to build a sense of progression from such an unpredictable process is raised from a view of knowledge, which is neither static, nor stable. In the end, the structure of the thesis followed the chronological order in which I encountered and worked through the emotions, themes and perplexing experiences that emerged as I moved through the transformative learning journey in real time. Therefore, in order to preserve some of the rawness and authenticity of this experience, for the reader, I decided not to edit versions of earlier chapters in a way that may misleadingly create the impression that I was following a predetermined plan. Instead, I allowed the twists, turns and surprises of this process, to emerge to the reader as they unfolded to me. It became a process of inquiry that emerges in incremental shifts and often loops back on itself. As is often the

case with biographical research, there are combinations of shifts in feelings or knowing or being in relationships, with a continuous revisiting of these biographical moments, which do not culminate in a fixed narrative. Instead, there is a layering of old narratives and perspectives, which sit alongside new possibilities that are continuously in a conversation with each other in an iterative process (Sands, 2010). This is in keeping with my understanding of our ontological vocation to become more fully human, which is always incomplete and provisional, as there is always more to learn (Freire, 1996).

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- How can I make sense of and work through the experience of grief and loss generatively, to encounter the entanglement of my relational self in the personal, professional, social and political, as a way of reconnecting with loved ones in life affirming ways and revitalise my commitment to being a critical adult educator?

I explore how every experience of grief is unique, accentuates our sense of vulnerability and essentially dismantles us; our sense of security, belonging, purpose and leaves us alone with the search for what we have lost. These questions and the accompanying search for meaning which are characteristic of disorientating dilemmas, also signpost that vulnerability is an essential dimension of transformational learning and may bring the possibility of change (Anderson Sathe, 2020). This is a change which can allow teachers and students alike, to use our imagination to gain a reflective stance on our past life stories and their meaning, that allows us to “grasp and understand what is now going on around us” (Greene, 2000, p. 20). It also allows us to move from the fixed habits and structures that socialized us into identifying what emotions we are entitled to feel, and demonstrate and share with others in our learning spaces (Boler, 1999). In addition, it creates the possibility for imaginative empathy with others, which can be a starting point for building a vision of what needs to change in our classroom practices, and in our communities, which mirror many of the deficiencies of our society (Larriveé, 2000).

We must be prepared to turn our gaze on our bi766.44 Tmēs.

narrative needs to be “ongoing and open ended” (p. 117). As I work through grief, I create critical conversations with the deceased, which raise questions about belonging and disconnection, agency and vitality, disappointment, as well as oppressive experiences of subordinating literacy practices (Freire & Macedo, 1987) which constrain our ability to retrieve our lived experiences from a muffled and oppressive silence and take control of them. This influences my understanding of what it means to be a critical adult educator as I explore how our current choices and imagined futures are shaped by our position in society, which in turn, influence and are influenced by our exposure to and fluency in these very different forms of literacy practices. The research argues for recognition for those literacy practices which equip us to dream, yearn, challenge, refuse and demand to become more or to stay stuck in a world that is a given (Barton et al, 2007). This sparks conversations about the necessity as critical adult educators, to acknowledge dark and difficult emotions like disappointment, loss, death, shame, and anger. These have the potential to erode our ability to remain convinced about our agency to create something better than what we are individually or collectively experiencing, and can present in us as conflict, when we must try to hold a hopeful space for our students. In turn, this raises questions about our limited ability as adult educators to discuss those more vulnerable aspects of our own lived and felt realities within our learning spaces, even though we aspire to create spaces in which our students can make such a leap in order to live better in a world that is full of grief and loss. The impossibility of doing this work by ourselves sparks a conversation about how our communities of practice might support our resilience, growth and hope, which is essential if we are to become more fully human and alive, and bring this vitality and conviction into our learning spaces.

- How might this particular experience, allow me to better understand transformative learning processes for myself and others?

The inquiry emerges as an opportunity to live within the process of navigating an urgent real life dilemma, to examine grief as a potentially transformative learning process.

This is underpinned by the assumption that as critical educators we are ethically obliged to examine our own transformative learning process. I adopt this response primarily as a necessity to try to reorientate myself out of a fog of grief, but also to better understand how to support this unpredictable, fragmented but potentially revitalising process, in my learning spaces. I consider that the purpose of transformational learning is ultimately viewed as a reclamation of selfhood, a self that “is not over psychologised, but deeply

embodied, forged in relationships; it is developmental rather than fixed, contingent on others and their/our responsiveness” (Formenti & West, 2018, p. 268). This becomes a place from which we can begin to understand those external forces which dehumanise ourselves and others, with an empathy which fuels our desire to expose and undo those taken-for-granted assumptions that keep us from recognising or challenging manifestations of social injustice.

I experiment with diverse reflective writing practices, embedded in creative and cultural reflexivity. This creates artefacts that can allow me to embrace a psychosocial perspective, which is essentially journeying inwards and outwards to read social practices and narratives that create multiple possibilities and perspectives for the self to grow and change towards greater coherence. I experience these as flashes of authenticity. I also explore how the very act of writing into our experience from a position of curiosity and openness, unlocks complex emotional portals and intuitive insights, which are often at the limits of language, but are associated with those micro-shifts in the transformational learning process when we are growing and expanding our sense of possibilities in our lives.

My desire was to respond to the fragmented and often chaotic nature of our lived day-to-day lives, by drawing on Freire’s concept “to exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it” (Freire, 1996, p. 69). I also draw deliberate attention to the psychosocial and historical dimension to meaning-making, which illustrates that all of our knowing is of course fragmented, limited and incomplete. The inquiry foregrounds this aspect of knowledge, in order to celebrate Freire’s (1996) imperative to us, that our ontology as human beings is to continue to embrace the challenges and beauty of our search to know more about ourselves, each other and our world, in emotionally responsive critical dialogue with each other. In other words, it is a search that enables us to become more fully human and is never completed.

There is a real difficulty in finding the words that can capture this knowing in a way that has the feel of me about it. Much of the language that comes most easily is tainted by voices, which minimise or trivialise this knowing. Therefore it was essential to break the silence with a new ‘language’ that erupts from feelings and imagery in order to truly find my own words and break from those names which disconnected my feelings from my thoughts and behaviours, from my lived experiences, past and present. It became essential to explore different models of transformational learning (Dirkx, 2006; Formenti & West, 2018; Butterwick & Lawrence, 2023) that consider how we can extend the more cognitive

led approach to critical reflection suggested by Mezirow (1991). The use of poetry, metaphor, collage story, dream and dance opened a process which was not only travelling inwards and through time, but also belonged to a genre of writing which finds it “necessary to scrutinise not only the truth of what we speak, but the truth of that language by which we speak it” (Lorde, 2017, p. 4). This allowed me to keep checking if I was remaining true to my intention to use writing as inquiry into those visceral pre-language experiences in the world, which hold our intuitive and hidden knowledge and help us to reclaim language that has “been made to work against us” (p. 4). It allowed me to move with more awareness between Heron’s (1992) understanding of imaginal and affective “presentational knowledge” (p. 165) and analytical and rational knowledge or “propositional knowledge” (p. 169). This helped me to gradually reclaim what I term as subordinate ways of knowing, such as feelings, intuitions and images, which connect us to the emotionally laden images of our subconscious renderings of the world. I refer to subordinate knowledge, as those ways of knowing which are structurally invalidated by dominant groups, who try to silence, distort or disconnect us from it, because of its potential to destabilise and expose imbalances of social power (Freire, 1996).

The spiral of this journey that was moving forwards and then back onto itself, brought me to explore a number of stories about loss and disappointment through my reconnection with my working class parents where I search to name some of the difficult unacknowledged experiences such as intergenerational shame, as well as those core values of decency, compassion and empathy. This sparks conversations about my practice, and my search to become more fully myself and more aligned with what I truly value. This gave me a renewed and more intimate understanding of the relationship between Freire’s concept of challenging oppressive internalised narratives and transformational learning, which brings a sense of restoration, reconnection belonging which may not challenge the external structures of oppression, but which bring revitalisation across my life and particularly into my practices as an adult educator (Fleming et al, 2019).

A conversation between critical pedagogy and transformational learning - Feeling our way into oppression

My search for meaning and purpose in my life, which is not an abstraction, involves grappling with my relational selves across my biography, acknowledging the private and the public as inextricably linked, positions this doctoral study within biographical life studies (West, 2016; Fraser, 2018; Steedman, 1986). It examines existential questions about how critical adult educators (Freire, 1987; hooks; 1994; Liston & Garrison, 2004) might

aspire to build a fairer, more compassionate world, where everyone can love, live and work in a more integrated and meaningful way, while navigating the inevitability of loss and disappointment in various forms, as life does not work out as we had hoped (Craib, 1994).

I consider that part of our grief and sense of loss as human beings, is connected to our inability to live wholeheartedly in a culture where we are manipulated to carve up and compartmentalise the domestic, personal, social, professional and political dimensions of our lives. My navigation of grief establishes the necessity of wandering across all of these boundaries as interconnected and as such enables me to resist the fragmentation of my practice as an adult educator from my personhood (West, 2016). Drawing on an interdisciplinary psychosocial framework enabled me to examine the dynamic interaction between intimate subjectivities of how we feel and behave towards each other, and how this is shaped by our entanglement in historical trends, institutions and structural forces (West, 2016; Formenti & West, 2018; Finnegan, 2019a) as a working-class family, with no way of naming or talking about these experiences (Crowther & Martin, 2005). The emotional fulcrum for the doctoral study is an encounter with an internalised oppressive silence, shaped by an intergenerational shame (Kaufmann, 1992) which brings my experience of growing up within my working-class family into the public sphere, to explore how our meanings are restrained and shaped by our social position so that we become our own oppressor and oppressed (Freire, 1996; hooks, 1994). But I go beyond some of the more prevalent concerns within critical pedagogy, to examine how ideas about shame (Kaufmann, 1992) and transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1990; Määlki, 2019; Green, 2012, 2023) might be relevant in helping us to understand what personal oppression feels like in our lives, relationships, and the banality of the everyday. These are matters of deep concern to me and by drawing on a psychosocial framework, it allows me to better understand how we might overcome some of our personal contradictions, by connecting them with the political (Freire, 2021, Butterwick & Lawrence, 2023).

A tilt towards an enriched form of an adult education methodology – generating metaphorical language to push past the limits of language

In responding to the challenge of generating significant knowledge from our subjective experience, the thesis generates methodological innovation in terms of biographical research. Drawing on ideas of praxis, (Freire, 1987) humanism, (Freire, 1996) transformative learning, (Green, 2012, Formenti & West, 2018; Finnegan, 2019a, Dirkx, 2006) and ways of knowing (Heron, 1996), I examine disorientating and limiting patterns of experience, through lenses of theorists for critical reflection (Freire, 1996, 1987, 2021;

Mezirow, 1991; Greene, 2000) including Brookfield's (1995) four lenses. This creates what I call a critical and creative adult education methodology, constituted by a triad of experience, writing as inquiry practices and critical reflection. This framework of ideas created a slow emotionally embodied transformational learning process, with significant biographical shifts and growth as it entered conversations with both internal and external oppressive forces. It tests out the hopes and challenges of growth and change by renaming the world through intelligent understanding, emotionally responsive, and more satisfying connections with ourselves, others and our environment. The boundary between the private and public as well as across academic disciplines is transgressed, as the research became an iterative process between myself as the researcher and my lived and dreamed experience as the focus of the research. In line with critical feminist autoethnographers, (Holman Jones, 2018; Lorde, 2017; Tamas, 2009), this doctoral study contributes an experimentation in how as adult educators, we might reclaim those formative experiences located within the intimate and domestic spaces of our biography, from which we have become marginalised, silenced or disconnected, and discusses how they become essential for our growth and development as adult educators and in this study inform the shape that the methodology becomes.

In order to access experiences, which are at the limits of language, there is a search for a new metaphorical language, which could disrupt my habitual response to the world (Greene, 1995, 2000; Biffi & Zuccoli, 2016) and enter into those visceral pre-language experiences that hold our intuitive and hidden knowledge (Lorde, 2017). This aligned with my interest in multimodal learning, to integrate Heron's (1992) ideas into my practice as an adult educator. The practices and processes that emerged allowed me to hover between the presentational and the propositional (Heron, 1992) and are discussed in detail throughout the study to open up this methodology to other practitioners. In order to deepen my engagement with these processes and heighten my reflexivity and criticality, I developed a range of reflective writing practices. These practices included haikus and a wide range of poetry, stories evoked from my personal journal, as well as reflective extracts, imaginative recreations of stories told by family members, composite pedagogical experiences and dialogues with composite students from my classrooms (some of which are reworked imaginatively with a metaphorical character or landscape), reflections on collage making, movement and dreams, as well as imaginative letters, and finally imaginative conversations with my deceased mam and dad mediated through personal memorabilia. I refer to this range of written texts collectively as evocative artefacts, which

can be loosely categorised as journal reflections, poetry and stories, with their varied inspirational sources. There is an intentional fluidity between the reflections, stories and poems which is intrinsic to the methodology as my writing crosses boundaries between these different forms, particularly between poetry and story. As I continued to craft poems and evocative stories (Leavy, 2020, 2005, 2020; Prendergast 2009) throughout the inquiry, I concentrated on some of the shared practices to strengthen both genres, in so far as both writing practices draw on metaphors and attempt to suggest and infer rather than explain and expose.

A view of transformational learning as a reflexively agentic process negotiated between the private and public space

My movement from the family into the classroom and finally into my peer adult educator and student communities, has allowed me to remember more of myself, and critically examine who and what has shaped me and my relationship with myself, others and the world. I represent transformational learning as a reconfiguration of certain sets of assumptions, in the presence of people with whom we can be vulnerable, and feel safe, seen and heard. (Mezirow, 1990, 1991; West et al, 2013; O'Brien, 2013). This research explored ways to reconfigure assumptions about self and shame, which implicate us in our own oppression (Freire, 1996, 1987; Kaufmann, 1992) the dynamic interaction between my past as mediated by the present, to interrupt its trajectory towards a more revitalising future, (West, 2016, Finnegan, 2019a; Sands & Bochner, 2010, McCormack et al, 2020) and my previously unexamined disconnection from my epistemology and my lived experience (Freire, 1996; Lorde, 2017). The research opens up for scrutiny the basis upon which I frame the reclamation of my core values and sense of purpose as a critical adult educator, as fundamentally a deeply relational process of trying to reclaim my selfhood. This illuminates why learning how to be and grow in the complexity of our relationships, even those that are deceased, is one of the most important, if messy dimensions of transformational learning which is ongoing and open-ended (Formenti & West, 2018; Sands & Tennant, 2010; West, 2013). There is an explicit effort to open up for scrutiny, a messy, slow and incremental embodied process, of feeling, thinking and imagining our way out of stagnant and diminishing ways of being to a lighter way of being (Butterwick & Lawrence, 2023; Green, 2012; Finnegan 2020; Hoggan et al, 2016). This illuminates ways that encountering our most debilitating emotions can prepare the ground for critical thinking, generating new meanings, and potential transformation of being (Mälkki, 2019). I align myself with transformational biographical work, where the old stories have not been erased, but they co-exist alongside more emotionally satisfying ones, in tune with my

whole being (Sands & Tennant, 2010). The doctoral study allows me to untangle the personal from the political, to discover within the intimacy of my family, a good enough, if imperfect love (Formenti & West, 2018) towards ourselves and each other, but more importantly some new perspectives on what is, and is not of our making. This means loosening the deadening grip of the past, towards a more emotionally freer and agentic self with new possibilities of living in better alignment with who and what really matters to me. This builds an argument that critical reflection on our biography and our own internalised oppressions must be considered as an important part of our professional development as critical adult educators, so that we are better positioned to challenge unjust internal and external structures, which reproduce discrimination and social injustice in our engagement with our students. It considers that this process is enriched by our willingness to re-examine our connection with our epistemology and lived experience. It also argues for the recognition of the undervalued and continuous role of our adult educator and student communities in sustaining our resilience and growth, behind the scenes, within emotionally responsive and dialogical spaces (O'Neill, 2015). The study suggests that there have been transformational shifts which do not bring about "praxis capable of effecting emancipatory institutional and social change" (Hoggan et al, 2016, p. 60) but can be considered to be a form of "emancipatory praxis at "a biographical level" (p. 60). These are important shifts of ways of being which suggest that an aspiration to achieve the former, is compromised, until we address our own internalised oppressor and become more "reflexively agentic" (Finnegan, 2019, p. 53) or an exploration of reclaiming what it might mean to be 'our Ger'.

What do I care about as a critical adult educator practitioner-researcher?

There is no other way to conduct this conversation than to start by acknowledging that I was taken completely unprepared for the extent to which grief would change me. A chasm of diverse forms of loss, such as disconnection and disappointment, opened in front of me, and I fell into it. The research emerges as a response to my desire to live and work wholeheartedly again. What I found most disorientating, was the fact that this sense of loss leaked into every aspect of my life, in much the same way that an oil slick spreads across water. The boundaries between the personal and the professional became blurred, entwined around grief, as do traditional notions of the public and private.

In order to understand this sense of loss that arrived like a spectre in my world, it is important that you get a sense of the 'me' before I fell out of myself. I think my sense of

rupture between my values, my biography and my practice will be more apparent to you, if I can give you a feel for what made me tick over the forty years of my practice as an adult educator, before you meet me in a sense of turmoil after the death of my father and sister within eight months of each other. In particular, I would like to attempt to illuminate my dynamic relationship with those core values that I aspired to animate in my work over the course of a lifetime, and which have also informed my research. As you will see later, the research begins at a moment when I am experiencing intense grief, and I am feeling at my most disconnected from being able to live them out.

I have a passion for letter-writing. I relish the intimacy and the opportunity to rework those meanings that on re-reading, just simply will not do. Therefore, my first letter is to you, the reader, as I set out to show you what really matters to me in my life and my work as an adult practitioner-researcher.

Dear Reader,

I have been a critical adult education practitioner for over forty years and I am passionate about this work. It has involved many types of contributions to critical pedagogy, curriculum and assessment, research, policy making, campaigning, as well as collaboration with government, national and international stakeholders. Throughout this period, what had made this work both coherent and revitalising, were those underpinning principles and values that anchored every aspect of my practice in a radical humanist tradition. These were not notional or abstract values, but part of a deeply held way of reading the world and yearning to be in it, and make interventions in our own lives and the lives of others. As an adult educator, I am committed to making connections between how we work, live and love, so that our work becomes a living out of who we are, or who we aspire to be. I consider this type of teaching to be deeply connected to finding ways of helping myself and others to live well, as we go about our daily business, informed by a desire to make the world a fairer more compassionate place for everyone.

I see myself as a practitioner-researcher and believe that our experiences can be generative sites for practitioner knowledge, which is useful for informing our understanding of how we live and grow as adult educators, particularly in those moments where we are facing challenging questions about who we are and how we want to be in this world. This form of knowledge is often not disseminated or valued beyond practitioner networks, which made it difficult for me to remain convinced about its value, particularly at the outset of the inquiry. I struggled to ignore a little voice in my head that questioned the worth of bringing my reflections on my life into a public space, where it risked being dismissed as trivial.

I have always been interested in critically reflecting on the internal meanings that we give to our experience of teaching, and how this shapes and is shaped by our social context within which we live out our lives. I understand that this does not magically come into existence but needs to be constructed with all of the participants who hold the knowledge and take into account our unique subjectivity as well as of the economic, social and political forces that shape our humanity. I have struggled with the term working-class as an identity and stereotypes associated with it. My family lived in a heavily industrialised area in the north of England for the first twelve years of my childhood. We shared those conditions associated with being a member of the working class, including intergenerational precarious and unskilled employment and unemployment, diminishing and broken experiences of education, and a lack of agency to question or challenge. All of which were internalised as our personal failures. But the fact that we owned our own house and my mam had many middle class aspirations, confused my sense of belonging within the working class. Even though along with other working-class people, we shared a fixed sense of being part of the 'little people' whose limited futures are determined by the 'bosses and big shots'. But I strongly identified with the experience of being working-class as "people's relative positions within structures of power and privilege" (Crowther & Martin, 2005, para. 10) and the associated dynamic between the internalisation of oppressive narratives, feeling and power.

Therefore, I consider critical reflection and the exploration of our biographies and their implications for our teaching, as essential professional development for all adult educators.

In my classroom, I have a finely tuned antennae for epistemological questions, about how we know what we know, how we value or invalidate what we know. This has been a point of interest to me since I was a child, where I learned that I would only be rewarded for those interests that mirrored those of my school teacher and not what I had really lived and experienced. I brought this into my teaching practice as improvisations with creative practices, which were pitched at making "sense of people's experience and enables them to play a full and active part in its construction" (Crowther & Martin, 2005, para. 13).

Like Freire (1996), I am convinced that it is our ontological vocation to continue to grow and to learn how to become more fully human. We cannot do this by ourselves. I deeply value making time to engage in emotionally responsive and reciprocal critical dialogues, especially with those who are interested in interrogating those limiting situations, which crush our ability to make useful interventions in our lives. This means that as an adult educator, I consider building relationships with our peers, with our students, and between students as something that we cannot live without. We learn and create knowledge, however provisional and shifting, within relationships. I have seen these relationships come under increasing pressure as teaching becomes more technical and

outcomes based. The practice of ranking and crudely comparing teachers against each other also makes it more difficult for us to build trust and respect for each other in a space where we can be vulnerable and creative in each other's company (O'Neill, 2015, McCormack, 2009). This really hampers our ability to acknowledge the many complexities and joys of being human, which in my mind is the starting point from which all holistic theories of learning should depart.

From the earliest days of my work, I would have said that my commitment to transformative teaching was anchored in Freire's concept "to exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it" (Freire, 1996, p. 69). However, it became clear to me, as I tried to apply this concept to my navigation of grief, I had to overcome a strong instinct to retreat into myself and resist putting words on those inescapable and fundamental experiences in our lives that bring us to the limits of suffering and language.

I believe that we teach because we have a deep desire to change something for the better. For as long as I can remember, I have felt that the world needed to change and that I wanted to be part of that change. This emerged from a poorly articulated, but felt experience that our family, and people like us, lived in the contradiction of knowing that we worked hard and always tried to do 'the right thing', while also internalising our inability to unlock a less precarious future, as our own failure (Finnegan, 2019a).

The question about linking my teaching to change has always raised particularly complex questions about the nature and purpose of what it is I am trying to change inside and outside of the classroom. Throughout my career, I would have continued to critically re-assess my different, but related priorities. Our values and our relationship with them is not static, they are extended, amended or eroded in a dynamic relationship with how we are experiencing the world. This meant an ever shifting balancing of my orientation between my emphasis on: connecting students with their prior and current lived and felt subjective experiences; generating frames of reference for a more egalitarian, inclusive and compassionate way of being in the world; and working out what this means for our growth and practice as critical adult educators. There was never a point of arrival, where I felt that I had it nailed it, as in "teaching there is always at the same time happening both more and less than one had planned for" (Kelchtermans, 2009, p. 267). I found living with this sense of never managing to get it all right at the same time, to be at variance with public discourse that reduced learning to meeting specific, technical learning outcomes. It planted doubts in mind that I seemed to be making an unnecessary fuss about something that could not be more straightforward. This is why I was never comfortable with the idea of excellence in teaching awards, which seems to oversimplify the complexity of our commitment to transformative teaching.

In my later career, I began to find a greater point of convergence between all of these approaches by considering all transformational learning as ultimately a reclamation of self, a self that is embedded in relationships. Therefore exploring myself out of necessity means uncovering all of the others who are shaping me. This means understanding myself as a prerequisite to understanding others, by allowing my imagination to understand what I may not have lived myself but someone else has. It can help us as practitioners to avoid “feeling like a chess piece or a cog, or even an accomplice of some kind” (Greene, 2000, p. 11) within oppressive internalized structures.

While my journey through the workplace was filled with precarity, I had always been guided by choices that allowed me to do things that I really cared about with like-minded people. It was a way of living with conviction, and testing out my agency to put my yearning for a fairer more compassionate world into practice. While there is consistency and coherence in my values over my forty-year career, my relationship with them in terms of my level of conviction as I tried to put them into practice over my career, has waxed and waned. Following the bereavement of my dad and my sister, niggles about my ability to embody these values and make them relevant to the lives of my students, became amplified. The research became a way to begin a process of trying to navigate this tumultuous period with no idea of where this would lead me. Therefore reader, I hope that the inquiry will give you a glimpse of an adult educator in the throes of trying to make sense of my experiences from a position where the old meanings and certainties have been hollowed out.

With much love...

PART ONE: ERUPTION

Chapter One: Learning how to dance with our values as a critical adult educator - The forty-year tango

Introduction

I have created three stories from my practice - one at the very start of my career, one from the middle period, followed by one from more recent years just after I had embarked on this inquiry. It is an attempt to show how core values are not static but how we are always in a state of flux around how we interpret them and try to live them out in our learning spaces and in our lives, depending on what is happening around us. Drawing on the evocative autoethnography tradition (Bochner & Ellis, 2016), my intention is to create a story, while also protecting the identity and well-being of the participants within the stories. While my life is the focus of the research, there are a number of the family members, colleagues and students who appear in the telling of my story. These are either deceased family members, or composite students drawn from memory and recall of a lifetime of practice, or episodic reflective journal, as well as a small number of peer adult educators with whom I have worked over the course of my working life and am still in touch with. Before I introduce you to some of the composite students you will meet in the following three vignettes, it is important to clarify my understanding of what I mean by 'truth' and some of the ways I attempted to dig deeply into the fabric of life while honouring both the fluidity of recall and memory, the complexity of our interaction with others, as well as protecting the anonymity, where possible, of those who appear in my stories.

In this section, I will discuss in more detail how I have responded to student representation in my sessions and workshops within the vignettes where I have drawn on 'fragments of the living' recalled from my memory and journals, as mentioned above, to represent a broader significance with a deeper complexity of student experience through the creation of a composite student in the vignettes.

Temporality and consent

This inquiry was further complicated because it was undertaken within two timeframes of the people and events recalled from a distant past, and also from the present which raised different ethical concerns, depending on whether the events occurred before, or close to the time, that they were recalled and evoked. The question of consent was more straightforward, where it was possible to gain the consent of the individuals represented, at the time of writing as in the case of my peer adult education colleagues. As I focused

on experience across a lifetime of practice, it implicated people from my past and present over a forty-year lifespan. This involved a form of memory work that Bochner, in Bochner and Ellis (2016), describes as “I am remembering now, using the present, (...) to draw from the past with my eye on the future” (p. 241).

I represented stirrings of memories of fragments of lives, of snatches of conversations, of expressions, of moments of connection or disconnection. These belonged to: family members that I loved who are now dead; students whose phrases I remember vividly but can no longer recall from which programme, students whose interactions I have carried all of my working life, but I can no longer remember their name or when we worked together. These snapshots of lives, which have become deeply woven into my life and pedagogy, are the basis for this inquiry. All of these cases raised questions about sharing experiences that automatically implicate others in terms of their ability or inability to give consent. These will be discussed as they arise in the context of the research, to allow for the subtle differences that exist between them.

Talking to fragments of the living

Throughout the inquiry, I am in an ongoing conversation with my experiences as a practitioner across forty years of practice. As I pondered how this emerging me is creating resonances or dissonance with my practice, I was full of stories, and moments that have animated me and made me come alive as an adult educator. I have no doubt that it was the joy of working with students in our learning spaces, which nurtured my commitment through all the vagaries of change within the adult education sector. The students I have worked with are so tightly woven into the texture of how I discuss and understand my pedagogy that their stories and our interactions feel as if they are living inside me. This meant that how these experiences were represented needed careful thought. I drew on a range of different forms. I have stayed true to my pedagogy and practice, by going beyond the confines of any one session with a specific group of students. Instead, I have drawn attention to critical aspects of creating transformational learning opportunities by weaving multiple related sessions together, from across my years of practice, informed by both memory and in some cases, my learning journal.

Therefore, I have drawn on various techniques for creating composite characterisation of students (Bochner & Ellis, 2016) to recreate some of these more significant experiences and reflections so I was not representing specific individuals and their specific stories. I found it helpful to consider how O'Neill, (2015) was more interested in illuminating

themes and tensions from a number of tutors which became dissociated from any one individual. My approach aimed to do something similar and to place the focus on the emerging themes and complexities from my practitioner experience. In addition to the memory work that I discussed above, I also drew on my own learning journals where I recorded in more detail those teaching moments that continued to haunt me for their concealed meanings, long after I had left the classroom. I have made every effort to reconstruct the characters and the sessions in a way that is less interested in a depiction of what happened and is more interested in what I experienced to be really going on.

In order to do this, I have drawn on composite characters, which are created from fragments of a large range of different students, tutors, or education coordinators that I am recalling from memory. While characters may have their origin in a real person, this is only a starting point for me to add layers and complexities from a number of students that I have known to complete a more rounded character, who does not exist or I have taken the qualities of one person and distributed them across a number of characters. Occasionally I have drawn on utterances that students have used in my learning spaces over the years that have stayed in my memory, long after the specific identity or location of the student has been lost to me, or were recorded in my journal. These phrases have been masked and attributed to a composite character and not to the actual representation of the student. If it was a very distinctive expression I decided to stay as faithful as possible to the sentiment while adjusting the phrasing. This involves a delicate balance of creating composite students who are living and breathing on these pages, while not representing an individual student identity. I have also made sure that characters are not linked to the group they were part of, but to a session that has been woven from multiple sessions. In some cases, I have introduced a fantastical element to my stories through mythical animals or metaphorical landscapes. My intention is to stay true to the pedagogical dilemmas that have been of most interest to me, but I am not attempting to reproduce a snapshot of any one session in a moment of time. It seemed to me that this was the best way to tell the story that a factual description could not reach.

I chose this approach on the basis that it was the best way to ensure confidentiality of those students. This was intended to maintain confidentiality, but also a way of creating a broader range of complexities or dimensions to human experience which are intrinsic to these stories, but which will not be represented within any one story. In addition, this fictitious dimension enabled me to represent the complexity of the inner life of an adult

educator, but in a way that kept everyone safe, while focusing on how we can meet these experiences in their rawness and attempt to learn from them.

Story One: 1983 - A ring on the door - No one is at home?

The first experience, from 1983, is based on my recollection of a real experience where identifying characteristics have been reworked drawing on other students I have known. I have also masked identifying personal and geographical details, in order to protect the identity of the two main characters. In this story, I am completely convinced about the value of my work as a volunteer adult literacy tutor, although this was sometimes naïve, as in this first snapshot of my practice. This story takes place at a time when I have set up a drop-in service for “one-to-one adult literacy tuition”, from my flat. This was part of a small pilot project that had provisional funding to offer some training to volunteers, who would recruit students to work with in their homes on a one-to-one basis. Along with other volunteers, we advertised publicly in supermarkets and social welfare offices, in the early 1980’s, and set up tuition in our houses.

I lacked neither commitment nor conviction, for what appeared to me to be a social movement for change. It was underpinned by a real sense of passion to contribute to tackling a problem that was still unrecognised by the Department of Education, and was being framed as an individual failure, as opposed to a systemic one.

You arrive at my door, very sharply dressed as always. There are clean hankies peeping over the top of your breast pocket, your tie is held together with a small golden pin, a tight crease in your trousers and highly polished shoes. I glimpse myself in the stained glass in the front door and try not to laugh at my extra-large baggy shirt and jeans. I wonder about the briefcase with the two gold clasps and the two tiny little keys that are dangling from the locks.

The room is cramped and the window is full of condensation from the Superser heater that is humming away, and barely taking the worst of the chill out of the winter evening air. I try to find a free surface to put your overcoat on, as you tell me about your journey here and the lengthy traffic jams in each of the towns that you pass through, I make tea and rummage around for some biscuits. Neither of us linger too long on the absurdity of driving four hours to come here. This is 1984 and one-to-one voluntary help with reading and writing is difficult to track down, but we also know that more importantly you are terrified that anyone in your town would find out that you have unmet literacy needs, as it would surely have repercussions for your business as an estate agent.

We don’t really talk about how you feel about all of this shame and hiding. I am reluctant to appear to be prying. We have been meeting for several months and we are just beginning to find our way with each other. I am being very careful not

to let my enthusiasm to make these sessions as helpful as possible for you, become something which asks too much of you before you are ready.

You catch sight of a photograph and piece of text that I have taken out of a magazine, and deliberately left lying on the table where it will catch your eye. It is a short piece about 'Ireland's most expensive house'.

You notice the price and cannot help letting out a guffaw, "if I sold one of them I could give up working for a while". You explain that the property market is very flat at the moment. But your curiosity is aroused, I cannot resist poking the Superser with a pen, and watching a little flame lick upwards, and spread across the grid. I notice you eagerly scanning over and back across the text and the photographs of the house, to pick out the gist of this story. You are using your expert knowledge to try to work out why this house can fetch so much money. This is the first time that you have taken complete control of our session. I sit back in the armchair with my own copy of the text, sipping away at my tea. I am wondering how I can make this task more manageable, without taking away your sense of personal achievement.

In spite of my lack of training, there is a feeling of ease, of not being out of my depth, but instead, connected to a steady, if flickering, hunch. Out of the blue, I think about my dad, not distinct sharp thoughts that I could capture easily in words, but a trickle of familiarity and intimacy that seems to nudge my sense of purpose. I ask you if you would like a hot drop of tea even though I know that it will irritate you, as I can see you are completely immersed in this piece of text. But I sense that this is a good way of maintaining this feeling of ease, before the 'real work' begins, and the inevitable anxiety when we settle down at the table to tackle a form that you would like some help with.

I fall into easy chatter with you about this house, which is based around simple questions that will only require a one word answer, the kind of answers that will allow you to draw on your vast expertise. I throw out some casual questions about the location, the size of the house, how many bedrooms, how many garages, is there a big garden? What might that house be worth in your town?

As you throw out the answers and begin to make informed guesses at why this house got so much attention, I congratulate you for doing such a good job of reading. At first you throw it back at me, that this not reading, that there are loads of words you do not know. But I persist that this is reading, being able to get the meaning of what the piece is about and form opinions about it. In response you turn back to the text with eyes of wonder, but not until you have punched the air and shouted in a voice that sounded like a rebut to a younger self, "I am not thick"! You are beaming and so engrossed in teasing out more and more words from the text that you do not hear the doorbell, and you are oblivious that I have left the room to answer it.

I am taken aback, to see a young woman at the door who is shouting that she has come to take her dad home. I am completely floored; I get such a fright that I cannot find any words. I stumble down the hall back to my flat, behind this woman who is now weeping and demanding to know why you are here.

I open my flat door and turn towards you. I am surprised to see that you are now standing with your overcoat on, and that the table has been cleared, and everything has been locked in to your briefcase, except for the mugs of tea and biscuits. I am waiting on you to explain everything. You are standing silent, stubbornly looking out the window. I notice that the tips of your ears are flaming red and there is perspiration on your brow. Suddenly I understand. I can feel the burden of your secret, which you are trying to contain within your briefcase. There is nothing in your world that could be more wretched or painful, than showing this child, with whom you have lived for years, your shame of failing to master something as basic as reading and writing.

You burst past us aflame with torment, still refusing to name the purpose of your visit. But not before you throw me a wounded glance.

A backward glance

In retrospect, what jumps out at me is my concern to make sure that I do not repeat those approaches towards learning, which have failed students in the first place and my concern to create experiences that will allow him to succeed. In these early days of my work, I have no 'headspace' to even begin thinking about how to link personal experiences with external social forces. I am making this up as I go along, just figuring out how to do this the 'right way'. These connections will come later when I discover that this can only be done within groups of learners, where they can help each other to share and name their realities.

But I feel privileged to be involved in a movement that is taking learning away from the institutions (Illich, 2000) which had failed these adults. I am attracted to the idea of moving learning into domestic spaces where we both have autonomy and room to root the 'curriculum' in the lived needs and experiences of these adults. I relished the freedom to allow my instincts and insights shape my pedagogical responses, but I put little or no value on this way of knowing. For now, I am eager to build learning spaces with students, where they can move through them, to a happier version of who they might be. I have read Freire, but have not yet any grasp of the ideas of transformative teaching, although that is what I am unwittingly searching for.

I have no idea that my professional development as a tutor demands that I must be willing to go beyond the torment of bearing witness to unwelcome and stubborn emotions in others, and be prepared to encounter them within myself. I have yet to dismantle the artificial construction, that there is a professional 'me' that does the most effective facilitation when I keep her at the greatest possible distance from the 'emotionally messy self' that is all of us.

This raises questions about the necessity of offering forms of professional development which do not frame teaching and learning as techniques of 'how to teach' but instead encourage forms of development where tutors have spaces to reflect more deeply on disconnections between their sense of purpose and their practice. This demands a willingness to engage with how our values and sense of purpose are implicated in our own biography.

How my life as an adult educator unfolded from 1983 - 2015

The early part of my career, from 1983, was a mix of precarious work across a range of settings where I worked mainly as an adult literacy tutor with adults and young people in literacy schemes, community training workshop, community projects, day-time adult education, drop-in centres, tutor training, and night-time adult education classes. Eventually I worked full-time in the prison service, where ironically enough, was among the few places where adults could get access to full-time Adult Basic Education courses and I also returned to progress my own education.

From the period 1989 to 1998, as the Director of the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA), I had a pivotal role in the development of the first professional qualifications for adult literacy practitioners in Ireland. These ranged from Level 6 – Higher Certificates to Level 8 honours degrees, (including the BA (Hons) in Teaching in Adult and Further Education) and recognised by the Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI). The professional qualification was substantially designed within NALA, in collaboration with adult literacy practitioners, other national stakeholders and support from Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT) and National University of Ireland (NUI) Maynooth, to bring greater legitimacy and recognition for adult literacy practitioners, and also to capture and enhance the good practice in adult literacy work which was emerging from the field.

In 1999, I left my position as the Director of the NALA, and moved to Waterford Institute of Technology (now South East Technological University (SETU)), to set up, along with a small team of talented practitioners and academics, what is now the Literacy Development Centre (LDC). It was jointly managed in partnership between NALA and WIT through a management committee and was initially funded by the Department of Education and Skills, and more recently by SOLAS (the State agency that oversees the Further Education & Training (FET) sector in Ireland). Practitioners demanded that their teaching and learning experience should mirror the principles of good adult literacy work

in the field, and be strongly connected to consolidating and developing good practice. Therefore, my core responsibility was to oversee the integrity of the relationship between academic theory and the good practice emerging within the field.

This required me to be an advocate for systems and approaches that were at variance with more traditional delivery and assessment modes within higher education. This became increasingly complex, as the environment of higher education aligned itself increasingly with a business model that valued profit, linear, technical and outcomes-based approaches to learning. It also meant being an advocate for an approach to literacy work, which viewed adult literacy as a human right and as an issue of equality. This perspective prioritises transformative teaching and learning, which is central to a literacy as social practice approach (O'Grady & Byrne, 2018). During the 1970s and 1980s there was a large diversity of adult literacy practices throughout the country, but there was a growing consensus among practitioners and students who were engaging in adult literacy approaches, which had not been clearly named at that time. However, it did foster those initial 'principles and values' of good practice, as they emerged from the field, and these informed the first and subsequent NALA policy documents as well as those values underpinning the delivery and assessment of the NALA/WIT professional degree.

Ensuring this symbiotic relationship between academic theory and good practice within the adult literacy field, continued to be a key component of my work as a lecturer and academic lead for the supervised observations of adult and further education tutors who complete the Level 8 - BA (Hons) in Teaching in Adult and Further Education. For me these principles and values, which anchor the practice in a radical humanist tradition, cannot be separated from my engagement not only within my practice in higher education, but also within daily life.

Story Two: 2011 - Building up, tearing down and building up again

This story, from 2011, is based on notes that I took in my reflective journal after classes over an extended period. They contain fictional composite characters inspired by students that I have worked closely with over the years and pedagogical experiences from different contexts and timeframes.

The story locates this session within a Freirean reading of 'disempowerment' where we become disconnected from our lived experiences and act from internalised oppressive

narratives which frame the teacher as the exclusive expert knower. I explore how to spark student interest in examining connections between their adult learner biography and limiting assumptions that they are holding about how teachers and students can behave.

We are slowly making our way back into the classroom for what we affectionately call the 'graveyard' session, which is the session straight after lunch. This one can be tricky. We are still in the early stages of getting to know each other. I am a bit concerned about yesterday. I am not sure that I got the right balance between taking enough time to help us to feel at ease with each other, while also getting through all of the information needed for navigating face-to-face, online and independent learning as well as the continuous assessments.

It doesn't help that Saturday afternoon often has a particular heaviness about it. The canteen closes so that there is no mid-afternoon refreshments. The heating is turned off as the building empties, and we are often the only people returning to our classroom. It is difficult sometimes not to draw parallels between us and the forgotten dinner trays in the canteen, that lie scattered around random tables, an oversight by those who were cleaning up.

I don't mind the normal restlessness, as people become anxious about starting their return journey home, while there is still daylight. Usually a conversation about an agreed time to finish up can sort this out. But as I enter the classroom, I have a niggle that there is a stiffness in the room. It's fair enough that they are still weighing me up, but as I look around the room, there are a lot of people who seem to be sitting at a distance from each other, by themselves. There is not the usual chatter where people are so engrossed, that it can be hard for me to get their attention.

But somehow today none of that is dinting my excitement. I am planning to use small groups to discuss good and bad experiences of participating in a discussion group, to reflect on what we mean by good facilitation. It's a simple plan, nothing particularly ground-breaking, but it always gets a good buzz going.

I have noticed in my student-teacher practice placement observations around the country, that there is less and less time given to whole group discussion, particularly where there are strong opinions to navigate. Such is the reluctance that I can often sense that this is where the tutor is moving to next in their session, even before they announce it to the learners. There is an almost imperceptible shift in energy, a slight hesitation, or a fidgeting with handouts that leads to a sort of tightening up of the tutor. Then a number of questions will be directed towards the group, which are designed to assess the mastery of the lesson content. These inevitably prompt a scattering of short perfunctory replies from around the classroom, none of which can suppress the barely concealed desire of the tutor to speed this part of the session up, and their eagerness to avoid dwelling here too long. This brings me back to my own experiences of facilitating heated discussions that would erupt about Trump in my classroom and my moments of uncertainty about where this might go. My rush to gather up whatever responses have been offered, grateful if I can avoid stirring up the depths of something that might become unmanageable. A 'keeping the lid on it' feeling.

It takes longer than I had planned to get everyone into their small groups. The room is far from 'on fire'. Chairs are dragged into circles, and with a few exceptions, there is a feeling of reluctance. I decide to let things settle down and ask each group to select their timekeeper and chairperson. I start tidying up my hand-outs and flitting from group to group making sure there are markers, flip charts etc., something I do too energetically when I am nervous. In spite of the fact that there are bursts of chatter from here and there in the room, I have a sense that I have asked them to roll an enormous boulder up a hill. I move around and try to get a closer look at exactly what is going on.

A couple of the groups appear to be, so to speak, getting on with it. But in one group, they are jotting down their individual experiences and reading them back to the reporters without any comments or discussion, a sort of dictation of answers rather than a discussion.

Another group seems to have ground to a halt, two people are chatting to each other and the others have retreated into themselves. Scattered around the room, there are a number of people who seem to be sitting at a distance from the group.

I approach those groups that look switched off and start to probe a little.

"How are you getting on? Do you understand what I have asked you to do?"

"Yeah, we're grand".

I continue around the room, pausing here and there where I sense the reluctance, and ask if this exercise is in any way helpful?

I am met with "It's fine", a silence or a scraping of chairs, or versions of my own explanation, but in slightly different words, and I can sense that these phrases carry no real conviction.

I am starting to feel despondent; I can sense that I am losing a large number of this group so early on in the module. Like a weather vane, I am swinging in all kinds of directions, searching for questions or ways of getting at what is going on here.

I glimpse someone checking their phone; someone else is looking out the window. But it is when I catch sight of one of the generally enthusiastic students rolling her eyes at her group that a giant flare whooshes up in to the sky.

I stand in the middle of the room and ask everyone to stop what they are doing, so that we can talk about why this activity seems to be bombing, and talk about how we can do something more useful.

Some are a bit taken aback. I sense that some people are worried that there is major problem and that they are in trouble.

One of the groups shouts up defensively "Well, we were getting on with it, and you can never bring everyone with you, so why stop?"

Someone else challenges me – "Can you even do that? I mean it's not very professional. I would never do that in my class".

“Do what”? I ask.

“Well, just throw out something that is planned and say that it’s not working”.

I ask her “Why not?”

“Well, it could make students think that we don’t know what we are doing”?

Another chimes in: “Yeah, I would just belt on and finish up as soon as possible, it’s not that deep really”.

Someone else says that she has never done this, but it doesn’t look unprofessional in her books.

From the back of the room, I hear a loud protest that it isn’t very professional either to leave people behind and not find out why.

“Well, isn’t that just sort of mollycoddling them, like pandering to them? Sometimes stuff is hard or boring, but that’s just the way it is”!

The classroom warms up. But I can see that there are still a large number of people who still do not feel safe enough yet to open up, and share their thoughts in this noisy and animated discussion.

Suddenly my niggle from earlier in the afternoon, takes on words and I feel a surge of energy. This weather vane is about to reset her course.

It is true that the activity is not creating the kind of energy that I had hoped it would generate, but it seems to me one of the difficulties is that I have misjudged the readiness of a large number of the group to share openly about their experiences. I need to give people more space to get to know each other better, build up trust and have a bit of fun, if I am to seize this opportunity to explore our understanding of how we work as adult educators.

“Ok” I say, “in pairs, grab a magazine and pick out any images which suggests your idea of what a professional adult educator would look like”. I tear out the image of a dolphin sand sculpture and say, “That’s me on a good day”. “Ok, today it has felt more like this and I hold up a photo of a lone figure trying to run through sand dunes.

People begin to chat and laugh about what comes to their mind. Someone has pinched someone’s magazine image, and there is feeling of childlike abandon as they chuckle and cut it up the middle. I feel that things are going in the right direction. I notice people tossing ideas around about how they might dress in class, someone asks me why I never wears jeans in class, and I am forced to own my more conservative streak. Others talk about things that they do or would never do in a class. There is no doubt that people really care about this.

But I am still figuring out how to move this on a step further, and then one student just bursts out: “I have fallen awake, in every sense, for the first time in months – I am looking at all of this stuff and thinking where did we get these ideas from, like who says we must do this or that”? This sparks a number of voices eager to get into this space.

I sit back and watch them slowly throwing out the threads of a learning community to each other, spinning a web to lift the lid on the ordinary and taken for granted.

A backward glance

There is an attempt to illuminate the complexity of reading and responding to the learning environment. But I am interested in the dynamic mix of uncertainty and surefootedness, which is a quality of my pedagogy, when I feel at ease in the learning space. I can see how this ease has matured me to challenge the ideas of others about what we mean by an excellent class and created my own criteria. I am concerned to learn what is really going on in this moment in my learning space, and aware that I cannot depend exclusively on what students will report. I know that this requires shifts in perspectives and approaches in collaboration with my students, to uncover ways to respond appropriately and with imagination to this challenge. I love the sense of joy with which I pay attention to the internal and external micro-cues, which help me to read more comprehensively what is going on in the classroom, and what is going on in me. This memory evokes a feeling of collaborating with students to challenge our taken for granted limits, but also making every effort to make the space as inclusive as it can be. Subsequently this raises questions about the personal, professional and political forces that disconnects us as practitioners from this deep and embodied sense of purpose, which fosters and shapes our connection with our students?

The back drop to the research - Drifting into weariness – 2015 - 2022

A substantial amount of my work from 1997, in consultation with practitioners and other key stakeholders involved developing, delivering and reviewing the accreditation degree framework for adult and further education tutors. My motivation, along with all of my colleagues who worked on it, was the hope that this would bring essential recognition to the particular expertise of these tutors within a national qualification framework. It was assumed that this would help to continue the conversation around the country, about what was meant by good adult literacy practice, as well as addressing the ‘ghost-like’ presence of adult education tutors in the mainstream education system. At the time, it was considered to be an important step to remove a significant obstacle to achieving stable and secure working conditions for adult education tutors. However in spite of the substantial increase in funding and recognition for tackling the adult literacy problem, the intervening years became a struggle to retain those literacy practices which demanded more for students than to function, in a hypothetical and more often than not precarious

employment. Many of the undertakings to regularise the working conditions for adult education tutors in the late 1990's, had either not materialised or had left them feeling undervalued. In such precarious working conditions, the chief concerns of those who were dedicated to continuing to contribute to adult education, were still dominated by conversations about levels of payment, retention or the need to increase their unpredictable teaching hours. It seemed to me that the values that had nurtured my passion to work within adult literacy were coming increasingly under attack and in some cases, being dismantled. This at times fuelled my determination to challenge these injustices, while also during other periods of my life, created weariness and doubts about the real difference a qualification could make to the lives and lived realities of the adult tutors and educators. Those who remained in the area were still experiencing unacceptable conditions of employment, levels of burnout and disillusionment, in spite of their unquestionable contribution to the lives of their students and communities.

It is important to know that it is within this period that I began doing more work across other programmes with vocationally oriented teachers, instructors and trainers for whom transformational teaching was not always what they were looking for as they struggled with their own complex working conditions. After more than thirty years of uninterrupted years of working with adult literacy tutors and further education tutors, I asked for a decrease in the number of my teaching hours allocated for working with adult literacy tutors. This was due to a number of factors. The isolating and labour intensive nature of teaching off-campus, (particularly delivering two and three day residential blocks of teaching around the country) had taken its toll on me. It was very difficult to keep in contact with other colleagues and also with campus life, as we worked off-site on a continuous basis. This also involved travel and long periods away from home, and packing and unpacking the equivalent of a mobile campus into the car boot. Jephcote and Salisbury (2008), document how this particular form of physical and emotional attrition arises, because tutors are, to a large extent, forced to draw on their personality and personal reserves of energy, in order to meet the little recognised emotional and logistical challenges of supporting and guiding adults within systems that are not resourced adequately to meet their needs. It was also very disruptive to my family and social life. This undoubtedly became a backdrop to my sense of loss and disappointment, but cannot fully explain why I experience grief as a hollowing out of my passion and conviction across my life.

In my mind, this was the moment where the research as it is presently constituted began. It emerges as a long and reflexive response to an eruption within me that has been simmering, but suddenly can no longer be contained. It was as if something at the core of my being had become dislocated. It was difficult to identify whether this had been initially triggered within my personal life or my professional life, but something that directly impacted on both was unravelling.

Over the life of the research, I returned to the experience described below, on multiple occasions, to verify if I was remaining true to the focus of my inquiry. It was as if it contained those seeds, from which those questions and issues, which were troubling me the most, could surface as my points of entry into this inquiry.

It is also important to say that it is clear that there were always periods of questioning and doubt about the value of what I was doing as an adult educator. Just as there were always periods where I was enthralled and passionate about what was happening in my learning spaces and beyond. But the period immediately following the death of my father and sister in 2019 stands out as particularly dark. These years stand out as different, because I am dealing with existential questions which destabilise me across every aspect of my life and cannot be resolved by superficial adjustments of either my work practice or my within my life. I am aware that I am in the grip of grief and disappointment and that they have changed me, and the way in which I make sense of my world or more aptly fail to make sense of the world.

The movement out of this period of emptiness demands an encounter with fundamental questions about my place and belonging in the world. This eventually emerges as the research documented here, as I attempt to respond to the ruptures that emerge between autobiography, practices and values as a critical and care-oriented adult educator.

Story Three: 2020 - Eruption - Grand entrance with Supervalu bag

The story is a rendition of a range of memories, recall and journal entries written over an extended period which I have merged into one, as a way of illuminating the complexity of my response. The experiences have been reworked to incorporate some of the craft of expressive writing, such as metaphor, switch of time and location, changing perspectives, which allows the internal contradictions and ambiguities to emerge without any easy resolution. It contains fictional composite characters and pedagogical experiences from different contexts and time frames over my extensive years of practice. In every instance

where I am representing those who were dead or living, I am guided by a relational ethic of care. O'Brien (2013) argues that this means acknowledging our interdependency and vulnerability, as well as the necessity of "relationship and dialogue [as] fundamental to education as liberation" (p. 29).

This was a challenging scenario to capture evocatively. In my first draft, I received feedback from a peer who was disturbed by the reaction of the students, even though it was based on composite students in a composite pedagogical context. This was not my intention, I had wanted the focus to be on my response, and I had to reconsider how I framed and presented this scenario. My intention was to spark conversations and create a perspective for adult educators, where we can begin to recognise fragments of ourselves, and name and reconnect to our deepest feelings from which we have become disconnected and silenced. From there we can grow greater empathy and love for the oppression of others, especially our students, but not as an end in itself. It is important to read this story as a continuous critical reflection, on a shift in my expectations of my relationship with this group of students, a shift which takes me by surprise, and for which the students are equally unprepared. I am faced with the possibility that I am searching for something from this relationship, a recognition of our shared humanity that I have inadvertently failed to nurture in our previous time together, in my urgency to support students through this process as efficiently as possible.

My hope is that this is a beginning of a process of gently questioning and gaining new insights into how we become implicated in our own oppression. Therefore, there is no 'other' in this work that I am pointing a finger towards. There is only the 'other' within that I am trying to understand and piece together. Throughout the work I was committed to at worst, doing no harm, and at best, honouring the lives of people and their relationships which are woven into my life, in a way that I hoped would leave us with a better understanding of what is shaping who we are with each other.

I had been teaching a number of modules to a large range of instructors and trainers. They were scheduled to present group projects for assessment, when I got news that my sister was very ill and I was called to the hospital, which meant that all of my classes had to be cancelled and rescheduled. My sister lingers for a while and then dies. My classes for an extended period of time are informed that I have had a sudden bereavement and will be given new dates for their next classes when this is clearer. The story is created around fragments of two distinct internalized conversations in my personal and professional life

that became entwined around a careful consideration of the death of my sister and dad on my practices in these learning spaces.

I unlock the classroom door and drag my overloaded Supervalu bag across the threshold into this space, that today seems almost a theatre or circus space, waiting for its principal actor or ringmaster. My bag feels heavier than usual. It is brimming with all types of handouts, art materials, flasks and containers of food. Bizarre. But we are here all day. The canteen is not open this Saturday, and there is not enough time to walk to the nearest petrol station. I chide myself that once again, I have brought too much material, but I cannot help myself from bringing contingency resources as a back-up plan. Today of all days, I am not able for group discontent or conflict. I need things to go as smoothly as possible.

I have chosen to be here, and yet I do not want to be here. I am, my dearest E, with you. I cannot, even now, leave your side. I see my hand cupped around yours, relishing its lingering warmth. Resisting this strange new coolness that is creeping in. I do not want to leave your side, ever.

For my sister, Eileen

Oh noble oak tree,
In whose branches I have sheltered all of my life long!
How can I watch you shudder and wince -
Under these catheters and pumps,
often rejected by your purple bruised skin?

How can I sit here with you to witness,
A fleck of scrambled egg balancing
On a fork that does not make it to your lips,
But instead is discretely covered with paper napkins.

They have whispered to me
You will never eat again,
And to make no effort to encourage you.
Surely No!

From the seventh floor, we silently take advantage of the view,
And choose not to comment on the arc of those golf balls that curve, way beyond
the horizon.

I am attending to these images in my head, aware that my body feels as if it is encased in lead. I am dazed, anxious and conflicted. I am preparing to open the bag, when the questions and doubts pour in and begin to preoccupy me.

I understand that being a professional teacher means 'rising to the occasion', but what does that mean? Should I draw attention to my present state of grief by briefly mentioning the bereavement, which postponed this class? But what if I become emotionally choked up?

Given the atmosphere of anticipation in relation to the assessment that was in the room, the last time we met, I consider that this might exacerbate their nervousness or perhaps cast a doubt in their mind about my ability to arrive at a fair mark.

In a fleeting thought, I try to recall to what extent I have succeeded within the busyness of the crowded curriculum, to get to know these students, really know them, their hopes, their fears and personal challenges. But I am blank.

Given my overall desire to create a more equal relationship between my students and I, I wonder if that legitimizes my need to name out loud this new world of grief that I am inhabiting? Is it fair to expect empathy or compassion? What if I take that risk, and I am met with a stony or uncomfortable silence- how might that influence my feelings about spending a day together?

I try to imagine using this as a chance to role model a challenge to the power imbalance within the traditional student and teacher relationship. I am searching for ways to acknowledge our different student and teacher roles, while also being able to acknowledge our shared humanity. I am struggling to make sense of the flurry of words and feelings that are tumbling around inside me. I can reach no conclusions.

Where did I learn, that how I am feeling and how I might share those feelings with my students, are not only irrelevant, but could be considered distracting to my core role of facilitating learning?

I glance at my watch, I now only have a half an hour to get the classroom ready. Gazing down the room, I sigh, as I realise that once again my request has been overlooked, and the desks have all been arranged into tight rows. I consider asking the group to help me to reorganize the tables and chairs so that everyone can be equally well seen and heard. But I am reminded from previous weeks, that there is every possibility that they will arrive late, jaded by their own challenging week, and irritated at another demand on them. They will resist and suggest we just get on with it, that it does not matter. I know that it does matter; we are supposed to be working in groups. I should insist, but instead I decide to remain silent and keep my energy for greeting everyone as they file into the room.

Finally, I open the bag, as if I am lifting the lid on a nuclear reactor. My mind goes back, dream-like to the collision of worlds, as I floated around the office, meticulously filing, gathering and ordering its contents. Checking my lesson plan for each of the sessions, against the appropriate teaching materials, while balancing my mobile on my shoulder and assessing the most recent news from the hospital. The caller and I are both trying to work out whether my sibling was in grave danger, and if now was the time to drop everything and go.

As I stare at the opened bag, I am horrified at my recollection of the forensic way in which, as the caller listed out the increasingly worrying medical changes that my sister was experiencing, I began to intensify my attention to a seamless ordering of the teaching materials into colour coded files. It was as if I knew that the next time I returned to opening that bag, I would be functioning as a broken phoenix might, who has resurrected from his ashes, but with no recollection of his previous shape and destined to be shapeless forever.

The first person arrives into the room and I go into my automatic smile and up beat welcome. I surprise myself. I have no idea where this cheerful and confident voice comes from. Inside, there is still a part of me that is taken aback, that after all of these years, I feel like a novice teacher who is ill prepared to come to any clear understanding of the questions that are buffeting around inside me.

When everyone is settled, and we have run through the programme of the day. Out of the blue, the same confident voice begins to apologise. I am concerned about what might be coming next. I

breathe with relief when I hear myself begin to thank the class for being so accommodating, as it had allowed me to spend precious time with my sister before she died.

There, I have said it. I have found a way to mention it, while focusing on the inconvenience to them, and not on the large rift that I am carrying inside. There is a silence. I wait, but there is not one sound in the room. I am adrift.

Perhaps they can see how vulnerable I am feeling inside? And if they have, is this somehow inappropriate, could this have silenced them?

I put my head down quickly and I return to my default position of starting a check-in that will focus on questions people may have about the day.

Throughout the day, I am aware that I am overcompensating for how reluctant I am to be in this role. During our coffee and lunch breaks, I am expecting someone to acknowledge my recent loss, or perhaps to sympathise with me. But there is nothing. There are lots of questions and anxiety about marks and the release date of results, as well as a request to extend the deadline for the second assignment.

I am beginning to feel angry and I contemplate that I might bring it up, more directly this time, but my intuition tells me that this is a high-risk strategy.

Do their students bring these types of situations to their attention in class, and if they do - how might they respond?

I am aware that I am becoming more and more angry as the day goes on, that I am on the one hand going to an enormous effort to put everyone at ease and generate constructive feedback, while I am becoming more and more emotionally distressed. I give them positive and constructive feedback, mindful that poorly chosen words can echo around in someone's head for a lifetime and undermine their ability to change and grow.

It comes to the evaluation and somebody is disgruntled that an email they had sent, to let me know that a link to some reading resources was broken, had not been sorted out. I stifled my frustration; this corresponded to the time I was in the hospital.

A voice from the back directs itself to me saying, "A handout would have been more helpful".

*I feel my heart burst open, and I want to shout back - have you heard what I have said? I am glad that a handout would have fixed this problem, **because it will not bring my sister back.***

But instead, I thank the class, turn my back, and when the room is empty I quickly gather-up and drop the abandoned materials into the recycling bin. I glance at the evaluations and can see that I was, so to speak, 'fit for purpose'.

I close my bag. I leave the room with contradictory feelings of rage, disappointment, bewilderment, maybe even curiosity?

I am done. Something needs to stop.

I sense that I am in some way disconnected from the source - the one that had compelled me to write, with such joy, my name and telephone number as a contact for getting help with reading and writing on the publicly displayed posters.

A backward glance - how did I end up here?

As an adult educator who aspires to create transformative learning opportunities to develop students' practice by inviting them to examine their identity and values, this feels

wrong. Loss is integral to the experience of being human. Liston and Garrison (2004) remind us that “we cannot grow without loss, without giving up our attachments; but learning what to give up, when, and why requires discerning wisdom” (p. 134). Loss can be experienced right across the spectrum in relation to people we love or to situations or circumstances that we value. It can “provide the challenge and the opportunity of learning to say goodbye to an old self - a relationship to self, to others, and to the world as we have known it” (Kessler, 2004, p. 139) and yet it is just one of the many human experiences that are not, within the “contemporary instrumentalist educational rhetoric”, even acknowledged (Liston & Garrison, 2004, p. 134). Therefore I found myself as an adult educator committed to transformative learning, living the contradiction of, confronting one of the most human experiences within our condition, which could potentially be a starting point for significant learning and growth, and yet feeling completely silenced. I was unable to overcome an internal voice reminding me that this was at best inappropriate or even irrelevant and distracting to the students, to expect them to respond to or acknowledge what I am experiencing. These were my initial questions, which were very pointedly focused on my professional practice as an adult educator. I do not yet know where to look to begin to explore my own implication in these oppressive narratives, in terms of what I cannot yet name about my own feelings of being both oppressed and oppressor.

How has such important work been diluted to become so functional and disconnected from the practices of teaching and learning that I value?

How did I end up here, so adrift from any feeling of connection with my students that I feel almost dehumanised, reduced to a teaching tool?

When did I become wary of resisting the increasing pressure from students and funders to take the shortest route to achieving maximum grades?

Why did I begin to prioritise handouts compiling scholarly knowledge, at the expense of facilitating arts-based reflection, which was messier, complex and often uncomfortable because of its embodied and experiential nature?

To what extent had my practice, which was committed to introducing students to disorientating experiences as part of fostering a transformative learning process, become wary of provoking student discontent?

In what ways had my classroom drifted towards re-creating a traditional classroom dynamic that had failed the population of learners that we were trying to reach?

What appeared as two disparate conversations, between my bereavement and my classroom, acted as a trigger to provoke some of those problems with which the thesis is

concerned as well as highlighting a crushing sense of disappointment, which I cannot yet, fully articulate, but which is fundamental to my sense of purpose and vitality. It also facilitated an opportunity to re-examine them within the context of re-examining my original sense of purpose and associated values that had spurred my entry into and progression through my adult literacy work for so many years.

At this point in the early stages of the thesis, I do not yet know that the search to reclaim and reconnect with those core values will demand an exploration of my own biography and how my progression through mainstream education, had disrupted my sense of connection with my mam and dad. This disruption involved navigating a deep respect for the decency, empathy and sense of compassion for all human beings that they had instilled in us as children. There was also the contradictory feelings of freedom and joy that were tangled with guilt and loss, as my progression through mainstream education collided with many of the practices, values and imagined futures of a more traditional working-class background. I have not yet, at this stage of the research, critically reflected upon how the distance between us, and the distance between our imagined futures for ourselves and for each other, are connected to our different exposure to formal education and consequentially the acquisition of literacy practices that nurtured or hindered our ability to read and understand our lived experience.

Why as a critical adult educator I must confront the heart of my own disappointment and loss

In order to understand the emotional complexity of this work, it is important to recognise disappointment as a dominant emotion that weaves its way through numerous conversations about my life and my work. The necessity of confronting this challenging emotion as an integral part of the process, is considered as a form of trying to reconnect with a part of me that I no longer feel at home with.

I have named the third story ‘Eruption’ because I cannot escape the gnawing feeling of disappointment that accompanied me as I left the classroom. I was gripped with debilitating feelings that compelled me to search for answers for what must change, out of necessity, if I am to continue working as an adult educator with conviction and hope. I do not know yet that I will have to search deep into my biography to confront my own sense of disappointment with myself, and my ambivalence towards living in a working-class culture and its strained relationship with mainstream education. This will eventually help me to begin to examine how this has shaped what I value and what I long to live in

my practice as an adult educator. But I quickly recognised that as I search through my memories and reconnect with those experiences of growing up with my mam and dad, I am drawn to those experiences which were underpinned by an unarticulated and silenced sense of frustration and disappointment with ourselves, our lives and our world. In this research, I view disappointment as a form of loss, which is generated, in my case, from grief. I will discuss this in more detail throughout the research, but for now, I am locating disappointment where it connects my personal and professional world. The research unexpectedly offered me the chance to tease out those connections between disappointment, and a frustrated attempt to remain connected to my birth world and to the 'me' that had felt so safe at one point within this world.

Grief forces me to give expression to my deep yearning to feel connected and loved by my mam and dad, by acknowledging the particular disappointment and how the very act of living out my chosen life, kept disrupting this possibility. Documents in my dad's wallet that I discovered after his death, as well as memories and cards that he had written to me, allowed me to uncover a pattern of intergenerational shame that is associated with poverty, and living with unmet literacy needs as an adult. Letters that I have written home to my mam from college, also situate this tension within an irreconcilable contradiction of being the first person in my family to complete secondary school and to participate in higher education.

I grew up in a family where education was revered as a validation of self-worth, an opportunity to gain respect and social status, accompanied with economic security. It was also viewed with fear as a process, which could expose the shame and failure of an individual, and justify their precarious, and limited life circumstances, for those, like my dad with unmet literacy needs, and my mam whose literacy practices could be understood as functional literacy practices.

Therefore, my progress through higher education emerges as a contradictory process that troubles those silent and deeply embedded feelings of intergenerational shame, which simultaneously connect us but paradoxically, because of the nature of shame, keeps us apart as we are all at a loss to know how to bridge this distance. It also gives me an opportunity to recognise my deep longing to move beyond this closed world with its limited possibilities and take more control of my choices for the future. This challenges my sense of belonging, and leaves me feeling 'not quite it', within both the working class community and the middle class world of academia, particularly as I begin to experience

increasing agency to shape my world with choices that do not meet the expectations of my mam and dad for my life after I have a degree. This creates a further paradox as I navigate the disappointment and the burden of succeeding on some terms, but also failing in terms of being able to remain ‘our Ger,’ as they would have affectionately called me in my childhood. This involves weighing up the risks and gains of participating in a potentially transformative process, which in some respects tears down and builds up again a new way of being and living, out of the class that you are born into, that deeply shapes what I value and how I practice as an adult educator. It also enables me to think about how working as a critical adult educator, is in part a search to fulfil my longing to be part of a community where like-minded and like-hearted people, can collectively try to build micro-groups which nurture and support us and our vision for a better world.

An invitation to adult educators to engage with loss and disappointment

This raises questions about how this particular experience of disappointment might be of interest to critical adult educators as integral to our work. As critical adult educators we are committed to finding ways to work towards creating a better world, which means that we are often forced to expose cruelty, suffering, injustice, manipulation, domination and brutality - all of which are an affront to our values, and endured over time can create a sense of cumulative loss. This means that we have no choice but to encounter the impact of these experiences within ourselves, if we are to learn how to encounter and navigate these bewildering and emotionally turbulent experiences in others. As a practitioner, I am often troubled about how difficult it is to enter into supportive conversations with our students about these inescapable experiences that often appear as intractable and hopeless.

Craib (1994) is helpful in finding an entry point, to penetrate and ultimately begin to encounter these emotionally charged experiences with the purpose of finding “better ways to live with ourselves, within our physical, social and emotional limitations” (p. 179). This demands an ability to be prepared to interrupt the strong feelings of satisfaction experienced after giving direct expression to such intense and complex feelings, and be prepared to “think against” ourselves (Craib, 1994, p. 172). This does not mean considering affect and cognitive reasoning as separate processes, but instead considers them to be a unified whole which resonates with Heron’s radical epistemology (1992, 2008), which challenges the subordination of “feeling and emotion to rational, propositional thought and discourse” (Yorks & Kasl, 2002, p. 189). The work of generating full-bodied and wholehearted knowledge is uncertain and troubling, but rests

on the assumption that the cognitive and the world of feeling are intrinsically linked. Greene puts it another way as she reminds us that “if there is to be a beginning, out of weariness (...) There has to be a why, and I would add, in order to investigate this why, the capacity to imagine what is not yet” (Greene, 2000, p. 24).

As adult educators, it is important that we embrace this healthy process of carrying a “doubt about the world and ourselves” (Craib, 1994, p. 172). In my attempt to understand more clearly the nature and target of my doubt, I tune into a concept of teaching, which Lee and Schallert (2016) describe as a mutually reinforcing journeying of the teacher in terms of an inward and outward movements between the internal and external world. In my case, my explorations of grief quickly forced me to recognise the elusive presence of disappointment in myself, and consider how an intergenerational sense of disappointment and shame, shaped my presence and practice in learning spaces.

Lee and Schallert (2016) suggest how these emotions can become implicated in my teaching, within a dynamic where past beliefs and assumptions, create a lens to imagine the future, mediated by the perspective of the current teaching situation. I am caught up with an ongoing search to render the journeying between these outer and inner worlds more visible. .

It seems to me that as an adult educator, this dynamic becomes entwined with an ongoing search for a sense of hope, as we try to reconcile our ideals of how we would like the world to be and the sort of people we would like ourselves to be with our lived experience. This raises one of the emotional tensions raised by the research, as I question how we can live and work with our ideals for a better world, which by their nature will always be beyond resolution. Craib (1994) suggests two possibilities and proposes that we either regard them as “pleasant dreams” (p. 5) that are “simply not on”, (p. 5) or we modify them in a way that motivates us to keep working towards them, while knowing that we will never achieve them. It seems to me that both options involve making “compromises with reality, [which] involves an ongoing, painful process that is rather like giving up part of ourselves” (Craib, 1994, p. 6). This frames living with grief as of concern for all critical adult educators, as we are forced to acknowledge the inevitable sense of loss as we live within the space between our aspirations, and what we are experiencing in our day-to-day reality. Therefore in the tangled mix of emotions which are hovering close to my efforts to frame a research proposal, I have a strong sense of disappointment, that something has not worked out

that I had hoped might be different. But I cannot quite put my finger on what all of this means yet.

While disappointment can fragment our hope and set limits around what can be hoped for, it can also be a generative experience. There is also the possibility that in probing the ‘dark moist underbelly’ of experience (Haiku – see Introduction) and its associated difficult emotions, that we can reconnect with what it is that we really care about. Critical reflection creates the possibility of scrutinising those oppressive structures, in particular those internalised structures that distort our understanding or disconnect us from ourselves, others and our agency. The private knowledge that is generated by practitioners, out of necessity, entwines the personal and professional domains and our relations with others. We must be able to acknowledge our vulnerability and interdependence. This creates potential sites for transformative learning where, if we can meet ourselves in our most vulnerable and intimate private spaces, we can generate a form of human knowledge that can enable us to connect with, and be emotionally responsive to ourselves and others. We may also be able to imagine ways of living, and working more resiliently with what we find most inhuman and intolerable our world.

PART TWO: LETTING GO

Chapter Two: Breaking from the mooring – Encountering silence

Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss how what appeared as initially separate conversations from my professional and personal life, wove in and out of each other. The process of grieving, and facing up to loss and death, mirrored a parallel drift and sense of loss in my professional life. Eventually they nudge me to recognise my deep concern about the validity of considering my own life as worthy of becoming a focus of inquiry for my research. This correspondingly tugs at the artificial separation between the personal, professional and political.

This involves moving through what seem to be a flow of disconnected experiences from my life and work as an adult educator. Exploring different creative forms of poetry and metaphor help me to see connections, between all of these experiences on the level of powerful feelings of loss, disappointment and disconnection, which are essential conditions of being alive, and cannot be easily resolved. They flow into expressions and explorations of how our grief in experiencing death, can shift the ground beneath our feet, challenging our ability to find ways for ourselves and others to live as well as we can, with all the harsher dimensions of being human, which erodes our identity. I begin to tap into poorly recognised and uncomfortable feelings of being ‘silenced’ which puzzle me as I begin to consider how I have learned to ignore and not to question this response over the years. I consider the knowing which emerges from this process, as a form of subordinate knowledge which questions the social and cultural forces which shape us to become disconnected and silenced from important areas of human experience. This arises when my self-doubts and sense of inadequacy about my place in the academic community, converges with my sense of shame about presenting photographs and experiences from my family background. This opens up explorations of a coherent feeling across all of the experiences, of not trusting myself to say what I am really feeling, a ‘limit’, connected to my working class background, which is preventing me from feeling free to bring these dilemmas into public spaces, for fear of being dismissed or ridiculed.

This brings me to yet another form of loss within my practice as an adult educator. There is a contradiction between my core values, where I invite students to name their lived realities as the starting point for learning, while I am silenced about my own. This raises

more questions about what gets in the way of students and adult educators engaging in true dialogue, about the meaning of their shared realities.

