



The Clay Pit's Hearth

Personal essays 2010 - 2014

Table of Contents

on passing the torch	5
on starting over, indefinitely.....	6
on my own little idea of salvation.....	7
on the selling of a flat.....	9
on walls and their bricks.....	11
on escape.....	13
on the Devil's eye.....	15
on focusing.....	16
on being in limbo.....	17
on collecting moonlight.....	19
on the naming and not naming of things.....	20
on celebrity.....	22
on spinnin'	23
on books.....	25
on holiday.....	27
on trivial forms of humiliation.....	29
on words left out.....	31
on unexpected survival.....	32
on human frailties.....	34
on the edge.....	36
on the human realm	39
on medication.....	42
on hiatus.....	44
on Christmas truths.....	45

on non-submission.....	47
on circles.....	50
on discrimination.....	52
on driving in snow.....	54
on one condition.....	55
on the small and the beautiful.....	57
on witches.....	58
on having and being.....	60
an open love letter to my sister.....	62
an open letter to the Director of the Dark Mountain Project.....	64
on institutions 1/3.....	67
on institutions 2/3.....	69
on institutions 3/3.....	72
on speaking out of place.....	74
on commitment.....	76
on stage.....	78
chiaroscuro.....	80
on my father at the wheel.....	85
on responsibility.....	87
on storytelling.....	90
reflection (May 2013).....	92
on roadkill of one sort or another.....	93
on belonging.....	96
one more for the Nutter folder.....	97
in context.....	99
it's taxing.....	101

the trophy life.....	103
one of those stories: five years on	104
one grey morning.....	106
the secret of divine wisdom.....	107
on clarity.....	109
all sweetness and light.....	111
only connect.....	112
on breaking rank.....	114
on the unnamed penultimate track.....	116
on learning to knit a new public discourse.....	118
heaven and hell.....	120
break down the door.....	122
empowerment is.....	124
there she goes again.....	125
on daring to be impolite.....	126
Miss Behaving.....	128
on losing the albatross.....	129
on dancing in the dark.....	131
at the walls of Troy.....	132
on ismism.....	134
goodbye.....	135
about cricket7642.....	136

on passing the torch

October 4, 2010

Yesterday I surrendered three hours of my life to a chore that I despise: clothes shopping. My daughter needed a winter coat and boots, so we faced down the pavement traffic and oppressive venues of the high street.

In one shop, we walked past a Ramones tshirt and I pointed it out to her, saying “hey how about this?” She turned to glance at it, then rolled her eyes in disgust and said “Oh god, mum. No way.”

She rolled her eyes at it. She rolled her eyes at the Ramones the way I used to roll my eyes at my parents’ Barbra Streisand albums.

I should point out here that she started high school recently, an occasion we celebrated with a viewing of Rock n Roll High School.

Rather than providing a super-cool bonding experience, this merely opened up a new generational gulf between us. I have to face the truth: the problem for her isn’t that she doesn’t like the Ramones, the problem is that *I* like the Ramones. And I’m not, nor ever will be, nor indeed *should* be, super-cool as far as my daughter is concerned.

It’s about passing the torch, and doing it gracefully. I hope I can do that, for her sake.

It puts me in mind of the lyrics to Freakwater’s *Gravity*:

All your beauty will be stolen by a young girl in the night, a thief as quiet as a dark cloud that stole away the moonlight.

on starting over, indefinitely

March 13, 2011

And now it's March. I dipped my toes into the blog water last autumn and sank without a trace. Now spring is thawing out the frozen mud, shifting the currents and loosening the grip of weeds on this bloated corpse and I arise like a zombie, clutching the wordpress dashboard with fingers dripping unspoken words oh dear. Shall I start over?

Standing at the sink yesterday washing dishes while E worked at the table, squishing pizza dough through her fingers, I decided I would return to Blogland (have you ever been had in Blogland?) and post my idle kitchen sink musings.

I was thinking of D who has been my friend for over 20 years now. I felt overwhelmed with affection. I want to declare it: I love D. She makes me laugh more than any other person I've ever known. She captures angles and pins them down while I flap about, inarticulate. She is scathing and loving in the same motion. She allows herself to play more easily than I do. She dances with her shadow and her vulnerability makes her invulnerable. She is dangerous: in self-defense she mocks, and anyone and anything may receive the stings of her Beatrice. Often I can't keep up with it, and she plays my gullibility like piano keys – it rises to the surface later, upon reflection, and I recognise the tune in hindsight. She invokes a bearable shame. She is powerlessness and power combined. Like me, she has it all yet struggles with unreasonable, acute, painful discontent.

At university we shared an idyllic year mapping out the contours of our private nation of two ("we're impervious; we scintillate") before stepping back onto our own roads. These diverge and merge along a treacherous landscape, through which we step gingerly and call out to one another – sometimes very near and other times across vast distances. At times we hear each other and at others we don't; we both ache to please. Our friendship has been stretched and squeezed over the years, it unravels and disperses but we start over indefinitely. We revisit our nation of two and find shelter there in those few minutes knitted together from the threads poking out of an hour on skype.

on my own little idea of salvation

March 15, 2011

“in order to work out my own little idea of salvation I really believe that it is necessary for me to live in some more tawdry place and particularly in some place where I was not born.” (Jane Bowles)

Once, at a bonfire, the person I sat beside introduced the topic of residency, and asked my thoughts. He was exploring the idea of place in our lives, and the trends of displacement and movement in modern culture, the impact these trends have on the human psyche.

The conversation was brief, as this person was eloquent and my response merely clumsy and mostly silent. My thoughts on the topic were entangled with strong emotions and personal history, and I didn't trust myself to make sense of it to this acquaintance, no matter how obliging and patient I think he'd have been.

At the time of this conversation, my mother had recently levelled at me the charge of having walked away from our family. I've lived in the UK now for over a decade, several thousand miles from the American midwestern suburbs where I grew up. What began as an adventure into an uncharted and insecure future has now settled itself down with a sigh: a decision with consequences.

My mother's comment surprised and hurt me when she said it. The resentment it seemed to contain (was I imagining?) implied that I had abandoned her. There was a finality in what she said – it wasn't a question (have you walked away?) but a statement (you have.)

Walking away from my family was never the purpose of my move – but finding a way to live by my own values has certainly always guided my choices. The circumstances of my life here in the UK do not reflect the prosperous middle-class security intended for me in my upbringing and held up to me as a virtue.

My preference is discussing furnishings. Always has been. I like that better than discussing styles. I'll discuss styles if the company wants to, but I don't enjoy it nearly so well. The only thing about furnishings that leaves me cold is curtains. I never was interested in curtains, even when I was young. I like lamps about the best. Do you? (Jane Bowles again)

To my mother, I have become a stranger: I have no interest in furnishings, and it grieves her. We find it increasingly difficult to connect.

These many months later, I've finally responded to her remark. I've sent her a long letter, containing my thoughts on the charge she laid at me. I don't know yet whether my honesty will bring us closer together or will drive us even further apart. Again I've stepped into uncertainty, and await the consequences of my decision.

I had a dream 2 nights ago, long and convoluted. At one point in the disjointed plot I received a valentine card from Mom which contained her reply to the letter that I have recently posted. When I opened the pink envelope, it held samples of wallpaper.

If I were at that bonfire now, I would tell the acquaintance beside me that changing my

place of residency was a transgression, and also the most rewarding thing I've ever done for myself. I stepped out into thin air and the universe held me – a priceless sensation. At the same time I want to howl like a small lost child in a crowded public street, separated from the ones with whom I belong, heart racing in the panic that I won't ever be found. I wonder if my mother feels the same howl pressing against her chest?

on the selling of a flat

March 18, 2011

“I shall live long and lonely as a tossing cork.” Kathleen Jamie

My friend recently persuaded his girlfriend to sell her flat. I saw her yesterday, and she told me that she was preparing it to go on the market in the next week or so. She also told me that she felt quite emotional about the idea of letting it go. She bought it a few years back and has put a lot of care into doing it up the way she likes.

I feel really sad about it, she said. *I didn't want to do it but he convinced me.* Indeed, when I had dinner there with them a while back, he was pressing her to sell it and she had been resisting. Her own preference had been to rent it out, but he thought that would be too much hassle – better to offload it entirely.

It's not illogical, actually. They are embarking together soon on a travelling expedition, and intend to set up a rural homestead upon their return, away from the city. The property market is precarious and they are giving up their incomes in order to travel, so freeing her from the responsibility of the mortgage will give them far greater flexibility. Nonetheless, my gut feeling is unease, that she has been persuaded to do something she didn't want to do, that he is getting his way.

They've been dating since autumn. He had moved here a few months earlier, making a fresh start from a past life in another city. He's energetic and ambitious, capable and charming; he knows what he wants for his future and has found someone who fits into it well. It's exciting, romantic, idealistic... and she has surrendered herself to it, wholeheartedly.

I don't know his girlfriend well enough to understand how much she has contributed to their plan, or where her own power lies in their relationship. I only see small glimpses of their interactions and am left to build my own impression: that he is in charge, and she has her place; that it's *his* story, and she is a part of it, swept along by his drive. These are only impressions, and I could be very mistaken about what I think I'm seeing. And irregardless, she appears to be very happy and confident about their relationship. She has braced herself cheerfully toward the selling of her flat, despite her sadness at losing it. A new life awaits her.

What intrigues me about it – this situation in which she has agreed to sell her flat at his insistence – is how the elements of love and power and trust are playing out. She trusts him enough to concede power to him; she loves him sufficiently to dismantle the life she had built for herself here, and sign onto a life with him. When they set out on their travels, there will be nothing here of her own to which she might return.

I view her trustfulness with a wariness which is the legacy of a failed marriage and many years of single parenthood. The threads of love and power and trust were woven well enough for me at the start, but eventually they snarled, knotted, and unravelled. Do my friend and his girlfriend really want a life with each other, or do they just want a life with *someone*? Are they like another person I know who accepted a proposal and thereby disposed of her singlehood, with the remark “because I want what other people have.” Will

they live happily ever after or repent at leisure?

Needless to say, I envy my friend's girlfriend for the pleasure of being desired and for the simplicity of the plot she can now follow, with someone else in the lead, not to mention the social approbation that showers upon those who pair up.

On the other hand, I disdain that plot, and the surrender it demands. When I tried it myself, with someone I loved and trusted, it challenged me beyond endurance. What began as an adventure into the real life of adulthood very soon congealed into a stale routine of unrewarding work and emotional concession. The overriding purpose of our marriage was my husband's wellbeing: my role was to support him, his role was to be supported. This dynamic grew so unbalanced and unhealthy that a new baby tipped the scales with demands that competed with and trumped his own.

I remember thinking at the time, when I was reaching the decision to leave him: what if this is it, what if I never meet anyone else and spend the rest of my life alone? It didn't signify. A lifetime alone offered relief by comparison: I've never felt as lonely as I did during my marriage.

So what has this selling of a flat got to do with me, then? Fear. It stokes my fear, watching my friend and his girlfriend organise their future together: fear of being alone and unloved, the same fear inside everyone. It battles with my fear of riding gunshot in someone else's life, of succumbing to the numbing ease of a scripted plot. I fear my ability to accept terms that have been set by others, to surrender my own power as payment for the promise of being loved. As I watch my friend's story unfold, I wonder how his girlfriend will feel after she sells her flat, and how much it will cost her.

on walls and their bricks

March 26, 2011

Antonio Dias recently published some reflections about power, within the context of the will to control. He observes that “Investment in power directly corrodes one’s strength.” He’s essentially unpacking the reasoning behind *Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth.* (“I’m glad they’re getting something, ‘cos they have a hell of a time” Life of Brian)

You can do all sorts of things with words like *power* and *strength* and *control* – it’s all down to context. As character traits or personal positions they can be considered positive or negative, and that will depend largely on a person’s circumstances and values.

My own thoughts – when I see the words *power* and *strength* and *control* – lead to the politics around gender, and where power sits in our social relations.

I find myself battering against the brick wall of gender inequality a lot these days, because it continually presents itself to me in my life’s experiences and I haven’t yet worked out a resolution within myself that brings me to peace with it. Or should I say, a way to break the wall without getting hurt by the tonne of bricks landing on me as a result.

In my own life, in order to meet the demands of femininity, I’ve swallowed my own power and voice until I’ve become sick at heart. I’m ever the little sister trailing along behind the big boys, the youngest daughter being scolded to *behave*. I’m ever holding back, and residing in my ‘strength to endure.’ This doesn’t reconcile with the independent life I chose over a traditional one.

Or does it? In a cafe yesterday I met Guy Standing, the author of *The Precariat*. When he obliged me by giving a brief summary of the book’s premise, he described my own predicament. I am part of a

new dangerous class...comprising the growing number of people facing lives of insecurity, doing work without a past or future. Their lack of belonging and identity means inadequate access to social and economic rights

There’s so much in that wee book blurb alone that I want to address – work without a past or future, lack of belonging or identity – but those tangents will lead me astray here; best left to subsequent posts.

What I’m concentrating on just now is that as a woman – and in particular as a lone parent – I am more likely to be a member of this dangerous new class. It’s not that new, though, is it? Aren’t social and economic rights what the international women’s movement has been seeking for a century now?

Just a couple days ago the UK budget for 2011 was presented. Various critics pointed out its impact on women. Here are a few of them:

- **Fawcett Society:** “Independent analysis of the budget has shown that it is women who will bear the brunt of the cuts unveiled so far.” *The Budget, the Comprehensive Spending Review and Women*

- **Trade Unions Congress:** “The Chancellor’s budget today forgot women and does nothing to address inequality.” *The budget ‘forgot women’, says TUC*
- **Women’s Budget Group:** “Yet again, Britain’s poorest women lose out.” *Nothing for Gender Equality in George’s Budget*

I like this definition of power, from Carolyn Heilbrun’s **Writing a Woman’s Life**:

Power is the ability to take one’s place in whatever discourse is essential to action and the right to have one’s part matter.

It’s that last bit I get snagged on: the right to have one’s part matter – the difference between lip service and genuine participation in the decision-making that will impact on oneself. For all the changes that the last century has seen, the evidence remains that the part of women still doesn’t matter.

And this brings me back to Tony’s post. I understand full well that by taking the discussion of power into one of its most familiar battle grounds I am acting out his very point:

we look to any excuse to ascribe power to ourselves, or our nation, our society, our culture – anything we can identify with and use that identification to build up a division between *Us* and the *Other*

Here’s a wall far more fierce, with tumbling bricks far more painful. I feel hobbled, and humbled by its challenge. Is the desire for justice the same as a desire for power?

As to finding that resolution within myself, the one which will stop me flinging myself against brick walls

only those... who reach the stage where it is possible for them to combat a second tragedy within themselves, and not the first over again, are worthy of being called mature (Jane Bowles – yes, I’m a bit obsessed)

I think I’m not worthy of this – and yet I’m certain that I can be.

on escape

April 8, 2011

“Well, do not be afraid. The trouble is not yet; the trouble is to come.”

Arthur Ransome, **Old Peter’s Russian Tales**

I occasionally have insomnia: a restless, broken night that leaves me feeling worn and shaky. I drop off quickly and soundly but then awaken shortly later, perhaps 1 or 2 am, through a disquieting blankness, gradually into consciousness and middle-of-the-night anxiety. The darkness lies heavy and still, and I recall the ironic comfort offered by Lemony Snicket, reassuring me that I am not alone in my wakefulness because “somewhere in your bedroom shadows, there is something moving.”

During these bouts of sleeplessness, I peer down into the abyss between what I think should be, and what is; what should be and what will be. “Should” is a monster more dangerous and damaging than any concocted by Universal. In the grip of “should” I imagine my escape to another place, another life, with other people and another me – a better, stronger, smarter, beautiful witty confident compassionate talented successful admired flawless me –in short, I imagine myself in Solla Sollew. Other times I imagine surrender, oblivion, the promise “that when you’re lost you will never strain” – the enticing painless nothingness of nonexistence.

These two extremes amount to the same thing: escape. Escape from “out of this world and into another...”

I’m reminded of this passage early in *The Diary of Etty Hillesum*, in which Etty describes a memory concerning one of her professors:

It was a few hours before the Dutch capitulation. And suddenly there was the figure of Bonger, shuffling along through the Skating Club, blue-tinted glasses, singular, heavy head tilted to one side and looking toward the clouds of smoke that came floating across the town from the faraway oil terminals.... I can’t remember the precise words we exchanged. It was that afternoon when people thought of nothing but getting away to England, and I asked, “Do you think it makes sense to escape?” And he said, “The young have to stay put.”.... And next evening at Becker’s, the first thing I heard was, “Bonger is dead!” I said, “That’s impossible, I spoke to him last night at seven o’clock.” And Becker said, “Then you must have been one of the last people to speak to him. He put a bullet through his brain at eight o’clock.” And Bonger is not the only one. A world is in the process of collapse.

Not *the* world – but *a* world is in the process of collapse.

My own view is that this is still the case: a world is in the process of collapse. Where others see a temporary recession from which the economies of our spoilt overdeveloped nations will be flogged back into movement, like the mottled corpse revived by Victor Frankenstein, I see instead the inevitable crumbling of the collective delusions of modern life, and the institutions that have sustained them. And I think that the trouble for us is not yet; the trouble is to come.

Most people I know find this uncomfortable, and unnecessarily negative, so I try to keep it to myself as much as possible. Who would wish for themselves the unwelcome role of Cassandra?! But I can't pretend it away inside myself, so I am left with this: if a world is in the process of collapse, then what world remains? There are as many worlds as there are people, so which world shall I dwell in? There's only despair on the surface – deeper down the resources are infinite.

Fear and Should are the same monster, threatening me with the trouble that is to come. As the horse of power in the story says, the trouble is not yet – it never is. Likewise another famous Holocaust diarist wrote from her Secret Annexe in Prinsengracht, "Think of all the beauty that surrounds you and be glad."

Bonger chose to put a bullet through his brain while Etty chose to remain in Amsterdam and face the Nazi occupation through to her own death a few years later, writing all the while of her inner striving for redemption and loving kindness. In her last postcard to friends – flung from a train enroute to Auschwitz – she writes "I am sitting on my rucksack in the middle of a full freight car....We left the camp singing....We shall be travelling for three days. Thank you for all your kindness and care."

on the Devil's eye

April 9, 2011

Friends have now seen this blog, which I had kept to myself for a wee while. My initial reaction is to squirm in acute discomfort at the exposure. Next I set the discomfort aside and try to ignore it. Now I've picked it back up and it sits in my hand, a Devil's eye marble rolling about in my palm. Will I set it down to roll across the desk and over the side into the mysterious hinterland of computer cables, pen caps and thick dust on the floor back there? Or will I instead put it in my mouth, to swallow and choke on?

I set myself a challenge at the new year, to fit writing into my life somehow, even if I must use a crowbar to do so. Not just keeping a journal – I've done that for 27 years, and while that's of course the ideal place to put my thoughts and impressions, it is mainly a formless stream, without shape or conclusion. I decided I would try to write things with more focus, with beginnings and ends, to see where it would lead. And here I am, blogging away into the blogosphere among the bloggers of blogland.

This all kicked off last summer when I wrote a brief something, in a bid to support somebody's collaborative project (thefuturewedeserve.net.) That short composition – while cramped and rusty and reminiscent of turning in homework – reminded me of how much I enjoy writing. It led me to attempt something larger in the autumn: an essay unravelling an experience I had at a festival last May. This was composed in response to a call for journal submissions, part of another collaborative project (Dark Mountain Project) whose edges I skirt.

The essay however grew into a many-headed beast which eventually overwhelmed me. Despite the intense dozens of hours I'd spent writing it, the thousands of words worth of slush eventually culled from it, and the near-completion to which I brought it, the submission deadline cornered me. The attempted essay had a hole in its heart, like a jigsaw puzzle with a missing piece. I needed to step back and to gain some perspective. This coincided with the distracting obligations of December, that merciless month with its domestic steamroller of festive duty (what Anne Fine calls "a ghastly demanding octopus whose tentacles spread further every year.")

So I shelved the essay. I described this development to my friend and neighbour, an experienced and gifted writer whose third book will be published soon. She zeroed in immediately on what was happening: *are you afraid of being heard?* she asked.

Hell yes. My personal demons are hovering now: my father's inevitable, undermining catchphrase "what you *mean* to say is...."; my brother's sharp-witted ridicule, always lurking. These people I loved and trusted (don't evade it: these *men* I loved and trusted) were all too willing, all too often, to rub my nose in my own inadequacy. Why is that? I learned to stay quiet to protect myself, and I've been doing it now for so long that I no longer know what I want to say or – more pointedly – if what I want to say is actually what I want to hear.

I must unlearn to not speak, "starting with I / starting with We."

on focusing

April 10, 2011

This morning I woke early, feeling a bit scattered. I sipped coffee, fed the cat; inevitably I pottered about the kitchen clearing dishes and wiping surfaces. But I felt unsettled, unfocused – I stood up, I sat down, I came into this room, I went back into the other, to where I'd just been. It was ridiculous. So I decided to go for a wandering walk under the fantastic clear sky of this beautiful spring day and allow my unfocus its own free rein.

It is my great good fortune to live in Edinburgh, a beautiful old city with a large wild park at its centre; the seaside nearby; scenic hills in the distance. You can walk along the narrow pavement of my tenemented street, with cars and large black rubbish bins clogging up the space, down to its cul-de-sac end. There you will find a hidden gap in the buildings, where the pavement will lead you around to a concealed passageway, and through an arched entrance into this wide expanse of green lawn, with a splendid view of Arthur's Seat.

It was early Sunday morning, perhaps only an hour past sunrise, so very few other people were out and about just yet. My wandering led me to Salisbury Craigs, facing west over the city with this view of the castle.

I sat for a while in the sunshine, staring down at the city and across to the Pentlands in the southwest. There was birdsong around me and the occasional insect whirring past, and gradually I grew aware of a steady grinding hum in the background: traffic building up, a train rumbling on the tracks toward Waverley... mechanised sounds encroaching upon this retreat, even at eight o'clock of a Sunday morning.

When I turned around to face east I saw that a mallard drake had ventured out beyond the loch, and was standing alone in the grass as though waiting for something to happen. Sure enough, within moments his companions flew overhead and he took off to join them.

I began to focus on the rocky ground where I sat, and I realised I was sitting just beside a roly poly bug, scrambling along over the lichen... and just further along from a stretch of dirt where slunk a sticky-looking slug.

Isn't it grounding, reassuring, to occasionally focus on something very small? This stretch of outcrop, with its textures of smooth rock and packed dirt and pebbly, scrubby grass, is a vast wide world to Roly Poly and Sticky Slug. Their respective journeys fit each one of them according to his size.

Eventually other people arrived – a couple joggers, a clutch of German tourists with a picnic breakfast – so I gathered myself together and wandered back down the path, returning home in focus.

on being in limbo

April 11, 2011

I owe my life to the wonders of our modern, technologically-advanced civilisation. Multiple medical issues at birth led to my spending three weeks in a premature infants unit, where I was well looked after by science and medicine. I survived and then thrived, without any of the disabilities that were predicted for me. I was spared the dangers that nature had intended, and sent home to the blanketing embrace of a suburban middle-class American, Irish Catholic upbringing that never, ever questioned its own assumptions.

I remember my mother sitting me down once when I was a child to tell me the story of my birth, with all its drama and happy outcome. She lingered on one detail, her gravity imparting its special significance: the doctor at the delivery had baptised me at her request, before whisking me away to an incubator for medical treatment. My survival was uncertain and it was incredibly important to her that if I died, I should die as a Catholic baby. The unacceptable alternative was limbo.

The Vatican defines limbo as “a state which includes the souls of infants who die subject to original sin and without baptism, and who, therefore, neither merit the beatific vision, nor yet are subjected to any punishment.” It recanted this theological position in 2007, but when I was young, limbo was still a recognised plank in the Catholic platform. The mythology of limbo described an infinite blank stasis that was almost more threatening than the torments of hell, which at least promised the sensational thrill of divine retribution. In limbo, there was no purpose, no meaning, and no narrative – only a mysterious in-betweenness beyond comprehension.

This alternative fate in limbo lay vividly in the background of my imagination when my mother told me my birth story, with its sentimental plotline around the emergency baptism. She wanted me to understand that the ultimate guarantee of my personal wellbeing had been provided at my arrival. Baptism legitimized the value of my existence, it ensured my role as a character in the Christian story of salvation, and it protected me from the terrible, luckless fate suffered by those countless other babies, those limbo babies, whose parents clearly hadn’t cared for them as well and responsibly as mine did.

I’ve been wrestling with this my entire life, as though I had been draped with a net, and pinned into a story of someone else’s telling. For large swathes of time I’ve gone still, like an animal in captivity that lies motionless, listless, obedient. Other times a small glowing ember inside me flares up, leading me to wreak havoc and alarm my keepers. I shred the net a little bit more every time. I abandoned Christianity years ago, and throughout the extended adolescent rebellion of my adulthood I’ve been systematically dismantling the other narratives that contain me. It resonates with me, when the DMP describes the converging crises faced by us in the 21st century, and asks

in what ways are these crises rooted in our cultural assumptions, the stories we have told for generations and the ways in which we have seen the world? How do we disentangle ourselves from those assumptions? 22 June 2010

What I've not yet been able to do is find a narrative with which to replace the ones I am dismantling. I'm in a space between stories. DMP cofounder Dougald once wrote:

I've come to see part of the strength of Dark Mountain as being the lack of a simple message....there's a lot of value in inviting people to slow down, to reflect on the situation without framing it as a problem that has a solution, but rather as a complex predicament which we have to live with... 5 October 2010

I like to think of the Dark Mountain Project as an inviting, relaxed version of being in limbo, one that involves poetry, singing, and gathering about bonfires with drink in hand. Really not so bad as my mother made it out to be.

on collecting moonlight

April 22, 2011

My friend Madzia has started a blog. She has begun by asking herself “who is it for?” and “what do I hope from it?”

One might ask the same questions of any form of writing or indeed any creative endeavor (photographing, painting, playing a violin, knitting a scarf, baking a cake, raising a child....) Who is it for, and what do I hope from it by doing it? My own sense is that for any individual, these questions will lead to so many possible answers at any time, and in so many combinations of will and expectation, that trying to settle on a definitive answer is like trying to collect moonlight in a jar.

And why publish on a blog (or indeed, anywhere?) rather than writing privately and keeping it to oneself? My friend S has called blogging “a new way of sharing the experience of being human.” Isn’t sharing the experience of being human behind all communication, artistic expression, and the building of relationships? So you might just as well ask the same questions every time you communicate with someone else, and of every relationship in your life, from your most intimate circle of family and friends, to the shop clerk on the till with whom you exchange perhaps only a few trite words. Who is this for, and what do I hope from it?

I think that the value lies in the insights that these questions encourage. The questions are only worthwhile if they remain held in one’s mind – serving as an internal lens – rather than holding one’s mind. The peril lies in their very real potential to demand certainty of purpose and outcome, and to become the proverbial tail wagging the dog.

I’m delighted that Madzia is exploring this new way of sharing her experience of being human, whoever it is for, and whatever she hopes from it. I will bask in her moonlight with no jar in my hand.

on the naming and not naming of things

April 25, 2011

Last week I took E out to Roslin Glen, for an impromptu picnic and a long walk in the springtime outdoors. We brought along the camera and snapped photos of one another and of the many lovely things we encountered along the way. We didn't know much of what we were looking at, but set that aside and simply wandered along, observing, receiving, forming impressions and chatting about whatever we came across – relaxed, absorbed, and out of context. We pretended to be aliens from another world, seeing our surroundings for the first time and considering them in their fresh weirdness. All the same, we felt very much at home.



That night in the flat, we pulled out the Collins guide and set about identifying the subjects of the photos. This naming of things – the puzzle and the hunt and the ah-ha moment of recognition – created a frisson of satisfaction, like setting a book on its shelf and pushing it into place within the row of spines, with a quiet thunk. It wiped away the lingering residue of fantasy, and the buzz I had carried back with me. It bottled and labeled the experience, to be set among my collection of memories.

I can't pretend that I am anything but mostly ignorant about the natural world. Once, when E was a toddler, my friend K took us out for a walk in the Norfolk countryside. As we walked along together, she pointed out to us every wild plant and insect and bird and creature in view, identifying and describing things with such easy familiarity, such sincere enjoyment, that I felt overwhelmed and wondered aloud at the breadth of her knowledge. She replied that long country walks with her family were a weekend staple of her childhood, and over many years her parents had followed the same patient process of observing, pointing, naming, teaching. Ah yes, that makes sense. My parents too were mostly ignorant of the natural world, a common modern heritage.

Later I tried to address this gap in my knowledge. I spent a few years tagging along with a group of natural history enthusiasts, many of whom pursued areas of professional expertise. These folks understood species and habitats and life cycles and migration patterns and conservation issues. They collected specimens and data and published analyses and used Linnaean classification. They owned high resolution binoculars and pocket magnifiers and echolocation equipment. Their enthusiasm was genuine and inspiring. But I never really belonged or felt entirely at ease among them, because I kept forgetting the names of things. What is the taxonomic nomenclature for “plant thingy”?

While we were at Roslin playing our alien game, E and I marveled at some modest, lovely little flowers that cheered up the gravelly and otherwise unadorned roadside. Here is the photo we took:



on celebrity

May 2, 2011

I was a sympathetic witness to a rant in the pub the other night, directed at the mute television screen with its pop video figures dancing around in their unnecessary and distracting electric light while a live acoustic set played from across the room. We carried no tv-signal zapper between us, despite it being White Dot's TV Turn Off Week, and so remained subjected to the screen's oppressive intrusion upon our field of vision.

The rant then turned to the print media and the newsagent's rows of magazines paying homage to the mindless, tasteless swamp of the mass market. Scathing remarks were made about the cardboard personalities populating the pages of said magazines, and the name Jordan was spit out with contempt as an example of the depths to which our cultural wasteland has sunk. She is a Celebrity, a creature of our voracious and soulless popular media.

And here I made a comment to the person speaking that derailed him somewhat from his train of thought, wondering what I meant by it. All I said was that he too is a bit of a celebrity, albeit in a much smaller circle, and appealing to a far more particular audience. He looked taken aback, perhaps even a bit offended, to be placed in the same noun category as some vacuous tabloid figure; there was a fleeting glimpse of genuine bafflement in his eyes. He is a thoughtful and modest person, intelligent and earnest – a poet and journalist, activist and author, with a well-earned professional reputation. Not a celebrity, surely?

Well I don't know..... He'd drawn a full crowd for his poetry reading. People had requested his autograph on the front leaf of his book. And how on earth do I know of him, for that matter? It's been a couple years now but in the first instance I learned who he was through the effective marketing of his nonfiction titles, via similar publicity mechanisms that create an audience for this Jordan person. Different audience, different content of message, different flavour altogether – but the same process (and oh dear, the theme tune from *Fame* just burst into my mind. I hope it doesn't linger.)

The next day I exchanged emails with another acquaintance over a query for some information, and in the banter I had made an observation about him, to which he replied "You know me too well!" Truer words were never said: I've only met him briefly on two occasions, with a minimal exchange of pleasantries in each instance. Yet I have formed a fairly substantial impression of his character, his work, his interests and his ambitions, due to his extremely effective use of social media as a communication and promotional tool. I do know him too well: celebrity?

What about the Campus Celebs that my friend D and I marked in our younger days: Buddy Holly, Raggedy Andy, Aviator Man... these people possessed reputations in our minds that have held fast for twenty years – frivolous, but enduring. Whatever happened to Aviator Man? I don't regard my poet and social media acquaintances as frivolous in the least; on the contrary, their messages are deeply considered and very worthwhile. But I wonder what I will be saying in twenty years' time, where these wee portions of celebrity will lead. Will it be "I knew them when..." or "whatever happened to....?"

on spinnin'

May 6, 2011

Once again my workplace has left me spinning. There was another meeting yesterday, this time reviewing a project which is developing a framework to assess the social impact of policy decisions. The idea is to create a tool that allows policy makers and funders to consider the repercussions of their decisions in the context of community and social wellbeing, much as there are similar tools through which they may assess environmental impact and compliance with equalities duties.

In principle, this is a good thing: a way for those with power to formally consider, within the decision-making process, whether a certain course of action will have a positive or negative impact on the quality of people's lives. It is a complex undertaking and it certainly doesn't expect or claim to be a comprehensive or infallible tool. It is only the very first draft of something new that may or may not prove to be successful and workable for the people intended to use it. My colleagues developing this tool are motivated by the desire to improve the conditions in which people live – and of course I would prefer that policymakers consider people's wellbeing rather than digits on a spreadsheet, when they choose to do or not do things.

What freaked me out was the tunnel vision that enveloped what would probably be described by others as an aspirational or pioneering piece of work. The purpose of this framework is essentially to translate wellbeing into a language that can be understood by those who "only speak numbers and money" as one meeting participant put it. It is an attempt to quantify the qualitative, insofar as that is possible; to capture the concept of wellbeing within a 'scale of indicators' in such a way that it can be included in the analyses behind policy and funding decisions.

I had a similarly adverse reaction to the Social Capital Toolkit, a conceptual model that helps small organizations and community groups to evaluate their work so that they can identify what they do as measurable outcomes. It helps them to gather evidence of their 'added value', to describe their work through the prism of performance, so that they can justify the worth of what they do. It is a way of bringing those on the fringes into the fold, adapting them to the parameters and conventions and identities and conversations of the status quo.

Fifteen years ago, even perhaps ten, I would have been an unswerving supporter of these tools. I would have been as keen in that meeting to develop a social impact framework as my colleagues at the table were yesterday, with a sense of David lining up pebbles to aim at Goliath. *We're going to get the people in charge to acknowledge what really matters. We're going to change things for the better!!* Now however I am in such a different place inside myself that I clutched the sides of my chair and dug my nails into it, clamping down on the shrieks of consternation that threatened to erupt from me. This is tinkering at the margins of a crushing, devastating machine of our own making. How can it make people's lives better to translate their experiences into 'evidence'? How will it help anyone or anything to translate qualitative phenomena into the language of numbers and money? I hear Soul Asylum: "When the cause is lost you find there is no point in winnin'"

In all honesty, though, it's not the meeting itself that distressed me, or the project and its aims. These were just triggers. It's the sense that I need to do something with this, with my visceral reaction, and I don't know what. I've been gently reminded about the mathematics of sharing ideas in meetings... I don't feel that hopeful. My ideas are propelled by a destructive scrutiny that picks apart what other people have built. Somebody put time and effort into this project, and all I can respond with is 'this feels like wrong dressed up as right.'

I'm reminded of another conversation, a while back now, in which I challenged someone's assertion that an overseas development project – supplying farmers with capital and helping them to create smallholdings that conform to a market model – was a worthwhile endeavor. Like the toolkits I've described, the project was steeped in the mentality and rhetoric of business-as-usual: outcomes, performance, leadership, rewards. In me, again, a visceral reaction, a recoil, and a spluttering dismay at this mindset being peddled as a legitimate route out of our human predicaments: I picked it apart with my destructive scrutiny, but did I have any better alternative to suggest in its place? I did not.

Do I have any better suggestions to offer? No – not practical ones. My suggestion is that we skip all these meetings and go out to the park and lie down under the trees and stare up at the leaves. Damn hippie.

Someone has recently drawn my attention to a quote by [Ivan Illich](#): "There is no time left for destruction, for hatred, for anger. We must build, in hope and joy and celebration." I understand the change of heart: letting go of anger, embracing joy. Destruction and building are where I'm stuck. Why set them against one another, as moral opposites?

Some of my friends would tell me to stop spinnin' and rejoin the real world. Other friends would tell me to stop fighting with myself, to move out of my own way and get onto the fairy tale path where my heart and my gut are leading me. E would tell me that chasing rainbows is all well and good, sure, but that just now she needs me there when she needs me, beside her and with feet on the ground. And I would tell me... well now, what would I tell me?

on books

May 18, 2011

I've not written anything here for a wee while. Life's been swept along the past couple weeks, with plans and logistics and appointments and to-do lists and paperwork. I've been feeling like the proverbial camel, my days filled with potential straws stacked up before me like Jenga blocks. I veer between feverish activity and giddy surrender, facing the impossible bottleneck of competing priorities. Not only have I not been writing, I've also not been reading.

I have been pondering one of Cat's posts in which she describes her relationship to books. Her post touched a vulnerable spot, and what I've been doing is dancing around and around with the thoughts that it triggered, and the memory that it sparked. I've been distracting myself with my appointments and to-do lists, and skirting around the edges of a brief exchange of words that I once had with my dad, outside a Cambridge bookshop.

My dad was a thwarted scholar. He loved philosophy and history and the life of the mind, but chose instead to pursue a business career, in a working class boy's bid to make good as his family's first college graduate. His widowed mother relied heavily and pointedly upon him to support her and his younger brothers, and so any dream of pursuing an academic, intellectual life was sacrificed on the altar of upward mobility. In classic family dysfunction, he fed his lost dreams and ambitions to his children, ostensibly as seeds planted for our own benefit, but also, sadly, to live vicariously through us. By nature we were drawn to books, but likewise our love of them was nurtured heavily.

My dad was a lay scholar. Family legend tells how in the early years of his marriage and as a young working father, he worked his way through Will and Ariel Durant's *The Story of Civilisation*. The complete set of eleven volumes sat in a long row of fat hardcovers on the bookcase in our sitting room. He would come home from work, sit with the family at the dinner table, and then go into the sitting room by himself to read, while my mother cleared up the meal and put the children to bed. He told me once that he had devised a strategy of sitting in a hardbacked chair, rather than an upholstered one. Fatigue from a long day's work would inevitably lead him to doze off, but the uncomfortable chair would prevent him from sleeping soundly and he would jerk back awake within a few minutes. A short nap was enough to refresh him sufficiently, and he would then be able to focus on the text for another couple hours.

My dad was a would-be scholar. When enough of his children had grown up and moved out to create a spare bedroom, he lived out the fantasy of owning a gentleman's study. He built wall-to-wall bookcases of beautiful polished wood, and set an armchair beside them, as well as a desk. Every Sunday he read the *New York Times Book Review*, to keep his finger on the pulse of the world of ideas. And although he bought many interesting books that had piqued his curiosity, he read them slowly if at all. His study time was diluted by other projects and interests – computers, woodworking, travelling – and perhaps also lack of confidence, fueled by regret.

My dad was a frustrated scholar. His business career in communication systems flourished as the digital age took root, and by the time I was a teenager he was fully embedded in the executive class, responsible for projects at his office that demanded ridiculously long hours and self-subsuming dedication to The Company. The prize he claimed from this deal was the privilege of sending all his children to private schools and to university. My siblings and I all performed well academically, winning scholarships and various honours for our work, and eventually pursuing postgraduate degrees of one sort or another. While he was very proud of these achievements, he was never entirely satisfied. We jumped through our hoops, higher and higher, trying to make him happy with our good grades and our intellectual pursuits – but of course we never could make him happy, not really.