Taking the co-ordinates of disruption - These feelings of loss seem to be pouring into everything that I try to write

Writing into profound grief and vulnerability creates a type of liminal space, which I consider as a zone of “groundlessness” (Green, 2023, p. 194) on the “journey from disorientation to integration” (p. 193). I find it helpful to consider this space as a place where the transitioning adult needs access to generative processes of agency, to recreate the more solid ground of new meaning perspectives, to replace the ones that no longer hold up. (Green, 2023). In my case, the process of writing allows me to explore this new and eroded sense of identity, and sows the seeds for allowing me to consider it as the beginning of a potentially transformative experience. I begin with an image of where I am. I see a boat ‘breaking from the mooring’ as I enter into this chapter. I want to convey the sense of rupture, danger and uncertainty when a boat is forced from its mooring, leaving it to drift. Its trajectory becomes perilous, as it is depending on the currents, winds and tide to carry it to safe harbour. I hope that this metaphor conveys my initial sense of ‘free falling’, with all of its incoherence, as the starting point of this inquiry. It invites the reader to enter into the experience as I open myself up to powerful feelings of disruption, which I referred to in the third story, but which continued to erupt, unpredictably, within my personal and professional life. It was as if I was ‘at sea’ in a fog, and could not find any co-ordinates to provide a sense of direction. These feelings of disruption are so disorientating that I am compelled to continue to explore them through poetry and metaphor, as my day-to-day language simply left me stranded outside of them. I began to recognise within my writing, an internal conversation between the artist and the practitioner scholar, who could in conversation with each other open up this experience and allow a deeper exploration of how vulnerability was shifting the ground that I stood on.

I am stating from the outset that there are no clear-cut answers, or moments of unequivocal insight. Instead, there are opportunities that compel me to learn more about ways of knowing and their potential to surface and interrupt stagnant spirals of thinking and feeling for closer examination. Art becomes a way of transgressing the public, private and professional boundaries, which allowed the emotions to speak, and for contradictions and ambiguity of feeling to be given fuller reign. It allows uncomfortable and disorientating feelings to flood into my awareness, and demand my attention. Butterwick

and Lawrence, (2023) remind us of the importance of these disruptive emotions in the process of transformative learning as they can “bring attention to injustices that are created, not inherent or natural” (p. 53).

I am unable to write about anything but grief. It sneaks into everything. Every idea turns to loss and sorrow. I am afraid that I am stuck here forever. I write to ‘let it out’ and also to try to see it for what it is. I am trying to get a better view of what is holding me in this suffocating stranglehold.

Too much death budding
On the lime trees this summer
Swans glide past unmoved

This is an extract from my reflective journal, which was originally intended to be a research journal:

Darling E, I am so utterly perplexed by my own feeble mindedness. I sit patiently watching seals and imagine that it is you, trying to keep watch over me. I have started to swim further from the shore, for a place where we might once again meet against the backdrop of those big sweeps of sky. The constellation of me, no longer holds.

I can hear our Dad’s voice, muttering at the telly as he watched his favourite team being put under relentless pressure, ‘keep y’er shape, keep y’er shape’!

Today my sweet, sweet E, in spite of how it may appear to those on the outside, I have no choice but to pick up whatever straws I can clutch at and plod heavily on with my life. I am afraid to lose my shape in any small way, in case....

I fear, I am an amoeba, and if I do not cling with all of my might to this limp shape. I will dissolve into salt water ... evaporate.

Metaphor and poetry become a way of listening to this sense of anguish that was disrupting my sense of who I am, where I belong and how I make sense of my day-to-day experience.

Addressing these painful realities involves the first step of connecting to turbulent and often contradictory feelings, which “will probably never be easy to experience” because “emotional learning requires a modification, and a loosening of (...) defences” (Craib, 1994, p. 192). This was accompanied by a hunger to find new ways to try to capture the ambiguity and complexity of my surging feelings, which were volatile but often contained anger and rage. I jotted down short haiku on a continuous and random basis, attempting to capture the sense that something could no longer hold.

The river torrent
Hisses in the weir snare

Floods the path with foam.

(13 days before Eileen died)

In a process, which in many ways paralleled the helplessness of watching terminally loved ones slip beyond my reach, I felt myself drift further and further away from my original research proposal. I became unable to silence the outpourings of grief that were making their way into every aspect of my life, my dreams and subsequently took over the writing in my research journal, which became indistinguishable from my personal journal. This is fuelled by an unanticipated compulsion since my dad died, to want to reconnect, and perhaps achieve an intimacy and unencumbered sense of acceptance and love from him, which could be difficult to read when he was alive. Bizarrely, in some way it seems more possible to explore, now that he is no longer here. I am tormented by a dogged bewilderment, that in spite of fulfilling his dream of progressing my education beyond what had been achieved to date within our family, my work as an adult educator in adult literacy had both distanced him from me and disappointed him. This sense of something which has not worked out as I had imagined it would, also seemed to resonate with my own feelings of loss, disappointment and lack of purpose within my practice as a critical educator, which I cannot yet quite put words on.

There is a profound sense that the “container” (Green, 2012, p. 199) of myself has shifted in a way that I feel but cannot yet name. Green frames this as a grieving for an old self, where “the ground of assumptions upon which we construct our identities” (Green, 2012, p. 202) has shifted. Therefore, the research process and my struggle with grief was emerging as connected and situated within a potentially transformative learning process. This, in theory, flags the possibility of the inquiry opening an exploration of various forms of loss and a reconstruction of self by challenging and replacing old assumptions (Green, 2012, p. 202). But this is another horizon beyond the limits of the currents within which I am swirling.

My preoccupations increasingly are generating probing questions about the “cultural and emotional terrains that we occupy less by choice”, terrains that I have inhabited and internalised as “unconsciously as the air we breathe” (Liston & Garrison, 2004, p. 121). This brings with it the concern of opening up my lived experience and exposing myself to the risk of setting out to try to make sense of this suffering, and perhaps fail. I fear becoming trapped in a sense of grief, which makes it impossible to make any of the shifts

in awareness, understanding, attitudes, feelings or behaviours that are associated with transformative learning and which I have rated so highly in my practice as an adult educator. This also brings the challenge of engaging with the essentially messy business of moving from the safe and private intimate spaces of my journals in which such explorations were previously conducted, into a public and scholarly domain.

My intuitive understanding is that much of this experience of navigating grief would involve an “emotional-cognition, full-body knowing” (Hart, 2000, p. 39) of my lived reality. For Hart, this avoids the dichotomy within a particular tradition of western thought that emotion and cognition are “typically conceived of as “separate phenomena with intellect being the dominant of the two” (2000, p. 39). Instead I am interested in a “non-linear, non-hierarchical model of brain functioning” (Hart, 2000, p. 39), where the relationship between emotion and cognition may be complex, and interdependent.

Moving towards an unexpected shift in perspective

The Museum

I am tiptoeing around a large showcase,
I feel a burst of joy as I recognise your make-up bag.
I know it intimately,
more intimately than you would have liked.
All those forbidden trips into your room,
searching for clues about how to be a teenager.

I am curious that remnants of you,
are taking their place alongside all the dead objects,
and dead people whose voices are only whispers and echoes
in the imagination of others.

The custodian is nervous and moves closer
as he observes me placing my face down on the glass,
circling my arms around the sides of this glass box -
breathing you in.

Clinging to you,
like the night you clung to me.

I am five and you are eleven.

I live in a world of imaginary friends
and a discarded purple silk dress from my granny
which is at once a billowing sail
and a horizon.

You are troubled and unable to sleep.
You ask me what I think it will be like to die
and wonder who will die first?

I have no answers, but I promise
to tell you stories,
that I will stay awake until you are asleep,

That I now know
how death shook and rattled your surprised frame
and swept you up into a cobalt blue grip,
that I saw unimaginable suffering,
is the most burdensome and debilitating type of knowledge.

This poem was written a couple of years after my sister's death, following a very strange dream that I recorded in my reflective journal. Tisdell states that often dreams that could be described as a spiritual experience, were "those that stood out as particularly transformative" and often came when the dreamer was in the "midst of a transition" (Tisdell, 2003, p. 70). This dream seemed to herald the beginning of a transformative shift; an example of how images are a way of tapping into our subconscious where powerful emotions lie. Dirkx (2006) argues that "through the experience of emotion, teachers come to recognize what is cognitively and affectively of value to them, and who and what they are" (p. 31). This poem, which emerges out of the blue, suggests to me that Eileen's death is becoming intertwined in my search to reconnect to myself and to my practice as an adult educator, but it is not yet clear to me in what ways this might be. The arrival of this dream, at a moment when I was struggling to establish a focus for my research, created a significant shift in my emotional stance. This is an example of one of those encounters through creative expression, which lead to "non-discursive engagements [that] create space for alternative thinking" (Butterwick & Lawrence, 2023, p. 54). This cannot be explained other than by suggesting that it forced me to acknowledge the indisputable fact of her death - which I cannot articulate and express because of the enforced silence in the museum, described below.

I am curious that remnants of you,
are taking their place alongside all the dead objects,
and dead people whose voices are only whispers and echoes
in the imagination of others.

But it also suggests that there is a new space opening up, in which I can honour the full circumstances of her life and death. This vivid and strange dream about my sister shifts some internal conflict and becomes a vantage point that creates enough distance to help me to recognise a disconnection from my lived experience, and the turmoil of emotions

that arise after experiencing my sister's death. My writing is not about vulnerability, but becomes the site of vulnerability where the ground is shifting.

Although I did not recognise it immediately, over time this dream did appear to usher in a new feeling of peace, as I simultaneously explored two contradictory possibilities. Eileen's death marked the end of my tightly knit family network and was accompanied by sorrow and a silence that was orphan-like, in my sense of disconnection from the sharing of all that childhood family experience and story with anyone who was there at the time.

It also slowly began to create an open space, which allowed me a freedom to re-examine those family stories without the fear of rejection from within those relationships. As I returned to my research, my pen felt freer and I was excited at the sense of possibility. It was as if I was "living out the energy of the dream" (Tisdell, 2003, p. 70). In this case, it meant a renewed and more energised connection with the research. I began to consider it as a way of encountering my grief, while also enabling me to adopt a more critical perspective and distance that would not have been emotionally possible in the past. I began to consider it as a way to lament the passing of those relationships, but also as a way of reconnecting, revitalising and repairing relationships with myself my family and my place in the world.

Casting off – Encountering subordinate knowledge

The following haikus capture something of my internal conflict and sense of disruption as I move tentatively towards the ghosts of new questions that are more relevant in this life after bereavement. The first haiku recognised the comforting sense of stability that has underpinned my family's sense of place for at least four generations. I wrote it by chanting aloud the names of these familiar places, similar to the way in which contemplative prayers are intoned. The chanting seemed to consolidate that deep sense of connection to the people, landscapes and events that were embedded within this geography, across the lifetimes of everyone I loved.

New Ross, Inistioge
Duncannon were the edges
Of my family's world.

However the next haiku conveys a general expression of fear and speaks directly to the impending sense that this research is sweeping me into the turbulent waters of uncharted

territory. There is an anxiety that I will not be able to find my way in this new landscape. I will not be able to go back to who I am or move forward to who I might become. The haiku is the most suitable form of poetry for capturing these raw images that surface from my unconscious. It feels stripped back to a sequence of images which act as signposts for the inner emotional turmoil, which I have not yet fully identified or begun to process, and can only glimpse through images.

The lake is a calm pool
'til a gust blows with fury
How will it re-lake itself?

This unprocessed inner turmoil is borne out in my journal as I reflect on some of the demands of opening my life up to this level of scrutiny, as I prepare to present an autoethnographic account referencing my working class background.

Hiding the Mona Lisa - Opening a window on my working-class background

I was in the last stages of preparing a presentation about my progress to date on my research topic for an international doctoral seminar, to be delivered the next day. This was in the first eight months of registering as a PhD student. At the last minute, I began to hesitate and heavily edit all of the specific references that positioned me within my family background. I felt unable to include photographs of my life with my now deceased dad and recently deceased sister, which illustrated some of the socio-cultural reference points in my world. I was gripped with shame about opening my world up to such scrutiny. Tenses will change within this extract from my journal, as I begin to relive the experience and sink deeper into the reflection that is being recalled after the event. I used the italic script as a way of registering that I am moving into a different voice. This is the more intimate voice of an internal conversation, which is less guarded and infused with rawer feelings. I had at the outset considered that more of my interrogations of experience would be rendered through poetry, but the use of a reflective journal to bring the reader more directly into my internal world became increasingly useful as the inquiry progresses. It satisfies me that I am beginning to trust myself and the reader more, as I bring them closer to who I am and what I am feeling.

I had worked my presentation endlessly and could not decide on whether to keep the autobiographical piece with references and photos of home and some of our cultural literacy practices. At the last minute, I deleted them. I can't explain why, but it felt like something had

imploded. It was as if I had hit my own delete button. I stared at a photograph of our living room wall where a reproduction of the Mona Lisa was clearly displayed, opposite the wall of cluttered photos of the various family milestones. The uncomplicated way Mam liked to think of our lives.



The Mona Lisa

I feel such tenderness towards it and yet I am also horrified. I see it as ridiculous and also as something that I want to protect from ridicule. It is not that I am unaware of the layered ironies of a symbol of the cultural capitalist art market being revered in our working class home. But I am filled with a new sense of shame and vulnerability, that all of these people in the conference room will see inside the intimacy of my house where I grew up. They will see that we were not poor...but struggling, poorly educated and with misunderstood middle class aspirations.

I feel such shame that this is whom I am, and simultaneously such anger that I am not able to rise above these feelings. I am also stricken that I am letting down all of the people who have loved me the most and supported me completely to stand in this room with these people. I am despicable. I am unravelling and I am about to unravel further in front of everyone. My pen leaks. I keep rubbing black ink into my face from my leaked pen. The information technology system goes down. My nose bleeds. Grief comes flooding in. I recognise that I am not being rational, but I cannot help wondering if my sister died prematurely because the three of them could not live apart from each other. It felt less like they had died, and more like they had just left me behind. A voice of 'shame' starts to drown out any attempt to connect with reality. I visualised all of the people who would be more suited to attend in my place, and the strong contribution they would make. I am dispossessed. All around me, I see people who are focused on important questions of social justice. These were front line workers who were, for example, meeting refugees or victims of domestic violence, all people who were dealing with human misery and suffering in a raw way. I was talking about grief and loss, being working class and teaching adult literacy tutors. My life felt small, irrelevant and less connected to anything important. A bit self-indulgent. A bit like a first world problem. I seem to have lost my sense of direction completely. Maybe I should give this up if I don't have anything worth saying?

I am silenced.

While this reflective journal extract does not attempt to grapple with my contradictory feelings of shame and tenderness towards my family, it does surface them, and opens the inquiry to consider the question raised by Boler (1999) of “how are people taught to internalize guilt, shame, and fear as ways of guiding “appropriate” social conduct?” (1999, p. 4). It also raises questions, for the first time, about the collision between the shame that I so starkly felt towards my family, and my feelings of inferiority about my ability to take my place in the academic community. This marked a necessary first step in allowing me to move beyond my initial perspective of explaining it exclusively as my fault and that I am ‘despicable’ as a daughter. This is described by Greene (2000) as making the shift from “treating the world as predefined and given” which allows the “given or taken-for-granted [... to be] subject to questioning” (p. 23). It signals the possibility of examining how emotions “reflect linguistically-embedded cultural values and rules” (Boler, 1999, p. 6) with a view to considering these contradictions within my experience as sites for exploring “power and resistance” (p. 6).

This became particularly relevant as I was also aware that the above account is at the same time true and untrue. I was feeling ashamed of my family and background, and yet I know that I am also very proud of them. I am not really convinced that there are grounds to feel ashamed of these noble people, and yet I am uneasy and embarrassed to bring our lives into this academic domain for scrutiny. Grief amplifies this contradiction and forces me to acknowledge that there is something not quite right between what I am feeling, saying and what I actually believed. I knew that there was no valid reason to be ashamed of these people who I admired and loved. I am grappling to move both outwards to grasp those general socio-cultural forces that have brought me here, and how they intersect with the particularities of being Geraldine.

I am drawn to the idea that we can identify our internal emotions by examining emotional reactions and responses in terms of our daily interactions and habits (Boler, 1999). I have always been drawn to poetry, which is at essence often drawn to those small details of our day-to-day experience, which are emotionally laden, and can pass us by. Poetry is my way for expanding upon those instances, which tug at my attention, and reveal more than what is immediately visible. I can see how paying attention to these emotional pulls through creative expression, is a way of problematising those familiar and unquestioned ‘givens’ of

life, which do not serve us well. I become increasingly comfortable with poetry as a way of disrupting habits that “come to feel like one’s chosen self and identity, but they are in fact as much social and cultural as they are personal” (Liston & Garrison, 2004, p. 122). I am troubled by these ambivalent and contradictory feelings about the dignity and value of my childhood and family background. I am also disappointed to discover the extent to which I feel so shaky about my contribution as an academic and adult education practitioner. When and how did I collude with a process that has ultimately exerted an influence over me to place so little value on my own lived experience and the people I loved with all of my heart? And where did I learn to hold all of this in unexamined silence?

The dream also marked the beginning of new understanding of this suffering as connected to my deep engagement with what could be called a subordinate knowledge about death - a knowledge which is deep inside us and which we are often resistant to surface, because it is at variance to the dominant discourses around us, within the public domain. This form of knowledge niggled, because I was unable or unwilling to put it into words. I am left not knowing what to do with it. Freire acknowledged that “recognizing our own internal oppressor and oppression is integral to our ability to name our world and to combatting oppression in the world” (O’Brien, 2013, p. 16). This means that we must be ready to read the world, by inviting into our lives a level of pain and confusion that can often accompany the naming of our reality. This is much easier to imagine than to do. We do not always know how to respond to this suffering, which can cause us to isolate or close down, rather than opening us up to a critical dialogue with others which can help us to grow as people by “speaking and acting with the other towards their and our own humanization” (O’Brien, 2013, p. 18).

One of the most wounding aspects of witnessing death was that it was accompanied with unexpected suffering and a knowledge that I did not know what to do with. My experience was at complete variance with what everyone wanted to believe about the transition between life and death, those gentle phrases which were used to describe the transition between life and death, like ‘slipping away’, ‘easing out’, ‘passing’. My dad’s death was the first experience of witnessing active dying, and it left me unable to make sense of it. I felt that there was an unspoken assumption to remain silent about it and to become complicit in complying with these “socially enforced rules of power” (Boler, 1999, p. 4). This silent knowing that could not be expressed in a public space became a burden and aggravated the grieving process.

That I saw incomprehensible suffering
Is the most burdensome and debilitating type of knowledge.

This form of knowledge often resides within the private domain that lies “outside the province of the politically governed, public spaces constructed and inhabited by men” (Boler, 1999, p. 6). It can be difficult to access because of its tacit or intuitive nature. It is also the type of knowledge that because of its challenge to dominant public discourses, demands a willingness to tolerate vulnerability and incurs personal risk for those who raise it. However, the relationship that the reflective practitioner has with this form of knowledge, which is held within the private domain and is emotionally disturbing and puzzling, is of specific interest within this research. This subordinated knowing felt one of the more risky dimensions of creating this doctorate. It is impossible to know how those we love, work with and depend upon in our personal life will react to it. It has the potential not only to disrupt how we view ourselves, but also how others might view us in various roles, precisely because it also challenges some of the emotional rules which determine what emotions are acceptable to interrogate and examine in their particularity, as we embody them in our daily lives (Boler, 1999).

I was painfully aware that witnessing the death of a loved one is a very sensitive and highly individualised experience, which could, in its representation of my experience, create harm for all of those who mourn this loss. I am also aware that my responses to being with loved ones who are dying are also heightened because of the proximity of the two deaths of my beloveds. My intention was not only to commemorate the lives and deaths of my beloveds, but also to try to create conditions that would make it possible to discuss those aspects of death that are considered inappropriate for public spaces. This appeared more important as I participated in a number of meetings of the ‘Death Café movement’, which sets out to increase awareness of death so that people might live more fully. I spent considerable time thinking through the ethical implications of how I might do this.

This also gave me a starting point for considering how to proceed with my deceased beloveds, in so far as I would begin by imagining how I might behave towards them if they were alive and approach our relationship in death with similar care. This was not to overlook how significantly more complicated this was because they could not give their consent. This increased the urgency of ensuring that “accountability and care were situated

at the centre” (Edwards, 2021, p. 2) of the research. In common with O’Neill (2015), I considered that ethics is something that we live out in our day-to-day lives and I bring this sensitivity of love and respect to my attempt to navigate a life changing experience of loss in death.

Dying

My experience of death is mapped through a very simple haiku, which emerged fully formed in my mind in the final hours of witnessing dying. There is nothing that can prepare us for the unique experience that accompanies each death of a loved one.

This space became, in many ways, the beginning of a renewed search for meaning, and changed my sense of what was important among those questions that I had been asking over my professional life. The intimate encounter with the physicality and repulsiveness of a body dying, wiped out my sense of safety, and opened up troubling questions about living a meaningful life. I was also vaguely tormented by a sense of the long days and years that I had spent working and being absent from my family.

Window rain - scattering
Drops down their rain paths - ‘til they
STOP. The journey’s end.

All of my previous experience of these moments would have been in the presence of another member of my family, who would have filled these last hours with prayers and rosaries. There was no such presence in this case. I did not know how to be in this space of letting go. I began to focus on the rain running down the window, while also being disturbed at my apparent detachment. I became completely engrossed in intoning each line of the above poem, over and over again until the rhythm settled with me. This haiku is perhaps the moment where I am most disconnected from my feeling body. It is the space in which I am unconsciously disconnecting from this burdensome knowledge which I can feel within me but which I am refusing to process consciously. The haiku is not a search to express, but a search to detach and an attempt to record and document rain falling down a window, a focus that helped me to manage feelings of distress that could have overwhelmed me. As Tamas (2009) points out, there is the contradiction of sounding coherent in those moments when we are least coherent. We are, according to Tamas in those moments “standing outside and above ourselves” (2009, para 10). We are talking

about trauma but “our narrative voice seems to have it all worked out” (Tamas, 2009, para 10).

This corresponded to a period, where I had the most concerns about the feasibility of using my experience of grief as part of the research methodology. I was afraid of, knowingly or unknowingly, sanitising or filtering these experiences in order to comply with a sense of what is appropriate as scholarly work in order to “communicate effectively and look smart or at least not pathetic and crazy” (Tamas, 2009, para 11). It brought me back to a comment from one of my students who complained that each time she brought herself, her whole self into her essays, the person that she recognised as herself, she ended up losing marks.

The reality of how death unfolds was the most difficult to carry, and the thing that I was totally unprepared for. My knowledge was limited to the dominant ideology of people slipping away into oblivion or not waking from sleep. No other possibility or any of the different stages of dying were ever discussed. Accordingly, I felt compelled not to bring my distress to anyone’s attention, as it seemed unfair to burden someone with a type of knowledge that may arouse fear and distress in others, without giving them any way to address it. Greene reminds us that we are, however, losing new possibilities if we are not paying attention to our “unexamined common sense” (2000, p. 23). Conversations about the processes of death seemed to belong to that form of knowledge that is brushed to one side as unexamined common sense, which requires no further explanation, as it is part of the life cycle.

Craib problematises this type of experience where we become what society expects us to be, as the gingerbread man syndrome. This is where society turns people into the “the sort of person - the gingerbread persons - that it seems to need” (1994, p. 11). In the case of death, the gingerbread person is the person who colludes with a common sense approach to death, which assumes that it is unproblematic, natural and requires no discussion. In the first instance, I became the ‘gingerbread man’ by trying to disconnect from my own sense of fear at the contemplation of my own death and anger at the devastating loss that these deaths had left. This was not what we had been promised or expected; it brought me to a threshold of dread at the contemplation of my own death. I attempted to talk to a professional for help who advised me to return in six months when my feelings were less raw. I sensed that she could not hold my grief and I leave feeling ashamed. Am I

overreacting? Am I emotionally out of control? I feel ashamed and I leave, returned to my silence. It proved very difficult to find somewhere that welcomed a real engagement with the questions which witnessing dying, had raised.

This inner conflict shifts unexpectedly within the dream, and seems to create a space, in which I gain a certain distance from this trauma and became more ready to begin to intrude into this silence, by seeing the possibility of making new meanings and connections between my research and grief.

The fact that I could not process the research any further until I had paid attention to the poem “Museum”, suggested some form of opening, or way of being with this troubling knowledge that did not overwhelm me. Instead, there is a sense of being able to reconsider it, and perhaps bring other perspectives to it. Greene refers to as a moment when we are willing to view ourselves “in the midst of things, as beginner or learner or explorer and has the imagination to envisage new things emerging, more and more begins to seem possible” (2000, p. 22).

I am curious that remnants of you,
are taking their place alongside all the dead objects,
and dead people whose voices are only whispers and echoes
in the imagination of others.

I began to recognise that in spite of the weariness and turmoil I felt within this poem, there was an emerging desire to put myself at some distance from my experiences of death and if not explore, at least learn to be with it in the fullness of the anger, fear and disappointment it has aroused. The focus of my attention, which was up to this on a feeling of being overwhelmed, has now been shifted unexpectedly to an awareness of those moments where there is more tranquillity. “Museum” feels like a poem that gives me permission to trust this new and surprising direction that suggests that my life and my research can inform each other in a way that enriches both.

Dying in our classrooms

Grief had without doubt accentuated my previous feelings of disconnection. Overtime this did deepen my connection with my students, who often arrive in class struggling with similar feelings. My students also work in precarious and difficult situations which were often at variance with their values and aspirations, as well as managing all of the

complexities of being alive. There were many occasions around this time when I sensed that the room was charged, not with negativity or cynicism, but with our shared sense of the harshness and suffering that is generated by the very fact of being alive. There was on these occasions a flow of energy between us that felt weary. In that regard, the experience of loss and grief levelled the playing pitch between us even more, but this felt at variance with my need to bring energy and conviction into this learning space.

Feeling so dispirited was deeply challenging to my commitment as the educator who was trying and failing to hold the emotional space in a classroom. It forced me to reconsider my understanding of what it means to share power with my learners and put into practice the belief that “there are neither utter ignoramuses nor perfect sages; there are only people who are attempting, together, to learn more than they now know” (Freire, 1996, p. 71).

While I welcomed them into the classroom and thought of the long day that we would be sharing together, I was also trying to work out how I could manage this dilemma of feeling dispirited with the world. For adult educators this can be particularly troublesome, because we are committed to holding an emotional space that has conviction and hope for a better world. Many of us are people of vision who have deep rooted beliefs in bringing about a more equal and fair world, in spite of all of the difficulties that holding such a position brings. Horton and Freire argue that as adult educators we not only have to meet our students where they are, but we must also know in what way we want to help them to grow, which demands that we “have some vision of what ought to be or what they can become” (1990, p. 100). Freire describes this as a conviction that the “power to create and transform, even when thwarted in concrete situations, tends to be reborn” (1996, p. 72). Without this “faith in people” (p. 72) there can be no real dialogue, because there will be a gap between what we say and how we are communicating and acting, and “dialogue is a farce which inevitably degenerates into paternalistic manipulation” (Freire, 1996, p. 72).

The problem was that I was questioning my own belief in myself and my “creative power” (Freire, 1996, p. 56) to challenge my reality. Students will always sense an obvious discrepancy between what we are saying as educators and the vision of hope and transformation we are inviting them to participate in. This type of dishonest communication will damage the trust or faith that students have in the vision that we are communicating. Freire develops this further by arguing that “faith in humankind is an *a priori* requirement for dialogue” (Freire, 1996, p. 72). This further challenges us, as we

cannot just adopt a stance whereby we can seal ourselves and our students into a classroom, where the multi-layered suffering and disappointment of society cannot pervade. As adult educators we must embody a deeply human response to the world, which means that we must love the world, for “if I do not love the world - if I do not love life - if I do not love people- I cannot enter into dialogue” (Freire, 1996, p. 71). If, as adult educators, we are experiencing situations within or outside of our learning spaces that are leaving us despondent, disillusioned or exhausted, there can be a contradiction between who we are and who we need to be. One way through this ‘stuckness’ is to try to find ways to open up real dialogue with our students where our lived realities can become part of critical dialogues which help us all to live better with these harsh realities. Therefore, as adult educators we cannot pretend to be feeling more hopeful than we are, nor can we switch it on like a tap. This raises questions of what do we do with this unwelcome knowledge about the gap between the world we are trying to work towards creating, and the one we are experiencing. When we are disappointed and disillusioned, whether that comes from our educational centre, from our experience with the relentless bleakness of world politics, or in this case the witnessing of the death of a loved one, we will struggle to hold the kind of space that is required of adult educators.

Handing the classroom over to students – Creating a generative space

The nature of the relationship between how we experience our own transformative learning, and how we can use this knowledge to enrich our approaches to creating transformative learning opportunities, cannot be grasped in a linear way. But creative expression can nurture their connection to take shape in our awareness. I was contemplating where this strange series of eruptions now left me, when an experience which had happened previously in a classroom, entered my awareness. Butterwick and Lawrence (2023) suggest that sometimes we can have “had transformative experiences in [our] past, but [we] did not have the language to describe them as such” (p. 54). However, by engaging creative expression we can reconnect with this experience and get a better understanding of it retrospectively. I felt strongly that the fragmented experiences discussed above, prompted this pedagogical activity from the past to return to me. Its reappearance in my awareness became a way of helping me to move forward with a better sense of what had shifted as a result of these experiences. On the occasion of its reappearance, it contained meanings which were not available to me at the time that it occurred in my classroom, but which now opened up feelings, impulses and conversations about breaking the invisible boundaries of what we are entitled to feel and to say which

silences us. I subsequently developed and explored a range of ways to expanded upon this activity in many other learning spaces, to encourage an opening into a dialogue that was rooted in our day-to-day experiences.

I know when I am feeling very comfortable with myself and my students because my pedagogy becomes very responsive, that is, it becomes increasingly informed by intuition, hunches and creative leaps into the unknown. I remember feeling that there was something going on in the room, as I began the opening session with my students. I felt that they were going through the motions of participating. There was something that was not being said.

On the spur of the moment, I abandoned my second session on the lesson plan and decided to call each person's name, as a prompt to say anything that they wanted to say about how they were feeling at that moment about working in their classrooms. In order to remove the feelings of awkwardness or overthinking, I increased the pace and continued a 'round robin' around the classroom several times. On each occasion, participants became more spontaneous and freer and began to take pleasure in just saying it as it was. Someone hesitated and then shouted "I am feckin' unreal". This introduced new possibilities as the language of the classroom extended to include more of their day-to-day spoken language, outside of the classroom. As people became more engaged, the space between utterances became shorter until it resembled the kinds of rhymes that accompanied skipping games. This meant that the students automatically adjusted their comments to phrases which did not interfere with the pace and sense of rhyme.

This spontaneous, unplanned intervention seemed to make itself and just emerged from within my practice. Therefore, I had no taped or written record of it, except the handout that I created for the group afterwards and which I developed into a teaching resource. As the facilitator, I was not in a position to take notes as it was unfolding. I too was absorbed in it. Later that evening at home, I jotted down those phrases which had stuck with me and typed them up as two distinct experiences. The following day, I read them back to the group, to remind them of the richness and contradictions of the diverse experiences and realities that were in the classroom, and that constituted our lives and work as adult educators. As I repeated this exercise with other classes, I continued to add comments to the original comments, which I have gathered from across a range of workshops, classes and residential tutor development sessions, to produce this version of amended collective

expression. In the interest of maintaining confidentiality, I have altered any expressions that might be associated with any one individual.

Voice of passion

I am on fire.
I feel that I cannot put a foot wrong.
I am a high wire artist and can take risks.
Everything that happens we talk about it, laugh at it, learn from it.
The room is light up.
Everyone has ideas about what needs to happen.
Someone always has a solution.
I stand back as learners try out flight paths.
My head is fizzing.
I can see ways of doing exactly what learners need,
and still cover the curriculum.
I am really getting to know my learners.
I am feckin' unreal.
I feel that we matter to each other.
Our conversations flow.
Our lives, our work, our dreams,
weave us together.
We are all hungry to be there.
I feel my way through the lesson plan,
sensing what is needed.
I see our classroom against a big open sky.

Voice of weariness

It all feels out of control.
I only got two hours work this term.
I get through what I can, in the time I have.
Bums on seats, money in coffers.
I am forced to slot students into levels that mean they fail.
My dad dropped dead last August.
The classroom works - but out there nothing changes for them.
The system works to satisfy itself.
My youngest is refusing to go to school.
Students with specific difficulties are seen as a nuisance.
I am monitoring a welfare scheme that condemns people to live in poverty.
There isn't even a table in the house.
I teach things and none of us value them.
A student threw a chair at another student and shouted racist abuse.
I hate when my learners quietly go along with this system,
Because neither of us feel we can fight it.
Two of my kids are now back at home and can't find work.
My work is invisible and does not count once forms are filled.
I have no time to think or plan.

I think about my learners but no-one thinks of me.
It feels like we are back in the system that failed them as children.
I am fed up.

Groups were generally surprised that they had revealed so much about the reality of their lives, and were interested that it had made them feel more powerful and energised, even though more than half of it was naming what was difficult about their jobs.

While this was a spontaneous activity that I embarked on because it felt right, I did not have at the time, a firm sense of why. However, the overall change in the classroom was palpable - the energy in the room had lifted and it had raised my energy also. In retrospect, I realised that I did not join in the activity and wondered if that was a way of giving students the power to take ownership of the emotional space in the classroom, or had it been a way of allowing me to conceal how I was feeling. Either way, there was a positive outcome in allowing the students to raise the energy level in a way that I could not have done, and challenging me to share that emotional responsibility with my students. It also fuelled interest in a following discussion about the macro-influences that were shaping the learning space.

Later, when reflecting in my learning journal, I recalled this activity and tried to arrive at a clearer understanding of the power of naming what is going on for us, even if we do not at that time have a way of challenging the concrete circumstances with practical actions that give rise to it. As Freire states “to speak a true word is to transform the world, saying that word is not the privilege of some few persons, but the right of everyone” (Freire, 1996, p. 68). This could also be valued as an important step in liberating ourselves from the deadening silence that accompanies it, and also locates the cause of the problem outside of ourselves and in the material world where it belongs. It highlighted the importance of being able to name our disappointment and celebrations, as essential for all critical adult educators. It strengthened my conviction about the necessity of creating these safe and open spaces for practitioners to generate knowledge about the circumstances of their lived experience. It acknowledged that our experience of being in the world fundamentally shapes our pedagogy, sometimes in ways that challenge our convictions to believe in the transformative power of education in face of relentless human suffering.

From the above responses, I noticed patterns of pedagogical experience among the students, which were shaped by their lived realities inside and outside of the classroom,

which moved along a spectrum of fading and strengthening hope and conviction. This simple activity created a space that honoured the lived realities of these students and encouraged them to break the silence and say what feels almost unsayable, in words that they recognised as their own. This meant in many cases being able to name that which institutional power relationships put beyond discussion, behind a wall of silence. This generated a map of the dynamic continuum of emotions that constitute the life of an adult educator. At one end of the spectrum, there is a cluster of experiences around feelings of self-doubt, disconnection and weariness, which correspond to feelings of overwhelm or disillusionment with what we can achieve, or the possibility of bringing about any real change in the lives of our students. I called this the voice of weariness. At the other end of the spectrum, there are feelings of passion and conviction, where we can see that we are making a difference and are relishing being with other learners and peers who share this sense of agency. I named this the voice of passion. The students recognised the movement over and back between these two positions that accompanied their search to create safe and potent learning spaces for themselves and their students on an ongoing basis. We create spaces where we can build an intimacy with ourselves and our students, which nurtures conversations about our wholeness and wellbeing.

Breaking the silence of the adult educator in the student-teacher relationship

As I reflected on this activity, I could now see more of its transformative quality, which, I could not express then when I first conducted this activity in my classroom. As I moved through the particular process described above, I became aware of a deep silence that had bound me up on those occasions when I encountered what I called subordinate knowledge and the troublesome feelings embodied within me. I recognised a silenced voice within me, which longs to speak more openly about the human experience of being an adult educator and also to speak against another voice that can be heard in those extracts from practitioners. This voice views teaching as a technical, rational activity, disconnected from the lived experience of the practitioner. These voices of the students are not just expressing fleeting feelings in response to the unpredictable situations that can arise in the classroom. These are deeper feelings that are connected to how we are in the world and our sense of hope and of agency for ourselves and our students.

My reflections on the above experience, for all of their limitations, undoubtedly left me feeling uplifted and more inclined to trust my unanticipated pedagogical responses. I

subsequently began to feel uncomfortable with my own participation in this exercise. Given that these deep and most troublesome feelings of disappointment can last for weeks, months and years, I had failed to take any ownership of my reality in this learning space, while it is true that I was absorbed in the facilitation of an exercise that I was creating in the moment. This provides a strong reason for team-teaching, which allows both adult educators to take turns in participating and facilitating, as distinct roles. But it was also true that there was a momentum within the pace of the activity that could have allowed me to engage in a spontaneous contribution. There was on my part, a reluctance to behave in a way, which could clash with an unexamined belief that professionalism demanded an emotional neutrality. This was embedded in deep-rooted fears. I had a lack of trust in my spontaneous self, a worry that I might become more fully myself, and in that spontaneity, reveal myself as an unworthy adult educator. In the light of such fears, I had returned to the safety of a belief system which encourages us to view educators as ‘empty vessels’, capable of effortlessly holding the complex and emotionally challenging experiences of their students.

Some of this fear to enter into this emotional landscape, however briefly, was also the knowledge that these displays of more dispirited emotions are particularly troublesome to some forms of management. They are viewed as negative, and the voicing of these concerns by either students or teachers, are discouraged in public. This carries the perspective that problems in the classroom are substantially the failure of the teacher and poor classroom techniques. This is symptomatic of an approach that blames teachers for not managing their classrooms through incompetence or indifference. They are viewed as failing in their duty to “adjust these ‘incompetent and lazy’ folk to [society’s] own patterns by changing their mentality. These marginals need to be ‘integrated’, ‘incorporated’ into the healthy society they have ‘forsaken’” (Freire, 1996, p. 55). The emphasis is on providing the type of training that sets out to correct teacher behaviour so that they can perform more effectively within this ‘functioning’ environment and concentrate on depositing knowledge in students (Freire, 1996). This diminishes our ability to acknowledge those harsher realities of our classroom associated with being human, and working within adverse systems that cannot be addressed by acquiring new teaching skills or classroom management techniques. This is the type of knowledge that aggravated my doubts about how to inhabit my classroom space, created a weariness and caused me to mistrust my experiences, impulses and intuitions. If our classrooms are to be spaces where we can learn more about how to become more fully human, it is essential that there are

spaces where we can name those most uncomfortable realities that diminish the human dimension to our work as adult educators.

This means that dialogue between students and educators, as well as between students and between educators, is essential, leaving me with no choice but to confront what I am hiding, why and from whom? This form of knowledge was painful to encounter, and was far from being resolved, but raised new questions to explore. If we are not sharing and exploring these real feelings about how it is to be an adult educator with our students, are we in fact colluding with a false reality? It also seemed to me that it would make it almost impossible to keep our practice alive and aligned to a vision with some hope for change, if we are not representing our experience, the challenges and joys of the work. We are then culpable of using false words to name false worlds. This knowledge generated difficult feelings within me. It challenged me to consider what it meant to create true dialogue with students where both are positioned more equally in relation to each other, without compromising the responsibility of the adult educator to nurture and hold that space. It also raised difficult questions about how as adult educators, we can acknowledge with our students, those challenges that we must navigate in our lives, in our search to live better, and make the world a fairer and more compassionate place. While I feel very connected to hunches and intuitive insights to engage students, I feel disconnected from either intuition or impulse to guide me towards including my own voice.

This became particularly problematic to me. As I reflected on my role in facilitating the student activity in my classroom, it struck me that I was living out a contradiction. I was and am committed to encouraging students to feel free to name their lived realities, including those feelings and experiences that are troublesome, and which are silenced by social power relationships. But I was forced to face my own reluctance and shame, of naming who I am and where I have come from, among my peers or with my students. It seemed to me that I felt safer when I did not have to expose myself and could retreat behind a facilitation role. Therefore, it seemed significant that it did not occur to me to join this activity with them. I wondered how students perceived this reticence. I am forced to dwell with the heavy knowledge that I have spent so many years of my practice as an adult educator, embedded in a silence about who I am, and hesitant to bring my full self, including my background, and all of my intuitions and impulses into the classroom. I am left to consider what kind of blocks and restraints this has generated within my pedagogy. I have not yet framed this in terms that give me new possibilities of how to move forward.

Later in the research, it becomes clearer to me that this presupposes that the adult educator is confronting their own internalised oppressive narratives that can get in the way of being able to engage in such a dialogue.

It did however increase my confidence about the value of bringing this intimate connection with my disturbed world and worldview, to the public attention of other adult educators. I began to feel a shift in my mood, which becomes a little lighter and more energised even though I am caught in this dialectic of grief, death and birth. I can see that my research is committed to encountering real questions and concerns that I am grappling with in my life and that I deeply care about.

Swifts spinning airborne
through the lengthening shadows,
too full of song to nest.

Our growth as adult educators demands an awareness of how we navigate the world, which also determines our ability to hold hope for our students and hold the space to encounter their struggles and resistances. I imagine possibilities for exploring the complexities of the classroom, in terms of the shared humanity of the teacher and students. This means teachers and students exploring what it means to become more fully human, by acknowledging the dialectical relationship between the “determination of limits” (Freire, 1996, p. 80) and our “freedom” (p. 80). Therefore teachers and students are both “simultaneously teachers and students” (Freire, 1996, p. 53) and the lived reality of both educator and student must inform part of the curriculum.

Conclusion

Therefore fragments of separate conversations about various forms of grief and loss in my personal and professional life were enriched by drawing on more subordinate ways of generating knowledge through poetry and dream. Eventually I embrace this emotional turmoil, by representing it through metaphor and poetry; these initially separate conversations became fused, and illuminated each other with a unified sense of grief and suffering. They became linked on the level of powerful feelings, as well as of shared questions and concerns, which challenged the artificial dichotomy between the personal and professional search for meaning. This and raised questions about how we might live with forms of suffering that cannot be denied or easily resolved. Generating poetry to encounter experience was not only a way of extending my perspectives to provide useful

insights for a deeper and more critical reflection, but also a way of revitalising my sense of being as I moved from a “thinking observer to a connected, present, aware participant” in the world (Hart, 2000, p. 35).

I recognised that there is another shared dimension of feeling between all of the experiences, in that they register my deep frustration with a silenced voice within me, which longs to speak more openly about the human experience of being an adult educator. This recognises the relationship between subordinate knowledge and the socio-cultural power relations that shape it. This is particularly relevant in terms of the shame that I feel about my working class background, and my participation within the academic community. The recall of a spontaneous activity in my learning space surfaces disturbing feelings and generates a radical subordinate knowledge that in many ways I am living out a contradiction as an adult educator. This contradiction was between my commitment and yearning to create human spaces where students are supported to name their complex and difficult lived realities of trying to live and work well as adult educators, and my fear to reciprocate this process on a more equal basis with students in the classroom. This was a contradiction fuelled by an as yet unexamined orientation, to hide where I had come from and who I might become, if it meant engaging with my deepest feelings and becoming freer to follow my impulses and intuitions. Later in the research, I will reframe this barrier as confronting internalised oppressive silences as essential, if I am to be more fully alive and more fully myself in the classroom, while nurturing and holding a generative space for adult educator practitioners where they can do the same. I left this chapter with new possibilities for the focus of the inquiry, a more intimate experience of the fragmented nature of my transformative learning processes, but most of all a deep connection that this research is rooted within my lived and felt experience.

Chapter Three: Letting go of a research focus – Moving into the heart

Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss how using a writing as inquiry approach, plays a significant role in the reframing of my research proposal. However I realise that in this process of reframing, I had been learning about and embodying the very process that would play a significant role in informing my methodology. This involves engaging with the use of poetry “a language that researchers want to access when they feel that traditional modes of representation, such as prose, will not capture what they desire to show about their work and research participants” (Faulkner, 2005, p. 3). In my case, it was a way of engaging holistically with embodied and stirring feelings about how to write into my experience to come to know them in an unexpected and vivid way.

Haikus helped me to begin to generate a different type of writing practice for opening up the research process which was strongly intuitive, deeply embodied and intelligible, but often just on the perimeter of language. Writing allowed me render powerful feelings more explicit and helped me to take more ownership of the research; trust my intuitive responses to problem solving; deepen my insights into researcher reflexivity and generate more satisfying and creative responses to problems that arose within the research. But more importantly in this section, I discuss how I come to trust myself and my intuition more, as well as how I learned to live and work with a methodology that emerged as I encountered each significant experience and puzzled anew as to how to encounter it with the hope of gaining new perspectives.

In praise of not always knowing what we are doing – ‘There’s many the slip between the cup and the lip’

As new and more immediate questions surfaced which reflected this new world of ‘falling out of meaning’, I become increasingly troubled by the framing of my original research proposal. My original question was ‘What is really going on in transformative learning in adult education teacher-education programmes - mapping the role of the affective domain in the pedagogy of transformative learning from a teacher-educator perspective’. This proposed a cooperative inquiry into how my adult educator colleagues, in the Literacy Development Centre, experienced the role of the affective domain in their practice. It concluded with a Gant chart in an attempt to be logical and clear. I thought of it as my road map that was going to keep me on track to complete the PhD in four years. Over

time, I reframe my research question in a way that would allow me to respond to and expand upon these new lines of interest that are emerging. The new title evolves to become, *'And catch the heart off guard and blow it open' - A critical reflection navigating grief, loss and disappointment, to illuminate ruptures between autobiography, practices and values as a critical and care oriented adult educator.*' This new title signposted how this autoethnographic inquiry had now become a work from the heart. This laid the foundation of what became an intensely personal work.

My initial instinct had been to disregard the process by which I reframed this proposal, and begin this chapter from my new point of departure. But my desire to lay bare the messy and uncertain process of trying to get to grips with the shift in my research focus, is compatible with my intention to use writing as a way of capturing the agony of not knowing. I wanted to avoid the impulse to pretend that I knew where I would end up from the start. Finally, I wanted to expose the process of writing in a way that can show us, what we do not know and how we come to know what we know. These ideas were central to creating the emerging methodology that has guided this research. It sparks an excitement for experimenting with different forms of writing that I felt strongly connected to, and in some strange way at home with. Much of this writing is in response to uneasy hunches and feelings. While there are no instant solutions or easy answers to knotted problems, writing identifies, and in some cases releases, restraints inside me, so that I no longer feel trapped in a particular perspective or in jaded thought patterns.

Journeying from 'doing research to living research' – Methodology and methods

Both the reworking of my research focus and methodology, and a series of grief and bereavement experiences, shared a sense of being somehow 'caught off guard'. There were similarities between the way in which my previous thirty years of actively participating in academic life, seemed to leave me astonishingly poorly prepared to encounter this particular form of scholarly inquiry, and my inability to arrest any familiar reference points, from my previous experiences of death, to help me in this present situation. Cixous (1997) reminds us that "At no moment can a previous bereavement serve as a model. It is, frightfully, all new" (p. 9). However for the bereavements, this sense of being thrown was all encompassing and resonated with Cixous (1997), who explains that "When an event arrives which evicts us from ourselves, we do not know how to 'live'. But we must" (p. 9).

It corresponded with a gradual but significant recognition that I was not ‘doing research’, but ‘living the research’. I began to note in my journal that the ‘I’ of the research and the ‘I’ of the classroom were raising similar questions of their research and of their life. I could no longer distinguish between where my research ended and where my life began. I searched for ways of expressing this deep sense of dislocation. This was a rich, messy and inspirational process, which allowed me to grasp a new understanding of my researcher/practitioner self, as “instrument”, rather than “the survey, the questionnaire, or the census tape” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 960). This required me to adopt a position of attentiveness and willingness to seek to enter “lived experiences with a creative openness to people and experiences and understandings” (Leggo, 2008, p. 168)

My understanding that whatever is needed to gain entry into this ‘research material’ is living or dying within me – ‘I am it’, heightens my sensitivity to an artificial distinction between methodology and methods within the thesis. While I recognise their distinct meanings, like Fraser, I agree that this research combines both (Fraser, 2018, p. 83). If I am the ‘tool’, then my ontological and epistemological positioning and questioning underpinning this research, would not be confined to one section of the thesis. The process of developing ways of accessing and representing this fragile and intuitive knowledge, would be a challenge for each section, and required imaginative attunements to the particularities of what I was seeking to know. This means that each section of the PhD can be considered as “research techniques” (p. 83) while simultaneously maintaining a conversation “within the broader ontological and epistemological frames of reference that underpin the whole” (p. 83) and becomes possible through a writing as inquiry approach (p. 84).

Writing as inquiry - The resonant voice and authenticity

This journey of reframing was supported and linked to a writing as inquiry approach, which has been well mapped by Richardson (2000), and (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2008) which I discovered retrospectively. This means that I discovered a form of writing that is not a matter of reporting on what I know, but see it as engaging cognitively, emotionally and in an embodied way with learning, as I write into the unknown. This allows me to write across time and into deeply embodied experiences.

However, this was shadowed with an awareness that while I struggled to come as close as I could to express authentically how it is for me in a given moment, I do not believe that

there is a unique, single and unchanging self. Instead, I would argue that language “constructs one’s subjectivity in ways that are historically and locally specific” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 961). Therefore, there are multiple selves that constitute and are constituted by language. There is something however, that makes me baulk at handing everything over to language, and denying the possibility of a human spirit. I find it hard to accept that there is no interiority and that the construction of our selfhood is dependent on the discourses available to us. When I use a writing as inquiry approach, there is something in me that resists the idea that “what something means to individuals is dependent on the discourses available to them” (p. 961), although I do explore later in the research, the extent to which our access to subordinating or emancipatory literacy practices, can play a part in shaping our ability to imagine our future and our dreams.

In this sense, writing has been very useful for me as a way of “Understanding language as competing discourses - competing ways of giving meaning and of re-organizing the world - makes language a site of exploration and struggle” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 961). Different writing models have allowed me to experience moments of epiphany (Denzin, 2014), and moments of compassion and connection with others and the world around me (Lawrence, quoted in Lawrence, 2008, p. 67). This led me to Elbow’s identification of the resonant voice or presence (1994, p. 16), where he goes beyond the more contested celebration of the sincere voice as one where speakers “really, really believe” what they are saying” (1994, p. 17).

He imagines a voice which is rarely achieved, but one which goes well beyond discourse which can never “fully express or articulate a whole person” (Elbow, 1994, p. 18). Instead, he explores those occasions when the speaker experiences a “fit between intention and conscious thought and feeling” (Elbow, 1994, p. 17). Elbow refers to “resonance voice” (p. 17) as interested in reducing “the gaps between utterance and unconscious intentions and feelings” (p. 17). On these occasions, the speaker captures words which “seem to *resonate with* or *have behind them* the unconscious as well as the conscious (or at least much larger portions than usual)” (Elbow, 1994, p. 18). This “writing with resonant voice needn’t be unified or coherent; it can be ironic, unaware, disjointed” (Elbow, 1994, p. 18). This informs my approach to select models of writing which allow me to try to extend our ways of knowing, which take us beyond the rational mind and into a broader landscape of subjectivity (Formenti & West, 2018, Heron, 1992). It was as if I was unwittingly capturing these utterances and enabling them to emerge as possible expressions of my unconscious intentions, and the wider experiences of being alive. This type of writing can be deeply

satisfying as it unites our different ways of knowing and being in our relational selves, which are illuminated, if only fleetingly by “sparks of authenticity” (Formenti & West, 2018, p. 268).

Finding a new practice for writing research - Writing into the knots

Less tears than rain. And the whole business
Neither here nor there, and therefore home
(O'Donoghue, 2008, p. 88)

Moving towards a new research question, and consequently having to let go of some of the academic practices which had guided my approach to research in the past, was not something I chose. It was as if it had chosen me, it felt like leaving home, where I had no idea where I was moving towards.

I was accustomed to using free writing and poetry to express my uncertainties in my personal life. But this had always felt at variance with my academic practices. My academic training had accustomed me to writing at the point when “I knew what I wanted to say, that is, (...) my points were organized and outlined” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 960). This was not a rejection of traditional writing skills, rather it meant honing my sensitivity to language in order to nurture different “writing voices” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 960). This chapter has been strongly influenced by Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005.

As I wrote into these life experiences of death and bereavement, I was aware that I needed to start dealing with these strong emotions of loss as a starting point. I felt swept along in a current, which I had difficulty trusting would help me to gain an insight into what I was really trying to explore in my research question. But I recognised that these life experiences were something that I was compelled to engage with, even if I did not have any clear idea how this might help me to orientate myself in my research.

While this process defied any attempt to work to a preconceived plan, it felt purposeful and my biggest struggle was to continue to listen to what I was learning from my writing and trust its implications for engaging with my research. Writing became the only way that I could inhabit this in-between space. Like Cixous (1997) who described writing as scary, it fills me with contradictory emotions, “emotions of jubilation, because it is like a gift. Disturbing emotions, because we are not the master of this writing which gallops well

ahead of us” (1997, p. 39) my writings were visceral and layered with struggles and contradictions.

My writing became more fearless as I departed from the kind of literacy practices that “holds sway in higher education which contrasts with other language and literacy practices.” (Lillis, 2001, p. 30).

Haiku – The word picture of the everyday

My biggest struggle with finding a language to express the turmoil of my inner reality was during the first two years of my doctoral studies, which corresponded to an intense period of mourning. My journaling was episodic, and while it started with a rush of energy, it often petered out into silence with nothing to say. It was during this early period of grief, that I found myself returning repeatedly to creating haikus, they became my landing place. Haiku were different. There was no conscious decision to write haiku, it was as if they had found me. They slowly began to emerge from my being and demand my full attention.

They generally burst into my being as stripped back images, which were deeply satisfying. They focus on a brief moment in time, juxtaposing two images and creating a sudden sense of enlightenment. I used a 17-syllable form with no rhyming lines. I had been writing them for a while when I discovered that “grief for the dead, and the loneliness experienced on journeys” (Kawamoto, 1999, p. 711), were among those topics which were traditionally considered as appropriate for the precursor to the haiku or the “Waka” (p. 711). However I was drawn to the vividness of the purity and brevity of the initial image which announced its presence as a “word picture” (Kawamoto, 1999, p. 710), flowing into a second image. Their composition was among the most satisfying writing that I have done. I can only offer a partial explanation of this, which is connected to the fact that they position the writer in the immediacy of the contradiction of expressing something, which is simultaneously at risk of being “ambiguous or downright unintelligible” (p. 710) while also being “highly intelligible” (p. 710). Kawamoto, (1999) suggests that haiku often are rooted in the mundane and everyday, while offering traditional meanings which it then plays with and disrupts. It is also something that has been stripped back to its purest form of expression, without any “disparate elements” (p. 710) which could obscure or distract. For me this form lends itself to the creation of images that dance at the limits of language, whose meaning is not static, and is open to the widest possible range of interpretations.

I have written poetry since I was a child. I intuitively understood that responding to poetry requires an ability to make space for “sensory imagery in a world dominated by cognitive processes” (Lawrence, 2008, p. 66). I experienced the haiku as a holistic way of knowing, and engaging with those parts of myself that are not so accessible through prose. They also allowed me to engage with the research process in a more intuitive way. This ultimately brought my research to a place where I could feel more comfortable with the lack of resolution as I struggled to create a new focus. In much the same way as poetry “demonstrates and discloses the human mystery” (Faulkner, 2007, p. 218) and allows us to reconnect with ourselves. These poems become a way of being able to feel more at home with my research, and to experience real joy as I puzzled if this could become a process of reclamation.

These haiku do not fall easily into a category. They are not research poems as discussed by Faulkner (2007) as this is “a method of turning research interviews, transcripts, observations, personal experiences, and reflections into poems or poetic forms” (2007, p. 219). While these haiku share some of the qualities of lyrical poetry in that “the goal is to stress moments of subjective feeling and emotion in a short space” (Faulkner, 2007, p. 219), I had less concern, at this stage, with sharing these experiences with others, whereas Faulkner discusses poems which are crafted with the intention of communicating with an audience. While there is an awareness of representing “actual experiences in such a way that the distance between self and others blurs” (Richardson quoted in Faulkner, p. 219, 2007), I was writing them primarily to make sense for myself.

I am embracing poetry as a holistic way of knowing which hovers in between what Heron refers to as four ways of knowing: experiential, presentational, propositional and practical but he privileges experiential knowing, which is at the base of this hierarchy, as the “touchstone” (Yorks & Kasl, 2002, p. 183) for all of the “higher sets of transactions” (p. 183).

Each poem brought me insights that revealed themselves to me either immediately or over time. In retrospect, I realised that I had found an entry point for a methodological approach which initially could be described as a ‘poetry as inquiry’, but later whose principles I adopted to guide my ‘writing as inquiry’ approach, through an extended range of writing practices, throughout the research. This is an approach that “seeks to reveal and communicate multiple truths via intuitive contemplation and creative expression” (Owton, 2017, p. 9). In this sense, poetry gave me multiple perspectives and also allowed me to

reach into those parts of myself that may not surface when we are writing from a more cognitive stance. Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) acknowledge that while “our selves are always present no matter how hard we try to suppress them”, that “in our writing we repress parts of our selves” (2005, p. 962). Poetry attempts to rebalance this deficit as “an analysis of the poem can give a picture of the poet’s heart” (Owton, 2017, p. 6).

In the depths of my mourning period, I could not talk about what I was experiencing. I turned to poetry as way of “experiencing, being with the emotion, resisting our temptation to run from it” (Lawrence, 2008, p. 67). However, many of the poems could be read with reference to experiences of fragmentation and reconstitution that were happening in my personal life, professional life and in my research. In this section, I am particularly interested in those that related more directly to my experience with the research process.

Writing into the underworld of grief in 17 syllables

These early haikus were predominantly visual and all of them began with a strong feeling of unease and needing to probe and explore. This is because very often they were composed aloud, committed to memory and then captured on paper. They are short because they largely came to me when I was preoccupied, walking or driving, and I did not have either paper or pen. I said them aloud, listening to the rhythm and the beat of the syllables. I composed them by listening to how they sounded aloud. While I did not comply rigidly with the 17-syllable rule, where it would compromise the representation of the experience, I was always concerned about the resonance and rhythm.

Occasionally I began by penning something on paper, but the composition was based around how it sounded when it was performed. Sitting in my car on the side of the road, walking by the river, pulled in at a petrol station, I spoke out these poems, moving, adding, deleting words and always performing them out loud to myself. This became a way of performing these experiences while enabling me to be present as a witness to them. As we move towards the future, we are “always negotiating that strange cleft between past and future, each moment leaves within us its trace.” (Mulhall, 2009, p. 142). The poems allowed me to perform and embody those moments, and go beyond the limits of the written word on the page. Instead, I concentrated on the sound and resonance of the word, allowing me to nurture new ways of seeing and knowing. They helped me to uncover a process that was stirring inside me to emerge.

The illness and subsequent death of my sister, my only sibling and last member of my family, who had been of such comfort to me when my dad died six months earlier, overwhelmed me. For the first two years of my thesis, my most prevalent emotion was grief and loss. The initial epiphany of that first haiku provided a way to begin to express this unexpected departure into an underworld.

Surprise beginnings
Quivering like moss
Conceal their dark moist underbelly

Following my first supervision/conversation with my supervisor, I had this surge of joy and excitement. This haiku appeared almost fully formed in the form of an epiphany or as Denzin describes a “pentimento” (2014, p. 1) as I drove home, in that “stories are like pictures that have been painted over, and, when paint is scraped off an old picture, something new becomes visible. What is new is what was previously covered up” (Denzin, 2014, p. 1).

Denzin refers to these moments as revelatory for the person in that “something new is always coming in to sight, displacing what was previously certain and seen” (2014, p. 1). Even though I was puzzled about its relevance to my conversation with my supervisor, the urge to capture those images in a haiku form was so intense that I was forced to pull the car into the hard shoulder and jot it down.

Paling winter light
Settles softly on the still room
Pull back the covers.

I stayed with the physical sensation this haiku had created in me for almost a year, as I connected to the excitement and curiosity of attempting to refocus my research proposal. Over time in my reflective journal, it began to dawn on me that the PhD could be an opportunity to assist me in reclaiming and reframing some part of my identity associated with my practice as an adult educator. The seed for drawing on an autoethnographical dimension had been sown. In other words in the style of pentimento “what is new is what was previously covered up” (Denzin, 2014, p. 1). I hesitated at first to do anything with these haikus that came to me on a very regular basis after I had captured this first one. I was reluctant to do anything more than to read them and perform them, usually for myself outside in a space where I could truly make the words resonate and thrill as they moved

from the inside of my body into the air. It was as if the word was made flesh and then made into air. Occasionally I would chant them clumsily and from memory to my PhD seminar meetings, as my way of checking in with the group. My surprise, when I look back, was how unselfconscious I was of these impromptu and somewhat irregular performances. What I recall was the deep satisfaction of feeling completely connected to an inner life, which became visible to me, primarily, in that moment. This was enough. It would take me almost two years before I was able to go back and mine through these haikus to write my self “into this historical space” (Denzin, 2014, p. 3), before I could read my “emotions through [... my] family history” (p.3).

However, this also disorientated me. I felt anxious at the idea of opening up my practice and more importantly revisiting some of the pain connected to an increasing sense of loss and isolation that had gradually crept into my feelings about my practice as an adult educator. But I return to the ‘knowing’ in this haiku later in the research, in my research process as I reframe my learning and re-write the final line.

Writing into our relational selves in 17 syllables

I had just spent a writing weekend in a seaside town that I visited with my family on day trips throughout my childhood, when these two haiku appeared.

Open refill pad
‘Child of an unskilled worker’
Sociology.

This captures the moment of expressing how I had felt so different to the other students in my class, when I learn that my family is positioned at the bottom of a socio-economic pyramid. I am perturbed, as I have never up to that point considered that my family were at the bottom of anything. This also coincided with the shocking realisation that my sister was spending most of her day in bed.

It was so stark that I can still feel the pain and shame as I viewed myself with this new label and wondered what it meant for me. This time it seemed to emerge from a private part of myself that I had never discussed openly with anyone, with the exception of a colleague and a small number of students. It was as if the part of myself that I had repressed had found an outlet. Perhaps the retreat of my last family member from my life, made it more possible to confront this reality. I found this haiku really supported my reflexivity. In a conversation with a colleague, I probed the possibility that my hesitation

with an autoethnographical approach could be, in part connected to a sense of shame and inadequacy that led me to believe that my life could not be worthy of doctoral research. This glimpse of an internal dilemma that I have only partially been aware of is signposted in the following haiku has been explored in an earlier chapter when I attempted to conduct an autoethnographical presentation with my academic peers. But for now, I am presenting it as it arose in my awareness, as a stirring of a yet to be imagined hope for the future.

A mute piano
Warmed by spring sunlight
Listens to distant music

This haiku represents a voicelessness that I frequently experienced in higher education in my early studies, which was triggered once again by my return to doctoral studies. It captures the contradiction of having something to say but being unable to find the form or channel for expressing it. It also captured a desire to disrupt the subordination of voice, which has been experienced in my family for generations. There was a dominant belief that 'little' people like us 'kept our heads down, our mouth shut and said nothing'. This connects with the earlier haiku where my hesitation to commit to expose my working class background in the research, emerged from my feelings about the questionable value of making my life a focus of research. The last line is puzzlingly optimistic but explodes as hope that my research could give me a voice - a chance to examine my life, and ask questions about how I came to know it as a life unworthy of research.

Tender green shoots
Becoming
Tall pampas grasses

Following a very thoughtful conversation with my supervisor, I am invited to take a leap and commit to an exploration of my own life and practice. It feels that a door of possibility has been opened for me, and I am scared but also elated. I can feel a surge of joy as I make the unprecedented decision for the first time in my life to inquire into my own practice rather than primarily focusing on the practice of others.

Sun spill yellow
Through the daffodils
Cheering in full voice

I will not hide; I will open up my practice with curiosity and passion. This was the moment that I begin to consider this research as a process of reclamation, which up to that point I had been struggling to express in words.

Caring for self in the midst of vulnerability

The change to an autoethnographical approach meant opening myself up in a way that I was not accustomed to doing in previous scholarly writing. This felt risky as it meant disrupting hegemonic ways of knowing and breaking with traditional research practices that left me feeling very exposed, and could only be possible by drawing on a range of supports. The possibility of doing harm to self was initially very daunting. In the first instance, it was essential to write into my journal as if no one would read it. This freed me from those limiting doubts about reader responses, and helped me to focus on what I felt compelled to say. However subsequent drafts were concerned with preparing it for a reader, as the writing process in my view, would not have been complete until it had been engaged with by a reader. This meant an ongoing balancing of what must be said, what could be left unsaid, and what or who was being enriched or diminished. The sympathetic and constructively supportive responses of my supervisor became a place to test some of these things out. Sparkes (2024) describes some of the difficulties of writing into your life, which resonated with me. They included encountering uncomfortable insights about myself or others, or becoming “trapped in the sticky web of the story” (p. 132) which brought me backwards rather than moving me forwards towards healing. As I described experiences that left me floundering, I wondered if family members, peers and students would consider me to be self-indulgent, or excessively demanding towards people who were doing their best at the time. There is no magic potions for any of these feelings. But my overriding conviction, which seldom wavered, was that this must be said, as a way to move to a better place by disrupting oppressive narratives inside and outside, and this helped me to hold fast.

However, this was not always possible. Sometimes the wheels of reflection would continue to spin and I could find no vantage point to interrupt them. I was stuck in loss and grief that held no meaning. This did not take me by surprise, I had always known that immersing myself in an emotionally challenging experience, with the hope of moving to a better place, was never going to be a tidy process, and the stakes of failing would be very high. McCormack (2014) captures the place of writing in a journal as a place that allows us to

disintegrate and also reconstitute ourselves. This requires us to meet all of our embodied, intuitive and emotional responses which “allows us to be fragmented, to be adrift in the relational world (...) and empathically express new aspects of selfhood that emerge from our encounters and the meaning we make of them” (p. 173). In this regard, feelings of being stuck, vulnerability, confusion, and reflexivity are useful for helping us to find better ways to live with ourselves and with others.

Even with the safeguards of a self-care approach to journalling and conversations with my supervisor, peers and critical friend, it was not enough and on occasions, I sought professional help. Journalling became a way of preventing me from getting stuck in unhelpful, grief fuelled circular reflection, and was also a useful way of generating learning, and teasing out the dilemmas of ethical practice (O'Neill, 2015).

Conclusion

In this section I have grappled with some of the struggles which we face when we try to bring as much insight and self-awareness into our writing as we can, so that we, as the primary reader of our work and all other readers, have enough material to examine the claims to knowing, that we are making. The business of reframing a research proposal was messy. In this case, it became inextricably linked with the grief of losing my last two remaining family members; my sense of disappointment as an adult educator; with an erosion in my own confidence as an adult educator who is feeling disengaged from the current discourses within education for technical, rational, upskilling programmes. However, the beauty of experimental writing practices and in particular, the appearance of haiku in my life, helped me to recognise, re-awaken and trust my intuitive response to living and researching. I have discussed how haikus became a way of creating word pictures that embrace the everyday and extend our ways of knowing and encountering our experiences that lie buried deep within us. I recognised that they are sensitive and embodied enough, to recognise the world of feeling and ideas as intertwined, which together are capable of deepening and disrupting meaning and understanding, which gave them an openness. The overall contribution of this chapter was also to show how I came to trust myself and my intuition more, across all of my life and research.

Chapter Four: An emerging methodology – Listening to the voices of the autoethnography - Dislocation and emerging navigational coordinates

A tribute to Heron – The story catcher

A watchful heron
Breathes in the swirling currents and
Catches the river story

Dear John,

I am writing this as a love letter to someone that I have never met, but who brought vibrancy and hope into my world when I needed it the most. I am rushing to say so many things at once, but will try to slow down so that I can show you how your work wove its way through my life. I am comparing you to a river heron that I see most mornings, standing on the river, listening to the river story. You gave me a set of ideas for validating the many ways in which I tried to ‘catch’ this extended story of myself, my family and life practice as an adult educator and in so doing, made me feel more whole. You named the world of feeling, in all its forms, which creates resonances through the generations of my family, illuminating our entanglement, while honouring our unique individuality.

My serendipitous encounter with the four ways of knowing, gave me the confidence to expand my arts based work in higher education, from the time I came upon them in 2007. Your “whole person learning theory” (Heron, 1992) literally stopped me in my tracks, as I lingered behind one day after work, trying to make sense of it. I did not understand it at first, but I knew that it could give me a way out of what felt like a closed world of scholarship, into a more vibrant one, and I was determined to keep puzzling over it. I had always brought a ‘making bag’ into my classes full of felt pens, paper, glue, photos, handouts of poetry etc. as a way of raising energy when people’s spirits were flagging. I knew that this was more than just fooling around, but I was not sure how to explain its relevance to the more overtly cognitive dimensions of our work.

I often felt apologetic and somehow ‘less than’ as a lecturer, when colleagues from other departments would enter the classroom early, as I cleared up all of the mess. Some students often resisted it too as wasting their time or resented being asked to work in a way that put them out of their comfort zone. In such a marginalised space, I often questioned its value. But once I grasped that the affective, imaginal, conceptual, practical modes of our

psyche each have their own distinct ways of knowing, with their own validity, I felt something opening up. I could feel myself becoming released from some tight grip of how I had traditionally been taught to understand the disconnected relationship between thought and affect, the latter which was always the poor relation. I felt a renewed spark for expanding my experimentations with my students by developing a visual reflective learning journal, using metaphor work in essay writing and collages. Your work gave me a platform that was firm, and yet flexible enough to let my imagination take flight. I thought about what it meant that each way of knowing has its own validity, and questioned my practice of asking students to explain the main ideas in their collage, in writing. Surely, this is using one way of knowing, to explain another, and is missing the point? And yet I struggled to reconcile this with my desire to draw on art making as a dimension of creating meaning and learning, none of which arrive in a flash.

You put words on something that I understand intuitively but could not put language on, that all of these modes “are all in play to some degree at all times in waking life” (Heron, 1992, p. 14). As someone who wrote poetry, consciously surfaced metaphors for working through ideas, and felt all kinds of different energy in my relationships with my wider environment, it brought a sense of cohesion to my world. But it was your argument that “the affective mode in its most expansive form as feeling, (...) is the root and fundament of all the other modes and contains them in a tacit or latent form” (p. 20) that excites me the most. This gives me a way of challenging my intellectual captivity within those dominant conversations about epistemology, which privileged a “down-hierarchy” (p. 20) from the top mode of the practical, through to conceptual, imaginal and downwards to the affective. I began to consider and re-evaluate, the implications of an “up-hierarchy”, where the lower modes of feeling and emotion “nourish and support” (p. 21) those higher modes and ways of knowing right through intuition, imagery, reflection, discrimination, intention and action. This validates my interest in encouraging people to share how they connect and feel about what they are learning, and how they must value this as significant learning.

Over time, I began to think about how your work might help me to understand the dynamic relationship between how all of these connected ways of knowing could throw some light on how all of this works in practice. The fact that each mode has emerged from the one beneath it in a slightly reduced form, and goes onto to generate a “relatively autonomous” mode above it (p. 21). It helps me to think about the process of making art in any medium, but particularly the art of making stories, poems and metaphors. It explains

why our “the world we feel is deeper and wider than the world we perceive, and our percepts can separate off from that felt world” (p. 21). This gives me a way of settling with the imperfect process of making and creating artefacts, where there is on the one hand always more feelings, than I can say or represent, and yet conversely the final product does not seem to be shrunken, but expansive, as if it has acquired a life of its own. It also explains why this is not a pure process. While it is open to what is going on in the psyche all the time, this can be in a “tacit, distorted and unacknowledged form because of blocks and deformations” (Heron, 1992, p. 21). Like you and your colleague, this makes me nervous about giving free reign to a “restrictive and ill-disciplined subjectivity” which “clouds our reality” (Heron & Reason, 1997, p. 280).

Your suggestion that it is helpful to be aware of these four ways of knowing, so that we can actively examine how they interact with each other, and how we might change the relationship between them, gives me another way to probe my reflexivity or as you might call it “critical subjectivity” (Heron & Reason, 1997, p. 280). In theory, this awareness should give us the possibility of actively changing the relationships between these different ways of knowing, for better balance between them, so that one does not dominate at the expense of the other, in practice it is not that straightforward. We may not want to, nor are we always able to achieve that kind of integration, where there are very strong and overwhelming feelings in play. There is also the problem of our blind spots and defences, which can be too risky to face up to, and which we may never be able to get past them to able to recognise those imbalances. It means we have no choice but to seek out co-inquirers, not just into our research projects, but also into our life, to give us support and these essential ‘other’ perspectives. But it did explain why it is so helpful to keep returning after intervals of time, to my reflective journals and writings, no matter how incomplete or inchoate they might appear, in the original draft. I began to really value them for the vantage point that it gave me of myself, moving and changing through time. This helped me search for ways to reassess and reconsider disturbing experiences beyond my own internal reference points.

In all of this difficult and uncertain process, I seize like a lifeline on the concept that “when incongruence is sensed, the learner must search for alignment by re-engaging in experiential knowing, located in feeling and emotion, intuition and imagery” (Yorks & Kasl, 2002, p. 184). This helps me to re-route myself in the inquiry when I write myself so far into the world of ideas that I become adrift. In that regard, I learn the true meaning of cherishing our feelings and respecting “those hidden sources of power from where true

knowledge and, therefore, lasting action comes” (Lorde, 2017, p. 8) which are central to navigating the world.

One of the most illuminating aspects of your work in terms of this inquiry is how you enriched my vocabulary of feeling. You include words such as “urges, wants and wishes (...) thoughts, opinions and beliefs” (Heron, 1992, p. 92). Words that I would have uncritically associated with the world of thought, imagining them like neurological impulses, stripped of their feeling dimension. But as I open to your beautiful possibilities, I understand that in “ordinary language the word ‘feeling’ is the most inclusive of all the mental words” (p. 92). If we accept the “up-hierarchy” (p. 20), the feeling world is not limited to physical touch or the sensory, you audaciously extend it even beyond this, by also including extra-rational vocabulary like “intimations, hunches and intuitions, to psychic and extrasensory impressions” (p. 92). These are words that I would never have dared to bring to the attention of scholarly writing. This vocabulary most importantly gave me ways of talking about these things with other colleagues, who also searched for embodied and holistic ways of knowing, which helped me to find my tribe. It helped us to engage in rich conversations, which allow us to recognise our extended ways of encountering our widest knowing, and consider how this might support our transformational learning process.