Shortly after I moved to the UK, he was diagnosed with cancer. The illness lasted for three and a half years, during which time I saw him only a few times, in transatlantic visits. On one occasion he and my mom made a trip to the UK, and we spent one of the days touring Cambridge. We visited the Fitzwilliam Museum and King's College Chapel; we wandered through college greens and saw the Bridge of Sighs; and we went to the Cambridge University Press bookshop, itself a heritage site. Dad had been enthusiastic about the day's explorations, but among the books he grew quiet. When we left the shop he stopped a few yards from the door and stood there, still and forlorn. After a moment, he remarked wistfully on all the good books there were to read in the world, all the ideas that people had shared, and said that he wished he had more time. The sadness with which he said this didn't allude so much to the time remaining in his lifespan, but rather to the time he had lost by denying himself his vocation.

I responded clumsily: heaven will be full of books. To start with, I didn't believe anything of the kind by that point in my life – but this wasn't about me. There was a terrible creeping discomfort at the direct allusion to his impending death – the problem with no solution. And it was awkward that he was delivering such a personal and revealing comment so unexpectedly on the pavement, amidst the bustle of pedestrian traffic. It caught me off guard. He had opened his heart to me – and he received a lame sweep-up job in reply.

My mother overheard our exchange, and added her weight to my remark: yes, heaven would right all the wrongs. Between the two of us, we steered his attention away from the reality of his life and his choices, away from the pain it was causing him. We all waltzed together in the great dance of denial. He seemed comforted at the time by my reply, but I wonder and doubt if he truly was.

Right now I'm missing him. I'm wanting to forward him the link to Cat's post, just email it along to wherever and whatever and however he is now that he's gone. I'm wanting to send these lyrics to a favourite Freakwater song, called *Heaven*:

Heaven is for the weak at heart
and those who never are
as smart as me.
But I would trade all that I believe
and keep no trick card up my sleeve
just to know the angels hold you in their arms tonight.

on holiday

May 28, 2011

I've been away on holiday with E. I hired a car and took us right up into the Highlands, to the west coast by Skye. We have been reading Gavin Maxwell's *Ring of Bright Water* to one another and the idea was to visit the site of Camusfearna, the remote cottage in which Maxwell lived with his otters in the 1950s and 60s. Our comic timing was impeccable: there were gale-force winds and almost constant rain throughout the three days of our stay. We managed camping on the first night only, shivering in our damp tent as a steady rain pelted its sides and created deep swampy puddles in the grass where we'd pitched. The forecast promised no reprieve, so we soon removed ourselves to a nearby youth hostel.

And from there we had a brilliant time, full of exploration and adventure, despite the challenging weather. We met serpents in Skye and deer in Glenelg and a troupe of Snow Scouts in Ratagan; we witnessed multiple rainbows at dusk over a mountain-fringed loch; we ditched the car and trekked along unmarked trails to reach beautiful, secluded Sandaig Bay (Camusfearna); we climbed over fallen pine trees blocking the path and crossed streams and peed in the woods. For three days we played with a different kind of life, away from our normal routines and circumstances.

It was exhilarating, yes, but I wouldn't say it was relaxing. There were many miles of intense, careful driving involved, through winding, treacherous single-track mountain roads; there was the task of organizing our excursions and meals each day, and coordinating them with the hostel's daily six-hour lock-out; and there was the social negotiation demanded by dormitory living and meal preparation in a crowded communal kitchen. People snored, trod on one another with unwieldy backpacks, and the oven and cutting boards and tea towels were unreasonably hoarded by the bossy matriarch of a visiting hillwalking group – all part of hostelling fun. On the final evening of our visit, as we took a walk alongside the loch by the hostel, E observed that I looked tired, to which I agreed. "But you're on holiday!" she protested, as though I were deliberately shirking my responsibility to become rested. I can't help how I felt: as the sole adult in charge of delivering a fun-filled family holiday, I was fatigued with the effort to keep it all humming along.

The next day I drove us back home in a six-hour stretch at the steering wheel, arriving in Edinburgh at the peak of rush hour's tense scramble of traffic. At home we unloaded the bags and coats and muddy shoes and parcels of uneaten food and damp camping gear from the boot of the car, up the stairs to our flat, and dumped it all in a pile in the hall for sorting out later. Then after dinner, E took herself to enjoy a long hot soak in the bath, while I sipped a well-deserved gin and tonic, and reconnected to the online world, plugging back into the context from which I'd taken a break.

And there I learned of some terrible, sobering news. What is the worst thing you can imagine happening to you? Perhaps you needn't even think on it: something will immediately come to your mind, a knee-jerk gut reaction, the thing you fear most. The worst possible thing ever has happened to someone I know, a friend from work. His husband J has died suddenly, unexpectedly, as though gripped on the shoulders by two unseen hands and ripped from the picture, leaving an empty, bewildered space with dust spinning and

gently settling down where a man used to be.

My friend talked about J frequently and with abundant affection. Sitting in the desk across from me at work he would often remark on their conversations, or what they'd done at the weekend. They recently celebrated their four-year wedding anniversary, and when he referred to the occasion his eyes were brimming with pride and happiness. Only a few weeks ago, he described J as the love of his life. The love of one's life! How many people can say that they are happily married to the love of their life? Their relationship meant something to me, of which my friend will not even have been aware: it breached my divorced-lone-parent cynicism. I enjoyed it vicariously: the sound contentment and the buzzing romance and the great good fortune they had found with one another.

The worst possible thing ever has happened to my friend, and I feel gutted and bereft for his sake, and stunned with the ridiculous awful hurt of it. The holiday is over.

on trivial forms of humiliation

May 29, 2011

It is Monday night at about 9pm, in the youth hostel lounge. The room is nearly full, perhaps eleven or twelve other people scattered around the chairs and sofas, all sitting quietly and reading to themselves or tending to the handhelds in their palms. E and I sit on a squishy, rust-coloured couch beside which she has set up the Trivial Pursuit board.

Into the silence E's voice rings out, as though on a stage: "What do nictitating women do to men?"

Me: "Huh? I don't... what?"

E: "They WINK at them."

I hate this game. I freeze up, fumbling and exposed. Even the ones I do know, I forget when I'm under pressure. Every item of information in my brain evaporates into a self-conscious blank. I stare into the air, brows furrowed in mock concentration, pretending to be thinking hard: it's just on the tip of my very intelligent tongue, the answer itself or a very reasonable guess. Really.

E: "What was the nickname of Dillinger Gang member George Nelson?"

Me: "Um.... um...."

Yeah, maybe I should know this... was there a film?...

E: "It was Babyface."

Me: "Uh-huh. Ok."

Should I have known that?

E: "Why would someone be called Babyface?"

Me: "I don't know. Just do the next question."

E: "Did his face look like a baby?"

Me: "I don't know."

E: "Even when he was grown up?"

Me: "Just do the next question."

What's worst about this experience is that twelve other adults are sitting silently in this room, listening to every word we're saying and witnessing this train wreck of my general knowledge. They're like a jury who will determine whether or not I am a moron. I can try to defend myself but the truth will out.

E: "This one's for a pie piece."

Me: "Ok."

E: "Oh no, that's too hard. Hang on. Right, you should know this one."

Great.

E: "What is the third letter of the Greek alphabet?"

Oh right, nice one. No, wait... oh shit...

Me: "...um... Alpha, Beta... um..."

The woman across from us smiles at me sympathetically. The clutch of old men in the corner rustle their newspapers impatiently.

Me: "Um... it's not Delta, so which one... um...."

E: "It's Gamma."

Fine. It's Gamma. I knew that. I KNEW THAT.

E: "What is the first commandment?"

Me: "Oh...."

The mood of the room is shifting.

E: "Mum! You went to church when you were little, you should know this!!"

Me: "I know!!! I just can't think of things when it's in this game..."

E: "What is the FIRST COMMANDMENT?"

Me: "I DON'T KNOW!!!"

This is like being in the town square, in the stocks. Someone is going to start pelting rotten fruit at me. I don't even know the first commandment!

E: "What is forty percent of forty?"

Me: "What? That's not trivia! That's MATH!!"

E: "Well that's what it says. It's in science and nature. What is forty percent of forty?"

Me: "Ok, just give me one second. And stop looking at me. I can do this one, you just... you divide forty... and... hang on...."

Honestly, it's not that I can't do this. It's that there is a room of people sitting and listening to it, every little bit of it, as I dig myself deeper and deeper and deeper into this hole.

E: "If you are a pugilist, what are you?"

The entire room is now drenched with my shame.

Me: "You know what, I'm getting tired, could we maybe stop here? Hey, look at all your pie pieces! You did really well, E. You're good at that game. Ok kiddo, time to go and get our jammies on."

E: "I can't believe you don't know what the first commandment is. Can I tell Nana you don't know that?"

Me: "You can tell everyone."

As we walk past the hillwalking club, the bossy matriarch glances up at me smirking, and I understand: everyone already knows.

on words left out

June 14, 2011

I've been thinking about an old friend from Chicago again. When I moved away from there we stayed in touch sporadically, but eventually our correspondence got caught in the reeds as the currents of our own lives swept us along, and we lost contact.

When I knew Michael I was young and idealistic; he was the age that I am now. I was freshly graduated and chasing adventures in the UK and then embarking on a marriage; he was trying to make sense of his life in the aftermath of a divorce and a failed small business. He lived humbly, earning enough to live on in a bookseller's post, and teaching Irish Gaelic. He held no further ambitions, neither for pursuing a professional career nor for tackling The Academy. He surrounded himself with friends, and books, and personal interests, and took each day one at a time.

One of our fellow booksellers once complained to me that Michael was in rut, that he was too old and too well-educated to be indulging in a lifestyle with so little status, that he should pull himself together and make something of himself. I didn't agree; he seemed contented enough in his wry melancholy; chasing a big place in the world wasn't what he was about.

A couple years ago I found myself reminded by Michael repeatedly, in a number of uncanny ways. Just the odd reflection, or thought of something he'd said, would drift into my consciousness. I wanted to talk to him, and find out how he was now; I wanted to tell him about all the things I'd learned since I'd known him in Chicago.

This happened enough times that I was compelled to follow it up and seek him out, but it had been so long and I had moved so many times by then that I'd lost his contact details. So I googled away and discovered this blog. He was extremely ill, had moved to hospice care, and had fallen foul of the vicious system of profiteering that the US calls 'health care.'

I sent a letter, and a contribution to the beoir, but... but I didn't say everything in the letter that could be said, and in any case it was delayed by postal hiccups when he moved addresses... and in any case...

I've been thinking about Michael again the past few days. In particular, I've been thinking about the time we were standing around at the tills and the topic turned to the shoplifters and scammers who were our regular customers there in the Loop. I confessed to him what an easy target I must be, that I was one of the most gullible people around. He smiled sympathetically, paused, and then asked conversationally if I knew that the word 'gullible' had been omitted by accident from the latest edition of Webster's. That's weird, I said, they don't normally leave words out of the dictionary. It's true, he insisted, it was a printing error. Go and check if you don't believe me. And you know, he was wrong about that: gullible is definitely there in the dictionary, somewhere between gulch and gulp.

on unexpected survival

July 15, 2011

The roof of the building where I work is a nesting site for seagulls. Sometimes when we look up at the ceiling, we see their triangular feet slap across the skylights like ghosts making a trail of footprints. We can hear them squawking and rustling about up there – really noisy sometimes!

A few weeks ago, someone discovered that a nestling had fallen from the rooftop, down into the empty lot behind the building. It was sheltering beside the bins, while Mama Seagull and several other adults circled and swooped down in anxious vigil, keeping watch over it.



I wish I'd thought to take photos of it back then. At that point it was still fluffy and small, perhaps two-thirds the size it is now, and we wondered how long it would last out there before a cat or a fox got hold of it.

Instead it has remarkably survived its ordeal so far. It has been growing larger and stronger, down there in its tarmac exile. Recently it molted the fluff and is now wearing a sleek coat of proper interim feathers.



We've all of us been tossing down bits of food to it – rice cakes and fruit from our lunches, or sandwiches and sausage rolls left over from the catering on days when our trainers are running a course. Normally when you drop food near adult seagulls they will land on it immediately and fight between themselves for a bite. In this case the adults are refraining from their customary grabbing, leaving everything to the stranded chick and no doubt bringing it their own offerings as well.

So now it is starting to stretch its wings and test their power. Soon enough it will be able to fly, and to move on from its temporary refuge.

What I've found most interesting about this little saga, played out from the vantage point of an upstairs office window, is the concern and aid we have been showering onto one hapless bird. It has easily become an office mascot, a focal-point reminding us of the world beyond our banks of flourescent lights and our LCD screens. Down there on the paved-over ground, beside the plastic bins, there is a survivor who will soon be strong enough to fly away.

on human frailties

August 24, 2011

I'm home now, post-Uncivilisation, and exhausted. This weekend saw the culmination of months of involvement and assistance, the last six weeks of which became relentless and overwhelming, eating up every spare moment of an already busy life and demanding unhealthy amounts of my attention and personal resources. I was anxious about the size and the scale of the undertaking, carried as it was by a tiny group of strangers scattered across the UK, all of whom struggled with competing priorities. But frustration and anxiety are demotivating, when there is a deadline: no time to open things up, just keep it to yourself please and keep your eyes on the prize – this is going to be *fun!*

Ironically, I began to feel like a lone doomer voice, questioning systems and anticipating collapse points. Of course, questioning systems in which much has already been invested is naturally unwelcome. It can even be construed as malevolent. I began to wonder where I might ever find this space, referred to in *Amelia's Magazine*, “this other kind of space, where it's safe to feel things and have conversations you might not do with your colleagues or your friends back home.”

So what does it mean, to be ‘exhausted’? Spent, used up, empty? To be fair, I'm not *totally* exhausted, because there were some incredibly good things about the festival that replenished my spirits, not least that so many people attending found it inspiring and useful. Like Big Star I want to say “thank you friends” to the people who made the weekend worth my while:

- M – for his dedication, patience, thoroughness, his sharp and sustaining sense of humour, his wry analyses, and his sensitive leadership from behind and from the side. A generous soul through and through.
- K – for her great good sense, her calm support, and her incredibly kind heart
- S – provider of perspective and wisdom, and a most grounded sense of the bigger picture
- C – whom I was so happy to finally meet and with whom I shared a most lovely, unexpected early morning walk that was ‘my favourite bit’
- J – who offered me two delightful out-of-the-blue bear hugs, both of which arrived uncannily at moments of sorest need, like messages from the universe reminding me of its wellness
- A & R – for their buoyancy and their reassuringly practical and sensible help, straight and to the point and getting things done
- C, M and Z – offering fellowship and affirmation from out of a seeming nowhere
- A – pressed into service unexpectedly and helping so generously throughout all of Sunday
- And finally, most importantly, E – for tagging along, carrying heavy bags, fetching and minding and sitting still and waiting, and not least for having endured weeks of distracted neglect, emotional fallout and shoddy meals.

From the back of the room, in between book sales and taxi chasing and volunteer

deployment, I caught snippets of the ‘Future of the Dark Mountain Project‘ session, with its open and welcoming circle of chairs and its invitation to support two unwitting and harrassed project leaders. It reminded me – infuriatingly, poignantly – of why I’d put my name down on a list, way back in October. And it brought to my mind a song by the Handsome Family, a song about our inevitable frailties:

A Beautiful Thing

Don’t you remember that snowy December
when we went to see “Singing in the Rain”?
I shouldn’t have smuggled in that bottle of gin
because after the film, I could barely walk.

But darling don’t you know
it’s only human to want to kill
a beautiful thing....

We should have been dancing like lovers in a movie,
but I fell and cut my head in the snow.

I wanted to tell you all the ways that I loved you, but instead I got sick on the train.
But darling don’t you know
it’s only human to want to kill
a beautiful thing.

on the edge

September 4, 2011

Yesterday my friend C and I took ourselves on an excursion to Seafield – Edinburgh’s sewage plant.

C has been preparing work on a project for an art degree that she is beginning this autumn. The topic she has been asked to explore is “edgelands” – the point of departure being a book of the same name, published earlier this year by Michael Symmons Roberts and Paul Farley. The book explores “places so difficult to acknowledge they barely exist.... Passed through, negotiated, unnamed, ignored.” The project spec asked her to choose a landscape and to spend time there, to sketch drawings and to journal about her thoughts and experiences there, and finally to produce a costume that integrates images of the chosen space. All these together would create a first portfolio of work.

I’ve been one of C’s sounding boards throughout this project. Early in the summer, over cups of tea, we first chatted about the assignment and she confessed that the sewage plant had occurred to her as a possible location. She cycles past it occasionally, a landmark that exists in passing rather than as destination. However, she wasn’t sure about this idea, she felt tentative: would she want to go to the sewage plant, to sit and sketch there? Would it be awkward, with plant workers approaching her to query or mock her presence (“What’re you doing there, hen? Can’t you find something better to draw?”) Would it be smelly? Think about it: the sewage plant – yuck. But that’s the point, I said – venturing into a place that is uncomfortable.

The conversation turned to the book, and to the metaphors offered by the concept of ‘edgelands’ – metaphors about oneself and one’s inner landscape. We talked about ugliness of character and difficult emotions, those parts of oneself that exist but which polite society insists must be mastered, set aside, concealed, or transformed through a cleansing process of redemption. When I first brought this up, C asked me to explain further and I fumbled around with my words “You know, the parts of yourself that are unpleasant or stupid or brutal, when you’re being heavy and negative and depressing ...” She interrupted me: “When you feel like shit?”

Since then C has coined a phrase that we use in shorthand together: ‘showing your edge’. This summer we’ve both of us grappled with some seriously challenging experiences in our relationships with other people, containing pick-a-mix assortments of miscommunication, egotism, anger, judgment, confusion, arrogance, resentment, exploitation, avoidance, ignorance – just lots of crap from everyone involved including ourselves. Our edges are sharp, all of us, and venturing into the edgelands sometimes draws blood. People hurt.

But not always. C told me later about an unexpected experience, a page for her project story. She had been feeling trepidation about asserting her lone female presence in Seafield’s industrial setting, where the plant workers were (all? almost all?) male. On this particular day, she’d gone to sketch and had settled down on a nearby hill, a scrub of grass and weeds overlooking a drive and with a view of the gates and the plant just beyond. While sitting there, a van drove past and pulled into the drive and parked away to the side. The driver got

out and sure enough, he approached her, walking across the drive and up the hill to where she was sitting. She braced herself for the intrusion. “I’ve not blocked your view with the van, have I? I parked as far over as I could. I can move it somewhere else if you like.” This, followed by a brief easy chat – a friendly and curious inquiry about the drawing – and then he left her to it with a wish of good luck to her project.

Yesterday then: we took ourselves over to Seafield for a photo shoot. The final leg of the project was to create a costume designed to evoke the imagery of the site, and to take photos of oneself in the costume and within the chosen edgelandscape. C pointed out repeatedly the ridiculous nature of our excursion, how foolish she felt, and at the same time acknowledged that this is the truth of what happens when we venture into edgelands: we look and feel awkward and stupid. It was indeed ridiculous, and she was beautiful for it.

Here she is, all wrapped up in monstrous gear:



The mask and the tubes designed to protect one from all the crap, to divert it and convert it and make it endurable:



And here she is, unmasked and smiling, among the wildflowers that grow in her edgeland:



and enjoying the absurdity of all this ugliness and beauty together.



on the human realm

September 14, 2011

“...we never leave the human realm. That is depression’s lesson.” - A. Ehrenberg

Tony has been reflecting recently on the Dialogues of J. Krishnamurti and David Bohm. He refers to

David Bohm’s tremendously powerful illustration of the way a failure to recognize proprioception leads us to causing unnecessary harm to ourselves. He uses the example of a woman who has been paralyzed on her left side by a recent stroke. She awakes in terror. She’s being pummeled about the face by an unseen attacker in the dark. Her cries bring a caregiver into the room. He turns on the light and they both see that her paralyzed left hand is poised in a fist over her head...