My relationship with your work, over the years, also gave me new grounds for considering extended models of critical reflection, and more recently locating this inquiry as a critical reflection. When I first encountered Mezirow (1990, 1991), I had understood critical reflection as a process of moving cognitive furniture around in our heads, which was how I also thought about essay writing. But your work helped me to root critical reflection and transformation in and informed by, a feeling world. The idea that we can only know ourselves by experiencing an “empathic resonance with the other” (Heron, p. 93) gives a value to the years that I have committed to exploring these central relationships in my life, as integral to this inquiry. Your understanding of “critical subjectivity” and intersubjectivity teases out the contribution of the world of feeling to ideas that I had encountered in (Brookfield, 1995; Freire, 1996; Mezirow, 1990) which emphasised the necessity of critical dialogue for learning who we are. But you help me to understand how feeling is a mandatory part of this process. We can only learn about our core assumptions, beliefs and values by exchanges and feedback from others, and these are situated within our experiences of connection and disconnection. Therefore feeling “also lays the ground for enabling critical reflection” (Perry, 2021, p. 345) and a transformation of being. I could

see that the metaphor of furniture is no longer appropriate. You helped me to change the metaphors for Mezirow's (1990, 1991) meaning perspectives, from 'cognitive furniture' which we disassemble in part and reorganise around in our brain to 'glow worms'. These are vital, alive and vibrant forms "formed by the filtering of experience through affect [which] always condition thinking" (Perry, 2001, p. 344). These can also operate as "edge emotions" (Hoggan et al, 2017, p. 55) such as "hurt, shame, frustration, depression, anger, or fear" (p. 55) which "tacitly orient our thinking to return to the comfort zone" (p. 55) and gives us ground for avoiding facing up to the unpleasantness and discomfort of re-considering them.

Although we have never met, you have never been too far away from me over the years and unknown to both of us, your work was nurturing this methodology with its twists and turns, as hovering cycles and spirals between the experiential, presentational, propositional and practical. But more importantly I am feeling more wide awake in my life, as I unapologetically search for new ways to remain tuned into the embodied, empathetic and imaginal which was often neglected in my earlier career, and for which I paid the price of losing sight of important co-ordinates in finding my way.

I consider you to be part of my tribe as another bird man, with other colleagues who have sung my epistemology, vitality and hope into existence.

The pedagogy of flying things

For Jerry O'Neill

A low shaft of winter sunlight,
lights up spirals of classroom dust
circling around the room.

Then we heard your voice,
you weren't in your usual place,
but perched high up in a billowing canopy of the greenest beech leaves.

You began talking with us about our lives, bottomless baskets of dirty washing,
our practices
and our flights of fancy...
to which you said,
"Come and join me up here."
Your voice trilled in full song,
the purest note that we could ever imagine.
A bird man singing about the pedagogy of flying things.

Yours with love,

Geraldine

Introduction

I leave the previous chapter feeling a little freer to listen to my impulses, and more willing to risk the uncertainty of connecting in an embodied and visceral way to those dimensions of experience, which have been silenced. In the following chapter, I explore this emerging methodology and examine how it begins to give me coordinates for working with how this research wants to be conducted. I give an overview of how the inquiry moves along and is structured by a series of critical conversations. I discuss the contributions from weaving together different methodologies: poetic inquiry, writing as inquiry and evocative autoethnography, which underpin what I am calling an adult education methodology, embedded in a critical and creative reflexivity. I also discuss what more might be required in order to respond to these complex and layered experiences. I return to an earlier discussion arguing for the fusion of methods and methodologies, and give an outline of the range of writing practices, which I am generically referring to as journalling, poetry and story. In reality, I examine how these practices become blurred and overlap with each other, in the search to create a language that is sensitive enough to express those deeply moving experiences. I draw on a definition of an emancipatory literacy that is a dimension of my view of writing as inquiry. I explore how creating these, writing practices constitute the research, as I animate them with a volatile and dynamic living presence, which embodies the knowledge, values and emotion which can lift the veil on our meanings and social practices. I open the conversation about the ‘show and tell’ debate in relation to creating evocative artefacts that develops in to a conversation about the relationship between writing as inquiry practices, critical reflection and transformational learning. I also open up conversations about some of the more distinctive orientations and challenges of this methodology, with a view to sparking interest among practitioners who are engaging in similar approaches.

Pulling things out of the air – An overview of the process

As I have given an overview of the conceptual position of the research in the introductory session, in this section I would like to particularly focus on how the concept of drawing on a psychosocial framework supported my desire to read my internal and external worlds in critical dialogue with each other. This led me to a process of creating a methodology

which often hovered between the ‘sayable’ and the ‘unsayable’ but was highly potent. This creates the basis for positioning both the methodology and the substance of the research as an ongoing critical reflection. This, in essence, nurtures a process which can dig deep into how we are experiencing our world, while also searching to expose those assumptions we may be barely aware of but which “undergird our understanding of what we judge to be ‘human nature’” (Brookfield, 1990, p. 177). I have borrowed the concept of a psychosocial framework from Formenti and West (2018) because it acknowledges the danger of artificially fragmenting our experience in the academic world by “creating academic tribes [which] can stifle us and the desire for multidisciplinary” (p. 15). The psychosocial framework, (Freire, 1996; West, 2016; Formenti & West, 2018; Green, 2012; Finnegan, 2019a) is an attempt to disrupt those academic tribes, which sets out to generate a dynamic of moving outwards to explore the external forces which shape our humanity, while also “engaging with the nuances of subjective life [which] force[s] us towards transgression of conventional academic delineations” (West, 2016, p. 44). This allows me to draw together, a wider perspectives from both, to illuminate those blind spots and gaps which can block my ability to engage in richer and more agentic meaning making which becomes the ‘stuff’ of transformational learning.

Therefore, my understanding of critical reflection goes beyond a narrow focuses on how to improve our teaching skills or manage groups, to include a broader social and political perspective (Brookfield, 1995; Freire & Macedo, 1987, 1996). It involves a consideration of how we unwittingly internalise oppressive narratives from external social forces, which mask our agency and lead us to misunderstand how we become intimately implicated, in reproducing or disrupting discrimination and social injustice in our own lives and in our engagement with our learners. It is in essence probing deeply into the “presuppositions” (Mezirow, 1990, p. 6) which have created the terms upon which we define, evaluate and respond to those problems and limits. These shape our lives whether or not we are aware of them this means that we must be prepared to give deep consideration to who we are and how we are in the personal, professional, public and political aspects of our life and not just within our classroom. This demands that we are prepared to travel inwards to our unique subjectivities and vulnerabilities, as well as outwards to how are responding and living, with a creative reflexivity to catch ourselves as we reveal how we think, behave, make decisions and participate within our relationships. This transgresses artificial boundaries between adult educators in their professional and private lives as our behaviours and language inside and outside of our classrooms will bear the imprints of,

and reveal our beliefs, values and our ideas of love, which are shaped within historical and social forces (Boler, 1999; Lanas & Zembylas, 2015).

As an adult educator, I create the most relevant curriculum with my students, by paying attention to what is going on inside us and in the external world. This becomes the basis of entering into a dialogical consideration of what has happened, or might be happening in our lives, our classrooms, public/political spaces, in conjunction with what we find illuminating within our scholarly work. This is a space where the past and present, visible and invisible, work off each other in conversation with a potential future

The process for encountering my knowing, and developing this adult education methodology, embedded in critical and creative reflexivity, emerged in much the same way. This involved a curiosity and a willingness to immerse myself in one “heart bursting experience” or disorientating experience (Mezirow, 1991, 1990) after the next. These are “anomalies and dilemmas of which the old ways of knowing cannot make sense become catalysts or ‘trigger events’ that precipitate critical reflection and transformation” (Mezirow, 1990, p. 14). Like Brookfield’s critical incidents, it is presumed that embedded within these selected experiences are “general assumptions [...that] can be inferred from their specific descriptions of particular events” (Brookfield, 1990, p. 180). Bearing in mind that each incident does not stand independently of the situational and relational context within in which it occurs. My intention is to meet each one with an openness about the best way to encounter it and create conversations around them, while paying close attention to the multi-layered dimensions of their context.

I found that a haiku might be exactly the right response at one stage and then it is not what is needed at a later point, only to find that it becomes useful again at an even later stage. Sometimes experiences criss-crossed, contradicted each other, or returned me to an emotional space of stagnation, from which I appeared to have edged out of at an earlier stage in the inquiry. It is very striking that the inquiry opens the conversation with death and loss, by engaging with my sister’s death. It is a considerable time later in the inquiry that I begin to engage with the loss of my dad, even though in chronological time, he died six months before my sister. But in the erratic nature of grieving, it is in the midst of grieving my sister, that I return to an incident concerning my dad which happened immediately after his funeral. It is intended that the inquiry will mirror the provisional nature of coming into knowing and our unfathomable capacity to make, often unsolicited

returns to our past. I note in my journal this chaotic listing, forwards and backwards and the buffeting of my energy and enthusiasm that accompanies it.

If I had written this yesterday it might have had an electric charge, but today I am simply narrating, I do not feel any passion or even care too much for any of this.

Each return is holding the possibility of incrementally deepening our understanding of something, as we meet it in new and different contexts across an unpredictable time span. Therefore, there is no attempt to create a chronological structure that mirrors the lived events of my biography. However, I can introduce the reader to the flow of the inquiry as a continuous process of becoming, which gives you an idea of what to expect from chapter to chapter as you accompany me through this process. By this, I mean that there is a sequence of imaginative critical conversations with my family, interspersed with ‘conversations’ with composite students. These ‘spontaneous conversations’ become the basis for ‘populating’ the inquiry with ‘participants’ who were dwelling inside me, in ways that surprised me. It was as if they chose themselves to participate.

These participants become fertile mediators for enabling me to create critical dialogues with parts of myself that were often hidden to my awareness, by drawing on sensitive reflective writing practices. In that sense, it felt as if I was pulling my research design out of the air, but conversely I had complete conviction that I needed to have patience and let this structure emerge, because there was something inter-generational that has waited a long time to be said.

This strength of this methodology is that it supports our critical and creative reflexivity by setting out to remain sensitive to those more holistic ways of knowing which draws on our images, intuitions, hunches, feelings, dreams (Heron, 1992, Hunt, 2006). These give us a heightened awareness of how we are thinking, feeling and behaving as we go about our day-to-day lives, as well as giving us a perspective of how our internal and external world engage with each other.

Therefore it is hoped that the reader can focus less on the temporality of when the events discussed throughout the inquiry happened, and instead follow the flow from chapter to chapter of this movement through a potentially transformative journey with its shifts and loops.

Finding a shape for the PhD - The gentle art of creating a filigree

One of the consequences of creating chapters, which were situated in the flow of how I lived this process in real time, was that I never knew in advance what the next stage of the research would be concerned with or whom it might involve. This was very demanding, as I had to learn to live with complete uncertainty and listen to what the research was saying to me now, and depend on hunches and impulses about where I might turn my attention to next and what I should ignore as the relevant threads that would constitute the whole.

I suggest that the reader considers this PhD as a ‘filigree’ – a delicate process of weaving together fine threads of precious materials into a unified whole. In terms of the thesis, this can be equated with the interconnection of approaches and themes. Together they convey a sense of how we cope, flounder within and attempt to navigate our way into and out of overwhelming but fundamental life experiences. I become a ‘learner researcher’, practitioner and mourner, as I develop my tolerance for the work of ‘letting go’ of preconceived ideas, and continue to trust in the creative power of my intuitions, thoughts, insights and powerful feelings, to allow the focus of the inquiry and the methodology to emerge in a synergistic process. There are tensions as one or other process could dominate to the detriment of the other. The tendency for such a creative and intuitive methodology to spiral and create multiple possible sites of exploration could make it difficult to find a connecting thread or a focus. Conversely, a dominant emphasis on a specific focus could lead me into abstraction and decontextualised ways of knowing which were at variance with my methodology. But this extended critical reflection with its ongoing questioning of the ontological and epistemological orientations anchored this inquiry within “reflexive, relational, dialogical, and collaborative research process grounded in a distinctively interpretive social science” (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 55).

Locating the cornerstone of the inquiry

As discussed many of these conversations are taking place with people who are dead. Sometimes these conversations are prompted through dreams and dance, or arise from a memory that floats into my awareness unsolicited. But in many cases they are a response to objects or images with which the loved one has an emotional connection, where they become containers of memory

For each of these containers of memory I wrote into them in different ways. All of them could be loosely categorised as versions or combinations of journalling, poetry or story. Each of them set up echoes and images in my mind. I wrote to try to inhabit the world of a loved one to meet them more intimately than might have occurred in the past

Formenti and West (2018) suggest that it was possible to listen to the research in much the same way as we listen to art objects. I began to approach the research like an art object and expected that “art objects talk back to their creator, and to others” (p. 238). This was transformational and gave me permission to move out of my head and pay attention to my body and multiple ways of perceiving and knowing. As I began to resonate with the echoes and voices that were resonating back to me, the inquiry took shape from within itself. They became a catalyst for encountering, in a holistic and imaginative way, a lived experience with a heightened attention to the interaction between those inner and outer worlds. For me they were in many ways the embodiment of the ‘heart-bursting’ experience which Mezirow (1990) describes as “trigger events” or “catalysts” “that precipitate critical reflection and transformations” (p. 14). These catalysts became more and more varied as I began to trust this process. They took a variety of forms and created very different texts, which included family documents, letters and cards, a painting of a bucking hare or documents from my dad’s brown wallet. This later extended to become a list of teachers’ names from my first parent-teacher meeting, a make-shift bed a half-an-inch too small, the rustle of the ribbons of a silk bonnet put back on a shelf, an empty tailor’s bench or a phrase like ‘Dad, I’m in the paper’, letters home, to name just a few of them. A combination of reflection and writing into those catalysts carried me into, sustained me within, and carried me across a portal into a transformative learning space.

Although I have generically characterised the writing practices that emerged as responses to these catalysts, as journalling, stories and poems, these vary in form within different contexts. In addition to the haikus in the early stages of the inquiry, you will find a range of longer poems, journal entries, stories as reflections from my personal journal, imaginative recreations of stories that I have been told by family members, stories with a kernel of true experience that in some case have been written up with a fantastical character, composite experiences from my classrooms to illustrate as much complexity as possible within a single story and protect anonymity, as well as emails between myself and adult educator peers interspersed with poetry, and finally, imaginative conversations with my family, mediated through personal documentation, cards, letter or reading material

namely, a bible. I will, throughout the inquiry, refer to these written compositions, with their different inspirational origins, collectively as evocative artefacts.

All of them allow me to re-imagine and gain a new perspective, by making something that was almost invisible because of its familiarity, become strange and curious. These artefacts share an emotional engagement with me, largely by generating metaphors and images that haunted me and had a story to tell. Mezirow (1990) recognises this process of intuitively engaging with metaphors “by which to fit the unfamiliar into a meaning perspective, so that an interpretation in context becomes possible” (p. 9). I found myself becoming more and more comfortable with abandoning any preconceived ideas, and instead entering into the flow.

Early on in the inquiry, I created a collage with photocopies of documents from my dad’s wallet. These surprised me and awakened rich insights and experiences, which generated a poem, story and a letter. These go on to form the basis of a later chapter. The collage not only holds the puzzles and emotions that become central to the inquiry, but it raises questions and gives me new answers to the question of what drew me to adult education and a radical humanism. I consider this collage as the holding space for the inquiry, and in that regard, I have called it the cornerstone. I return to this collage on two other occasions in the inquiry to illuminate the shadow of shame which my sister and I had been unable to name, and which brings an illumination where there was silence. Finally, at the end of the inquiry, I return again to it to help me to see where I now am; feeling more fully myself with a sense of reconnection and belonging within a community of adult educators.

The never ending process of becoming a whole hearted adult educator – Inquiry as a series of imaginative critical dialogues

My grief led to my temporary withdrawal and movement away from relationships, within the external world, while conversely I was flooded with fragmented memories of my family. These took the form of questions, fragments of conversations, and family turns of phrase, which would drop into my head or my dreams. My response to this profound sense of loss was to search to reconnect with those relationships, with whom my bereaved self is deeply entangled with and constituted by. This revealed how the beloved are implicated in my practices as a critical adult educator. The work of reclaiming my core values was fundamentally the process of trying to reclaim my selfhood and name the ‘me’ in them, and the ‘them’ in me, which shaped my hopes, dreams and frustrations with my practice as an adult educator.

As an adult educator, I had longed to animate Freire's (1996) imperative to us, to continue to be in a "process of becoming" (p. 65). This "process of becoming" is a useful way to describe the research process, which is primarily a movement through series of imaginative and critical dialogues with myself, which are mediated by my students, my sister, my dad as I remembered him in my early life, my dad as a ghost within my classroom, my nana and granddad, my mam and finally written and spoken communications with my adult education peers. These are interspersed with reflexive conversations about the corresponding contradictions and disconnections between my biography, values and practice, which are mediated through my pedagogical experience as an adult educator by creating composite characterisation of fragments of students across my practice.

This means imagining a flow of emotionally responsive critical dialogues between us, which will bring the reader from chapter to chapter. I intuitively understood that I needed to re-examine the relationship, first with my dad, and later with my mam, in order to achieve more wholeness and integration in my own life, which I had identified had started to fragment when I started in mainstream education. A conversation with my sister feels she is alive to me once again, and as if there has been an epistemic shift, something makes sense to us that has eluded us in the past. In these imaginative spaces, I could feel the "good enough love of the (m)other" (Formenti & West, 2018, p. 268) which allowed me to enter into our mutual vulnerability, interdependence, yearnings with an emotional openness to set off again. It was easy to imagine them, as they were to me, but that was not the point of the conversations. I was particularly interested in the silences, unfinished conversations and the many areas of experience that I had intuitively learned not to question, which had become part of these relationships, but with my dad in particular. I reconnect with stories from my nana and granddad, which give a more rounded picture of where I came from, within a social historical landscape that recognised the value of craftspeople. These imagined conversations gave me an opportunity "to learn how to reconnect or celebrate existing bonds" (Formenti & West, 2018, p. 267) posthumously. I am then ready at this point to finally enter into an imaginative critical dialogue with my younger adult self, through letters I have written to my mam, from the time I went to higher education. This allows me to reflect on my contradictory feelings of disappointment and excitement at the shifts in my life relationships that this opens up. These took the form of a fluctuating grieving process of moving forwards and backwards, as I re-position the beloveds as still present in my life through critical, imaginal and dialogical relationships.

I extend this practice of continuing conversations from my family life to include a series of communications, which took place with my peer adult educators via email and some infrequent in-person meetings during the Covid-19 pandemic. While these communications would normally have taken place on a person-to-person basis, the switch to email during the pandemic turned out to be serendipitous, as the written communications supported more extended reflections. These communications are intended to illuminate the relational qualities that build resilient, joyful and emotionally responsive communities where dynamic models of love and care (hooks, 1994; Feeley, 2014; Lynch et al, 2012) can help us to navigate those internal and external forces that can limit us. It is significant that in contrast to the disconnection of the opening of the inquiry, I illuminate the community of adult educators in which I am embedded. This gives glimpses of the day-to-day fabric of how, as adult educators, the personal and professional are interwoven with our desire to generate relevant and hopeful practices in collaboration with our students. They give glimpses of what it might look like as a community to support each other to grow across all of our lives, and how to support each other to navigate our limits and animate in our lives and our learning spaces, those values committed to a fairer and more compassionate world.

The final epilogue is a setting off again into a new, more revitalised and grounded iteration of a snapshot from my classroom, where I am convinced and energised in my invitation to students to write into and through their disappointment. As the research values and is underpinned by a writing as inquiry approach (Richardson & St. Pierre in Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), it seems appropriate that the final story contains literacy practices which challenge those subordinating literacy practices (Freire & Macedo, 1987) with which my mam and dad were entangled. These practices reinforced their sense of a world that is 'given' and cannot be examined or questioned. This final story allows me to embody and support my students, more sensitively and hopefully to write into their weariness to find their seeds of revitalisation and agency.

Weaving a methodology - Naming the warp and weft of our lives

In line with an adult education methodology, this inquiry is grounded in lived experience. I write into those tangles of subjective experience which are yet unknown to us, allow us to "start to see writing itself as a significant part of the learning or research act" (O'Neill, 2024, p. 115). It is important to bear in mind the value-laden nature of writing as "a constitutive force, creating a particular view of reality and the self" (Richardson & St.

Pierre, 2008, p. 475). This comes with the possibility that it will “disrupt traditional notions of how research is done and, furthermore, what the product of that research looks like” (O’Neill, 2024, p. 115).

I am particularly interested in those experiences that give voice to both subjugated knowledge and voices that are not normally listened to. These experiences draw me to a tradition of critical autoethnography (Holman Jones, 2008) where “personal stories become a means for interpreting the past, translating and transforming contexts and envisioning a future” (p. 211) and in particular to evocative autoethnography (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). Tumbling on evocative autoethnography was like discovering the insistent rhythms of the bass guitar of the Rolling Stones. I had found something that caught the pulse of something that I wanted to say. It places the researcher’s experience as the primary focus of the inquiry, and sets out to enable readers of social science texts to “not only receive but also *feel* the truths of first-person accounts of lived-through experiences” (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 218). The writing enters deep into my vulnerabilities, which is risky, as I struggle among all of the uncertainties and unknowns to find any sense or meaning in the chaos that has become my life.

The influences of a writing as inquiry approach (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005) and evocative autoethnography, converge in their shared concern with the critical and relational dimension of knowledge, “writing stories are not about people and cultures out there” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2008, p. 482) which means that as we write into ourselves we are writing into the lives of our friends, family, colleagues. Cixous (1997) reminds us that “the other in all his or her forms gives me *P*” (p. 13). It allows us to “catch me at: reacting, choosing, refusing, accepting” (p. 13). But this is accompanied by the responsibility of establishing “what can we say and with what consequences?” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2008, p. 482). Writing can be a way of exploring how we “are shaped by wider society and relationship, but [how] we also shape them in turn” (McCormack et al, 2020, p. 81). This creates writing practices, which become a point of entry to reflect on an oppressive internalised shadow, which I grew up within as member of a working class family. The artefacts become portals to open up my lived experience to reflect on those internalised oppressive narratives of failure, shame and disappointment. These contributed to shaping our decisions, how we felt and behaved in our relationships with each other and our interactions with the world, in our effort to deny and hide parts of ourselves. In this regard, my understanding of writing as inquiry resonates with Freire’s definition of literacy as an emancipatory act. Writing is not just a cathartic process or a

coping mechanism with the hope of re-establishing equanimity; I consider it to be a radical literacy practice. By this, I mean that I do not subscribe to definitions of literacy that are limited to helping individuals or myself to “read, understand, and transform their own experiences” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 7). Instead, I consider writing to be “part of the process of becoming self-critical about the historically constructed nature of one’s experience. (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 7). I am writing to understand to what extent my needs and most human of desires have been mediated and limited by social structures, which leave me disconnected and isolated where I dream of belonging and connection.

Ultimately, this becomes a deep exploration of the relational entanglement of the me in the other, as oppressed and as oppressor. This does not have to be a condition for breeding hatred. Cixous (1997) reminds us that even our enemy can make “a sort of mysterious map of all of our points of vulnerability appear” (p. 14). This can be a starting point for growth. Therefore the generation of these evocative artefacts, and the reflexive cycles with their embodied emotional responsiveness, have enabled me to experience, if not a “transformation of structures” (O’Brien, 2013, p. 21), at least a “transformation of subject (...) through a self/other dialogue through feeling and recognition and a naming of the oppressor” (O’Brien, 2013, p. 21). O’Brien (2013) makes the Freirean argument that “coming to terms with (...) our own internal oppressor and oppression is integral to our ability to name our world and to combatting oppression in the world” (O’Brien, 2013, p. 16). Mezirow (1990) presents this in more general terms stating that “we must begin with individual perspective transformations before social transformations can succeed” (p. 363). The methodology is hoped to be a way of creating a reflective space between our internal and external social, cultural and political worlds, to identify sources of agency. This means re-engaging with our unarticulated and often subconscious oppressive narratives which are lurking in our silence and which must be challenged. This positions the process of the inquiry as both methodological, epistemological and ontological, as I question and try to reclaim what really matters to us, across our lives, when grief strips away life’s distractions and who gets to decide on these questions.

Writing into memory and imagination - Hitting the spot and truth finding

The critical autoethnographical tradition particularly suited this inquiry because of its intention to capture and validate those lives that are not recognised in any public sense, and are often misunderstood and poorly appreciated and valued, not only by more

dominant groups but also by the people themselves. If, in any instance, these representations seem unfair, biased or unbalanced, I would ask you to be patient with me, and bear in mind that my overall purpose was to honour these lives, which would be unaccustomed and uncertain about occupying such a public space, but whose resilience, compassion, decency, vulnerability and dreams for a better world deserve to be celebrated. Their lives are not too small to be recorded for what their insights reveal to us about what it means to be human.

In addition, I am not setting out primarily to tell their story, as that would entail a different type of recall and writing, which I am not undertaking. Instead, I am representing primarily my own lived and felt experience of these relationships, which will of course be unique to my particular needs, wants and desires. It seemed appropriate that I might use the privilege of my scholarly knowledge, to present another perspective on how internalised oppressive narrative (Freire, 1996) can distort and misrepresent the richness and complexity of the lives of working-class people.

This raises questions about what I mean about the truth of recall and memory. Muncey (2010) suggests that memory is “a reconstruction of past events in the present” (p. 136). But they do not emerge in a tidy and sequential way. Therefore, the basis upon which I selected some memories and did not select others, raises questions about how to determine if this work is trustworthy. I selected those fragments of memories that were more emotionally engaging or provoked more intense curiosity. They would stubbornly reside in my awareness until I began to engage with it, and abandon myself to its pulls and tugs.

I began to see a pattern, that I was drawn towards those experiences which resonated with unarticulated or silenced frustration, disappointment, uncertainty about belonging and grief for something that could no longer be hoped for. This I began to realise was the resonance that was of most interest to me. These eventually became a way of examining what I was and was not bringing into my own classrooms.

This is not to romanticise or deny the complexity and contradictions of such lives, but instead to embrace them, by attempting to articulate what could not be understood or expressed, and remained in silence between us until the time of their deaths. As the inquiry progresses, this moved to a place where I felt a renewed connection and a revitalisation of my relationship with them which I did not think was possible to experience after death

and provide some new ways to think about grief and our relationship with those whom we have loved and lost. This process enabled me to experience a form of reconciliation with myself, as I engaged deeply with my own transformative learning processes of exploring my ‘internal oppression’.

In that regard, I am not attempting to produce a rounded or comprehensive representation of any of my family members. There is no doubt that I could retell all of those stories from a different perspective and generate equally authentic knowledge. However, each of the imaginative encounters and conversations were worked on repeatedly until they felt right, until I had a sense of them ‘hitting the spot’. In that sense, they can be seen as “plausible and trustworthy” (Muncey, 2010, p. 121). Like Muncey, (2010) I am suggesting that given the “embodied nature” (p. 121) of these representations of lived and felt experience, “I have come to think of the appropriate criteria for evaluation as akin to the gut reaction, the intuitive response or just an impression of that ‘just makes sense to me’” (p. 121).

This demonstrates the complexity of the ethical issues and gives a glimpse of the problematical nature of autoethnographical studies, as there is always the risk of writing into experience in a way that unwittingly does harm to others or to the self. In my case, at the outset of the inquiry, I submitted my ethical proposal to the ethics committee and got approval (see Appendix A), but I found that there was a continuous process of sorting out and reflecting on those ethical dilemmas “which are those unanticipated situations and dilemmas that arise over and over again and demand continual monitoring and circumspection” (Adams et al, 2022, p. 7). While my application for ethical approval was useful for helping me to anticipate consistent responses to those re-occurring and overall general ethical issues, the autoethnographic method demands a much more “fluid, and highly contextual approach to exploring and understanding self-experience in context” (Edwards, 2021, p. 3) than I could have outlined at the outset. Therefore, it was only towards the end of the process that I was finally able to create some kinds of categories with shared dilemmas, which I grouped into conversations with the deceased, the creation of composite characters from my years of teaching experience such as students/managers and finally, peer adult educators. These emerged from those specific dilemmas, which were better dealt with from within the particular context they arose in the research process. In all cases, there was no ‘easy rule of thumb’ as each experience had its own unique challenges. This meant that every response required imagination, deep reflection and a

commitment to integrity to resolve them. This meant that I sought ethical approval from my peer adult educators towards the end of the process when I was clearer about why and how I intended to use their contributions.

Critical reflection, academic scaffolding or academic stifling

Writing was an important way of coming in to myself, but as Biesta has argued, “expression in itself is never enough” (Biesta, 2016, p. 14). Writing into experience, making poems, haikus or stories, feels similar to the process described by Biesta of doing art, in so far as it was a very rich way of inhabiting this “worldly space” (p. 16) between frustration, desire and existing “with what and who is other” (p. 17). Like art making, I was not searching for predictable outcomes or solutions but more of a negotiation about what it might mean to “exist in a grown up way” (Biesta, 2016, p. 17), in relation to our desires, as well as everything and everyone that gets in our way of fulfilling them. My hope is that writing can not only make them visible, but also help me to explore those that have been “fabricated by forces beyond our control” (p. 17), and those that are “desirable for my own life, my life with others, on a planet that only has limited capacity for fulfilling our desires” (p. 18). In that regard, I am searching to engage in a writing process that offers possibilities of transforming stagnant and self-defeating experiences, through critical dialogue with how it is to be in the world.

For the inquiry, it means creating a space where I could re-enter into an intimate relationship with my family and come to know each other again, from a different perspective, not as we had done in the past but from the view of a critical dialogue about our expectations and desires for ourselves and each other. This felt like an ambitious attempt to write, examine, discuss, reflect, question, challenge, act, rage and love until those internalised structures which “reduced [us] to things” (Freire, 1996, p. 50) were named. While this range of memory containers inspired some powerful writing which unquestionably provided for cathartic release, this was not always enough to automatically bring me beyond unhelpful circular thinking or morose ruminations to a place of more possibilities. Cathartic expression or an awareness of our feelings, will not by itself be enough to examine how we can intervene in disrupting the often insidious interaction between our own internal forces and those within our environment that place artificial limits on us.

This brought me to the heart of the dilemma referred to as the ‘show and tell’ balance (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). Like Formenti and West (2018) I agree that “transformation,

however, does not descend directly from art, or its contemplation” (p. 233), nor simply by making art. I try to make the reader fully aware of the synergistic relationship between the researcher and the research. This involves opening up the process of creating artefacts and the process of generating meaning, as an immersive experience, which entails “a dynamic cycle triggered by aesthetic experience, entailing self-exploration, positioning, and re-positioning, soul work, dialogue, and critical thinking” (Formenti & West, 2018, p. 233). In this regard it mirrors Heron’s (1992) spiral where learning is not about trying to somehow transcend each mode of the psyche, but instead should be a continuous spiralling “for the continuous functioning of the psyche in an integrated person” (p. 21). This is neither obvious nor straightforward. It demands a combination of self-awareness, integrity, courage and hard work. Formenti and West (2018) suggest that this integrated process of knowing and being might be thought of as “aesthetic representation [...as] a valuable form of knowing, to be integrated with authentic experience, intelligent understanding, and deliberate action” (Formenti & West, 2018, p. 233)

Finding the balance between allowing these artefacts to speak for themselves with their own distinct form of knowing and as a poem or a story, and drawing on other lenses to illuminate their potential meaning, was not easy to achieve. In the early stages of critically reflecting on these catalysts or prompts, there was a lot of dead writing. This created two contrasting dilemmas. One was conceptually rich writing with too much explicit explanation where “knowledge and theory become disembodied words on a page” (Ellis & Bochner, 2006, p. 431). The other was writing that had rich emotional resonance, without conscious reflection, which was less likely to generate learning about issues of social justice and oppression, which could be articulated and shared by readers. Initially I had decided that I wanted to use Freirean critical reflection to ensure that these evocative texts would not be walking “in a circle, without the possibility of going beyond the circle” (Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 99). While my biographical experiences are situated within the working class, and keenly draw on Freire’s oppressive internalised narratives and structural feeling which have shaped them, these are not sensitive enough to talk to the range of our internal subjectivities. Like the feminist care scholars (hooks, 1994; O’Brien, 2013; Feeley, 2014) I adopt care and care ethics as a dimension of this inquiry and situate experiences within the domestic and intimates spaces of family life, as well as in the public and professional and believe that we can only begin to change structure when we recognise those “aspects of our own identities that are oppressive” (O’Brien, p. 26). Such dialogues with our inner and outer struggles allowed me to meet myself in a way that could not have

been possible, before my immersion with these evocative artefacts, which were up to that point either inaccessible, unarticulated or distorted renderings of experience.

In my search to generate a fluid form of critical reflection to move inwards and outwards as well as forwards and backwards, I drew on Brookfield's four-dimensional reflective framework with some amendments suggested by O'Neill. He creates a triskelion reflexive flux where "knowledge and meaning [are] being constantly created and recreated through reflexive cycles" (O' Neill, 2024, p. 112) so that each spiral "the personal, communal and careful readings of the word/world engage and inform each other" (p. 112). This consists of the personal/autobiographic, a learning community which has been merged from the separate dimensions of students and colleagues (O'Neill, 2024). Although in my case, while I am a member of the practitioner community and draw on my students' knowledge to inform my understanding, I am not trying to represent the student voice factually, rather I am representing my engagement with it and what it signifies within my personal search.

O'Neill (2024) describes the final lens of the triskelion spiral, as "a Freirean prompt" (p. 112), in terms of reading the wider word and world and includes a range of scholarly dimension, which suit the purposes of my framework very well. As the Freirean cycles of reflection are situated within a psychosocial framework, they are complimented by drawing on a range of theorists from psychology and transformational learning theory to embrace a reading of the world to include Craib, 1994; Boler, 1999; Kaufman, 1992; Mezirow, 1991; Heron; 1992; Butterwick & Lawrence, 2023; Finnegan, 2019a.

This means that the inquiry starts with a probing of the self but the role of critical reflection creates the broader scope of the inquiry. This goes beyond an illumination of self, to raise questions that have a transformative capacity to act upon, to change, our inner and outer worlds.

The tale of two selves and transformation

Sea mists rolling in
past my eye sockets and tongue
quietening and numbing.

For a long time, while I was writing and gaining rich, and what felt like important, insights, I was still fretting that I did not know how to convert this messy writing into something that could make a scholarly contribution, and wondering if I was perhaps wasting my time. The doctoral programme really challenged me. I learned that I had internalised a form of

scholarly writing, which focused on evaluating the opinions of others, and putting an argument together, as my own voice. I had worked hard during the undergraduate programme to learn how to master academic writing. In a conversation with a colleague, I realised that my connection with my own lived experience was viewed with suspicion, or at best as a secondary source, whereby I tried to express what others had said, and then to evaluate it against my own experience. If my experience was the primary source, it could only exist and be expressed through the voice of the other. I realised that I went to university and completed my degree and a postgraduate programme, without ever really connecting with who I was or what I really thought about how all these things connected with my life before I entered the undergraduate programme.

Even though I alluded to this problem of my disconnection with my lived experience in the early stages of the inquiry, this awareness did not make it go away. Nor did it lessen the sense of constraint of what could and could not be written within doctoral studies. It was as if there was “a stranger living in [me], inhibiting [me], countering [me] (Cixous, 1997, p. 39).

This was limiting my ability to explore deeper feelings, vulnerabilities and confusion. It was also at variance with my desire to write in a way that would expose “adequate self-awareness and self-exposure for the reader to make judgements about my point of view” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 964). But Lillis creates a framework drawing on key ideas from Ivanic and Clarke, among others cited in Lillis (2001, p. 50) which gave me ways to interrogate myself during the writing process, in order to examine the nature of the blocks that were freezing me. Ivanic “elucidated three dimensions for exploring” (cited in Lillis, 2001, p. 50) the power differentials and struggles that face students when they are writing within academia, by framing it as a struggle between “authority, authorship and authorial presence” (p. 50). Lillis continues to make connections between these ideas and Clarke’s three key questions, which frame the complexity of writing in higher education. These questions can be posed as “Who can you be? (...) “Who do you want to be? (...) which raises question of authority; (...) What can you say? What do you want to say? (...) which raises questions of authorship (...) How can you say it? How do you want to say it? (...) which raises questions of authorial presence” (Clarke cited in Lillis, p. 51). This gives me a way of penetrating the mists that would create voices of resistance to those deeply embodied impulses and images that stubbornly reside in my awareness until I begin to engage with them, and abandon myself to their pulls and tugs.

This involved making deep connections with my lived and felt experience. However, this creates a dilemma. On the one hand, I am searching through my exploration of transformative learning processes for those moments when I arrive at a place where I feel more fully myself, at least where there are illuminations of “sparks of authenticity” (Formenti & West, 2018, p. 268). On the other hand, there is also a contrary movement which simultaneously recognises that truth is relative, contextualised, constrained by discourses and shifting (p. 268). Each story of ‘me’ uncovers a slightly different me. This does not mean that “truth is ultimately relative or unknowable, but rather that any perspective we take on, should be held onto lightly” (Hart et al, 2000, p. 4).

I was very aware of the power of these evocative writings as once they are told the “story not only depicts life, it also shapes it reflexively” (Ellis & Bochner, 2016, p. 93). But I was particularly fearful of the impact that these poems and stories could have on others and was guided by Ellis and Bochner, (2016) relational care ethics (p. 147). But I questioned myself continuously if I was doing “everything in [my] power to minimise hurt” (p. 151). This continued to challenge me to the end of the research and there is still a feeling of vulnerability, but I also feel that this is essential if it is true to the spirit of evocative autoethnography. There is an understanding that it may create “discomfort” (p. 151) because it is setting out to question and challenge complacency and systemic unfairness. As I move through the inquiry, I began to feel more confident and convinced about the purpose of exposing vulnerability through a writing as inquiry approach, and was better able to frame the struggles and the resolutions to the different problems as “the tale of two selves” (Bochner, 2000, p. 270). This involved writing into the self from the past in order to liberate a more future oriented self. I understand it as a metaphor between my dad’s determination to straighten himself up and my determination to own more of myself. I use a double haiku to reinforce our connection with each other, and also our disconnection in terms of our different relationships with writing

Shaky

Placing all his weight
On his stick, he pulled himself
Up to his full height

Leaning all her weight
On the nib of her pen-She
Straightens herself up

Writing into the wilderness - Examining different reflective writing practices

Speedy (2005) emphasises the experimental nature of the writing and defines layered accounts as one which “may differentiate between different kinds of writing within the same text” (p. 63) While the extracts from the reflective journals and the haikus were prevalent within the first part of the research, they really built up my confidence to listen closely to the research to find other voices within it, which could be accessed through other forms of writing.

The creation and reflection on these stories, poems and journal extracts, to encounter these disorientating dilemmas, created a powerful connection to an oppressive silence. All of these writing practices evoke emotions, and are situated in the autoethnographical tradition, with their potential to sit between “a commitment to document the reality of what actually happened and a desire to make readers feel that truth coursing through their blood and guts” (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 66).

I invite the reader to go beyond a more traditional one of questioning whether these poems and stories are ‘good’ in terms of their particular tradition and craft, but to focus on a questioning of their purpose in qualitative research. What “then is good poetry used as/in/for qualitative research and what should it accomplish?” (Faulkner, 2020, p. 103). Later in the chapter, I ask this question in relation to the stories and journal extracts. This is not to ignore craft but to recognise the purpose of crafting these writing practices in terms of the research. The journal extracts, stories and the poems, are generated to evoke the reader’s emotional and embodied response, and are guided by an intention to “to artfully arrange life in ways that enabled readers to enter into dialogue with our lives, as well as with their understanding of their own” (Ellis & Bochner, 2016, p. 79). It is hoped that this will encourage the reader to respond to them and find that they illuminate something in their life or something that needs to be in their life or the lives of others. These realities are of necessity represented as partial and situated realities that have my imprint as integral to them. I was very conscious that they are representing an experience within particular relationships, with specific power dynamics and circumstances and our perspective on them will keep changing. There is no doubt that some of this poetry will reach readers in different ways and will leave them questioning whether or not they consider it to be poetry at all. But I am ultimately striving to write “good enough poetry” (Faulkner, 2020, p. 155), to meet the research goals shaped by the purpose of my research as discussed above within the autoethnographical position.

In terms of developing reflective writing practices within an autoethnographical methodology, I was interested in exploring the boundaries between different but connected reflective writing practices, which were drawn on throughout the research, particularly poetry and story. This became even more blurred when I participated in an avant-garde poetry (Michelle Moloney King) workshop where a number of prose pieces and combinations of images and prose were reconsidered as visual poems. In many ways, I was interested in how some of the techniques, which we use within poetry, can be integrated into the stories and to some extent into journalling, through the use of metaphor. In other cases, I used a combination of journalling and poetry within a journal extracts, which sometimes nurtured evocative autoethnographical stories. As I continued to craft poems and evocative stories throughout the inquiry, I concentrated on some of the shared practices to strengthen both genres, in so far as both writing practices draw on metaphors and attempt to suggest and infer, rather than explain and expose.

The very act of writing poetry, and evocative story mirror different aspects of the transformational learning process in relation to meaning making, and play an important role in helping me to immerse myself in the experience, and at the same time get a distance from it, so that I could see it more clearly. The writing process often gave me an insight into how I “acted while actually experiencing the situation” (Freire, 1996, p. 96, as well as prompting a possible directions for moving forward. This is a methodological approach, which supports me to encounter feelings of loss, isolation and disconnection, while conversely enabling me to experience periods of being more sure-footed and more at home in myself. I am in both genres also trying to achieve a balance between complexity and accessibility. I consider that poetry in particular, but also story, works at its best when there is ambiguity and strange or contradictory juxtapositions that create multiple possible meanings.

All of the writing practices aspire to have a “razor sharp” (Leavy, 2020, p. 90) attention to language, which Leavy argues is particularly important for poems because they have relatively few words. In the composition of all of them, I read them aloud and use punctuation or line break to introduce silence, where words have encountered a limit. This means there is a process of verifying that each word, phrase and metaphor is not only full of vitality and surprise but also must feel honest.

While writing and re-working pieces I have an awareness of paying attention to Heron's (1992) fine attunement between the language, imagery, feeling, intuition and imagination and the skill of drawing on literary principles of crafting to regulate the relationship between them. This conscious attention to a wider spectrum of ways of knowing can rupture the predictably tight connection with more commonly shared meanings of language, and with the habitual images and discourses that we normally draw on when we discuss our reality. This innovation is particularly nurtured by metaphor, which according to Brady is a "tool of and for discovery" (Brady, 2004, p. 629), which can create the surprise and innovative perspective associated with creativity within poetry or story.

My quest in the section below is to examine what each of these writing practices can contribute to the research in terms of bringing meaning, insight, as well as the emotional, cognitive shifts associated with the transformational learning journey. This means considering how these creative and writing processes enhance my reflexivity and critical consciousness of how to learn from some of our fundamental human experiences, as well as enabled me to reconnect beyond weariness, to those core values that motivate me as a critical adult educator

Liminal spaces, poetry - Staying afloat in the void

In this section, I consider how the poems in this inquiry are committed to grabbing the attention of the reader and showing us "something about ourselves in general; what we have in common with the rest of the world (...) if not precisely reported fact, by category of experience" (Brady, 2004, p. 630). As the research progresses, I begin to let go of something that is restraining me, and replace the tight form of the twenty-one syllables of haikus, with its reduced choices, to write longer, less constrained poems and search out other forms of self-expression. I discuss how over time I create two poems, which suggest different states of being within what I am describing as the liminal zone in transformational learning (Turner, 1969). I am interpreting this as hovering in that place of being, between an old world which no longer makes sense, and a new world which has not yet come in to view. While both poems attempt to evoke the psychological and emotional landscape of letting go and allowing myself to float in that liminal space, the interval of almost a year between the composition of the first and second poem, allows me to notice some subtle shifts.

As I reconsider how poetry is not just a representational form, but can be another way of interpreting and thus understanding (Brady, 2004), the crafting of poems becomes valued by me as integral to the research knowledge. Prendergast (2009) describes the poetry created by sources that have come from the researcher, such as observations, reflections on documents and objects from early adulthood, meditations on notes hastily taken, as researcher voiced poetry. But it is not enough to put exact phrases of an interview beside each other, it “requires more focused attention to craft issues” (Faulkner, 2020, p. 131). I consider that the potential of these poems is to “use words, rhythm, and space to create sensory scenes where meaning emerges from the careful construction of both language and its absence” (Leavy, 2020, p. 85). Brady (2004) states that poets are “writing from one self-consciously calculated interiority to another” (p. 630).

Writing a poem is more emotionally led, than writing a story, and requires an impulse to condense and strip back experiences into “snippet[s] of human experience that is artistically expressed as in a heightened state” (Leavy, 2020, p. 85). However, I do not see why the use of heightened language should create poem, which mystify readers and keep them locked out from its meaning. Many people do not read poetry as they consider it too inaccessible and keeps them at a distance to the experiences the poem is revealing. Therefore, I have tried to create poems that can reach people with an immediacy that motivates them to stay with the inner complications and contradictions that are at the heart of it. The challenge is to find an anchoring point, an image or metaphor, for those turbulent experiences in the midst of a plethora of contradictory and incomprehensible feelings. The most useful poems follow this guiding imagery, which allow me to take something complicated and multifaceted and condense it, while retaining the emotional complexity of the experience.

The poems below create a stormy sea landscape, which gradually open up into a metaphor for the psychological, emotional and social landscape that I was inhabiting. I consider that this is the place from which the methodology slowly begins to emerge. The first poem illuminates the process of writing poems into ‘lostness’ and apathy, while also generating glimpses of hope for new possibilities. The use of the extended metaphor of a sinking boat in the poem below, allows me to be lost more safely, in so far as by “broadening the horizon of [my] perception” it gives expression to some of those frustrations and desires from my “background awareness” (Freire, 1996, p. 96) into my consciousness, but in a contained way. As I can now see the “perception of [my] previous perception.”

Foaming, wave-ripped-seas,
The 'I'
Abandoned into the trough,
Emptied of wind,
Sails drop limp-then
Stilled.

Metaphors become important portals for those evocative and lyrical writings and reflections, which emerge more abundantly as the research progresses. Green distinguishes between “metaphors that are meaningful or vital, [versus] metaphors that are emptied and clichéd” (2012, p. 201). He proposes that by tracking the “combination of meaning and vital energy” (p. 201) he can see where their “composure is disturbed” (p. 201), this becomes a potential entry point into a transformative experience. The final word ‘stilled’ becomes the emotional axis of the poem as it holds my attention to survey this new world.

The ‘I’ of the poem attempts to convey the sense of a world where I am emotionally abandoned and stuck with no possibility of movement. As I read it back to myself, I can feel the terror of being immersed in those “foaming, wave-ripped seas” and my grief on becoming an orphan, as my mam had died five years earlier. There is the perception of unsurmountable limits, “foaming wave-ripped seas”, combined with a complete absence of wind, making the setting of a course, impossible. This could make fatalism appear like the only response as I am wedged in the feeling that everything is out of my control, in much the same way that my life, work and research feel out of my control and on a downward spiral. There is an implicit understanding within the poem that this situation will require a combination of instinct, trust, courage, imagination, contextualised knowledge and skills to move out of the trough. I am unable to rouse most of those qualities, and I sit with this metaphor for months.

I read this again at a later stage, and I begin to pay attention to the image of “stillness” which now generates an image of spaciousness, which suggests possibility. I read it out loud several times and something shifts. The metaphor of the seascape suggests a paradox that I am ‘lost’ and not lost as I am now ‘here’ in this space. The sea and waves know where I am. I am naming a new ‘here’, a new place where I am now dwelling. In a chaotic and unpredictable world, there is also a chink of hope, that contained within the fury, turmoil and movement, within this metaphor, there is a chance that the sails could catch the wind anew, and the ‘I’ may be thrown up out of the trough.

Green acknowledges the very difficult emotions of anxiety and depression which accompany what he describes as “dis-integration, re-constitution, and re-integration that is transformational learning” (2012, p. 200). I am suggesting that the creation of a poem in many ways, through its juxtaposing of unusual images, can force a reconsideration of our habitual reality and act as a support to nudge us towards the unsettling emotions associated with some of our primary references in the world, from which we generate our meanings. The reconsideration that these anchoring points may not hold up can move us into a liminal zone, which is between “two ways of being” (Green, 2012, p. 203). This means that there is a painful recognition that “the familiar cocoon of meaning no longer provides the shelter that it once did” (Green, 2012, p. 212). Writing into the unknown can be a way of entering that moment between the old and discarded and the new and unknown. Lorde reminds us of the risks involved as “the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger” (2017, p. 3). There is also the possibility of remaining stuck or regressing.

As I return to this poem once again after an interval of two years, I re-read it over time and eventually it generates a second poem below, which suggests a shift in that there are now contradictory emotions of wanting to move forward while also wanting to stay stuck.

So this is what stunted hope looks like.
A limp leaf dangling
Face down on the riverbank.

The thundering weir bulges past
“Move on, Move on”.

Yes,
But just for now

Let me feel my full weight
Crumple in on myself,
And mourn.

This poem returns to me on many occasions throughout the inquiry as I spiral in a liminal space of loss for the old and longing for something more. It appears to carry an emotional current throughout the inquiry, as I move forward and backwards in my “quest for safety, meaning, hope, and love [which] is never ending” (Formenti & West, 2018, p. 266). In many ways, it becomes a container for holding the contradictory tension of the liminal

space, which in its formlessness contains hope and hopelessness, stagnation and movement forward, as I sway from one to the other, which is integral to this search.

This poem could be watermarked, on all of the pages of the thesis, to remind the readers that this ongoing dilemma is integral to being alive. It demands that as part of that balance, we must learn to recognise those occasions where we must learn the power of “focus, trust, letting go” (Hart, 2000, p. 49), while remaining open to a new possibility which may give us more grounds for hope. I see in this poem a place where we can meet the interface between our possibilities and our limits.

I feel a strength in claiming the right to pause and experience the power of “focus, trust, letting go” (Hart, 2000, p. 49), which also resists the compulsion to dispel these powerful feelings of grief and apathy at all costs. I recognise this dilemma can only be provisionally resolved, as we return again and again to these experiences that leave us winded, but does not stop us from continuing to search in our conversations or reading for new perspectives.

Making the road by writing - Learning to write into stagnant experience

This methodology and the knowledge that it allowed me to construct and reconstruct, could not have emerged if I had not learned to connect to a range of experiences, especially those which did not appear to hold any insight or meaning, and therefore would have led me to consider them to have little to contribute to the research. I spent a lot of time in this early phase enjoying the freedom of experiencing the value of externalising these experiences in their rawest and least desirable forms. This realisation helped me to engage with the disruptive element of evocative autoethnography, which sets out to write against those norms and traditions that try to minimise or mute the voices of adult educators who are struggling with the curriculum of life.

The process of grieving through poetry had made some important contribution to shaping who I was, and how I managed in my day. The process of combining words, feeling, images and sounds had reached deep into me and allowed me to scoop them up and externalise this senseless suffering. The very process of externalising it gave it value.

However, while this gives a level of recognition, it does not mean that it will necessarily bring greater understanding or insight to us. Tamas (2009) reminds us that sometimes “Like CIXOUS says, writing can reveal what we cannot know before we have written it.

But sometimes we still can't know it even after we've written it" (para. 21). This seems to mirror what I have entered into the journal.

And so I learned that some poetry is not worth shit (...) It does not give meaning. It does not give hope. But it gives me a TRUTH. A TRUTH that my body knows and cannot ignore. It lets me sit in the room with my torment and stare it down. It lets me be Real in this moment and no hold back or cover up. This is what it is to be me, to be Geraldine, to be human.

There is a selection process within the research that chooses those poems and texts when there is movement, insight, something that I have learned or maybe something that someone else can learn from. That is not to deny those long periods of stagnation and feeling, which were accompanied by meandering, messy and circular reflections that brought me nowhere. In that regard McCormack (2014) helped me to re-evaluate those writing practices which I had formerly considered as stagnant, as the beginning of generating "evocative and imaginative writing [that] offers a rich resource of image, symbol, and metaphor by means of which complex subjectivity can be expressed and considered" (p. 10). If writing was bringing me into this emotional wilderness and challenging the certainties that had held my sense of self intact (p. 9), I was discovering that writing is both a way "to get lost (...) and to be kept safe" (McCormack, 2014, p. 9).

This encouraged me to include and gain a new appreciation of those poems and direct extracts from my reflective journals that would expose the vulnerability and volatility, which lies behind the polished text and can be expected within a writing as inquiry approach. This is an important starting point in the relational transformation project by "finding a language that enables us to think about what is often hidden or obscure in human interaction-yet of ubiquitous significance" (Hunt & West, 2006, p. 162)

I found Hunt and West's (2006) use of the concept of border country very useful as they discuss the ways in which the emotional work of psychoanalysis converge with adult learning, as both of them "can help us to understand how we often contribute, unconsciously, to our own oppression and suffering by perpetuating our own oppression and suffering by particular forms of behaviour" (p. 164). I recognised that I too was in a border country similar to McCormack (2014) "where identities are questioned and risked, where anxiety is a constant threat" (p. 4). I realised that in continuing to write through this period, without any attention to a readership, was an act of "self-care" by giving a voice to this self that remained when all of the familiar anchoring points were no longer working for me.

I too experienced the paradox of these writing experiences as discussed by McCormack (2014), that writing allowed me to engage with those “emotional and embodied ways of knowing and hold and contain them safely” (p. 9) and me, in this total disorientation or border country. Hunt and West (2006) remind us that while letting go and opening ourselves to painful experience can bring different degrees of suffering and anxiety it can also lead to a “new sense of complexity of selfhood and a range of associated possibilities through creative work” (p. 167). I perceive a new value in many of the poems and stories from the early period of the inquiry that express suffering, while also keeping me safe. But more importantly, I value them not just as a way to navigate the border country, but that “it is the border country itself - the very thing – a way to both get lost, and paradoxically to be kept safe” (McCormack, 2014, p. 9).

How do we write into suffering, when we have nothing to say?

The concept of writing into experience as the border country (Hunt & West, 2006) encouraged me to include extracts and poems from my reflective journals that I might have dismissed, as they did not seem to bring me anywhere or contribute to any particular conversation. One of my early pieces of writing emerged as a pure expression of loss and took the form of what I imagined a textual ‘sigh’ would look like on a page. It took the word ‘suffering’ and seized upon it as verb and a noun: a way of living or not living and a state of being or not being. It then splits into a new verb ‘ring’, which is calling out to the world and waiting for a response that does not come. The world where this suffering lives is uninhabited by anyone else. This poem surprised me. It was undoubtedly the poem that held the emotional weight of the stagnant suffering of the early stages of grieving. This text is straining to break with some expectation of a poem to be constituted by phrases and instead is working with a naked page, “experimentation with font, layout, spacing and voices” (Speedy, 2005, p. 63) as well as words.

Suffer

S u f f e r s

S u f f e r i n g

RING

RING

RING

No-one there?

No one?

No one!

No?

NO?

NO!

I think of this as the voice of suffering, which is trying to represent a raw and inchoate experiential reality we often would rather not encounter. I am not writing to find meaning, I am writing to express something that feels honest and convincingly representative of the beauty, and ugliness of the world. I recognise it as the voice of anguish and disappointment. I recognise this voice as honest, because it surprises me as a voice that I am uncomfortable with. I am fighting feelings of embarrassment at its lack of restraint, and how it made no attempt to conceal in any way the depth of my anguish. It is expressing something that Greene (1995) described as “ordinarily unseen, unheard, and unexpected” (p. 28). This textual sigh seems to emerge from a depth where my individual suffering is fused with the deep intergenerational suffering of my family. It reaches deep into the unconscious and opens “the thinking process from the bottom up, the translation into thought of bodily and emotional sensations that have hitherto been denied” (Bion cited in Craib, 1994, p. 193). This resonates with Heron (1992) who describes the affective domain of the psyche as including emotion and the more expansive world of feeling: “In feeling, we live and move and have our being” (p. 94). This voice is connected to our deepest experience of what we care about and how it feels to be in the world where these things are absent or under threat.

Making the road by writing – Learning how not to write a poem

Writing poetry is a particularly embodied process, and is uncertain and unpredictable. I cannot just decide that I was going to represent experience within a poem, even those experiences that seemed important and to which I was emotionally attached. Below is an example of a writing process that is initiated by a decision. I try to force a poem to satisfy a pre-determined idea or outcome, which was to show different understandings of what it

means to succeed, rather than allowing the poem to come to me, and failing as a result. This is very different to my usual starting point, which is to attend to a whisper of a line, or a glimpse of an image.

I had experienced an intriguing conversation with colleagues about the different approaches to climbing mountains, and the different approaches people took to reaching the top, at any cost. I wanted to capture the energy that fuelled the conversation. I began to draft something on the back of a napkin, later I begin to write it again, but I cannot finish it.

Of the bullish fire to climb the mountain
Of the sacrifices and choices that must be made
Of knowing who and what must be left behind
Of who will plant the flag
And who will wait behind

It feels as if I have too many fixed ideas about all of these concepts, and inadvertently it is these ideas that are shaping this poem, and are blocking me from the vitality of this experience and a more embodied connection with an experiential knowing, a neglect to live out the view that “the mind’s conceptual articulation of the world is grounded in its experiential participation in what is present, in what there is” (Heron & Reason, 1997, p. 277). Something is out of kilter. I am full of ideas, but they seem to be rehearsed and known. It is as if by not attending to the felt world, I am caught in an “inward spiral of perceiving the world in more and more narrow terms” (Perry, 2021, p. 347). This feeling of disconnection from the embodied feelings of ‘right here and right now’, is causing me to encounter this experience within a narrow frame of preconceived references and become less open “to alternate possibilities” (Perry, 2021, p. 347). The poem becomes didactic. I have set out to write it instead of being prepared to wait and listen for a fragment of it to emerge and then allow that to unfold on a page. I have lost it on this occasion, and almost a year and a half later it finds me and I finish it as part of the final chapter.

The act of creating a poem is far from a panacea for the wounds of humanity, but it is a way of creating a type of ‘knowing’ and understanding the world which must emerge and cannot be pre-determined. Writing in this more open and curious way, generates an energy that challenges the stagnation of getting stuck for too long in circular thinking, and difficult emotions.

Making the road - Journalling to lose mastery of yourself

The experience of grief deepened my practice of journalling, which directly or indirectly was haunted by the question of “what it is to be human, this thing that speaks, that thinks, that loves, that desires and that one day is extinguished” (Cixous, 1997, p. 32). In this section I reconsider the purpose, and challenges of journalling experiences in the here and now, but particularly the opportunity that journalling presents to re-reading extracts, after time has elapsed. This is a process of writing which I consider to be equivalent to breathing life into the ghost of myself, by losing the need to have mastery of the process and instead to accept the “disturbing emotions, because we are not the master of this writing which gallops well ahead of us, and we tend to be wary of it (Cixous, 1997, p. 39).

Formenti and West remind us that we “appear to need experiences of birth and death, of loss and displacement, and of worries about those we love, to act as triggers to engage with the big questions of life and learning” (2018, p. 253). My more contemplative considerations took the form of my personal journal where I talked to myself and let the images and feelings and voices bubble up and flow onto the page so, that I might consider them as part of me, but always being aware that this is not the whole story. Even though at the outset, I had no intention of using it in the research, I continued to use the personal journal throughout the research process as an important way of untangling complexities of my experience.

I did not realise what would be taken when she died, how much of my world would be inaccessible to me forever, and how the electrons would reconfigure leaving this one, stubbornly spinning in a solitary elliptical curve. But then I started to realise that it was jarring me. It was opening something, something wide, which smelled sour. Something that I wanted to ignore.

The writing that worked best for me in my journal was a form of free writing. This is essentially a way of writing that does not require planning or attention to grammar, spelling or craft. The writer simply puts the pen on the page and writes with an uninterrupted flow. It is a process by which the writer gives themselves “permission to express and explore openly” (Bolton, 2011, p. 29). The writer is assured that “whatever it is, it will be right” (Bolton, 2011, p. 30). It is a very effective way of bypassing writing blocks and switching off internal critical voices, which can interrupt the flow of thought and feeling onto the page. I used it in my professional and personal life as a very fluid way of capturing “those insights which spring out of nowhere” (Cixous, 1997, p. 33).

Cixous (1997) recognises that this can only happen when “one leaves oneself in freedom; when one does not master oneself” (p. 39).

This writing sometimes went nowhere in particular or just stopped, but even for these extracts re reading them after an interval of time was useful. This series of reflections below were written after rereading my reflections in my journal from February 2019 to August 2019, after an interval of one year. I return to them and recognise that the research is clearly becoming a place where I could take refuge. This combination of free writing, retrospective reflection and sometimes responding to an urge to progress my journalling by creating a poem, becomes a way of grounding myself.

I wrote and read continuously, following my impulses with a staunch sense of it being purposeful, and yet having no purpose that I could clearly articulate at the same time. I realise that it was this writing and reflection that has helped to carry me through to this gentler space. It was from this reflective space that I began to uncover the deep connections about who I was, who I was in the classroom and who I might be in my research.

It also begins to capture the early recognition that I am searching to reclaim something from the past to build a more solid vision of the future, which would give meaning and hope to my life and work.

Before I could begin to name or confront my existing reality, I needed to give myself permission to speak from the intimate space of a private journal, which means that “I could talk and sound like myself, not like me trying to sound like someone I wasn’t” (Cisneros cited in Schneider, 2003, p. 259). It allows me to express my feeling of being. “This being abroad at home, is what I call an *entredeux*” (Cixous, 1997, p. 10). I searched for new ways to express these increasing feelings of dislocation which I was experiencing in my life and which were occurring in my research.

The presence of anger seemed to hold my energy. It was particularly useful for cutting through rehearsed or habitual and safe attempts to rationalise my sense of abandonment and loss.

Glinting sheets of rain
Go at the river’s skin
With hammer and tongue

My experiences of the permanence of death forces me to accept that I am the last person left and that my death is also unavoidable. Cixous talks about the dilemma of loving as “when we love, we are already half dead” (1997, p. 37), in so far as we put our life, our

well-being and our happiness in the hands of another. I write like I am only half alive. I worry about health symptoms that never troubled me in the past. I am sleeping and eating badly and feel unable to know where to begin to step out of this cycle.

I note in my reflective journal the twilight world that I am living in.

I feel as if I have moved into a sort of twilight world that I am reluctant to share with anyone, even with myself. It is space that I have never inhabited before (I sense my sister's presence around me as if she has never left me...) If all of this is (still) alive, then what is death? I know that life is not robust, as I have watched a life turn to stone, but then dying is not a slipping away or an end? Where does our lived experience begin and end? Or am I making all of this up out of some desperate need for consolation, some desperate need to avoid engaging with the tormenting realisation as I walked behind her hearse that I am orphaned in the world. I am carrying a poetry book around, in much the same way as my mam carried her prayer book to mass every Sunday. Writing and reading poetry is becoming the place where I can retreat to, where I can lay myself bare, if not to find meaning but to fully embrace and give witness to this strange new reality that places my own understanding of reality in question.

At times I wondered if all of this giving expression to how I was feeling was just bringing me further into the lost place and compounding it in some way. There was a very critical voice, which kept warning me that I was 'overdoing it', it was time to pull myself together. This was the most challenging time in terms of writing. The slow embodied and emotional practice of letting the writing run ahead of my rational brain, allowed me to encounter and dwell among these images, feelings, metaphors, fragments of expressions, which would surface unexpectedly into my awareness, as I wrote freely into my journal. In this raw state, they very often brought different shifts in my energy but without any clear sense of meaning that I could articulate. As I discuss in the research, that is a longer, iterative journey between my personal experience and the research. Overtime I began to recognise this over and back movement, with its search to generate meaning from a range of perspectives would become useful for giving me glimpses of 'here' as opposed to there, where I used to be. But this slow and messy process of uncertainty was at variance with a pressure I felt to start writing in a way that might make sense of what was still inchoate experience. My journals were full of concerns that this type of writing needed to stop and I need to start producing some real work. I described my attempts to search through my reflections to find something that might be 'doctoral'.

(...) I am frantically creating signposts forwards and backwards to force connections and try to make it as explicit as possible that this was not self-indulgence that this could count and be taken seriously as an academic piece.

But this writing helps me to understand the importance of generating evocative accounts of experience through metaphor and poetry which will test and push against the

“discursive and testimonial norms” (Tamas, 2009, para 1). It also helps me to reduce the risk of generating “pseudo-insights, performed, cleverly on the page for my scholarly audience” (para. 17) or forced resolutions, which are at variance with the unstructured and obtuse experience of being alive, and which preserve the illusion at all cost that we are “coherent, knowledgeable and safe” (para. 11). But I learn to value the writing in my reflective journal as a place where I can revisit myself and reconsider how the ‘then and there’ has become the ‘here and now’ - the space in between these two perceptions. I can be a signpost towards possibilities for learning and growth beyond the grip of the oppressor within.

Storying our lives - Locating our power and layering up

While there are links between some of the techniques, like the use of imagery and metaphor which both stories and poems draw on as evocative texts, in this section I want to suggest why stories are best suited to raising “self -consciousness and thereby promote reflexivity” (Leavy, 2020, p. 57). Leavy (2020) suggests that stories feel more recognisable than poems, as they are part of our day-to-day life where we tell and listen to stories in order to make sense and get to grips with our experiences. Stories set out to tell us more about what it means to be alive and opens up the pain of living, losing, searching to be loved. However, there is an intentional fluidity between the reflections, stories and poetry, which is intrinsic to the methodology. This is not cut and dried in this inquiry. Many reflections and poems in this inquiry seemed to fall between both categories, in that they often contain fragments of stories, which I have lived or been told. Faulkner talks about narrative poetry which is “most interested in storytelling” (p. 79) but still contains the qualities of a lyrical poem. This will be discussed in more detail later in the inquiry in ‘Flickers of you in the classroom’.

I find it very helpful to acknowledge that within autoethnography “the autoethnographic short story allows the emotional experience to be conveyed as part of the knowledge itself” (Leavy, 2020, p. 58). This give a value to the emotional dimension of experience, which becomes enriched when it is situated within particular cultural and historical contexts and the associated power relations. This gives me a framework to explain how a particular experience can arouse our curiosity and encourage us to question some of the social meanings we attribute to our experiences and feelings. The story ‘Eruption’ in Part 1 was written as a short extract of embodied emotion that wrote itself in to a story that is formed

from contradictions and constraints that are operating and shaping this experience but I cannot yet name.

‘Eruption’ emerges as a narrative about falling away from those practices and people that have given shape and meaning to my life. While the emotional weight of the stories is nurtured through imagery and metaphor, there is also some sense of recognisable “characters (...) context (...) temporal ordering of events (...) an epiphany or crisis (...) around which the plot or action depicted in the story revolve (...) and a point to the story” (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 88).

The first person arrives into the room and I go into my automatic smile and upbeat welcome. I surprise myself. I have no idea where this cheerful and confident voice comes from. Inside, there is still a part of me that is taken aback, that after all of these years, I feel like a novice teacher who is ill-prepared to come to any clear understanding of the questions that are buffeting around inside me.

While acknowledging that we “live in between, perpetually moving forward into experience and backward into memory” (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 92), there is a larger story to be told. This involves understanding how the cultural, social and historical dimensions of our lives are imprinted on the language, feelings, actions and thoughts that constitute the story.

I am aware that I am becoming more and more angry as the day goes on, that I am going to an enormous effort to put everyone at ease and generate constructive feedback, while simultaneously becoming more and more emotionally distressed. I give them positive and constructive feedback, mindful that poorly chosen words can echo around in someone’s head for a lifetime and undermine their ability to change and grow.

I am aware that as I am writing it, I am writing against something. There is another conversation going on behind the obvious details of the story, about something that is not named directly, but is present by its absence of an answer.

Where did I learn that how I am feeling, and how I might share those feelings with my students, is not only irrelevant, but could be considered distracting to my core role of facilitating learning?

This culminates in my final gesture, which is when I throw all of the evaluation sheets into the bin before I leave the classroom. This small detail is opening the dominant themes of the inquiry as I explore in existential terms, what I am resisting and what I am hoping to find.

I sense that I am in some way disconnected from the source - the one that had compelled me to write, with such joy, my name and telephone number as a contact for getting help with reading and writing on the publicly displayed posters.

This emotional engagement of moving people's hearts and minds can become an invitation to a potential "source of empowerment and a form of resistance to counter the domination of canonical discourses" (Bochner, 2000, p. 271) or more straightforwardly what am I searching to let go of that is holding me in its grip?

Finally, I have also crafted all of the evocative artefacts to weave together personal, professional and sociological contradictions and tensions, so that they might be suitable pedagogical material. This meant focusing on "the purpose of self-narratives [which] is to extract meaning from experience rather than to depict experience exactly as it was lived" (Bochner, 2000, p. 270). The inquiry is best understood if the reader can flow between poems that hope to create sensory and embodied experiences, and fragments of stories that intend to create "spaces of hope – destinations that can be arrived at from any number of locations" (Holman Jones, in Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 234) as a way of creating empathy to spark debates and dialogues about the future we want to create.

Evaluation - How might the reader assess the worth of this work –

One of the shifts which I have experienced as I have progressed in this research, is a willingness to embrace an awkward reality that "in our hearts, if not in our minds, we know that the phenomena we study are messy, complicated, uncertain, and soft" (Bochner, 2000, p. 267), but like Bochner, I agree that these are not a "sign of inferiority" (p. 267). Therefore, I am proposing criteria against which I would like the work to be judged, in the full knowledge that they are "ultimately and inextricably tied to our values and our subjectivities" (p. 267).

Overtime I developed a gradual sense of purpose, which was to navigate my own experience of grief, loss and disappointment, as a way of exploring transformative processes, as I search to reconnect with those I loved and the core values that gave me a sense of coherence and vitality across all of my life. This establishes the question of coherence: did I do what I set out to do? The reader should be aware of a "tale of two selves; a believable journey from who I was to who I am, a life course reimagined or transformed by crisis" (Bochner, 2000, p. 270), emerging over time in this inquiry. The extent to which I have confronted my vulnerabilities is more than just an empathic

engagement to show “what life feels like now and what it can mean” (Bochner, 2000, p. 271), but an attempt to get grips with possible new and more helpful meanings and illuminate those incremental shifts and changes as they have occurred or get to grips with what this might mean.

Muncey argues that this demands making explicit an “engagement in an iterative relationship between your research and your personal experience (Muncey, 2010, p. 148). Therefore the reader should have a sense that this I am ‘living’ this research and be convinced about the emotional credibility, honesty and trustworthiness of the critical inquiry process. It also means opening up my meaning-making processes and assumptions to the reader so that they can decide if my claims are reliable and trustworthy. This involves a reflexivity that invites the reader into the intimate space of observing me in the process of generating or as the case might be, failing to generate meaning. Richardson (2005) suggests that this means questioning if “there is adequate self-awareness and exposure for the reader to make judgments about the point of view” (p. 964). In the inquiry, this often takes the form of an explicit exposure of how I am experiencing, understanding, denying, colluding with or resisting powerlessness.

I also would like the inquiry to be assessed in terms of whether my methodology might inspire other practitioner-researchers to recognise and value the ways in which they come into knowing, and consider how these might be more valued and incorporated into their research in the future. For all readers, I would like the inquiry to give them some new ways of thinking about grief and other overwhelming life experiences, as well as generate ideas about how to “create new and better ways of living in this world” (Bochner, 2000, p. 269). In particular, I would like it to encourage all those working in adult education to consider with whom and with what, we might need to reconnect in order to feel more fully alive and revitalised as people and as adult educators. This means recognising the necessity of confronting our own internalised oppressions and oppressor. We cannot do this by ourselves and therefore I hope that those who read this work will be inspired to continue to build our networks and communities of practice, which can allow us to flourish as human beings, with resilience, joy and compassion, and support our commitment to generating hope for ourselves and those we live and work with.

As discussed earlier, I view ethical practice to be a way of being, which underpins every aspect of the research. Therefore, it is important that the reader will consider that I

represent all of the people who appear directly or indirectly in this inquiry with a “credible account of a cultural, social, individual, or communal sense of the real” (Richardson, 2005, p. 964). This means attending to how everyone has been represented in ways that they are “multidimensional” (Leavy, 2020, p. 279) and that there was a cultural sensitivity so that we “don’t colonize those we aim to portray” (p. 279). It is also important that stories do not fix characters in static narratives but are open to constant revisions and generations of multiple new meanings over time (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 94).

In addition, like Richardson (2005) it is important to make sure that there is, for the reader, enough “personal, biographical experiences” that show what “led me to author such a story” (p. 966) and in this particular way. Therefore, it is important that there is a transparency that the reader can clearly see how and why I am shaping these stories to respond to my own desires and needs. This also means that the reader should be able to engage with these stories, the moral judgements and dilemma, which also gives them a space to become more than they were (Bochner, 2000) and engage with their own stories.

I have had, throughout my life as an adult educator, an interest in the craft of writing as reflective practice. The poems, stories and journal extracts were created from within the autoethnographical methodology, so the reader is drawn into the experiences with enough concrete and sensory detail “to feel the flesh and blood emotions of people coping with life’s contingencies” (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 212). But it should not stop there. The question becomes one of asking, “Does the use of creative and lyrical practices open up the text and invite interpretative responses?” (Richardson, 2005, p. 964) including those poorly recognised assumptions which need to be interrupted if we are to break silences and open up the world of feeling to make a substantive contribution. In other words, do these pieces “contribute to our understanding of social life” (Richardson, 2005, p. 964)? Therefore the inquiry is concerned with self-narratives “to extract meaning from experience, rather than to depict experience exactly as it was lived” (Bochner, 2000, p. 270).

This cannot be properly understood until the reader is clear about what I mean by telling the truth, which like Denzin, (2014) I consider to be a mixture of “facts” (p. 13) and “facticities” (p. 13). While the inquiry is based on facts, that is to say “events that are believed to have occurred” (Denzin, 2014, p. 13) or I have lived, in the course of my personal or professional life. I am aware that even if some of the stories that I have grown

up with are not true, this does not diminish their power and reach into our lives, as we believed in them, they were true for us. Therefore the inquiry is equally interested in how those facts were lived and experienced by interacting individuals which Denzin (2014) refers to as “factcities” (p. 13). This means that the line between fact and fiction within autobiographies can become blurred. In the case of my dad’s story of origin, there is no conclusive DNA evidence available to establish the factual accuracy of this story. But this does not reduce the power of this story to shape not only my dad’s life but also the lives of all of those who lived with and loved him.

Conclusion

The chapter leaves me with clearer co-ordinates of how to position, understand and support what I am calling an adult education methodology. The chapter marks a turning point in the inquiry, as it draws upon a substantial amount of experimentation over the years, with integrating Heron’s ideas into my practice as an adult educator. His theory of “whole person learning” lays down the groundwork to feel and respond to the voices of the research. This fuels my curiosity about how to write into and illuminate my ‘resonance’ with these ‘heart-bursting moments’ or memory containers, which create a range of reflections, stories and poems flowing into and out of each other, and are referred to as evocative artefacts. I explore how feeling prepares the ground for critical thinking, generating new meanings, and potential transformation of being. This explores the potential of poetry, story and reflection in this process, to support creative expression as a way of giving meaning and hope. It is important to say that this marks the beginning of this conversation, and in keeping with the concept of emerging methodology, these conversations will continue throughout the research where these ideas are being tested and developed.

PART THREE: BURNING OFF THE FOG

Chapter Five: The dad who lived in the brown wallet

The story about the stories - Whose story is it?

As mentioned earlier, the relational dimension of our being meant that it was impossible to write into my experience without implicating others. This became my way of writing critically into the doubts and uncertainties within me or as Edwards (2021) reminds us, of the seriousness of this ongoing reflexivity with our work as we remember that rather than “representing experiences of others, we write about ourselves, and our experiences in interaction with those who were present when the experiences occurred” (p. 5).

The first draft of the stories in this section flowed very smoothly. I experienced in the first instance a compulsion and a sense of uninterrupted flow about how these stories should unfold. For some of them it felt as if I was being urged by a force beyond my “direct and rational control” (Sparkes, 2024, p. 112) to write them. It was difficult to write or focus on anything else, until these particular stories were committed to paper. However as I edited them, doubts and questions began to pour onto the page about who can claim these stories, and in the face of disagreement whose story gets to win out. The knowledge that the people about whom I wrote are deceased and cannot give consent, combined with the knowledge that I can never say with absolute certainty that they would have given their consent, hung heavily on me throughout the inquiry. My response was to increase my attention to the rigour of who and how I represented them.

In the case of my dad, the research evoked the differences in my relationship between the ‘dad’ of my childhood and the ‘dad’ I came to know towards the end of his life. Our relationship took a shift towards the end of his life, and my dad started to talk to me with less reservation. He showed himself to be more open and interested in a changing world where many of the shaming beliefs about the permanence of marriage, children born outside of marriage and poor educational experience have been challenged, and in some instances dismantled. My experience over many years of talking with adult literacy students helped me to open new perspectives on his own experiences and along with conversations with his grandchildren, gave him opportunities and other ways to think about his unmet literacy needs. This seemed to bring some ease to the sense of burden he was carrying. I am hoping that the stories and conversations in this chapter can challenge those misleading assumptions that caused him such pain. I want to reframe them and bring to them the respect he deserved, to illuminate them with intelligent understanding and dignity. In doing so, I intend to readdress the internalised sense of personal failure from the past and

represent not just his life, but the life of all those people, including the many people he loved, who have been and are continuing to be diminished by systemic failure. This is something that the dad I loved would have approved of. This was also accompanied by the various dreams that I had throughout the research, which are discussed later, that suggested energetically to me his approval.

As these were family members, the question of not being able to withhold their identity was a considerable responsibility. It also led me to give careful consideration to how I might represent them, in a way that would avoid creating suffering, discontent or anger for those who love them still. This demanded a range of expertise, which I called on from my supervisor, other colleagues and three critical friends, who have walked this walk in different guises. My friends listened to me over the years, helping me to establish boundaries around what is mine to tell and what is not mine, with useful suggestions for ways in which this can be done, while keeping everyone safe. This was particularly helpful for those conversations around shame, and those stories that implicate others in my shame. I also spent a lot of time over the years discussing the impact of the research on my own wellbeing as part of my self-care. From time to time, I sought professional help, which was undertaken with the seriousness it deserved, to question my ethical responsibilities and integrity in working out how to write these stories, to which, out of necessity, I returned to understand myself better. I felt pulled between the recognition that while they belonged to others, I had a particular interest in them. It helped me to navigate the most difficult moments of the grieving process, as well as to talk through the knotty area of growing up in the shadow of secrets and stories shared within my family. I undoubtedly internalised these stories and secrets, and they have unquestionably shaped my life. But because I have no way of factually verifying them, I was worried about doing harm to an innocent party. On foot of these conversations, I have been explicit where it is necessary to state the lack of verified fact and emphasise that these are stories that have been passed down and that I am re-storying in my attempt to search for their meaning.

In all of the situations there was careful consideration given to the balancing of letting my voice be heard, with those “competing claims” (Edwards, 2021, p. 4), against exposing others to a type of harm by considering their implication in my distress or discomfort. I attempted to balance what might be considered to be an intrusive intervention into other peoples’ lives, by also setting out to be an advocate for those people and their stories that are not often heard in public spaces. But I am aware that in some cases, this means bringing

stories and experiences into the public spaces, which by their nature, were considered to be intensely private and personal, by those to whom they belonged.

In addition, there was a continuous need to probe into my subconscious motivations to check if I was shaping the narrative, to represent myself in a particular way, at the expense of those implicated in my experience and to check if I was exploiting the vulnerability of others for my own ends. There was a nagging concern that my desire to complete this research would cloud my judgment on the wisdom of bringing some of these sensitive stories from the past in to the public domain. This awareness made me even more rigorous in my reflexive questioning with critical friends and professionals about what I have the right to say and not say. I raise questions about the danger of becoming overinvested in particular interpretations of our life experiences. This also demands high levels of attention to how we story these experiences and to “the kind of person one becomes in telling one’s story” (Bochner, 2000, p. 271). It is too easy to create narratives that create false dichotomies between villains and heroes, which would have serious implications not only for the people that I am representing but also for me as the author of the story. The fact that there were large intervals of time between the composition of each of the stories did allow me to re-examine my initial interpretation and check any blatant oversimplification or easy representations that might distort the overall representation.

What can be said?

I was particularly challenged about the implications of discussing my mam and dad’s literacy practices, because of their own feeling of sensitivity about them when they were alive. I drew on those practices primarily to draw attention to the political nature of literacy, which can either be a tool for liberation or for preserving the status quo. But I also wanted to subvert the common perception that those literacy practices which are closer to the rhythms and vocabulary of the spoken word, are somehow lacking in beauty, completeness and wholeness, by drawing on cards, letters and notes that they had authored, and appreciating them beyond the diminishing conventions of standard English (Harmon & Wilson, 2006) As the research both values, and is underpinned by a writing as inquiry approach (Richardson & St. Pierre in Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), I was particularly interested in examining how my mam and dad’s relationship with “functional literacy” practices (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 147) were reinforced by, and colluded with their sense of a world which is ‘given’ and cannot be challenged. This is not to romanticise or deny the complexity and contradictions of such lives, but instead to embrace them, by

attempting to articulate what could not be understood or expressed, and remained in silence between us until the time of their deaths.

For my sister, I longed to continue our conversations and to capture the stories she shared with me, and the perspectives that emerged. She was the person with whom I could express my deepest feelings of doubt and uncertainty and with whom I learned to see myself from other perspectives. However, while her death rattled my world the most, I was unsure about how to write about her death and loss in a way which would not reduce her to a victim of circumstances, exploit our intimacy or cause suffering to those closest to her.

As the author of the stories, I wanted to be explicit that I am not setting out primarily to tell the story of the people who appear in these pages. Like Bochner (2000), I consider that “the purpose of self-narratives is to extract meaning from experience rather than depict experience exactly as it was lived” (2000, p. 270). Therefore I consider that truth is not a description of what unfolded in a step-by-step process, as if I was uncovering a perfectly formed, pre-existing version of a story. In this regard, I found Richardson and St. Pierre’s (2005) metaphor of crystallisation to be helpful, in so far as they generate a metaphor for validity, which acknowledges that there is “no single truth”, (p. 963). This also creates possibilities as it enables me to “paradoxically, (...) know more and doubt what we know” (p. 963).

This is not to abandon a search for truth. To that end, I am faithful to the accounts that I witnessed directly or which were passed to me indirectly through others. But in crafting the story, I am searching to represent why this story matters to me, and why it could also be of interest to other adult educators. As my grief reconnects me with my deep love for them, I grow more confident that the inquiry is becoming a place to illuminate the lifelong burden and oppression of people who have internalised the failure of educational institutions and the way in which people internalise their poor experience of education as their own personal failure.

I could not ignore that faint sense of relief that they would never read these accounts. This gave me a sense of freedom to explore more openly what I wanted to say, to examine our reciprocal flaws and limitations, but always against the backdrop of “protecting us together and individually, and other people in the story” (Ellis, 2007, p.

16). I tried to imagine how they might respond to these stories, while knowing that I could never really be sure.

Introduction

The initial seeds of this chapter began with a collage that I made about nine months after the death of my sister, which followed the bereavement of my dad six months earlier. I returned intermittently to the collage over a further period of six months to pay attention to new stories and insights that it opened up to me and which helped me to complete this chapter. I am experiencing a sense of abandonment, which opens up a series of conversations about my sense of belonging within my family, and in particular in relation to my dad. The process of constructing a collage from fragments of documents I have found in my dad's wallet after his death becomes a way of mining deeply into my experience of mourning and loss (Butler, 2004). This became a search for many things, including a search for reassurance, that in spite of becoming implicated in his sense of disappointment with himself, I was deeply loved. I use the collage making process as a basis for generating imaginary conversations with my dad, to create a new and more vulnerable relationship with him, where I try to untangle those troubling emotions of shame and fear associated with intergenerational family stories. The process of engaging in individual critical reflection and critical dialogue with a colleague opens up an intimate perspective on a transformational learning process, which probes narratives of an oppressive silence that have been poorly articulated within our family. the nature of embodied ways of knowing, and my relationship with my dad as one of the more formative influences on informing those core values underpinning my vision and practice of adult education within a radical humanist tradition.

A note to the reader – How to read this world of loss, memory and transformative possibilities.

In this chapter, I focused on a particularly significant experience as a child, where I witnessed my dad's response to being humiliated in his search for employment. I use the socially constructed definition of "functional literacy" (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 147), as one way of understanding how my dad, like many adults with unmet literacy needs, has internalised an oppressive model of literacy which has silenced his voice; a voice which feels that it cannot express itself fully to ask questions, to challenge, to express desire or vulnerability. This gives me a transformational perspective from which I identify some of the implications of living under this shadow of silence and explore the 'unsilencing' of my own voice within a critical literacy tradition, as I recreate an imaginary conversation with

the silenced dimension of my dad which kept us at a distance from each other. This requires a movement between direct conversation and reflection on the possible meanings generated through that conversation. This requires a stylistic technique of addressing my dad directly with the use of 'you' for those imaginative conversations, and with 'him' for the more discursive reflections about those conversations.

This process moves incrementally towards identifying the conflicting feelings of pride and shame that anchored my vision and core values for creating transformative adult learning spaces, while also presenting the blocks and barriers within me that often silenced me. This is underpinned by a movement from a Freirean functional literacy experience of the world, to a more critical literacy stance. This compels me to more consciously integrate an embodied way of knowing which roots this chapter in an epistemology where aesthetic representation becomes a valuable form of knowing (Heron, 1992). These stories become integrated within the demanding work of spirals of critical reflection and the repositioning of my day-to-day life and worldview, "where aesthetic representation becomes a valuable form of knowing to be integrated with authentic experience, intelligent understanding, and deliberate action" (Formenti & West, 2018, p. 233). The process of engaging in individual critical reflection and critical dialogue with a colleague enables me to explore how my relationship with my dad has played a role in my work choices and also in shaping the core values that locate my practice as an adult educator in a radical humanist tradition.

Why do I feel haunted by these documents?

I am clearing out my parent's house by myself, a situation that I had never imagined I would find myself in. This was one of the many disruptive dilemmas which arose as a consequence of my sister progressing into the terminal stage of her illness, immediately after my dad's death. I tumble upon a number of documents within my dad's wallet, which gave him a voice that suggested a greater range of self-expression than he had shared with me in his life. They suggested a sensitive, passionate man with hopes, desires and vulnerabilities, which had remained largely unknown to me.

The documents consisted of a range of texts which included a primary school report which was my dad's final year of formal education, aged 13; some references from building sites and garages; a hand copied lyrical prayer; a page from a catechism from 1930; and two photographs of the family that I had not seen before. I expected to find family photographs and perhaps prayers, but I was not expecting to find all of his character and

work references, as well as a final report from school, and the cover of a school catechism. These were particularly surprising, given his traumatic experience of school, and they aroused my curiosity and generated multiple stubborn questions that would not let me go from their grasp, about the meaning that these documents had held for him and why he had placed such a high value on these things that were never shared with us.

Living within the entanglement of your unbearable disappointment with yourself

The experience of being grief-stricken forced me to encounter some of the more difficult and suppressed feelings of disconnection with my family which had accompanied me throughout my life. It opened up a path of exploration that brought me closer to his feelings of disappointment with himself, and particularly with his struggle to be a more secure financial provider. As a result, I became implicated in his disappointment, by becoming both a source of hope and disappointment. His hopes for me, that my progression through higher education, would secure a level of recognition and security that eluded him, were frustrated. Many of my values and work choices, including my rejection of a career in mainstream teaching for the precarious and poorly recognised world of adult literacy, drew me away from his dreams of a better life that had evaded him, but that he had hoped would become mine. This dissonance became very obvious when after my degree, I took up a position as an adult literacy tutor in a prison, which coincidentally shared a name with a very prestigious teacher-training college. My dad deliberately allowed people to be misled that I was working within the more prestigious teacher-training college. Although very little was discussed, I knew that he was disappointed with me, that he believed that I had thrown away a good degree in English and French to “teach prisoners their ABCs”. This in retrospect becomes even more poignant as I work through the construction of the collage and become more cognisant of the extent to which my dad struggled in every aspect of his life as an adult with unmet literacy needs. This is the dad that I am drawn to meet, the one whose voice was hidden in his wallet, the one who could not face his own disappointment in himself, but who carried documents which gave him a wider range of self-expression and sowed seeds for hope beyond the grim sense of just getting on with it and getting by. This was the dad who I had silently witnessed suffering and who had retreated from me, the dad for whom I yearned to alleviate his suffering, and to my sorrow, I had somehow unwittingly compounded it.

Grief and the search to untangle what I am mourning

Every possible chair is positioned
church-like around the walls of our living room.
Four castor wheels support your weight in the open coffin
and bruise the faded rose pattern of the carpet.

You lie washed and shaved, laid out in your three-piece suit.
I worry that they have not taken care to put on your socks and shoes,
but I do not check.

Gracious, gentle, confusingly contemplative -
as when you welcomed back the ring-collared pigeon into your garden
after its miscreant wanderings.

Inscrutable.

Upstairs is still waiting for you.
Toothpaste carefully resting on the bristles,
overstretched braces clipped tightly on your trousers,
dangle down the back of the chair.

I warily step into your bedroom,
remembering the clues -
'Post-its' dotted around the kitchen, with large stubborn words that would not
land in your head,
the sullen retreating into yourself - "I'll hand you over to your mam for that,"
or an abrupt - "We'll leave it there", brushing me away with your hand,
always a tide on the ebb.

Like a swift, I light from drawer to cupboard to chest of drawers to a corner press,
as if I knew the silk bag with its bursting seams was waiting for me

Sepia snapshots, sealing wax, knuckle duster, a wallet -
shiny from years of moulding in your back pocket.

Your sixth class report - your final validation from mainstream education,
a reference for a job in an abattoir,
a prayer copied in shaky handwriting, of unearthly beauty, rich with ambiguity of
hope and despair,
a photo of my family that I have never seen before,
the ragged cover of an Irish catechism.

I did not know you,
I do not know the 'you in me'.

Unlike Kelly, (2004, p. 156) I was not aware that my relationship with my father "had
always been deeply and consciously implicated in my teaching". But after his death, I did
share her "dishevelment" (p. 157) in many aspects of my life and particularly around my
teaching work. My sense of optimism and hope for the possibilities of teaching to

transform lives and social structures was significantly eroded. Kelly explains her erosion of confidence as directly linked to the death of her mother whose life had inspired her to “contribute to changing the conditions of the lives of others (...) because as a child it was not possible through any efforts or achievements for me to change the conditions of my mother’s life” (p. 164). In retrospect, at the end of the protracted period of constructing the collage and associated artworks, I can see the resonance with my own life choices and subsequent frustrations. But these ideas had not taken shape and were not yet fuelling my search as I cleared the house after my dad’s death, which initiated a chance encounter with the documents in his old brown wallet.

My uneasiness at such an invasion of his privacy co-existed with a curiosity and a yearning to understand why he had valued these particular documents, and what I might learn about his emotional life that was such an enigma to me.

The poem represents that moment in the mourning process, when “one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly for ever” (Butler, 2004, p. 21). The house with all of its domesticity can never return to what it was. The toothpaste “resting on the bristles” and the “over stretched braces” on the back of the chair will never again be a part of my dad’s daily routine, in much the same way as I can never be the person who I was, when he was part of my daily routine. There is a troubling realisation that I have lost the opportunity to deepen or nurture any further relationship with him. I am facing the reality that there is no longer a possibility of sharing an intimate space, where he could express how he felt, and the meanings that he generated from some of the painful experiences that he endured from childhood. Something has been lost that is a part of me and that has deeply unsettled me.

The experience of entering into this disorientating dilemma mirrored Butler’s experience of mourning, as something that was not a wilful engagement; it was as if “this experience of transformation deconstitutes choice at some level” (Butler, 2004, p. 21). This resonates with my sense of purpose, which underpinned my search through his personal drawers and cupboards.

Like a swift, I light from drawer to cupboard to chest of drawers to a corner press,
As if I knew the silk bag with its bursting seams was waiting for me.

I was embarking on a process that is “larger than one’s own deliberate plan, one’s own project, one’s own knowing and choosing” (Butler, 2004, p. 21). I had a sense of being

carried purposefully forward towards something that I was searching for, while also feeling completely out of control.

All that I knew for certain is that I needed to engage with these documents in a way that would allow me to imaginatively create a new relationship with my dad. This was an attempt to “inquire, not into the loss of ‘you’, but into the change in me that your undeniable physical, literal, material, bodily death is effecting” (Wyatt, 2010, p. 510). Dad’s absence was becoming a new presence that engulfed me. It was as if I was seized by a compulsion to create a relationship with him, which would allow me to be vulnerable with him. There was an impossible longing to be assured that he had really loved me and to understand more clearly the nature of his disappointment with himself, which I had become implicated in.

Inside the ‘thrall’ of the loved one

In the months that followed my dad’s death, I was thrown, disconnected, struggling to find meaning in most of my daily practices, teaching often felt flat and without a purpose. I did not recognise for a while that I was in the grip of what Butler describes as “the transformative effect of loss” (2004, p. 21). This is a conscious and unconscious registering of “the thrall in which our relations with others hold us, in ways that we cannot always recount or explain” (p. 23). This was particularly difficult as it corresponded to feelings of being out of control and disintegrating. It seemed to mirror that moment in the transformative learning process where it is easy to get stuck or spiral downwards into further disorientation. I wonder if this is what is meant by mourning.

I had not expected to feel so compelled to try to reclaim the unnamed and unarticulated nature of the bonds between my dad and myself, which I had not attempted to explore during his life. This confusion about what I was mourning for, brought me into connection with multiple ‘mourning’ selves and was further complicated by what Butler describes as the realisation that “on one level, I think that I have lost “you” only to discover that “I” have gone missing as well” (2004, p. 22). She suggests that we need a more precise language to discuss this experience of how we are constituted by our relations with each other, because our relations with each other cannot be compartmentalised into an “I” who is still alive and a “you” that is dead (p. 22).

Butler describes this as the loss of those connections (in this case with my dad) which “is composed neither exclusively of myself nor you, but is to be conceived as *the tie* by which

those terms are differentiated and related” (2004, p. 22). Butler recognises that grief is the process by which we are acknowledging how we are all vulnerable and interdependent on each other, and death which breaks these bounds can leave us feeling completely “undone” (Butler, 2004, p. 23). I am also clear that I am not trying to discover the ways in which those ties constituted each other’s sense of identity as an end in itself. Instead I am interested in the nature of those ties and how they might help me to understand more fully the relationship between who we are and what we do (West, 2016), particularly in terms of what is informing my sense of how to be an adult educator.

My dad’s death had been accompanied by the obvious loss of those connections which were part of my day-to-day life - our Sunday evening tea together, with boiled eggs and toast; our chats about the electrification of his village etc. But this feeling of moving through the days as if I was in a dream was exacerbated by something stronger, which became all encompassing as I dismantled his house. Increasingly I became intrigued by what I was glimpsing about his more private self and was left with feelings of carrying a burden that I could not clearly describe. But the fragments in his wallet seemed to encapsulate the shadow of someone who had both a sense of hope and fatalism for life’s possibilities. It was a barely expressed desire for more, entwined with a disappointment and shame, that he had tried to keep hidden from us, but which I had become entangled with.

In the poem, I am surprised by the choice of the word “inscrutable” to describe my dad as in many ways he was very forthright. For the first time I began to reflect on some of the more erratic and unpredictable dimensions to his behaviour. In retrospect, I can sense that my motivation to explore possible meanings for these documents was a quest to probe more closely “who ‘am’ I, without you?” (Butler, 2004, p. 22). The sense of loss was also entwined with a sense of relief that I can no longer disappoint him.

You have been a gentle and reserved shadow in my life. I did not know you as much as I longed to know you, the you that would retreat or go silent. The you who would, on rare occasions, unexpectedly become angry and tell me that I had wasted my degree. It was never the incident in itself that lodged deep within me during these exchanges. In some ways, I had become used to making decisions that you did not approve of and could not understand. It was the bitterness and disappointment that was exhaled with every word, that left me crushed and forlorn, a sense that life itself was pointless and unfair, that people like us were always struggling against an inexorable force of darkness which would inevitably grind us down to dust. It was as if you were watching me too sink under that oppressive weight of your unfulfilled dreams, which were now swallowing me up too. I have nothing to say that could be helpful to either of us. I am puzzled at how I am becoming such a disappointment to you. I am forlorn and bereft after these exchanges. I have nothing to say that could break this painful silence between us.

Within that disappointment there was this impossible contradiction, whereby on the one hand my dad had hoped that I might succeed, where generations of his family had failed, and that I might attain a ‘respectable and comfortable life’. However, there was also a contradictory expectation that failure was inevitable for the likes of us. Unknown to myself, I am simultaneously “gripped and undone by these very relations” (Butler, 2004, p. 23). However, I am also on the portal of being able to delve deep into my own experience of a transformative process, which becomes one of addressing this burden of expectation. There were no quick fix solutions. But in recreating conversation with these fragments, where I allow “material artefacts to jostle with memories and imaginings” (Gannon, 2018, p. 26), I begin to express myself more fully. The rupturing of this silence around my childhood allows me to begin my journey, to re-affirm the importance and value of my work as an adult educator with more than just a commitment but with a stronger sense of conviction.

A consideration of the process of creating a collage as a valuable way of knowing

Before I even embarked on the collage, I knew that this work could not be done by myself but needed a colleague with whom I could be vulnerable and curious while also feeling safe and in some way held. I welcomed an opportunity to work with my colleague, Alice Bennett, who was also drawn to creating a separate collage about her core values, which we agreed to use as a basis for sharing a critically reflective dialogue before, during and after the collage making. In addition, we decided to use a reflective journal throughout the process to capture the shifts, insights as well as the moments of ‘being stuck’ and unknowing became essential. This section attempts to draw on my reflective journal to consider how it feels to experience the disorientation of embarking on a transformational learning process from the inside, while also paying attention to the process of collage making as embedded within experiential knowing (Heron, 1992) and as a valuable way of knowing. The process of cutting up photocopies of these artefacts and organising them onto the page generated four core metaphors: the first metaphor, I will call ‘The torso’, the second metaphor is ‘Strangling seaweed’, the third is ‘Sun’ and finally the fourth is called ‘Mer-Angel’. The images will be included in the relevant sections.



Collage holding four key metaphors

All of these images enabled me to feel anchored, while also allowing me to let go and lose myself in a relationship of vulnerability and openness with my dad, which I was realising that I had yearned for when he was alive. For the purpose of this chapter, I will focus on the first image ('The torso' - the limbless outline of a body with a sun in the centre) as a metaphor, which creates a particularly intimate space to invoke my relationship with my dad.

In order to rebuild an imaginative relationship with my dad to explore some of these contradictions, I decided to use photocopies of these fragments from his wallet to create a collage (Biffi & Zuccoli, 2016). The process of making collage seemed well suited to interrogating this multi-layered experience by "providing a novel and metaphoric language with which to give shape to thoughts and ideas" (Biffi & Zuccoli, 2016, p. 135). These metaphors emerged by paying close attention to the vibrant sensations, intuitions and insights which resonated as I 'listened' intently to those documents which had been photocopied from my dad's wallet, and tried to capture them through images, shapes and textures.

Green (2012, p. 202) describes the transformational learning process, as the “whirlpool”, where new water is continuously entering while the shape is held as a constant. This is the process that is interrupted when we begin to test out some of the assumptions which both consolidates our identity and at the same time constrains it. This corresponds to a process of questioning some of the basic premises at the heart of our identity where we make meaning and which are responsible for how we orientate ourselves in moments of doubt or uncertainty, we “turn to our basic premises for guidance” (Green, 2012, p. 203). In this case, there is a niggling worry of arriving at insights that do not bring healing or reassurance but create additional deterioration within my relationship with my dad.

What if some overwhelming experiences emerge, some half-remembered experiences that I have chosen to ignore, take me over and leaves me feeling inconsolable. There is no one still alive who was there at the time. What if I am left feeling even worse and more abandoned? Not knowing and not being able to unknow?

Throughout my academic career, there was a slow losing of my vital self as my love of metaphor, poetry and story was dismissed as a leisure pursuit, which had no serious place within the tradition of scholarly writing. One of the benefits of deciding to explore my own experience of transformational learning meant that I had no choice but to root this research in significant lived experiences, which also gave me a strong rationale for admitting “felt-realities” (Hunt, 2001, p. 351) and embrace a strong sense of freedom. This took the form of wandering across the traditional academic disciplines of adult education, sociology, psychology. Writing was “a creative act (...) to do justice both to the personal and the academic and bring narrative coherence and integrity to complex experience” (West, 2016, p. 45). However, my initial concerns were that I could get stuck in a torrent of experiences that would remain as inchoate ideas. This would render me unable to move out of the loop of presentational and experiential knowing, in any satisfying way, which did justice to the complexity of the personal experience. It would expose my inability to penetrate beyond the distance that dad had carefully maintained between us for most of his life with me.

I wondered how to close down my brain... my fear of the white page ...my fear of being blank with nothing to make or do or reflect on ...or of producing something that feels flat... false ... white, too white empty and lifeless ...

The loss of my dad provoked a new experience of bereavement for me, which I had not experienced so clearly with the loss of my mam. I welcomed Butler’s suggestion that in times of mourning we discover the limits of our existing vocabulary and yearn for a new

“vocabulary”, (2004, p. 22) which could describe this “relationality” (2004, p. 22) for “who ‘am’ I, without you?” (Butler, 2004, p. 22). I too was searching for a language that can capture that disintegrating sense of loss, which accompanied me at a preconscious level. I was aware of how powerful and revealing the use of metaphors can be in the construction of poetry. I was equally curious to explore how I might draw on metaphor to create a ‘new language’, or at least not use my habitual language for meaning making and express myself instead through collage. In the initial stages of the process, there was a resistance to move past a more cognitive approach to making meanings.

I am trying to control the process and think my way through it in much the same way as I would plan an essay...I am trying to put an order on this experience and start laying them down as if I am making a sentence which expresses an intended meaning.

However, this early stage gives way to a freer process whereby I am intuitively connecting experiences and stories to these images. I am constantly reminding myself not to over think it and just plunge in.

The actual process of making the collage was a little bit like being a gannet. All of the paper and images were spread around on the floor and I would just swoop down when I saw something that I wanted. I have a sense that these artefacts have their own life and will reveal themselves to me.

The process of reconnecting and re-imagining how it might have felt to be my dad, and how this is entangled with my story was essentially a messy process. I had no clear idea of where this might lead me and understood that true to all transformative processes the outcomes “cannot be charted or planned” (Butler, 2004, p. 21). While this was a messy process, which had an undetermined outcome, it also felt guided and purposeful.

I cannot say why I am placing these images and fragments from the photocopied documents in these particular ways. I cannot even discuss the relationships between these fragments that I have pasted down. It was on the one hand completely incoherent, but I also felt that I was placing images in a way that allowed them to exist and breathe on the page as I experienced them. I work quickly and lose all of my hesitancy. There is a powerful feeling of release as I select sometimes images from magazines and on other occasions I am directly cutting up the photocopied fragments, I select, paste, hide, forefront, layer, place in tight connection or at a distance. I do all of this with unswerving confidence. I know what I am doing.

The process of making the collage initiated a deeper engagement with a more embodied way of knowing, which brought me through a rich emotional process of first showing experience and later exploring how to tell it. This enabled me to articulate raw painful experiences in a more nuanced and authentic way. Heron (1992) privileges experiential knowing in so far as there is an upwards movement which means that “the validity of each way of knowing is also dependent on the ways of knowing that ground it” (Yorks & Kasl,

2002, p. 183). Therefore, experiential knowing which is at the base of this hierarchy becomes the “touchstone” (p. 183) for all of the “higher sets of transactions” (p. 183). This resonates with this deep feeling of plunging into an embodied form of knowing which has been a guiding force in constructing this collage. While also recognising that the completed collage has moved through cycles of ways of knowing, which culminate in the ‘practical’. The cycle of moving through this “up-hierarchy” (Heron, 1992, p. 27) allows the collage in its final form to be simultaneously enriched by the particular ways of knowing it has moved from, while it has also take on a relatively autonomous life of its own (p. 21).

My colleague and I were so moved by the force of this powerful way of knowing that during one of our encounters, we created a poem by cutting and pasting words and phrases out of our reflective journals and re-arranging them into a representation of embodied knowing, which Holman Jones (2018) describes as “the insights and understandings generated in feeling, touching, sensing, speaking, and moving in cultural spaces and experiences - are valued as equal partners to the knowledges generated by thought, text, and intellectual engagement in the meaning-making enterprise” (p. 8).

I am holding my breath, barely breathing,
a skin memory, a blood memory.
I feel the tightening of my muscles.
Dreams, flashes, and always waking early in the morning with images,
the vivid recall burning.

Breath, blood and beat of heart, touches me
- inhale deeply.
Pulling inwards,
I am flooded,
one action leading to the next.

I feel a little sick.
I draw breath,
dive in.

A skin memory, a blood memory took on flesh,
something stirred.

Tightening of my muscles.
Blankness, confusion, I need to step away.

I draw breath,
I step back in.
Head talk - pushed to one side,
I am flooded.

I think about our joint poem as a showing phase or a reaching out to others which Tamas (2009) argues is primarily around generating empathic connections with other people. It invites the reader to try to feel with us the deeply embodied experience of making this collage which “requires the capacity to listen to our own bodies and their manifold ways of perceiving and knowing, beyond the obvious and the visible” (Formenti & West, 2018, p.1) in the hope that they might be encouraged to do something similar.

Listening to the artefacts

The experience of moving from the showing to the telling phase (Tamas, 2009) was very significant and almost seamless. As I pasted the last of the three metaphors down, I experienced a shift. In emotional terms, it was one of those shifts that we associate with transformational learning. It was accompanied by an experience, which Formenti and West (2018) describe as one where by “art objects talk back to their creator” (p. 238).

Towards the end of the process, there is a weight inside me. But as I step back I have a sense that it is done. These fragments are telling stories simultaneously. I imagine each part of the collage talking and moving and declaring itself, none of them listening to each other...a bit like having lots of windows boxes open on a computer screen at the same time.

I know that this marks the end of the process and I am alert to new possibilities and to taking a new direction. It is at this point that I enter into a process that appears to release some functional and constraining metaphor inside me, which can no longer hold these experiences that have emerged from the collage together. I feel connected to enter into these stories. As discussed, this collage became the cornerstone and over the following four years, at transitional moments I return again and again to examine their meanings. I felt liberated to express something that attempted to explore some of the unarticulated dissonances within our relationship. It broadened my understanding of how participating in transformative processes must be “deeply rooted in real life experience” (Formenti & West, 2018, p. 1). But it is also accompanied by a formative encounter with the reality that “transformation (...) does not descend directly from art, or its contemplation” (Formenti & West, 2018, p. 233). Instead it emerges from a demanding multimodal cycle of bringing our being, understanding and doing into conversation with our experience. I had considered attaching copies of the individual documents used in the collage, as appendices, but once I had finished this process I changed my mind. I wanted to make a distinction between the documents, and how I drew on the documents to position them in relation to each other to create an artefact. The artefact tells a bigger story of how all of these

fragments from the individual documents created jostlings of memories, stories, sensations to capture the story that emerged in my imagination.

This is one way of understanding how I positioned one particular story about my dad's humiliation in search of work, as central to the research. It illuminated how my initial departure, which appeared to be a search for the core values which underpinned my practice and a better understanding of transformative learning, deepened into another more vulnerable inquiry. An inquiry which not only raised questions about the nature and depth of my dad's love for me, but also about my search for community and belonging which were also connected to my vision of adult education.

There were many moments in my encounter with the process of collage making which left me brooding and lost or just confused. The only way in which I could begin to get some kind of grip on them was by sharing my experiences of the process with my colleague, in the hope of finding a language to talk about what it was and what it might be.

Once the experience of creating the collage was complete, I wanted to begin writing and talking about it. This conscious bringing of these experiences to my awareness was an essential part of generating meaning which is a different but complementary type of knowing. It was not enough to retain this knowing in my body.

Formenti and West (2018), elaborate on this process by suggesting that "aesthetic is a bridge between experiential and propositional forms of knowing, through cultivating awareness and reflexivity" (p. 239). The process of "cultivating awareness and reflexivity" took the form of a desire to begin to try to talk about it within a safe and mutually respectful relationship, which emerged at a significant moment within the process. Many of the meanings were generated within those critical dialogues with my colleague where I drew on Brookfield's lenses throughout this process, with reference to a Freirean framework of analysis for understanding and reframing oppressive narratives.

The spiral process of creating the collage, writing in to the experience in my reflective journal, combined with critical dialogues with my colleague, all enhanced my ability to pay attention to the particular details of my dad's life as an adult with unmet literacy needs. It allowed me to represent him so that he was not just "aggregates of certain sociological or epidemiological variables" (West, 2016, p. 37). It allowed me to give him a voice within an imaginary conversation as someone "with stories to tell of what it feels like to exist in particular conditions" (West, 2016, p. 37). This creates reverberations with my own lived experience of both witnessing silencing and my own experiences of feeling silenced as a

child and later on as a scholar and practitioner, which creates an empathy with those students who may feel silenced as learners in my learning spaces, and as practitioners in their own learning spaces. This becomes a process throughout the thesis, of returning to my dad's experience of shame and silence, which becomes a lens for examining the particular implications of how my internalisation of these processes unwittingly shape my work as an adult educator.

The focus on the first fragment – which could be interpreted as a limbless 'torso' connected to a silhouette of a man concealed with tracing paper, became one point of entry for engaging in a critically reflective dialogue with my colleague, which enabled me to recognise and bear witness to my dad's 'silencing' within the family space but also within the public spaces, as an adult with unmet literacy needs. As I created an imaginary conversation with this metaphor, a complicated and sometimes ambivalent relationship between my dad's internalised sense of personal failure and shame within the educational system, and my own learning autobiography, unfolds (Brookfield, 1998). I began to understand how witnessing the silencing of my dad could be examined through the lens of the internalisation of an oppressive model of functional literacy associated with Freire's Banking system of education (Freire, 1996), which silences our ability to question, express desire, explore dreams, protest and even to demand self-respect. I interrupt this silence between us by adopting a critical literacy approach, which in this chapter enables me to express and challenge my own sense of being silenced as a child, to interrogate my dad about those aspects of our relationship that I had learned not to discuss with him throughout most of my life.

I am particularly interested in how this informs my understanding of the necessity of "cultivating relationships in which individuals feel legitimate and are able to question the taken-for-granted without experiencing paralysing anxiety" (West, 2016, p. 13) by creating horizontal relationships of trust and respect where there is a real emotional attachment both to the learning process and to the learners. This enables me to begin to consider the ways in which this encounter with intergenerational shame and silence deepened my own appreciation of the transformational learning process, as one of trying to go beyond our silencing. It renewed my appreciation for something I had often take for granted in my practice, which gave priority to supporting students to connect with more of their lived reality by articulating those 'unsayable' experiences that are embedded within subjugated experience.

I know that the collage must be a way, not only of creating possible emotional connections to my dad and how it might have felt to live his life, but also to tease out some of the connections and distances which that has created between us. Ultimately, it must also be a way of helping me to examine what I am bringing into my teaching and what is bringing me to teaching (Kelly, 2004). Therefore, it consolidated my belief for the need to weave a multidisciplinary approach to this exploration. This will include a weaving of the emotional, subconscious, inter-subjective and critical sociological perspectives embedded within a critical reflexivity.

The dilemma of meaning making

I am drawing on Freire's (1996) idea of dialectics to explore those external forces that shape our lives and dehumanise us, as well as examine the internal experience of trying to move beyond these limits to a place that may hold more possibilities. Green (2012, p. 202) reminds us that "the ground of assumptions upon which we construct our identities is remade during transformational learning". This meant that the process of trying to gain a better understanding of the transformational learning process was, by necessity, a process involving grief, as old meanings and assumptions at the core of my identity collapsed and gave way to, but does not guarantee new possibilities. Therefore, I was aware that I was setting out on a journey where there is every possibility that I will experience feelings of anxiety or depression, with no certainty that there will be any satisfactory resolution to those disturbing emotions.

However, the feeling that something that had sustained me was no longer sustaining me, propelled me to re-examine aspects of my experience within the family from a different perspective. As I entered in to the process of making the collage, I was aware of moving from being an outsider holding my dad's school reports, poetry, photos and references, to experiencing them and their associated sensations, and becoming an insider. It was a process of allowing these sensations to reverberate through me. I knew that I was searching to give a voice to some of those painful silences that I had unwittingly participated in with my dad. My hope was that this would allow me to question the dominant narratives which underpinned those unarticulated meanings that had implicated me in his sense of disappointment and failure. I could not easily attribute these to either one of us, or both of us, but which was a defining quality in our relationship. I also knew that I wanted to use these fragments to generate a wider range of emotional expression

around the meanings of some of those experiences my dad has talked to me about, or were passed onto me by someone else or those I have witnessed.

I had something to say, but it is as yet unformed and living inside me in a conflation of sensations, impulses, rememberings, scents, images and dreams. Finding entry points into this experience was largely an intuitive and organic process. Taylor (2019) suggests that this involves being able to “stop, dwell, contemplate deeply, inhale, focus, face the problem fully in its difficulties and to [...try to] attend to what’s going on meanwhile in the spaces where small and large injustices occur when no one is apparently looking or are deliberately looking the other way” (p. 10). In this sense, I hoped that the process of making the collage would allow me to pay particular attention to those shadowy spaces where injustices have reverberated within me. Chant (2019) suggests that collage making is both helpful as a “constructivist approach, linking experiential knowing and understanding with the action of choosing and placing of pictures, images or other artefacts” (p. 5). But my particular interest in the collage resonated with Biffi and Zuccoli (2016) who shared my view that art is not an optional extra “but (...) a mode of research in its own right: one that advances our understanding of the object under enquiry (...)” (p. 135) and creates an extended epistemology for valuing other ways of knowing.

Therefore, it is less a question of how the collage appears at the end of the very physical process of cutting, placing and pasting images in relation to each other. It is rather the process which I need to remain alert to. Enabling a shift from a more habitual cognitive based response to the world to an “embodied experience [...where we could] “co-create [a] space in which it is safe to participate with [our] whole selves [...our] whole bodies” (Meyer, 2012, p. 29) and relationships. Therefore, there is an intricate weaving of content and knowing so that the process is the content.

However, breaking silence with established meanings, within such a significant relationship is problematic. It is not a predictable space, but a very vibrant one, which presented both nurturing and disorientating experiences. Some of the problems of opening myself to these potentially vulnerable experiences appeared safer, by working directly with images in collage making. But the process of generating meanings was complicated, primarily because meanings did not arrive fully formed as coherent thoughts and ideas, Tamas (2009), reminds us that “Art is not a tool that can pry out recalcitrant truths and put them on display like a tray of impacted teeth” (para. 20). Articulating the way in which I was resonating with these images was almost like trying to interview myself,

to tease out some of these meanings that were hovering between my conscious and unconscious. Therefore, I needed a form that would allow me to embrace that messiness. In choosing collage, I was aware that I found myself going back, again and again to the value of showing and telling. I am not claiming to create a fixed or stable interpretation of this experience. My telling involves an offering of meanings and the context within which they have been generated. This raised the recurring question throughout the inquiry of considering the basis upon which I was establishing the validity of these meanings as well as the difficulty of trying “to speak from within that which I purport to describe” (Tamas, 2009, para. 23). This means not falling into representing these experiences in a way that neither leaves them raw and completely incomprehensible to readers nor tidy and comforting which misrepresents the raw chaotic nature of our experience.

West (2016) reminds us that “we are in murky, illusive, emotional, time-consuming, psychosocial and discursive territory, trying to understand human well-being or its antitheses through narratives of how more democratic and open forms of relationship may be learned” (West, 2016, p. 39). As I am setting out to recreate a narrative between myself and my dad, which did not take place during his life, in many ways I am talking to a ghost, a creation of my imagination fused with memory and felt experiences. I need to be very transparent about the basis upon which I am constructing these meanings. I also need to be careful about becoming over invested in particular interpretations of life experiences where the person concerned is no longer here to create a response. West (2016) reminds us that we are “like [...] dramatist we have constantly to be aware of what we do and how we represent others and what is not said or silent in representation” (p. 40). We also have to be aware of the “effect of a story on us” (p. 40), as discussed earlier.

As I have stated above, I am setting out to immerse myself in particular aspects of my dad’s life, which are sparked by engaging with documents he cherished and carried in his wallet. I am clear that this inquiry is less about trying to establish truths, than exploring possible meanings they are holding for me about my experience of my dad. My hope is that might be useful in reclaiming the sense of who I might be and how I am in the world.

Green (2012) warns us that the problem with this fundamental restructuring of our sense of selfhood is that we enter a liminal zone which involves a “shift from one set of basic premises to another, we are indeed flirting with the danger of relativising all meaning” (p. 203). However, Formenti and West (2018) argue for the “transformative and transcendental force of uncertainty” (p. 239) which in my view does not equate provisional

interpretations of the truth with relativism. Instead, they argued for “aesthetic representation of human experience, of life itself, which is not meant to convey one truth, or fixed meaning. Good art is open, enabling stories to move on, to generate other stories” (p. 239). I am aware that I am ultimately generating meaning from a particular perspective, within a specific context and time, which is a provisional response but none the less capable of creating illuminative insights. Therefore, I am attempting to bring what Mills would call a sociological imagination to some fragments of those stories that I have grown up with about my dad’s life, as a way of exploring, and making connections between private troubles and public issues (1959). This work is possible by drawing on the Freirean lens of critical literacy as a basis for considering the process of meaning making, as one whereby through the recreation of imaginary conversations with my dad, I move from a voice of silence and compliance, to one of protest and healing.

Freire (1996) recognises the incompleteness of this process in so far as we are always in a “process of becoming” (p. 65). For Freire, this is the point of departure for all education, as we continue to challenge and reflect on our situated experiences. It is this state of incompleteness that propels us as humans to adopt a stance of critical reflection and continuous exploration of ourselves, our relationships and the world in which we live all of this out. This is a perspective on our lives which is not about seeking answers, but is a way to help us to continue to find the new questions that we need to keep asking in order to gain the kind of distance necessary, to theorise these experiences that helped me to disentangle the ‘I’ from the ‘him’. It also opens the possibility of beginning the slow work of reframing some of these internalised oppressive narratives, which continues throughout the inquiry, to confront the “image of the oppressor” (Freire, 1996, p. 29) which my dad had internalized. These are the first steps in moving to more joyful possibilities. Irrespective of this realisation, this state of provisional knowing often left me feeling dissatisfied with the “shadow of not knowing, and what lies beyond, outside the frame, is always there” (West, 2016, p. 45). One of the questions that disturbed me the most was how my dad would feel about such a public interrogation of his life.

Breaking into your garden shed

I became increasingly uneasy about the ethics of making an interpretation of my deceased dad’s story public, where there was no possibility of getting his consent. Gannon (2018) shares my concern that “there is no neutral space from which to write”; therefore, I needed to move in close to the detail and be alert to the ethical implications of writing” (p. 26).

The process of creating a collage over a protracted period of days involved opening myself up to the very turbulent and nuanced emotions, but also excitement. While I had concerns about exposing our vulnerability as a family in a public document, I also began to explore ways of doing it so that it might simultaneously protect and possibly liberate us, while also become relevant to adult education practitioners. The focus on exploring my own transformative learning processes as I re-examined my feeling of rejection and disconnection gave rise to a number of concerns. Primarily that the necessity within a research genre to show movement and generate new meanings out of all of this mess and uncertainty, could inadvertently push me to either fall back onto previously held nostalgic or sentimental views of the past, or to become trapped in these difficult emotions and find myself stuck with nothing to say. There was also an equal fear of unwittingly resorting to deluding myself with neat and articulate conclusions that did not do justice to the complexity and contradictions of what it means to attempt to see the world through the eyes of another and learn from it.

My reading of Fraser (2018) and Tamas (2009) supported my belief that reflection on tragedy and loss was valuable, because it could be a particularly significant way of deepening my understanding of my reflexivity and my worldview. However, I was concerned that I might be in some way using my dad's life experiences for my own ends. As I entered deeper into the process, I could not have predicted the intimate insights about my dad that started to emerge. My concerns became more heightened about including this work in the PhD, as my research drew me closer to a dad who had gone to great lengths throughout his life to maintain his privacy, and protect his identity as an adult with unmet literacy needs. I questioned whether he would have approved of this work if he were alive. I worried that it was exploitative.

Then I had a dream that changed my feelings about this work. The experience of finding my research weaving in and out of my dreams was not a new one, but this was different and fell into a category which Tisdell (2003) talks about as belonging to transition dreams. These dreams give us a sense of "direction" (2003, p. 71) in times of heightened confusion and conflicting feelings. The dream, like the writing of haikus that I discussed earlier, not only helped to give me a clearer sense of direction, but it brought with it a tremendous sense of being on the right track, as well as a feeling of having gained some form of validation for my research. It was as if "from a spiritual perspective that this was the right decision to make" (2003, p. 71).

In my dream, I am moving around in your garden shed. I do not know why I am there. I am feeling very distressed because I know this is private space and that I am an intruder. Then out of the blue, the dream changes. I hear you call my name, Geraldine. You call it so beautifully, and with such great tenderness that although I know that you are dead, I feel completely embraced by your presence, as if you are holding me in your arms. I am overflowing with the wonder of hearing you call my name again. I realise that I had already forgotten your rich tone. The constant ache that I would never hear your voice again is temporarily eased. I have this strange sensation of simultaneously knowing that you are dead, and also experiencing that I am in your presence. A heavy weight is lifted from inside me.

The next morning as I recalled this in my reflective journal, I felt confident that my dad was in some inexplicable way, voicing his approval for this research and urging me to keep going. The feeling that I had as I was led towards his wallet all those months ago, resurfaced within me, which I expressed in the lines of the poem.

Like a swift, I light from drawer to cupboard to chest of drawers to a corner press,
As if I knew the silk bag with its bursting seams was waiting for me.

This corresponded with a dream that I had as I finished the PhD, and was feeling overwhelmed with the work of editing it. I dreamed that I was holding a ladder in place to help my dad to climb up to the back bedroom window in our house in Gateshead. I woke perplexed by the sustained intense and vivid sense of purpose that it demanded from me, if I was to prevent my dad from falling. Later it dawned on me as I woke up one morning that this research was among other things making it possible for him to clean the bedroom window so that we could together see out more clearly. Once again, the energy of the dream was uplifting. It seemed to chime with my memories of his increased curiosity and eagerness towards the end of his life, to explore some of what lay behind his reasons for emerging from school as an adult with unmet literacy needs, as well as the impact on his life. This added to my sense that my dad would have been keen for this conversation to continue, particularly if it could help to remove some of the distortions that got in the way of being able to see ourselves and our deep, if imperfect, love for each other. The integration of my dream life into my research was the first time that I had combined these two very different ways of knowing. It resonated with my intuitive understanding that an immersive experience of encountering objects from the dead demanded an approach that incorporated an extra rational way of knowing, in order to gain a more full-bodied way of knowing (Hart, 2000). To reconnect to those pivotal experiences in my life history I needed to have more than a perspective shift (Mezirow, 1991). Shifts in more rational and cognitively led knowing are not automatically accompanied by, shifts in how I feel about myself, and in my way of being in the world. These deeper shifts are more likely to occur when I am engaging with more aesthetic ways of knowing, through making art, stories or

poems. These are discussed in more detail as they arise in the inquiry. However, Formenti and West (2018) are particularly helpful for articulating how aesthetic knowledge can enhance transformational learning. They suggest that presentational knowing strengthens our capacity to communicate our lived experience and our connections with each other. It also “cultivate[s] ‘epistemological coherence’ between feeling, thinking and acting” by “cultivating awareness and reflexivity” (p. 239). The shift in energy which accompanies the recalling of the dream surprises me, but there is a feeling of satisfaction which resonates with Formenti and West’s claim that there is pleasure and beauty in “finding the pattern which connects, in contrast to the perversion of power, the market and commodification” (p. 238) even though I know that this is provisional and can and will reveal new truths at each examination.

I stayed with the overwhelming sense that my dad was in some way inviting me into his private space, which deepened my commitment to the research. I began to reframe it as a way of identifying some of the shadows of the intergenerational silence about poverty and poor educational experiences, and later in the inquiry, I examine the many ways in which I colluded with them. I felt clearer about the value of giving voice to some of those experiences of shame and silence that I had witnessed through my dad’s suffering, in the full knowledge that I could not undo them, but I could at least reframe them with respect and dignity.

Plunging into the crevasses of the silenced voices and the dead voices

I have chosen to work within the autoethnographic tradition, as a way of bringing a lens of criticality to that space where I am trying to tell the individual’s story within the context of society (West, 2016). This means searching for the spaces of personal agency and choice within the structurally oppressive forces of class as well as the “subtleties of the relationships in which they are embedded” (West, 2016, p. 38). In this section, I am reconnecting with those parts of my dad’s life that had remained invisible and unapproachable to me.

At the core of autoethnography there is the recognition that our “personal experience is infused with cultural norms and expectations” (Adams et al, 2022, p. 3), and as an autoethnographer I am committed to “reflexivity – in order to identify and interrogate the intersections between self and social life” which were of interest to me (p. 3). There was also a critical dimension advocated by critical autoethnographers, who like Holman Jones, regard autoethnography as a political practice committed to show how our “experiences

with/in relationships, institutions, communities, and cultures are enlarged or constrained by power and (in)justice” (Adams et al, 2022, p. 11).

The difficult question of achieving fairness and justice for those that I have loved most in the world was agonising, but became inextricably linked to my navigation of grief and my search to find new ways to think about it. I invite the reader to consider the extent to which I have achieved my purpose of attempting to interrupt an oppressive silence, in a probing and spacious way, which would not have been possible to achieve, within our existing relationship with each other, when they were alive, or in the case of my sister was cut short by her premature death. These conversations were unusual, in so far as they were ultimately conversations that were attempting to engage with silence, with what has not been said, but has been borne, and with what has been witnessed and is searching for fledgling words, inside me.

This means legitimising the language that people feel comfortable with, when they are among their own people with whom they are on intimate terms. This is the setting off point for drawing on those examples of literacy practices i.e. letters, cards and post-it notes etc. that name their reality, with a criticality which allow me to consider the social and political structures that enforce a “culture of silence” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 159). This travelling between the inside and outside of these experiences kept a focus on how hegemonic power privileges some people at the expense of marginalising others and how I am implicated in my life and work. The purpose of these critical reflections is not to expose the other in some humiliating way, but to reconnect us in a renewed relationship, which is fuelled with compassion, empathy and generosity. So that we might see our “differences that separate us, so that we can imagine (...) new and better ways of living in this world” (Bochner, 2000, p. 269).

I examine the fragments of stories that the collage evokes by using a functional literacy lens, which limits literacy to “a device for defining only the *minimum competencies* required of an individual (that is the individual as worker and citizen) in a print society” (Taylor, 1993, p. 144). Ultimately, it does not function to promote democracy or “freedom of expression, or a more genuine realisation of the power of citizenship” (Taylor, 1993, p. 144). Instead, it becomes a way that “individuals can find their place in society” (Taylor, 1993, p. 143), where literacy acts as one of the gatekeepers in the economical hierarchy. Taylor explains that functional literacy becomes a way to “create discrimination and division” (1993, p.144) and justify why those who do not meet the baseline of functional

literacy are poor. Those who are very literate by virtue of their “position in society and their cultural superiority are able to define the principles, socially, morally and economically, which those wanting to function in society must accept” (Taylor, 1993, p. 145). Therefore my dad would have struggled with the additional burden of believing the narrative that our family’s struggles and inability to arrive at that status of ‘being comfortable’ was directly related to his lack of literacy skills. This also promotes an understanding of literacy that does not promote creativity or enable people to explore those dilemmas that are integral to our experience of living in relationship with others and our desire to question what it means to be alive. It promotes a literacy that requires individuals, at least at the bottom of the social and economic hierarchy “to function in a way that is commensurate with those literate expectations which reflect the societal norms” (Taylor, 1993, p. 143). These are essentially about holding down a job and getting by sufficiently well so that they can engage in those narrowly defined literacy practices in a way which allows them to do them in the way that “other people do them in the same situation” (Fingeret & Drennon, 1997, p. 63). In other words, they can participate in a society without drawing attention to themselves.

The stories are interrogated from a critical literacy perspective, which in this section becomes a way to try to understand how dominant narratives of privilege, mediated through structures such as the school, church, workplace, employment agencies etc. can create feelings of self-blame, crippling self-doubt and marginalisation among adults, who have been failed by these institutions, which implicate them in colluding in their own isolation from family, community and the wider society. Holme is sceptical of the limitations of critical literacy because of the danger that it presupposes that “‘empowerment’ seems now to mean helping critical literacy students to acquire a dominant literacy so that they too can dominate” (Holme, 2004, p. 60) or it can be “a form of contextual manipulation where students are brought to believe what the teacher believes” (Holme, 2004, p. 60). In this instance, I am adopting a critical literacy lens in order to expose the text “not as a product of a given author but as a method of encoding the social and cultural forces to which that author is subject” (Holme, 2004, p. 61). Therefore, one of my hopes for telling these stories is to challenge the emphasis on literacy programmes that promote reading at the expense of writing. This disempowers people, even those who can read the world, from writing letters or stories and bringing them to a wider audience in a range of contexts. One interpretation of this logic is that “if I can read, I can follow what you want to say to me. But if I can write, you can read what I want to

say to you” (Taylor, 1993, p. 146). This raises the possibility of generating multiple and contradictory perspectives to those which are put forward by the creator of the story.

It is within this context that my dad’s collection of snippets of poetry and a hand written prayer become a challenge to those limited definitions of literacy within the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) survey in 2013 (OECD, 2013). It not only reveals the spikey literacy profile of adults who may fail at reading workplace texts, and yet can engage successfully with those texts which they value and which arise in contexts in which they are comfortable. It also demonstrates how in this case, texts were drawn on from others which not only gave him access to conversations about what it means to be human, but also experiences which would not have been readily available to him within his immediate community.

There is a delicate balance to be achieved between viewing people who have limited personal agency as helpless victims within a sociological perspective, while also recognising that these individuals may be living inspirational and fulfilling lives. In order to do justice to both perspectives, the engagement with this research required what West described as an “interdisciplinary imagination” (2016, p. 43). This enabled artefacts to evoke memories and sensations, and give full reign to the “fragments of social, cultural, psychic, the here and now and the there and then, [which] are always present in our stories” (West, 2016, p. 43). This created a more nuanced and holistic representation of an individual’s life.

In this chapter, the term a ‘silenced voice’ has a very particular meaning. It is derived from a definition of functional literacy where the individual is supported to use those literacy practices that allow people to function in the status quo of our society. It does not allow people to fully express themselves, to confront that which diminishes their dignity or their life choices, to name those emotions and experiences that allow them to be fully themselves. It does not encourage man to realise his capacity “to treat not only his actions but his very self as the object of his reflection” (Freire, 1996, p. 78). It creates the passive receiver who has “been given entry into the elite’s library of knowledge and who therefore may be seen there, but who cannot, or must not, be heard” (Taylor, 1993, p. 146). One of the characteristics of functional literacy is that it privileges those literacies that teach people how to acquire those specific literacy practices that enable them to be able to respond to the literacy practices of dominant groups. These include accessing skills to participate in training programmes geared towards the work place, or interact with government agencies,

filling in forms, reading instructional manuals, completing spreadsheets, engaging with the functionality of websites etc.

In the PIAAC survey in 2013 (OECD, 2013) literacy is defined as key information processing skills, which are essentially “economic and work-related skill[s] [where] other dimensions or reading and writing are made invisible” (Hamilton, 2020, p. 68). In addition, only those who are considered eligible to participate in the workplace (aged between 16 to 65) are surveyed. They did not survey people’s ability to write, to express themselves or to generate their own meanings through producing written texts or those multiple literacy practices that diverse communities engage in, and highly value for the connections and access they give them to participate in their own communities and cultures. The focus was on engaging with the texts of others. PIAAC was not interested in the difficulties that people experienced when they wanted to create their own texts that held significance for them. Their silence, compliance and lack of questions or expressions of hope and despair, present no challenge to the functioning of the economy and therefore remain undocumented. This for Freire perpetuates the myth that being able to name your experiences in the world as a starting point for generating dialogue to “achieve significance as human beings” (Freire, 1996, p. 69) is the privilege and “the task of an elite” (Freire, 1996, p. 71).

What my mam told me

Towards the end of her life and over intervals of time, my mam confided in me about some of the hidden world of hardship which was integral to my dad’s life, and which she considered to have contributed to the shorter life expectancy of his siblings, except one.

What I remember most was her sense of secrecy as she talked. She had heard the story below about my dad’s early childhood, from her mother, I will call her Eilish, who was very friendly with my dad’s mother, I will call her Siobhán. Therefore, this story is recalling a conversation between friends, which eventually travelled down from mother to daughter (my mam). These were small communities, which created the basis for some very intimate relationships, particularly between women who lived near each other and could meet easily around the household tasks. There was a pump/tap at the intersection of their streets. I imagine Eilish and Siobhán talking as they drew water, which was an important social meeting point for women at the time.

It is important to remember that my mam is storying this story in her own fashion and therefore told me about those parts of the story which she had heard from her mother (Eilish), but which seemed important to her. I had the impression up to both of their deaths that dad had never discussed his early life with her, at least in any intimate detail.

You were born into poverty in the 1930's. The youngest of his siblings. Your mother (Siobhán) was living within a very volatile marriage. In the 1930's, it was considered a wife's sacred duty to respect the lifelong commitment of the marriage vows, and normally a woman would have had no option to leave a dysfunctional relationship. However, your mother's (Siobhán) brothers intervene and remove her from the house with her children. As a deserted wife, there is the stark reality that the family could have been split up; however, your mother and your siblings are brought back into her family home in a small rural village. Your birth, sometime after this upheaval creates more fissures in the family and in the wider community, as it raises questions about the identity of your birth father as you are born after your mother has left her husband.

At this point, my mother assured me that your mother (Siobhán) has sworn on the bible to my Mam's mother (Eilish), that she continued to have feelings for her husband and had met him secretly on a number of occasions. That you had been conceived during one of these clandestine meetings.

There is no way of verifying any of that. I have no doubt that my mam believed this version. It is however quite plausible that this was a sanitised version created by vulnerable women to bring respectability to the family. To this day, there is still a divide within the extended Mernagh family about our claim to be part of it. One way or another this story in its silence and its shadowy articulated presence, wormed its way into how we felt about ourselves and our connections with the wider family.

I had a flash of insight as I thought back to my refusal to relinquish my name when I was married, and my disappointment that he was so angry with me and refused to use it and continued throughout his life to refuse to use it. This may have been a stubborn refusal on his part to accept my decision, which flaunted the conventions and rules of respectable marriages in his eyes, or did it show his concerns that this might give the wider community a basis for questioning the legitimacy of the births of my children, or was it a desperate attempt to encourage me to set myself free from the shameful and conflicted legacy of the 'Mernagh name'? How could I have known that my declaration of what I perceived as a proud connection with family identity was perhaps to him, a refusal to avail of an opportunity to remove myself from this origin of uncertainty?

What you have told me

One day we are sitting in the kitchen together after my mam has died and you are still well enough to make my tea. It seems to me that out of the blue, you suddenly announce that you think that you probably have no father. I reply too quickly that everyone has a father. But this seems to push you back into silence. I have misunderstood what you are trying to tell me.

So I try again and say that I do not care who your father was, or what name he carried, because all I know is that he must have had very fine qualities to produce such a wonderful dad like you. I sense that this has not brought you any ease.

You carry your sense of “illegitimacy” as a heavy burden. You continue to tell me that you were the “only boy in the village who didn’t have a father”. There was one other girl whose father was away working in England; this became a basis for striking up a deep friendship. You reach a certain age and you are actively discouraged from keeping company with each other. You understand that her family are hoping that she will marry into “respectability”.

I know from other conversations that you attended the local school where you are taught to serve, to conform and not to question. The master spends most of the school day unsuccessfully trying to teach Irish grammar in preparation for the much feared Inspector’s visit. The page of the catechism within your wallet bears some reference to the type of authoritarian rote learning which was used to impose an ideology of submission and oppression on you as your worldview. You are of course a sin, and you and your mother are sinners.

You are silenced.

Your mother is silenced.

How did we know, not to ever ask you about our grandad? Once as a child, I asked my mam about him. She looked so uncomfortable and did not look at me as she told me that he had died. Nothing more. I knew that she was not telling the truth.

That was when the silence came down and we knew never to ask you again about your dad or about any aspect of your life that might cause you to recoil in anger and pain. We learned that there is a silence within you that we must not disturb. Over time this became a silence within me that I learned also not to disturb.

Opening the conversation

My eyes land on your last school reference within the collage that you carried with you to England as you searched for work. I am holding the original copy and I am wondering what you felt when you held this report.

Once you told me that you left school to get work at 13, with no qualifications.

...You work in an abattoir

My heart sinks. You who spoke daily with birds and woke at night to tend our sick and dying pets. You who could calm the most disturbed wild animals with your soft whisperings. Wilful ponies would raise their heads so that they could look into your eyes. You who created a 'neonatal unit' for the 14 surprise guinea pigs that arrived when we were on our holidays, and you were looking after our pet guinea pig. You who was welcomed to the church by a tolling bell and a flock of birds who circled the spire until you were taken to your last resting place.

You could never talk about that work [in the abattoir] or most of your work. But this workplace in particular is pulling at us both now. You once told me that all animals, especially pigs, experience total terror from the minute they are loaded into the truck until you put the gun to their tormented heads.

But you are not sentimental about animals or about the world. I am sitting in silence with you and imagining the love you felt for your mother, which pushed you to harden yourself to do what you needed to do to bring in much needed money.

I ask you to let me know how did it feel to be starting work at 13 in this place, which was so brutal that you could never talk about it until the end of your life.

You have learned well the limits of expression, you know not to question, not to yearn for more, not to desire.

He was told where his place in life will be and he cannot expect more, he cannot dream or desire or challenge this view, or ask questions why this is the only place he can be. He does not doubt this narrow interpretation of his potential. He carries this report like one who has earned his bad luck.

We are both silent. You did what you had to do, just like your mother did what she had to do. And the cost of it cannot be discussed even now that you are released from this world. You loved your mother, her sea blue eyes and her gentle voice. You remind me of how as a very small child

she brought you to her work, where you helped her to pick stones out of the field together, indifferent to the cold, only happy to be beside her.

Later you would search for cigarette butts in the street and make her smile by bringing them home to her to smoke. In the nursing home, against the doctor's advice you continued to smuggle packets of cigarettes to her. And then you are silent with each other.

Holman Jones (2018, p. 9) articulated the intensity of this shared moment between us, when she writes that “In addition to the emotional charge that telling such stories creates, critical autoethnography creates an affective force that literally moves us in relation to and with one another”.

You continue to say nothing. There is silence. I can feel that you are silenced. You have no reply nor no protest. They have taught you well. Men must do what they must do.

You travel between England and Ireland, looking for work, but depending on these bits of paper to secure the approbation of others who do not know you, in order to secure it. The only pieces of paper you have to speak for your immense ability in an exploitative workplace.

They acknowledge that you are a man with superior intelligence, exceptionally good with numbers, that you are honest diligent, respectful and hardworking.

Did you carry this piece of paper with pride? Was it something that restored your injured sense of confidence as employers turned you away? Did you read it when you needed to speak up for yourself?

Or did it become a weapon to use against yourself? Did it deepen your sense of failure that you had not only failed to master reading and writing but that you also had not been able to live up to your potential as a man who had a head for numbers?

But he did have a dream. A dream that never left him.

You tell me time and time again about how the senior engineer in an open cast mine where you were working, asked you on a regular basis to verify in your head, complex calculations that they have completed with formulas and measuring tapes, which have been made to assess suitable approaches to new seams of coal. He suggested that you could go to night school and start a qualification in engineering, and eagerly discussed ways of overcoming any obstacles that might get in your way. You are deeply frustrated and you find it impossible to fully understand why you cannot take up this opportunity. There is something missing. You do not know exactly how to describe it. Some of it is that you believe that you are stupid when it comes to book learning and that they are being kind to you. The more they overturn your excuses and reasons for not being

able to take up this offer, the quieter you become until you are once again silent and he stopped asking you.

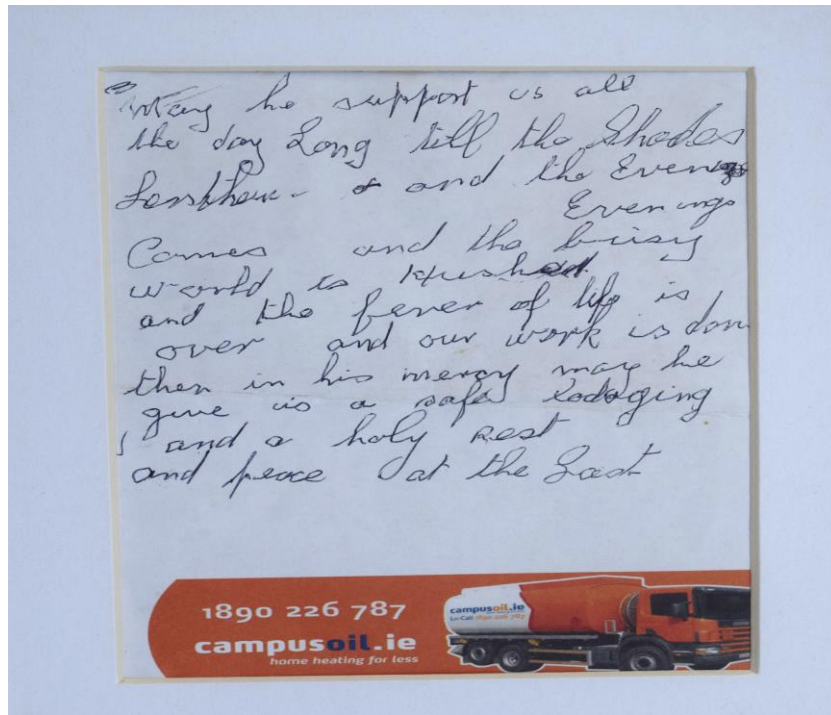
My last trip with you before you died played back into that hidden dream in those stories, which I have heard so many times. You have pneumonia and I am alone with you at home. You are listless and drained. I cannot relieve your mental and physical suffering. The only thing you have mentioned to me in days that has aroused your interest, is that you desire to visit the construction site of the new bridge in New Ross, which is a spectacular feat in engineering with its unusual and dramatic cable suspension system.

It is freezing outside, but I bundled you into the car against all advice. We arrive and you insist on getting out of the car and walking unaided over to the best viewing point of the bridge, in the biting cold. You stand marvelling in front of this magnificent edifice. I am completely surprised as you tell me that you have come not only to witness the complex cabling system with its single pile in the centre, but that you have come to satisfy yourself that they have not blasted away the cliff face, where your friend spent a large part his life with a chisel and hammer, widening the roadway at the foot of the cliff. You point out the rows and rows of hand-chiselled rock. A life's work. We pay our respects in silence.

I am struck by how your wonder at this prestigious piece of engineering, was conditional on discovering that your friend's life's work is still visible and has not been blasted away during the construction of the site for the new bridge. You say no more and sink exhausted back in to the passenger seat.

And yet this is not enough to capture who he was.

I turn my eyes to the fragment of prayer that I have taken from your wallet, along with a collection of poetry cuttings by Patience Strong, which you have cut out of a daily newspaper. You have painstakingly copied this prayer in your own handwriting onto one of the notelets that you kept in the kitchen, to jot down the commonly recurring challenging spellings, like shopping lists and the Irish names of your grandchildren. The opening lines are shaky and still resonate with your fear and sense of intimidation for the task ahead. Words randomly begin with capital letters, until you settle down, get in to a flow of lower case letters and abandon the additional effort of trying to recall the rules that guide the use of capital letters. Only the final word 'last' is written with a flourish of capital L. It is as if you get lost in the beauty of the text and the labour of copying it onto a page.



Dad's prayer

There are indications that you are attempting to follow the rules of transcribing poetry that you have learned in school. The word 'evenings' which you have written incorrectly, is written correctly underneath the 'mistake', at the right hand side of the page. Then there is another shift and it seems that your focus is on copying each word until there is no more space on the line for the next word, and you move to the following line. This representation of the text indicates that it has lost its connection with your spoken voice. This is the only piece of handwriting that I have ever seen you produce. I have only seen phrases, words and names. I imagine you, not so much worshipping the divine, but relishing the beauty of this imagery, which eases your yearning to express more of yourself, your vulnerability and your need to ponder over the dilemmas of our human experience with hope.

I am stopped in my tracks by this fragment of my dad's text, written out laboriously and with intense care. It bears witness to his concern to move away from his spoken voice, but there is a sense of confusion about how to follow through on those long forgotten rules embedded in the culture of schools which ask us to make distinctions between how we speak and how we write. Elbow (2007) states that "illiterate writing" (p. 6) is connected with an idea that "tends in fact to imply that the writing suffers from being too much like speech" (p. 6). It seems that he is trying to fill up every line with as many words as possible before he moves to a new line. This means that as he writes, he is not listening to the words, in a way that allows him to cluster them as he sees them on the page, instead he is

copying blindly word for word. But this seems acceptable to him as he adheres to some half-remembered rule of writing from school. Or maybe it is because he has realised that he will struggle to fit this on a small page, and he needs to use up all of the space available on this notelet. It is not a possibility that he will use a longer, more formal blank page. I can feel the safety in this small notelet that he gets free with every delivery of oil.

I take time to linger over every word, imagining how he approached it, how he framed his challenges and his solutions, to commit this text to his page, in his pen, and in his handwriting. I feel a powerful connection with him as together we recreate the text, and writing becomes an act of resistance which pushes back against the demeaning definitions of functional literacy and the narrow range of competencies investigated in the PIAAC (OECD, 2013) survey. It is as if we are both engaged in an act of resistance. Together we are beginning to challenge some of the limitations of functional literacy. On the one hand, it could be interpreted as a demonstration of his deference to what Taylor describes as the “primacy of the written form” (Taylor, 1993, p. 118) - the supremacy of literacy over orality. While it appears to recognise the power of literacy on the one hand, it also seems to me that this private act of transcribing this piece of text, is one that allows him to engage more meaningfully with the world and help him to go beyond and gain a new perspective on suffering and hope, which interests him. Freire in conversation with Horton, (1990, p. 86) reminds us that “it’s impossible to read the words without writing them”. It is possible that as he re-read this text, word by word, and re-read it now that it is in his own handwriting, it has become a way of taking ownership of it. There is the possibility that in this new more intimate relationship with this text, it allows him to generate some new meanings, and that it could become an opportunity to take something that he has nursed in his heart and gain a “perception of the former perception of the reality” (Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 88). This could present an opportunity to change, amend or extend the importance of this text for helping him to carry his disappointment and suffering.



The torso

This raised complicated and conflicted feelings for me. Your silence on the journey home holds a melancholy, but now that I look at this torso without limbs in the collage, and your silhouette hidden behind tracing paper, I am sensing a particular type of disappointment. The disappointment of desiring and holding wonder for something that has eluded you because of what you perceive as your own limitations and failures.