... held in place by her brother, who sits beside her. He is playing his favourite game from their childhood, gripping her by the wrist and using his greater strength to override her resistance, smacking the hand against her face as he says “Why are you hitting yourself? (smack) Hahaha. What’s wrong with you? (smack) What are you, an idiot? Hahaha. Stop hitting yourself! (smack)”

I wonder if Bohm had a sister (“called Judith, let us say”) Was this sister someplace in the background, while he and Krishnamurti conducted their Dialogues, mapping out their philosophies together, two insightful men confidently bouncing groundbreaking ideas off one another? Was she perhaps in the other room, boiling the kettle, setting the tea tray, preparing a light refreshment in loving support of those two busy thinkers, themselves too engrossed in the flow of their ideas to tend to such mundane details? Did she carry in the tray and set it down unobtrusively, gracefully rearranging the table mic and water glasses to make space for it? Did she make offerings of interest and admiration, did she ask questions and request opinions, did she show good faith in their integrity?

Did she attempt to sit down with them herself? Did she join the discussion, offer her own suggestions, intrude upon their already Established Dialogue? Was she gently but firmly dismissed, postponed to later, did they promise to listen at a time more convenient to themselves? Did she raise her voice, push harder, demand attention? Did she lash out, frustrated and angry, unnecessarily critical – did she cut too close? Should she have imposed herself more carefully, more discreetly, more strategically? Made her presence felt more softly? Should she have communicated more reasonably, controlled herself better? Did she need a rest?

I know, I know: I am missing the point of Bohm’s anecdote, I am completely sidestepping the points of wisdom offered up in Tony’s generous and deep-hearted posts. I am also embroidering amalgamations of people and incidents from my own experience into my scenario above, to make my own point. I don’t know anything of the characters of the real Bohm and Krishnamurti to say how they would have received a woman into their discussion. And I’ve only read a small portion of their Dialogues so far, though with the best of will making my way through the copy I’ve had on loan from the library for nine weeks already and renewed yet again, a mark of my respect for Tony’s enthusiastic recommendation. It’s not the first lead from him that I’ve followed.

But it is slow going reading the book; there's only so much I can fit into my days and there have been extremely limited opportunities to slow down sufficiently that I can sit quietly, and focus adequately – without fatigue – on the content and quality of the ideas contained in it. Therefore I must rely on Tony to acknowledge that

Two things that come across most clearly in Bohm and Krishnamurti's dialogues are Bohm's affectionate and empathetic listening, and Krishnamurti's deep reflection before speaking. Between the two they embody and communicate the two sides of the activity they are discussing. Contact with Mind, and the inter-connectivity of all things, leads to a profound sense of love; and that connection with Mind requires a deep act of listening, not only to the "other," but to the upwelling of Mind as we quiet the brain's striving. Their example of patience, coupled with an insistence to couch their discussion in a terminology that is both open and precise, is another of the wonders of these dialogues.

I do understand that by creating my own scenario above, my brain is striving and twisting things round, dragging the discussion to where my ego wants it to go. My striving brain is focusing the spotlight on what is meant by the "other". What if the "other" in this dialogue were a woman? Would she have been listened to as empathetically, as patiently? If her hands were full of dirty dishes and a distracting toddler was clinging to her leg, would she have been included in the dialogue? Or would it have been assumed that those cluttering dishes and that distracting toddler were her responsibility, that she should go take care of them in her "other" room, and allow the thinkers to carry on connecting their Minds without such interruptions? I respect the ideas being discussed by Krishnamurti and Bohm but I can't help but wonder: who were the women in their lives and what was their contribution to the ideas therein? Where did they fit in this dialogue? Even Krishnamurti and Bohm cannot leave the human realm.

Awareness of proprioception may well unveil a real phenomenon of habitual self-hating thought processes. But those self-hating thought processes leading the woman in the metaphor to beat herself black and blue are the same self-hating thought processes leading her brother to enjoy his smacking game. The self-hating thought processes by which Judith carries in the tea tray are the same self-hating thought processes by which David takes his cup so perfunctorily from her hand, while focusing so intently on the Dialogue with his colleague.

And what do I feel when I discover myself yet again carrying in the tea tray so dutifully? How did I get there? How did my brother get to that seat where he awaits his cup? Before he arrived there, did he find time to do the shopping, prepare meals, wash dishes, tidy the flat, help with homework, pack lunches, sort laundry, make phone calls, chaperone to Brownies, write emails, take out rubbish, clean out cat litter, clean a PE kit, sweep the floor, sort out the recycling, clear and wipe the table and counters, buy and sign and post birthday cards, bake cakes for the school fete, pay the bills, make the beds, spend eight hours at the desk of a paying job...was he engaged in Dialogue on 'childcare day' or did he manage to schedule around that? How did he arrive in that room with the seat, there with his colleague, and not in the kitchen, tending the kettle? Why are there two separate rooms? I can't help but observe that, whether or not I should, I do feel anger about this. *Does he feel anger about it too?* Or does he not understand? Does his salary depend on his not understanding?

So here I am again, I have landed up once more at that emotion: anger.

Anger is our friend. Not a nice friend. Not a gentle friend. It will always tell us when we have been betrayed. It will always tell us when we have betrayed ourselves. It will always tell us when it is time to act in our own best interests. (Julia Cameron)

I'm trying to work out how to act in my own best interest. I've tried various strategies already and not got it right; all I've managed to do is exacerbate a battle with two defensive sides, wounds bleeding from the furious cuts inflicted. I recently came across the following quote: "*Do not teach your children never to be angry; teach them how to be angry.*" (Lyman Abbott) Yes, that I understand. I recognize that I was taught never to be angry, by a well-meaning family themselves taught the same. I recognize that denying one's anger leaves it buried like toxic waste in one's heart, and the most effective method of its management is a blanketing depression, lying clammy and stifling like a cloak of firefighting foam through which one struggles to see, smearing a mess over everything one touches. I recognize that I have much still to learn about *how* to be angry.

As I've been writing this other chores have been neglected – dirty dishes sit stacked on crumb-scattered kitchen counters, the beds are unmade, the bin is full – I'm not even dressed yet and I must now take myself to my paying job. I've been dwelling in one room at the expense of the other. One step forward, two steps back?

on medication

September 25, 2011

“though your promise counts for nothing, you must keep it nonetheless”

All through my life I've been medicated with words. Words encourage healing, offer solace, sometimes just enough to hold onto, like a handgrip offered momentarily for balance as one takes a particularly treacherous step. Song lyrics, poetry, literature, essays and more recently blog posts – all rich pickings, all of them sharing in the experience of living, whether they are flourishing and celebrating, commiserating, or simply imparting survival tactics. I gather up quotes, like the one above, and carry them around with me like a purring cat I've lifted to my chest to cradle for a few moments.

I've been thinking again about drugs. Many of the people I love take drugs: my mother takes pills to help her sleep whenever she is unsettled; my ex-husband negotiates a precarious cocktail of mental health prescriptions and endures their side effects with resignation; other members of my family and some of my closest friends and many people I know take or have taken antidepressants.

I've never yet taken sleeping pills or antidepressants, but every so often I pick the idea up from its shelf and dust it off for a closer examination. I've not ever taken them but I've come close: a prescription for Prozac was once handed to me with little interest by a GP after only a short few minutes' consultation. I'd just ended my marriage and was living in a new country, in near-isolation with a seven-month-old infant, struggling to make sense of the trajectory my life was taking. Who wouldn't be depressed? I'd gone into the surgery to request a referral for counselling, on the advice and encouragement of my health visitor (incidentally, thank you to the NHS for the health visitor service and thank you to Gina, whose kindness and support I will never forget.) The GP heard my briefly summarised situation and agreed to refer me on to the counselling service, then threw in the Prozac like a bonus prize. I hadn't asked for it, but I accepted his authority and received the prescription in a daze of curiosity and potential relief: was this a fix that would ease the pain?

I remember the growing disquiet with which I carried the piece of paper over to the chemist, the sterile fluorescent lighting under which I was handed the paper bag, the cold officious labelling on the packet of pills inside it. For days it sat unopened on the top shelf of a kitchen cabinet, as my disquiet blossomed into frustration and resentment. Did I really need a fix? Did I need to *be fixed*? Was I something broken that needed mending? Was it *me* that was broken or the circumstances in my life? And were they even broken, for that matter, or just plainly, ordinarily, heart-crushingly difficult?

The packet ended up in a drawer, and moved around with me unopened for years; eventually I handed it in at another chemist: *no thanks*. Things had moved on, my circumstances were less volatile but they were certainly still difficult and it was certainly still taking its toll on my sense of wellbeing. Again I considered the potential relief offered by prescription meds, and again I chose to stick it out without them. Turning in the unused Prozac was a symbolic gesture by which I reminded myself that my inner landscape belonged to me, not the pharmaceutical industry.

I've been thinking again about drugs, because it's been rough going lately. I feel muddled, all over the place, like a pinball bouncing off everything and everyone. Each smack sends me veering at another angle, rational in its direction but inevitably into another clash, flailing about in a dance that feels random and chaotic. It's crazymaking, this dance, rattling the business-as-usual with its inconvenient messes: I say things I shouldn't, argue unnecessarily, succumb to hostility and bouts of tears and overwhelming lethargy. My inner landscape is volcanic, and while it may belong to me, it impacts on many of the people around me. Why can't I just control myself? Maybe I should take Prozac.

So here I am, thinking again about drugs, because I followed a signpost recently from Ran Prieur's blog to an essay by Chris Norton, describing the experience of coming off his prescriptions. Here is someone asking the same questions, from the other side of a different experience; someone who opened the packet and tried living on medication, and now many years later has handed it back and is trying to live without. I gather up and hold like a purring cat the following remark made to him by an understanding friend: "at times like this I can't say enough for the fetal position."

So then, maybe I'm not a pinball, maybe I'm a pinball wizard, a deaf dumb and blind kid playing by intuition. Maybe this exhausted unpeeling is just the stuff of my life, and there's nothing more to it, and nothing more for it, and nothing more in it. I've only ever glimpsed the fairies and the angels in brief elusive moments at the edges of my vision, I've never yet met them full-on in the joyful magic nonsense of their dance – and sometimes I think I never will. Sometimes I think that getting up and getting through the relentless task of each day is all I will ever manage.

I brace myself to get up again, by prescribing a balm of words:

*Though your promise counts for nothing, you must keep it nonetheless.
You must keep it for the captain whose ship has not been built,
For the mother in confusion, her cradle still unfilled,
For the heart with no companion, for the soul without a king,
For the prima ballerina who cannot dance to anything.*

on hiatus

December 17, 2011

“I see nobody on the road,” said Alice.

“I only wish I had such eyes,” the King remarked in a fretful tone. “To be able to see Nobody! And at that distance, too!”



I've been sometime away from Blogland, exploring instead various avenues of correspondence with friends and family.

Like Alice my size changes. I'm larger than life and unable to fit through any door; I'm small and swimming through a sea of tears. I nibble pieces of mushroom carefully from each hand, trying to find a good fit. Forward steps, backward steps – a dance. Realignment.

“What more can you expect? Such is life.” JB

Caterpillars and crickets, I am in the clay pit now and warming myself by the hearth.

on Christmas truths

December 23, 2011

I'm home now, and I do not expect to venture out again until the 27th December, if even then. I'm exaggerating somewhat. I will cross the threshold tonight to visit friends who live in the flat downstairs, to toast the season with a glass of wine and some roasted chestnuts. It is entirely possible that at some point over the next few days I will go out to the park to stretch my legs, breathe fresh air out of doors, and partake of the splendid bit of wildness that is Arthur's Seat. And we will have company on Christmas Day, to share a meal and exchange gifts.

But I am adamant about Christmas Eve: it is unsullied by any contact with shops or last-minute spending – if I've not sorted it out by the 23rd then it is too late. Christmas Eve remains blocked off in my calendar – it belongs to me and E at home, baking biscuits and working a jigsaw puzzle, listening to Vince Guaraldi or John Denver & the Muppets, reading *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!* or *The Box of Delights*. I do like the Grinch, with his bitter cunning and his heart two sizes too small, bursting its seams nonetheless when all the Who's down in Whoville join hands in their circle to welcome Christmas with joyful singing.

On Christmas Eve, after E has gone to bed in all her buzzing anticipation, I bring out the wrapping paper and gifts, I make myself some hot chocolate dosed generously with Southern Comfort, and I turn on Gram Parsons. Gram's been the soundtrack to my Christmas Eve since 1999, the music that signals a small respite to the season's mayhem, a few hours to myself sipping my drink and playing with paper and ribbon, pulling everything together for the morning's drama.

During E's early childhood years, I took great pains to hide my tracks where Father Christmas was concerned: I'd eat the biscuits she'd left out and would leave a messy litter of crumbs on the plate, I'd reply to her letter to Santa with the same disguised handwriting used on the parcel tags, I'd even eat the carrots she'd provided for the reindeer, leaving only the chewed-looking ends to spark her imagination.

When she was about 6 years old, she started to ask me if Santa Claus was real. The rumours in the primary school playground had reached her ears and planted doubt – there were those among her peers who claimed that it was just the parents, pretending. *What do you think?* I'd respond. *Why might he not be real?*

At first she accepted this noncommittal reply; she didn't want to let go of the story of Father Christmas and so she didn't pursue the point too hard. But over the next few years, she grew more assertive in her demand for a solution to the mystery. Still I didn't resolve it for her one way or the other. I batted her questions neatly back over the net to her: *Do you think it could be me? What makes you think so? Gather your evidence, think for yourself, use your eyes and your mind, trust your own judgment – answer this question for yourself.*

I wanted her to learn something I hadn't realised for myself until much later in my life, something I still haven't got a firm grip on by any means, as it works against the grain that was laid so deeply in me by my own upbringing. *Trust your own judgment. It's as worthy as anyone else's.*

I relaxed the performance, made less effort, and she began to observe that Santa's handwriting looked like mine, that the paper he used to wrap presents was of the same design as the paper we'd used to wrap presents for Dad and Granny and others. She lay down this evidence with mounting annoyance at my truculence, until finally when she was eight or nine she declared with scorn, *It's just you!*

You're right, I admitted, it's just me. So now she knows to trust her own judgment – to spot inconsistency and to challenge falsehoods.

Our next lesson will be to reclaim that belief in magic, and to join in the circle with the rest of the Who's.

on non-submission

December 31, 2011

Today is the deadline for submissions to the third *Dark Mountain Journal*. I'm choosing to not submit. I'm choosing to say what I want to say, here, instead – to say what I want to say rather than trying to work out whether what I'm saying is sufficiently Dark Mountainish to merit approval, rather than trying to meet criteria, or to follow the rules or the expectations of anyone else but myself.

I didn't submit any writing to the previous two journals either. For the first collection, assembled in 2009, I wouldn't have dared. I agreed with much of what the DM manifesto had to say, and felt instinctively that I belonged among those who recognised the futility of pursuing the impossible contradiction of endless growth, those who were questioning the dominant cultural narratives. But I didn't think of myself as one of the writers that the project had invited to participate. I didn't write, despite having enjoyed writing very much, once upon a time. In my family it was my brother who was the writer, my brother who was acknowledged and feted as 'the creative one'. All the talent had been handed to him, and it was his exclusive territory; it became his identity and his career, while I had a different assignment: be quiet and polite, keep yourself to yourself, and look after everyone else. My mother set a good example.

The next call for journal submissions was in 2010, with a deadline at the end of November. This time I wanted to say something. I wanted to write about the experience of attending the Uncivilisation pre-festival camp and the festival itself, which had taken place in Llangollen earlier in the year. As exhilarating as the experience had been (a holiday on my own, away from my home, apart from my daughter for an entire week) I returned with a growing sense of unease. My involvement there had been almost entirely as an observer. I had no confidence and little sense of my own person – not after a decade of identifying mainly as My Child's Mum, and before that, decades as My Husband's Wife, My Parents' Daughter. I had sat at the edges – part of the chorus, part of the setting – watching the space and following the conversations that were held predominantly by men, who had so much to say, and no hesitation in saying it. If they had any doubt they didn't show it, regarding the authority of their views, or the value of their contributions, or their right to join on their own terms.

As much as wanting to express myself by writing about this experience, I wanted to participate in the project as more than a backdrop. Are expression and participation not essentially the same thing? So I gave writing a go, struggling to fit it into my already-crowded life. Responsibility for a job, the care of a child and a home, not to mention many good friends and other family members, all laid claim to my time and attention. Still, I tried: I squeezed it into the corners, set the alarm clock earlier and earlier, I spent my mornings at the keyboard instead of the sink.

As for the writing itself, once I'd started it the floodgates opened. There was too much to say, and the more I wrote, the more spilled out, all over the place, without any sense, with too many themes, too many points – prickly sharp points, weary points, angry points, never-

before-spoken points. The more I tried to tie up the loose ends, the more they came undone. It got ugly. Absorbed in typing, I neglected the laundry and the dishes, threw ready-meals in the oven. Scribbling in a notebook, I forgot to pack my daughter's lunch, to sign her homework jotter, to find her the correct change for bus fare. The competition between these two worlds – the trying-to-say-something world and the do-your-duty world – was too fierce to tame by the end of November. With all the other demands upon me – insistent, guilt-producing, using-me-up demands – there simply wasn't enough time or space for me to pull it together, to find a note of redemption and sound it out into words. So I gave up, and missed the deadline.

Now, another year later, the third Dark Mountain Journal is underway, and its theme is Coming Home. Hang on, pull the other one; have I really been away? All I can think of is the laundry that needs doing after festival camping. I still haven't found a resolution to my dilemma; there isn't one. Everyone's life has boundaries, all we can do is make our own small attempts to push at the edges. So I write some things into this blog; it is a good place for making marks, as my friend Anhhrefn says. And spending even a few moments on writing means operating from within the space of oneself, rather than on behalf of someone else.

"If I were to speak for myself," a graduate student said one day in the middle of her oral exam – and then stopped. Hearing the sound of dissociation – the separation of herself from what she was saying, she began to question her relationship to what she was saying and what she was not saying. For whom was she speaking, and where was she in relation to herself? (Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*)

The normal and natural conflicts emerging out of my daughter's adolescence are caught up in this: she has stood at my elbow demanding that I get off the computer and pack her lunch, while I have punted back that my priority is to finish what I'm writing, and that she's old enough now to pack her own lunch. It doesn't sound like much of an argument but the tension is extreme and our emotions run high: there is a conflict of interest, a change of roles and responsibilities, a renegotiation of power, a testing of love. I am setting a different example to the one my mother set.

This autumn I had the good fortune to hear Carol Gilligan speaking at the opening session of Wordpower's Radical Book Fest. She was introducing her new book, *Joining the Resistance*, which explores the experience of young women in adolescence who are right in the thick of it, internalizing their gendered identities, and learning how to behave as socially-acceptable females. She said that she had been surprised by the young women she met, surprised to observe how much they were resisting, with passion, the restrictions they were encountering. They were resisting the expectation to be quiet and polite, to keep themselves to themselves, and to look after everyone else. They were saying what they wanted to say rather than trying to follow the rules or the expectations of others, resisting the "pressures to disengage themselves from their honest voices." Gilligan's thesis, as I understand it, is that we – all of us, men and women – would do better for ourselves in the long run, should we lend our support to this resistance rather than suppressing it.