It has been well documented that adults who have been failed by the school system internalise a general sense of failure, which impacts negatively on their learner identity, unless it is challenged (Tett & Maclachlan, 2007). This places them in a situation whereby they cannot often express their frustration in any other terms than as their own personal failure, even where they know that they had an inadequate schooling experience. This creates an exaggerated sense of failure which extends throughout their lives and they are unable to recognise their wider talents and qualities as they adopt a deficit lens of functional literacy through which they view themselves as failing to function “in a way that is commensurate with those literate expectations which reflect the societal norms” (Taylor, 1993, p. 143). This means that they measure themselves against internalised models of what it means to be highly functioning within a society where this is equated as possessing those literacy skills that are considered essential for participating within society by dominant groups with a particular interest in a functioning economy. This sense of failure

contributes to a type of attrition that can erode a sense of hope for anything better and an inability to imagine a better future. Freire interprets this as the inability to achieve a criticality which goes beyond merely seeing reality in “fragments” (1996, p. 85) and instead invites them to engage and name their lived experiences in a way which allows them to see how these fragments are “interacting constituent elements of the whole” (1996, p. 85).

However, there is something else in this silence as I sit gazing at this brooding torso, which has no limbs, and I recall our last excursion out into the world. There is for my dad the particular torment of never being able to relinquish a longing and desire to have taken up some of the many opportunities that were presented to him and that he declined because of his terror of engaging in literacy practices and the situations that they would require him to participate in. O’Brien argues that in some cases “for the oppressed, emotional connection may be too painful” (2011, p. 23), as they lack the criticality to begin to reframe their experience in a way which no longer personalises their failure. But for him there is the suffering of remaining emotionally connected throughout his life to a dream of who he could have been, someone who could have participated in those wonders of engineering. In addition to this disappointment of who he did not become, there is the suffering of perceiving that he disappointed those around him by his failure to be a better financial provider. This definition of literacy is focusing on what Taylor (1993) describes as the question “of what is literacy a function?” (p. 142). In this case the application of literacy was for my dad linked to “the ability to hold a decent job to support self and family, to lead a life of dignity and pride” (Harmon quoted in Taylor, 1993, p. 143). This particular sense of internalised failure is in many ways one of the most startling ways in which he “internalized the image of the oppressor” (Freire, 1996, p. 29). This caused him to blame himself for his struggles and disappointments, particularly in the working world. In a similar way, it caused him to view others who rejected this deferential stance to authority as troublemakers, particularly in the trade union.

I ask you to help me with my sums. You do them in your head but you will not come near the table with its workbooks and work sheets that I did not know were a foreign language to you. The next day my teacher asked me to write them out again twenty times because she does not accept right answers that have used a ‘wrong way’ to arrive at the answer. I am cross with you that I am in trouble with my teacher, and annoyed that you are showing me the wrong way. In my head, I am angry that you cannot do them the way that we do them in the book. My mam says that she cannot understand them she has forgotten all of that. You withdraw into silence and pull away from me. I stop asking you for help and from now on there is silence between us as I do my homework.

I am again gazing at your torso and wondering how it must have felt when I took out my homework and we were alone together. Was I sulky and angry, or was I patient with you? Did I pretend that I did not need help? Did I already know that you are suffering and that there is pain behind your sullen retreating? Or did I enjoy showing off that I am able to do things that were a mystery to you? Did I engage in a series of behaviours that bely the fact that I really enjoy this school work, so as not to aggravate your suffering?

School based functional literacy frames the literacy difficulties that a person is experiencing as a deficit, it encourages them to think about what they cannot do and does not set off from a place of valuing what they can do. It also underpins a system that creates the idea of a universal literacy which is rule governed and does not allow for other practices and other ways of knowing. I wonder if your knowledge of maths, which you were initially so proud of, became diminished as it was judged by my teacher as irrelevant and misleading. I fear that I am already implicated in your disappointment as my progress through school exacerbates your disappointment with yourself and feelings of failing yourself and your family

Telling the story

I return once again to contemplate the collage, where intellectual activity, images and experience play off each other. For me, this pulling inwards triggered a powerful need to record a particular experience from my childhood. I found the biggest shift in my epistemology was examining how my creative representation of myself and the others in the text could retain moral integrity, within these creative and evocative texts. My purpose in creating evocative texts was to bring people into the moral tensions and dilemmas that prompt us to question what kind of life do we want to live. This meant the blurring of boundaries between “fiction and ethnography” (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 222) which would speak so directly to the lived experiences of the reader that “they would feel the ‘truth’ of the story deep in the bowels of their own lived experiences” (p. 222).

As I contemplated the tracing paper covering the limbless torso and the fragment of prayer you have copied which is displayed as a sun, something stirred which sharpened my focus. Something new had awakened. There was a vibrancy and real movement. The dead rehearsed words of telling and retelling this story to myself was pushed to one side and became impossible to revert back to, as a burst of ‘living it’ gripped me.

The metaphor of the torso with no limbs became what Green (2012) would describe as an “entry point into a transformative experience” (Green, 2012, p. 201). It becomes, in

the retelling of it, a story of “two selves” (Bochner, 2000), as I record a flow of images which have been stored in my memory from childhood. But I am now re-storying them from the perspective of an emerging self that is unfolding from image to image, and is moving with incremental confidence, from the position of helpless bystander, towards an uncertain but powerful form of agentic power and direction. This signals a move beyond the all-consuming pain of connecting with the depth of an oppressive silence, which crippled my dad’s sense of dignity and justice.

It is 1971 in Ireland. I am 11. Our weekly Sunday spin feels heavier today. But the sight of the apple tart reassures me that the picnic is taken care of.

You drag yourself out of the car. I can almost feel the weight in your body. You make your way nervously up a twisty muddy lane, where you knock on the farmer’s door to make your plea for work - a shy proud man to whom this does not come easily. Your knowledge was in your head, hands and in your heart. Reading and writing is far from your experience. You have disappeared inside this grand house.

A bony dog is crouching down, chained to the wall. He cannot, or has lost interest in, lifting his head. Myself and my mam are now craning to see how this will go.

After a long time, you step outside of the house and trudge back to the car. It is your face that holds me. I have never seen a face like this before. I do not want to look at it.

You slump into the car and looking straight ahead you say “Nothing Lil, nothing”

I sank back into my seat, trying not to look at you. Nothing needed to be said.

You were used to this. But this one was different. This one cut deep. This one cut despair. This time something ugly had been said. You are humiliated.

I am angry. I am very angry and I want to cry. I want to jump out of the car and drag this farmer out onto the lane...but I do not know yet what I would say.

This is wrong and this must end, is all that I know for now. But I will find those words ... AND I WILL CHANGE IT.

I dream that I will find that farmer and I will bring you to him, and this time you will stand tall and proud and say ‘I am Kieran Mernagh and you cannot speak to me like that, you cannot speak to someone who respectfully knocks on your door and looks for some paid work from you like that, I would like you to apologise’.

We go straight home in silence, the apple tart uncut.

His face, then as now, haunts me. I sometimes see his face in my classrooms, when I mark assignments or make teaching practice observations. I see him and the shame and the cruel injustices, which he accepted with such dignity. And I question if and how this activity will change any of this system that continues to perpetuate humiliation and shame.

Bringing you out into the world

I am now in a better position to choose to explore a new relationship with my dad, by creating doubts about the childhood image of him as someone who had chosen to keep us at a distance, or had little interest or need to express his inner emotional states of desire and frustration. I became reacquainted with a dad who had been silenced in part by poverty, marginalisation and the associated poor educational experience, which left him with a distorted view of why he had unmet literacy needs as an adult. All of these constraints limited significantly his ability to make different choices. The insight that my dad, and by implication myself, “have been ‘colonised’ by an agency other than [...our] own” (Green, 2012, p. 206) became a new point of interest. The coloniser within that had led him to internalise the failures of the social structures as his own, created a frustration, fear and level of shame that left him silenced and in retreat from any emotional connection with his family and with me.

This in some way appeared to be in contradiction to the fragment of the prayer he carried in his wallet, and other snippets of poetry that he had cut out of newspapers, which showed a sensitivity to text for its power to express hope and desire. This created layers of personal turbulence and contradictory feelings for me as I encountered two dads. The first dad is one who is living within a culture of silence. The second dad is the dad of yearning who privately searched for ways to express and reflect upon our human vulnerabilities, as a possible starting point for finding ways of living with and in opposition to an unjust world. The first dad was the one who was more familiar to me - a dad who was disconnected both from his lived experience, and a means of both understanding or expressing that experience that left him silenced and just surviving within the workplace. This positioned him in a twilight world, where he mistrusted his lived experience, and his confidence to articulate who he really was and who he might become is diminished.

Green explains this conflict between desire and behaviour in terms that recognise that the “conscious mind [...] is] not the only player in the game. Some *other* intentionality exercised more power” (2012, p. 208). This is a useful way of understanding how the internalisation of oppressive narratives can remain unchallenged and become drivers that implicate us in our own self-destructive behaviours, if they are not brought into our awareness. The use of a critical literacy lens sets out to shine a light on the voices and stories that have been silenced within the dominant narrative and are shut out of public spaces. It searches to identify the ways in which institutions and discourses use their power to silence adults with

unmet literacy needs by creating narratives of individualised failure and shame. This meant scrutinising “systems, institutions, and discourses that privilege some people and marginalize others” (Holman Jones, 2018, p. 5).

This created one way of understanding what brought my dad to the door of a farmer to ask for work, and left him crushed with the shame and frustration of his own limitations and his perceived failure to provide financially for his family. It also gave me an insight into how witnessing this humiliation reinforced my unwitting collusion with the silence about his childhood, my grandparents or my successes and failures as I progressed through school. As a child I am enraged at this injustice, and I am more enraged because my younger self has an intuitive sense that if questioned, my dad would in some way feel that this response was in some way merited and one that he had brought on himself. My response was to avoid exacerbating his disappointment and suffering which was woven through these experiences, and to remain in silence alongside him.

This in many ways was my portal or point of moving towards reconstituting some of those assumptions that had been fundamental to my identity. “Poetic communication and authentic participation bring new ways of voicing stories and ourselves” (Formenti & West, 2018, p. 236) but it is not enough by itself. I am ready to bring these stories within a larger cycle of “intelligent understanding, and deliberate action, that interconnect in cycles” (Formenti & West, 2018, p. 235). The point of critical autoethnography is “not only to break silences and give voice to subjugated experiences and knowledges but to do so in order to create change” (Holman Jones, 2018, p. 10). It opens up new possibilities to explore more fully the iterative connections between who I am, and how I am in my practice, so that I can better understand the nuances of inviting my students to engage in a similar journey, which for me begins by questioning not only what we value, but why we value what we do about learning and teaching. These stories have reconnected with my passion to give adult learners an opportunity to break their silences, reframe their knowledge and their ways of knowing, to disrupt the narratives of personal failure and locate their agency within oppressive social structures.

There is a challenge in knowing how to bring this from story into the world, in the form of action. I wanted to avoid it becoming a decontextualised description of abstract values that underpin my vision for adult education, and are prescriptive and dogmatic. Ignatieff reminds us that “there are few presumptions in human relations more dangerous than the idea that one knows what another human being needs better than they do themselves”

(1984, p. 11). He reminds us of the importance when working with others, particularly those who do not share our knowledge base, of being conscious that “one has no right to speak for needs, which those one represents cannot intelligibly recognise as their own” (Ignatieff, 1984, p. 12). In this regard, Heron’s (1992) four ways of knowing becomes a useful way of understanding how we can move between these different ways of knowing in our struggle to be both inside and outside of our felt encounters. By remaining alert to how these different ways of knowing interact with each other, and adjusting the relationship between them, “so that they articulate a reality that is unclouded by a restrictive and ill-disciplined subjectivity” (Heron & Reason, cited in Yorks & Kasl, p. 183, 2002). This in many cases meant privileging the aesthetic and experiential ways of knowing.

I am drawn to writing a letter as a way of exploring how we can represent stories as “embodiments of knowledge that can and do create movement and change the world” (Holman Jones cited in Holman Jones, 2018, p. 7). Heron (1992) also highlights the necessity of recognising that each way of knowing has its own canon of validity. According to Yorks and Kasl (2002) if we “interpret them in words and concepts, and then suppose that the interpretation is what really matters” (p. 182), we have missed the point that each way of knowing is a unique way of interpreting and understanding the world.

Crean and Lynch indicate a way through this when they suggest that analysis needs to be “tightly knitted to experiential knowledge holders” (2013, p. 59). Therefore it became clear that one way of moving in closer to the story with a view to using this emotional resonance as a fuel to make some difference to my practice was to address the dad who I imagine as an adult learner who I am welcoming in to my class, with the expressed intention of disrupting their previous ideas about schooling and learning, which have invalidated their ways of being and knowing.

Dear Dad,

Do you know that in my heart for all of my life, I have carried a picture of a learning space where you would be treated with dignity and respect, where there is no such thing as shame? A place where people are supported to challenge any ideas that suggest that they are subordinate or unworthy. Where the structural failures of the educational institutions will be named and those oppressive practices will be subverted.

But I know Dad, that this will not mean much to you today, if anything all those sociological terms, will just push you further away from me, and from an opportunity of experiencing more of your potential. Trust me Dad that none of the above is for today. This is something down the road of your learning journey that may or may not make sense to you, but every step of the way you will be given choices and you will be allowed to stop and start and do U-turns if that is what

is required. This is because I trust you and your wisdom that faced with clear choices and the right type of support you are the best person to make those choices that are right for you.

But try to imagine yourself in a space where you will learn to trust yourself, this means that you can trust your instincts, hunches, dreams and experiences as a basis for giving you an ownership of your learning. In this space, your knowledge(s) will be honoured and valued, there will be no one-way of learning or knowing, there will only be your way. Those teaching you will open their minds and celebrate your country gentleness, which did not want to outdo, or gain a competitive advantage on anyone, but instead wanted to work alongside your companions in a spirit of empathy and collaboration.

Your world (and your ways) where you live in tune with all people, animals and the natural environment would be recognised as our best hope for the future. You will feel more equipped to face your vulnerability and to challenge those assumptions that led you to believe that you were better than no one, but unable to accept that no one was better than you. You will gain the confidence to challenge the 'big shots' when they offer you exploitative and humiliating work, or none at all. Or refuse to comply when they tell you your 'keep' is in partial payment for your labour, and that this entitles you to bed down with the animals in the outhouses.

You will have the chance to challenge those 'stories' from school which forced you to accept that as the 'only child in the village without a father', you are not entitled to have dreams or desires beyond functioning within the lower base of the economical hierarchy. You will have a voice to vigorously overturn the labels they had placed on you and your ability to hope.

Your lack of money will not make it impossible for you to develop your talents and natural sporting ability. You will no longer watch with envy as the other children play hurling in the village. You will be helped to have a hurl of your own.

You will be in a learning space where literacy would celebrate your love of language, poetry and learning. Where you would be encouraged to be fully yourself and feel entitled to express who you are becoming,

*Love, as ever,
Geraldine*

I imagine this space where tutors and students know that achieving this vision may be just beyond us, but if we stay with the trouble of trying to put any aspects of this into practice, we are already achieving a version of this dream.

Living our story

I am asking the reader not to consider the story and the letter above as a checklist of what I understand to be useful for trying to embody and live out a radical humanism in our lives and practice. Instead I would like you to think of these values as something that lives inside me, like a provisional working vision. Something that challenges the idea that our criticality in critical autoethnography views theory as “a body of knowledge – a given, static and autonomous set of ideas objects or practices” (Holman Jones, 2016, p. 229). Instead these stories and letters live within me, along with my other experiences, and contribute to a

“theorizing [which] is an ongoing, movement-driven process that links the concrete and abstract, thinking and acting, aesthetics and criticism” (Holman Jones, 2016, p. 229). Therefore there is an continuous connection between thinking, being and doing, which often takes the form of snappy, often unfathomable, judgements and adjustments that inform a continuous alignment and realignment between my practice and my vision. They are the subterranean basis upon which I process the meaning that may be contained for these people, in this situation, within this activity. Or it becomes a way to gain some insight in to my own internal experiences of turbulence within my practice.

Conclusion

In this chapter, there is the emergence of a self that is beginning the work of encountering those powerful stories and observed experiences of shame and disappointment, which have simultaneously positioned me within a new relationship with my dad, and gone some way towards understanding the emotional distance between us. This allows me to acknowledge my need, which does not decrease when he is dead, to be assured that he did really love me, and to begin to question the ‘him in me’ which I recognise feels heavy and oppressive but as of yet I have no language to discuss it. This unravels my own disappointment as I reframe my commitment and practice within adult education as a furious attempt to change one constituent of the world that let my dad down, so that it might not let others down, only to find that this creates further distance between us. There is a parallel exploration of how the creation of evocative artefacts creates embodied ways of knowing that embolden my desire to move into the uncertain process of transformational learning with all of its vagaries. This brings me to a place where I find ways of questioning what to do with all of this in terms of my life and practice as an adult educator, which is addressed in the following chapter.

Chapter Six: Flickers of you in the classroom

Introduction

In this chapter, I set out to explore what Freire (1996) would describe as the “duality of the oppressed: they are contradictory, divided beings” who have internalised and live out internalised oppressive narratives of feeling unworthy (p. 37). In addition to drawing on Freire’s (1996) understanding of the internalisation of oppression which renders us both oppressed and oppressing I draw on Walker’s (2017) concept of shame as embedded and learned within socio-cultural relationships, as well as a range of frameworks for understanding different models of transformational learning (Mezirow, 1991; Green, 2023; Mälkki, 2019; Butterwick & Lawrence, 2023; Jordan & Walker, 2023). Kaufman’s (1992) understanding of the internalisation of shame enables me to stay particularly close to how the oppressive experience of shame can influence the ways in which these narratives are observed, learned and played out in our day-to-day decisions and behaviours, as they pass down through the generations. The chapter is formed by a series of disparate fragments of richly sensory experiences, which together, remain alert to an embodied movement through a transformative learning process (Green, 2023; Mälkki, 2019; Hoggan et al, 2017) of coming home to an estranged, shamed and suppressed self. This is a process which oddly gives me a bridge with my family and, however provisionally, a ‘joined up’ sense of a self, where my feelings, emotions, intuitions, thoughts, judgements and actions are working together (Formenti & West, 2018).

From this place, I become aware of a fluency of a deeply embodied language which reflects that sense of connection with a more whole self (Freire, 2021; Formenti & West, 2018). This connects me to a language that feels uniquely appropriate for trying to disentangle and examine the emerging self, from the intricate relationship of shame as the oppressor and oppressed within me. Throughout this chapter, different artefacts and imaginative representations of experience help to illuminate those more nuanced and largely invisible turbulences associated with shame, and gave me different contexts and perspectives to conduct a closer scrutiny of what a transformational process might look and feel like from the inside, at different times and across a range of contexts within the private, public and professional spheres of my life. It meant trusting in the flow of images and my critical conversations with them, to notice connections, meanings and dissonances between these fragments of imaginative recall, which brought me inside of what it feels like to be

oppressed, as well as throw some light on the nature and extent of what I am referring to as transformational shifts (Hoggan et al, 2017).

Getting into a flow

The reader is invited to respond to a flow of memories, material objects, intuitive prompts and fantasy, which are encountered to negotiate the process of inquiring into the slippery and deeply held feelings of shame across the private sphere of my personal and family life, as well as in my practices as an adult educator. Kaufman (1992) reminds us that shame is one of the human experiences that particularly show us the limitations of language to capture that “feeling of exposure inherent to the experience” (p. 7) and the anguish associated with feeling emotionally naked and unworthy. I draw on a broad range of knowing and representing, including story, dream, collage and dance, to attempt to continue to create a new, more embodied language. I hoped that this may help me to focus this chapter on rendering shame as more knowable.

I am reminding the reader that my understanding of flow is not a seamless and inevitable progression from one emerging image or memory to the next, which builds incrementally towards a single and stable inevitable truth. Instead it is a torrent of feeling, imagery and phrases that I select and juxtapose beside each other, for my purpose of “bring[ing] them into a stuttering sort of relation to biographical fragments” (Gannon, 2018, p. 27), to create spaces for reflection where shifts within my mind, body, and life might happen.

These triggers include the painting of a buck hare in spring light; a reflection on a night of soul dancing; a precarious conversation with an employer; a memory of witnessing my dad’s toxic perfectionism; the imaginative representation of an experience of an adult and further education management meeting with tutors, as a vivisection of a ‘bucking hare’ a dreamlike recreation of entering my dad’s story as we return together to the farmer’s door where I had witnessed his humiliation as a child; my return to a fragment of a collage, showing an image of billowing seaweed entangling the silhouette of my sister, where we tangle with the family story of shame and unworthiness, and finally a Christmas card from my dad. These memories and artefacts also allowed me to find footholds in the “groundless, liminal zone” (Green, 2023, p. 191) associated with the transformational learning process which by “its nature is devoid of signposts and familiar landmarks” (Green, 2023, p. 193). They supported me to resist the temptation to avoid those uncomfortable reach for safer and more familiar meanings from the past, and to hold me in those intensities of feeling, where I could consider them from new perspectives.

My exploration of the ways in which narratives are oppressive as they manipulate us to doubt and disconnect from our experience, and teach us to reject, ignore or hide parts of ourselves, for fear of exposure to derision or contempt, continues to present a real challenge. Once again I find myself examining how “style and form might draw attention to the ways that writing can never be enough and is always too much” (Gannon, 2018, p. 26), particularly in terms of handling the question of interpreting stories and poetry or allowing them to speak for themselves. This places a demand on the reader to be patient with longer reflections, as I struggle to create learning moments from these intensely vulnerable encounters. There are also those moments when language cannot keep up with a surge of expression. Those instances where “the text might achieve its own momentum in language and time, exceeding intentionality, rationality, and the particular contexts of production and reception” (Gannon, 2018, p. 26). In these instances, the reader is trusted to bring their own unique empathetic encounter with the story or poem. Ultimately, I am alert to exposing how each encounter creates an emotional turbulence as I try to balance and illuminate the destructive and enriching aspects of these experiences associated with transformational learning.

The flow of these encounters is guided by my interest in reflecting upon how these internalised narratives of shame, can create a deeply ingrained sense of being in some way lacking as a human being, and how this distorts our ability to read the world of injustice accurately, as we attribute failure to our own deficiencies instead of structural failure. As I move through the transformational process I am ready, in the story of ‘The vivisection of the ‘bucking hare’’, to examine how I “deal with authority” (Freire, 2021, p. 8) within an oppressive working environment. I attempt to “make power visible and challenge[e...] its oppressive effects” (p. 8) which are particularly destructive as it exacerbates an embedded sense of shame, which makes it almost impossible for me to “make those who exercise authority and power answerable for their actions” (p. 10). Towards the end of the chapter, there is what feels like, a significant shift in my being as I attempt to conduct a series of conversations between my students and myself on different terms to my habitual approach. This enables me to challenge the silence around my sense of shame that was fuelling the oppressor within me. From this point I reach a point of readiness towards the end of the chapter, where an imagined conversation can take place between my dad, a student and myself in my classroom which can move us beyond self-blame and isolation. This creates a conversation that connects us in our experiences of shame, and holds us in an emotional bond, across the boundaries of time and history, to be present to each other

in our vulnerability. This brings a new sense of flow and spontaneity into my work as an adult educator as I feel more open to trusting my impulses and experience.

Sparkling against inertia



Painting of the bucking hare

My pull towards multidisciplinary ways of encountering and representing these experiences was particularly helpful, because the experience of shame is not easy to pin down or to address. From the first time I saw the painting above, in a colleague's office, I experienced a stirring, energetic engagement with it. Such was my fascination with the almost weightless sense of flying, that my generous colleague lent it to me, to inspire me. The pure, physical exuberance of the hare bounding through mid-air, elicited a feeling of joyful longing for the possibility of being more fully revitalised in the world. It summoned me like a clarion call, to lift my pen and burrow through the layers of personal, familial, social and cultural layers that had inadvertently restricted and restrained me. This exuberance was somewhat contradicted, by a deeply limiting feeling of shame and an associated fear, that felt like 'mine', and yet in other ways was 'not mine', but which chided me to keep my head down, say nothing and urged me, at any price, not to draw attention to myself. The bucking hare became a metaphor to hold my many doubts and fears, and guide my trajectory of moving through a liminal space towards greater emotional openness. The contemplation of this bucking hare sparked an energy which served to carry me forward and warned me against the danger of becoming stuck for too long in an

“unpleasantness” (Mälkki, 2019, p. 70), where there is no added “value to our learning or thinking processes” (p. 70). It encouraged me to be patient and remain alert and steady within those “edge emotions” (Mälkki, 2019, p. 63), like anger, depression, fear which can “orient us back towards our comfort zone where we can avoid the threat to our meaning perspectives” (Mälkki, 2019, p. 63). Such a response diminishes the potential of critical reflection to modify and regenerate outdated meaning perspectives and the hope of further growth. Above all, it fuelled a strong sense of joy and vitality which was inexplicable, but to which I continuously returned as I wrote this chapter, and which propelled me to continue to search for a way of living where I could feel freer to be more open and less guarded in a wider range of personal and professional contexts, even when it gets uncomfortable.

This energetic engagement with the painting sparks and fuels a more embodied intuitive and dreamlike engagement with a transformational process of engaging with shame in the following sections. This is ‘Liberating the ‘un-word shame, and the world’ from the sea weed’ which evolves into a musing on soul dancing and again, further on in the chapter, there is dreamlike musing as I imaginatively return with my dad in the account of ‘At the farmer’s door’. Throughout this chapter, the bucking hare acts as a guide, reminding me of the necessity of “courage and creativity” (Green, 2023, p. 191) as we “accept the risk entailed by leaping into the unknown – from ground to groundlessness” (Green, 2023, p. 195) in my attempt to displace shame so that I might see more clearly, what we have lost or cannot live without.

Liberating the ‘un-word shame, and the world’ from the seaweed

This section emerges from an unanticipated flash back to a Freirean concept (1987) of reading the word and the world. This suggests that “reading the world always precedes reading the word” (Freire, p. 35) to gain a critical understanding of the forces which are acting on us and shaping our humanity, so that we can rewrite “what is read” (p. 36). Freire argues that it is only then, that we can find the true word which best describes the nature of our world. I refer to shame as the ‘un-word shame’, as a way of capturing its slippery and insidious nature which does not come easily into the light of day, and is often concealed by and confused with cowardice, passivity, incompetence and self-doubt. Its concealed presence in our lives further throws us off the track, by misleading us about the true nature of our relationship with ourselves and our world. I explore the associated feelings of fear and self-doubt, which lead me to re-evaluate what I would have in the past

considered to be termed cowardice, and recognise it as fear. But this is only the start of the journey. I need to travel further to unearth the shame that is buried and often intricately concealed, beneath fear (Kaufman, 1992).

Confronting fear, and... cowardice

It is close, it will do, but it is somehow not enough. There is something missing. There is something that I am not saying, not even to myself. I have rewritten the title four times. I put down fear. I hover over the second concept that I want to discuss and hesitate. For now, it is beyond my reach.

Later, something stirs in me as I engage in soul dancing, which is a very free and rhythmic form of dancing which invites us to explore and express our internal sensations through movement. I find myself recalling first of all the wild and free bucking hare and then the collage image, where I am watching my sister tangled up in cascades of spiralling seaweed, which completely bind her. But I am not ready to engage with this image yet, that will come later. Instead I can sense that there is something that I am not saying, which has protected me, but which now appears to be at odds with the “importuning of one’s aspirational self” (Green, 2023, p. 193). The passage below which was written following a soul dancing session, suggests that I may now have a readiness and a language to engage with this dark shadow. It may not emerge as a shifting or easing of the emotional weight of this shadow, but it may allow me to enter in to a relationship with it, whereby I can understand more of its complexities, and have a better sense of the choices that may be available to me as a result.

Once again I am aware, like Green, that the process of transformation, out of necessity, involves a “groundlessness” (Green, 2023, p. 190) whereby the meanings to which we have been attached, no longer serve us in this current situation, but they have not been replaced nor is there any guarantee that they will be replaced by something that can recreate that original safety. I pause and register that there is a vague sense of weighing up the different angles and perspectives from which I can approach or block this experience, which is just at the edge of my awareness. I am pulled towards particular memories, and yet there is always the recognition that when I am dealing with living experience and memory. It is always “subject to retelling from another angle via a different lens and line of sight, a different point in time, a different set of relations” (Gannon, 2018, p. 26). I seem to be able to tolerate this tension better than on previous attempts, as this complex

and conflicted sense of fear, which is very difficult to put into words, feels fuelled with a strong sense of purpose.

Green says that “little transformation occurs that does not respect and address resistance to change” (2023, p. 193). There is a deep longing that compels me to examine this stranglehold of fear, which is limiting and frustrating me. Conversely, in the familiar grip of such fear, I recognise patterns of reluctance to expose myself or to move from a safe space. It has prevented me from being able to speak up, and forced me on too many occasions to retreat into a silence, which allowed an oppressive status quo to rumble on, uninterrupted in both personal and professional spaces. Kaufman (1992) argues that fear of exposing oneself “operates to further encapsulate shame, hide it from view, and finally mask shame from consciousness” (p. 75). So that the shame remains concealed and only the “fear remains consciously accessible” (p. 75).

Fear-filled responses to experiences, which I have framed in the past as a cowardly reticence, are awakened as I am soul dancing. It is an elision between body, memory and ancestors, which among other memories, loops back to an intimidating conversation with an employer in a precarious work circumstance, where I was paralyzed with fear. This becomes a re-imagined conversation, which I refer to as ‘YOU, talking to me’, which spontaneously follows my recalling of the experience of soul dancing.

Soul dancing

We are dancing and drumming. First with our feet and then with our bodies. We move our limbs to create our prayer for the world and we ask our ancestors to make us strong. I move self-consciously at first. I imagine the moon and feel her anguish. How must it be to send light down onto the earth - a magnificent sea-garden, and oversee: the burned out rubble of war-torn homes, hospitals and schools, whole populations abandoning the hope of ever drinking clean water or raising crops to feed themselves, and the last of the rivers trickle and die before they reach the sea. I embrace this fear and suffering and am helpless. I move my arms as if I am caught in a net and am struggling to break free. A wave pulses upwards, and my body sways with the push and release of seaweed floating off, on the turn of a tide. I am fuelled with anger. I am ‘myself’ but gripped and restrained in some way, I am also aware that I am at the same time a voice for more than just me. I must do more - what is holding me back?

I listen to the generations of voices of my family who are somewhere in the shadows, and it becomes clearer. The fear, the silence, the holding back, the not saying, the heads to the ground, the eyes to the floor.

They want more.

They are telling me to clear my head and to speak. It is time to examine not just our shame, and our shame that we are ashamed, that draws us to the protection of the shadows. But it is also to

examine this fear that keeps us there, unable to voice it or confront it. It is the doubly suffocating contradiction of feeling not only that we are somehow less than what we should be, but that we are unworthy of expecting more, that we alone are responsible for staying trapped in this, and unable to move beyond it or outside of it. We are lazy, we are ignorant. To dream of better would be an outrage. This story must end with me.

In the grip of a paralysis that is unassailable, I can feel the perilous warnings of those who have come before me - saying that somehow if we challenge any dimension of this, we will be undone, punished in ways that we cannot even imagine. There will be a price to pay and we will become even more powerless. The master will reign over us with a terror and withdraw his favour. We will be cast out, blocked in our tracks, isolated and left to wither in some arid land. There is the interminable contradiction that there is an annihilating menace all around us, that will inevitably wipe us out if challenged, and yet if we do nothing and remain trapped and paralysed in our lives, it is our lack of courage and vitality that has brought us to this state. We can only reproduce what we know because we cannot yet imagine how to intervene in this space that is shaping us through our direct and indirect hierarchical social and cultural relations. (Freire, 2021, p. 5). This seems preposterous and yet my mind casts back. To YOU.

YOU, talking to me

I have a few precarious hours of employment a week and I am leafleting on Saturday in a busy street to advertise adult education classes, to those who might not normally think of it as for them. My manager approaches me to check whether I have managed to engage any new potential learners and departs reminding me that she will see me on Monday.

I remind her, for the third time, that I have a medical procedure and that I had informed her a few weeks ago that I needed that day off. She turns towards me in rage (she has clearly forgotten). I am not surprised but I am anxious. I had watched her closing her diary without noting it down, but I did not feel in a position to draw her attention to this, as this might antagonise her as a criticism. She is shouting and telling me she cannot provide a service with such unreliable staff. She lets me know that fortunately, there is a new person starting, and she will be able to take over my timetable, there will be no reason for me to come back.

My stomach knots and I am speechless. I want to say so many things but mostly I want to cry. My friend has overheard this exchange and is listening. I can tell from her expression that she is waiting for me to say something. I look down and say nothing, I am afraid that anything that I say will only make it worse.

In that one exchange I feel that my chances of finding work in such an under-resourced and tightly connected network have been completely wiped out. I say nothing, I am completely crushed. I continue to hand out my leaflets in silence, worrying about what to do next and the end of month's rent.

I am emboldened and I am curious. I return to the subtitle of ‘Confronting fear and cowardice’ but this time re-frame it as ‘Confronting fear and shame’.

It is said. It is named. There it is. There is no going back.

Half an inch beyond my reach

My most generative memories are substantially rooted within my relationship with my dad, which gave me a vantage point from which I could bear witness to my complicated and changing relationship with shame, the emotion which is the most insidious and “cunning in its ability to hide itself and to evade scrutiny” (Walker, 2017, p. 359). This moves my reflection into an exploration of how shame can move from generation to generation and surfaces a memory of witnessing my dad, in a moment of complete dissatisfaction and self-loathing. The encounter a ‘Half an inch beyond my reach’ below, provokes me to question how I have internalised my dad’s sense of insatiable perfectionism, and become complicit in his desire for me to excel where he has perceived himself to fail.

You are standing back from the base of a bed that you have designed for me, foldable into a number of single loose slats, which can be tied together and transported in the backseat of a car. This is your creative response to my precarious existence on part-time work, which often involves unpredictable movements from flat to flat at short notice. It has made it necessary for me to only bring what I can carry in a car journey. This has meant that I have long ago abandoned the idea of having a base for a bed and I now sleep on a mattress on the floor.

In spite of my protests that this is not a problem for me, you are completely driven in your determination to ‘get me up off the floor’. You are telling me that I cannot live like this, and questioning what I have come to. It is not said, but it is there in the room with us, that you are beyond disappointed that someone with a degree should be living like this. I want to say that I don’t care about bases of beds or long-term rental arrangements, that I am on fire with my work, and for now I do not need anything to change, that I know somehow it will get better. You are visibly upset, and I can sense that you are no longer listening to me. It does not feel that you are talking to me, so much as you are travelling to some deep broken place inside you that lies in the long shadows where this mattress on the floor, feelings and memories collide. There is something that you cannot face, nor can you share with me. A shame which pulls you back to a time where there was no choice but to bed down on a crowded floor, along with the other Irish ‘Paddies’ that arrived on the boat with you, a time when you used newspapers in your shoes, to keep your feet dry.

Your next move surprises me for its ferocity. You notice that one side of the mattress takes a forceful push to slide into the base, and you are becoming more and more annoyed with this slight miscalculation. You circle around the bed muttering under your breath. You continue to move around the bed, sliding your tape measure out, to record random measurements across the width of the new base. Each time you are crestfallen and let the tape measure slap back into its case, as if in contempt of such shoddy workmanship. You question out loud how this could be a ‘half an inch too small’ and what stupidity has led to this.

You are ashen-faced, moving between loathing for yourself, contempt for your handy work, which has now become in your eyes an object of humiliation and ridicule. And a spiralling frustration

with me, that somehow I am responsible for this painful encounter with your unworthiness. Worse than that, I am making poor choices, which will inevitably bring me to the same shadowy place where you are. The place where people go who have little or no social status or recognition.

I have given up trying to reach you in any way that might offer you some comfort. You are emotionally deaf to me. You dismiss me, and it is clear that my opinion is worth nothing to you. You are listening to those other voices that are mercilessly stripping away any other explanation than that you must be stupid or careless or both to have made such a 'shoddy piece of work'. I have never seen you efface yourself like this before. I am horrified and at the same time heartbroken. I recognise that you too are entangled in some shadowy fronds, which create a toxic version of who you are, and I feel frightened, as I recognise that I am also, in some way that I have not yet at this young age put into words, trapped in these fronds with you.

There is no question that I loved you, and wanted desperately to be reassured that in spite of all of these complexities that were and were not of our making, that you loved me too. But it has never been clearer to me that there is a gulf between us which is not only that I have failed to meet your expectations, but that your experience of this gnawing sense of never being good enough is frightening me. There is a niggle that I may have also internalised this without being consciously aware of it. While this was never intended on your part, there is this silent emotional language between us. In my adoring of you, I have tried to be more like you. I notice how you quietly remain in the shadows and flick away or dismiss what you have achieved and the care you take, the gentle way that you deflect any attention from yourself. I relish receding into this invisibility with you, and talk to myself in much the same way as I experienced or observed you do. Now I can see that I failed to compensate you for your own sense of personal deficiencies, by gradually creating a life that failed to draw a line between the poverty and the humiliation that had shaped your life and your family.

Kaufman's (1992) words jump out at me on the page as if he is reading my heart - "it is the impact of the parental behaviour on the child, not whether it was intended thus" (p. 103) that leads to the internalisation of shame. Kaufman (1992) describes the process of internalised shame as never just a feeling among many feelings that can be triggered and released, allowing the person to move on. As different experiences become "interconnected, and thereby magnified" (p. 72) they coalesce and "through language we come to interpret separate shame experiences as signifying essential meanings about the self" (p. 73). We feel "a deep abiding sense of being defective" (p. 73).

From an early age, I began to anguish about those parts of myself that challenged, questioned or hesitated to comply. Yet I was unable, like some of my family members, to give blind unquestioning obedience to anything. In situations where the balance of power was held by a suffocating and dominant narrative, I would feel emotionally conflicted about myself. One voice was compelling me to ward off the potentially crushing menace that awaits those who oppose and challenge this dominant force, and another which compelled me to act in some way to resist it. I found myself in the irreconcilable contradiction of feeling torn between trying to be smaller, quieter and less visible or louder, more challenging and more confrontational. Irrespective of which position I adopted, it

left me feeling exposed and somehow wrong. There was always the impossible contradiction of being too much, while simultaneously not being enough.

I recognise the possibility that my father's convulsive displays of self-loathing had entered into my psyche as internal "gatekeeper of the unconscious, the self-appointed guardian scrutinising all that happens inside the self and dispensing shame, contempt, hatred or fear as warranted" (Kaufman, 1992, p. 102). My feelings of having been a disappointment left me vulnerable to "say the very things sub- vocally" to myself (p. 102) which my dad would have internalised about his own unworthiness, and which he in turn said to me or which I absorbed from him. In this case, the way that my father spoke to himself, and occasionally directly to me, were I believe, a measure of the extent to which he had "adapted to the structure of domination" (Freire, 1996, p. 29) and become "immersed" (p. 29) and "resigned" (p. 29) to the narratives of individual blame and failure which were perpetuated by the oppressor. My heartbreak, which measured no more than half an inch on a measuring tape, trails not only the length of those voices of my ancestors, crushed over and over again by inhuman social systems, but also registers the particular agony of carrying the additional pain of the insight that there is more to them than was recognised by the various institutions, but that they "feel incapable of running the risks it requires" (Freire, 1996, p. 29) to challenge those narratives. I imagine my dad's pain, recognising in me, all of those conflicted and diminishing messages of the gatekeepers which have been internalised from generation to generation as our "internal representative" (Kaufman, 1992, p. 103) telling us who we are and who we can be. Kaufman reminds us that even this unintended rejection, which is embedded in a context of providing love and care, is enough to confirm "rupture" (Kaufman, 1992, p. 69) and shame in the child.

But in this immediate moment there is only the two of us, and in ways that you cannot or will not recognise, I am trying to reach across that half an inch of mutual but uncommunicated distress between us. My very presence triggers all that you reject about yourself, and my unspoken search for you to reaffirm our relationship by some gesture or word is not forthcoming. I help you to put your toolbox into the boot of the car and watch you close the car window, as you pull out of the drive, focused on the road ahead. None of this is what either of us wants, but we have no way of talking to each other about it.

Walker captures this feeling which is very isolating "because it immediately compels us to want to hide, run away, disappear, shut up, and shut out, shame is the loneliest of emotions" (2017, p. 366).

Telling stories about tangling with the oppressor

In the following stories, ‘The vivisection of the buck hare’, ‘At the farmer’s door’ and ‘Wrestling shame from the seaweed’, the psychological lens is extended beyond Kaufman (1992) and Green (2023). Green (2023) draws on the liminal zone to map the transformational journey from disorientation to integration. In addition, I include a Freirean (1996) lens, to interrogate those increasingly prevalent discourses in wider society, which represent those who are poor as lacking in courage, talent and initiative and holding them responsible on an individual basis for their misfortune and limited opportunities (O’Shea & O’Brien, 2013). The stories ‘Half an inch beyond my reach’ and ‘YOU, talking to me’, loosen the ground under some of the premises that have shaped my fear around entering into conversations around shame and silencing. These bring me into a new creative space where I generate the following stories of transition below, which allow me to identify, name and gain a more nuanced perspective on the nature and experience of oppressing and being oppressed, within a Freirean understanding of oppression (1996). This takes the form of probing more deeply the following concerns: the individual and socio-cultural connections and relationships between perfectionism in the form of shame which disables my sense of being enough (Kaufman, 1992); the internalisation of an insatiable, judgemental and authoritative oppressor or master’s voice (Freire, 1996, 2021), and my collusion with doubting and disconnecting from everything that I value and know to be essential to be at the core of my practice as an adult educator. The identification of the insidious and deeply embedded sense of shame, which overshadowed our family, is made visible through the stories, so that I can begin to grapple with the “image of the oppressor” (Freire, 1996, p. 29) within me.

I ponder what can be done with this burden of shame that has constricted us, silenced us and nurtured “self-depreciation” (Freire, 1996, p. 45). As we consciously and unconsciously labour with the generational pain of being told that we are “good for nothing, know nothing and are incapable of learning anything” and “unproductive” (p. 45). This embeds an enfeebling ongoing questioning of our worth and worry about our own “unfitness” is created (p. 45). In order to confront the shared burden of shame in which we are both oppressing and oppressed, I also draw on what Mälkki (2019) describes as edge or threshold emotions, which are those unpleasant emotions which if we deny or ignore, can hamper our ability to bring critical reflection to refresh our meaning perspectives (p. 60). I draw on them to navigate these seminal stories, and explore how each of them contribute to creating the conditions from which we can begin to glimpse

the internalised beliefs that were “foreclosed by their previous meaning perspectives and premises” (Green, 2023, p. 193).

I also searched to try to understand how we came to live under the shadow of this gnawing sense of “being defective, never quite good enough as a person” (Kaufman, 1992, p. 73). This meant giving glimpses of the feelings associated with interacting within the wider context of dominant and unaccountable social relations, how those oppressive relational narratives were formed by and also informed our worldview, our behaviour and our day-to-day experiences, and how shame and silence allowed them to remain largely unchallenged. But more importantly, they enabled me to situate my experience of shame within the bigger narrative of my family, my ancestors and the wider issues of structural inequality, as well as the ‘here and now’. This led me to the larger question of what it might mean to transform shame. To what extent is it possible to achieve the “expulsion of the myths created and developed in the old order” (Freire, 1996, p. 37) which are sculpted deep into our being, or is it a question of learning to live in a more constructive relationship of continuous dialogue with them?

There is also a recognition of being more fully myself and experiencing a renewed sense of belonging within my family, as I understand more clearly the ties and binds that connected us and separated us. These conversations take the form of an imagined conversation between my dad, a student and myself in the classroom, which draws on musical terms associated with the structure of a concerto: *allegro* in a major chord, *andante* in a minor chord and the final movement or *coda* which returns to the themes raised in the first movement but with more resolution.

Stories talking to stories

The hidden nature of shame required me to approach it indirectly, by paying attention to experiences and feelings that were not obviously associated with it. This meant consciously playing with the concept of transformational learning “not as a moment, a single dilemma or event, rather [...] a dynamic and emergent process involving many moments of reflection and imagination, occurring over long periods of time” (Butterwick & Lawrence, 2023, p. 53). Instead of being alert to those singular and more clearly defined troubling moments where my existing assumptions were no longer helpful to manage within my existing life work circumstances, I began to pay attention to disparate and unsettling experiences, over a number of years. I am calling these catalyst moments because they

aroused my curiosity, and over time, I began to see connections and patterns between them, which revealed a bigger meaning.

The process of writing into these experiences was initially always one of letting go of any need to think about a purpose, outcome or any effort to search for relevant connections between these stories. Creating spaciousness with a sense of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996), and with no concern with outcomes, or an internal editor, became essential. Capturing these moments set in train an embodied, intuitive and dynamic process of imagination and reflection which captured moment arising sporadically across all the contexts of my life, and which I scribbled down with little regard for their significance.

As I reread through my notebooks, a cluster of shared feelings about shame emerged which were developed into these three stories. It became apparent that each of these stories could not be understood by themselves, but needed to be considered as talking backwards and forwards to each other, for them to succeed in hitting “the spot by describing a feeling [or feelings] very specifically with words other than being direct” (Montanari, 2023, p. 207). They were generative moments as I moved through different experiences of a transformational journey. In a similar way to the collage making process, glimpses of meaning and considerations of new possibilities, were generated as much by the connections between the different insights that emerged from the various stories, and were not exclusively restricted to one specific story or one specific moment in time. The resonances between these imaginative accounts, helped to reduce the distance between what I can say and what I am sensing, in these experiences of subordination (Elbow, 1994). The imagery and metaphors nurtured the process of catching something coming in to consciousness, and moving almost in a dreamlike state from story to reflection, to memory, but which looped over and back between the past present and the future.

Stories as generative spaces for transformational learning – ‘The vivisection of the ‘bucking hare’

The composite creation of a workplace conflict below, which is populated with composite characters, initiated a process of journalling, critical reflection, and working through the resistance, which allowed me to connect to a particularly deep and internalised shameful pattern of being silenced across a range of contexts throughout my working life. I explore how shame generates a self-doubt that is more than transitory fears of being viewed as incompetent, foolish, tedious or even disruptive, from which I can move on. Instead, this is a recurring pattern that reinforces feelings that “I am shameful, deficient in some vital

way as a human being” (Kaufman, 1992, p. 72). In order to get closer to an exploration of living as “contradictory, divided beings” (Freire, 1996, p. 37), who have internalised and lived out internalised oppressive narratives. I use a technique of creating a conversation between two different and contradictory dimensions of myself. There is myself as a tutor who is silenced and shamed, and another self who is a ‘bucking hare’ who is passionate and anchored in her intuition, intellect and embodied experience. I am interested in how this recurring pattern of helplessness and self-doubt had become so embedded and dominant, while simultaneously co-existing with my passionate sense of purpose, conviction and agency. I also explore how the experience of oppression is exacerbated by, but not exclusively connected to the insinuations and threats raised by the ‘accountant’. I consider how these debilitating feelings are also connected to the awakening of those internalised oppressive narratives of unworthiness and perfectionism, that become our “internal representatives” (Kaufman, 1992, p.103) and which Freire would describe as the “boss (...) inside” us (1996, p. 46).

The story

The meeting has been called as a matter of urgency. The manager and accountant are chatting, welcoming us into the room and engaging in light-hearted banter. The banter dies away, as they thank us for coming and indicate that this will not take long. The accountant tosses off a barrage of numbers and figures from his head which are intended to show us beyond question that there is a serious financial deficit. It suggests that the numbers in the centre are not generating the income that is required, particularly among the programmes offered to the more basic students at QQI Level 2. This is the level I teach.

This is quickly followed by a series of statements that are difficult to follow but indicate that this situation has come about because of our unreasonable demands or incompetence as tutors. Some examples are given:

- Requests for number capping by tutors for basic education groups
- Students chatting through what seems like more frequent and extended tea breaks
- Slow progress in portfolio preparation made by Level 2 groups
- Poor classroom management in relation to the tutors’ ability to teach multicultural groups with mixed levels of proficiency

- Lack of professional creativity in dealing with continuous rolling intake for groups with speakers of other languages with a range of fluency in English spoken and written

This swiftly moves onto the implications for the future: bigger classes, recruitment focus for September will be on QQI Level 4 - Level 6 and an insinuation that if we do not pull up our socks 'jobs will be in danger'.

I sense that we are all reeling and finding it difficult to process this rapid trawl through our alleged failing practices. We throw each other glances, recognising what we all know to be true, and have seen coming for months - management have overspent on a number of vanity projects with no tangible outcomes, which have diverted funding from our most vulnerable learners.

We sit silenced.

Questions, responses, tumble half-formed into my brain, but they feel porous and seem to leak in this atmosphere, which has become heavier, thicker and murkier. I do not know where to start or what I can say that will not draw unwelcome attention to myself.

In my head - I am something different.

I am an energetic buck hare, poised on my hind legs and deftly boxing away the distracting questions that are intended to sidetrack us from the central issue, which is poor budget management.

The hare plants her feet solidly on the ground, arching her back and stretching her hind legs out behind in an exuberant gesture of command, as she surveys the room. She sniffs the air, picking up scents of a hunt on the wind, and then suggests to the accountant at the top of the table, that it would be easier to address what is fundamentally a financial problem, if he would kindly circulate a balance sheet which represents more fully the financial situation of the centre so that we might consider if there are other ways of addressing this problem, which would have less of an impact on the most vulnerable ...

Before she can finish, the accountant waves his hand dismissively towards her and rejects this suggestion.

In response, we learn that the densely complex flow of revenue for this centre is far too specialised and intricate to bring to the wider group.

There is no doubt in his mind about what needs to be done. There will be no more recruitment for three of the four basic education groups next September. It is beyond question that these groups are more labour intensive, more prone to volatile attendance and take a disproportionate amount of time, relative to other groups, to achieve any form

of accreditation. This, he suggests, gives grounds to reflect on poor classroom management strategies.

The hare twitches and glances around the landscape a little less sure-footedly but recovers her poise, and rising again on her hind legs, begins to gently remind the accountant that these lower levels require more support. That we have discussed this many times in the past - how we are adult literacy tutors which means supporting our students to identify and overcome the many barriers that have limited their experiences of learning and diminished their ability to take more...

Again, she is interrupted and met with impatience as the accountant glances at his watch and looks even more irritated. This needs to be finished quickly.

*Can I remind you, he says, that all of the tutors in the centre are committed to this vision, and **still** manage large class numbers and progression satisfactorily to portfolio completion?*

I sit further back in my seat. I am failing where others succeed. I am silenced. I am reluctant to be exposed as making a big deal out of something that more competent tutors manage successfully - this may be viewed as having a 'poor grasp' of my role.

Other tutors try to penetrate this smog by suggesting ways in which we might understand this differently, but somehow they are swallowed up in the gloom.

I notice that the hare, who was perched on his hind legs, ready to spring in to a future of blue and more blue, is hunched down as if to shrink from view.

The accountant responds in a matter of fact tone that the information he has, which he is not able to disclose, clearly indicates that we cannot continue to offer courses to Level 2 and basic education groups, unless numbers are doubled and completion time frames are halved.

This does not want an answer. Nor is it possible to frame an answer, when the specific figures about how this decision has been made, have been withheld from us.

This is not a focal point for discussion. This is an invitation to combat - a clarion call to enter a carefully managed snare, where whoever steps into that space risks engaging with a narrative, where our vision, hope, identity and passion for our practice will be dismembered. Where words that made sense and flowed from the heart and head dissolve feebly, when aired in this space.

The hare covers and looks confused.

My heart sinks, as once again the accountant throws out a menacing warning that hours may have to be cut. I have just signed a lease for one year on my small bedsit.

More statements are ricocheted around the room, which suggest that we have to date got away lightly in what has been expected of us, but that is about to change. I think of the unstinting and unrecognised generosity of my colleagues but I am afraid to say anything and enter again into this combative space, where even a victory will be hollow or at best short-lived, and more likely to cause personal difficulties in the future. I have been here before and I have paid the price of a 'troublemaker'.

Tutors who seemed so powerful outside of this room, chatting and drinking tea are slowly becoming silenced and have abandoned any attempt to contribute to this discussion. The energy and vigour of our conversations that have set our classrooms on fire, and fuelled us to work at really getting to know who our students are, so that we can create runways and flight paths for them, seem to be bleeding from the room. I search for the hare and I realise that I am watching a vivisection.

The hare has sunk on one side and a sticky dark substance like blood, is starting to bubble up through an open wound. It is the first incision.

The accountant is getting increasingly impatient as he catches sight of the time. There is not enough evidence that these learners are making any real progress...only a quarter of the group completed their portfolio by the end of the first semester.

I am finding it hard to breathe with frustration. I want to raise my hand and challenge his limited view of progress, this does not correspond with what we experience, this is inaccurate - our drop-out rate is less than 5%, our student satisfaction could not be higher and some students on mandatory programmes are now choosing themselves to continue onto other non-mandatory programmes. But I sit silenced.

The hare is completely turned to one side and the blood seeps out from the back, suddenly the skin ruptures and we can see the heart.

I say nothing more. I listen as if in acceptance of this distorted truth. I do not like myself for my silence, for my fear, for my apparent collusion with this interpretation. For my inability to remain connected to what I know to be true, and to defend it, to stand up and resist this barrage of trickery.

Now the heart pumps not red but black tar like blood.

We have clearly wasted his time. He reminds us that this should have taken an hour. He had an interview forty minutes ago that he has now missed. He is clearly exasperated with

the manager, who has let this situation arise and allowed himself to be partially seduced by our pseudo-arguments about what is needed to create quality learning experiences for more vulnerable learners. The manager is trying to distance himself from this situation, and re-iterates the importance to us of keeping up to speed with technological tools, for moving more of our teaching to student self-directed learning. Problem solved.

I have lost all interest at this point. I can smell a stench and I am not interested in witnessing rotting flesh.

As the accountant ends the meeting, there is a feeling that he has achieved something, but the true nature of this achievement is not obvious to us because it is beyond questioning. He gathers his papers and clips his laptop closed, a gesture that rings out the unequivocal message that all of this is our fault. We have been getting away with lazy teaching for too long. We do not understand the challenge of budgets, or pedagogical principles, or classroom management for challenging groups, or the pressures within his job that he is balancing, that we exacerbate through our poor performance. We have been pulling a fast one, and we have been shown how a better grasp of technological tools can correct some of these errors.

The accountant leaves the room asking for a summary of the meeting in bullet format.

The hare gives a last kick. I want to bring it outside to let it see the open sky, but its neck is twisted. I turn it upside down so it can look up.

Raising the white flag: surrendering to fear and shame

In retrospect, I can see that this story navigates me through the in between stages of the transformational learning process, where experience is still inchoate. Green argues that it is the “dynamic phase” of the liminal zone (2023, p. 191) within the “between stages” (p. 191) which are “poorly defined”, where it is thought lie “periods of greatest personal growth” (p. 191). This dialectical conversation between two dimensions of myself, immerses me in an emotional turbulence, which enabled me to distinguish between fear, which is triggered by cowardice, and fear that “finally mask[s]” (Kaufman, 1992, p. 75) a deeply internalised sense of shame. It is the crippling paralysis of self-doubt where I not only become passive, but doubt the very things that I am most convinced about which bring me to the heart of this complex emotion and appears to set me apart, at least in my own mind, from other tutors, as I succumb to the internalised voice of shame which I am imagining in the form of an insatiable ‘boss’ or oppressor (Freire, 1996).

Mälkki considers these disruptive emotions that threaten to dislodge us from our comfort zone, as “edge emotions”, which “form critical thresholds for developing our ability to critically reflect” (Mälkki, 2019, p. 60). We must traverse these if we are to embark on a transformational learning process. Without the presence of the ‘bucking hare’, the intensity of the discomfort and vulnerability in this story would have made it very difficult for me to move so deeply into this experience of shame. The temptation might have been to find a way to get back to my psychological comfort zone by explaining this situation in some old and familiar way that kept me, and my performance as a professional tutor, emotionally intact. This might have taken the form for example of “blaming others, avoiding dealing with the issue, simplifying it” (Mälkki, 2019, p. 69). The creation of the buck hare allows me to gradually give expression to the process of being silenced by manipulative and impenetrable discourses. This strategy pits tutors against each other, blames them for structural failures, and also acts as a trigger for my internalised oppression of shame, rendered as perfectionism. But more importantly it allows me to meet the contradiction within myself and begin to try to “learn to embrace, be with and disentangle our edge emotions” (Mälkki, 2019, p. 63) in terms of both “the assumptions that brought us there and the experiences that were impossible to make sense of from the perspectives of these assumptions” (p. 69).

I leave the meeting disappointed and frustrated with myself. It is not just that I have largely remained silenced. It is not even that I was unable to contribute to those brief exchanges where colleagues attempted to formulate other perspectives on this situation, before they became silenced too and join them in their attempt to hold the management team accountable for their actions. It is my feeling of floundering, of being less sure and more hesitant about those deeply held convictions, which have been generated over years of reflection on practice, and in multiple learning sites. It is the anguish, that the very act of articulating the purpose of transformative learning and the conditions required to support it, out loud in front of such a disparaging audience, does not transform the world in a way which strengthens my conviction and hope (Freire, 1996). Instead, it leaves me questioning the basis upon which I am making these claims. I am puzzled why this particular form of combative discourse, which focuses on value for money and measurement of outcomes, in terms that I passionately reject, should even temporarily disconnect me from those embodied experiences of what matters in the classroom, and appears to attack the very legitimacy of my lived experience.

This oppressive space seems to annihilate any possibility of representing the beauty and vulnerability of classrooms. Our classrooms should be spaces where getting to know our learners, so that we can work alongside them to help them to discover their potential, is central to any understanding of progress. It is a narrative that refuses to understand the language of being human. Instead, it renders this heartfelt position on learning as over-indulgent and in some way misguided. It silences me.

There is however something even more troubling about my response, which I am not picking up from the anger, demoralisation or contempt of the tutors who were also present at the meeting. It appears to me that they feel frustrated, misunderstood, poorly appreciated as professionals, but do not have a “feeling of exposure of the self either in a painful or diminished sense” (Kaufman, 1992, p. 121). Their anger is clearly directed against the inadequate grasp of an understanding of pedagogy and transformational learning that the accountant has displayed. This realisation brings me closer to the very personal ‘felt’ meaning conveyed by this story. This is a shame which not only causes me to question what I know, what am I allowed to know, what am I allowed to say about what I know but also the very basis upon which I have come to know these things. I am wounded and somehow shrunken. It is as if this feeling of oppression (Freire, 1996) has breached something inside me and caused me to temporarily surrender who I am, what matters to me, and returned a distorted version of someone who is fundamentally deluded about herself. The presence of the buck hare allows me to express the feeling that my heartfelt position towards how I want to live, learn and be in relationships, is being slowly dismantled. The accountant emerges as a winner and I am the loser. I struggle to understand how this exchange has created such a sense of loss, self-doubt and disappointment primarily with myself.

I think back to Freire’s story, which is at the heart of the contradictory nature, about the peasants who took over a latifundium and who were unable to hold the landowner as hostage because not one of them could guard him. They are unable to see through their terror of the “magical force of the landowner’s power” (Freire, 1996, p. 46) and his invulnerability. Like the peasants, I am fearful but not intellectually blind to these strategies of exploitation and manipulation, it is not that I was unable to see through these distorted misunderstandings by the accountant, of how we engage and hold our learners. But emotionally there is something inside me that dismantles this conviction, and is determined that I will not question, challenge, resist or dare to hope that I might grow to become more than what I am.

In search of the master within

It is never specifically clear which tutors are being accused of poor practice or what specific practices are being challenged. This menacing sense of pitting tutors against each other, if it becomes embedded within an organisation can create a culture which implicates everyone and becomes an “inadequacy-motivated competitiveness” (Kaufman, 1992, p. 89). Establishing and maintaining relationships based on trust, collaboration and vulnerability becomes almost impossible, where gaining recognition, reward and visibility is achieved by “maintaining one’s decided edge over others” (p. 89). This hampers real conversations that can expose these dehumanising strategies and creates isolation and demoralisation, and “erodes communal life” (Freire, 2021, p. 10). This isolation feeds individuals framing of structural problems as “reduced to the logic of self-responsibility” (p. 10). In addition, it exacerbates a perfectionism associated with shame, which Kaufman (1992) argues, has not “developed an internal sense of how much is good enough” (p. 88) and it feeds my self-doubts. I hear echoes of an authoritative voice that reminds me that “no matter what one tries or how well it is done, it is never enough” (Kaufman, 1992, p. 89). The suggestion that things are managed differently and more competently in other spaces fills me with uncertainty. This also triggers that form of shame which is closely linked to fears of “being exposed as someone engaging in aberrant behaviour and arises due to a fear of damaging social relations and/or experiencing scorn or rejection” (Walker, 2017, p. 359). I am aware that where generalised dissatisfaction is expressed without any specific explanations, I feel most anxious. Although I am aware of the irrelevance of these forced comparisons between tutors across diverse contexts and programmes, as a perfectionist, a comparison of myself with others invokes a shamefulness that “inevitably ends in the self, feeling the lesser for the comparison” (Kaufman, 1992, p. 89).

The sense of a non-specific threat from this authoritative position is hanging suspended over all of our heads, but it troubles my sense of being at fault in some intangible way. I hear that authoritative voice, which once again tells me that I am to blame for this situation and it, is only a matter of time until this will be revealed to myself and everyone. It is as if this experience of shame is playing on a deeply embedded feeling of being “deficient in some vital way as a human being” (Kaufman, 1992, p. 9). This makes it difficult, within a confrontation where there is an imbalance of power, for me to be confident about attributing wrong to another or their actions, as I feel compelled to take responsibility for whatever failures are being alleged.

Walker reminds us that if we feel that we have in some way been misrepresented and that there are no solid grounds to support the negative claims being made, then this will not inevitably lead to experiencing shame (Walker, 2017, p. 364). However if there is “even a kernel of doubt” (Walker, 2017, p. 364) this will provoke anxiety. It seems to me that the voice of the master is a “kernel of doubt” which lurks there, unsubstantiated, often unrecognised, but driving so much of my day-to-day life. This creates an “internal shame spiral” which involves getting trapped in uninterrupted cycles of feeling shame about shame (Kaufman, 1992, p. 74).

I am dwelling in a feeling that places everyone beyond my reach, except my dad.

Freire’s conviction is that only the oppressed can lead this challenge to the status quo by first “freeing themselves” (Freire, 1996, p. 38). This gives me a foothold to move forward, to return my focus to the intergenerational nature of shame as the ‘dad’ in me. This demands what Freire would describe as confronting the “boss (...) inside” us (1996, p. 46), a ‘boss’ who is determined that I shall not question, challenge or become more than what I am, in any way.

Dreaming our way from despair to hope – Critical reflection and transformation

The relationship between insight and critical reflection, was different but connected, depending on whether the experience of transformative learning originated from what Dirkx describes as a soulful model or not. Unlike the first story, the following two stories emerged as dreamlike musings where the insights arrived unelicited and unscrutinised by critical thinking, like a bolt out of the blue. This was a more soulful model of transformation (Montanari, 2023) with an interest in the role of the imagination in transformational learning which recognises that “tapping into the imagination involves our emotions and our entire bodies” (Butterwick & Lawrence, 2023, p. 51). In this form of transformative learning, Dirkx (2006) describes soul work as working “imaginatively with the emotions and feelings associated with our teaching and the images that come to animate [these] emotions and feelings” (p. 31). It does not just involve the rational and reflective but an engagement with emotionally laden images, which either arrived in my consciousness and took me by surprise or arose as I wrote into an experience. In either case, “they appeared to have minds of their own” (Dirkx, 2001, p. 16). This engagement with metaphor and symbol brought a heightened awareness and understanding to my experiences, by helping me to connect the “knowable world to the unknowable or

unconscious” (p. 16). It very often initiated the transformational process by allowing me to learn to “recognise, name and give voice to these images” (Dirkx, 2001, p. 16), and with the help of critical reflection could become “integrated” into my whole being (p. 16). Hart suggests that this is a form of inspiration or a “concept of knowing or gaining information from some disembodied source and through some non-rational mode” (2000, p. 36). Green (2023) considers that these flashes of insight may be something released from the unconscious to our awareness. However, it was clear that the role of the imagination was central to this process. These were leaps of the imagination, which nurture our critical reflexivity and “our imagining of things being otherwise” (Greene, 2000, p. 22). Both stories took on a life of their own, as they surfaced and embodied that “unconscious knowledge through the imagination and provide[ed] a way to express what we are feeling when words fail” (Butterwick & Lawrence, 2023, p. 54).

None of these experiences were planned or acts of deliberation, however once they reached awareness, they did become part of critical conversations. However, their unplanned and unintended arrival did create surprise and energy that generated a relentless orientation to confront, and to avoid retreating into more familiar emotional spaces of comfort. Their coming into being did not initially emerge from critical reflection, but they gradually became a rich source of critical reflection, for informing and expanding my sense-making. The emotional grip they held over me drove my compulsion to embrace the feelings of “groundlessness” (Green, 2023, p. 194) and to push ahead to fundamentally question “if we feel ourselves airborne, we understandably look for a safe place to land rather than wondering what caused us to fly” (Mälkki, 2019, p. 67). Both of these stories create a place where the emotional turbulence is held in a delicate balance between mindfulness where emotions are viewed nonjudgmentally, and critical thinking, which involves judgemental processes and discernment. Mälkki (2019) argues that “edge emotions may be viewed as situating the praxis of critical reflection between these processes” (p. 61). In this sense, these stories emerged in my awareness as momentary sparks which, once imaginatively encountered, invoked insights, complete in themselves, but they also guided me towards a more expanded sense of their relevance, by identifying those assumptions, which under scrutiny, would help to “release emotional shackles of [my] past” (Montanari, 2023, p. 204).

Stories as generative spaces for transformational learning – ‘At the farmer’s door’

The second movement of transition is an imaginative account where I re-imagine the earlier story of my dad’s humiliation in his search for work, ‘At the farmer’s door’. I imagine my dad and myself revisiting the site of his original humiliation and we are knocking on the farmer’s door together. I am interested in exploring how creative expression can recreate an empathic relationship between us and the type of shift in my perspective that occurs.

Once again dad, we are standing at the front door of a farmer, but this time it is me who is clutching a handful of references. I hold out calloused and blackened hands, which I do not recognise as my own, and I have not them noticed before. But it does not stop me from saying in a soft but urgent voice, I am willing to give them to you for your labour, to work your fields, tend your animals, rebuild your walls and fences and whatever you decide needs to be done. I thirst to work hard, all the day long, until shadows fall. I am asking you for work.

I hear the sneer, the curses. I see the arm raised to run me down the drive, and the door slammed in my face.

We are silenced, crumpled, emptied of words.

This leads me to a liminal space where old meanings are challenged and we cannot go back. This is the pivotal centre of the emotional turbulence where inchoate experience cannot yet be theorised. This story is important for the feelings that it generates between myself, my dad and other members of the family who over the years were also implicated in this emotional entanglement. As I look down and recognise his ‘black and calloused hands’ on the ends of my arms, I am able to experience the discomfort and the pain of this bond between us as creative expression. It creates a new sense of connection between us by allowing me to get a “felt sense” (Butterwick & Lawrence, 2023, p. 56) of what it might be like to be inside my dad’s body, and to be able to “feel it fully” (p. 56) in my own body. This becomes a pivotal moment which allows me to “shift perspectives and understand the world of another” (p. 56) and has the surprising impact of propelling me forward to avoid getting stuck in anguish. I am deeply and empathetically connected to a suffering that trails back to stories that I have not heard but I am implicated in. There is a stillness and feeling of strength, as I feel flooded with the powerful presence of our shared story, which these images have surfaced within me. The very process of engaging with these images, emotionally positions my life within my dad’s story. This is not the fear that emanates from cowardice, this is the fear that is anchored to shame and positions us trapped within the social hierarchy as ‘less than’, which has travelled through our family.

This deeply held fear, which functions to “hide [shame] from view, and finally mask shame from consciousness” (Kaufman, 1992, p. 75), has finally been unearthed. This gave me an intimacy and a sense of standing together with my family and ancestors in our story. As Lawrence stated, these personal connections allowed me to “tap into empathic connections with issues of universal concern” (2008, p. 67) of manipulation and exploitation. This encounter with shame that has run so deeply in our embodied family experience, brings me home to a place where I feel words flow freely. I feel at the core of my being that “struggles are not natural nor inevitable, and therefore transformation is possible” (Butterwick & Lawrence, 2023, p. 56). I feel a fluency to follow this with another musing that feels purposeful and generative. I move quickly to the next musing where I create a new embodied conversation with shame.

Stories as generative spaces for transformational learning – ‘Wrestling shame from the seaweed’

In the final section, I return once again to a dreamlike engagement with meaning-making. I am taken by surprise that I return to my original collage where there was an underwater image of my sister who is entangled in seaweed. There is a contradictory empathetic pull towards her, and paradoxically away from her. This seemed to capture an emotional pull and push that this emerging new perspective creates between my family and I, which haunted me with contradictory feelings of hope and distress. As I enter into an imaginative conversation with my sister, I recognise for the first time that I have gained a perspective that moves me slightly beyond the tight narrative of our family. I am interested how this particular process of transformational learning, where I am in the presence of someone I feel safe and loved by, expands the possibilities of expressing and navigating contradictions. The search for liberation, also brings a severance with how I would have traditionally interpreted the world, from within my community which seriously impacts my feeling of belonging and being.

Once again I return to the image of you, Eileen, in my collage where I saw you thrashing and spiralling in all engulfing fronds of seaweed. There is something simultaneously claustrophobic about these silent depths, and yet somehow spacious. A place to move more freely, to question anew, to reconsider. You appear to me, just like that morning when I bumped into you in the street, as I was about to get into the car to drive to work and you were rushing to the retail park.

At first I was impatient, my head was lost in working out the timing it would take to change rooms if the projector was no longer working after the night classes the previous day, which was often the case. But that quickly dissipated when I looked again and saw you. Your face was blotchy and crumpled. Your eyelids looked red and swollen. There was not even a trace of make-up. You could not stop crying, to tell me exactly what has brought you to this state of wretchedness. You were distraught and you were telling me that you felt trapped. There had been an incident

and it had completely shaken your confidence. You had become frantic, checking and double-checking every aspect of your work. You were even questioning your ability to send straightforward emails. You were leaving later and later in the evening as you availed of this quieter time to re-check what you had done throughout the day.

You paused in desperation, and tried to recall instances that suggested that you were more than that. It was a long list of overcoming and achieving. They were hesitantly called up one after the other, like casting spells, with the hope of restoring your dignity. I imagined you, as in the past, shaking and showing off your heavily laden silver charm bracelet to me, the one that I now keep in my drawer. Ripe with charms, collected over a lifetime. Each one carrying a testament of your worth. But it was not enough on this occasion. Halfway through, you stopped and pleaded with me, "What is wrong with us? It's like we have some strange, diseased extra limb that is invisible to others, but that is trailing alongside us from birth, tripping us up". I said nothing. I had nothing to say. But we are unmistakably sisters, we are skin and blood tight. I have never known such intimacy. Such nakedness. Such belonging. Such safety. We cannot return to this conversation, it is a swamp too deep.

I can see it now Eileen, a little more clearly, but not then.

I now recognise that you are also, like me, caught in this family story of shame. Squeezed between the contradiction of believing the unsubstantiated claim that you are floundering, that you are not really up to it. And yet also convinced that this does not feel right. Somewhere you also know that this cannot be the case. It feels like we are perpetually suspended in this contradiction. I return to you, not with solutions but with anger.

There is a strength between us to face what needs to be faced. Together we are freer to imaginatively explore ourselves more fully, in these watery depths.



Strangling seaweed

I turn towards you now and recognise that I am simultaneously watching you from a distance, while also trapped with you. We are surrounded by fronds of seaweed that drift and glide hypnotically. But once encountered, entangle and suffocate allowing no way out. It is quiet down here. Not even the suck and plug of currents. You writhe and turn in a spiral, but the weight of

your struggle pulls you down even deeper. Our fingers touch in recognition and comfort. I move my head to the light but I cannot reach yours, it slips through my grip on every reach. I see you now out of the corner of my eye, wafting and flowing over and back through all of time and beyond, on every coming and going of the tide. My words, my knowing, have come too late to share with you, my sweet darling, who through all the incomprehension and miscommunication showed me the meaning of unconditional love. But I know that you do not want me to stay trapped down here. I sense your hand gesturing towards the light.

This brings us past the limits of any conversation we could ever have had together. Instead, we imaginatively and painfully entangle, in a shared encounter with our lived experience of shame, while surrendering to its grip. This has the unexpected release for me of uniting us in an emotionally safe space, which becomes infused with a sense of openness and possibility.

There is, throughout this musing, an almost disturbing sense of expansion as I witness your distress, and recognise within it, my own. It is as if we have returned to that moment where words failed us that morning long ago, where we clasped each other's hands and hurried on our separate ways, back to our busy lives. But this time we are not at a dead end and moving away from this pain. We are tangling and untangling together in it, swirling around those hierarchical relationships where we learned how to lose our voice and to distrust our experience. Out of the blue, I am filled up, and swept beyond your reach, by a current of a song that drums inside me as protest.

Do not push us out of sight
because we are not 'respectably quiet'.

Do not push us off the branch
because we do not share your stance.

Do not push us away
because you feel we have gone astray.

Do not push us down
because we are not one of your own.

Do not push us over
Because you hate our questions of "Why not?"

Do not push our passion out of the room
because it shows the gaps in what you 'forgot'.

A new feeling of buoyancy encourages me to turn and tumble to reach out for you to join me. But I cannot get back to you and you cannot follow me. You cannot hear my song, my sweet, darling sister. For you Eileen, it has come too late.

I am bereft and try to close down this song that is carrying you further and further away from me, while you remain anchored and stuck.

But instead of paralysing me with loss, it surprisingly ushers in what Denzin's (2014) refers to as an "epiphany" (p. 12), those moments when "our lives are turned around by significant events" and which "leave permanent marks" (p. 12).

Towards the end of this piece, something has loosened, the feeling of being ensnared. It is as if this musing eases me simultaneously towards a reconnection and a rupture with our family story, in a way that is more bearable because of your presence because of this deep feeling of belonging, of being yours. Everything shifts at that moment where I sense your hand pointing towards the light. I can hear you and your urgent hope for my well-being.

In spite of my discomfort, I paradoxically find solace and connection in returning to our shared and deeply emotional meaning perspective about shame, with my sister. The unpleasantness of the experience does not diminish the rapture of experiencing once again the feeling of belonging and being accepted among my own people, which supports me to create new meanings. This ripples with an echo of Freire's call to "become more than we have ever imagined rather than becoming more squarely located in our fixed understandings of what it means to be human" (Walker & Jordan, 2023, p. 227).

This was more than a cognitive shift; it was a sliding into those emotional realms that rooted me once again within my family. It brought a surprising recognition of the way in which I have carefully and consciously concealed where I have come from, outside of my learning spaces. This ultimately allowed me to feel freer, to recognise my inadvertent collusion with the delegitimisation of my own experience.

I could not say that this long engagement, with so much of what is invisible and unseen within my own and family psyche, had changed anything materially or that I would necessarily be better able to navigate those snares of shame in the future. However, there was more of a sense of acceptance, 'so if this is it, then this is it'. This felt like the equivalent of one long deep exhalation. This was accompanied by a desire to loosen the tight grip with which I held onto my story, of where I had come from, of who I am and what I care about in my teaching. There was an unmistakeable movement backwards to reclaim something of a self that has got disconnected, abandoned, while also moving forwards towards "a construction of a new self" (Walker & Jordan, 2023, p. 239).

This "new self" (Walker & Jordan, 2023, p. 239) is curious to explore what this might mean in terms of being more fully alive in the classroom. It is perhaps a step towards feeling more confident about teaching from the heart, of setting out to be more open within my learning spaces about the process of dismantling those insidiously oppressive narratives, which diminish us and our agency. Dirksen (2006) gives me a renewed sense of value for the imperceptible changes that this process has brought me through. I realised that this opening of the heart is important, because we can only teach from our hearts "if we recognise its role in our life and develop a conscious relationship with it" (2006, p. 37).

It is time to return to you, Dad and talk about your place in my classroom, in the shadows of the classroom, that I glimpse and acknowledge in the silence of my heart.

Even though I feel as if I have come home to more of myself, I am wondering about the risks of putting these experiences of vulnerability beyond the personal into a more public space, and what form this might take. This surfaces the impossible contradiction of, on the one hand, feeling a ferocious sense of what we must say and be and do, yet simultaneously constrained by my inability to override the visceral fear of losing the respect of my students, as they perceive my vulnerability as incompetence and perhaps lose confidence in me as this challenges their own representation of the “professor” as the one who has knowledge” (Freire, 1996, p. 45). I am equally concerned that I may be viewed as an academic imposter by other colleagues and have a fear of the reprisal of the master (Freire, 1996).

What might transformational shifts look like in our learning spaces - First movement in a major chord

One of the consequences of an increasing emphasis on the technical and rational dimensions of learning, is that a focus on emotions, particularly the emotions of the teacher, are often considered to be irrelevant or disruptive. Dirkx (2006) argues that by encountering these emotions which are often invisible, but which will suddenly become present within our interactions with ourselves and our students, we can “develop a deeper understanding of who we are as teachers and what teaching means to our life” (p. 31).

Wrapping you up in a hand-out

In order to try to map transformational shifts, I create composite pedagogical teaching moments with composite characters and I draw on the metaphor of the three movements of a classical concerto. *Allegro* is the first movement and is generally a fast-paced movement and introduces the main themes of the composition.

I am working with students to examine our values. My research has allowed me to identify the strong connection between my relationship with my dad’s struggles with literacy, and my hope and dreams for the classroom. But I do not know how to bring him into the room. In the past, I have never spoken about him, or his struggles with reading and writing and my early witnessing of his life opportunities fractured by the implications of a limited formal education. I am unsure how to draw on my own most resonant experience, which is the story of his humiliation by a farmer that touches some deep nerve within me that

leaves me emotionally raw. I am nervous of sharing this life-changing story with them. I am not sure why? Am I worried about becoming emotional and that this will be at odds with my role of supporting and containing any difficult emotions that they experience as part of my responsibility for their well-being? Or am I protecting myself? I do not know this group well. I am a bit nervous, and a number of them are more highly qualified than me, with doctorates. Will this story from my background colour their perception of me? Will they see me as a less than credible academic? There is also the concern that I might become emotional and they will see the deep and conflicted love that I have for my dad and will this be interpreted as unprofessional?

I decide on a compromise. I write up Dad's story as a case study with points of reflection, and hand it out to the small working groups (See Appendix B). I indicate that it is the experience of a tutor that I have worked with. First, I read the story.

I am totally surprised at the amount of emotion it generates within me, even though I have practiced this at home many times and was able to remain at an emotional distance. But as I read it, I am back there again in the car and my breathing shortens. I pause at those moments where the emotion is intensely charged. I hold the silences like long notes that slide interminably into the ether and insist that the accompanying instruments must wait. At the end of it, I am flushed, disorientated and ridden with guilt. I am full up with you. You are everywhere in the room. Every face that is looking at me is you. But I have wrapped you up in my handout and I am denying that you are my sweat, my flesh and my bone.

There are a couple of comments about how 'sad' it is. I can sense that the students are still trying to work out the meaning of the piece and my connection to it. I deliberately move quickly into the small groupwork and avoid a full group discussion.

The tempo picks up immediately when they see that there are paints and modelling clay to support their groupwork. The pace quickens even more, as they puzzle over the story of this anonymous man and child and how it might speak to what they too care about. As they become increasingly absorbed in their own stories and begin to highlight their values, the discussion becomes more and more animated and we almost lose track of time.

But in spite of this animated tempo - I am brooding. Who am I if the 'you who is in me', and the bedrock of those things that I value and care about in my teaching are denied and must lie packaged out of sight? How can I help students to face their experiences of shame if I am too ashamed of my own? There is gradual descent from *allegro* to *andante*.

What might transformational shifts look like in our learning spaces - Second movement in a minor chord

Glimpsing you in the shadows

Andante is one of the slowest tempo markings which is often reflective in its nature and indicates where something important needs to be said. I am talking with my students about those experiences when we have worried that our language is not good enough for the situation that we are in, and that we will be judged harshly. This starts very slowly at first. The pace becomes even more faltering, when one student begins to explain how at the beginning of her degree, she was scared to talk in her classes, how she worried not only about saying something that would make her look silly, but also that she would sound different to the other students who came across as so educated. She worried that everyone would see that she did not belong here. I notice heads nodding around the room, comments are beginning to flow and the discussion becomes more animated. A few students talked about not feeling comfortable with some of the big words that they met and how it was not always that they did not understand them, but that they did not feel like themselves when they used them. It did not sound natural to talk like that. That was not how people like us talk. Everything seems to slow down. It is as if we are all turning something over in our mind that is not yet fully shaped enough to be expressed.

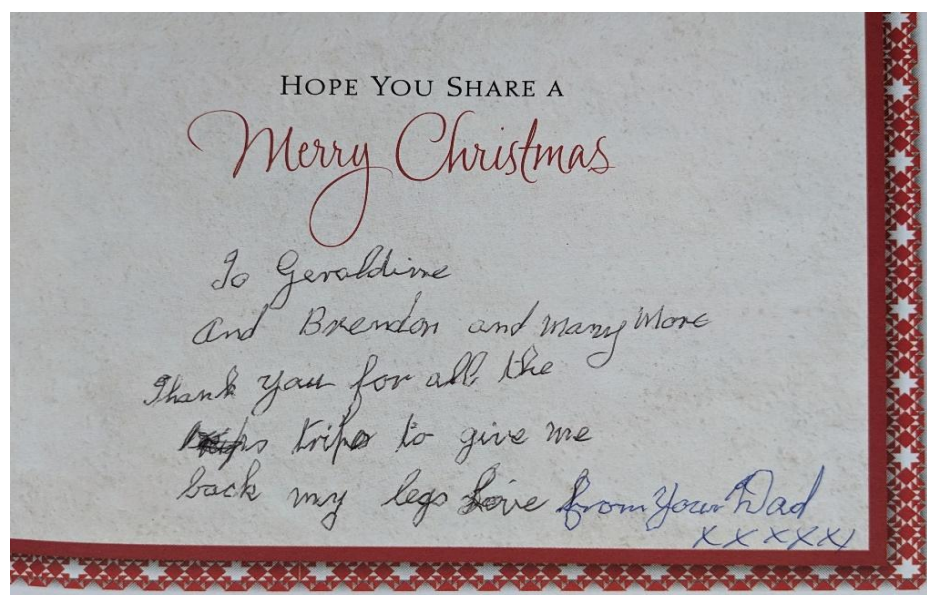
Words of anger, frustration and pain
Light up the darkening classroom like glow worms,
I write the word 'shame' on the board'
And sit down quietly.

I have written this spontaneously, and I am wondering what will happen next. So far, I have said very little. I ask if their students might share some of these anxieties, and in what ways they might be similar or different?

It is then that I notice a flicker of you, which catches my attention in the deep gloaming. I am once again pouring over the last Christmas card you sent to me. It is lavish. I savour every effort of your labour. This is the first time that you have written more than your name and have included a message to me. I imagine every exacting detail that could have potentially stopped you in your tracks, but which you overcome with such focused determination. You have spent time picking it out. You have carefully read the good wishes on the inside of the card that say 'hope you share a Merry Christmas'. It pleases you; it is what you want to say. All you have to do is to extend it by adding 'and many more'. You have something to tell me and I can imagine you searching for a way to say it to me. It is an important message. I can see that you are unhurried. You are determined that each word will be in attached writing, you do not give yourself the ease of lapsing back into print which would be faster, but in your mind, 'babyish'. I imagine that you pause after each word and check that it is correct. There is a constant shake in your hand as it edges across the page, and is restless to grip the smoothed wood of your favourite spade and send it singing into

the earth. Your message is one complete sentence, with a flourishing capital T for 'thank you' at the start, and a looping 'L' for love at the end. The word 'trips' has not worked out for you, it does not look right, it will not do it must be crossed out and written again. You come to the point. You thank me for 'all the trips to give me back my legs'. I am puzzled, taken back by its precision. And then the memory of our frequent trips to a therapist, and your easy chatter beside me in the car about those memories that were lodged inside you because of their strangeness, echoed in my head.

I notice that at the end of your greeting, you have added your name in a different colour ink. Before you posted it, you obviously checked it again and noticed the omission of your name. You clearly cannot find the black pen that you used. You will have to settle for a blue pen. You add to the original signing off which was 'Love', and include 'from your Dad XXXXX/'. I can feel the warmth of you and a rush of unchecked emotion, as you do not limit your embrace to one large 'X' as in the past. This time you are not counting. I imagine you letting your pen carry you along in a flow of love, until you lose the rhythm, and the last 'X' slides incomplete onto the edge of the page. I linger here in the pulse of you, which joins us in a space outside of time. Ease seeps into the breaks and bends of our journey to this moment. I remember you long ago explaining to me that 'X', was how to write 'sending you love and a kiss'.



My last Christmas card from my dad

Ignatieff reminds us that “language which has ceased to express felt needs is empty rhetoric” (1984, p. 138). I wonder at the power of this simple ‘X’, and the depth of emotion that it conveys, and mourn the overemphasis on the technical aspect of teaching writing, which does not pay enough attention to helping students with unmet literacy, needs to find ways to express what they feel and value.

I linger over these last four words, ‘love from your Dad’ and feel you tantalisingly close to me. I know how much this change of ink will irk you, after your intense labour to get this right. But it matters more to me that you risk what you will have perceived as a sloppy effort, in order to address your love directly to me for the last time in writing. I imagine that there is a sense of pride

in the lush loops of the L in 'love', the curves of the 'Y' in 'your' and the elaborate sweep of the pen in the 'D' for Dad- 'Your Dad'. Your message hollows me out with longing.

This straightforward and plain expression is the voice of you. The voice that I would recognise anywhere. The voice that I can hear in my classroom. The voice that I yearn to bring into the classroom but am at a loss to know how this can be done in a way that is illuminating and safe for both of us.

This throws me off kilter as I enter into a lengthy discussion with my students about 'adults with unmet literacy needs'. I am talking with a great sense of detachment about people who are out there somewhere, as if I have based my understanding of literacy from insightful texts and conversations with literacy students I have worked with in the past. Meanwhile I am dithering and swaying over and back in my head, playing for time, to decide whether I will acknowledge his presence in the room. On impulse, I blurt out loud, that I have lived alongside my dad who has struggled with unmet literacy needs all his life.

I feel myself welling up and I am floundering. I sense that this confuses my students; it throws them a little. It was unexpected. It seems to have come from nowhere. I imagine that they can sense my embarrassment and unease. There is a silence. I am unsure about whether to stay in this space or move quickly out of it and close all of this down.

Your Christmas card is wrapped around my heart and I am entangled in you. I panic. What am I doing? What was I expecting by announcing your presence in the room? Why have I done this? What am I hoping to achieve by inviting my students into this intimate space with you? I am not read. I am thrown by this flood of confusion and rawness, which I am just barely holding back.

I wonder what you think of me now Dad, at that moment where I packed you away and seamlessly changed topic. What sense are you making of my reluctance? We can talk frankly now. Do you feel relieved in some way that I am preserving your dignity, by refraining from exposing your painful relationship with the written word? Or do you feel that perhaps I am ashamed of you? Or maybe that I am ashamed of us all, that it really is not good enough to belong to a working-class family where pens were more often than not like sharp knives, that wound us as we struggled to move them across the page?

I do not mean to betray you, or to let you down. I do not mean to shut you out of my classroom. I do not mean to dismiss you or to diminish my heartfelt connection to you. But, I notice that almost involuntarily, my voice moves breezily along, with no further reference to you, suggesting a tidiness that belies what I am experiencing inside. I am practiced at this closing down and speedy recovery, as if this is dealt with, it has been worked through, I have moved on. There is no need for any further discussion. On a music sheet it might be recorded as andante for its poignancy.

You fade back into the gloaming
Silenced, but this time by me

What might transformational shifts look like in our learning spaces - Third movement in a major chord

Loosening my grip as you rise up

Coda is a section that concludes an entire piece or a major movement. Sometimes changes key to draw attention to a difference as the composition moves towards some form of a resolution. This is a moment when I feel a real sense of alignment which resonates with what Formenti and West (2018) refer to as transformative learning “where perceptions, emotions, concepts, values, judgements, and decisions are not separate, but work together, largely unconsciously, to guide us in the company of others, to create a more integrated understanding of learning” (p. 83).

The experience below is based on a number of illuminating pedagogical moments in my practice. I create a composite identity for the student, and rework a very striking exchange from a real student, while staying true to the meaning, to conceal her identity. I have drawn on experiences from within my own childhood in Newcastle upon Tyne, to flesh out the poem, which I create to illuminate the bond between us, as the student talks to me about her childhood.

You appeared to be tidying away your books in a deliberately slow manner at the end of class. I sense that you are waiting for the room to empty so that you can talk to me. I had noticed that you had become very quiet towards the end of the day, as if you were elsewhere. You begin to tell me how much you had enjoyed our class, particularly remembering some of the words and expressions that were spoken among your family and friends back home. How the word ‘clarts’ (dirt) made you laugh and cry as you saw your Mam warning you not to come home if you were playing in them. The words rolled on your breathe like a song. You said each one slowly, savouring them...hiney, canny, haddaway...

Your rich Geordie accent eddies and swirls
like the Tyne river that you grew up beside.
The dead swamp,
the lanes and alleyways where you raised your dreams,
the dark love of raiding each other’s dens,
the breathy winded triumph of holding your ‘enemy’ down in a chest-lock.

You wanted me to hear this story, to be your witness to a ‘you’ that felt less burdened and self-conscious. Your eyes drift away from mine. In the twilight, you begin to drift away from me. You breathe more heavily and begin to tap your foot. I watch your thumb and index fingers twist your pen around and around as if you are searching for a starting point, the first word, an opening ... I wait. I am listening, all of the stories that my body carries in its hands, stomach, shoulders, neck, feet are listening.

Words slide away,
unable to find a grip,
your breath is short and swallowed up.

I move in a little closer,
You are burning,
brimming,
bursting,
choking,
something is pushing you out of shape.
Your tongue is swollen like a watermelon.

You tell me that you for most of your life, you have been afraid to speak to anyone outside of your community for fear of being jeered. Rather than show the world your broken words, you became temporarily silent.

I listen as the air thickens between us.

I see a musical score with notes wheeling and circling before slipping to the ground

I feel such a strong sense of connection with Mary that there is no need for me to say anything, I listen and nod, a nod that says I understand these things.

It is then that I notice you, Dad.
Your presence brightens from the shadows and startles me.
This time, a country child with bare feet, crouched over your copy,
protecting your head.

But today it is the sting of the leather,
That lifts you from your chair and leaves you sprawled across the room,
lying at the feet of the master
who will tell you when you can get up and take your seat.
You steady yourself by counting the welts on your swollen feet, eyes cast down.

Shamed.

The air is thick with you Dad.
The you in me and the me in you.

This guides us into a new and more open space where Mary and myself comfortably discuss “long term, iterative learning” (Bartlett, 2007, p. 554) inside and outside of school, of feeling shame and then flow into a conversation about those moments where we have “seen others shamed or been shamed” ourselves (p. 554).

What I am trying to say to you Dad, is that I allowed you speak. I allowed you rise up out of the shadows and into my classroom where you stood up tall and proud and did not cover from speaking your truth. You were no longer waiting for the command of the master. It was me who was the master, the oppressor, who was holding you in an iron grip in the shadows, where you waited for me to summon or to silence you. That is over now. You flow into and out of my conversation with Mary and only withdraw, when the air is clearer, lighter, fresher.

Some of the burden of shame has been challenged and “the loss of the taken for granted, opens a psychic space that was previously occupied” (Green, 2023, p. 195).

A stable door swings vacantly over and back,
A stallion with head bowed and crazed eyes, bolts into the darkness,
Gallop towards the blue of predawn.

I leave the room and know that something has moved. Fragments of stories from my dad's life weave through a flow of feeling and images to create a bigger story through a poem that has a sense of ending and beginning, with its perplexing image of loss, change and hope in the 'blue of predawn'. I have found a way to talk to you and to our shame, which has brought with it a sense of being more fully alive. This is not a stepping away from something, nor the neat packaging up of a messy series of emotions. It is more of a stepping into who I might become. It is permission to be seen more completely as a "flesh-and-blood human being with passions, enthusiasms, frailties, and emotions" (Brookfield, 2015, p. 43) not as someone who hides behind a collection of learned roles in the classroom.

Conclusion

In this section, I drew on a range of sensory, and imaginative 'entry points' rendered through story, poetry and journal fragments to attempt to be inside of, while also confronting, my experience of living in the grip of the "duality of the oppressed" (Freire, 1996, p. 37), which has internalised oppressive narratives of shame. Walker acknowledges that while shame is diminishing and "at the core of who we are - and who we can become - as adult learners and adult educators" (2017, p. 357) it also contains the seeds of possibility, "a positive force for learning, not just something to overcome" (p. 367). This becomes particularly significant to an exploration of the experience above, as it explains, in part, my eagerness to work with different forms of transformational learning, in order to encounter the presence of such internalised and debilitating forms of shame. The role of the imagination, connected to our intuition, feelings and bodies, is explored for its capacity to enhance our critical reflexivity and reflection, which makes it possible to see alternative ways of living and being. The process of silencing is even more insidious, because of my own collusion as an oppressor in the Freirean sense, in the delegitimising of my epistemology, my values as well as my lived experience and my failure to hold powers of authority accountable for their actions. In the 'summoned up' presence of a loving and accepting other, I experience a cognitive and emotional shift which strengthened my connection to the value and the truth of my own experience, while illuminating the possibility of rupture with the shared meanings which connected us as a family. Like the hero's journey, this requires a form of transformative learning that allows

us to progress to one of more “authenticity [towards a] more integrated, less compartmentalised self, a more solid self in better relation with others” (Jordan & Walker, 2023, p. 239).

It has been a long and contorted process of responding to intuitions, dreamlike musings and a series of unsettling experiences over a long period of time. These became my entry points, which allowed me to be inside of, while also confronting my experience of living in the grip of the “duality of the oppressed” (Freire, 1996, p. 37), which has internalised oppressive narratives of shame. The conscious weaving of emergent insights from the more soulful inspirations, with extended and focused critical reflection, meant that I did not become overwhelmed or stuck, as was often the case in the past when I tried to explore these confusing intergenerational tensions and suffering. Access to the conversations of others who have written about transformative learning light up the way ahead. In particular, the consensus that chaos and being lost are integral to the search for our truth, encouraged me to keep pushing ahead and break through the paralysis of these deeply embedded narratives that held us in confusion.

Not that either of us, could understand any of our pain,
That came later with ‘book learning’, that set off words like flares.

There is a sense of celebration and of hope that I have emerged in a better place and that some of my worst fears and doubts along the way have impeded me, but not stopped me from emerging into a brighter world with a feeling of well-being. My relationship with my sister has become more intimate. The enigma of my dad, which put him at a distance to me, is a little more comprehensible and I feel more of a sense of belonging with in my family. It has also given me a way of valuing deep and meaningful connections with the lives of my students. It has deepened my empathy with my students so that I feel more confident about identifying and guiding these vital and difficult conversations that are central to my understanding of the curriculum of critical pedagogy can become part of our curriculum.

It is not that those deeply embedded shames and narratives have lost all of their power, nor that I am assured that I will always be able to navigate with ease those situations in which I question myself and become disconnected from my lived truths. But I now have a clarity and a capacity to reframe them within critical conversations that can talk back to them and guide me towards more solid ground.

Chapter Seven: Longing to be somebody

Introduction

This chapter is constituted from fragments of texts and stories. I hope to illuminate how the flow of this chapter addresses some of the themes which helped me to progress the inquiry. I consider that this chapter brings me close to the epicentre of my disappointment, which has remained within me all of my life, but which was particularly exacerbated since the death of my mam and dad, and brings me back to reconsider my progress through higher education which culminated in my choice to work in adult education. I return again to the question of dying, but this time it is a question of how we can move from the deadening grip of feeling stuck, not as an individual, but as a member of the working-class. This involves an intimate exploration of how we can internalise a subtle sense of being constrained by a dominant group, and feel undeserving and disconnected from the possibility of re-shaping our futures towards a more autonomous way of living.

As I examine my family stories, this develops into a slow examination of my transformative process as a young adult to break from this fixed way of life, in search of how I might live with a real sense of purpose recognition and love for life. The emotional and cultural connection with the embodied experience of having been working-class, and that almost ineffable feeling of being relatively positioned within “structures of power and privilege”, (Crowther & Martin, 2005, p. 8) drives my search for new choices away from my immediate community. I consider the dangerous and risky business of how we imagine what it is that we hope to change, and what we will lose and what we might gain, in that process. I explore this conversation by drawing on stories of my progression through education, which gives me a very welcome wider worldview, with more opportunities to live with meaning and passion. This is framed within the bigger conversation about progression through education and class mobility (Crean & Lynch, 2013). It becomes a way of examining my disappointment that accessing the privileges of a third-level education brought rewards, but unexpectedly created an oppressive silence between my mam and dad and myself, which we were not equipped to examine at that time. It raises difficult questions about how we navigate between the different social and relational groups whose recognition we value, but who have unequal cultural influence and power (West et al, 2013). If we succeed in one group, for example the world of academia, it involves transformations that place us outside of those shared meanings and connections of the other group, which is my working-class family. Rainio et al (2021) is interesting in

the observation that moving beyond the communal comfort zone can be a possible consequence of transformational growth and development.

This felt even more treacherous because these are the people, along with my nana and grandad, whose storytelling created a world that allowed me to become grounded in values of respect and fairness, while also allowing me to imagine disruption, vitality and challenge to those structural forces that locked us out.

This attachment to the world of my family collides with my yearning for the knowledge and agency which access to middle-class institutions and ways of life can give us, which is not available from inside of our communities. But that is a retrospective framing of my experiences, which paradoxically only became available to me as a consequence of participating in higher education and the opportunities it created. As I set out on my journey through mainstream education, I had hazy and confused expectations, as did my mam and dad, that led us to believe I was en route to become a 'real somebody'. There was a vague sense that I might be able to shake off this oppressive and limiting feeling of being stuck in a repetitive intergenerational script. We hoped that if it happened for me, I could also, in some unclear way, make it happen for them. This, however, was not to work out as we hoped.

There is in this chapter an examination from the removed distance of the present, a re-engagement with my progression into and through higher education. This is explored through family stories and letters written home to my parents, which open up the process of navigating between the two worlds of home and my new life in college. I draw on an intergenerational perspective through a range of literacy practices, including memories, a newspaper cutting, oral stories from my nana and grandad, a conversation with a letter demonstrating 'intimate relationship strengthening' by my mam and a series of reflectively written letters addressed to my mam and dad from me after I left home to go to college (1977-1989). I examine how our different relationship with affirming or diminishing experiences of school, and the literacy practices which we acquire, contributed to shaping not only our expectations for ourselves and for each other, but our ability to question some of the faulty and misleading assumptions we have internalised from the education system. This created an emotional and cultural distance, which moved us tantalisingly beyond an 'unselfconscious' ease with each other. My sense of grief when they die pushes me to re-engage with this earlier sense of disconnection and loss, in an attempt to restore in some posthumous way the bond between us. I don't know how to say it any other way

than that I am grief-stricken that my journey out of the suffocating constraints of living within the experience of being working class, also renders me unrecognisable to my mam and dad as ‘our Ger’.

Therefore, this dislocating experience of education and educational social mobility does not seamlessly enable me to let go of meanings that no longer serve me well, and allow me to transition to a new beginning. Instead, they hang around like ghosts that carry a wound of grief with them, which accompanies me into the more agentic revitalised zone of renewal. There is a particular poignancy that it was these lives that fuelled my dreams to change and recreate structures that would honour and recognise the lives of people like them who have been silenced, in a respectful equitable way.

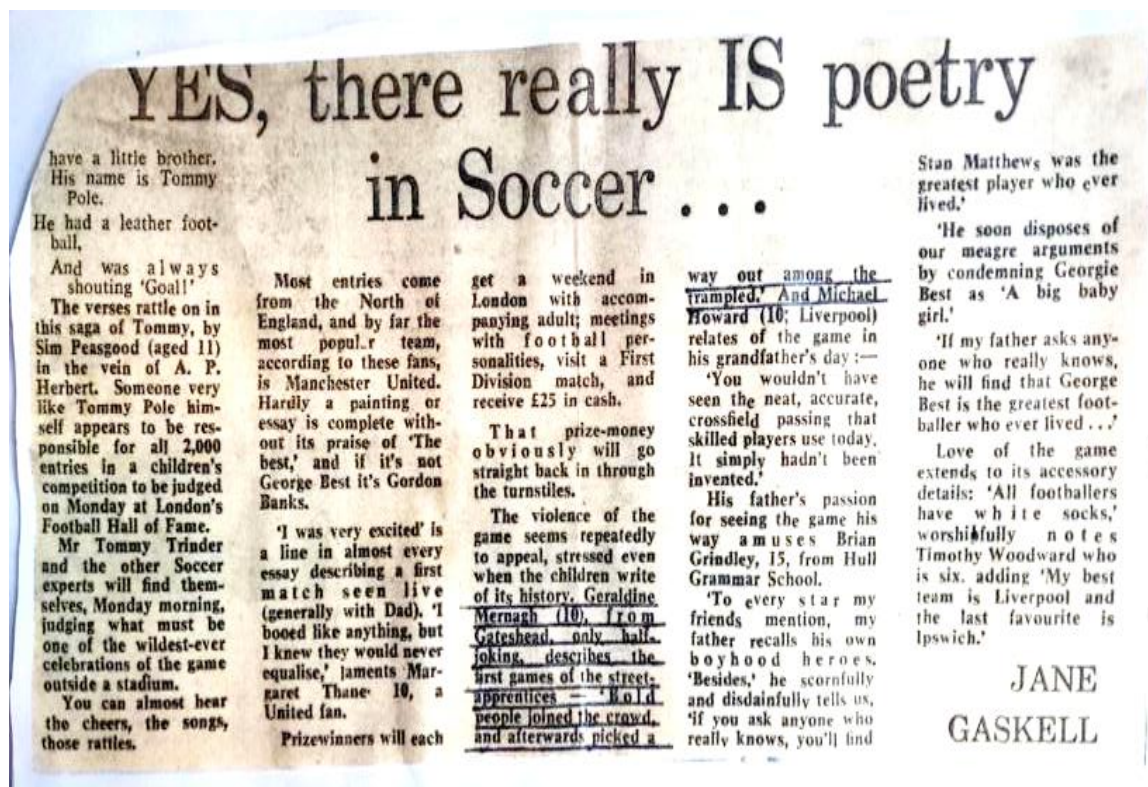
This raises fundamental questions about the complexity of what we are inviting our students to change, within our practice as educators committed to transformative learning. It also raises questions about how we can prepare and support ourselves and our students, to enter into and progress through a process which may challenge them to dismantle some of their fundamental assumptions, which may also be entangled in some of their most significant relationships. We cannot assume that it is always in the interest of the student to change meaning perspectives and need to take into consideration both the “difficulties of the process and consequences of dramatic personal change” (Hoggan et al, 2016, p. 53). One response is to create communities and dialogical spaces, which can nurture our growth and ability to critically reflect on our life circumstances, if and when we become ready. I will return to this in the last chapter.

Dad, I’m in the newspaper – how do we become somebodies?

As I move more deeply into my biography I begin a reconsideration of what belonging to the ‘working-class’ means from the inside out, within particular contexts of my life and work. This means exploring our experiences of accessing education and its impact on our relationship with oppressive and emancipatory literacy practices within my family, in order to tease out their relationship with our sense of identity, of feeling heard and recognised within the public space (Freire, 1996; West et al, 2013). An interrogation of these practices becomes a way of illuminating shared frustrations of engaging or disengaging with acts of naming the world to transform it (Freire, 1996). I probe how our relationship with education and restricted access to valued cultural practices of literacies which allows us to value and name our experience as a way of problematising our world, could be useful as a way of positioning my family as ‘working-class’. I have always struggled with the term

‘working-class’, particularly because my mam had created her own understanding of middle-class values, or becoming a ‘somebody’, that she brought into the heart of our family. I want to go beyond a focus on the status of our family in terms of unemployment, precarious and poorly paid employment, level of qualifications, material aspirations, access to opportunities, all of which existed and which can be useful indicators of working-class. But this does not seem to be enough to capture the pervasive frustration and sense of being locked out from something that is essential for connecting to our conviction – the conviction that we are able to interpret and interrupt patterns of unwelcome life situations that elude us as they masquerade as the normal order of things. It is also accepted that this worldview is intimately connected to our position in society and to some extent the associated experience we have of institutional learning.

This begins with an exploration of the emotional resonance and sense of hope and possibility that ripple through two generations of my family, sparked by a reference to me in a national newspaper. I use the lenses of literacy as social practice (Barton et al, 2007) and functional literacy (Freire, 1996) to explore my family’s relationship with dominant literacy practices, as well as some of the literacy practices that were valued and not valued within my family. This leads to an examination of how these everyday practices were shaped by their social, economic and cultural position in society, and how in turn they also shaped their “imagined futures” (Barton et al, 2007, p. 131). The implications for those who do not have access to those literacy practices which secure status and recognition, are that they learn to reject their lived, tested and valued knowledge as subordinate to the rational, and decontextualised knowledge of the academy (Freire & Macedo, 1987).



Newspaper clipping mentioning my name

The discovery of this old newspaper clipping in my family home plunged me back into the exhilarating childhood experience of seeing my name in print. The heady sense of disorientation and disbelief that fuelled my journey home from school, as I pushed open the back door and breathlessly shouted into the kitchen, 'Dad, I'm in the newspaper!'. There were very few newspapers in our house: *The Catholic Trust*, *The New Ross Standard* (posted from Ireland to our home in Gateshead) and the occasional *Daily Mirror* that Dad would pick up in work, and which was consequently always a few days out of date. We knew that people like us had no place within these texts, other than to read about the people and events whose lives mattered.

I am using the term literacy practices to refer to the contextualised nature of literacy that is always embedded and shaped within social hierarchies of power relationships (Barton et al, 2007). The literacy practices in our household, with the exception of writing occasional letters and sending greetings in cards, would have aligned with what Freire defines as a functional literacy which privileges the "basic reading demand of an industrialized society" (1987, p. 147). Another dimension of functional literacy was that this emphasis on reading was at the expense of creating written texts for any other purpose than to engage with the "ever more complex technological society" (p. 147). These largely functional interactions occurred with school, the workplace, household activities,

bureaucracy and interacting with professionals. They included religious ceremonies, forms, lists, instructions, manuals etc. These literacy practices would have been integral to much of my mam's household work and "like the rest of housework and care for the family, was rendered invisible" (Rockhill, 1990, p. 96). This emphasis on the consumption of texts is still very evident today in literacy classes. Barton et al (2007, p. 75) noted from their research that within most literacy learning classes, the emphasis was on "having practice in understanding and using written texts and, less often, writing them" (2007, p. 75).

Therefore the unexpected appearance of my name and a reference to something that I had written, indicated a disruption, and held multiple meanings that although they were poorly understood, were never the less considered to be important enough to ensure that this clip was kept safely for over 50 years. I had written an essay about football in school, and unknown to me it had been entered by my teacher, Mrs. Smith, into a competition. The fact that she had taken the care to post this newspaper cutting to my school address, while she was on maternity leave, gave it an added potency. This almost seemed to transgress some unstated, but carefully observed boundary between the lives of teachers and students that heightened my sense of being plucked out of invisibility, of being seen. It was almost unimaginable to my then ten-year-old self that a teacher would write to me, and reach into my life, from the intimate space of her home. It was such an indisputable indication that I existed to her outside of the classroom, a person about whom I knew nothing, except that she now had a baby boy with an beautiful name, and that she lived in a 'well-off' part of Newcastle.

My eyes now as then, are drawn to disregard the bulk of print, and focus instead on the section where I can see my name, my age, and my address.

I imagine you, Mrs. Smith, scanning through the newspaper, and then stopping unexpectedly at my name. Does this surprise you? Do you see me differently? Does it add something more to me than what you have known of me up to this? Are you hopeful for me? Do you imagine a future for me and what colour is it? Or do you see it as transitory, a moment to be enjoyed, but which has no consequence or impact to alter anything that may come after this? Is this really to let me know that I have a chance of winning and if so, did I disappoint you? Did you rush it into the post, without giving it a second thought, distracted by the care of a new baby?

But there seems to be more. You are now vividly in front of me, painstakingly drawing clear, straight blue lines with your ruler, under each of the phrases which referenced me. Recreating the same method that you had taught us to use in class, for those significant sections of our textbooks. But this was not in pencil, something provisional to be erased later. This was in permanent blue ink. As if to say, 'sit up straight and pay attention to this name'. This is Geraldine Mernagh, she is 10 and there is a possibility that she may be SOMEBODY.

As I hold this yellowed newspaper once again between my fingers, I can feel its reach, deep into my flesh, where it has nestled for a lifetime, and provoked searching questions about my collusion with a hazy and poorly articulated hope of becoming a ‘somebody’. It became an ongoing search for that elusive ‘success,’ that would create some kind of safe refuge, as yet not imagined, for all of my family to take shelter from the deadening grind of the past.

I had grown up in a family where education was simultaneously revered and feared. There was an unquestioned assumption that if you succeed in school, then it was the basis for securing a job that would entitle you to a corresponding level of respect, social status and economic security. Or paradoxically for those who failed, it would become an alienating experience, which justified precarious and limited work and life circumstances. As is the case in anyone’s life, my parents had lived through many unpredictable and uninitiated changes in their lives, which significantly impacted, on the choices that they could “make at any given time” (Barton et al, 2007, p. 23). My parents were born in the 1930’s, they left Ireland in the 1950’s, at a time of mass unemployment, with primary school education, to look for work. My mam had served a long apprenticeship with her dad, as a tailor, where they made from scratch, bespoke suits for gentlemen, using techniques and tools that had been passed down from her great-grandad. My dad was a general labourer. They returned in the 1970’s to look after elderly parents with health problems, hearing that there was work in Ireland. But the country went in and out of recession. Dad moved precariously between different factory jobs created by Industrial Development Agency’s (IDA) tax packages designed to attract international companies into Ireland. As these eventually relocated to more profitable locations, the town became once again bereft of employment. Driving past the wind-whipped skeletons of these abandoned factories, where my dad had spent large parts of his life, prompted him to pause.

‘Recessions didn’t make any difference to me. I was either in the thick of one, or I was headin’ into one. There was never any money in my work... and looking for jobs....needles in haystacks ... but yer Mam could work miracles’.

My mam and dad spent most of their lives managing the direct impact of either entering or recovering from an economic crisis, which seriously disrupted my dad’s ability to retain and find employment. The turbulence and hardship, which each wave of unemployment brought, took its toll on them. They were frustrated and could not understand why people who do all the right things, working long and hard, bringing up their family to be hardworking and honest, should be continuously battling to bring in an income. In an

attempt to explain and make some sense of these recurring patterns of economic hardship that they experienced, they explained it to themselves in terms of their lack of formal education.

Barton et al (2007) demonstrates how if we are “‘doing’ anything, engaging in any social practice, [it] always means ‘learning’ in the broad sense” (p. 25). People who are living precariously are continuously navigating the unexpected and are in a continuous learning curve as they adapt to each new set of circumstances. But this was invisible to my parents who understood that it was their inability to learn and particularly to engage with ‘school learning’ that had created this situation for which they were responsible.

The social practice definition of literacy is helpful for illustrating how people can become entrapped in a cycles of social behaviours which reinforce the very circumstances of their lives that they experience as limiting. Barton et al (2007) argue that “social practices are more than what people do. They also shape who people are, their identities and identifications” (p. 21). They show how “people’s current practices are shaped by their life history; people’s purposes and goals are influenced by their present circumstances” (p. 18).

A poor experience of school had travelled between generations, through family lines, and had created a particularly looped trajectory between how the past coloured their experience of the present, which in turn coloured their “hopes, dreams, and ambitions, conscious and unconscious” (Barton et al, 2007, p. 24). The necessity to search for paid work combined with poor experiences of engaging in schooling, were more often than not alienating and diminishing. This not only influenced their own day-to-day experiences, but also significantly shaped “their imagined futures [which] is what people believe to be possible *for them*” (p. 24).

In some way that newspaper clip, as trivial as it may seem, created a rupture in the suffocating “economic and political forces [which] are in motion beneath us, powerful and often hidden” (Finnegan, 2020, p. 83) and which trap us in our daily practices and routines. These underlined phrases in the newspaper extract associated with me, were imagined to make a tentative connection with the other dominant literacy texts in our household, all of which were produced by people who mattered. It appeared to create the beginning of a counter response to those relentless cycles of recession, unemployment and despair, which “like magmas (...) suddenly crack through the crust of tradition and fracture or even destroy established ways of life and patterns of meaning-making” (Finnegan, 2020,

p. 83). They provided a chink of hope that I might be able to break free of the shackles of the past and a hope for something better.

It is as if this text was carefully minded because, in some unarticulated way, this moment of recognition in a newspaper, fuelled the possibility to dream what Freire (1996) might describe as a moment in personal history. There is a recognition that this moment presents the possibility for change - the possibility that I may progress to a different kind of future and become a symbol of hope for my family for better things. I dream of disrupting their 'stuckness', with a sense of being able to do something differently, which would allow them to interrupt "an identical past and present, and a future without hope" (Freire, 1996, p. 154).

The concealed nature of these assumptions, which are taken for granted and appear as normal, leaves us unable to find the words and concepts to explore with each other what this really means. There was no ability to examine the "why and how of [our] adhesion to reality" (Freire, 1996, p. 154), a reality which offers no sense of hope for real personal agency. There was an unquestioned acceptance that "education can deliver all it promises: that it will provide the means to a different life, a better life" (Rockhill, 1990, p. 89). But there was no individual or shared understanding of what that this desire for respectable and respected life, might be. Instead, there was a hazy image within my family that this involved "a well-dressed woman doing 'clean' work, important work" (Rockhill, 1990, p. 89).

This inability to articulate the flare of hope which this newspaper extract illuminated, meant that there was no way of discussing what this might mean in terms of increased personal choices, and more importantly, also no way of clarifying the limits, in real terms, of what this does not mean. If anything, it probably endorsed the false assumptions of meritocracy - that if you have some ability, and participate fully in school activities, you can create your own future (Young, 1961). This oppressive silence also left unchallenged a vision that was limited to individual enhancement, which would magically benefit everyone around me.

I am going to read the bible from cover to cover

As my mam was largely responsible for all of the functional literacy practices in our day-to-day lives, I consider the gendered nature of literacy practices within the invisibility of the private domain, (Rockhill, 1990) I also try to bring to life her impulse to live in a way

that goes beyond merely adapting to what is there in the world, and her yearning for something more. This becomes a way of encountering my mam's search to engage with a dominant literacy practice of reading a highly valued text. I explore her frustrated and self-defeating attempt to read the complete *Catholic Truth Society Bible*, and identify it as the moment when she abandoned her own search to become more than and instead pinned all of her hopes on me. This brings me to a consideration of the distinguishing qualities of the identity of a 'somebody', within the understanding of my family. I consider one possibility that being a 'somebody' refers to someone who has 'valuable' knowledge, and the literacy practices to express it, for recognition within private and public spaces. People who can produce texts. This marks them out as someone who has worked hard in school, and deserves the financial, social and cultural rewards that this brings.

The most valued reading texts in our house were an (unread) copy of the *Catholic Truth Society Bible*, a hardbound copy of a cookery book and later a set of children's encyclopaedias that were paid for on a weekly basis, and had been sold as a pathway for securing our success in school. The entry of these books into our home had pushed my mam to insist on my dad making a heavy brown stained book case, to display them in an appropriate type of library setting which was worthy of their status. The cookery book, with its luscious photographs, was a source of great joy, unlike the other books that were simultaneously an invitation to a better life, and a reproach for their pristine status which revealed their under use. They seemed to embody the longing for a rupture with this re-occurring sense of disappointment with the present, in spite of my parents' best efforts for change. Like the newspaper article, these texts carried an incessant and poorly understood longing for something more, to be part of some other world.

This heartfelt longing for something more, gazes translucently through the image of my mam announcing to me one afternoon that she is going to read the bible.

I can sense your frustration - the endless routine of meals, laundry, cleaning, and making whatever items of furnishings or clothes that were needed, on an inadequate budget, in a world where you are not entitled to space or time, or a say in how your day unfolds. You are sitting down in the armchair when I come into the room. As often happens, you are annoyed that I have caught you sitting down. You remind me that you have been on your feet all day working hard, that you have not stopped since early morning and you list the multiple tasks that you have done and redone since you have got up. You say that this is the first minute that you have had to yourself, and before long, you will have to get Dad's tea ready because he is working a long shift tonight and can only dash home for a few minutes.

I am baffled why you do not feel that you have the right to sit down. But you are waspish and cross and I accept your explanation without saying anything. I am trying to work out if I am part of the problem or the solution. I put my schoolbooks down and offer to help you, but you will not hear of it. It's clear that I am the only one in this family who can sit down. I settle down at the table to start my homework.

Then you surprise me, you take off your apron and reach across to the bookcase as you turn purposefully towards me and announce that you are going to read the whole bible from cover to cover. You are animated and I can hear the pride in your voice. You wait for me to acknowledge this remarkable project. But I am staring at this dense and impenetrable text, and I am already worried that this will not bring you the satisfaction that your animated expression suggests you are in search of.

I am puzzled why you would want to read the whole bible, as you had never shown any particular interest in it before. There are short extracts on our Sunday prayer sheets; I cannot help thinking that it would be a better place to start. But you are buoyant and full of enthusiasm.

What have you been tossing around in your mind that has brought you here? This is a 'you' that I do not know and I am bewildered. Do you want to find an excuse to sit down without appearing to be lazy? But why the bible? Do you want to see what is inside it, to verify if it corresponded with what you were told in church? Do you want to enter into its secrets and learn more about why we are sinners? It seems particularly odd and not like you, because you were the person who explained to me that Catholics cannot read the bible, without the presence of a priest to interpret it for us?

You take it off the shelf where it has rested for years undisturbed, beside the leather bound cookery book. You open it up at page one. There are over a thousand pages. I wonder again what you are searching for from this page. Are you looking for comfort, for some kind of reason to make suffering and the daily grind more palatable? I know you have a prayer book, and I hear you praying for comfort and support at night, as you kneel at your bedside and murmur the Hail Holy Queen after a decade of the rosary. No, this is more purposeful. There is a sense of mission and urgency about this decision. Could this be your attempt to fill yourself up with the knowledge that will give you a value, and roll back those years of invisibility? Or will it give you a sense of achievement that you can say that you have accomplished something, something that does not keep dissipating without any trace of the human effort involved in its execution. Unlike the laundry basket, which is in a constant cycle of full, empty, full, empty. Or is it a way of becoming a somebody, a somebody who now has the wisdom of those who know what is really worth knowing in this world. Do you see this as a first step towards joining those voices in the public spaces where 'educated' people meet and talk?

You move the book up and down, holding it at arms-length first and then closer to you, as you get tired. You gaze at the first page. I hear a sigh. I sense that you are reading and re-reading the same opening paragraph. I pretend that I am not studying you and bracing myself for the end which I know, even then is inevitable, and will leave both of us disappointed, and returned to the same place of who we were, before this project was initiated, the place that we cannot easily name, but that we are trying to leave.

I am fretting. It does not seem right to me that you open it at page one, with those hundreds of rice paper thin pages, assembled on the other side, waiting for you to turn them over. It already feels overwhelming. There must be a better way. But I don't know what it is and I cannot help you. I want to help you. I desperately want you to succeed. Surely, it is not too much to hope that you, who has never before uttered a desire for your own life, should not be disappointed.

Only once you expressed a desire for yourself, and confided in me that you had hoped to open your own boutique and design tailored, hand fabricated clothes for individual customers. Until the mass-produced 'clothes off the peg' dismantled that dream. Surely you will be allowed to succeed in this one instance, even if it is almost certainly unrealistic?

You are determined to understand these cryptic words with their dense meanings. You do not allow yourself to look up once, in case you lose your place. You take an old photograph that was on the mantelpiece and slowly place it under each line marking your pilgrimage across the line, from word to word. I can feel your deep concentration as you focus on every single word, until the meaning of the full sentence is lost to you and you must start again.

Slowly your eyes begin to lose their light and your face appears weary. You start flicking through the pages ahead, more and more quickly, to get a sense of the scale of this undertaking. It is like lifting grains of sand on a beach.

*I rule another margin on my homework copy and I hear your long, extended sigh, which tells me that you have given up. The bible is returned to the shelf and I know that something has been lost, abandoned, some way out, some possibility of bringing recognition and some grander value to your life has slipped away. **In my mind, this is the day that you gave up and place all of your hopes on me.***

Women like you “did not experience their lives in terms of rights, but of responsibilities to their family and home” (Rockhill, 1990, p. 97), where all of the care for the family and housework was rendered invisible. This created a sense that their lives and experiences had little or no value beyond the domestic space, and were not significant enough to be considered worthy of recognition within printed text or within the public space. It also reinforced the unquestioned logic, that this lack of representation in texts or public spaces of the experiences and lives of themselves and the people that they knew, somehow justified the precarious living and working conditions that they found themselves in. It placed them in a binary position to the ‘somebodies’, consolidating their identity as ‘nobodies’. It also played a significant role in silencing the justifiable rage towards the social economic and cultural forces that positions families in this limiting social position.

This bestowed a type of ‘magical’ status around the printed text. There was a sense of being locked out of anything that extended beyond the daily literacy practices of reading occasional newspapers, magazines, prayers, interactions with functioning administrative forms, as well as writing letters and cards. They required a constant negotiation between what she wanted to read or say, and what she was able to read or say, without the fear of making mistakes. This was possible because my mam had no way of interrogating the belief that “there is one correct way to say things” (Bartlett, 2007, p. 556). She carried that persistent doubt that “someone else has learned the ‘right’ way to say things” (p. 556) and that their “linguistic superiority was achieved through schooling” (p. 556), which had

ended for her at 13. Therefore, if she was speaking in a public space outside of the home, there was always a niggling worry that her lack of schooling would be revealed by “pronunciation or vocabulary, grammatical differences [which] strongly mark ‘uneducated’ speech” (Bartlett, 2007, p. 556). She had no way of knowing that “the ‘rightness’ of the speaker’s language” was linked to the “social status of the speaker” (p. 560) and not to their intelligence and schooling.

The fact that my mam could function quite efficiently in the day-to-day interactions of her life, meant that the limits of her literacy difficulties would not have been obvious or even presented as a lack. She left school with a high level of functional literacy, which Lankshear (1996) argues means being “adapted to the way things are” (p. 104). This narrow emphasis on being able to read functional texts, in addition to the lack of encouragement to represent what really matters in a written format, unquestionably contributed to a perception of the indisputable power of the written word, and particularly the published word. There was an exaggerated and deferential respect for those who could produce text.

Longing to talk properly

In this section, I am drawing on ideas about language and power, which were the basis of generating many illuminating conversations where I gained invaluable insights from my students. What was most disturbing was the sense in which this “notion of linguistic superiority [which was] artificially imposed” (Freire, 1987, p. 129), created a double humiliation. In the first instance, my mam had internalised the view that the words to express her day-to-day experiences were a cause of potential humiliation, as they gave a snapshot of belonging to a social reality that clearly positioned her as inferior, thereby silencing her joy and willingness to discuss her day-to-day experiences outside of the immediate family and community.

I grew up knowing the signs, that unmistakably affirmed that how we spoke at home was not good enough in a public space: my mam’s nervous repetitive coughs to clear her throat; the slippage into long vowels or an occasional random use of a grammar point that collided with how we normally spoke (‘May I?’); the unexpected mumbling of words that were run together at an accelerated pace, to mask the uncertainty of their accuracy; the uneasy insertion of words that were not ‘ours’ as in, ‘Mother’ instead of ‘Mam’. It meant that she was always vulnerable to correction by those who knew better. Gee (2008) would frame this process as the tension between our primary Discourse which defines our “‘home’

identity and that of [the] people with whom one is intimate and intimately connected” (p. 179) and those secondary Discourses which involves interactions with “people with whom one is either not ‘intimate’, with whom one cannot assume lots of shared knowledge and experience” or requires more formality (p. 175).

The problem was not that my mam was consciously trying to borrow from “public sphere secondary Discourses” (Gee, 2008, p. 177) and embed them into our existing template of language. Gee (2008) describes this as a useful “pre -tuning” (Gee, 2008, p. 177) which would have to some extent reworked our primary Discourse in a way which would have helped to prepare us for our meeting it and mastering it later in life for example, navigating language in school. Rather the problem was that because she had such limited “exposure to models in natural, meaningful, and functional settings” (Gee, 2008, p. 177), she had no chance of mastering it fluently, nor would it have been accompanied by the appropriate values, accent, behaviour, dress code etc., that would be components of the ‘normal’ identity of the user of this Discourse. Therefore, she resorted to adjusting her primary Discourse “in various ways to try to fit it to the needed functions” (p. 175), which is always destined to fail. Instead, it becomes an experience of shame for her, as it is obvious that she was not “born” into these dominant discourses (p. 179). She is exposed as an ‘outsider’, reaching beyond her social position. This became a significant dimension of excluding, protecting herself or closing down her participation in public spaces, and with it, the restriction of possibilities for entering into spaces where dreams could be nurtured.

Where these amended secondary Discourses have been successfully embedded, they can then be passed onto their children and assist their sense of belonging and succeeding within mainstream education, which can play a role in rupturing an intergenerational legacy of school failure. My sense of ‘belonging to school’ was, similar to Gee, substantially through religious practices (Gee, 2008, p. 176). As the child of Irish immigrants who were totally committed to Catholic practices, my attendance at a Catholic school that was run by an Irish principal, who embedded the daily and seasonal rituals of the Catholic church into our lives in school, gave me some sense of belonging and home. Gee (2004) argues that “children cannot feel like they belong at school, where their valuable home-based practices are ignored, denigrated and unused” (p. 37).

The parent-teacher meeting - taking notes on my future

A reflection on a note which carried the names of my teachers, in preparation for a parent-teacher meeting, in first year of secondary school, illuminates the socio-linguistic barrier between the Discourse of home and school (Gee, 2007) which does not promote either a reading of the world or a naming of it (Freire, 1996). This illustrates some of the complexity of engaging in public space where literacy is defined as “mastery of a secondary Discourse involving print” (Gee, 2008, p. 176). She started the slow process of getting ready to face into the annual parent-teacher meeting early in the afternoon. It was her first time to enter the school that I had just started the previous September. But there was a gap, and as I turn over the list of teachers names that I gave my mam, to guide her through that first parent-teacher meeting in secondary school, I catch the ghost of this ‘gap’ as scrawled and disconnected words, scribbled on the back of the notelet and which stopped abruptly - a tension that even her best coat, the lipstick for special occasions and freshly washed hair, could not efface.

1st Science Teachers
Sr Cecilia = Singing
Sr Ella = Maths
Sr Mary = Geography
Sr Immaculate = Domestic Science
Sr Annunciaty = Religion
Miss O'hara = Science
Miss ^{Mc}Guire = French & History
Mr Doyle = Latin & English
Miss Carr = Physical Education
Miss Gilligan = Elocution
Mrs Alexander = Civics
Comment.

MR. DOYLE GOOD
VERY INTERESTED
B^t ANNIVERSARY COULD BE A
NUN

List for parent-teacher meeting – front and back

In spite of your reservations, you have put on your best coat, your hair is done by my aunt, even a touch of lipstick.

There is at the outset, an underestimation of the amount of information that will be communicated. You have imagined that you will be able to fit it all onto one notelet. You never had paper in our house, other than small lined pages of Belvedere Bond for letter writing and later on, school copies for me. You wrote on the backs of receipts, strips of cornflake boxes, Post-its - functional, efficient, constrained... silencing.

Or perhaps you didn't anticipate that you would be expected to commit some of these conversations with teachers to paper. You intended to simply remember them and tell me afterwards. Perhaps you became conscious that others were taking notes, and felt pressurised to do the same, but you only had the back of my list of teachers' names and subjects to draw upon at that late stage.

It is clear that you give up trying to jot down notes in the very early stages, and rely on committing everything to memory. I can imagine that you felt intimidated by those who were writing fluently. You would have noticed that there were some parents in the long queues who had the confidence to regulate the pace of the conversation, to ensure that they had time to take accurate notes. I can picture you, searching to find appropriate questions about my academic progress with little or no understanding of how this system worked, or what was expected of you as a parent, and of me as student. I can feel the intense pressure of talking, listening, responding, while also trying to jot down important words. Something that you would never have done in other circumstances. I also can feel your creeping fear that teachers might notice you hesitating as you tried to write words which you were not accustomed to speaking or writing - a clear signal to them that you were struggling with spelling, and were an outsider to the world of education. I can feel your dread that you are exposed and that you are letting me down. The mention that I might join the nuns would have thrown you. While it was a standard proposition to girls who showed some ability but no means of continuing their education, this perturbs you and it appears slightly menacing. Your own experience with them is enough for you to forget about even attempting to take any more notes. Later at home, you don't discuss this with me. You have decided that they will not get me, under any circumstances. You know your own mind, even if you cannot risk saying it out loud to them.

There was also the additional humiliation of internalising the belief that knowledge that exists outside of the academia was worthless (Freire, 1987). Mam's domestic space was brimming with worlds and experiences that collided with her internalised perceptions of the "classical definitions of the well-educated man, thoroughly grounded in the classics, articulate in spoken and written expression" (Freire, 1987, p. 146). There was an unquestioned and uncritical belief in the superiority of those who succeeded within the schooling system and their knowledge, "regardless of the actual content or outcomes" (Bartlett, 2007, p. 560).

This illuminates a further contradiction in my mam's impulses to engage with one of her most valued dominant literacy texts. It suggests that she considers the reading of the bible as a way to acquire a valuable dominant literacy practice, something that equates with being

educated. Freire highlighted the gatekeeping aspect to the use of standard English embedded in dominant literacy practices, that it was “a weapon” (Freire, 1987, p. 129), a way to lock people out, who did not acquire these practices. Therefore, my mam’s false belief in the superiority of Standard English over her own dialect silenced her further, as she doubted not only the value of her experiences, but also the words to communicate them, beyond the domestic space. This deep sense of the inferiority and limits of her language and knowledge, ironically, prevented her from the “critical mastery of the standard dialect” (Freire, 1987, p. 129) she so desperately sought, as such a mastery is linked to “the development of one’s voice, which is contained within the social dialect that shapes one’s reality” (Freire, 1987, p. 129).

None of this can dampen down your emotional ambition that I should do better than you. But it creates an irreconcilable contradiction within you of simultaneously inspiring a courage to enter onto new paths that will bring you into new worlds, while also filling you up with a debilitating fear of being exposed as the ‘outsider’ we are in these worlds.

Hovering in the back ground there is an absolute unquestioned certainty that you, Dad, would not attend this meeting, which was completely unquestioned by me

Your Hand

The men on our street, like the milk bottles,
Went out at dark,
Scrubbed and soaped ready for the night shift.
Coming home in the pre-dawn light
With the rattle and hum of the milkman’s cart.

You disappear into your blue boiler suit and pull the donkey jacket tight around you,
The sandwiches and unread newspaper were arranged under your arm,
And finally, the flask was filled, enough to see you through the night.

I put on my nightdress, with the hand-stitched lace trims and the ‘pearl’ button,
Which you had left near the fire to warm,
And I puzzled over an adult world where night and day were upside down.

Later that night we both laboured and toiled with the careless systems that squeezed
Not just our joy, but our hope of joy.

You,
In open cast mines, where slag heaps blocked out the skyline,
threatening an un-ceremonial burial to an unlucky ‘paddy’.

Me,
In terror of the long addition that awaited me in school,

Wrestling with numbers, that fluttered from behind the curtains and wardrobe
And pinned me to the bed.

You move around the kitchen getting breakfast ready,
I am one slice of toast and a bowl of porridge away from facing the correction of
my teacher.
You notice I am clinging to your one free hand
And you try to reason with me
That you cannot get on with the morning with just one hand

But I can find no way to explain to either of us
about this shadowy place which is my classroom, that is to be my new home.
There is something in you that is struggling, and does not want to know.

But what matter of all of that,
I waded out of my depth that morning to the front door
Where you kissed me goodbye,
And only then let my hand go.

School added new complexities, connections and distances into my relationship with my dad. Shame and frustration hung over my dad; it made him silent, withdrawn and preoccupied for a lot of the time, particularly in relation to my experiences in school. My dad's traumatic experience of education renders him unable to either acknowledge or respond to what is clearly my reluctance to go to school, because of my anticipated sense of my teacher's anger. Even at that young age, I sensed that he was powerless to either be an advocate or intervene on my behalf.

There was the sense that your precarious world, punctuated with night time work, danger, dirt and snatched packs of sandwiches eaten in dank canteens or outside in the open, was at variance with the orderly and comfortable world of school. But there is also my recognition of a powerful shared anxiety between us. There was always fear of something, or someone, and more often than not, it was a general anxiety about economic survival, with a sinister sense of concern about upsetting anyone who could make life harder for us. For you it is the prevailing threat of 'being let go', cut adrift from the means that protected our family's economic survival. For me it is the threat that is hovering unspoken, but embedded in every interaction within my world of school. The threat of failure to succeed here, as this risks the possibility that I will 'end up like you'.

This is a devastating contradiction. I relish those moments where you comfort and protect me, and yet, school marks the beginning of my complicated sense of betraying you.

'Your Hand' captures my feelings of betrayal, as I acknowledge that for all of my nervousness about my teacher, I am hopeful of embracing this strange world of school as 'my new home'. However in this 'new home' I will be immersed in a culture where "functionally illiterate adults are indeed treated as 'the pathology of the healthy society' " (Lankshear, 1996, p. 105).

This is at complete variance of my experience of you. As I progressively immerse myself in the joy of this new world of learning, I also begin to recognise that people 'like you' who end up in continuous precarious employment are offered up to us as a warning of what to expect, if we did not apply ourselves and succeed in school. You are a lesson in how we must not end up in the world. A lesson that you too want me to learn. But in my adoring entanglement with you, it was unimaginable and confusing for me to accept and understand which bits of you I must not become.

Each of us holds our fear tight to our heart.

You become silent and gradually withdraw from everything which is associated with my world in school. It is a conversation between us, which is impossible to have.

Lorde (2017) reminds us that “in the cause of silence, each of us draws the face of her own fear – fear of contempt, of censure, or some judgment, or recognition, of challenge, of annihilation” (p. 3).

For me it was the withdrawal of your love and engagement in my life. I yearn for those days, before and after night shifts, where you would get me ready to leave for school with such affection and care, those days before I fully understood that your traumatic experience of education had made you unable to respond to any difficulties I experienced in school or engage with any conversations I brought home from the classroom. Or before I knew that you would become increasingly powerless to intervene on my behalf in public spaces, or express any curiosity for my life in school.

For you I imagine that you fear I will pity you as 'uneducated', or see you as someone who must remain in the shadows of the worlds that school opens up for me, for fear that your 'uneducated status' may ensnare me by association in your precarious world. You fear that it might limit my opportunities of moving somewhere better than this place where we are, to a somewhere where I could take my place among the somebodies.

We did not understand the particular type of oppression that people with no credentials, in precarious employment and being in the world, suffer. We could not name the concomitant emotions like shame, anger, depression and anxiety that became an inextricable part of their love for us. The fact that these things could not be articulated, compounded our feelings of isolation and feelings of helplessness, as we were not able to have these things “spoken, made verbal and shared” (Lorde, 2017, p. 1).

I know without ever being told, or without ever asking that you will not be attending. That Mam has no choice.

In this sense, Lorde identifies fear as one of the most significant barriers to being open to those experiences of our “possibilities within ourselves” (Lorde, 2017, p.7) which are “ancient and hidden” (p. 8). However the power to weave story into and around our

experiences is where that source of power is tapped into and unfurled - a glimpse of who we are, when we are not afraid or ashamed.

Do you ever go out dancing?

All of the stories above raise questions about the poignant and dynamic relationship between my family, myself and my evolving literacy practices. Our understanding of literacy perspectives were viewed through the lens of those are subordinated and accustomed to having their ways of making senses invalidated, not only of the printed word, but also of the world. These are contrasted with the preferred literacy practices within my family from a wealth model perspective, where the stories of my nana and grandad are explored as verbal 'texts', which disrupt their silence and invisibility and become voices which ring out in my childhood and create seeds for a different type of life; one of vitality, disobedience and self-respect, as well as of compliance and submission. In some way, that I cannot explain fully, listening to these stories and so many more, stirred a restlessness to be in love with the world and with life, without understanding any of the implications of such a desire. They situate my personal experience within a world of tight-knit communities, family responsibilities, and the invisibility of women within public spaces. My nana over time, became a keen audience for public broadcasting, where she relished engaging with those conversations about more progressive women who were challenging many of the religious and moral codes that had restrained her. But in the case of my grandad, there is a view of a more public world of trades, apprenticeships, but within a changing world where many of these traditional and social bonds are under threat. In both cases, they give me a way to create my own stories of what I want to disrupt in these ways of living.

Barton et al (2007) argue for the importance of enabling students to choose what they want to read and write "for its own sake". This can be a way of helping students "to make sense of life and to establish a sense of who they were and who they wanted to become" (p. 72). In many ways, the stories of my grandparents and wider family served a similar purpose to written texts. They were records of what they cared about, helped them to see patterns and connections between life experiences and were the vehicles which gave them the freedom to uncover, from a distance and among their own people, however indirectly, aspects of their "hidden histories" (Barton et al, 2007, p. 20). This presented them with possible glimpses of how their life's choices had been shaped by forces beyond their control.

It is always late when I get into the quay, off the Dublin bus. You tell me that I am not to pass your door, no matter what time it is. I must be your first visit, the first person to tell you my news. You are eager to find out if I am eating properly. It was a particular gift of my nana to be able to search my whole body with a glance, while never letting her eyes lose mine for a second. Always scanning me, alert to any give away signs of neglecting myself, or of spending too much time in front of books.

I move quickly in through the sliding door where you are waiting for me. You have questions in your heart about what seems to you to be an 'unnatural' life in a big city, so far away from everything that is familiar and known. You want to find out more about this life, to help you to work out if it is making me happy. But you cannot imagine any part of it clearly enough, to form questions that might make sense to me. You, who have spent most of your life in this main street and its laneways.

I imagine you remembering those evenings during our holiday visits, when you were tasked to mind me while my parents caught up with cousins and other family members. You would grab a fistful of change from the milk jug, and we would stock up on contraband goods from the sweet shop next door - burgers, chocolate, ice cream wafers and sherbet dabs. You would tell me stories with characters that light up that dark inner sitting room, behind grandad's workshop, with no window onto the street.

These were not the wise or puzzling stories of my dad and grandad, designed to provoke reflection and self-examination. These were stories of women who were 'ringin' rips' or 'big baters of ones' who were immortalised in stories, designed to teach lessons to the women of the town about how not to conduct ourselves. But you and I loved them for their audacity.

You would re-create them so vividly, that these larger than life women would parade between our two armchairs in front of the fire, and thrill us with their outrageous defiance. They shocked and satisfied me, not only because of their irreverent acts, but because of their staunch refusal to be accountable to anyone but themselves. I would hold my sides, and shake over and back with laughter, begging you to stop so that I could breathe.

These stories unleashed a vitality and energy for a life which had not been scripted by deadening institutions, and day-to-day norms of convention and respectability which underpin an oppressive and "necrophilic view of the world" (Freire, 1996, p. 41). These stories in their passion and intimacy contained the "search, the restlessness, and the creative power which characterize life" (Freire, 1996, p. 42). They infused me with a "desire for a new world despite an emotional/world situation that attempts to render such desiring impossible" (Duggan & Munoz, 2009, p. 278). It revealed to me a vitality, which in many ways burbled and swirled inside her like an underground stream, and had no way of reaching the surface.

The fire burns less brightly and twilight is bringing gloom into your eyes. You are a young woman, in love and just married. The housework is done, and as yet there are no children to take care of. There is still a spirit of freedom in those long summer evenings, beckoning you to walk out the roads, where you can drink the clear water of Brandon Well, as you did in your courtship. You have taken off your housecoat and put on your bonnet with its long satin ribbons, the one that you wore on your wedding day. You are waiting patiently for your husband to finish up on his

bench, where he has been stooped over lengths of cloth all day, in the narrow smoky workshop in front of the house.

Through the glass in the workshop door, you see him take his coat and hat off the hook, and swing open the front door with impatience. You rush into the workshop to join him, when he turns and tells you that you are not coming. He is meeting some men to play cards and to get some news and chat after the long day.

The door closes and you are left with your thoughts. You have never shared those thoughts with me. But as we sit across from each other at the fire, I begin to see you in your world. How it is now that it has been stripped of something vital. I see you take your bonnet off. I imagine it, like a dog tearing flesh from a bone. I see you put your housecoat back on and wait ... and spend a lifetime waiting for someone or something, to return to the place you will never leave from ... thinking of nights of dancing and walking and laughing with your friends, a life that is beyond the reach of a woman who is destined to put on a housecoat every day, and take it off last thing at night, when the fire is set for the morning and the last child is in bed.

There are whispers from my sister that your courtship was short. There was an unexpected pregnancy, family disputes, recriminations, shame - the honourable thing was done. A baby dies, but too late! The marriage has already taken place.

This is your secret and you are adamant that no one must be told. That it weighs on you is without doubt. But it is a ghostly burden that I sometimes glimpse, when you warn me 'not to be anyone's fool' and to remember - 'marry in haste and regret at leisure'. But it is still not clear to me who regrets and what is regretted.

Do you fear that you are the 'regret', which even a fine bonnet and a walk at dusk in a long summer's evening cannot atone for?

It is somewhere within this story that your next questions to me are born, out of your deep desire that my life might have some of the joy and freedom that were silenced in yours.

You search around to find a way of asking if I am perhaps taking life too seriously, and if I ever give myself over to wild and mad laughter. But not wanting to cast judgment on what appears to you as my sterile way of life, in a rented room among strangers that I do not know, you ask me instead, if I ever go out dancing? I nod, but this does not give you the information that you are searching for. No better question comes to your mind, so you ask:

"How long more will it be until you have the 'black cap and gown' and will be able to come home?"

Coming home, even then seemed problematic in some way, but leave that for now.

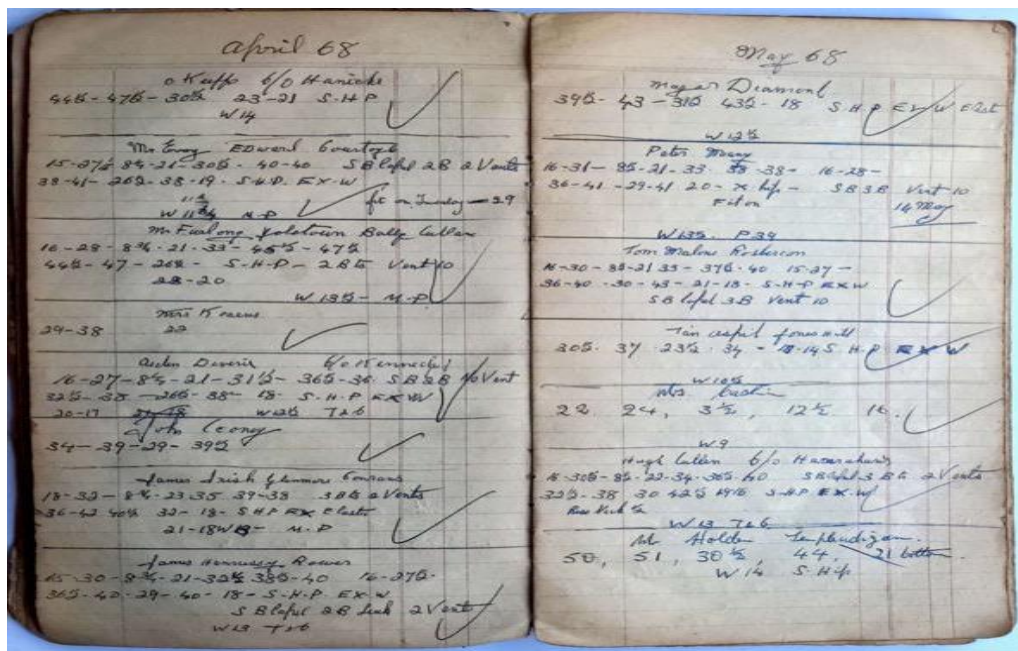
Unable to know how to help me in any other way, you grab a cluster of notes from the milk jug once again, and thrust them into my hand to buy a 'good dinner' for myself.

No - to your 'off-the-peg' suits

This story was one of many from my grandad that thrilled me in its audacity and simplicity - a man who encounters manipulative and exploitative forces, and says NO. It wove

another thread into how I understood our possibilities in the world, by exposing the power of dismantling our complicity in exploitative “limit-situations” (Freire, 1996, p. 87) by refusing to comply. My grandad had a more privileged relationship with education, which appears to have exposed him to a wider range of literacy practices, encouraged perhaps by his grandmother who had a collection of books in the house. This was the criteria that was used by my mam to establish him as an educated man, even though his early apprenticeship with his father, as a tailor, suggests that his formal education ended prematurely. He had started a night class in book-keeping, in the local vocational school, in later years, to help with his business. He listened to the news, read newspapers and had relationships with other men, with whom he would engage in lengthy discussion about different changes taking place in the world. All of this provided him with the capacity to start with “the knowledge of experience” (Freire, 2021, p. 74) but to participate in and generate literacy practices which allowed him to get an “understanding of the relationships among the component partialities of the totality” (p. 75), which prevented him from getting stuck within his personal experience.

The story below gave me one of my first encounters with the practice of reading the world, naming it and acting in opposition to it. I am emotionally embroiled in his frustration which Newman (2006), says, “is a state of mind and has usually come about as a result of some (...) intractable set of conditions” (p. 50) which often can lead to passivity. But more importantly, I am thrilled with his anger which becomes the basis for making a “judgement - that a person’s actions are insulting, or offensive, or unjust, or morally wrong” (p. 54), and then finding a response which if not dismantling the problem ends his complicity with it.



Order book

There was a sense in our family of the burden of a dark history, full of suffering and therefore better forgotten. This was very often a reality that was overwhelming, poorly understood and only then, in “fragments” (Freire, 1996, p. 85), with little understanding of how they interacted with each other to shape our lived experiences. In particular, this was because there was an assumption that any explanation of the hardship of the past, would mean exposing that the cause lay within the individual family members and that it would compel the individual to “have [their] faults diagnosed and be taught how to improve” (Lankshear, 1996, p. 105). Therefore, “in the face of the overwhelming force of the limit-situations” (Freire, 1996, p. 87), there was silence.

In some cases, these stories could be understood more clearly as the beginning of an initial push back, against a dominant ideology, that “others have this knowledge. [And] it is not for me to determine the problem or the cure” (Lankshear, 1996, p. 105). Stories become a way of identifying a contradiction that something is wrong here, something needs to change and we are nobody’s fool.

My grandad’s stories stood out to me because they shimmered with resonances of resistance, even then, they suggested a reading of the world where the individual exposes exploitation and refuses to be complicit. It reveals that historical moment when we see ourselves as a cog in a wheel and act in a way which disrupts it, in a bid to take more control of our own destiny for a more dignified and purposeful life. It is not just a set of

intentions, but it is followed with a decisive rejection and an action which thrilled me and stood out because of its attempt to “make a different history” (McClaren & Leonard, 1996, p. 98).

I can picture your tiny tailor's workshop, where I sat on the bench with you, doing my homework. You would admire my precision for setting up each page of my exercise with the ruling of a half inch margin on the left, a date on the top right corner and a title centred underneath. You would suck hard on the Sweet Afton hanging on your lip, and note that it was like the careful positioning of a suit pattern on a length of material - the secret of a good cut.