The cover of the book shows the image of a single hand, small and slender, held erect and open-palmed. Gilligan described this image as capturing the message that she had heard from the young women in her study, the women who were resisting: *Stop, and I want to join*. She repeated it:

Stop
And
I
Want
To
Join.

This is exactly why I'm not submitting.

Maybe some other time. Because truly, there is so much that I love about the Dark Mountain Project. We do need new stories.

on circles

January 4, 2012

We have to stop running and take our places in the circle and face ourselves in front of each other. That is to say, to face how limited and uninteresting we are. Every one of us has to do this in front of everybody else. At that point, we have grown up. Nothing can let us escape this confrontation.... We have to come to terms with ourselves, with how bad we are, how limited we are, how short our life is. Louise Bourgeois

I was told not too long ago about a group icebreaker exercise at a conference in which participants were asked to organize themselves along a line measuring two poles of extreme view about climate change: everything's-fine-business-as-usual, and too-late-now-we're-fucked. The point of the exercise was to compel people to speak with others in the group and get to know one another better. It was also to highlight how we negotiate our sense of ourselves in respect to other people, according to our values and personal perceptions. The exercise forces the participants to analyse one another according to the starting proposition, and to dig into the complexity of the beliefs held by oneself and by other people. To analyse, categorise... to tap into that bottomless well of judgment that allows us to manipulate our world so adroitly, and to build entire complex civilisations based on a zillion interconnected calculations.

My own response – and also that of the friend who was telling me about her experience – was to question the premise itself. Why set such an exercise on a group of people who could potentially meet together with great goodwill? What purpose does it serve to ‘keep them in their place’? We agreed: take the two ends of the line, and join them together into a circle. Allow them to move around.

I don’t know much about the use of the circle as a sacred space, but my gut instinct is to respect it, and to resent its misuse. There was much made of the Round Table, but that was a political tool and damn it if Arthur wasn’t still king – he wasn’t *that* committed to equality. And as for ridicule... well, I guess we can all stoop so low. I know I can; I was taught by the best.

But isn’t that the point of the circle? It symbolises containment. It holds the bad stuff as well as the good, it holds the destructive impulse as well as the creative, which work together – no up without down, no near without far, no joy without anger, no relief without pain. Not for nothing do they call it the circle of life. How do we cope with the bad stuff? Do we put it over there, at the other side of the room, on the other end of the line? Is it carried around in someone else? Or is it right there in the mirror? It’s really hard to look at that mirror, and not become overwhelmed.

Dear Anhhrefn – ever on the ball, ever humble – gave me the gift of this poem a few months back. I’ll just copy the comment in full, as it is a fitting way to end this musing about circles:

I offer you words that are a balm to me, not mine but Louis MacNiece's. It is a reminder that we are none of us alone, an invitation to 'join hands'. It is called 'Wolves'.

*I do not want to be reflective any more
Envying and despising unreflective things
Finding pathos in dogs and undeveloped handwriting
And young girls doing their hair and all the castles of sand
Flushed by the children's bedtime, level with the shore.*

*The tide comes in and goes out again, I do not want
To be always stressing either its flux or its permanence,
I do not want to be a tragic or philosophic chorus
But to keep my eye only on the nearer future
And after that let the sea flow over us.*

*Come then all of you, come closer, form a circle,
Join hands and make believe that joined
Hands will keep away the wolves of water
Who howl along our coast. And be it assumed
That no one hears them among the talk and laughter.*

I hope there are lines here that purr for you when you pick them up. We must all come closer, join hands and defeat the howling together with our laughter.

on discrimination

January 7, 2012

Spring 1988, late at night. I'm sitting beside my friend, L, in the stairwell of her college dormitory. We're sitting side by side on a top step, looking down toward the landing: cinderblock walls painted white, ceramic floor tiles, weak fluorescent lighting. We don't agree, and we're both of us crying, and our words bounce off the empty space and echo down the stairwell to the flights above and below us.

I'm visiting L at her small, private Catholic college on the east coast, a long weekend trip for me from the Big Ten state university I attend in the midwest. We've been best friends throughout high school, like chalk and cheese yet complementing one another, two parts of a whole. L is a romantic: she loves aimless walks on the beach with her dog, she wants to live a good life and help the world, she talks about joining the Jesuit Volunteers or Peace Corps when she graduates. I on the other hand am a cynic: I listen to the Violent Femmes and XTC, I read Kurt Vonnegut and Hunter S. Thompson, I have no plans for my future.

We'd survived our high school with one another's help, both of us awkward misfits. Other girls at our school enjoyed shopping at Benetton and Banana Republic, they hung out at Giovanni's and Old Orchard, they lined the insides of their lockers with screen stills of Rob Lowe and Tom Cruise. L's locker on the other hand had sported a hokey picture of Robert Redford in *The Natural*, mine a creepy shot of Robert DeNiro in *Taxi Driver*. We'd rebelled against prom, with its awkwardly-arranged dates and its purchase of elaborate frocks with died-to-match shoes, its hiring of limousines and posing for photographs. On prom night we had taken ourselves on an imaginary double date with Roy Hobbs and Travis Bickle, and had ended up on the beach of Lake Michigan, walking barefoot in the sand by moonlight and gossiping about our classmates, wondering how the event was getting on without us.

Now here I am with her, almost a year later, and our relationship has hit a snag. I don't like her new circle of friends at college, and she knows it, and they know it too. My goofy friend has fallen in with the crème de la crème of her college social scene: debutantes whose fathers work on Wall Street or in Washington, who spend their summers on Martha's Vineyard or in the south of France; they wear designer clothes and drive their own cars, they get their hair done, attend tanning and nail spas and parties with the college football team. L's kudos has skyrocketed from her association with these campus elites, yet from what I can see she is merely permitted into their ranks as a mascot. To them she is a token outsider, a midwestern hick, a parvenu whose role is to set off their own sophistication.

Well, that's what I think anyway. They just don't seem nice to her at all. She sees herself as belonging to their group, but I see her tagging along and supporting them indiscriminately while they pay her little heed and even less respect. The L whom I know from high school may be there when we're alone together but with these others, she wavers, becomes less distinct, she recedes into herself – she worries about what she should wear, and how her hair looks, she tries to keep up. I think she deserves better.

The problem – the reason that we are out here in the stairwell, away from her roommate and friends – is that I have made the mistake of writing down my thoughts, committing them to

paper in an attempt to sift through and pin down what exactly is upsetting me. I have asked her point blank what it is that binds her to them, when they appear to have so little in common with her, and to treat her with indifference.

It hadn't seemed like a problem when I did it: we've always written each other notes and letters, L and I, and it's a comfortable and familiar form of communication. Throughout high school we'd passed one another notes constantly and were even once hauled into the office of Sister Benedict Annette – a fierce ancient disciplinarian – to be grilled about a confiscated scrap of lined paper on which our scribbled exchange had included my use of the word 'opium'. L had wept and apologised while I sat beside her, furious and defiant.

But L's roommate has discovered what I've written, and shared it with the other girls, who have confronted L with its contents. It is a betrayal and a transgression, her association with critical, unimpressed me. It has embarrassed her terribly, and placed her in an even more precarious position within their group. I feel awful, and guilty, but at the same time bewildered and frustrated by her taste for these companions, her desire to be included among them and to meet their approval.

They're good people, L says. You just don't know them. You're judging them. They're just like you and me, deep down.

I'm not saying they're bad; I'm just saying they're creeps, I reply. We all have to discriminate on some grounds, we can't be friends with every person we come across because there simply isn't enough time and space in our lives to do that, so we all have to work out a system for who's in and who's out. Why bother with people who don't respect you?

They're my friends, she insists.

They don't treat you like it, I counter.

We sit on the step in that stairwell, and go through it all, over and over and from all the different angles, but we can't find a place to regain our harmony. I do understand the principle, and agree with her, that everyone is essentially good; it's the reality of relationships with other people that stumps me.

And it still does. I've been on the different sides of this exchange, many times over, with different people in my life, friends and family as well as others who are not so close. No individual should be written off completely. And likewise no one deserves to be treated badly. But the unpleasant truth is that we do treat each other badly, all of us, in all kinds of ways, even the people we like. We often treat the people we care about the worst, because we trust them sufficiently to bear up under our faults. We open up and show them our insides, and our insides are not easy.

I often return in my memory to that stairwell, I go back to it, and back again. I've never been able to resolve the dilemma that was illuminated under its humming fluorescent lights. I can only make up my own rules of operation, and then manage with everyone else according to what I imagine to be theirs. We never really know for sure and we all just bumble along, getting pissed off with each other along the way and then getting through it, or over it, or around it somehow – usually. I think there is something in there too about the difference between boundaries and barriers... and something too about forgiveness... but those are for another time.

on driving in snow

January 10, 2012

About ten years ago now, I was visiting my family in Louisville over the Christmas holidays. My brother and I had spent the evening with my uncle at his place, and we were heading back to our parents' house late at night. It was snowing heavily and the roads were slick, not yet cleared by plows or gritters. We were on the Watterson, a dual-carriageway ring road, with an exit approaching in the distance, about... oh help me out here, I can't do spatial quantities: would it have been 40 yards maybe? Beyond the metal barriers at the side of the road, down in the distance below, we could see sign-lit industrial blocks and car parks, places where the highway exit was leading to.

There were only a couple other cars on the road with us, and one of them must have been trying to make the exit. My memory is blurry here: had that car ahead overtaken us, trying to go around, or to get past another? All I remember vividly is how time and space together congealed into slow motion, as it skidded in the snow and veered directly across our path, spinning around 45 degrees and heading straight at the barrier rails, toward the drop to the streets and car park below. I remember how calm, how detached I felt, as I pumped the brake: I learned to drive in a city with serious snowfalls, and how to prevent a skid was one of the first things we were taught. The other car slid past us and stopped a few feet from the edge. Our own car stopped a few feet from its flank. You couldn't have filmed a more eloquent sequence if you'd tried.

My brother unbuckled and got out immediately, approached the other vehicle. I could see him through the windscreen as the snow continued to fall, could hear him asking the other people if they were ok. Other cars behind us had stopped too, and I could hear someone else calling out to him. He came back over and got in beside me, pulled the door shut, reached for the buckle, snapped it in place. We watched the other car back up slowly and turn itself the right way round, but it didn't get back onto the road. It remained pulled over at the shoulder, its driver needing some time to regain composure before rejoining the highway traffic. So we moved on, back along the road, back on our way.

The thing that I can't remember in this memory is what, if anything, my brother and I said to one another. We must have said something. Did he ask me if I was ok, as easily as he asked a stranger? Did I ask him? Did we comment on the experience, review what had happened? Of course we did, we must have, there's no way we could have shared that experience and not remarked upon it. But I can't remember. All the words have been edited out. They will have been inadequate to the occasion, inconsequential to what really happened. In my family, like in many families, we find it nearly impossible to talk about things that matter. All I'm left with are the visuals, and the resounding quiet of those few slow-crawling seconds as that car cut across our path, and my feeling of calm, of detachment.

on one condition

January 14, 2012

Not so long ago, I was on the phone with someone dear to me, hearing an anecdote about her friend who had been raised in difficult circumstances by a mother whose mental health had been diagnosed as problematic. This daughter now suffered from anxiety and various issues of poor physical health, and it all went back to her upbringing, to the relationship between mother and daughter. The suffering inherent in these consequences, I was told, had been abated somewhat by a therapist with the following reassurance: “your mother loved you when she was sane.”

My heart constricted at this comment, slipped into our conversation so casually and offered so unquestioningly as a prescription with which to treat the sore perplexity of relationships and behaviour and challenging circumstances. I’m intrigued by what lies beneath this assumed connection between love and sanity, curious indeed about how much can be explored therein, but at the same time I am horrified by the message that hinges on a single word: *when*.

When says it all: sanity is a condition that must be met, in order for love to be possible.

I have some experience myself with the dilemmas involved. My husband too had been diagnosed with a mental health condition, long before I’d met him. I remember a conversation I had with a friend of mine in the lead-up to the wedding, her acute discomfort on hearing about my fiance’s acquaintance with a psychiatric unit.

Do you realise what you’re getting into? she’d asked me. Maybe you should reconsider...

What do you mean? I’d replied. Are you saying that he can’t be loved?

That’s not what she meant, I know; she was concerned for me and what I might be taking on board in my own life. She was a good friend. I think back ruefully to this conversation, because of course his situation brought with it heavy challenges for both of us, and our marriage did eventually buckle under the pressure and break into pieces.

Many years on, I have my own experiences with which to inform my views on mental health. I grapple with my own bouts of depression and understand even more how debilitating and subversive it can be. I’m aware of my shadow: sometimes I look straight at it, other times I avoid its gaze; sometimes I fight with it, other times dance. Sometimes I pass it onto other people with a tap of the shoulder and then run away; other times I drink it up like water.

But I’m digressing: this is about *when*.

When I was born in circumstances of dire illness, the condition that my mother set upon me was baptism, and by hook or by crook or by pure damn luck in that instance – with her help and the doctor’s too – I was able to meet that condition and avoid the unsavoury potential of consignment to limbo. In her storytelling, she held this up to me as a moral lesson, and raised me to understand that life’s meaning was established by *setting* conditions, and love then expressed by *meeting* those conditions.

I don't understand any longer what I was taught. In my own moral composition, *when* is an unnecessary line drawn into the infinite universe. *When* decrees that the human creature is the sole bearer of intelligence and consciousness. *When* decrees that asphalt and tarmac trump soil and grass. *When* decrees that good spelling counts. *When* decrees that father knows best, and that daughter should be seen and not heard.

When is the one word in that statement of belief which changes everything for everyone: it allows for one condition – any condition, take your pick – to stand between oneself and one's rightful place in the circle. Do you realise what you're getting into? Maybe you should reconsider....

on the small and the beautiful

August 17, 2012

In this, as in all other matters, lapse of time will be needed before things seem to straighten, and the courage and patience that does not despise small things lying ready to be done; and care and watchfulness, lest we begin to build the wall ere the footings are well in; and always through all things much humility that is not easily cast down by failure, that seeks to be taught, and is ready to learn. (William Morris)

So. The writing well ran dry for a spell. My attention has been fully engaged on other things, “small things lying ready to be done.” For instance, I have taken up needlepoint. How did that happen?!

When I was growing up, I regarded stitching with disdain. It was a grandmother’s pastime, tedious and fussy. And now here I am – if not yet a grandmother – grey hair beginning to show, settled into the rocking chair with a tapestry on my lap. It’s relaxing, pulling a thread of wool back and forth along the canvas, and satisfying to see an image take shape.

I’ve mastered the basics now, so that challenge of learning more stitches and developing technique beckons my intellect. The haberdashery at John Lewis fascinates me, it’s a veritable sweetshop of wools and accessories. I browse the internet, hunting for designs which are not farm animals, or scenes of twee cottages, or goofy patterns of hearts and teddy bears. I muse on various ideas of my own design to be stitched on a blank canvas, but for now I am happy to play with kits such as this one:



Strawberry Thief - adapted by B. Russell from William Morris

What appeals to me most about the stitching of needlepoint is the focus of my attention onto something small, immediate – something that exists only for its own sake and not in thrall to some higher purpose or ambition. Wrestling with the greater narrative of our culture, trying to drive it in one direction or another, is a futile pursuit; real revolution takes place within, and as Raoul Vaneigem suggests, in the actions of everyday life. Small is beautiful.

In conversation with a friend not too long ago, we were discussing the various cultural and ecological crises that are irrevocably altering the landscape of our own and our children’s futures. The problem, she observed, is that it’s all just too big. I agree. The damage being done by our industrialised, global-extending civilisation is the work of a beast that – ironically – cannot be tamed.

So I focus instead upon the small and the beautiful. “I can but think of myself as living in some new way.” (William Morris)

on witches

August 24, 2012

One day, Old Witch, the head witch of all the witches, was banished. Amy, just an ordinary real girl, not a witch, said Old Witch would have to go away. So, Old Witch had to go.

Long before Hermione Granger arrived at Hogwarts, and even before Mildred the Worst Witch attended Miss Crackle's academy, Eleanor Estes wrote a magically weird story called *The Witch Family*. I still have my copy – originally my sister's – with its browning stiff pages and its corners dog-eared with love. In this story, the boundaries between the dreamlike imaginary and the “ordinary real” become so blurred, the two realms become so intricately intertwined, that one must simply surrender to the narrative and ride along as though carried on a broomstick. How else could one reconcile the worlds described: on the one hand, that of a little girl sitting at her red playtable with paper and crayons, beside the window in her mother's bedroom; and on the other, that of the mean old wicked Old Witch, croaking her spells and dancing the Hurly Burly, and her Little Witch Girl, enduring the hardships of witch school and picnicking with her mermaid friend by the side of a colourful lagoon, deep inside the caves of a great glass hill.

Witches have an honoured place in the world of stories: from the tyrant Wicked Witch of the West in Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, later named Elphaba in Gregory Maguire's spin-off novel *Wicked*, to the fearsome Baba Yaga Bony Legs of Russian folktales, and not forgetting the witches of well-known fairy tales such as Rapunzel and Hansel and Gretel. Contemporary children have of course the *Harry Potter* (Rowling) and *Worst Witch* (Murphy) series, as well as picture book favourites *Meg and Mog* (Nicoll) and *Winnie the Witch* (Thomas). Historic novels considering the dilemma of women accused of witchcraft include *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* (Speare), *Witch Child and Sorceress* (Rees), and *The Witching Hour* (Laird) – in fact, young adult fiction is abundant with witches.

Witches are of course not confined to fiction. They have existed throughout history as the scapegoats upon whom society exercises its fear and repression. As to fear, consider the motivation of the creators of witch bottles, those talismans against spells and curses that are excavated in old dwellings. Rima Staines has written evocatively about these artifacts, and has created a beautiful image of her own Witch Bottle. And as to repression, one need only refer to the infamous *Malleus Maleficarum* to see the religious indignation and spite that fuelled medieval inquisitions.

Witches are likewise not confined to history. Last week, a friend of mine gave a presentation at the Capturing Witches conference in Lancaster – Zoe's reflections on the event highlight some of the issues at stake (no pun intended) in present-time witchhunts, and our reluctance to recognise bigotry, persecution and ageism occurring at close range.

But this distinction between fiction and nonfiction is misleading. Is any story real? When we speak of someone's own story, or the stories of history, or the cultural stories we abide by in our own times, what do we mean? Is a story not simply one line captured from an infinite number of perspectives and subjective experiences? Surely there is never a single story to be told, no matter how powerful, charming, persuasive, appealing or unanimous are the voices

insisting upon it, no matter how worthy or unworthy the purpose or motivation behind it. Witch hunts are frequently no more than dissenter hunts. What better way to silence dissent or disarm a challenge than to taint the dissenter with the brush of demonisation, with accusations of evil or malicious intent? What more effective way to dismiss the voice of complaint or criticism?

Then again, what magic lies in stories, what power to create change, that fundamental principle binding us to life and death. Stories cast spells upon us and transform our reality as effectively as any potion or incantation might do.

“Tell a story about Old Witch,” said Amy. “Make it bad, but not too bad. Have it begin bad, but end good. All right, begin. One day, Old Witch...”

on having and being

September 7, 2012

We recently moved a chair from my daughter's room to my own. It changed the space dramatically, created a place to sit in the evening, reading or stitching. It inspired me to heave into some clearing out and reordering of that room, a chore which has been hanging over me a while. My room tends to be the dumping ground for all the paper and clutter that builds up, all the unfinished projects and unopened post and various things-to-do. But now that chair is there, and I want to sit in it. It's interesting how one item in a room can change so much. It brought back a memory.