I would admire your handling of the smouldering goose iron, lifted from the embers of the fire, and stamped up and down on the dampened remnants of cloth, used for protecting while also sharpening the trouser crease underneath, lapping up your stories of how customers would try to save money in those hard times. I'd hear how farmers would return to you with their twenty year old, heavy serge suits, and ask you to unpick them, and turn the material inside out to be sown up again as a 'new' suit.

My eyes, as always dart towards the suits hanging down one wall, waiting to be collected and paid for. This is an unspoken worry. The daily monitoring of what has been collected is an accurate measure of what you will be able to slip into the black leather purse, beside the clock on the mantelpiece, on Saturday night.

My nana and I never lost the habit of casting a furtive glance at the two racks of suits, every time we pass through the workshop, which leads to the inner sitting room, even though I have only heard your story second-hand.

It was a long time ago, during the crippling recession of the forties and fifties. The uncollected suits were piled so deep against the wall, it left you with no choice but to take the boat and train to London, where you brought your suitcase of handmade suit patterns, in anticipation of finding work as a tailor in the Burton factory.

But you had no love for this life in the city, it was not for you. It was even harder, for a man who sat on his own bench, in his own workshop and in the company of other skilled craftsmen, shared the labour of those long days: measuring, drawing, pinning, cutting out, tacking, padding with horse hair and lining, precision fitting, stitching on your treadle machine, edging, button-holing and hand trimming, to bring a suit to life from the suit lengths purchased from the local drapery. And all the while singing, swapping news, telling strange stories of ghosts that had walked among you.

Such was your homesickness standing day after day on a factory floor, that you lost your appetite, became sickly and weak and sent less and less news home. The escape you yearned for came one morning when you were called into the office of the factory manager, who had learned that you were a tailor and had brought suit patterns with you. They imply that they are interested in them, but that they would need to hold onto them for a little while. There is no suggestion of any form of recognition for this 'hand over'.

I imagine this exchange, and even in your weakened position, I can see you straightening yourself up. You are nobody's fool. You are a proud man and you had learned your craft from your father, and he from his father. You had sat with my mam beside you on the bench, slowly passing on and tending to all those intricacies and secrets that would shape her 'magic' with lengths of cloth.

Holding his gaze so there can be no misunderstanding about the meaning of your well-chosen and plainly spoken words, you leave him in no doubt - you will not be handing over anything from your suitcase. 'Why', you ask, 'would I hand over a lifetime of labour, to someone who is trying to put all of us tailors out of work forever, with your 'off the peg' suits?'

With that, you walk out of the factory and take the boat back home, taking your chances on whatever income you might make. It will be in your own workshop among people who take pride from the skill of your work.

But the ghost of this story has taken its place on the shelf, high up over the workshop door, where it notes the ebb and trickle of customers coming across the threshold from the street, until most of your trade becomes the turning up of a hem or a new zip in those 'off the peg' suits, and where you sit alone, cross-legged and defiant on your bench, every day until you are no longer able to get out of bed.

This story is embedded in my consciousness because it is one of very few stories about that handful of family members who said 'No', and could not be either intimidated or manipulated into compliance. My grandad was working at the dawning of a period which today is characterised by global forces that make it economically almost unviable to create crafts by hand, without depending on elements of outsourcing and mass production. So as the years progressed there was a gradual erosion not only of his economic worth, but more painfully of his cultural worth. Even when the workshop door remained largely unopened for most of the week, as customers drifted to the mass produced menswear sections in department stores, he continued to put on his suit and tie and set to work, every day.

These stories of my nana and grandad carry their imprint on the world and contain their entanglements and disruption with structure and agency. However, they whisper to me of a repositioning of our lives, which recognises our "imperative to act and make sense of the world on a biographical level" (Finnegan, 2019a, p. 54). While this is "'narrow' in scope" (p. 54), they nurture my emotional longing to make something that is weighing us down, better in the world, and to reject the deadening scripts of settling for something which does not feel like enough. These stories from my childhood are rich with contradiction but they provide a counter narrative of mocking contempt and irreverence for authority, protest, speaking back against the odds, choosing dignity and autonomy. They often arose as a disruption to a "structure of mutism in face of the overwhelming force of the limit-situations" (Freire, 1996, p. 87). It was a way of digging deep into those raw and strange experiences of the world by "infus[ing] words directly" (Lorde, 2017, p. 59) with what they were feeling. In many ways, these stories were a way of keeping alive those feelings of protest and frustration, and overcoming the limitation of living within

“structures defined by profit, by linear power, by institutional dehumanisation” (Lorde, 2017, p. 10) where our feelings “were not meant to survive” (p. 10). They allow me to redefine a ‘somebody’ as a person who has a sense of vitality, a sense of purpose for a better world and a sense of belonging. They are at odds with the narrow, life-reducing purpose of a functional literacy, which comprises a minimal, essentially negative, and passive state. Finnegan (2019a) reminds us that these stories are not enough for breaking with “mentally and organisationally - oppressive and alienating social practices” (p. 50). But they create guiding metaphors which prepare my psyche for a quality of “deep personal change which is capable of altering the terms under which a person acts and interprets social relations” (Finnegan, 2019a, p. 54).

When are you coming home?

I am full of impulses for a different type of future, but I am unclear about what it is that I want to leave behind, and what it is that I want to bring with me. My progression through mainstream education progressively brings me towards a liminal zone of dislocation and confusion, a zone where I am gradually and almost unwittingly disconnecting from values and relationships which both held me and stifled me, while also struggling with the burden of my family’s hopes for me as a result of going to university.

I deeply treasure these stories because they showed me the resilient good humour and joyfulness of my nana, who was uncowed by the numerous tragedies she had endured. Similarly, they capture the pride and integrity of my grandad who understood how this world worked against ordinary folk, with all its blatant injustices and unanswered questions, but who refused to become bitter or compromise on his own principles of generosity. These were essential parts of my hard-wiring, which I took for granted, but they seemed to disappear out of view throughout my education. There seemed to be no adequate space where they could be given recognition and consideration within the higher education curriculum and therefore gradually became dimmed a little. Fleming and Murphy (2000) argue that this separation between an adult education approach to learning and content which emphasises “an elevation of subjective knowledge as the generator of other knowledges; and the higher education philosophy, with its subject-centred process and focus on objective factual data” (p. 87), leads students to feel as if they do not belong within higher education and silences them from attempting to draw on their prior experience or bring any attention to it. This had the overall impact of trivialising and devaluing the experiences and insights of my life outside of the university. It was, at best,

of little significance and was hampering my ability to belong and fit in within these educated communities, or at worst, it became something that needed to be handled with sensitivity, but which ultimately needed to be erased and replaced with something that carried the validation and legitimacy of those who knew better about what we should know and value. This is explored in more detail through the research poem towards the end of the chapter.

This broken sense of myself in higher education, as a student who was full up of irrelevant and in consequential experience, was searching inadvertently for a way whereby my experiential knowledge could be a place to move to get a better understanding of what was going on around me in my day-to-day world. In other words, spaces where my nana's painful secret, her relinquishing of her engagement in the public world, her measured respect for those women who refused to be complicit in their own diminishment and my grandad's refusal to be manipulated and exploited by the manager of Burton, could have found wings and been recognised as valuable knowledge. That would, more importantly, have allowed them to take their place in humanity as 'somebodies'.

The journey towards the emotional sentence

There was a tugging and yearning for something that had not yet taken shape. For me it was something expansive, revitalising, a hankering to feel a power to "explore, name and act in the world" (Finnegan, 2019a, p. 49). I longed for a life of vitality, of feeling fully alive and free to make choices that reflected the joy and passion associated with purposeful and meaningful action. Similarly, I desired an autonomy that could carry me beyond the daily fretting and anxiety of getting by and putting up with injustice or hardship as part of inevitable destiny. At this young age, I did not yet have any words for this or any way of expressing it. However my gradual encounter with the conversations of Heron, Formenti & West, Lorde, Ellis & Bochner, McCormack during the research process supported the stirring of an "epistemic break with the 'givenness' of the world" (Finnegan, 2019a, p. 50), by encouraging me to reconnect with my lived experience through the powerful world of feeling and imagining. I had a sense of scaling some wall, which was locking me out of the world, a chance to be a player.

This research process has enabled me to realise that this almost 40 year journey, has involved trying to locate, in scholarly work, the language and concepts to give a form to some of what I already emotionally knew but was unable to express. I also needed to know

how to make sense of my experience. I was surprised to learn that I did not always need the scholarly work to help me to know what I did not know. In many cases, I needed to find people who had succeeded in creating the language and concepts that I was missing, to articulate the depths of my knowledge.

This world could at least be partially glimpsed through writing with imagery, metaphor, story and poetry. It allowed me to connect with impulses that did not seem to fit with anything that was available to me in my day-to-day life. Therefore, instinctually, it became clear to me that my day-to-day life must go beyond the limits of this world, beyond the limits of what I now called home.

Bird on a sky perch
Poised between HV cables
Flash of golden beak.

This involved a different relationship with writing. While the newspaper cutting (and the feeling of agency which was unleashed by that repositioning of me as a producer of text) gave me a sense of public recognition, it was the title ‘YES, there really IS poetry in Soccer’, by the journalist Jane Gaskell, that captivated me. The idea that poetry could be found in one of our family weekly rituals, intimated the existence of a type of radical literacy, which could harness dreams, desires and real lived passions to the power of the written word. It brought an awareness to poetry might feed on my day-to-day lived experiences and those of my family, like the football league, which were up to that point subordinated and not considered worthy to inspire poetry or appear in print. It suggested the possibility, however poorly understood, of re-evaluating the significance and value of those intimate experiences of living and loving within my family, which held me safe and brought joy and celebration into the world. In particular, it suggests that those experiences of being loved and of trying to love, which have shaped and are shaping me, run deep. I can feel them, see them, even smell them. These were the ones that I never brought into the school, or later into college. These were the ones which like Lorde (2017), did not emerge in a thoughtful step-by-step way, but instead would “bubble (...) up from chaos that [I] had to anchor with words” (Lorde, 2017, p. 57). For these experiences, I realised that I could use my imagination to re-present my world, by “infus[ing] words directly with what I was feeling” (p. 59) which could be written and not just spoken.

This type of reflection which allows us to connect with experience and selves that may not be immediately available to us, is central to adult education practice, but requires a slowing

down and rejection of “our current obsession with immediate results” (Lanas & Zembylas, 2014, p. 41). This was not supported by the more classically led models of education, and therefore throughout childhood, I would have considered it as something to be hidden from my teachers and education. In English class in school, I had used my imagination to write essays about worlds that did not exist, or I would write about experiences that I had never had, but felt that I was expected to have had. But then there were those moments when something bubbled up inside me, when I drew on an imagination that was intimately connected with my experience, when I realised that words could vibrate with what I felt and that there was such a thing as an “emotional sentence” (Lorde, 2017, p. 59). This was the beginning of making poems that could surface hidden or subordinate knowledge. These I kept hidden in my diary as a child or on scraps of paper that quickly got lost, but for all of their transience, could not be unknown or unsaid. Like Lorde, I discovered that “as poets [...] it is our dreams that point the way to freedom. They are made realisable through our poems that give us strength and courage, to see, to feel” but unlike Lorde, I was not able to ‘speak’ them (2017, p. 10).

This refreshed engagement with aesthetic knowing through poetry, as both a lens and an entry point into experiences, through the world of a felt reality, became a pivotal point for engaging with my own embodied and storied connections and disconnections with my family, as I progressed through higher education and beyond. Lorde (2017) points out how “The quality of light, by which we scrutinise our lives, has direct bearing upon the product which we live, and upon the changes which we hope to bring about through those lives” (p. 7). In this case, it triggers me to reconnect with experiences from the past, as it echoes within the present and changes my hopes for the future. But it also generated deeper and richer critical reflections. It was from within this energised space, that I created the following poem, which acts as a bridge between my past and present.

Reconnecting with home – glimpsed through the lens of muddled eyelets

Chuchutons Shhhhh! (Whisper!)

La Crepuscule drifts (twilight, gloom, dusk)
Down the hall of sunlight dust,
Golding two worn boots.

Like their owner,
They have taken on too much water
And tide marks remain.

Stitching is bog water bleached,

Ruptures are displayed -
Forcing gaps between the sole
And the gortex boot.

Laces caked in mud,
No longer hold the shoe tight.
Instead they sag limply.

Only the muddied eyelets,
Remember Sunday's
Mountain bog trails.

Crumpled newspaper,
Packed tightly inside,
Reinforces their damp shape.
I imagine your hands,
Carefully teasing out their form,
Before leaving them at my door

Better than you found them.

This love poem was written following an exhilarating day out with my future partner, after relocating my home from France to Ireland. The sight of the returned boots, which have been thoughtfully dried out, holds my gaze, and recalls images of belonging and feeling cherished from my childhood, but more particularly a vivid reconnection with those multiple acts of loving kindness.

It reminds me vividly of what it felt like to be at home - to be restored and replenished, to be rendered fit to set off again. It reminded me of what it felt like to be among those whose world was shaped around loving and taking care of me, to remember the warmth of those people, whose only motivation was to protect me from the 'want and loss' of a world that had for generations, cast them out like corks, and left them to bob and ultimately disappear, on treacherous seas. But ultimately, it recalled my admiration for the members of my family who endured their struggles and hardships, but never allowed it to curtail their compassion and generosity towards others who suffered.

This becomes even more precious now that I understand more about the world that my parents inhabited - a world of systemic unfairness that generated a rage which I glimpsed only very occasionally as a young child,

Eileen and I are full of the infinite and limitless possibilities of waking up early on Saturday morning. There is a watery slant of morning light, illuminating a new track of dust which has

just been exposed down each side of our bedroom walls, as we push our two beds closer together, for the purpose of holding a pillow fight, to get the day off to a good start.

We are heedless of your banging on the wall, a reminder that you are on night shift and have just crawled into bed, exhausted.

Mam shouts in to us, to go back to sleep.

We are oblivious, and continue with even more vigour, lost in the exhilaration of ducking and diving with total and concentrated focus on 'landing', or as the case might be, 'avoiding' the knock out wallop. You burst into the bedroom, your eyes are barely open and your temples are bulging, purple, you are spitting mad, unable to find the words to show us what weeks and months of shift work can do to the gentlest of workers.

We get one slap each.

I answer you back, and shout that it is not fair. You turn before you leave the room and tell me what you have thought often, but today is the day that you will make it clear and irrefutable:

*'Life is not fair, it never was **and it never will be ...** the sooner that you learn that, the better'.*

Even then, I know that this is bigger than any of us in the room, or in our family. We are all lost for words. But something inside me erupts as protest. That is no way to live, waiting for that final blow...waiting to be wiped out. I smell rot and decay. As you turn to leave the room, I call after you that you are wrong, that I do not believe you. That this cannot be the case.

The door closes. But I will not let it close on the possibility that something better can be made than what is already here. Deep within me something stirs, a pulse, an exuberance with which I will resist this ugliness in the world. I can live no other way.

I often think about the amount of anger internalised by my parents, in their day-to-day interactions, given the precariousness of their existence. Instead it seemed to fuel a determination to bring ease in whatever way that you can, to that vulnerable place, in all those who you instinctively sensed, felt left out, forgotten, ignored, passed over, and invisible.

In correspondence - an overview of the practice of letter writing within our family.

The discovery of a suitcase of my letters to my parents, tracked a period from 1977, when I started college, up to 1989 when I completed my Masters, and began working in NALA. Letter writing was, for those who had been initiated into this practice, the main way that our family kept in touch with each other. There are throughout my letters, numerous references to writing to my sister, my favourite aunt, my nana and grandad as well as all of my friends. We did not have a phone in our house for a long time. Letter writing suited

me. I would often begin a letter and come back to it over several days, updating them on my news. Most of my letters are written on A4 paper and run from three to eight pages, often with numerous entries on different days. This is in contrast to the sporadic letters I received from my mam which were always on one page of Belvedere Bond ruled writing paper. There is no recognition within my letters, or allowances made for the imbalance of fluency between us in our ability to express what we want to say in our letters. My early letters, in ways, follow many of the same conventions which governed my mam's, in terms of content. But mine draw on more conventions associated with formal writing taught in school, as in the use of paragraphs, explicit description, a bigger range of verb tenses and less use of the vernacular. My later letters, from 1981, when I am in France become more of a reflective practice, as I question some of my own assumptions and begin to engage my mam in more reflective conversation about some of hers. There is more of a sense of using writing to gain a perspective on my day-to-day experiences, than simply recording them.

I have no expectation that my dad will make any contribution to these letters. For the years that I am away, there is no direct communication between us that is not mediated through my mam. The fact that my dad did not engage with the written word did not appear strange to me, and in many ways, I understood that this was inherently associated with being a dad. It is clear that the stigma and silence, in which we were all complicit, indicated that we had no understanding of the quiet agony that my dad must have experienced in relation to his unmet literacy needs. It becomes more apparent in an extract from a letter, from a close family member, the extent to which we did not fully recognise nor understand unmet literacy needs. There was a poor understanding that my dad's struggle to express what he wanted to say, was limited by what he felt confident about writing, and not an unwillingness to enter into more diverse conversations with us.

This can only be understood if we return to the dominant ideas of the time. These assumed that the adult literacy problem in Ireland did not extend beyond those adults who were intellectually impaired and therefore unable to read or write. The first official recognition for the adult literacy problem was the Murphy Report, commissioned by the Minister for Education in 1973 (Murphy, 1973). Therefore, I cannot be sure that my response would have been any different. It was a problem that existed and yet was also invisible. It does raise all kinds of difficult questions about the impact of not being able to express what he wanted to really say in a letter, on himself and his relationships, particularly within a world

where recession meant that family members and friends were dispersed around the globe. The absence or expense of phone calls meant that letter writing was still highly valued as a way of maintaining intimacy across the distance. Below is an example of a letter demonstrating 'strengthening intimate relationships'. The format of these letters was guided by the flow of a spoken conversation. These progressed through a number of general themes (health, weather) to those topics that would be of immediate concern to the recipient, and functioned to generate a feeling of intimacy between them, across the distance.

Staying in touch – You, writing me into your heart

My dear Geraldine, New Ross, January 1978

I have just reread the first of only two letters that I have from my mam. Others had been stored in the attic of my childhood home with the rest of my college and young adult possessions, but were not to be found. These letters were always sporadic and would arrive out of the blue until I was in second year, UCD, 1978, when they stopped. On my way to take the bus back to college in Dublin, she told me that she could not write to me anymore, not while I was sharing accommodation with friends, with other people, who knew her.

I am late for the bus and you are distracted and agitated. I sense there is something urgent that you want to tell me. You wave your hand in the air as if you are swatting something away. You turn partially towards the closed door, muttering that other people might read them; I hear the word 'illiterate'.

I did not expect this turning away from me, not from you, you who did all of our paper work. You who were the foundation and roof of our days.

You who let me climb into bed beside you, when you discovered nits in my hair and my repulsion made sleep impossible.

You who never complained, about the extra tedium of making my sandwiches separately from the others, without butter, and a dollop of salad cream instead.

You who talked to me, from the inside, about strange and puzzling things.

You whom I trusted implicitly, when you suggested that UCD was better than TCD for working-class people, like us.

You the first person to name who we were - working-class

You who held so many of the contradictions of who I was and my imagined self.

You suddenly seemed to be more fragile, against this invisible, but towering backdrop of something indefinable, which shrinks you and makes you smaller.

But not completely. There was still and always would be, a spirit of you, which was in many ways irrepressible, when a shoulder was needed, to steady the careering tilt of 'fortune's wheel of luck'.

In front of me is a cream coloured Belleek mug,
A gift for your wedding anniversary and brought out on occasions.

It has a small round base, which rises into a potbellied bulge,
Just barely narrowing before it forms a thick lip.
The testing point for you of its porcelain pedigree -
Is it fine enough on the lip, to be a cup?

You had your standards.
Mugs with their coarse thick lips were not tolerated
Once Dad was working again.

In this scattered day where Post-its, papers and pens swill chaotically around my desk.
Even now, it sits there
The decorative plaiting, suggesting fragility.
But you, you are the stillness
Urging me to be 'steadfast'.

In the compressed space between us, I tell you that I love your letters because they conjure up a world where I can be among the first people I loved. But your hand moves impatiently through the air, erasing my words. You make no reply.

On the journey back, the bus stops in a town, where there is the last glimpse of a smudgy blue horizon of a mountain ridge, before the yellow glow of city lights bleeds into it.

It is the first time that I witness you willingly let some delicate thread between us, slip through your fingers. It is the first time that I recognise that the people in my new world, that I hope to grow to love and trust, are troublesome to you. I see new limits to your world that were not there before this conversation. They are tentative and tightly drawn. But I know that I can no longer take for granted, what or who can enter in to this space that used to be our space, where our lives entwined. And more importantly, I cannot take for granted what must remain outside.

Yet these concerns about the quality of my mam's writing are unfounded. "Even when people are most conscious of their own individuality and think themselves cut off from social influences - they still use language in ways which are subject to social convention" Fairclough (1989) quoted in Lillis, 2001, p. 25).

I discuss one of the letters¹ below as rich examples of how the rhythm of our daily conversations, largely dominate the flow of the letter, interspersed and creatively fused

¹ I had originally placed a copy of her letter into the text. While I had felt confident about including copies of my dad's hand written texts, on reflection my mam's situation was different. The different values we placed on her hand-written letters was an ongoing part of our conversation while I was in college. But unlike my dad who was more willing to explore some of the implications of his unmet literacy needs, first with me and later with his grandchildren, I never felt invited to return to that topic in my mam's later years. I had hoped within the context of my PhD, to present her letter as a way of celebrating those unrecognised literacy practices that brought me home to a safe place for so many years. I also wanted to break a collusion with the stigma that literacies, which did not conform to school, based literacy practices, were deficient and inarticulate. But I could see this more clearly as my desire. I had no clear indication from my mam that her position on not wanting to have her actual handwriting viewed by other people had shifted to any extent. It felt more respectful of her wishes, to interpret how I framed her letter without opening the actual letter to the public. I do want to recognise though, that it is largely due to Mam's honesty about her sense of

with remnants of literacy rules learned in school. Even today, they still create an emotional connection with me. This takes the skilful form of the writer, who leads the conversation, created by using their intimate knowledge of the reader, to engage them as a very present and 'active' listener. There is an attempt to imaginatively re-create how the conversation might develop, if the recipient was a silent listener and not an active contributor to it. This flows from exchanges, which generally open with updates about health and the weather, then to immediate news of the family, or news of people that we know or have recently met, and finally news from the town, if it was of shared interest. The opening and signing off of the letter was very significant, as it could be an indicator of the level of intimacy between the correspondents. A number of different expressions of affection could be drawn upon or invented to convey the particular emotional quality of the relationship between the writer and silent listener.

You open your letter with 'My Dear Geraldine', and you sign off with, 'God bless you and lots of love Mami'. You find it difficult to express your feelings for the people you love in words. Your language is kindness and thoughtfulness.

But I notice the 'My' in front of Dear Geraldine, and this changes the whole emotional weight of the letter. I have never seen you use this type of address to anyone before. It speaks to me, even now from the unarticulated depths of your feeling for me.

I smile at 'Mami'. You do not know how to refer to yourself in writing. You cannot elevate yourself to 'Mother', on the other hand 'Mam', seems too casual for a text that opens with such eloquence. You settle on Mami, I imagine it is not quite right either, but you are in a rush to make the tea and get this into the post, it will have to do.

I return to the rest of the letter to ponder it. I can feel your nervousness, as I open it up into this public PhD space. I know that temporarily, you are irritated with me. You want me to call you Mother, to give you that respectability. I wish that I could once again give you what you want. But I cannot talk to a Mother. I cannot feel you or hear you, if you are not my mam.

I am calling you up into this public space, and I am asking you to stand beside me, and to trust me, that we are here to see how the beauty of your letter unfolds, how it lacks in nothing.

What I love is how the page has a feel of you, I see you taking form in front of me, each word builds into a line and finally into a world, a world which has now disappeared, but in which I still feel safe, protected and never forgotten.

I am surprised by your opening lines - 'We hope that these few lines find you in the best of health as it leaves all of us'. They are polished and show a grasp of written conventions for letter writing, which are outside of how we talk to each other.

incompleteness with her experience of living her life through others, and her encouragement to lead a more independent life, which opened the skylight for me to see something more than what was immediately in front of me.

I am smiling at the eloquence of the carefully measured exchange of interest in our states of health. I am pleased for you, because now you have started. Your pen is moving, the anxiety of the blank page is easing.

*You progress to safe ground when you move your attention to the weather:
'Hasn't the weather been very cold?' This question is addressed to me. I can feel you warming up further, finding your own voice as you imagine me in Dublin, and worry about the impact of the cold weather on my asthma.*

*Then you break into yourself and I recognise you, the 'you' when you speak from the heart and use the pen to draw us closer, to pull me into the kitchen with you:
'I'm glad you have a heavy coat, boots etc. You should wrap up well going back into college at night'.*

Once you find your own voice and the pen is at your command the news flows - there is space to fill it up with all that is important.

First there is my Debs, where every Leaving Certificate student attends a dinner dance with their family and teaching staff. It is a formal occasion and our house is in a fluster. I am the first person to complete secondary school and therefore the first debutante in our family. I can sense your excitement and anxiety, but you are not thrown. You methodically work through every aspect of it and consider what needs to be done so that we will be seen to be 'enough' and fit with dignity into this setting.

Tickets are being bought for it, that day. My dad is hiring a suit... my sister worries that her boyfriend cannot get off work in time to attend... my aunt does not have a partner to accompany her for the night. I hear that my dad, who has never danced, is trying to practice a waltz in the kitchen, so that he can take me out for the first dance, as is the protocol.

You remind me that I will have to set out from Dublin in good time to get the bus down and not be late. Above all, 'don't forget to have a good dinner before you leave'. Always an eye on the importance of eating regularly and well, those rituals which stitched the day together and all that might happen in it.

That night for the first time you give me your necklace and bracelet to wear, the one that dad bought you for your wedding. I know that you are so proud of me, and you are doing all of this so that I will fit in and we will be recognised as people who belong here.

I am not very comfortable with any of this, but for now I say nothing. I will leave for Dublin on the bus the next day and you will have the photographs. The business has been taken care of.

You pull me closer and the joy of the letter unfolds spontaneously, as you move to the news of the pantomime and the Tops of the Town, activities that I participated in with exuberance, towards the end of secondary school:*

'The panto finished last night'

'They got packed houses most nights'

'They are having their dinner dance Friday night'

'Most people really enjoyed it'

Peter, got a great write up for his dancers [in the local paper] they are asked to be in the 'Tops' of the Town'²

Throughout this letter, our intimacy allows me to recreate our world, the one that we shared together and understood. However, to the reader outside of this world, this may appear more like a shopping list of fragments, or a lifeless report lacking in nuance or emotions. The rich account of these fragments of our shared lives, are full of combinations of tension, humour, celebration and commentary. There is also the additional intimacy of knowing that some of this meaning can only be accessible to those who belong within this shared community.

The letter sets out to reduce the distance between us. Emotions were not explicit. They were implicit in the choice of news that was shared, the careful phrasing of questions which suggested affection and care, but which did not demand an answer. Nothing is teased out on paper, instead dancers is underlined twice, in the certainty that I will be able to infer the unstated complexities of this achievement. Facial expressions and body language are normally used for face-to-face conversation to express nuances of meaning which are specifically shared by our family (Gee, 2009). That is why these letters are temporal. There are only a few people left who will know how to read these texts and connect with the joy, exuberance and sense of belonging to a community with all of its struggles and triumphs, which they brought to me. I want to honour the distinctly unique achievement of this literacy practice, which allows you to reach me in a way that no one else could have done, in your particular ability to make such an intimate reconnection with all that I held dear about growing up in my family.

Before I put you away and we enter in to more emotionally turbulent territory and the disappointment that it brings, I want you to know that there was no one else who could write me such a letter – the way that you addressed me and knew how to bring me back, across all of the distances, to that sense of home that I only half left. How you always reminded me, that my dad was there also, in his silence:

'We are looking forward to seeing you for the big night'

That you can recreate this whole world, based on your intimate understanding of how we had lived our past lives together... and pour this out so freely onto a page.

You are writing at speed, you miss letters off words and endings of words, in your haste. I linger here, at those speedy omissions. They beckon to those days when we were less troubled in each

² A song and dance competition, representing the different professions and trades in the town. i.e. shopkeepers, bankers, teachers, factory workers, etc. I entered either with the hairdressers or with the factory workers

other's company, a shared excitement about the future, when your pen would take flight in your eagerness to bring me back into the kitchen with you.

But now it seems that these letters can no longer enter into my new world, I can expect less of this, and therefore it is up to me to write you into my world.

Staying in touch – Me, writing you, into my heart

Dear Mam and Dad: Extracts from letters home, 1977-1989

I have grouped these letters into different contexts and periods: University College Dublin, where I studied for my BA, 1977-1980; working holidays in France, 1977-1980; Teaching Assistant, College St. Joseph, France, 1981; Higher Diploma in Education, 1982-1983, Masters, 1987-89; voluntary and paid work in adult education, 1983- 1989.

As I reacquaint myself with my own letters, I experience how “seeing our writing is also to see our thinking; reading it suggests new writing and other thinking pathways” (Mace, 1992, p. xviii). This time I am reviewing these letters, 40 years later, from a new perspective. It is important to state at the outset that this critical reflection on the content of these letters has been constructed from my stance position now and was not available to me at the time that I was writing and receiving them. The letters allowed me to understand more compassionately the ruptures, which I simultaneously initiated, and yet did not set out to initiate, as I progressed through college and the world of work. In particular, there are glimpses of those different relationships that gave me new perspectives on myself and my possibilities. I began to connect and trust my experience, in a way that allowed me to renegotiate my sense of self and purpose in the world, away from the more constrained world of my family. This takes me into a more precarious and unstable world, in marginalised spaces on the fringe of adult education, which in some ways, seems to be at variance with my parents’ vision of the kind of recognition and status that open up to a person who has received a university education.

Throughout the letters, I begin to map what was a very confusing time, as a transformational learning journey between the years 1977-1985, towards deepening my insight into the values upon which I wanted to live my life, in a synergistic relationship with my vision for being an adult educator. I begin to identify a way of connecting my desire for a fairer, more compassionate society within the practices and the relationships within the community of adult education. This sustained process of reflecting on the

reflections of a younger self, brings a renewed perception of those earlier struggles and is accompanied by greater self-acceptance and ease. I consider this process as being one of pondering a younger self who aspires to understand what it might mean to “name the world, to change it” (Freire, 1996, p. 69) break free from a culture of silence and limited choices. But that is to understand it from this place where I am now, and therefore I am prompted to examine those letters in a way that will allow my voice to emerge. More importantly, it will allow the shifts and contradictions to emerge which tell the story of connection and rupture, of finding and losing, and expressing the grief within love and the love that is within the grief, as I move closer to my vision of working as an adult educator. I address this series of letters to my mam, as she is the correspondent who reads and responds to them, who represents my relationship with my wider working-class family and community, and is also person with whom I built my hopes for the future.

The poem illuminates the lengthy and fragmented nature of mapping a transformational process, which occurs over a long period of time, towards a more healthy identity, accompanied by feelings of disappointment and guilt. It is a story about sensing my way towards expanding perspectives and horizons, so that I can make choices that feel revitalising and challenge deterministic and oppressive scripts. I set out to weave these fragments together which “creates an imperative to love self and other in the process” (O’Brien, 2013, p. 20). This corresponds to the early stages of teaching where I am questioning inhuman models of education and developing a sense of purpose and urgency about opening up possibilities for learners who were themselves, in some way, feeling locked down and locked out, through various emerging adult education initiatives in the early 1980’s. From this place, it enables me to write my way into new meanings that celebrate the joy of opening up possibilities for myself, always accompanied by the longing to open them up to my whole family. I write as vividly as I can, so that I could make them part of this new and exciting world. I wanted to bring all of those lives that had nurtured me into a space where they too could receive the kind of respect and recognition that they deserved, and that had been, to date, withheld from them.

There is a gradual awareness that this is not possible and I must make choices, choices that bring emotional repercussions through my life. While I am not regretting those choices, my letters register how I am struggling to process the complex feelings of loss, disappointment and abandonment that accompanied this journey away from the warp and weft of a more traditional working-class family lifestyle. I became aware of the irony that

it was those deeply embedded experiences of living within a world that valued decency, solidarity, love and compassion, which had enabled me to reach that starting point. These values drew me to discover the complete joy of working alongside people in the adult literacy movement, who are equally interested in understanding how we can create an education system that can overturn some of the stifling practices that leave people unrecognised and silenced.

This poem can be considered to be a form of a research poem (Prendergast, 2009) in so far as I use *italics* to refer to my original phrases that have been copied from the letters that I have written during this period. I put my comments and observations in plain font, to highlight some of the tensions within the conversation, about competing understandings of what we mean by becoming a somebody, in my family, which for me involves embracing the vitality and agency of the world of adult education.

This is an intensely emotional journey over an extended period of time, which has its pivotal moments, stagnation, regressions and lack of resolution, but also moves towards a greater sense of wholeness, purpose and love of life. Therefore I chose those phrases from the letter which can embody some of the “weight, emotional tenor, sound, and of course, meaning” (Leavy, 2020, p. 90) for the reader. Each stanza sets out to give a sense of the significant shifts and twists in my journey: the colliding dreams, the surges forward with their emotional undertows, the exhilaration and the loneliness of locating myself within a wider world.

Biography, shared stories and change

The early letters resonate with the themes explored in the beginning of the chapter. There is an underpinning concern about dreams and imagined futures, which begins with our shared naïve assumption that my acceptance onto a BA degree in a university might enable me to become a ‘somebody’. This is accompanied by an ill-informed understanding of what it might mean to be a ‘somebody’ and the vague expectation that this might be a way of bringing status and respect to the whole family, which will not only interrupt generations of disappointment, as a result of limiting and deadening choices, but create grounds to imagine a better future. This develops into an exploration of competing understandings of what it means to be a ‘somebody’. The poem views the parallel drift from the loving but restrictive world of my family, towards a more revitalised and agentic world of adult education (Freire, 1996; West et al, 2013). It explores the risk of

disconnection and isolation, as the price to pay for moving beyond the frustration of living within the deadening constraints of “collective premises” (Green, 2023, p. 204), with their shared meanings and practices.

This is balanced against an increasing desire to work in adult education which satisfies a need to reject a “‘well behaved’ present nor a predetermined future” (Freire, 1996, p. 65). I am beginning to recognise that I can only be authentic when “engaged in inquiry and creative transformation” (Freire, 1996, p. 65). One of my solutions to this ‘loosening of ground’ between myself and my family was to temporarily create a ‘New Ross Geraldine’ identity, which is more consistent with who I was then, and which is mediated through the text. This gives me the space and safety to experiment with an emerging Geraldine, while, at least on paper, attempting to preserve the other one intact. This will gradually become dismantled as I find a more solid sense of ground and belonging within the community of adult education, and begin to make choices that gave me new previously unimaginable freedoms. This is all overshadowed by the associated sense of exhilaration and guilt, as I grow into an identity that feels like a betrayal in the trust that had been placed in me, to succeed on different terms.

In order to understand this more specifically in terms of my life, I pay particular attention to the future that was ascribed to many working-class women, like my mam and nana, which I am resisting. I also try to empathise how these women, from this position of helplessness, took solace from attempting to live out their dreams through the lives of others. The purchase of an avocado becomes a metaphor for personal freedom and for connecting to the world of feeling, experience and desires. It speaks to a collision of my emerging world, with one that is determined by the oppressive narratives restricting working-class women. This involves unearthing a painful contradiction, that I cannot be more than what I was, and at the same time remain unchanged. Yet I sense that this means being displaced in their world. I anticipate the dilemma of inviting others into transformational learning journeys, by naively encouraging my mam to take care of herself, and to do what gives her joy. It is only in later years that I realise the impossibility of this invitation within the restraints and isolation of her world.

The poem sets out to give glimpses of some of the conditions that cumulatively support meaningful change at a biographical level, and arguably prepare the ground for more public and structural change in the future. My participation in university and the

opportunities to do professional placements and travel, gave me access to conditions for change: connection with the world of feeling, vitality and our lived experience (Lorde, 2017 and Freire, 1996), recognition within loving and legitimate relationships both in the family and beyond (West et al, 2013) and an opportunity to develop critical dialogue “to name the world” (Freire, 1996, p. 69), so that we can explore problems and “limit-situations” (Freire, 1996, p. 87). The differences in the capacity of different literacy practices to create these conditions is explored. The stories and the ‘intimate relationship strengthening’ letters feed my impulses and imagination and provide loving relationships, but lack the critical dialogue and reflexivity that is essential for change. This does not stop me from taking my first steps towards trying to name the world, as a springboard for trying to change it, through letter writing. As I learn to write reflectively in my later letters, my reflexivity is heightened and they become dialogical spaces where I begin to question the values that dehumanise the poor people of the city, many who are carrying out the kind of service work that my family have done. I know that this is wrong. There is however, an additional complication. My relationship with my mam is mediated through a form of letter writing which gives me access to an extended form of written self-reflection that is not available to her. This is particularly so when this takes the form in my later letters, of probing assumptions that question many of the “limit-situations” (Freire, 1996, p. 87) which I recognised were invisibly constraining my mam within a role that was not allowing her to grow or change. While my progress through college is beginning to give me a reflexive form of a literacy practice which extended the writing space beyond the transmission of day-to-day news, this is not available to her. This is a literacy practice that is not encouraged among people who do not complete their education. These long and dense letters become our primary form of communication through these years, without access to a phone. This raises questions about the extent to which my probing reflections and attempts to allay their sense of disappointment or frustration with me may have been totally unread or misunderstood. It becomes obvious that the contents of the letters are never either responded to or discussed when we meet. There is the additional poignancy that their difficulties in reading and understanding much of the content of my letters, becomes for them evidence of my ‘new learning’, that I have moved up in the world, and quietly reassures them that I am on a path to becoming a ‘somebody’.

The search for recognition and selfhood

The letters bear witness to an evolving process, whereby between the years 1977-1989, I am moving beyond the worldview of my family, with frequent working periods in France,

to improve my French language. I became increasingly focused on my own process of searching towards “personal identity development and struggles for recognition and selfhood” (West et al 2013, p. 126). This takes place within different types of learning spaces, which from the letters appear to enhance my sense of self-confidence and self-esteem, and can be attributed to feeling “honoured in a university” (West et al, 2013, p. 126). While I do not feel either “seen [or] recognised” (p. 126), by the teaching staff, there are numerous references made to my feelings of enhanced self-esteem arising from the exposure to new ideas in literature and philosophy as well as from a placement organised by the French Department and teaching practice as part of the Higher Diploma in Education which brought feelings of “success in the practical rituals of professional placements” (p. 126). These situated me within relationships where I received different forms of “attentiveness and legitimacy” (West et al, 2013, p. 124) in relation to work which I highly valued and was already beginning to align with my desire to bring about change to those who had been locked out of learning spaces.

It appears noticeable and surprising, that there are very few references to my experiences of learning how to participate in academic discourse. The lack of reference in my letters can be partly understood as my resignation that I was not bright enough to be any good at this type of thinking, reading and writing. If I had felt clever, as the first person in my family to complete secondary school, these feelings were quickly replaced by feelings of being intellectually inadequate. It also demonstrated the absence of a vocabulary or knowledge of concepts, necessary to give me an alternative perspective to reflect on these troublesome experiences, other than in terms of my own individual failure. Remarkably, the letters also evidence that this did not dim my pure exuberance for the ideas that I encountered along the higher education journey.

It is when I return to complete my Master’s degree that I mention for the first time my feedback on an ‘exercise’, but I am able to conceptualise it as an incompetence with a “specialist” (Gee, 2004, p. 17) form of English and something that I can learn with support. This was supported by the interest that one of the lecturer’s took in my academic development.

“I got my first exercise back. I was pleased. The lecturer who corrected it said that my ability to do research was very impressive. However, I have to learn how to write the kind of English that is used in a University thesis. It’s slightly different to any other kind of English. I’ve lots of people to help me to learn” (Masters).

This meant that overall higher education played a very substantial role in exposing me to ideas and to relationships, which gave me an increasing sense of self-confidence. This was undoubtedly enhanced by a couple of lecturers and significant peers, “producing the feeling that we can play in this space – the world of ideas, for instance – and feel accepted and legitimate in doing so” (West et al, 2013, p. 126). This unexpectedly leads me to experience some significant shifts in my sense of identity, which ripples through how I relate to myself and others. It significantly prompts me to begin to question my mam and the confined domestic space in which she dwells, which has become the limit of her world. While I still desperately want to be able to provide financial support to bring some ease and comfort in to their life, I am beginning to push against the idea that her well-being is inextricably linked to my future. In particular, I am beginning to question the socially constructed assumption that a woman’s happiness is best lived out by living vicariously through the lives of her family, or that it is fair to assume that my desires and ambitions will unquestioningly reflect those of a previous generation. I am perhaps resonating more closely with some of the ‘wayward women’ that my Nana and I celebrated in her stories.

A poem created from extracts of my letters home

1. The unsaid – Living in England - 1960-72 and attending UCD - 1977-78

There was so much silence in our family,
All those years in England when the IRA brought murder to the headlines
and shame to our accents.
We kept our heads down,
We said nothing,
We kept ourselves to ourselves.

Dad was silent
You, Mam, told me secrets that were hidden in some of the silences.
I listened to his silence,
And it spoke to me of a pain that I did not understand.
But I always knew
It needed silence to ease it.
I make jokes to him in my letters,
Tell Dad I’m not *studying logic*
So I won’t have *an unfair advantage*
When we argue.
I write words of love to him,
As soon as the plane crosses the Irish Sea,
I’ll parachute down
To see you,
I won’t bother waiting for it to land.
I know that he is there,
but in a silent way.

His words are locked inside him,
and my words are locked outside of him,
without you.

*I can see you reading him this letter,
while he is eating his dinner.*

1. 'I've really started to find my feet'! - First year UCD - 1977-78

*I didn't write sooner,
Everything was so mixed up,
I couldn't have told you what was happening.*

*We got off the bus,
First one mile too soon,
And last night, two miles too late.*

*I'm sticking to Latin, French and English,
English and French are opening up areas I could never have dreamed of.
I haven't even started yet
To study,
I haven't any books.*

2. Finding ways to hold you tight, Mam, in digs, UCD - 1977-78

I got five letters this morning
*I opened yours first,
I could imagine I was at home.*

I know that we are never closer
Than when we are eating our dinner together.
You put the kettle on,
Before we wash up,
That is my time to talk to you, Mam
As we drink our mugs of tea.
Dad listens.

This evening I am eating mine, with another family,
But not at dinner time,
At teatime.

Don't worry the food is *exquisite*.

*Soup, roast beef, potatoes,
Carrots, apple sponge and cream,
Tea and biscuits.*

I know you that you will linger here,
And read this out to Dad.
We will all relish this together -
You would feel at home around this table.

3. Our dream - 1: Things will get easier for you – 1977-78 and working in France - 1981

I know that the whole family is making sacrifices so that I can come here.
Money is a worry.
A life where you live from week to week,
Is full of worries of sickness, being laid off, strikes.

I want you to know that I am not wasteful,
I long to unburden you of this constant struggle.

I am very thrifty in college
the pound was great to get,
but I am doing fine.
My bike was stolen.
I spend 50p a day on good days,
20p for bus,
4p for milk, sometimes I buy a yogurt,
Or 6p for meat,
Or bus back to college if it is raining
Which is another 20p.
But that's the cheapest I can manage.
Everything costs a bomb.

Your sacrifices weigh heavily on me.
I desperately want you to
Have money,
That is not just about getting by.
I want life to be easier for you.

Later I do part-time work.

Here's a little present,
I am sending you this,
On condition
That you can treat yourself.
5 pounds is for Nana, Grandad and Breda
I had saved it
I don't need it.

When I start working I promise to ease these worries once and for
You shouldn't have any worries about the future
Because by then I'll be established.
Nothing would give me more pleasure
Than to reassure you,
Not to worry about money.

4. Initiating you into UCD, alongside me – 1977-78

First years are called freshmen,
Freshers for short.
Lectures in the morning,
Tutorials are small classes (about 30) in the afternoon.
English lectures are brilliant.
Send [my] Virgil - Aeneid II and IV

*(bottom of my wardrobe).
 400 of us in a lecture hall,
 You meet someone and arrange to meet,
 10 to 1 you'll never see them again.
 At the Freshers get together,
 There were about 100 girls
 All talking in groups,
 No one even turned their head,
 We nearly died.
 We almost decided to go home,
 When we caught hold of ourselves.
 I met girls 'from the country' and staying in digs fairly near.*

*When I am really fed up
 I would love to go home
 just for an hour to see you all.*

I really love the freedom.

5. Weaving the threads between us – UCD - 1977-78

*Tell Eileen I miss her a lot,
 She's to come up on her day off
 To see me.
 Tell Grandad I wore the brown skirt he made me,
 To my first coffee evening,
 It was the best fitted skirt there.
 Tell Nana to keep the fireside chair dusted down for me.
 Tell Breda she could call her hairdressing shop
 Chez Breda, Breda's place, in French.
 Give all my love to dad and a big hug.*

6. There was always you Mam, and our heart shaped map – Au-pair, France - 1978

*But there was always 'you',
 You talked to me,
 You gave me words to talk about the ups and downs of my life.
 My first visit to France,
 I am worried, my exams were hard,
 Maybe I have failed?
 I didn't admit it to myself.
 I had no one to talk it over with' (...) 'under these foreign skies.
 I am waiting for your letter.
 It takes 13 days.
 I was beginning to despair,
 I feel at the other side of the world.
 It arrives,
 I was absolutely thrilled.
 It's a fabulous letter.
 I know people with BA degrees,
 Who haven't half your ease when it comes to letter writing.
 It's like as if you were talking to me.*

I set off with no map.
You could see bigger skies for me,
So I borrowed yours and hoped it could be mine.
I thought that it was mine
For a long time,
I thought I was making our dream happen.

7. Our dream – 2: Letter from Mam to me as an au-pair in France - 1978

You write to tell me,
*We were delighted
To get
Your very welcome letter.
I'm answering right away.*
You have seen a graduation and you explain:
*They were all dressed in their three corner hats. As Nana says,
'Wait 'til your day comes!'
One of the girls put her gown on her dad
And took his photo,
'That's what our Ger would do!'*

8. Shadow dream – a day of public recognition – Teaching Assistant, France - 1981

I have mixed feelings about this recognition.
I do not want them to be outside of it,
To feel out of place or lesser than,
To feel that I am now standing on something that makes me different,
....taller than them.
*I want the graduation to be your day.
I couldn't have done it without all the love and help.
You were always there in the background encouraging me.
The day of the graduation for me is the day when I step into the background
And all of my family who helped me in their silent way, have a day of recognition.*

9. Our dream – 3: Living like a film star? Working summers in France

I am here to live out many of the things,
We have heard about.
Over three working summers in France,
I guide you through this new world,
With the promise that any of it can become yours in the future.
I will of course bring you to see all of these places, one day.
*I'd promised myself
I'd see the Riviera someday,
I went to Cannes (Film Festival)
In Nice,
We swim on the beach at midnight.
In Lyons all the buildings are made of golden bricks,
The streets are like show rooms ; fountains and seats and parks,
The shop windows are beyond description.*

*I visited Arles (thanks to my Latin teacher),
I've crossed the Rhone bridge,
Avignon, next week,
An open air ballet at Aix.
All the places I have ever dreamed of.
I am enthralled,
- living like a film star,
I just travel and go away for weekends.*

I am living with people
Who are very different to us.
But they are very affirming and encouraging.
I feel recognised beyond the limits of my family,
A new world opens up.
My au-pair family constantly affirm me.
I am stunned,
*They wish that their daughter
Will grow up to be like me.*

*This is one of the elite families
They all work in nuclear energy, oil and the Common Market.
You wouldn't believe the wealth of the family,
I couldn't name all of the automatic gadgets (in their house).
They know an amazing amount,
Art, philosophy, painting,
They never ridicule my ignorance.
We eat all of our meals out on the balcony.
Every meal of about eight courses,
Lasts for two to three hours,
It's like something out of the Great Gatsby.*

*I pretend that I am used to it
But I am boggled.*

10. Shadow dream - you, inside my skin – working holidays in France

I am nervous.
I know that this world is not my world,
Where my heart feels at home.
I fear I sound like someone you don't really know anymore?
Do you feel smaller?,
With your letters of meals and housework and comings and goings?
Do you still recognise me?
I am enthralled in this world of possibilities.
I do not yet know how to understand it,
But I know it has always been out of the reach of people like us.
But I do not want all of this at any price.
I notice how I continue to assure you
That I am, as I always was.
You will see it for yourself one day,

I am at pains to insist that
It would be more perfect if you were all here with me.
 Then I write myself, as someone that I do not recognise.
 It is the voice of someone who is only passing through this world.
 It says I will be back,
 And
 You will see that nothing has changed.
 I am 'our Ger',
 Who buys you the most 'ideal jam pot covers' in Lyon.

I come back to the safety of the table, our refuge,
 That brings us together into our shared world.
We have lunch overlooking the mountains.
That's salad, then some chicken, some meat, some bread, cheese, crackers, fruit and finally yogurt
and coffee.
 But I do not stop there.
 I will write a 'me', that will make you smile.
 But that will more importantly,
 Demonstrate beyond any doubt, who I really am, 'our Ger'.
 I ridicule the possibility that I am becoming posh,
It would take a lot to beat a fine lump of ribs or bacon,
Thrown over a pile of potatoes,
And bordered with a head or two of cabbage.
 And if this is not enough,
 I spell it out to you,
 Mme. has offered to take me skiing in Switzerland.
It's tempting.
But when you put the grimy streets of home,
Beside the snow-capped peaks of the alps,
The odds will always fall towards home.
 I prefer to go home.
 I choose you, always.

11. Our dream – 4: 'A real teacher' – France – 1981; Completing H. Dip. teaching practice – 1982-83

We thought that I would become a teacher and teach in my old school.
 I start in France as an English language assistant from UCD.
Today I am teaching in France,
It was like a dream.
I was given my first copy book as a teacher.
 I feel recognised in a way that has not happened up to this.
 Janine was my mentor,
 She reassures me,
My pupils were very happy.
She tells me that it was a pity I couldn't stay next year.
 I come home and agree to do the H. Dip.
 I need to be financially independent, so I take a part-time job teaching.
I am pinning my hair up,
Hoping to look like a real teacher.
I stand out a mile,
With a sensible tweed skirt.

Miss Mernagh - is that me?
I don't seem to be doing anything
except working and sleeping.
Thank you for bringing up the box of food.
I am nervous,
There is a job here for me,
If I can handle these classes.
My class
Has a lot of problems.
They have tried everything,
Nothing has worked.
But I love them.
I take several days
To really prepare my classes.
I want to do something purposeful
With these children,
Lost to, and in, the system
I am not a baby sitter.
And I am starting to trust myself
And my instincts in the classroom.
I think a lot about things
And then I always end up,
Doing what comes naturally.
Once again, I am recognised within a community of students and teachers whom
I respect.
My class have got so interested in French,
Two more people want to join my class.
My night classes went really well.
Mr. P. says that my name was being highly recommended.
I had a reputation that was growing,
In the right circles.
I hear echoes of you Dad,
I am wondering who are the 'right circles'.
I feel the ghost of dread,
Of trying to satisfy these 'right circles',
And the daunting cost of failure, if I don't.

**12. Shadow dream - what might it mean to be airborne? Teaching Assistant,
 France – 1981-82**

The following conversation with a colleague and means more to me,
As there is a real fondness between us.
She notices that
I had got a letter (from you) and didn't come down for dinner.
She put two and two together,
'Come down in your pyjamas!'
And we ate
Omelettes, rice pudding and cream and finally yogurts
To catch my heart.
We talk about my plans for next year,
I have to get a job and be financially independent.
From what she knew of me outside of school,

Teaching might not suit me.
 This stirs something inside me.
 It's true that this is not how I imagine teaching.
I'm supervising detention on Saturday morning,
There's one little one,
She's been given two hours of spelling,
And she's crying her eyes out.
France is really tough!
I feel sorry for them,
Especially when they get their tests back,
The girls always get upset and cry.
 I do not want to be part of this punitive and cruel machine.
 My friend has searching brown eyes,
 And tells me that
Teachers have two feet solid on the ground.
 I begin a new wondering -
 What does it mean to be airborne?
 I have heard of 'naming the world
 To change it'
 But I do not know yet -
 That this will be my flight path.

I know I am different in class.
I almost change personality,
Organised and serious.
Friends wouldn't recognise me.
I can see what she means.
Teachers make a routine,
Plan their classes,
Stick to it.

Living a job,
A routine where nothing ever changes,
Isn't really what I like,
Or do the best?
 She loved me and is very generous.
 I do not recognise myself,
She would like to speak English like I speak French,
She would like to make friends like me.
 She urges me to do something I love,
 I think of friends who did not.
He didn't give himself enough time to work something out for himself.
He could have done something more appropriate to his temperament.

13. You, inside my skin – Teaching Assistant, France - 1981

I sign off from my letters,
'You're always inside my skin'.
When I am in an unfamiliar place,
I dream about you in the early morning hours,
I can hear you moving around in the kitchen

*with the radio on'.
It fills me with longing
For you,
I miss you,
I can't even eat I feel so miserable.
I have never been homesick like this.
I had forgotten what it was like to really miss you.
'After your letter, I was a bit homesick,
Come to see me?
I can buy you a 'magic bus ticket.'*

I had forgotten how much I loved you,
Until I read these letters.
Before an uncomfortable disappointment,
Bled into our lives,
And made us uneasy,
With each other.

I need to go back to the start again,
To trace for those clues,
How we slipped
Past each other,
Silently.

14. My Dream – 5: 'I've really started to find my feet!' Working in France, 1977-79

*So many things are happening, I can't help thinking that I must be changing.
I desire to know what independence might look like.
My friend is leaving our summer job.
I'd love to go as well,
But I have not done what I came to do,
I'm a bit lonely.
But I want to stay.
I want to see how I'll manage by myself.
I'd like to think that If I had to,
I could live by myself in a foreign country.*

I am working as an au-pair.
I am treated with respect in the workplace
Which is a new experience.

*She never forces me to do anything.
She asks me if I have time,
And lets me make most decisions.
For the first time in my life,
I can actually state my case,
And look after my own interests.
I am paid every week,
I never have to ask for it.
I am also allowed to
Put my foot down,*

If my own plans are completely overlooked.
If ever I do extra work,
I'm always given the option of declining.
Imagine!

I learn that I can trust people
Outside of my family.
Up to this point you are the only people
Who I have relied on.
You were all there,
If I wanted you,
When things weren't going right for me.
We do not depend on others.

But I discover new, supportive relationships
Over all of my stays in France, people who
Have made me part of their family
Friends who help me,
Guide me and support me
Who recognise me
Eliane ... rang her friend,
So I could spend Wednesday evening
And Thursday with her.
Eiza has said I can live with her, rent free.
I'm made part of whatever's happening.
I've been getting on really well with the staff.
Something has shifted,
I think maybe I might be growing up a bit.

15. Shadow dream - Invisible people – France – 1978-79

They encourage me to become
Auditeur libre in the university.
They encourage my emerging interests.
I'm going to study the problem
Of migrant workers in France
For my dossier.
I visit this 'other world'
In Marseilles.
This brings new complications.
I have questions,
That they cannot answer about this world.
I am moved by the poverty,
I am alone in this.
I can sense their
Contempt for these people.
They warn me to keep safe.
I thank a toilet attendant,
For the meticulous cleaning
Of a public toilet.
'It's as clean as yours, mam!'

With lost brown eyes,
He tells me,
I am the first person
To ever notice.
I do not know what to say next.
But I want to turn this world
Upside down.
I try to imagine it,
Standing on its head,
Spinning and tilted to the sun.

16. You, inside my skin – Teaching Assistant, France - 1981 - 82

I do not know where I belong.
*Sometimes I feel that I'm going nowhere
Just like a whirlpool,*
I start feeling caught between worlds.
*I don't want to lose touch with my home,
I'm trying to make a world for myself
In Ireland and in France.*
*At times I feel like I belong in the two of them,
And at times in none of them.*
*For a while I thought that maybe
They (the staff) didn't like me,
Sometimes I think nobody could like me,
But I know they like me now.*

*I know it is so important to be able
To live alone in the world and yet,
I am failing so desperately.
I'll allow myself today,
And tomorrow
I'm going to make a huge effort
To pull myself together.*

17. Colliding worlds - 1: Making a choice - Teaching Assistant, France – 1981-82

I leave France.
I do not want to go home.
I do not want
To go back to my old world.
I am feeling guilty.
I try to reassure you,
This is not a rejection of you,
Of my life with you.
I tell you,
I have felt
*Loved and happy,
And that security has always been with me,
Wherever I go,
Or whatever I do.*

I read that now and it does not read like the whole truth.

I feel something is slipping
through my fingers,
I am trying to grasp it.
I explain to myself,
To you,
Why I want different things,
Why I am curious,
Why I have new ideas for the future,
Why I am not coming home -
Like the others.
Not because I do not love you,
But because you have loved me.
Feeling loved and happy,
I can take a risk,
Travelling to new countries,
With new people,
Is in some way because
I am safe.
Because in my heart,
I've a home that
I can always go home to.
I see how much you sacrificed
To bring me up.
All the money and work
That went in to my college days,
Surely, this gives me
The ability to choose
The career that I want?

I wonder now
If you ever read this?
Was this where our centre
Slackened?
Did you just skim words,
Looking for my 'news'?
Could you make sense
Of those long reflective letters?
Did you have those feelings too, once upon a young woman?
Did you cast them off as wayward, fanciful, selfish?

Nothing is discussed
When we meet.
You put the kettle on,
We drink our mugs of tea
Quietly with each other.

18. Colliding worlds – 2: Home, Ireland - 1982

You give me a list
To buy bread, milk, cheese,

Toms and rashers.

I see an avocado,
Ripe with
Sunlight lunches and chatter,
Relishing being alive.
I buy it for you,
With my money.
A gift,
A treat,
A surprise.
I want to 'dress it',
Like we did in France.
It is the last item
I lift
From the bag.

You explode.
You throw it down on the worktop.
You cannot look me in the eye.
You are shaking with anger.
'We can't afford for you to throw away good money'
It is the next line that cuts through the air between us,
You make it clear to me
It's a waste -
We don't eat the likes of that stuff.

I feel cast out.
What has happened?
What has been closed down?
I am stretching something.
And you,
You are not budging.
Was I wrong to
Try to bring a different world,
To your kitchen,
To widen your world?
Did it say to you this here
Is not good enough
For me,
And it should not be good enough
For you?
Do you understand now,
That
I was trying to hold you,
Under my skin?

We do not talk
About it.
Later, in another letter,
I try to come back to it again.
Writing is my way.

I write to you.
I still get a little glow,
It was always my dream,
To let you have a taste of the good life.
I think that's why
We misunderstood each other,
About the avocado pear.
I was trying to give you
A little bit of the good life.
 There is no reply.
 You have set your limits.
 It is time to let go of 'our' dream for me,
 and embrace mine.

19. My dream for an emerging world – working in adult education, Ireland - 1983-85

I'm really trying hard
To just live my own life,
And not think
So much about suiting other people.
I feel in control of my life
For the first time.
 I have made my decision
I am going to persevere with adult education,
In spite of the lack of security
It offers me.
It's very important to me,
That I see this through.
I'm so happy
When I am teaching,
I feel no discontentment
With anyone or anything.
 I am on fire
A [name of T.D.] is coming to the inner city,
To our [adult literacy drop in centre],
I hope to present some of my students to him,

I'm working hard on the drug booklet
It's published in November.

I am at the beginning
 Of a new wave
 Of adult education
 Initiatives.
I've posted on the newsletter
As promised,
You can see
This is a different group
Of adult learners.

I'm training adult literacy tutors
for the next three weekends.

*I am getting really caught up,
With my new work
With young people,
In community training workshops.
Working is enjoyable,
When people want
To come along to your classes.
Everyone seems to be buzzing
With enthusiasm for the work.*

*I have found a sense of home.
I really love the flat.
I was afraid that I was going
To feel lonely,
But
I feel great.
I'm starting to feel
It's like home.
I will sell my possessions
To pay the rent,
If I have to.
There is a real sense of taking root.
I don't want another thing,
Now that I am settled
In this new flat.*

20. Shadow dream - You, inside my skin - working in adult education, Ireland, 1983-85

*I read these letters,
I can see that
I have found something,
That brings me alive.
But for you,
Life is no different.
Dad's job is once again
Under threat.
I write to you,
I'm really angry about the way
Dad has been exploited.
If the factory folds,
I'm going to ...
The next line is blanked with 'Tip-pex.
I can still decipher the words -
'Write', 'name of factory' and 'recognition'.
But my real message is lost.
Did I decide, that my first response,
Would only add to your troubles.
So I write instead,
...Be very annoyed.
Dad shouldn't be in the position*

He is in at present.
And ...
To add to your disappointment,
I have just turned my back,
On a permanent job,
In my hometown.

21. You, inside my skin – working in adult education, Ireland - 1985

But I still dream of you,
Moving around in
The kitchen, starting the day.
I want to hear
That you still love me.
But we are uneasy
with each other.

I am worried about you,
I just wish
That you could rest more,
When I'm at home.
I thought that you looked tired Mam,
When I was leaving.
I want to help you,
To give you
Permission
To look after yourself.
I know it's not easy
For you to put yourself first,
Because you have never done it.
I try to tell you that
We do not need you in the same way.
We all have our gripes,
But we have never been better off.
Eileen has built up her home and family,
Right next to you.
Dad and yourself
Have each other,
And your health,
To enjoy each other's company.
There is a silence.
This is not what you want to hear.
There are fewer and fewer letters between us.
There is an emptiness.
For you,
Your life feels hollow.
This is not how it was meant
To be.
I can sense that you are struggling,
I come back to it again,
I know that there
There will be a big feeling of emptiness

*Once the visitors leave.
I don't know what to say.
I know that you need,
To have more of a life
Of your own,
Where you don't have to take on
Everyone's worries.*

*Come and visit us,
Instead of the other way around?*

*However it's all very well to
Talk about making a new life
For yourself,
Where you do the things that
You have never been able to do,
But it's difficult to get it started.
It seems so clear,
In retrospect
Why it was so difficult
To feel at ease,
To feel intimate.
I have touched on a nerve.
I am giving you permission
To be more,
To live more,
Your own dream,
On your terms.
But you are missing something -
An entry point.*

*For the first time
I see that
You have been my silent warning.
You are the life
That I am determined to avoid
At all costs.
A life that is lived for and through others.
A life where the feeling world of impulse and spontaneity is shut down.
A life where we 'put up and shut up'.
A life of uncritical deference to the 'big shots'.
There is something,
They never told you,
About the price to be paid,
When they told you
That your happiness would be
watching others being happy.*

22. Windows are not enough – Working in France - 1981 and NALA, Ireland - 1989

I think of you now Mam,

Reading all of those letters.
A window onto my world.
All those moments of watching me,
Following my impulses,
Searching for a way of
Living from the heart.
I spend some time in Paris
I don't think that [I] will ever be the same again,
I started to cry,
It sounds silly,
But you couldn't imagine how happy I was.

It's not enough for you Mam,
Is it?
You deserved more than that.
I don't feel that I ever became your 'somebody'.
But we both know now,
Being a somebody is complicated
and shifting.
But for me,
It has something to do with
Being with people you love,
With a feeling of connection
To a shared future,
That you set out to
Re-imagine
Using true words
That sing
Their way into actions.

Like that time in Namibia
When I was staying with farmers,
Who were driven to set up
A Trade Union.
I spent my days
Learning about
Embedded literacy practices,
Before that was a word.
This holiday/conference is turning out to be truly a heart's desire.
I wonder what it felt like to see those long densely packed letters
Dropping onto the hall floor,
With less and less news about weather,
Our health visitors, meals,
People we knew.

I dream of an after-life,
Perhaps the ultimate epistemic shift.
Where we can stand
Shoulder to shoulder
In blissful recognition
And rejoice in

Who we are,
In our most fully complete form.

Reflections on re-reading and re-writing our words and our worlds

This chapter illuminates the lengthy and messy nature of mapping a transformational process, which occurs in different settings, over a long period of time, and is neither a steady linear nor chronological progression towards a more healthy identity. It is neither an erasure of feelings of disappointment and guilt, nor a clear dismantling of oppressive structures. Rather these shifts seem to dwell in the in between space where there are aspects of “individual autonomy and biographical change” (Finnegan, 2019a, p. 51) by nurturing critical dialogue and the intra/interpersonal skills necessary for a “democratic egalitarian project” to succeed. (West et al, 2013, p. 132). While my family nurture my core values of decency, compassion and equality and help me to stay connected to an underpinning moral compass within my life and my practice in classrooms, this is not enough. It is not enough to enable me to embrace a deep vulnerability, which by itself cannot give me powerful insights into that most human ontological desire for longing and connection. There is a need to nurture a self-respect and self-acceptance that allows me to listen to my heart and begin to make my own decisions and understand how the world of injustice works against working-class people.

As my work in adult literacy progresses, this evolves into a new perspective on the narrowly defined script which has been central to the lives of generations of women in our family, who believed that the true life was one which was required them to take care of the happiness of others, with no regard for their own dreams. In retrospect, I wonder if she read my letters in any detail, if they were just too long and intense or was it too frustrating or painful to respond to my invitation to begin to discover who she might be. In many ways, they often took the form of reflective journals. There is a poignancy in realising more fully now the impossibility of asking her to make such radical changes to her view of her place in the world. It was only when I worked in adult literacy for a number of years, that I fully understood the extent to which my mam was isolated and unsupported in her impulses to live a more revitalised life, before she transferred her hopes for herself onto me.

We cannot do this by ourselves, and we cannot do it from within our working-class communities, impulses and feelings are only the beginning. We are dependent on the critical conversations and multiple perspectives of others to deconstruct and reconstruct

some of our core assumptions and beliefs. Yet this critical knowledge is predominantly held within the dominant communities in higher education. This means that accessing this emancipatory knowledge involves our willing, or our inadvertent assimilation into the culture and practices of these dominant groups, whose rewards and comforts simultaneously shape our learner identity in a way that distances working-class students from our communities. The student is experiencing what Freire describes as “cultural invasion”, where they are invited to begin to enter into “the process of assimilation” and to replace their own values for a set “which are not their own” (Taylor, 1993, p. 118). Critical knowledge is a prerequisite to being able to read the world before we can write it. This highlights the inherent contradiction that we “have to be able to think and speak in a literate way before we can become ‘literate’” (Taylor, 1993, p. 147).

This created the irreconcilable contradiction of allowing me to benefit from the awards of a liberal education system, which had reproduced and still reproduces shame and inequality for working-class people through its oppressive practices (Crean & Lynch, 2013.) The letters from my undergraduate experiences reveal both my attraction and my uncritical initiation into a process that was colonising me with alienating values in terms of my working-class background, by not valuing or discounting my lived experiences and reality (Crean & Lynch, 2013). The painful contradiction is that those alienating middle class values, in some ways present as less alienating to my family, who have an understanding that this ‘knowledge’ from the academy is associated with becoming a somebody. It is my entry into work with working-class people and marginalised groups, that share some of our experiences of being ‘locked out’ that causes the most rupture with my family. Freire reminds us that this is the consequence of internalising the oppressor (Freire, 1996). The oppression of others reminds us too much, of our own frustration and of the very limits and constraints that we are most afraid of not breaking free from.

In particular, there is the contradiction that our social, cultural and economic position in society shapes our literacy practices, but it, in turn, shapes our position in society. The stories, letters and poetry, speak to the lived experience and they unpack the dichotomy that those who most need to have access to those literacy practices that can help them to challenge, desire and express condemnation, are excluded from them. Instead, they are only exposed to the literacy practices of maintaining their existence, of writing shopping lists, postcards, letters that exchange day-to-day news and reading other people’s instructions or ideologies (Lankshear, 1996).

One of the central contradictions in this chapter is that this lack of schooling, and the literacy practices which are associated with it, become the explanation for explaining their sense of being stuck, cut off from an abundance, from a better life that must be possible somewhere for someone. Nobody knew this better than my family, who at night after saying the rosary, murmured the lines of the Hail, Holy Queen prayer, with an intensity that even as a small child let me know that they were nobody's fool. They understood their position in the world, through these metaphors. They tried to use them to explain it to me - that we must be stoical and resigned for less than what the heart might yearn for. We must be ready to bear with dignity, the injustice and arbitrary nature of what is doled out to us. We must wait for what may be our reward on the other side.

To thee do we cry,
poor banished children of Eve,
to thee do we send up our sighs,
mourning and weeping in this valley of tears.

But they also recognised that there was another way to live. We felt it in all of our impulses. The oral literacy practices are sites that celebrate the vitality and to some extent, the embodied sense of questioning and resistance.

Hail, Holy queen Mother of Mercy
Hail our light our sweetness and our hope.

But this life of sweetness, hope and light was only reserved in the next life, for those who loved, and lived hardworking and decent lives of compassion and kindness, unless you had a good education and then you could expect it all now.

Conclusion

The newspaper cutting, stories and letters enabled me to reconnect with the contradictions of listening to my own internal desires towards a more unpredictable and vital world, while also allowing me to anguish at the distances they created from feeling solidly part of my family and their world. As I completed this chapter and re-read what I have written at different ages in my life, I have a sense of spaciousness. I have been unhurried, and held back the sense of urgency to make sense of the clustering of images and sensations, which accompanies every artefact, as I search for meaning. I have particularly dwelt among the phrases and accompanying shifts that the letters evoked. The connections, disconnections and emotional contradictions seemed to surface a number of struggles, aspirations and disappointments which played out in the lives of so many men and women in the wider society.

In many ways, the themes that I have selected from the letters attempt to capture some of these shifts as I move to a place of greater vibrancy and a redirection in my life. West et al (2013) state that “It is persons in relationship that lie at the heart of epistemic shifts” (p. 121) and through attentive and encouraging relationships, as well as emancipatory knowledge, I begin to gain a recognition which gives me the confidence, self-respect and self-esteem to connect to my impulses and experiences, to take more control of my life (West et al, 2013). This is not available within my working-class community. It is my participation in higher education and the opportunities it gives me to access recognition, multiple perspectives, emancipatory knowledge with the associated emancipatory literacy practices, and eventually communities of practice of adult educators with whom I can engage in critical dialogue, which create the conditions for change. However I recognise that my experience within higher education also became an oppressive experience in its own right, as it made no attempt to value my lived experience and reality in such a way that might involve “taking the outside in and putting the inside out, and changing the character of both in the process” (Crean & Lynch, 2013, p. 56). I argue that this creates a welcome, if complicated, transformational shift that positions me as looking backwards at what I have lost, as well as forwards for what I have gained, with contradictory feelings of desiring and rejecting.

PART FOUR: SETTING OFF AGAIN

Chapter Eight: Deepening our roots and spreading our wings

Introduction

As I approach this last chapter, by way of a conclusion, there is a sense of arrival and a setting off again, with some new insights, questions and dreams emerging from those concerns which were threaded through the inquiry. As love becomes another dimension of grief, I create a triptych of three scenarios, which together tell a story of coming home to myself, as a daughter, adult educator, colleague and scholar practitioner. I layer my story with a new one, of how I might live now that I have dwelt within, challenged and interrupted the contradiction of being implicated in my own oppression. I align myself with transformational biographical work, where the old stories have not been erased, but they co-exist alongside more emotionally satisfying ones, in tune with my whole being and which open up more hopeful and revitalising possibilities (Sands & Tennant, 2010). As importantly, it is also a story of how our ongoing development and growth depends on these loving and supportive communities, where we can step back from the immediacy of our life and dialogue with other perspectives to become more clear-sighted about what we can and cannot live without, for ourselves and others.

This sparks a reframing of those relationships within my adult education and student communities as revitalising spaces, where throughout my life, I have felt loved, seen and heard (West et al., 2013). My decision to open up the intimate insights of my communications with peer adult educators is charged by my commitment to recognise these relationships as essential for fostering our ongoing transformational learning process where we can take refuge, lose ourselves and reconfigure jaded meanings, to prevent us from becoming stuck. The private knowledge that is generated by practitioners, out of necessity, entwines the personal, social and political. The intimate, empathetic and caring connection between the participants ruptures the boundary between what can and cannot be spoken about. There is a respectful willingness to enter into another's point of view to gain a new perspective, which is illuminated by ideas from psychology, pedagogy and sociology. All of these are woven unselfconsciously into the conversation and bring an enhanced dimension of critical reflection. There is an ongoing search not only to explore the here and now, but also to unveil the causes and reasons behind things. The first and second scenario illuminate the necessity of sustaining our peer and student communities as dialogical spaces where our personal, professional and political dilemmas are rich learning resources, for staying finely attuned to what we really care about. The final

scenario recognises the ongoing nature of our relationship with those we love, even after death. I suggest that there has been a transformational shift that repositions my relationship with my deceased mam and dad, which brings a new ease and where we can mutually relish their dynamic presence in my epistemology and ontology, in other words, in what makes me tick. The chapter intends to open up, in an act of love and celebration, the fundamental importance of nurturing these relationships, where we can live, struggle and dream for a world that evades us, but which we continue to reach for. These are recognised as essential for helping us to sustain our ability to navigate and reclaim ourselves in a precarious world, where disconnection and fragmentation from how we want to live and what we care about, is never far away. The limits and challenges of searching for ways to express the complexity and richness of our experience is responded to with poetry. The conversations are interspersed with poetry, to capture those energetic shifts in being, knowing and relating, which can only be expressed through the affective and the imaginal (Heron, 1992).