When I was a child, I was fortunate enough to have my own bedroom, and like many children's rooms it was usually a mess. I preferred getting things out to play with, rather than putting them away. Even a didactic Mrs. Piggle Wiggle story (*The Won't Pick Up Toys Cure*, in which Hubert Prentice becomes trapped in the debris of his untidied room) failed to influence me.

At thirteen however I started earning a cash income from babysitting and bought what was in those days a decent enough piece of kit: a stereo turntable from the Sears electronics department. It sat centre stage on my desk and inspired a new obsession with LPs. Pride of possession planted its nefarious seed and with that stereo came a new appreciation for the space I called my own. This prompted me to clean and reorganise my room from top to bottom. From a messy slob to an obsessive neat-freak, I kept strict order over the wee corner of the universe that I felt belonged to me – my teenage territory – and I carried that impulse for many years: a place for everything and everything in its place.

So along I went, following the traditional middle-class storyline: finish college, get married, get a job, buy a sofa... the next thing to do was to save up a down payment and join the ranks of the homeowners. And then, something happened. Like one small mis-step throwing me off balance, I made a choice which skewed the plot entirely. I moved abroad to the UK, and into the upheaval of a transatlantic move whereby all of my furniture and most of my belongings were left behind. I brought with me only the bare basics of clothing and personal items, and a portion of books, with which to begin the task of rebuilding a household.

Next I had a child, and my attention focused onto that one demanding experience. The baby's needs and my own fatigue trumped all else; any ideas of house-buying were shelved until things settled down. But they didn't. Instead, a divorce sent me reeling into a situation where mere survival drove my decisions. Owning a house sat on the list of long-term plans, and there it festered for several years while I moved around, exchanging one rented flat for another. I was so preoccupied with raising a toddler and so skint that the first rung of the property ladder remained well out of reach. During those years I also surrendered to the chaos that a small child creates. Any last lingering remains of my neat-freakdom dissolved in the happy waves of clutter produced by Little Miss Entropy.

A nagging worry ate at me continually: how would I ever be able to afford my own place? I would need to work full-time, leave my daughter in daycare, focus my time and energy on a career and salary – all in order to afford the expense of a mortgage. This went against the

grain of everything my heart told me to invest myself in, and I couldn't bring myself to do it. I opted for stay-at-home parenthood with part-time work to fit around it, and my earning potential followed suit.

Meanwhile something else was happening, something deeper than mere circumstances and which only gradually took shape. I began to resonate with ideas very different to the ones I'd grown up with. First I met a friend who described the choice she faced when offered the opportunity to buy the council house in which she lived. Her decision? To decline the offer, so that the property might remain in the public housing stock. Her reasoning was both simple and generous: the house had been there for her when she'd needed it, and should be available to others who might need it. Sod you, Margaret Thatcher.

Next the same friend put me onto Tom Hodgkinson's wonderful books about living as an idler. In *How to Be Free* he muses that:

People object to renting in principle because, they say, you are 'throwing money down the drain', but the mortgage system is an organized way of throwing money down a different drain, the one owned by the usurers.... Putting a lot of time and money into mortgages and the 'dream home' is never going to be more than a distraction from the real issue, which is you, and your state of mind. The mortgage is a commercial exploitation of our longing for home.

Another touchstone was Erich Fromm, whose *To Have or To Be* captured precisely what I was wrestling with:

Speaking of having something permanently rests upon the illusion of a permanent and indestructible substance. If I seem to have everything, I have – in reality – nothing, since my having, possessing, controlling an object is only a transitory moment in the process of living.... In the having mode, one's happiness lies in one's superiority over others, in one's power, and in the last analysis, in one's capacity to conquer, rob, kill. In the being mode it lies in loving, sharing, giving.

The idea of buying my own place became entwined with this conflict of values, and it sits there still. On the one hand, I feel anxiety at being priced out of the property market, coupled with a very mild discontent in my current abode. I wouldn't have chosen yellow for the sitting room; I would prefer hardwood floors to carpeting and laminate; I certainly wouldn't have picked out this wallpaper or that light fixture. If I owned my own place I could choose these details myself, to reflect my own taste.

On the other hand, I harbour the fear of heading down a misguided path and losing my way. I know only too well that the neat-freak lurks within me, threatening to catch me up in those details of wallpaper and floor coverings, in the need to make it perfect, to assign those things the power to matter. My energy and attention might so easily be diverted from discovery and growth into owning and controlling, into having, not being.

There's more to it though. It lies in the distinction between mess and chaos, between order and control. It's a very fine line to tread, a delicate operation: to create in one's home a place of comfort and beauty according to one's view of the world, without venturing into the realm of control and perfection, without slipping into comparisons and envy and craving for the next improvement, and without confusing one's surroundings with one's identity.

I'm still working on all this. And now I'm going to go sit in that chair.

an open love letter to my sister

September 9, 2012

You are the eldest, I am the youngest, with a gulf of seven years between us. When we were children you were saddled with the burden of babysitting, given charge of your younger siblings, and we resented you for it. I remember running from you, streets and streets away in search of our mother whom I wanted. I know now that you wanted her too.

You grew up, moved out of the family home into your own city apartment, while I remained the last chick in the nest, prickly with teenage rebellion. You invited me to visit, our own weekend together, young and independent and free of parental interference. As we walked the pavements, exploring the shops and sights of your neighbourhood, we approached an intersection. Traffic heaved past and you reacted with thoughtless authority, your hand on my arm, holding me back. The spell was broken. I raged at the presumption, the patronisation, the infantilisation: I wasn't a toddler who would dart out into the road! I know now that the gesture wasn't intentional and that this happens to everyone; our learned habits run deeply deep and catch us unawares our whole life long.

I grew up too, left home. At our brother's wedding, you and I shared a hotel room. In the dark that night, I could hear you weeping and I didn't know what to do. It was so unexpectedly raw, so huge and heavy and frightening, and I felt so ill-equipped to take on the role of confidante or comforter. I inquired meekly if at all, fumbled awkwardly to put it away, to put those unruly emotions back onto their shelf. I know now that you needed to be held.

I knew it then too – I just didn't trust myself to know how. But as the years progressed, I tried to learn. I opened myself up to the potential of our friendship, and tried to listen, to offer encouragement, to be a source of support. You confided in me, came out as a lesbian, gathered yourself up to tell our parents, and I stood by you as best I could. Our mother was accepting, our father rejecting, and you dealt with the aftermath. I know now how much courage you summoned and what strength you've got for living truthfully.

I moved away and our friendship flourished through correspondence. You cheered when my daughter was born and became a devoted auntie. You gave her beautiful gifts: quilts you'd sewn and handmade books with stories you'd written. You visited us and you loved her to bits. I know now just how lucky she is.

Then came a difficult time when I pushed you away. I felt smothered, weighed down by duty, unhappy and exhausted with the unravelling of family knots. I retreated from everyone, determined to be independent and to curtail any emotional debt with those who didn't seem to know me as the me that I knew myself. You recognised that something was wrong, and reached out to me, only to be slapped away, bitten, scratched, wounded. I know now how much I hurt you.

We steered clear of one another, our contact stilted and wary. The distance grew and a chasm opened up around me, deeper and deeper until one day I tipped over its edge and went tumbling and spinning. I called Mom in a panic of fear and she said do you want me to come to you? and I said yes I do, and she said do you want me to bring anyone with me?

and I said yes I want you to bring my sister. Even in the confusion of spinning, I knew that the responsibility lay with me to try to mend the damage I had done. I know now that I was also reaching out for help.

Mom told me later that when she called you to ask, will you come? you didn't hesitate. Yes of course, you said. You took an emergency leave from work and flew over with her to my side and that of your niece. I know now how much patience and forgiveness you exercised, how much love was in that lack of hesitation.

And so we've been mending, bit by bit, and rebuilding our faltered friendship. And I want you to know now that I love you. Not just because you are affectionate, loyal, intelligent, interesting, courageous, creative, witty, thoughtful, patient, generous, tasteful, kind, a wonderful sister, a loving daughter, a devoted aunt.... you are all of these. But I want you to know now that I love you because you are lovable. It is that simple.

an open letter to the Director of the Dark Mountain Project

or, On Painting by Numbers

October 12, 2012

Dear Paul

I hope that speaking my mind in the context of my own blog will not constitute, in your mind, an act of antagonism. Perhaps it will help if I preface my remarks with my reassurance to you, sincerely and publicly, of my admiration for the [Dark Mountain Project](#) and for the fascinating and sorely needed discourse which it explores in the avenues of its published journals, its events, and its online presence. I might also remind you that I have supported the project since its early days, by contributing financially to the publications of books 1 and 2 (you'll see my name there on those back page rolls of honour); by attending events in Wales, Hampshire, and Dumfries as well as helping to organise more than one meet-up for interested parties in Scotland; and by giving you the best part of my spare time and energy last summer to help run Uncivilisation 2011 – no laughing matter for a single working parent, and an experience which ate up more time and burned me out more than any stint of volunteering should ever do to anyone. I hope you can recognise my contributions to the project and agree that I am entitled to form an opinion from my experiences and observations.

The reason I am writing this is to invite some dialogue with you regarding the gendered dimension of the Dark Mountain Project.

Just this morning I received a link to this blog post by Naomi Smyth, and when I read it I was surprised that I hadn't come across it before now. Feedback about the DMP is usually circulated via the [@darkmtn](#) Twitter thread. You were certainly aware of Naomi's post, having commented at the end of it yourself, so I am curious as to why it's not been shared with the wider DM audience. It includes a very reflective account of Naomi's impressions of Uncivilisation 2012, as well as some great video footage of the 2011 festival, including an unusually succinct interview with yourself and Dougald – altogether a neat little promotion of the project.

I have to admit that I wonder if you've been unwilling to draw further attention to the issues raised in Naomi's post. You do remark that her perspective will be "useful to mull over" so I am hoping that you will mull over the following thoughts as well.

I know that the DM ethos favours qualitative experience over quantitative number-crunching. Nonetheless, I would like to paint a picture with some numbers. It's the short work of a morning, over my cup of coffee and using my Dark Mountain Journals 1, 2 and 3. Very informal, this piece of research, and governed with a hasty methodology (page flipping and pencil scratching): I set out to determine the numbers of contributions to the DM journals, by gender.

Now, I can guess your views on such an exercise. Doesn't tell the whole story. Content is

what matters, the spirit of it is what counts. We've tried to include women. We can only publish what we receive.

I agree. But in any case, here's what I found, in respect to the three journals together:

- Total number of male contributors: 80
- Total number of female contributors: 23
- Total number of articles/items by or including male contributors: 130
- Total number of articles/items by or including female contributors: 41
- Total number of pages by or including male contributors: 722
- Total number of pages by or including female contributors: 164

Pedantic? Certainly. Numbers can be pretty boring (perhaps someone could produce an infographic?) but they can also tell a story about who is the main protagonist, who holds power, whose thoughts and perspectives warrant a platform – in short, who matters enough to be listened to. The numbers there tell me that DMP is for the most part exploring its wealth of ideas from a man's point of view.

The numbers also show that you're onto the case: women's contributions increase with each successive publication. For instance, Book 1 contains 17 pages of content by or including women; Book 2 has 53; by Book 3 we're up to 94. You *are* trying to include women. That's nice of you.

A final observation I'd like to make – using numbers again – is in respect to your reply comment to Naomi's blog post. You remarked that "there were a lot of women running the festival this time around – as opposed to three men, which it was the first year."

By my count there were *four* people running the first Uncivilisation festival in Llangollen: three men and one woman by the name of Kat Dunseath. I'm surprised you have forgotten her so readily, as my own memory of Kat during that event (she tented beside me in the field) was of someone entirely harassed with responsibilities, not to mention someone who was a vital coordinator in the pre-festival preparations. She also worked at Uncivilisation 2011, in fact she was an indispensable member of the 'backstage crew' for that second big DMP event, and she has been employed by the project in other ways since then. Surely you do remember her? How is it, then, that she doesn't figure in your account of "running the festival"?

Perhaps this is just a minor detail, an understandable oversight. Well, unfortunately, I would suggest that our civilisation's accounts of its own history are crammed full of such oversights. I'm sure there are plenty of feminist scholars who could present the argument more thoroughly than I can.

I'm focusing on gender, but obviously that is only one of many characteristics that contribute to identity and create differences which can lead to discrimination. Equalities legislation these days makes reference to "protected characteristics" which the Equality and Human Rights Commission lists as: "age, disability, gender, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief and sexual orientation." All of these aspects of personal and social identity will continue to exist as our culture greets the consequences of its choices, and our collapse unfolds itself. I would suggest that, for all the 94 pages that it grants to women in Book 3, the DMP is missing out on a great deal of the stories that are out there.

One of the DMP's clarion calls from the very start has been a demand for new stories, different from the ones which are currently driving us into an unprecedented quagmire of environmental and social problems. The story in those numbers cited above? That story isn't new.

Here's my own wish: that the future's stories are fully inclusive of all those voices which the current stories marginalise, outnumber, or simply omit.

Is the Dark Mountain Project up for that? I'd be willing to bet that it is.

I'll end here with my very best wishes to you and to the project.

on institutions 1/3

October 28, 2012

Shadow could not decide whether he was looking at a moon the size of a dollar, a foot above his head; or whether he was looking at a moon the size of the Pacific Ocean, many thousands of miles away. Nor whether there was any difference between the two ideas. Perhaps it was all a matter of perspective. Perhaps it was all a matter of point of view.

Neil Gaiman, American Gods

Yesterday I went along to the Edinburgh Independent and Radical Book Fair, which is organised annually by the magnificent Word Power Books. In its sixteenth year now, this event is held at Out of the Blue Drill Hall in Leith and its regular features include an eclectic line-up of authors and guest speakers, and an enticing display of books for sale. Long rows of tables are arranged in the main hall and laid out with a vast selection of books, so that people may wander up and down the aisles, absorbed in their browsing.

There are no 3-for-2 stickers on these titles, nor any piles of insipid bestsellers. Like Word Power's shop on the south side, the offerings range from the obscure to the polemic, from the subdued to the strident, from anarchism to zapatistas. Politics, sociology, art, fiction, poetry, cooking, craft and even children's books line the tables; again, as when I visit the shop itself, I find it impossible to leave empty-handed.

As I walked over to the Drill Hall in the noonday sunshine, brown leaves crunching under my feet on the pavement, I reflected that the Radical Book Fair sits beside Samhain and Bonfire Night in my mind, as a signal of autumn's peak and winter's approach. "It's an institution," I thought to myself.

This year I attended a session featuring Richard Holloway and Helen Percy. Holloway is the former Bishop of Edinburgh of the Scottish Episcopal Church, and the well-regarded author of several books. I'm currently reading his latest, *Leaving Alexandria* (subtitled "a memoir of faith and doubt") and in the past have read and found much to ponder in his books *Godless Morality* and *On Forgiveness*. Helen Percy was a minister in the Church of Scotland, whose book *Scandalous, Immoral and Improper* recounts her experience of being raped by a parishioner and subsequently blamed and vilified by the Church community and authorities, rather than supported and protected. I've not read this book, nor indeed had I ever before heard about her case, so I was appalled to learn of the suffering inflicted upon her throughout the ordeal.

In the course of the session, Holloway made the following observations: that an institution's primary goal, beyond all others, is self-preservation; and that an institution will always sacrifice the individual in order to maintain its own existence and retain whatever power it holds. I should add that he clarified his remarks as being a general observation of all institutions, not as a condemnation directed at a specific institution, ie the church. Institutions, he suggested, were too complex to be labelled either 'good' or 'bad' – they are as flawed and riddled with imperfections as the human persons who create and constitute them.

Ok, fair enough. But then, perhaps it's all a matter of perspective. Perhaps it's all a matter of point of view. In my view, institutions are hoarders of power and preservers of the status quo, and they are driving a global monoculture of consumption that is causing our ecological boundaries to creak at the seams, threatening to burst.

This reminds me of something that Helen Percy mentioned near the start of the session, in respect to her work aiding victims of rape in South Africa. She described a boy she knows, from a tiny village in the Kalahari desert, whose personal ambition when he grows up is to join the Navy and to obtain the ultimate status symbol: a flat-screen tv. Her tone implied, to my mind, that this was a *good* thing to aim for, an implication she sealed with an approving wonder that the dreams he harboured were “just like ordinary boys.” I *think* that she must have meant that his unordinariness stemmed from his traumatic experience of rape, not the hardship he is enduring in a childhood without The Box.

Just what will he learn of himself when he acquires that idyllic flat-screen marvel? That he is a child of God? Or that he is a disposable cog in a machine busily grinding its way through his people’s rightful heritage? And who is it that defines what is ‘ordinary’?

On my bedside table, next to *Leaving Alexandria*, sits the other book I am currently reading: *American Gods* by Neil Gaiman. The novel pits a ragged collection of all-but-forgotten ancient gods – carried by their believers from the old world to the new – against the modern deities of media, technology, and designer logos; fantastic, magical and weird versus slick, shiny and shallow. I’m not quite finished with it, so I don’t know yet who will win. Do any of us?

on institutions 2/3

or, On Playing King of the Mountain

October 30, 2012

All institutions over-claim for themselves and end up believing more in their own existence than in the vision that propelled them into existence in the first place.

Richard Holloway, Leaving Alexandria

There was an arrogance to the new ones. Shadow could see that. But there was also fear. They were afraid that unless they kept pace with a changing world, unless they remade and redrew and rebuilt the world in their image, their time would already be over.

Neil Gaiman, American Gods

Occasionally I stumble upon books or sources on the internet that speak directly to what I'm thinking about and feeling at that given point in my life, that present themselves to me in the spirit of serendipity. Haven't we all had that experience, that frisson of *yes!*, that sense of connection and mutuality with the thoughts and ideas of another? It is the essential ingredient of art, that gratification of sharing, drawing us to read or listen to or look at the creative expressions of others.

My friends, family and readers of my blog know, for instance, that over the past few years I have been following the evolution of a group called the Dark Mountain Project – first as a tentative observer, next as an exhausted and disregarded volunteer, followed by an unhappy stage as a resentful and furious (abusive, some would say) critic, and now full circle, back to my role as mere observer – though not tentative so much as marginalised-yet-persistent in my commentary. So it goes.

I was reminded recently of what drew me to the project in the first instance. In this conversation with Jeppe Graugaard, Antonio Dias describes eloquently his own experience in words which could have been taken right out of my mouth:

I vividly remember reading the manifesto. I felt a powerful synchronicity, a sense of having stumbled upon just what I needed. I passed from a profound isolation, preoccupied with concerns no one seemed to share, to discovering a network of people with whom I shared a common language.

There was a compelling clarity in asking,
“What do we do when we stop pretending?”
It touches the heart of our situation!

Finding community – A conversation with Tony Dias (Part I)

What has intrigued me much about the project has been its transformation from a formless exploration and exchange of ideas (billed frequently as an invitation to join a conversation) to its consolidation into what I now consider to be a commercial institution, with the inevitable shortcomings and power struggles that all institutions harbour. It's as though the

fluidity of unknowing inquiry has congealed into a ‘brand experience’.

People believe, thought Shadow. It's what people do. They believe. And then they will not take responsibility for their beliefs; they conjure things, and do not trust the conjurations.

The branded experience has certain contours, and is trimmed to fit the worldviews of those in charge: narrative is shaped accordingly, as it always has done throughout recorded human history. How else could human activities propel our race along the age-old route of colonisation and over-consumption, if not through the on-message narratives shaped for us by leaders and by those conditioned to having their voices acknowledged?

On the first night, guitars passed back and forth in the central marquee, all distinction between performer and audience erased. It was, as Uncivilisation’s charismatic architect Paul Kingsnorth told us, not a consumer experience. *Tales on a dark mountain*

It was, I must respectfully point out, most certainly a consumer experience. Festival-goers paid for their tickets in order to gather in that marquee; they paid for transport to the remote venue; they paid for tents and camping accessories before they arrived and food and drink while there. A particular type of product was on offer: wholefood vegetarian and real ale, earnest earthiness and campfire bonding – all this speaks to a certain audience, no matter how briefly the illusive curtain between performer and audience is lifted in singalongs and conviviality-by-architecture. Those without the finances or wherewithal to partake were not in attendance. As a friend of mine pointed out recently, “Dancing in the woods in Hampshire begins to seem like a unattainable luxury.” As a consumer experience, it always comes back to customer profiles and target markets, and to the angle being played in the sales appeal.

Was I the only one who noted the breathtaking transparency with which Dougal wrote about the difficulties of hitting the right note in DM fundraising? It was, he suggested, all about how to frame the bid. In considering Andrew Taggart’s advice on how to attract income, Dougal had realised:

A better approach might be to speak in terms of a ‘We’ that includes all of us who feel at home in this company that is drawn to Dark Mountain. [Andrew] writes: “If I were doing the fundraising for DMP, I would stress the We: the yearly festivals, the meetings and meet-ups, the informal gatherings, the DMP-inspired artistic projects, and so on.” *Ever danced with the devil?*

It put me in mind of the Bill Hicks routine about marketing: *“I know what all the marketing people are thinking right now too, “Oh, you know what Bill’s doing, he’s going for that anti-marketing dollar. That’s a good market, he’s very smart.”*

This is not by any means a criticism of the mechanisms used by the project in order for it to function in the commercial world of bookselling and event organising. It is simply naming it for what it is: a small business institution. The marketplace of ideas is still a marketplace.

What is interesting though is where it intersects with the desire for transcendence:

Kingsnorth sees it as his task to ‘make it clear what’s wrong.’ And what’s wrong, he believes, is more than just practical short-sightedness. It has a metaphysical character. I asked him what he would think if civilisation didn’t collapse. ‘There’s still a huge hole in the middle,’ he replied. ‘It’s still a society that has to cannibalise nature in

order to live, it's still a society that has to put a price on everything, that has to give a material value to everything, has no spiritual relationship with nature.'

Viewed in this light, Dark Mountain's intense preoccupation with story and ritual makes more sense. These, after all, are the means by which spiritual dispositions are traditionally cultivated.

At times it seemed as if the whole event was an experiment in willed pantheism. '[W]hat we're talking about here,' Kingsnorth notes in the third issue of Dark Mountain, 'is something that is maybe not exactly religious, but it's obviously spiritual, it's beyond the rational ...' *Tales on a dark mountain*

This reaches right back to the ideas explored in the Manifesto:

Uncivilised writing is more deeply rooted than [environmental writing, nature writing, and political writing]. Above all, it is determined to shift our worldview, not to feed into it. It is writing for outsiders. Dark Mountain Manifesto (p.14)

If this is the case, then the New Testament Bible is probably the best known (and best selling) example of Uncivilised writing out there.

I'm not sure, but is Dark Mountain poising itself – perhaps unintentionally, even unconsciously – to be a new 'not exactly' religious movement? If so, it will be a sad ending to an interesting story. What drew me to Dark Mountain at the start was its declared willingness to sit with uncertainty, to embrace paradox; not the "non-negotiable" platforms of self-definition (what is commonly known as dogma.)

Religious institutions, Richard Holloway writes,

segue from the ardour and uncertainty of seeking to the confidence and complacency of possession. They shift from poetry to packaging. Which is what people want. They don't want to spend years wandering in the wilderness of doubt.

Sell the people what they want: a creed shared by snake-oil salesmen everywhere. As for abiding in that wilderness of doubt, engaging in that process of uncivilisation... perhaps the Dark Mountain Project might practice what it preaches?

on institutions 3/3

November 1, 2012

Their vision is always grander than that of the leaders; their vision always includes more of the world in its embrace. But then we take this vital passion and institutionalize it. We create an organization. The people who loved the purpose grow to disdain the institution that was created to fulfill it.... [Institutions] insist on their own imperatives. They forget we are self-organizing. Sometimes, so do we.

Margaret Wheatley and Myron Kellner-Rogers, A Simpler Way

I once challenged my Dad on the topic of Western medicine. He had made some off-the-cuff comment in which he'd asserted the superiority of Western medicine, and the vast need justifying its use in developing countries. I ventured to disagree with the premise, and it drew him up short – literally, as at the time he'd just been passing through the room where I sat, and he hadn't expected his remark to be up for grabs; he assumed that what he'd said was self-evident. He got a little upset, actually: exasperated, as though I were wilfully ignorant and stubbornly refusing to concede the obvious. I tried to make my case but he didn't really want to hear it. He gave me a few minutes, reassured the positive value of medical science, and then made his excuses out of the room and back to his desk.

What I had argued was that Western medicine has positive and negative value – it is not a uniformly beneficial practice. And that non-Western medicine too has positive and negative value. They are not opposites: one good and the other bad; one real and the other sham; one superior and the other inferior. I suppose it boiled down to a disagreement about the definition of medicine. I saw it as a cultural practice, whereas Dad, I think, saw it as an unassailable product of rational thought ("can't argue with science.") I also disagreed with the idea of 'developing' and got nowhere with it. He didn't want to, or perhaps just couldn't, step outside a worldview in which Western civilisation's values and paradigms were the template to which all others should aspire.

And perhaps it had also to do with the idea of institutions. In my family we were raised to respect institutions: church, school, the workplace, the family, the community, the law, and yes, medicine – all these were imbued with an authority in respect to ourselves that we never thought to question. Institutions were human constructions, true, and they were limited and flawed accordingly: much of good human work was toward their reformation and improvement. In that respect, my family were (and still are) progressives and left-leaning in the American political spectrum. But the role of institutions as the foundation of civil society – and the essential superiority of civil society – this was never a point of examination.

Nor indeed was the institution of the human race ever questioned. As Catholics, we abided by the Christian theology which places humanity in a unique position within God's creation, recipients of grace and subjects of divine intention. Genesis summed it up: creation culminated in humans and we were given stewardship over everything else. It never occurred to us that we might be in the same category as a tapeworm, or an arctic fox, or a tree, or the fungus that causes athlete's foot. Yet we all reside in the category of living thing

and we are all of us dependent upon the functioning of our ecosystems in order to remain alive.

[The] traditional two-kingdom system and the attitude it embodies endure because shifting from the belief in “man, the highest animal” to a more egalitarian view of the world that respects and empowers all life is too drastic a mental move. To admit that our ancestors are bacteria is humbling. It has disturbing implications. Besides impugning human sovereignty over the rest of nature, it challenges our assumptions of individuality, uniqueness, and independence. It even violates our view of ourselves as discrete physical beings separate from the rest of nature and – still more unsettling – questions the alleged uniqueness of human intelligent consciousness.

“Power to the Protocists” in Dazzle Gradually, Lynn Margulis

So we humans continue in our stewardship: gobbling up coal and oil, chopping down trees, eating up fish, laying down roads, spraying pesticides, dumping waste.... And meanwhile we accept record droughts, storms and floods, melting icecaps, ocean acidification, industrial pollution and nuclear accidents as, well, just part of the price we must pay to uphold our institutions.

on speaking out of place

November 8, 2012

When is the right time and the right place for a challenging conversation? When there is a disagreement, or there are conflicting views being shared – views that cut close to the bone – who among the parties involved determines how the topic will be addressed: in what format and on what terms, and within what parameters?

The reason I bring it up is that I have recently observed two men of my acquaintance, both of whom I admire as intelligent men of integrity, suggesting that an online exchange with a woman would be better placed in a “face to face” setting. The first of these was a friend, speaking within a small group discussion thread; the other was Paul Kingsnorth, replying to this blog post in its comments section.

This reminded me of an incident that occurred in the 2011 Uncivilisation festival, when a woman in the audience challenged Paul (face to face) about power structures, including the aspect of gender representation among decision-makers. He replied that the topic was too complex for discussion in that forum, and must be looked at separately, at another time.

Whether she would be available to contribute to the discussion at Paul’s preferred time was not clear. It didn’t appear to matter that she was attending the festival as a Dark Mountain Project supporter, and that the session was an open invitation to discuss the future of the project. Her concerns were not on the agenda and her adamance was interpreted as a disruptive hijacking of the forum’s purpose.

My own experiences and observations tell me that it is common for someone who is being challenged to reassert their own control by postponing the discussion (I do it myself when my daughter raises a complaint or criticism at bedtime – and damn if she isn’t her mother’s daughter, digging in her heels and refusing to be put off. I love her for it.) Likewise, I have noticed that when I myself am in a position of disagreement, challenge or conflict with a man, I am often dismissed with the judgment that it is not the right time or place or format.

I have exchanged comments in blog posts only to be told to move the discussion to email, where it can be thrashed through in privacy. I have been told in email exchanges that this is too direct and personal, and more appropriate in the formal, neutral space of a public forum. I too have been told that face to face exchanges are better than the impersonal sphere of cyberspace, but shushed and diverted when speaking in person. (In fact, it has frequently been me shushing myself, in obedience to my conditioning as a good, quiet, agreeable, supportive woman.) I have been in the ironic position of being told that debating is not permitted – as this taints a conversation with the machinations of negotiation, where dialogue is a more effective method of sharing views. (I don’t disagree with that *ideal*, but the problem is that dialogue never takes place in a vacuum of power, it takes place between individual people who are each embedded in social roles whereby negotiation is inevitable.)

I have been told – or told in as many words, in as many ways – that my concerns are peripheral, divisive; that they do not matter as much as other issues and are diverting energy away from those issues that take precedence. I’ve got it wrong, and should leave well enough alone.

All in all I'm left to wonder: when and where exactly may I share my tuppence without speaking out of place?

Perhaps my views are uncomfortably provocative, indeed some would say too critical, not constructive enough – and unsurprisingly, I don't agree. I believe that my views are as valid and worthwhile as any other person's, and just as important an ingredient in the soup pot of mutual learning. I'm reminded of the postcard on my kitchen billboard, quoting Rebecca West: "I myself have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is. I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat..."

on commitment

November 18, 2012

“Washing one’s hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral.” Paulo Freire

I used to volunteer extensively with the Parent Council at my daughter’s primary school. It was an interesting time to be involved: the City of Edinburgh Council was pioneering a formal structure in which it communicated directly with parents about education. It had set up a Council subcommittee called the Consultative Committee with Parents (CCwP) which holds meetings every two months at the city chambers. At the same time, a local parent set up an online networking forum for all chairs or other reps in the many Parent Councils around the city. It was very successful and provided a valuable tool for sharing information and organising campaigns on particular issues. This was all around the same time that the Scottish Government was promoting “Parents as Partners” – in other words, the CCwP was part of a wider trend and national agenda.

I’m not going to knock any of these developments: they were and are positive steps which acknowledge that parents and carers play a vital part in a child’s education experience. What I want to tease out of my example are the limitations of the formal structures.

First, the CCwP took place within the context of a typical Council meeting, on a weekday evening at the city chambers, generally with the formal apparatus of a top table, PowerPoint presentations, and a formal meeting agenda with minutes and other papers. There are many, many people out there who are allergic to this type of format. Indeed, some of the parents who attended were visibly uncomfortable and intimidated by the officiousness and formality. The fact that it was on a weekday evening meant that those parents who couldn’t arrange childcare over teatime, homework time, and bedtime were excluded from the meetings. In other words, there were barriers to participation.

Second, consultation is not the same as partnership. In some instances, ‘consultation’ meant ‘tell us what you think about what we’re already going to do, whether you like it or not.’

Again, these are just the normal and expected aspects of political business. The CCwP was a fairly new instrument, and it takes time for such things to grow and meet their potential. But what I wanted to draw out was the aspect of power dynamics that limited genuine participation. On the face of it, parents were being given a seat at the table, and the Council could quite comfortably say they were working in partnership with parents. In reality, the fact that the seat had been given and the terms of its use had been dictated by the Council, meant that parents weren’t equal partners; in some cases it was simply a rhetorical gesture that concealed the actual decision-making process.

This leads me back to Freire, who examined how power dynamics disrupt true learning and participation. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, he writes

The radical, committed to human liberation, does not become the prisoner of a “circle of certainty” within which reality is also imprisoned. On the contrary, the more radical the person is, the more fully he or she enters into reality so that, knowing it better, he or she can better transform it. This individual is not afraid to confront, to listen, to see the world unveiled....This person does not consider himself or herself the proprietor of history or of all people, or the liberator of the oppressed; but he or she does commit himself or herself, within history, to fight at their side.

What if human civilisation is essentially a fight between the powerful and the powerless? We can only choose to act in the moment and within our own small sphere of influence, with whatever challenges we encounter on our life's journey – but these do count, they do matter. You can't be neutral on a moving train.

on stage

January 13, 2013

*All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players:
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts...* As you like it, Act 2 Scene 7

When I was in high school I was a theatre geek, part of the small group of kids who were regularly involved in our school's annual productions (a musical in the autumn, a drama in the spring.) By the time I arrived, there were footsteps to follow: my two older brothers had established themselves as players, the younger of them with particular success in landing lead roles.

My own comfort zone, however, turned out to be even less visible than supporting cast: I worked among the backstage crew – building sets, acquiring props, assisting with lighting and stage management, soothing and encouraging performers as they nervously fidgeted behind the curtain, awaiting their cues. I remember the Drama Director reassuring me of the importance of my work, and the value of the unseen contribution. Without me and the others keeping things running backstage, there would be no show, and no spotlight for the performers to bask in.

This came to mind recently when I was digging through a stash of my old papers, and came across a reference that she had written for me:

[Cricket] has been one of our most diligently hard-working students. She has been a crew chief, student producer and 'general factotum.' Whenever we need someone who is reliable and can work on her own, we turn to [her.] Her sense of initiative and willingness to accept responsibility is outstanding!

Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, written in 1959, posits that we interact with one another as performers, conducting ourselves and regulating our behaviour according to the impact we have on the people around us. In this model, we all act out a personal drama, and those with whom we interact are both our fellow cast members as well as our audience.

For those of us who linger behind the curtains in our sensibilities, the idea of life as a nonstop performance is alarming, or at least somewhat disturbing in its implications. I for one feel at a distinct disadvantage. Susan Cain, in her recent book *Quiet: the Power of Introverts in a World that Can't Stop Talking*, examines the plight of the introvert trying to navigate a 'culture of personality':

Should we become so proficient at self-presentation that we can dissemble without anyone suspecting? Must we learn to stage-manage our voices, gestures and body language until we can tell – sell – any story we want? These seem venal aspirations...

(Cain, p.33)

But dig a little deeper into what Goffman is exploring, and there is much to consider:

Interaction (that is, face-to-face interaction) may be roughly defined as the reciprocal influence of individuals upon one another's actions when in one another's immediate physical presence.... A 'performance' may be defined as all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants. (p.26)

He goes on to suggest that "the object of a performer is to sustain a particular definition of the situation, this representing, as it were, his claim as to what reality is." (p.90)

In his chapter on 'Regions and Region Behaviour', Goffman examines the concepts of stage space and backstage space. A region, he says, is "any place that is bounded to some degree by barriers of perception." (p.109) Frontstage space is where the primary activity of situation-formation takes place, but backstage space is just as important in the mutual creation of shared reality. Backstage is where alternative situation content is held out of view, and "where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course." (p114).

The book also includes chapters on 'Communication out of Character' and 'The Art of Impression Management.' Altogether, the model establishes two realms of reality: the staged, performed, mutually artificial interaction between participants, and the alternative, extraneous reality which lies backstage and in true character. It fits neatly with the Platonic concept of duality from which Western culture has grown. This assigns us a dimension of free will, in which our discrete, 'real' selves choose behaviours that either contribute to or diminish 'reality.'

One of the most interesting contributors to the Dark Mountain Project's first Uncivilisation festival – held in May 2010 – was Alex Fradera. He co-presented a mainstage segment on the art of improvisation, and later held a smaller workshop on the use of masks.

Improvisation, he suggested, operated via observation, receptivity and openness to the flow of invention. It demanded full attention and provided much greater narrative flexibility than traditional scripted performance.

The workshop on masks then delved into what happens when we adorn ourselves with the means to separate ourselves from our usual identity. In *Impro*, Keith Johnstone defines a Mask as "a device for driving the personality out of the body and allowing a spirit to take possession of it.... In its original culture nothing had more power than a Mask." (p.148) He goes on to observe that in our current culture, "We distrust spontaneity, and try to replace it by *reason*.... The Mask begins as a sacred object, and then becomes secular and is used in festivals and in the theatre... The Mask dies when it is entirely subjected to the will of the performer." (p.149)

Obviously neither of Alex's sessions in their brevity could begin to explore all the possibilities created by these ideas, but they were an excellent introduction to a compelling truth. In our reality-describing lived performances, there are no scripts other than those we carry inside us as we traverse the boards of "This wide and universal theatre".

chiaroscuro

January 31, 2013

Two Old Women: a cautionary tale

“... personal stories have as much (if not more) to teach us as any manifesto.”
*We are Everywhere*¹

Today is the deadline for submissions to the Dark Mountain Journal issue four, and – like last year – I am choosing not to submit. Again I prefer to slip past the gatekeepers on the editorial board, and instead publish freely and directly my contribution to the invited conversation. I’ve learnt much about climbing mountains as I’ve lived out the steps along my personal story: first and foremost, that it is best to travel light.

This year the editors call for cautionary tales. I offer the following story, itself a retelling of an Athabaskan Indian legend, traditionally shared from mother to daughter. It will be something like eighteen years now since my friend Wendy gave me the gift of a book entitled *Two Old Women*, by Velma Wallis. It was a wonderful story, she told me, one that every person should know and that every woman might draw strength from.

The tale tells of two old women who are abandoned by their tribe at the start of a harsh winter. They complain too much, and the men of the tribal council have decided that they represent a burden of care which lessens the tribe’s chances for survival. The chief with some regret announces the decision, and The People are afraid to disagree, for fear of being abandoned themselves. The two women sit, stunned and silent, beside their tent as the tribe packs up and leaves them.

Eventually they rouse themselves from their shock, and help one another to face the fear rising within them. They begin by accepting their predicament, and determining the manner in which they are going to meet it: “They forget that we, too, have earned the right to live! So I say if we are going to die, my friend, let us die trying, not sitting.”²

As they gather their courage, and support one another, they delve into their personal resources, reminding themselves of their many years’ worth of knowledge and skills. They travel – slowly, wearily, doggedly – to a distant and long-since-forgotten campsite by a river, where they are able to shelter themselves and survive the winter. With hard work, perseverance and luck, by hunting and foraging throughout the spring and summer months, they build up a surplus of food and supplies. As autumn turns to the first days of another winter, they are thriving.