Weaving the threads of the inquiry into a filigree

Among those many narratives which shaped the limits of our future, the one which paradoxically uprooted me, while it also ‘pegged me down’, was the dominant message that we could expect to struggle silently in a precarious world. Therefore it was safer to remain small, invisible and learn how ‘to shut up and put up’, all the while bearing the shame that this was of our own making, and it was wise not to draw attention to any injustice that was meted out. A lifelong journey of attending to the quiet voice at play within hierarchical social relations, which would reproduce and leave me stuck in the same position, is once again challenged as I move from the family, in my classroom and arrive in community. The process of reclaiming reconfigured and new meanings from my holistic encounter with my life, has given me lighter wings, deeper roots and a strong sense of being reconnected to those people and values that I deeply care about. By this, I mean that it has allowed me to dwell within, challenge and interrupt the contradiction of being implicated in my own oppression as oppressor and oppressed, as I internalised the concrete and verifiable oppressive narratives of a working-class background. These insights do not arrive as a set of stable and fixed reconfigurations about how I view and feel about myself as I move forwards in a more grounded and vibrant way. Instead it leaves me in wonder at my incompleteness, which spurs me on to continue the search to continue to become more, to be a knowing being, as I engage in embodied and emotionally responsive dialogues. I am imbued with a feeling that love is another dimension to grief,

and there is a celebration of our interdependency, and the fundamental truth that we live, learn and have the potential to keep developing, growing and reimagining better ways to be, from within loving relationships.

This leads me to reconsider those relationships that can nurture our being in a process of continuous transformative learning. The creation of the triptych allows me to probe from both inside the intimacy of this relational space, while also maintaining a criticality about how our ability to broaden our perspectives can play out in real life contexts. This is interwoven with poetry that opens our perspective by tapping into the rich imaging of what is below our immediate awareness. It is an attempt to put real flesh and bones on an aspiration that our transformation and development as embodied and purposeful adult educators, is contingent on “dialogic relations between actors who have feelings, bodies and minds and how these are experienced and expressed within the historical and contextual specificity of their lives” (O’Brien, 2005, p. 22).

I explore how grief and loss, which have been a concern of the inquiry, can be transformed by love, into hope, resilience, connection, reconnection and generate creative visions within supportive communities of practice. This means exploring how we might create spaces for our vulnerability within our communities where we feel seen and heard, places where we can move across artificial boundaries between the personal, public and political, to strengthen our resistance to inner our outer forces which manipulate us to carve ourselves up and remove our adult education practices from our personhood. This was made possible by my engagement in largely online correspondence, with occasional face-to-face conversations, with colleagues from within my community of adult educators. I hope in this chapter to strengthen an appreciation for sustaining these communities as important pedagogical spaces, where our personal and professional dilemmas are rich learning resources, which directly, or indirectly, make us finely tuned to the lives, dreams and struggles of our students, as we encounter our own.

I return to a learning space in the second section, looping back to another concern within my own learning journey, which recognised the transformative potential of particular writing practices. I move into a free writing space with my students as free thinkers with agency to act upon the world. This is underpinned by my own experience of how writing and metaphor can prepare the emotional ground to nurture critical reflections and strengthen social connections. These can begin to counter demoralisation and reframe both the work and those people who engage in it as valuable.

As the research progressed, I become more and more committed to reconnecting with my lived experience in an embodied and holistic way, which opens up those relationships, particularly with my deceased beloveds, which ripple through my life and practice. I am drawn to write a letter to my mam and dad, as I would have done in my earlier adult days, to celebrate their heartfelt commitment for my growth and well-being, which was with me all of my life. I imagine us experiencing an epistemic shift, where we can mutually enjoy the richness of the learning that I have valued the most and reconnected with or reframed in this inquiry, and the ways in which their lives are woven through my practice.

Grieving and loving within a community of practice as a form of inquiry

The exploration of how grief and loss can be transformed by love, into hope, resilience, connection, recognition, and generate value-based visions of my practice, emerged from a series of conversations with colleagues within my community of practice. These conversations were not completely driven by a research agenda. Instead, they were substantially woven into the fabric of our day-to-day communication. I had hoped to invite my colleagues to respond to one of the evocative texts within the inquiry. One colleague did, but in general, our conversations were generated from within our experience of what was most relevant at the time of the Covid-19 pandemic. In that respect, those conversations with colleagues overlapped with the concerns of inquiry, but were a heartfelt response to our increased isolation as we navigated the unpredictable and unprecedented circumstances of teaching from our homes during the Covid-19 pandemic. This became an unique opportunity for us to reconnect with those values that gave coherence and meaning across our life and work, in an unstable world.

It feels appropriate that the inquiry, which is drawing on autoethnography, should give particular recognition to the voice of practitioners and the poorly recognised relationships that are at the heart of our resilience, growth and vitality as adult educators. I continue my interest in exploring how as adult educators, we can sustain our commitment to create a vision that is always beyond our reach, while living within a world which will often disappoint and disconnect us from that vision and our values.

I create four vignettes drawn from this community of practice, in an attempt to give glimpses of the experience of belonging within a community where I feel safe and where we support each other, so that we can collaboratively generate the knowledge which is required to do this work and to live our lives as well as possible. It is equally important that we also remind each other to value and celebrate those micro-achievements along the

way, which edge us towards those aspirations. As the personal and professional are inextricably linked in these vignettes, I hope to generate the broadest possible understanding of what we mean by practitioner knowledge. This involves a reflexive engagement on how to be vulnerable, how to be supported and support each other, in preparation for those inevitable fundamental experience of grief, loss, injustice, apathy, shame and anger. These emotions are inextricably entangled in creating empathic encounters with our students and sustaining a vision of a fairer more compassionate world.

Talking to the living – The background to our community of practice

The vignettes below will make more sense if you have a feeling for how we work as a community of practice. Lorde reminds us that “the quality of light, by which we scrutinise our lives, has direct bearing upon the product which we live, and upon the changes which we hope to bring about through those lives” (Lorde, 2017, p. 7). The community of practice that I participate in has seen various changes in participants, but has been illuminating my life for over 25 years, where among other things we could challenge feelings of being judged as “not being a good/competent teacher” (p. 5). In general, there was an understanding that each of us shared an overall broad framework underpinned by core values that made us coherent as a group. These included creating an inclusive, fairer and more compassionate world. But each individual drew on the community of practice to critically reflect on their unique interpretation of how this might be put into practice. This heterogeneity in many instances generated more passionate debate and vitality to examine our blind spots.

Throughout this research, it was not that I always needed the scholarly work to help me to understand what I did not know. In many cases, I needed to find people who had succeeded in creating the language and concepts that I was missing to articulate the depths of my knowledge. This often resided in the poorly recognised or valued conversations with my peers, which took place outside of public spaces. These friendships have created spaces for ongoing critical reflection that is situated in the embodied and contextual experiences (Yorks & Kasl, 2002). They have been sites of transformation that moved over and back between our personal and professional lives with little awareness of a distinction between the two. Key insights and shifts in my practice have been nurtured largely by those spontaneous, unstructured, vulnerable and responsive conversations, over extended periods of time, which have arisen from the immediacy of needing to talk, needing to be heard, needing to engage in a critical dialogue about ‘what is really going on

in my classroom and in my life' with a colleague. We had over the years developed a vibrant community of practice, which was situated around a shared table in our office, coffee shops, kitchens or any of the spaces that we lived out our lives in.

I am, for the purpose of the inquiry, drawing on extracts from our correspondence that capture the emotional and relational tone and quality of these conversations. Over the years, this became a generative adult learning space.

Gaining consent from within a community of practice

At the outset of the inquiry, I had envisaged conducting individual conversations and focus groups with follow-up one-to-one conversations in person. But during the international pandemic, 2020-2022 that became impossible as all of our work and communication moved online. However, I am limiting my selection from that period, when our connection online and by email was significantly increased.

At the beginning of the pandemic, assuming that this was a temporary crisis, I asked participants if they would be happy to join me in conversations over email, with a view to using some of them at a later stage in the inquiry. At that point, I initiated a number of conversations, including a conversation about one of the evocative texts I intended to include in the inquiry. I made it clear that I would renegotiate with each individual if they still wanted to be included in the research, as the purpose and use of their emails emerged.

I realise now that I was quite naïve in my understanding of what it means to work with autoethnography as a methodology which is formed by a process of emerging knowledge. If the primary subject of autoethnography was my life and values as an adult educator, then there is no way of constructing a boundary in advance of the conversation, to outline what aspects of the conversation will constitute the research. As you will see from the vignettes, it becomes obvious the extent to which our ongoing need to communicate about our day-to-day experiences of working and living with Covid, had blurred the line between a directed conversation about my research and our more general conversations as part of our community of practice. It would have been epistemologically incoherent to try to situate the research apart from this new pressing reality that we were living on a continuous basis. There was no 'us' that could enter into separate conversation from 'IT' (Covid-19). However, the sense of global

crisis meant that our conversations were substantially formed around what we really valued, at a time when everything was unpredictable and uncertain.

The enforcement of an open-ended national lockdown overshadowed all of our conversations, and made the communications between us, more urgent. Our communication took the form of one-to-one or shared emails, which suited the lack of synchronisation in our work schedules as domestic responsibilities increased. They moved over and back between updates on how we were managing our lives and our workloads.

I initiated one-to-one conversations by email with those who had agreed to be research participants for this initial stage, and then allowed these conversations emerge in response to what was of most value and interest to us at the time. The overlap between our personal and professional communications with each other was not unusual, but during the pandemic, they took on an even more treasured importance, as our emails became a form of connection and a safe and intimate space, especially during lockdown when we had little or no access to our normal social world. This raised issues about gaining consent, protecting anonymity, while not removing that essential personal dimension that characterises our care for each other. As the pandemic dragged on and it continued to be impossible to meet in person, I asked the group if in addition to our regular and online communication by email, I could share some focused questions that I was thinking about in relation to my research. This became a space that enabled me to reflect on what the inquiry was surfacing within me.

In alignment with the emerging nature of the research, I was even more aware of the importance of renegotiating consent at the end of the inquiry, as it became clear that neither myself nor the participants could have known what exactly we were getting into. This meant checking with participants if they still wanted to be part of the research, as the 'why' and 'how' of their representation within the research became clearer. I also agreed to work with them on the final representation. I invited them to make any changes that they felt would represent them more fully or withdraw their contribution at that stage, if this proved unsatisfactory.

The small size of the adult education community, combined with the rich detail that is used to represent their lives and work, meant that it was not possible to absolutely guarantee anonymity. Therefore, I went to great lengths to conceal any individual

details or information, while trying not to strip them of the personal colour and texture of our relationships. These included changing names, removing or masking identifiable characteristics or locations.

When the relevant section of the research was completed, I returned to the participants at the end of the research again to renegotiate their consent retrospectively. I showed participants the purpose, context and how I represented them by drawing on their emails. I also showed them the poems or reflections that I created which were inspired by their conversations. The poems aspired to capture the qualities of these relationships that went beyond literal language and suggest what it meant for me to belong to a community of practice with a shared vision and values. While Tullis (2022) argues that retrospective consent is far from ideal, as it can become coercive, I felt that in this case, it was essential to give participants the opportunity to make a decision based on a more complete understanding of the purpose and nature of their representation in the research. This was something that could only be offered towards the end of the research.

When one participant mentioned that she would be happy for me to use her real name, I invited others to do the same if they wanted to. While they were happy to retain their real names, I decided that it might be safer to use pseudonyms. Given that no one can predict how future readers of the research might respond, I cannot guarantee that this would not become problematic for them then.

These autoethnographic conversations share some of the similarities that Ellis et al (2011) describe as interactive interviews, this means that they are “situated within the context of emerging and well established relationships” among the researcher and participants - “one and the same - probe together about issues that transpire, in conversation, about particular topics” (para. 21). However, our identities as colleagues and friends would have challenged the traditional power dynamic between the researcher and participants, as we were accustomed to engaging in challenging conversations and debates with each other.

Capturing conversations onto a page

Most of the conversations took the form of emails. I drew on a range of emails, some of them had been responses to concerns that I had raised or that were raised by others, arising from our unusual work conditions. These were written either directly to a

colleague, as part of an ongoing correspondence or they were written following on from those rare face-to-face conversations, telephone/Zoom calls or our regular team meetings online, to hold a record of my ideas for my own benefit as part of my personal journaling process.

Many of the reflections on conversations and the emails were written in the course of a busy day, where we grab those stolen moments of time to stand back and process our thoughts. This was often written on the hoof. In order to preserve the authenticity of the writing, I have retained some of the fragmented writing and elipsed sentences, unless it interfered with meaning. In some cases, I have omitted personal information, or added information, using the traditional conventions of brackets. But these written conversations were so eloquent and articulate that most of the changes were created to give them a context. I have included my imaginative responses to this correspondence as poems, to capture the depth of feeling that goes beyond what can be inferred from the actual correspondence. I also hope that they will help to nurture critical reflection by moving “our spirits most deeply and directly towards and through promise” (Lorde, 2017, p. 11) for something better, and to generate multiple meanings rather than prescriptive, straightforward interpretations.

Why we must treasure our communities of practice

The reader will have connected with my frustration in my letters as a young adult, to understand a new way of making sense of a world that no longer made sense to me, with the interpretive devices that were available within my immediate community. I realised that I needed to search further afield. While higher education, placement opportunities, travel and workplaces were useful, it was communities and particularly the communities of practice in adult education where I felt my deepest sense of belonging and found the knowledge and the application of the knowledge that I desired. They allowed me, over time, to reframe my understanding of disappointment and loss as integral to the life of an adult educator. The reality is that “once you make the commitment to teaching towards a better world, one of the first things you realise is that your work will never be done” (Ayers et al, 2004, p. 127). In this regard, I invite the reader inside to the ‘invisible magic’ of what it has meant to me, to belong to a community, a family of adult educators. I hope that the vignettes illuminate the privilege of belonging to a community with shared values, which has sustained my heart, my hope and my love for my students, and the learning spaces that we sculpt

together. They also suggest the subtle ways in which participating in this community generates connections and inextricable links between living and working as an adult educator, which suffuse every aspect of our lives and practice. This is in opposition to the idea that adult education practice can be reduced to techniques and behaviours reserved for our classrooms.

I am at heart somebody who writes to burrow my way from the dark to the light, therefore I had dozens of reflections on conversations and email conversations, over the course of the timeframe described above, with all of my colleagues and students. It was very difficult to make a selection, as it was not my intention to dishonour or render invisible, in any way, the generosity of all my colleagues. In the end, I simply chose correspondence that evokes a glimpse of those generative and restorative conversations that helped me to address those sensitive themes of the research including grief; disappointment; belonging; disconnection; core values and transformational practice.

It is an opportunity to bring the seldom-heard voices of practitioners into a public space where they can be recognised and celebrated. I hope that this will go some way towards illustrating how, within these safe spaces, our relationship with our peers restores and generates new ways of being in our lives, and creates rich spaces where under recognised knowledge is generated, disseminated and strengthens our practice. It also sets out to challenge an artificial dichotomy, which would have us believe that we must separate our concerns and passions between the inside, and outside of our classrooms and illuminates how our learning spaces are intimately connected with the realities of our students, ourselves and our relationships with each other.

I am not offering these vignettes as examples of absolute positions. These are snapshots of our thoughts within a particular context, which was during a very unusual time during an international pandemic. They show our aspiration to name our lived reality using true words. There is no doubt if we were to return to these conversations, there would be new additions, contradictions and amendments. I have aspired to capture our commitment and conviction, but this is a very messy space full of contradictions. It perhaps illuminates how when we are dealing with real flesh and blood people in pursuit of a better world, this must always remain elusive. These are only resting places that are provisional, until we set off again with curiosity for what is next and what can be different. But I am offering these as examples of the type of conversation that I deeply cared about, which generated love, learning, enthusiasm, curiosity and a sense of joy for my journey as an adult educator. It

also sustained my curiosity to keep going and find new and more relevant ways to encounter my students, with approaches that leave something better than it was before we started. It helped to create a 'me' who is more fully myself and more fully alive, and eager to gently nudge my students on a similar journey. I suggest that the reader may want to re-read the third story in Chapter One - 'Eruption - Grand entrance with a Supervalu bag', to appreciate some of the shifts that have occurred from my point of departure.

Introducing the four vignettes

In the following extracts from emails with Kate (on March - June, 2020), Miriam, (in April - June, 2020), Lizzy (May 2020 - January 2021) and Carmel (April - May, 2020), we are thrilled by our coming into knowing, by questioning, challenging, paying attention to our embodied worlds and sifting through what we truly value which will help ourselves and our learners to navigate this unfamiliar world. These were seldom strings of conversation, as often there was a face-to-face or telephone conversation that has happened in between, and brings the correspondence in a new and unexpected direction.

The four vignettes hope to illuminate why it is not enough to exclusively position nurturing the learner, the teacher-student and student-student relationship, as of primary importance in the classroom. They suggest the necessity of supporting strong relationships between peers to help us to know our emerging selves; what we stand for, and with whom do we stand. They highlight conversations with grief and vulnerability, and how it changes me. They believe that to say the "true word – (...) is work, (...) is praxis" (Freire, 1996, p. 69). They suggest ways in which we can lean into each other with love, without which these conversations are not possible. They also show how they sustain us, so we may be alive to the impulses, intuitive insights, spontaneity, and emotional turbulence associated with the risks of generating practitioner knowledge, by exploring our tangled subjective experiences where we have no choice but to confront our fragile, vulnerable selves.

Vignettes One, and Two were a mixture of emails where I had formerly approached the recipients with a question which was of interest to my research, along with some of the spontaneous exchanges of conversation which were ignited from the circumstances of our lives at that time. For Vignette Three, it emerged from a spontaneous conversation that we decide that we will team-teach together. Vignette Four remains the closest to an intentional conversation about the research, as it focus

on an evocative story about ‘shame’. This was because we had no immediate reason to be in touch with each other over Covid, outside of this conversation.

I will create a brief context for each vignette but I am going to let them speak to your heart, your life, to what and who really matters to you. I invite the reader, to join us in our collaborations to find some true words, “because no one can say a true word alone – nor can she say it for another” (Freire, 1996, p. 69). I am not suggesting that you will meet new ideas in these conversations, like Lorde (2017), I am interested in finding “new ways of making them felt - of examining what those ideas might feel like being lived on Sunday morning at 7.00 a.m., after brunch (...) mourning our dead” (p. 11).

Vignette One: Our, becomes ‘your’, if you add a ‘y’

You will encounter the quality of love and trust within my relationship with my colleague, which allows me to be more fully myself and break my silence on my experience of death and shame, which have been weighing me down. This is not always enough to usher in change, but in my experience, it does usher in dissonance. This then can be the spark of longing for change, which in this instance brings up a conversation about what do we really care about, if death is where it all ends. These are the conditions that are fundamental to encouraging our practice to breathe and emerge as evolving practitioner knowledge. As I open up to my experience of death that I have carried in isolation, I feel I belong in this space and there is a sense of community. From this place I can make connections with a bigger system, that not only undermines what I value about my work but works subtly in opposition to how I want to work and live as an adult educator.

Dear Kate,

I am writing this as a letter email to you to capture for me the spontaneity and warmth as we burst into this idea and that idea ... something that might capture our ideas roaming over and back. Something that acknowledges the friendship and respect that has been nurtured over the years as we share ... loss, personal triumphs, not to mention worksheets, workplace frustrations and the joy of sometimes having the best job in the world. ... Just one of your comments can open up whole worlds of questions and connections ... All that I know, has either been generated or validated in conversations with colleagues I respect and feel safe with, colleagues who will not judge me or find me wanting ... You were at your desk and I was propped up against the radiator after sea swimming, trying to warm myself up. The office was empty. It felt cosy and I was relaxed. Always happy to hear what you are thinking about and how the balance of our lives is swirling around in the business of taking care of ourselves, our families and our work. I have just noticed something amazing ‘Our’ becomes ‘your’ if you add the ‘y’. Do you see what I am getting at? It’s like as if in our language, there is recognition of how we are all embedded and entangled in each other. We do not exist as separate but in a deep and intimate connection ... Yesterday I was completely lost in our conversation. It was a real shared search to work out how to value what

we know and how to share it. I can feel those important conversations it's actually physical. I was completely focused and excited. It was as if the radiator and you were bringing warmth back into a weary me. I had to stop myself from interrupting you. I kept wanting to say yes, yes, yes, that happens to me too. Something makes sense. I felt less alone. I felt connected to why I do this and remember its value.

I raise my concern about experts and practitioners and share the tentative ripples of echoes of my dad's presence in my practice:

My anxiety to make sure I am well enough prepared to [work with you] mirrors a similar anxiety [about presenting my work anywhere].

It's as if in one way, I understand the value of my practitioner knowledge and have an appreciation for the messy incomplete way it is generated in conversations where there is trust and honesty. But some part of me doubts this if I am bringing this knowledge into a public space with other academics. Will this be enough? Will the experts find a gap in it? Maybe I should read one more article. Maybe there is more out there that I do not know yet and I must stay silent until I know what those others, 'the experts' think. In other words, I have internalised what Freire calls the 'banking model of education'. What is disturbing is that this is the view of knowledge which crippled my Dad and caused him to dismiss all that he knew.

We are all a bit at each other these days, and I am sure it doesn't help that I'm so narky. I better run - I'll be late again. My child told me that her friend was crying because her mam was late for the pick-up. She told her 'My mam is always late, but she always comes'. Is that a big fail for me?

Days later, Covid brings a national lockdown and we are teaching online and our correspondence becomes an even more important way of breaking with the isolation and reflecting in each other's presence. We begin to recognise the value of this knowledge that flows so freely and often unrecognised in our face-to-face conversation.

Hi Geraldine,

...I didn't realise how much value our conversation had until I read your letter. I knew somewhere in my own mind that these conversations are valuable and that I take something away from them, but when you write it down it really turns it into a concrete learning experience. What you have taught me is the value of writing down these conversations and our deeper reflections as a consequence of these conversations.

...I will use a swimming metaphor because I know that you love swimming... feel like we are swimming against the tide... The system wants to bring us one way and we are furiously trying to beat it by swimming against it. You as a swimmer know well that that will just lead to exhaustion and we will eventually drown.

I recall (I might be wrong) the best strategy when caught in a current is to stay afloat and go with it, until such time as we can get out of the flow. What this is teaching me about our position as educators is that we are in a current that we can't individually stop. To avoid burnout, we need to stop swimming against it. However we can stay in one place, and keep afloat. I see this as maintaining our values, strength and what we are about. We don't have to swim with it, but we

can hold our own within that current. That way we can stay afloat, look around us and know when to escape the current.

I know that we will be discussing this in a few weeks but I have been thinking of our conversation and needed to pour all of this out somewhere ... Your question 'Where is the teacher in student-led teaching?' really stuck with me all through dinner and I had to write about it. [Have we] ... become so student focused that we have forgotten our own needs as teachers? ... [or should we] care deeply about [our] student's development but also, like a parent, [...] know when to let go and allow [our] students to falter and learn from their mistakes [but] provide safe spaces for this to happen.

So dashing downstairs to make a better effort to take an abandoned dog [...] for an [overdue] walk.

Later we went for reflective walks and coffee and I create a reflection.

*We walked, sometimes silently. As we rounded the headland we discussed how our teaching, was an extension of these conversations, where we are living out the contradictions, the struggles, the openings and clearings about remaining fully alive and alert to creating possibilities for transformation, inside and outside of our classrooms. You have no idea how much it helped me to talk about death. The fact that you found it so upsetting and not like they tell us in the films. It amazed me how somehow we started to talk about what really matters if that is what the end is like. I thought back to the first chapter of my PhD, and how these questions were teased out in the silence of a blank page. Here I am living them, and walking them rhythmically around the headland in this wide and open space. There was this deep sense of something strong and unshakable that had been exchanged for something that needed to be named - **community**.*

Vibrating like guitar strings - a community

I sit with you all, my colleagues,
we are sipping coffee in our happy place,
away from the cluttered rooms, black screens,
abandoned cups, sterile hand-wash,
wads of folders of old lesson plans,
records of our desire to create flickering moments,
something vital and fully alive.

Something that will help us to get lost
in our searching and questioning,
something to satisfy our yearning,

Without which we lie dull and unremarkable,
like pebbles when the tide has gone out.

We sit facing each other.
Excited, talking together, cutting across each other,
Jumping in with new possibilities,
Our thoughts and feelings vibrating like guitar strings.

A seagull swoops with pure joy towards us,
and in one crescendo of a screech, snatches a half a scone from the table,
reminding us to pay attention to this blazing and treacherous world.

We each have our story, but recognise that the other has pieces of this story
and together we sculpt it.
Greedy, eager like the sand sculptor,
who brushed tiny grains of sands off the gargoyle face
he was carving from the sand,
on that bleak rain sodden day,
shaking his head and saying - it 'freshens me up, no problem'.

You blurt out indignantly,
'I wouldn't want to achieve a goal of reaching the top of Everest,
If it meant leaving someone to die by themselves'!

I am aware of the sea, tumbling inwards,
licking the pebbles with a lusty suck
and seeping back to the shoreline.

I wonder what would I do, if my life was at risk? Stay/go.

Someone names people who have stayed behind
to be with their dead companions,
placing their life at risk.

'Life is so bloody', 'so lacking in easy choices,'
'so heart-rippingly demanding',

'I don't know', I say.

I would like to think that I would stay to help my dying companion,
but I am afraid that I might run to save my own life!

Where does that leave us?

You are sure, you are convincing,
Together, we are people who would not put our goal of climbing a mountain,
Before sitting and holding the hand of someone who is dying.
That would be so much more important to us.

I feel a shiver,
And I look around at everyone.
Maybe that is why I share this place with all of you,
and talk and build stories so easily.
We aspire for a better world, not unaware of the odds.

The tide has reached the high-tide point and is careering over the prom wall.
A child shouts in glee as they are covered with spray.

Maybe it is enough that we want to be above all, human,
and present to help each other.
That we value solidarity with all of its complexities,
over individual domination and conquest.

The wave rushes back through the railings and retreats to the shoreline,
but not before it had pitched all of its mighty force
in one euphoric gesture of daring.

Vignette Two: Alchemy - A celebration of practitioners talking

This emerges from a conversation from my bedroom where I am now teaching on Zoom. Grief leads me to examine its spiral nature and how it is changing me. This exacerbates the edginess of pedagogy and raises questions of how to manage our own vulnerability, and keep our learning spaces human and agentic, in the face of an increasingly

technological, chaotic and unpredictable world. Pedagogy is viewed as relational and situated within communities of practice constituted by our students and peers.

Hi Miriam,

As usual I had set myself a list of things to do and was about to start. When I realised that it's weeks now since I spoke to you and it's your birthday (...) I felt that I wanted to start the day by just seeing how things were for you in this strange world.

*Our conversations make themselves like textiles. We move between whatever is on our mind at that moment, our families, our wellness, bits of news from work. It seems to me that after years of these conversations, our reflections emerge **from** all of that and not in addition to, as an add-on extra.*

Everything is churning and swirling. One minute I think that I am heading for the cove and the next I am carried out to sea. I feel I know this place and I recognise my bearings, but in an instant, I have lost my bearings and feel panicky. However, the movement brings energy and feels as if it is pushing stagnant water away from me. I think this is the first time I have been able to write and talk about my research without getting caught up in loss and vulnerability. It seemed no matter what I read or wrote, it always came back to some devious form of grief.

So maybe these conversations are a bit like an open window and I can meet you in place where grief is not mauling at me. I can try to figure out what is going on for me from the heart up and I can ask you what is going on for you from the heart up and feel an excitement and not a drag.

For that Miriam, I thank you.

Hi Geraldine,

This is my birthday treat, reading your page and reflecting. This is a special space, and we have a ritual for it that you described above. Yes, we go around the houses and then funnel down into what is old in the sense that it has been hanging somewhere, but new in the sense that it needed naming, and the name is new.

We know we need so little. It is not that we are isolated, because we have conversations that normalise the occasional moments of panic and anxiety. So we feel part of a bigger community. What I do notice is that because I am not tired the way I normally am, I manage these moments far better than I used to, even though what spurs those anxious moments [Covid-19 pandemic] is far bigger than anything I have experienced before.

There is, you are correct, an enormous sense of alignment that the world has temporarily identified what is most important, and is acting well.

My pressing desire is seeing family and friends on WhatsApp and Zoom and having conversations. It is satisfying beyond words.

What you are saying about reading and writing and grief connects with what (...) says she has learned about struggle and grief; that a new struggle connects with an old one, and connects to the same pain once again. That is such a devious form of grief, you are so right, so why do it?

You don't have to answer that question. But it might be relevant to the whole idea of transformative learning. I think it goes to a new level of the struggle perhaps.

Hi Miriam,

I was in a low place last Friday when my Zoom froze. I know our classrooms are highly volatile and unpredictable. But when for no apparent reason, the technology leaves me down, it does not prompt creativity and resourcefulness that happens in a face-to-face classroom. It induces helplessness and a feeling of passivity, overwhelm and beaten. Not immediately, but very quickly my limited range of responses runs out, this is where I end up STUCK! Suddenly working in my bedroom, turned sour. There was no one to ask. I wonder if these are the most dangerous emotions for blocking learning. Feeling shut out?

The vulnerability was about being in a situation where I was completely out of control and feeling 'cut off and stuck', fed back to the grief of last year. I feel that I spent at least 12 months watching events unfold, and incapable of influencing them.

My work space is at present in my bedroom. When I am in a good place, I take time to make the room into a space that supports me. On those days, it looks more like a mindful reflective space: candles, essential oil burning, lots of light, with trees outside of my window. I really love it. I feel I am sitting in a space that lets me connect with myself and be grounded in who I am. Lots of tea and sometimes music. I love seeing the spaces my students work in; it feels very intimate like the early days in literacy when I worked with students around my kitchen table.

My email is bursting with mindfulness, wellness etc. I feel it makes it more acceptable to introduce a different way of talking about our classroom which is not just meeting LO's and assessment criteria.

Take care of yourself and take everything you need to take care of your self.

Hi Geraldine,

I hope that the disorientating dilemma has eased a bit, and that writing about it helps. This is what we are missing at the moment, a ready availability of non-judgemental colleagues who will listen and help normalise the situation.

When I think of so many instances of technology failing us over the years in the classrooms, tech failure was normal. So I always had my whiteboard markers to the ready. And my handbooks (...) were the usual culprits. And in the face-to-face classes, there is always a student or two ready to help out if and when some of the technology doesn't work. So this time, we face real isolation.

This is how I face a disorientating dilemma, seeing it as a hill to climb, and not one I wanted to face. Feeling tired and defeated sometimes, even before I start into it. So I leave hard tasks until

after a good night's sleep. And after the sleep, my perspective has changed. The sense of discomfort has eased a bit. And I start eating an elephant, one bite at a time.

This time, our students' expectations of us have to be a lot lower than usual.

So tell me more. All in due course.

Hi Miriam,

As we walk the path of creating careful and transformative spaces within higher education, we really need each other to be able to establish our norms (...). This means for me that non-judgmental support from colleagues is not just some soft flaky thing, but an enabler that allows us to hold onto our values and stand strongly behind practices, which slowly and carefully nurture relationships.

As the feeling of safety and trust builds, I feel freer, more relaxed, more creative. They trust me to bring them through this space in a constructive and nurturing way. I can be more myself, more spontaneous more responsive. This, I always think of, as golden time in a classroom - there is ease. Whatever comes up in terms of discombobulation, we will pull with each other to handle it. I can make mistakes and demonstrate infallibility and ongoing learning. I can show the limits of my expertise and ask a group member to help me. We are on the same page. If that connection is not made, then I know this is going to be a hard run and I scale down my creativity and improvisation. I stick to the lesson plan.

Much gratitude for the clarity and sparkle your insight give me. When this is over Miriam, a visit to (...).

Take care enjoy the sun and some well-deserved rest and then let me know what your projects are and if I can be of any help or maybe that will be next year?

Later I meet with Miriam in her garden, and we discuss ownership of knowledge and who really owns the knowledge that is generated through dialogue. I want to capture that afternoon. We discuss how generating practitioner knowledge through dialogue is a form of alchemy, when two perspectives meet and create something that has a heightened value. I also wanted to acknowledge how Miriam embodies those qualities I recognise in my colleagues, which distinguishes our conversations. She will dig deeply, to bring out treasures, which she shares generously. This knowledge is embedded in her lived experience, her life stories. This is what makes for the real connection between us, beyond the functionality of an interviewer and interviewee, or a receiver and a giver. This is a very particular way of generating knowledge which is embodied, relational, emotional as well as cognitive and which liberates us to be more fully ourselves. There is an ease in these conversations that are embedded in creativity and criticality. We are interested in making

connections between the personal, psychological and the political, which are expressed in a conversational way with humour and stories. We burrow into our lives through dialogue and poetry, with a sustained curiosity to find the reasons behind things, enabling us to give new names for old words, create sparks of praxis and a wholeness that in retrospect appears to me as a living breathing critical and creative adult education methodology.

I bring earth and roots,
Seeds and tubers to you,

You hold them gently.
I cup my hands around yours.

You place them deep in the pain and joy
Of all that you have lived.

We open our hands
And new growth erupts.

Vignette Three: The two-hand reel - belonging in a community of practice

I explore death, stagnation, blind spots, joy, hope and hopelessness, with my colleague Lizzy. This resonates with the isolation that many of our students are experiencing. There are threads of transformative possibilities as I face my blind spots and imagine through our collaboration, how to address the isolation of tutors by creating virtual communities of practice to sustain their relationships.

I created these notes and a reflection to record my impressions of what we had spoken about together, with a view to capturing as closely as possible the words and phrases that were most significant to me for further reflection in our conversation.

***Me:** I seem to expect nothing more than to trickle out from this life. I was drained. I was invisible. It is as if somewhere I am just getting ready to limp to old age and die. I am not sure what to do with this all [but] I know that Lizzy held me in it [while I considered] the perspective that I may have really turned my life away from entertaining renewal. Why am I holding back, what am I waiting for to start living? I don't know how to date this, but I am just getting by... I will let the young people have the dreams and I will be old and sit by the fire... I have no new dreams...when did I get this old... where did my zest and energy go? Is this really what I want?*

Is this very small world giving me peace or is it a backwater to protect me from hoping and acting for more?

You: *I have this strong sense that you have been writing yourself off, closing yourself down for too long, Geraldine.*

This is a position of hope which does not reject hopelessness but which embraces it as the other state of being hopeful. Duggan and Munoz (2010) suggest that complacency is the opposite of hope. They argue that “complacency [is] a form of happiness that will not risk the consequences of its own suppressed hostility and pain” (2010, p. 280). This conversation allows me the space to break free and to come into myself and does not attempt to simply keep me within, but to move beyond it. I did not realise the extent to which the retreat from social interactions, some of necessity because of the pandemic, had reinforced my sense of helplessness. Our conversation helps me to find new sparks and entry points of empathy with students who are also isolated, and struggling with learners who are in many ways even more isolated. My focus shifts and moves to a way of supporting our learners within our virtual classrooms. It was what was needed to acknowledge and transform these difficult emotions by focusing on “something better and more promising in our future” (Daniels, 2012, p. 12).

I remember even now how it felt to be listened to, to be really seen and to be held in this space long enough to be able to begin to name the deadening limits of my world and to be pushed to expect more. We begin to explore how our module could support the development of online communities of practice, which might continue after the module is finished.

I feel myself come alive as we sit at the kitchen table and start to imagine this new community of tutors.

We became more animated and energised.

...We finished each other's sentences. We both, at the same time guessed what needed to be said next. I felt pure energy as I became more and more excited [at teaching together and] delivering a completely different type of module. [In a mode] of delivery that I would have resisted before.

We knew what was important for our students and for ourselves.

Being together. Making meaning and knowledge together. Sharing the personal, the educational and the political. [Sharing] the process of discovering and making meaning collectively [online needed to be carefully thought through]. So we came up with the idea of creating online small student hubs. We were on fire; we made one draft and then went for a swim. Then we came back and it was so clear. We are trying to set up communities of practice. We are scaffolding them to create something sustainable when we leave. [Past experience shows that] once we set up communities they will disappear, they [students] need to have ownership. That is why WhatsApp works, it is there and there are no teachers present... [they need] to feel safe. [The] time, content etc. [cannot be] taken out of their hands.

It raises new questions, more and more of them.

How do we find the balance between setting up pods around the country that they feel in charge of and yet we can (...) align with the module content and outcomes? How do we give autonomy and privacy and yet monitor and assess? How do we scaffold such a hybrid?

Yet without having answers we could see that something new was emerging which feels like a new phase in making a difference to the field.

It is lockdown, and we got permission to deliver the module together, from the kitchen. We created two distinct and complementary roles while we were online, which we alternated between us. What was most important was that we each communicated with one another (mostly through body language) how it was all going. We both agreed that this was the glue that held the entire project together. We realised that this was an opportunity to draw on our relationship as a demonstration of the kind of qualities and values that we would like our students, to bring to their communities of practice and into their classrooms. Being ourselves and not feeling judged or evaluated, enabled us to direct all these positive and caring emotions to our students, as well as to each other. It was effortless. It flowed. Our relationship with each other in the online classroom was infused with trust, empathy, understanding, kindness, curiosity and critical dialogue. The authenticity of our relationship transmitted itself to our students. One student tells us:

The encouragement, curiosity and sheer joy of learning that the lecturers displayed to the class are gifts that I would love to pass on to my learners. I could sprinkle my class with smiles, laughter, understanding and encouragement just as I witnessed on this module.

The student feedback emboldens us, and gives us the confidence to deliver a joint presentation to staff about why building relationships between adult educators and with our students needs to be prioritised within higher education. We take even more risks and

decide to include a roleplay, based on our composite experiences for the module to spark discussions about what it means to teach as a team, from the inside. We co-created a presentation to the Centre for Technology Enhanced Learning (CTEL) Community of Practice session in SETU. This is the script of the roleplay that we performed online, via Zoom:

9.50 am

Lizzy: Will we let them all in together now?

Geraldine: I am still trying to get a handle on this group; they seemed very quiet during our last session, what about if I let them in one at a time and just exchange a quick greeting? Welcome them with their name and say good to see you, hope all well with you, you know that sort of thing – it leaves a space for someone to give an indication if there is anything major in the week.

Lizzy: That's a great idea, if anything crops up that you think you want to follow up on - you can let the rest in together in a group and discuss it. I can pick up the welcome piece for late individuals through the chat room. It really worked yesterday; I would never have known that Miriam was looking after three children with Covid – God it doesn't bear thinking about.

Geraldine: Oh, look an email from John, his server is down (apparently this happens in good weather) rain gives a better connection - is there no end to what is out of our control?

Lizzy: Do you remember Pauline who has to go on mute every time a tractor passes in her lane because we could all hear the roar of it? So you are taking the first session? I can look after the chat room and any difficulties that individuals are having. I put their personal emails on the desktop, do you know it was the best way of sending the link to those new students who had problems registering.

Geraldine: Brilliant I can do the share screen. This time during the break, I will manually set up the breakout rooms because we need a better mix in the groups - do you have the info on who has the most practical experience Lizzy? We need to mix up the different levels of experience, but maybe keep people working in similar settings together? What do you think?

Geraldine: Crikey my screen has frozen!

Lizzy: no prob, I can let them know what's happening...while you reboot. OK, I am pressing the button. Good Morning, Jack! Good to see you- how are you doing? I love the view of the mountains from your window.

11.00am

Geraldine: Phew, I can breathe – I felt that there were a lot of people who didn't seem to want to be there - but then again I was focused on the slides ... there seemed to be big pauses of silence, more than just the usual online tech sort of quiet? I was wondering about the pacing, remind me to ask them tomorrow please.

Lizzy: No, I was watching and do you remember the group who were struggling yesterday, they were all nodding their heads and smiling - give them time another session in the COP and they will get more used to speaking online

I loved that input on PLAAC- I could see how that really builds on my definition session- it just comes together like magic – I am going to start with that link in my next session. I was so interested, I forgot I was supposed to be working.

Geraldine: I don't think so Lizzy, you played a blinder when you picked up that one pair hadn't been asked for their feedback - I am still getting used to their names – it was fantastic that you were able to step in. It's funny how you can pick up a vibe even across the screen.

Lizzy: The last group were on fire, but we have definitely passed some kind of milestone today - I can feel them warming up, becoming a little freer.

Lizzy calls it our two-hand reel - and we are dancing.

This connection which begins with a conversation and develops into a collaborative action together to create something that did not formerly exist, helps me to experience a feeling of joy and reminds me about other ways of being from which I have been disconnected for too long and sparks the beginning of a process to nurture this essential vitality of hope. It is as if the collaboration allows me to imagine a classroom, which more closely mirrors the world that I long to inhabit, which does not exist yet beyond this pedagogical space.

I am greened, by this newly rain-washed cow parsley bed,
opening its animal scents and tracks to me.
A shrew darts purposefully across my path,
drawing my eyes down to a celandine,

casting the music of opening petals,
to the lime trees above.

I am in love with this world.
A world I enter like those darkly light stone churches in Brittany,
On those sky blue afternoons,
Where strange prayers pulsed inside me,
As I tiptoed towards the altar.
Each step shaking off my need to know or understand
Stilled.
A place
to pause,
to breathe.
To look again,
to listen,
to reconsider,
to reimagine this familiar place,
anew.
(April 4th 2020)

Vignette Four: Naming what can't be easily named - belonging in a community of practice

In this vignette, I am interested in how we can build relationships, over time, which can hold us in our most fragile spaces. My colleague's love and care allows me to come out of hiding from myself and name in this private space, those powerful feelings that I cannot name in more public spaces. I have no sense yet, that I am connecting with one of the dominant emotions of the inquiry for understanding my vision and practice as an adult educator. I do not know that I will be looping back to this conversation from different contexts on many occasions. This touches on the slow incremental nature of transformational learning which does not arrive as a blinding flash of insight. Instead it is one of many conversations over years where I work and rework, in different social and relational contexts, my struggle to make sense of these contradictory feelings of love and shame. It is also an opening onto a world that has not been fully worked through, but frames shame as not just an individual problem, but something that we have learned from institutions and other social forces.

Dear Carmel,

In many ways, I am trying to replicate in my research the thrill and excitement that I experienced when we would just fall into conversations and let our thoughts about our practice just tumble out.

There is an experience that I would love to share with you, which I think that you will understand. I set myself the task of trying to recall an experience in my childhood that might explain in some way why I was so drawn to spend all of my working life, working towards a fairer educational system.

The problem was that I went back into an old rehearsed story mode. As if I had a [script] that I was using to explain myself to myself. Somehow being in this strange space, where there are no members of my family alive, gave me permission to explore my past more freely.

Anyway, I started with a collage of photocopies of these artefacts, then a poem, then was gripped to write in the present tense an account of an experience that happened in a flash but I don't remember ever talking about or consciously mulling over.

I couldn't help wondering why these documents were of such importance to him. I could only imagine. But I did hear him call my name so beautifully one night in a dream, while I was working on this and wondering if it was disrespectful. So I felt that it is good to revisit this story and perhaps release something that had become trapped in my dad and then in me, (if that is not too bonkers).

(...) It also lifted a veil on my dad's relationship with me, and how shame put a distance between us. It seems that I spent a part of my childhood bearing witness to someone struggling with the crippling consequences of almost wanting to be invisible, in case they would be 'truly seen'.

Do you remember one conversation where we were talking about our fear of revealing to our students that we were from working-class backgrounds? In my case, I was really afraid that they might think I wasn't the real deal from an academic perspective.

I got stuck in this story [about my dad's experience of humiliation at the farmer's door]...I felt that one way through it was to turn [his story, into a story that I shared as a reflective activity in class] (...) that I could use for sparking discussions with tutors about their motivations and values in adult literacy work. I am not sure if this was a good idea. What was good is that it gave me a chance to be able to talk about this experience with composure and not cry, so that is some kind of progress. I left them guessing [who it belonged to], by leaving Dad's name in, and [left them] wondering whether it was me or not. I don't think that they made the connection. If I do it again I need to think about why and how, afresh.

Dear Carmel,

As part of my research, which is examining my experience of being an adult educator committed to creating careful classrooms for transformation, I am trying to reflect on a very old dilemma which has plagued my time in WTT, and rose its head again last week when I was trying to hold control of what I could and couldn't deliver in terms of the Language and Power module. I am hoping to run these thoughts by you in the hope that you might feel able to respond from your own experience.

Dear Geraldine,

First, thanks again for reaching out to me and my apologies for making a slow return to this. I do know the situation, of course, and oh God, the irony of the Language and Power module too.

You have such a beautiful and caring approach to your classroom work and your students - they are so, so lucky. Not all of them will realise it of course, or not immediately. But you are modelling a way for them to be their own human selves, often in a difficult and under-resourced space - teaching is both an art and a very human practice. I used to say to them that they are first and foremost teaching people, second is the subject.

For myself, I never managed to shake off the lack I felt - the lack of a middle-class upbringing, the lack of cultural capital, the lack of a qualification from a standard university. And on and on. How could I have been ashamed of my upbringing, when my [Mam and Dad] did miracles just keeping us all together, with no support from those in authority, none. But that's the effect of knowing your lack of privilege, and shame is of course learned. Encountering Bourdieu and cultural capital etc. was profound for me.

I read your very moving piece about your dad, [at the farmer's door]. I remember meeting him no more than once or twice but he struck me as being somehow noble in himself. Does that sound like a strange thing to say? But yes, a man of quiet dignity and nobility. And imaginative too - those inventions and patents!

Putting down firmer roots - living, loving, and learning through vignettes.

McCormack et al (2020) reminds us that autoethnography “is about the self, of use to the self but not for the self” (p. 78). In that sense, I am using deeply personal experience as a way not only of coming to know the self, but also that it may be a way of drawing attention to those voices and experiences that are not recognised within mainstream, in order to disrupt some of the grand narratives that subordinate them through silence.

I selected these particular vignettes because they illuminate a pedagogical space for creativity and mutual exploration, with people who are living, and whose insights, responses and experiences I cherish, in my struggle to know myself and the world. Autoethnography considers the researcher as “the primary focus of the inquiry, the source of experience from which knowledge emerges” (McCormack et al, 2020, p. 75). The vignettes can be considered as a collaborative space where we are generating practitioner knowledge by exploring deeply into our own subjective experience, while simultaneously exploring into the other, in so far as we are exploring how in relationship we are shaped and shape each other. They are also potentially a way of making a “keen intervention in that process” (McCormack et al, 2020, p. 81) as they try to capture those moments where we are reflexively alert to the “complex dynamic between our internal and external world”.

Humphreys (2002) suggests that “Grief moves us like love. Grief is love, I suppose. Love as a backward glance” (p. 50). Therefore, it feel right that after an extended conversation with grief, this section should have been about love. Love has appeared in many guises throughout the inquiry, but I have let it seep through these last pages in its least complicated form, so that you will feel that you could almost inhale it.

The vignettes are perhaps most useful for capturing love as a transformational opening up of perspectives and possibilities, which is driven by a “commitment to others” (Freire, 96, p. 70). O’Brien (2005) suggests that transformation and development occur through the “recognition and resourcing of caring engagements between embodied, emotional and rational subjects within their own specific contexts” (p. 22). However, the caring engagements between us, within our community of practice, thrived because they were neither recognised nor resourced by our Institution, and existed outside of its structures, which gave it an autonomy.

The legitimacy came from within the community where there was an unstated understanding that “we must learn how to learn cooperatively in a way that nobody need ‘lose’” (Formenti & West, 2018, p. 267) and that “dialogue is the necessary road to authenticity and to encounters with truth, however ragged and imperfect” (p. 269). I consider an adult learning space to be one where there is a more community-based approach to learning, where learning is not an individual commodity. The relationships must be loving and attentive, and committed to bringing change inside and outside of our lives. Formenti and West (2018, p. 268) describe the quality of the relationships as the “good enough love of the (m) other” (p. 269). This refining of our experience so that we can learn from our experience and support others to learn from theirs, can only be possible within reciprocal and loving relationships where we can ourselves be fully human, vulnerable and share insights and perspective with others.

The vignettes are also interested in how these relationships of love foster qualities of “curiosity, emotional openness (...) including critical reflexivity” (Formenti & West, 2018, p. 268) as well as bringing acceptance and warmth. The qualities which are essential for nurturing our ability to struggle with our fragility and vulnerability which comes into play when we commit to naming our lived experience as we encounter fundamental experiences of grief, loss, injustice, apathy, shame and anger, which are entangled in confronting our internal and external oppressor in our lives and the lives of our students. There is throughout all of the conversations, empathy and care to connect with each other

and understand a different point of view, rather than an attempt to score points or win arguments at the expense of gaining some new insight or meaning. This is a collaborative form of critical reflection, as participants draw on their experience, as well as ideas from psychology and sociology, to open up new perspectives as well as possible reasons behind things. Critical reflection takes the form of stories, metaphors, humour all of which breach any barrier between the personal and the public (Fleming, 2019).

Spreading our wings in the classroom

This is a moment of working from within a more whole sense of myself. This is a vantage point which has recognised the subtle and destructive nature of shame and allowed me to view my practice in a more open and curious way. This is possible because I am freer, more connected to my own lived experiences and trusting my impulses and instincts in a way which is impossible from within the “internal shame spiral” (Kaufman, 1992, p. 74.). In many ways it captures what Formenti (2018), describes as transformative learning, “where perceptions, emotions, concepts, values, judgments, and decisions are not separate but work together, largely unconsciously, to guide us, in the company of others, to create a more integrated understanding of learning” (p. 83). I have a deeper, more embodied understanding of how our relationships with our colleagues become vital for sustaining us inside and outside our learning spaces, and while often invisible, are intimately connected to our practice, our relationships with ourselves and our students and the structures in our workplaces, which in this case are creating fragmentation and demoralisation among the majority of the students working as adult education tutors, as is illustrated in the incident below.

I am more emboldened and have a clearer sense of the purpose and also the risks of inviting students to explore their experiences with freewriting and images to express the ‘unexpressed’, which is linked to their lived reality. I have once again recreated a pedagogical moment, which I noted in my journal. But I expand on the theme of writing into and beyond heaviness by populating this story with composite students and drawing on composite comparable pedagogical experiences. This is very strong, as I can sense that they are frustrated with what is being asked of them in their work setting. I am inspired by Duggan and Munoz’s description of “revolutionary love” as “the desire for a new world despite an emotional/world situation that attempts to render such desiring impossible” (Duggan & Munoz, 2010, p. 278). I feel a deep conviction about the beauty of a disruptive love stirring inside me. I know intimately the groundlessness and the possibilities of

working towards a better life, through a process of undoing, dismantling and recreating. I am also very aware of the messiness involved in inviting students to use free writing, to move beyond their comfort zone.

But the critical incident below arose at just that moment when, from the general chatter, I could feel the air dense and heavy, with untold stories of weariness, disappointment, anger. These stories resonated through me, and brought us at once together, and yet still apart. I could feel the pain of all that love simmering under a torrent of emotions that was bubbling up from the frustration of not being able to work meaningfully with adults with unmet literacy needs. I too needed to emotionally engage with what was only partially expressed within me and within the room.

The classroom is quiet. The sun is illuminating a room full of enthusiastic adult literacy tutors who care deeply about their students, and love their work. They are sharing their understanding of a new regulation which is required of them and are becoming increasingly despondent as they view the gap between what they value as good classroom practice and yet another bureaucratic demand which will take from their contact time with their learners.

Suddenly I notice that my eyes are smarting a little, as smoke curls upwards from one side of the classroom. The air has thickened and something is smouldering. My chest tightens. I sense danger. A spark jumps up from the left hand side of the classroom and one of the tutors says that she feels very sad. 'I know that this is what we should be doing, but it is really difficult given the short time I have with them', and then goes on to detail an almost overwhelming workload which leaves less and less time to focus on the learner. The flame is fanned with a gust of wind as more and more voices rush in to speak, 'It seems mad, when at the end of it my student will have a folder full of stuff that he can't even read'. The smoke is now thickening in the room and visibility is becoming more strained. 'How can I find the time to help them with literacy when it isn't even a learning outcome on the module descriptor and they have six months to complete the course'?

Peering through this dense smoke, I am aware of something else which is smouldering in the centre of the room. It is the intense heat of passion, as tutors reconnect with their deep concern to do right by their students, while encountering what appear to be indomitable constraints.

This is a pivotal moment in their learning journey, as they identify a complex dilemma at the heart of their practice, and one that plays out over and over again in my classroom. It is also a pivotal moment in mine. I pause and feel the full complexity of this moment. The lid raised off my classroom to reveal the ebb and flow of feelings, values, positions, ideas,

relationships, past and present experiences, all of which are creating this unique moment. This is a place that is both familiar and unknown. As Kelchtermans (2009) describes it, it is that moment when teachers unconsciously are “getting into their students’ skin while teaching (empathy), anticipating the possible impact of their teaching acts on learners” (p. 259).

I look at the register and can see that they live and work at huge distances from each other and can experience long periods of isolation. They have few opportunities to share their stories and their practices with each other. This, for some, is the first time they have tried to articulate a dissonance between what they are doing and what they feel they should be doing. The years of working precariously as tutors has taken its toll - how can they hope to liberate students when they are feeling ground down and trapped. In many cases, they internalise their frustration with the system as their personal failures.

There is no time to waste. I pick up my own pen and invite them to do the same. I invite them to consider different aspects of our practice as adult educators, as if we are animals, fruit and vegetables, landscapes.

Our heads are bowed and we are writing in short furious bursts of three minute. There is no time to hesitate, falter or overthink. I am inviting them to join me in a collective act of revolutionary love, which “opens up the space to imagine a collective escape, an exodus, a “going-off script” (Duggan & Munoz, 2010, p. 278) together. I am very aware of the unpredictability of inviting learners to bring their disappointment, struggle and joys of their lived realities into the classroom, but I also know the power of letting our impulses direct us away from “announc[ing] the way things *ought* to be, but, instead, imagining what things *could* be” (p. 278).

The smoke begins to clear and the room is full of powerful eagles, elite athletes, dolphins, night skies, avalanches, watermelons...

But it does not stop. Some people want to read and others want to listen. Some have written nothing but they are fascinated by what they are learning from other people. There is fun, laughter, empathy, tears. Again and again, people comment on how they know each other better and feel a greater sense of connection to each other, how easily the writing flowed and how surprised they were at the power of the writing as they journeyed inwards to their internal world. This gave them an opening into a reconsideration of their

experiences of working as an adult educator, as a way to begin to work through this heaviness.

Our discussion takes off. Then someone says, ‘It’s as clear as the nose on our face, that there’s something eating away at the heart of our work, which is pushing us to do the opposite of what we know is needed’!

I hear that clarion call, the naming of the true word, that changes our classroom into a deeply human space, where the shadow of a road begins to open in front of us, and it begins to slowly dawn on us, that we have important work to do and we must start now.

Feeling you in my skin and in my being

As the research progressed, I become more and more committed to reconnecting with my lived experience in an embodied and holistic way. This allows me to reposition myself, more intimately in relation to my mam and dad. I return again to the collage and focus this time on the image of the sun and some of those earlier documents that shaped our family story.



Collage of the sun (within the torso)

Nothing is definite or fixed, but there is something new added to this narrative that was not there before. The collage feels different; I am drawn into the powerful vibrations of the sun that is radiating outwards. Something has been named and reframed, which allows a less tangled form of love overshadow any shame between us or inside us. I feel the excitement I used to feel in my college days when I would long to share what was beautiful in my world. I still long to make them part of it. Sands and Tennant (2010), suggest that finding a way to reposition yourself in relation to “the deceased, the self and others” (p. 116) can be viewed as a result of transformational learning. This meant that while the old, grief-laden meanings were still active, there was a more hopeful and healthy one which stopped me from getting stuck in fixed and despairing ruminations. This is not an end in itself, as this multi-layered dialogue will continue into the future. But I have a sense of being more at home with myself and my mam and dad, as this research has allowed me to reconnect to so many parts of my lived experience that I had pushed down and tried to ignore. But now I can open myself to imagine us experiencing a collective epistemic shift, where we can mutually enjoy the richness of the learning that I have valued the most, and celebrate the ways in which their lives are woven, and will forever be woven through my living practice.

But now I can, as I imagine us experiencing an epistemic shift, where we can mutually enjoy the richness of the learning that I have valued the most, and the ways in which their lives are woven, and will forever be woven through my practice.

My dearest Mam and Dad,

I wrote to you all through my college years when I desperately wanted to share some of the excitement and learning that brought such joy and feeling of possibility into my life. For one final time, I want to write to you, to bring you with me to the end of this journey, in the hope that we can celebrate this new space that has opened up in front of me.

You did not understand my choice to work in adult education in the past, but I invite you into this world to understand this community and our work a little better. Above all, I want you to know that I am living among people who hope and work for a world that is closer to the lives that you lived and encouraged us to live

It's a long time since I have written you a letter, but I have not left you out of my sight for one day since we said our goodbyes. You have patiently travelled with me. You have stood back when I needed space, and moved in closer when I lost my foothold, but not too close - not so close that I could not come up for air and breathe and take an expansive look around me. I sensed that at times you were irritated with me, as I forced you into the public space that you had such ambivalence towards. You were nervous that your literacy practices, which you furtively protected, would be exposed to correction and ridicule. I hope that I did the opposite and honoured them.

I imagine that at times you were tired, bored, and frustrated at this long drawn out, slow, messy and often uncertain and inconclusive process. There are no dramatic insights or revelations here. It may feel at this stage that I have stated the obvious, that I could have, should have, made these connections sooner, maybe when you were both still alive. But there is something about grief that gave me a new impetus to feel close to you, even closer than we had been towards the end of your lives.

There is no answer to that. I can only say that whole process has moved through real time, at a pace that was out of my control but which brought incremental, transformative shifts that moved me from disconnection, sadness and doubt, to this new space of renewal and reclamation. This happened in ways that filled me with wonder. There were those visits of insights, which just appeared in my life, out of the blue, a dream, an image or a poem that would just arrive into my life. I learned to listen to those objects that you loved and that I kept near my workspace, I would hear you both talking to me, and sometimes I could even hear voices from even further back in our family. I can't explain to you very well, but I felt compelled to keep going with this research so that I could in some way break silences that were full of suffering and poorly named and understood experiences, which filled us with disappointment and shame. But you will be glad to know that my college knowledge was able to help me with the pain of working through some of these dark spaces. It gave me perspectives that assured me that it was ok to be in the middle of the darkness and lost, that this was a stage that might open out in to something more constructive. It encouraged me to use my love of reflections and writing to keep searching for ways of learning from it and of making some sense of it in a way that did not leave me stuck and feeling worse.

I have made a story, which addresses something silent and disappointing that overshadowed and interfered with my yearning to reach you both intimately. Do you celebrate that this story has allowed me to better understand our experience of feeling 'less than', and answerable to something that would always find us lacking and not enough, something that wanted us to remain where we were? But most of all, is it a relief to you that I have named how this sense of shame and disappointment within us was something that we learned and internalised from those hierarchical social relationships? It was not of our doing - there were things that we did not know and could not have known which caused us to miss each other and misunderstand our best efforts to connect with each other. We did not know that you and Dad were given different messages, than me who attended college. While sharing so much, we also learned different things about who we were, who we could be and what kind of future we could imagine.

Did you feel my rage and anger as I tried to imagine the frustrations of not being able to name or express that experience of being subordinated? This was unquestioned as part of the natural order for people who learn that they are positioned at the bottom of a dominant social hierarchy and who are manipulated to believe like we did, that through our own fault, our future was pre-determined.

But above all, I hope that you have heard how I feel in many ways more fully myself, and how this has progressively worked its ways into these chapters. I hope you have heard that, in a strange way, I feel more like a 'somebody' whose relationship with shame has changed, so that I feel less suffocated by it and perhaps it will finally dissipate in this next generation. Do you find peace that I have a renewed sense of having woven my life more closely into the fabric of you both, which has changed my experience of grief, from loss and rupture to one of reconnection?

I wonder can you finally grasp the freedom of living within the contradiction that we are enough, while there is always more learning, more hope, more joy, more grief and more loss - a place where I could celebrate your courage and strength that inspired me as a child? I remember your insistence that we must always consider the impact of our thoughts, words and deeds on the lives of others and your compassion that understood how a simple throw of a dice was between us and destitution,

suffering, hard times and all that it brings. Your response to an unfair world underpinned your conviction that the human race was one family and that we must respond to each other with empathy and compassion. This was something which temporarily did not carry the same importance or weight for me, as I embraced the knowledge and practices of my new world in higher education, but which we now know, had motivated me to work in adult literacy and were the core values which have underpinned my practice and been my moral compass in confusing and challenging times.

Do you feel satisfied that my work was challenging the limiting stereotyping of people with unmet literacy needs? It is my attempt to celebrate and recognise the dignity of those lives that were confined to the margins and shadows, outside of public spaces, but more importantly that they would have the opportunity to bring their own stories and lived experiences into public spaces where they could be honoured and recognised. I dream that there would have lifelong access to learn how to use their own words to question, challenge, celebrate, lament and to name the world, so that they can better understand 'the why', behind the constraints on their dreams and hopes and stop blaming their own personal failures. Can you see your experience at the farmer's door differently now, Dad?

For me, this has to be a process of us being encouraged to connect and value the truth of our lived experience and feelings, by using different ways of knowing which were already valued in your vibrant world of story-telling, like words that resonate, images, dreams, intuitions and empathy. It should have been a priority within your schooling to be given permission to express what it really means to be human, and learn how to name those processes and structures that oppose it. Did I make it clearer to you how our position in society is linked to our exposure to subordinating literacy practices, these practices that you were not enabled to acquire, are the very practices that are needed to understand, express and challenge our own subordination. It is not enough to spend hours learning lists of irrelevant spellings, writing shopping lists or signing forms. This just helped you to function in the very system that had pushed you to the margins. Do you see how easy it is to become implicated in our own experience of being trapped, like a recurring decimal point, with no way of breaking free?

None of this will dismantle those international and national forces that closed factories, created recessions, emptied the centres of our towns and laid workers off with two-weeks' notice. But it can help people to feel energised and angry, and teach people how to use that anger not against themselves, but to take back some control of their lives. This can change how we see and feel about ourselves and others, which enables us to behave differently. This can lead to collective action from the bottom up, which can make real changes. But you knew some of this Dad, didn't you? I mean you saw it in action. I remember how distressed you were to vote against strike action, because you could see it had been manipulated by management to provide the excuse to close the factory and blame the workers. I wrote this below for my students who were returning to study and who were very nervous about doing sociology. I wrote it as if I was writing it for you. You will hear echoes of how you inspired me in it, and perhaps take heart that there are ways of understanding those frustrations and constraints that were not just at play in your life, but are across society.

In the reflection below, I feel an emotional openness and sense of being more whole. From this place, I find my landscape and my language to weave, unfalteringly and with a heartfelt fluency, the different dimensions of my life together - the personal, professional and political - as an invitation that they may grow in this learning space with me. It feels like a new departure, a new way of inviting students in to my life, with an intention to encourage them to bring their

valued experiences into this module. There is also a hint of sadness that it has taken me so long to feel this comfortable with myself in a learning space.

Some thoughts to you, my students, from the river bank...

I swim in the early morning every day that I can, in our local river. It helps me to 'come together' in my mind and heart. There is a heron who watches me with great curiosity.

For those moments when I am swimming up river, I feel deeply that the world is a beautiful and a perfect place. More importantly, I feel that all of us, wherever we are in the world, are one big family and it is our 'work' to take care of each other and to help each other to grow strong and be fully alive.

As I am drying myself, I often think about the day ahead. Today I am thinking about all of you and I am wondering how best to start this module. I want to welcome you. I want you to feel safe and curious, so that we can share our experiences and think about a world which is far from perfect but which can be changed.

I want you to take time to think about your own experiences of learning. I wonder if like me, you have experiences that were shiny and made you shine. But perhaps you also hold sensitive memories that were not shiny, and taught you messages about yourself that limited you and dimmed your view of yourself and/or others. Connecting with some of these experiences can be useful to help us to understand how we can support our learners to challenge some of the distorted ideas they have about themselves as learners, which do not serve them well.

As I look down the riverbank, I realise that there is a connection between getting into the river and our experience of learning in school. Your position on the riverbank plays a large part in determining how easy it is to access the river or not. At one part of the bank, there is a ladder and you can step easily down into the water. At other points, the access is blocked by mud, marshes and reeds that makes entry more difficult. Towards the bend in the river, there are rows of willow trees and it is almost impossible to enter from that point.

You might be wondering what this module is about? Will I understand it? Will there be a lot of reading? Put that out of your mind for a while and think about the story above. Society in many ways is like the riverbank. Your position in society and where you are born and grow up, play a significant part in shaping your experience of accessing education and the outcomes you gain from it. This is the story that we are exploring in 'Literacy and Society'.

With my with love as ever,

Geraldine

We must make it possible to create a world where everyone can raise their pens to change the world, by filling it with true words that interrupt the stagnation of living in silence, a withering silence that would have us believe that we have no right to strive for more or better. I come back to the collage again and I can see in the 'Mer-Angel' that I am there in my embodied and knowing self, shaking off some of the historical structures and shackles, or at least in a better position to confront them and loosen their grip with new stories with unknown endings. But there is still a dissatisfaction, a restlessness that more has changed and shifted than I can put into words. I know that this new way of being is provisional, incomplete and will keep emerging and changing. It has given me a renewed and more intimate understanding of the relationship between Freire's concept of challenging oppressive internalised narratives and transformational learning, which brings a sense of restoration, reconnection and belonging which may not challenge the external structures of oppression, but which bring revitalisation across my life and particularly into my practices as an adult educator (Hoggan et al, 2017).



Mer-Angel

This sense of renewal as transformational can, in this instance, be best known through poetry, and is written for my supervisor, Fergal Finnegan, who guided me like a conductor to liberate the 'blue note' inside me, and transform it into a musical score. This liberated me to reframe the lenses of the present, shaped by the past, and create more possibilities for the future. I have also included two 'instant' poems about why literacy matters, written by a group of students who represent all of those magnificent tutors working in adult literacy, from whom I have learned so much and 'who just get it'!

Midnight Blue

And so it turns out, I can make words
Vibrate against sinew, muscle and bone
Like long blue notes.

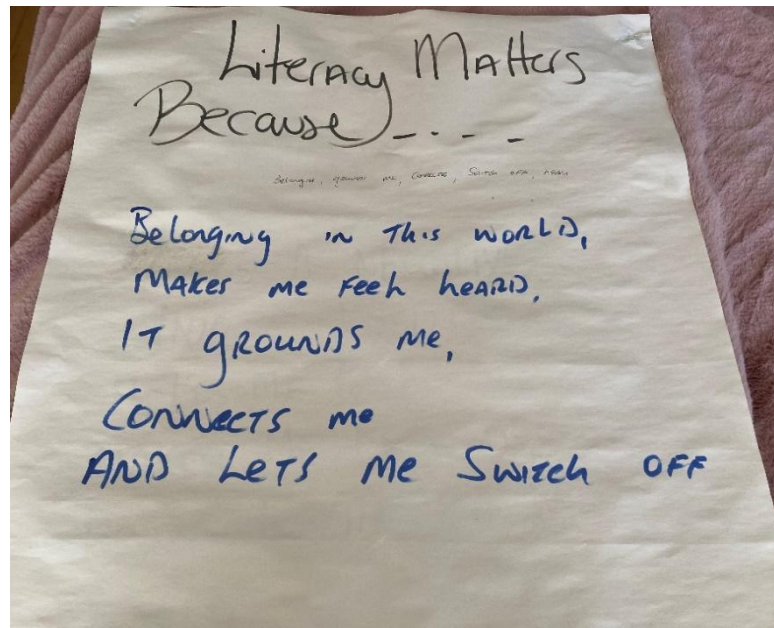
I lift my pen tall and straight,
A lightning rod,
And plant it deep in the soft flesh

Ready to trap the twitch
And throb and stretch and slump
Of me.

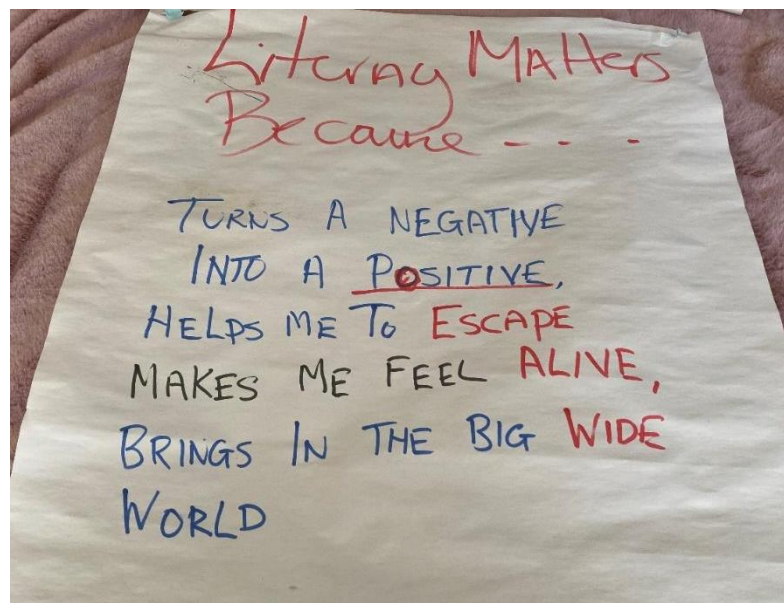
Something surges and falls apart,
Bubbling through the skin.
Gliding upwards,

Hanging long and pure, then resting
Before swirling and gaining speed
Until it shatters beyond the horizon,

Turning the sky
And then the whole world,
Midnight blue.



Literacy matters because (i)



Literacy matters because (ii)

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APPENDIX A – ETHICS FORM

**Autoethnographic research study with contributions from
Adult Educators committed to supporting transformational
learning in Waterford institute of Technology**

Focus group/follow up conversations

Consent Form for Research Participants

I.....agree to participate in Geraldine Mernagh's research study titled:
An Adult Educator's critical reflections on the experience and value of creating a 'careful
classroom' to support transformational learning within Higher Education.

Please **tick each statement** below if you agree with it. Please **do not tick** them if you **do not agree** with them.

☐ The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me verbally and in writing. I've been able to ask questions, which were answered satisfactorily.

☐ I am participating voluntarily.

☐ I give permission for my focus group interviews with Geraldine Mernagh to be audio/video recorded.

☐ I give permission that relevant correspondence concerning the focus group interviews (e.g. email, phone, Zoom) between Geraldine Mernagh and myself may be used.

☐ I understand that I can withdraw from the study, without repercussions, at any time, whether that is before it starts or while I am participating.

☐ I understand that I can amend or redact my responses up to ten days after the focus group interview or follow-up one-to-one conversations.

☐ I understand that I can view the transcript of the focus group interview or one-to-one follow-up conversations and make changes to my contribution within two weeks, and I may withdraw my consent for it to be used up to the submission of the draft thesis.

☐ It has been explained to me how my data will be managed and that I may access it on request.

☐ I understand the limits of confidentiality as described in the information sheet.

☐ I understand that my data, in an anonymous format, may be used in further research projects and any subsequent publications if I give permission below:

☐ I agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview

☐ I do **not** agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview

☐ I agree for my data to be used for further research projects

☐ I do **not** agree for my data to be used for further research projects

Signed..... Date.....

Participant name in block capitals.....

I the undersigned have taken the time to fully explain to the above participant the nature and purpose of this study in a manner that they could understand. I have explained the risks involved as well as the possible benefits. I have invited them to ask questions on any aspect of the study that concerned them.

Signed.....

Date.....

Researcher Name in block capitals

If during your participation in this study you feel the information and guidelines that you were given have been neglected or disregarded in any way, or if you are unhappy about the process, please contact the Secretary of the Maynooth University Ethics Committee at research.ethics@mu.ie or +353 (0)1 708 6019. Please be assured that your concerns will be dealt with in a sensitive manner.

For your information the Data Controller for this research project is Maynooth University, Maynooth, Co. Kildare. Maynooth University Data Protection officer is Ann McKeon in Humanity House, Room 17, who can be contacted at ann.mckeeon@mu.ie. Maynooth University Data Privacy policies can be found at <https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/data-protection>.

Two copies to be made: 1 for participant, 1 for PI

APPENDIX B – A LEARNING RESOURCE

A tutor's story of a formative experience of educational injustice and how it informed her work?

It is 1971 in Ireland. I am 11. Our Sunday spin feels heavier today. But the sight of the apple tart reassures me that the picnic is taken care of. You drag yourself out of the car. I can almost feel the weight in your body. You make your way nervously up a twisty muddy lane, where you knock on the farmer's door to make your plea for work, a shy proud man to whom this does not come easily. Your knowledge was in your head, hands and in your heart, and reading and writing is far from your experience. You have disappeared inside this grand house. A bony dog is crouching down, chained to the wall. He cannot, or has lost interest in, lifting his head. Myself and my mam are now craning to see how this will go.

After a long time, you step outside of the house and trudge back to the car. It is your face that holds me. I have never seen a face like this before. I do not want to look at it.

You slump into the car and looking straight ahead you say "Nothing Lil, nothing"

I sank back into my seat, trying not to look at you. Nothing needed to be said. You were used to this. But this one was different. This one cut deep. This one cut despair. This time something ugly had been said. You are humiliated. I am angry. I am very angry, and I want to cry. I want to jump out of the car and drag this farmer out onto the lane...but I do not know yet what I would say. This is wrong and this must end is all that I know for now. But I will find those words ... AND I WILL CHANGE IT.

I dream that I will find that farmer and I will bring you to him, and this time you will stand tall and proud and say "You cannot speak to me like that, you cannot speak to someone who respectfully knocks on your door and looks for some paid work from you like that, I would like you to apologise".

Your face then, as now, haunts me. I sometimes see your face in my classrooms, when I mark assignments or make teaching practice observations. I see you and the shame and the cruel injustices which you accepted with such dignity. And I question if this activity will change any of this system that continues to perpetuate humiliation and shame.

We go straight home, the apple tart uncut.

Discussion points

Take some time to consider if this story sparks any memories or stories of your own?

The tutor draws on this experience to inform her understanding how she might try to create a 'care-full classroom' to support transformative learning for her learners.

In groups of three, create a poster – images and words - to show us your idea of the 'care-full classroom'.

- What would be important in creating that learning space?
- What would it feel like to be a learner in that room?
- What would be considered important learning?
- What might she be inviting learners to reconsider, over a long interval of time?