The tribe, meanwhile, has fared less well. They too survived the harsh winter, but it took a great toll from them, and their spring and summer months were not prosperous. They face another winter in a state of weakness and gloom, and they are moving from place to place in a punchdrunk search for survival. During this time, a hunting party discovers the camp of the two old women. They are invited into the tent to shelter beside a glowing fire, where their hostesses feed them warm, sustaining broth. “With astonishment, the men realised these two old women not only had survived but also sat before them in good health, while

they, the strongest men of the band, were half-starved.”³

The men describe the tribe’s year of struggle and its current circumstances, and the women in their turn describe their year of labour and prosperity. The tension is great, and the currents of emotion are strong, as they all recognise that the tables have turned. “The men sat in silence listening to Sa’ speak in a strong and passionate voice. Then she laid down their terms.”⁴

The women extend a mercy that they were themselves not shown. From the maintained distance of their own established camp, the women share their surplus food and supplies, and the tribe survives another winter. Slowly and gradually, these people rebuild a different relationship with one another to the one they had before. The tribe never again discount them as being of lesser value, and “The People showed their respect for the two women by listening to what they had to say.”⁵

And so ends the story of the Two Old Women, and the journey by which they gained their voice.

“... maybe we will always be a reminder to them in harder times ahead.”⁶

Different voices

“In order to gain your own voice, forget about having it heard.”⁷

Of course, my retelling of *Two Old Women* is like the skin shed from a living snake; it holds a certain shape, reveals the faint imprint of a pattern, but it is not the breathing and moving original. Even the source text from which I’ve quoted is no more than a captured snapshot, frozen in time and place.

Written by a native Athabascan woman who had received the story in the traditional way from her mother, it borrows that degree of authenticity... but the truth of the story was in the telling of it, in the breath and voice of her mother, her choice of words and style of expression. The truth of it grew from the context of their family history and the nuances of their relationship. Written in English, published by Harper Collins, the book can only ever be a translation, for the tale itself lives within a different voice.

I am reminded of the writings of Viola Cordova, a Jicarilla Apache woman whose posthumously published collection of essays describes Native American beliefs and philosophy. She compares the conceptual frameworks of Native and Western cultures thus:

European thinkers pride themselves on being masters at the art of dealing with the mental art of abstraction.... But the Western thinker suffers from a tendency to reify all of his abstract notions, think of them as real things.... The Native American’s response to the terror and awe inspired by the universe is to call it sacred. Its mysterious qualities are maintained. It is sacred precisely because it is beyond reification.⁸

Similarly, our dominant culture – “a world psychologically rooted and historically anchored in the experiences of powerful men”⁹ – sets the parameters around which the different voice must negotiate, and determines the language into which the different voice must be translated. “Men and women tacitly collude in not voicing women’s experiences and build relationships around a silence that is maintained by men’s not knowing their disconnections from women and women not knowing their dissociation from themselves.”¹⁰

It is not enough to issue invitations to participate through the channels of submission and attendance. In order to hear a different voice, one must listen in a different voice. Otherwise all one can hear from the other is the discordant sound of defiance and resistance, or the silence of disengagement. “Whether spoken, silent or enacted, disobedience constitutes a particularly feminine discourse, made necessary in a patrifocal...culture where a woman’s identity is defined and shaped through her relationship to the male world, and a man’s to a single standard of masculinity.”¹¹

Really, what greater offence can a woman commit than the disobedience of knowing and speaking her own mind? Smack her back down with the charge of ‘bad faith’ – it is the simplest ruse, to cover yourself with bluster and arrogance. Tell her that she is a nasty thing, this malevolent woman of bad faith who encroaches on your stage, who refuses to play by your rules. Turn the switch on her, put her on mute – like duct tape slapped across her lips to silence her angry buzzing, and –

Hush now. Step into my tent, come sit by my fire. Cover your shoulders with this woolen shawl that my sister knit by hand, stitch by stitch, row by row. Now take this cup of broth: its steam rises, it tastes of stones and onions and salty tears – it is nourishing. Sit still and stare into the fire, with its crackles and rising sparks, its dangerous warmth and reassuring light.

“Stories are light. Light is precious in a world so dark. Begin at the beginning.”¹²

We are everywhere

“What we call the beginning is often the end. And to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from.”¹³

“Do you want to know what I think? Or do you want to know what I really think?”¹⁴

What does it mean, to invite others to participate and to help shape a cultural narrative? What happens when the different voice speaks – in a tentative whisper, in a belligerent criticism, in a furious, rebellious snarl?

We see the same patterns executed over and over in the realms of politics and organisational governance – ‘consultations’ executed, lip service paid, focus groups gathered to lend credibility to what has already been determined. Dissent is smothered, dismissed, ignored, deleted, censored and even burned. A fresh commitment is made to the dominant voice, spouted from the same fatherly soapbox, from within the same confining structures.

Despite this, the different voice persists. (“They forget that we, too, have earned the right to live!”¹⁵) The Athabascan people of the *Two Old Women* tale are among those currently demanding recognition of First Nations sovereignty and treaty adherence in the Idle No More movement. These are people who speak in a different voice to the ones with whom they negotiate. They value Mother Earth, and regard the digging and mining of her minerals to be a violation and a desecration. They don’t understand her as a product to be harvested, but rather as a being with whom they connect and interact in relationship.

In his 1991 book entitled *In the Absence of the Sacred*, Jerry Mander dismantles the assumption that Native people abide by the same governing principles as the Western cultures, that is, by a system of majority rule. Expecting a consensual people to appoint representatives to attend parliamentary bodies – this requires them to play by a foreign set of rules. He quotes Oren Lyons, Faithkeeper of the Iroquois Turtle Clan:

In our government, national consensus is paramount. There is no process for voting. We have a system of discussion and council that requires agreement from all sides of our council fire; all must finally agree on the subject before them. All meetings are public. We cannot have a closed meeting....¹⁶

Mander also points out that

Tragically, traditional Indian people tend to express disapproval by boycotting meetings, walking out, and refusing to vote. This is logical among Indians themselves, who recognise a boycott for what it is, a negative vote. But when dealing with whites and white legal systems, the effect has been to leave the voting and deal-making to those who remain; i.e., those who want to make deals.¹⁷

We return to the issue of speaking out of place: who sets the terms whereby communication will take place? On whose territory do we stand, in whose tent do we sit? In whose voice are we speaking?

We cannot separate ourselves from the political dimension of our existence in this finite world. Cordova expresses this beautifully in the following translation of a Native American concept into a Western, written text:

The legends of Native Americans that portray humans as cocreators of the spinning Universe should be taken deadly seriously: Time and the Universe have everything to do with expectations of what it is to be a human being. I AM RESPONSIBLE. My actions in the world are not meaningless; they may be no more than a drop of water in the ocean, but at some point that drop triggers a deluge, or a weather pattern, or myriads of other ‘relative motions.’ The future does not exist. ‘I’ have not yet made it, contributed to it. My present actions are making it. Present actions are like layers of snow added to a snowball – the shape of the present outer layer determines the future shape of the whole.¹⁸

Sharon Blackie echoes this point in her conversation with Jeppe Graugaard:

But note this: we don’t change the meta-narrative by sitting around thinking up new stories. We do it by getting out there. By not only seeing in new ways, but living in new ways. By being the subjects for those stories. More than that – by being the stories. We ARE the stories. That’s how it’s always been.¹⁹

Well – once again, I salute the Dark Mountain Project and its call for new stories and cautionary tales to share in this crooked and hurtful world. Thanks for the invitation. Do you want to know what I really think? Here: I am living a story for you right now. You see, I am building my snowball right here, in this spell of winter. Like those two old women, I have so much to give: so many skills, so much knowledge, so much forgiveness and integrity and good faith in myself – and such perseverance! Like those two old women, I too can offer a seat by my fire and speak in a strong and passionate voice, in a different voice. And I too am ready to die, trying.

“*We live ourselves forward, and understand ourselves backward...*”²⁰

1 <http://artactivism.members.gn.apc.org/allpdfs/014-Opening%20salvo.pdf>
(p.17), via <http://www.weareeverywhere.org/>

2 Two Old Women by Velma Wallis, Harper Collins, 1993 (p.16)

3 Wallis (p.113)

4 Wallis (p120-1)

5 Wallis (p.135)

6 Wallis (p.118)

7 Allen Ginsberg, <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/318657-to-gain-your-own-voice-forget-about-having-it-heard>

8 V. F. Cordova, *How It Is*, U. Arizona Press, 2007, (p.108-9)

9 Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, 1990 (p.xxi)

10 Gilligan (p.xv)

11 Lena B. Ross, in *To Speak or Be Silent: the Paradox of Disobedience in the Lives of Women*, Chiron Publications, 1993, (p.62)

12 Kate DiCamillo, *The Tale of Despereaux*

13 T. S. Eliot, “Four Quartets”

14 quoted in Carol Gilligan, *Joining the Resistance*, Polity Press, 2011, (p. 20)

15 Wallis, (p.16)

16 Jerry Mander, *In the Absence of the Sacred*, Sierra Club Books, 1991, (p.241)

17 quoted in Mander, (p.309)

18 Cordova, (p.175)

19 <http://patternwhichconnects.com/blog/transforming-stories-sharon-blackie-on-the-culture-of-nature/>

20 Richard Holloway, *Leaving Alexandria*, Canongate, 2012 (p.271)

on my father at the wheel

March 29, 2013

It's one of those throw-away quips in our culture (or comments of outright misogyny) that women are worse drivers than men.

Not in my family! My father's driving grew increasingly erratic the older he got. Pointing over his shoulder at distant architecture that had caught his attention whilst merging into 70mph motorway traffic; absorbed in emphatic monologue whilst negotiating crowded junctions; ignoring the horns and rude gestures directed at him by other drivers and the small noises of alarm from his passengers... none of it phased him. He even insisted on driving in the UK, on the 'other' side of the road. My mother reminisces about how terrifying she found this experience, how deeply relieved she felt when they survived intact and finally returned the car to the hiring agency. It's a mercy that he died in a bed surrounded by his loved ones rather than in a car wreck of his own making.

Over the years, the number of incidents grew in frequency, yet we didn't confront him over this issue, not to my memory anyway. As in much else, we indulged him, rather than provoke a conflict. His place at the steering wheel imposed itself upon us as an unspoken rule, and to question his driving ability would be too close to making an offensive remark, too much of a challenge.

Hang on – a challenge to what? His authority? His control of a situation? His freedom to go where he wished, unhindered? His pride?

His masculinity, perhaps?

To question his driving would be to question his judgment, to imply its weakness in matters of concentration and visual perception. We would rather risk our own safety – literally – than challenge him over his traditional place at the steering wheel.

I say "we" but can really only speak for myself. I ventured to challenge my dad (unsuccessfully, for the most part) on a number of issues, but not on this one. Challenging someone isn't easy, especially when that someone is used to having things their way, and when the established power dynamics set a fixed pattern of behaviour and expectation.

But where else might the process of rebalance begin? The task of a challenge is to reframe assumptions and open one's perception to other interpretations – what feminist theory terms 'consciousness raising,' and what I am beginning to think of as 'tuning in and listening to a different voice.' The different voice contains a challenge simply by existing, by asserting an equal right to participate and influence and to sit at the steering wheel.

Reflecting on the early development of feminist thinking (circa 1970s) bell hooks points out that

When women first organised in groups to talk together about the issue of sexism and male domination, they were clear that females were as socialized to believe sexist thinking and values as males" (*Feminism is for Everybody*, p. 7)

Too right. I am absolutely guilty of sexism. I have deferred to, accommodated, and even obeyed men against my better judgment, and in doing so have expected them to carry a burden of responsibility on my behalf. Some part of this concerns a lack of awareness – self-awareness – beyond social assumptions; but equally it involves a lack of confidence. Confidence is a precious commodity to those who don't have it, and a significant lesson of my own life has been to realise that confidence is only ever healthy when earned through one's own efforts – not when it is bestowed as a privilege.

I know what I'm talking about: I was raised with class privilege – unlike my father. The foremost work and achievement of his life was to leave his working class background and enter the professional middle class, where he consolidated this legacy by raising his children in the context of his social aspirations. My parents both worked hard to conduct a decade long project of educating their children in fee-paying private schools, and we all of us exceeded their expectations by excelling academically and moving on to university and postgraduate degrees.

I've spent much of my adult life in questioning my upbringing and the assumptions of class privilege it provided. I've challenged myself on this matter in the most painful and self-critical ways, stripping myself of the confidence that I understood to be a purchased gift, and struggling badly without it. I'm only gradually gaining a foothold again, and rebuilding confidence in myself – in my abilities and my values, in my voice and my judgment.

In doing so, I am learning to contain within myself the paradox of who I am by upbringing and who I am by awareness and choice and experience. It's all any of us can do, if we want things to change. We all together share the responsibility for where we're headed, and that means taking turns at the wheel and sharing both the driving and the riding.

on responsibility

Posted on April 16, 2013

The other night, a friend came over for dinner. The conversation turned to the unhappy topic of welfare reform, and its detrimental impact on lone parents (the majority of whom are women, and all of whom are struggling to raise their families in already challenging circumstances.) We reflected on how public discourse emphasises a single parent's right to work, rather than the right to stay home to raise children without risking impoverishment.

My friend shared a memory with me, from years ago, of a doctor she once met. Something he had said at the time has stayed with her all these years: people, he reflected, talk about their rights and responsibilities, but really “we have only responsibilities.”

This thought pulls me up short, it seems so imbalanced at first glance. Yet maybe this is because I was raised in American culture, where I grew up indoctrinated with the notion of individual rights. They were enshrined in the US constitution and Bill of Rights, and mythologised in the American Dream of the self-made man who owed no debts to anyone, and whose success had sprung from his own will and effort alone. Now if that's not imbalanced....

In Europe too, we abide by the notion of rights: human rights, civil rights, citizen's rights, consumer rights, women's rights, children's rights, animal rights.... can you think of more? I'm sure you can. Why do we need to articulate all these rights so formally? What is their purpose? Are they there to protect us from the worst effects of our individual and collective lack of responsibility?

I've been thinking much lately about what I've learned from the work of Carol Gilligan. In a recent comment to a blog post, I summarised where I'd got to myself, with her ideas:

Carol Gilligan has written about initiation in respect to gender socialisation, and the break in the psyche created when boys dissociate from the feminine within themselves, and girls dissociate from the masculine within themselves. She describes these two aspects not as masculine and feminine per se but as voice and relationship/care. In very general paraphrase: the idealised, socialised female will suppress or surrender voice (eg her own perspective and agency) in order to maintain relationships, while the idealised, socialised male will suppress or surrender relationship (vulnerability, emotional interdependence) in order to maintain voice. These aren't conscious choices, they are responses to cultural and social expectations, behaviour and environments.

I like this way of looking at it, that men and women both hold within them the capacity for relationship and voice, along a spectrum which allows for the unique expression of these capacities by each individual. But then on top of that, gender socialisation impacts on where in the spectrum they are allowed to comfortably dwell, and on how much they exercise each capacity.

What comes after civilisation: the wild women versus the wild men

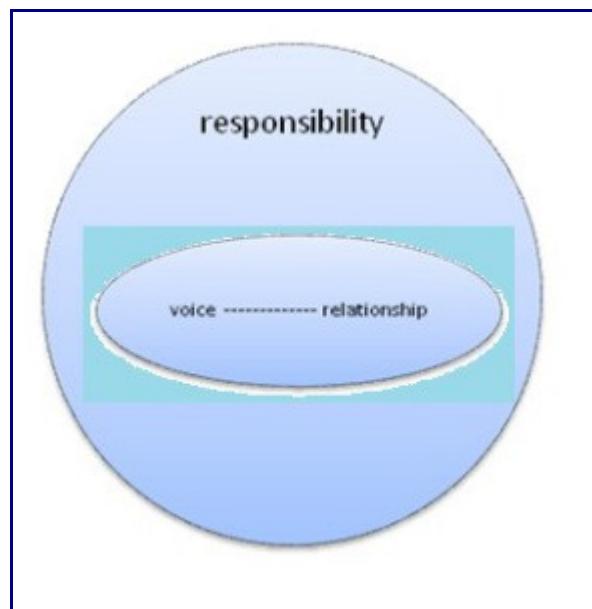
Now add to these reflections the following account from V F Cordova, describing how Native American cultures understand the notion of personal potential:

Humans are born “humanoid,” that is, with the capacity to become “fully human” through the exercise of all of their faculties.... An infant is seen as becoming “human” when he or she demonstrates the fact that he is aware that his actions have consequences on others and on the world. Becoming a human is a responsibility of the group that teaches the new being what it is to be human in **this** group of beings. In many tribes the new being is not seen as fully human until he or she is five to eight years old (many official naming ceremonies take place at this time). It is at that age that a human being can discern the consequences of his actions on others. He is taught to be human by showing him that he is one human among others. Because he shares the world with other beings, there is an emphasis on cooperation rather than competition; sharing rather than accumulating. (Cordova, *How It Is*, p. 152-153)

What happens when we view these two sets of reflections through the lens of “We have only responsibilities”? How does the tension between voice and relationship fit with this? It is tempting to align voice with rights and relationship with responsibility, both sitting on spectrums along parallel lines, like this:



But what happens if we remove rights, if we conceptualise this diagram with only voice, relationship, and responsibility? The way I am seeing it, in my mind, it is 3-dimensional rather than 2-dimensional as below:



It seems to me, that if we allow for these three elements to form the basis of our interactions with one another, the need for rights becomes obsolete. We no longer need to seek out something that we feel has been diminished, because we together ensure that it isn't. We take care of one another, without losing voice.

If every man and woman acted within their own personal full capacities for both voice and relationship, guided in each by the demands of only responsibilities, I wonder if we might stop needing to strive so desperately for the fulfilment of social justice? If we extend our understanding of responsibility to include all beings, might we stop needing to strive so desperately for the fulfilment of environmental justice? The concept of justice serves us only as a precarious stop-gap, while ultimately holding our imbalances in place.

on storytelling

April 16, 2013

What if information is the basic ingredient of the universe? This is not a universe of things, but a universe of the “no-thing” of information. And this information is organised by a second invisible element, meaning. (Margaret Wheatley)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.... And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not. (Gospel of St John)

There is a way between voice and presence where information flows. (Rumi)

Of all the surprises I could give myself, alluding to one of the New Testament's most famous verses sits easily on the top ten list. I left the Christian church as a young adult, and have avoided its culture and resisted its influence ever since. Twelve years of Catholic school was quite enough, thank you! It's not the Christian story itself that I resent, so much as the conceit held for its being “the greatest story ever told.” Such an idea fuels evangelism, which presumes itself the bestower of one all-encompassing Truth. I cannot agree: I think we all find our own truths, in our own ways; learning is about sharing – not providing, not receiving.

I've been musing about this blog post on *Re-enchanting the Earth*, with Martin Shaw's observations about story. “A story is a spirit-being, not repertoire, allegory, or a form of psychology.”

Story is information. We understand ourselves through story. Living systems – whether a single cell, or the myriad cells and microbes forming the networks of a human body, or a tribe of people living together, or a species-rich ecosystem – all systems use information to be.

A system needs access to itself. It needs to understand who it is, where it is, what it believes, what it knows. These needs are nourished by information.

Information is one of the primary conditions that spawns the organisations we see. (M Wheatley)

According to this way of thinking, change occurs when new information disrupts an existing system.

When chaos erupts, it not only disintegrates the current structure, it also creates the conditions for new order to emerge. Change always involves a dark night when everything falls apart. Yet if this period of dissolution is used to create new meaning, then chaos ends and new order emerges.... We create reality through our acts of observation. What we perceive becomes true for us and this version of reality becomes the lens through which we interpret events. (M Wheatley)

This echoes the point made by Viola Cordova when she describes the Native American concept of time:

Many Native American groups portray themselves as active participants in the making of the present.... Since we are participants in a process of motion and change, we know that we can affect the future.... We build the world through our present actions.

We build the world when we meet that story-spirit of information and we choose what to notice, which threads to use in our weaving.

We use *voice* to shape our story, to make it our own unique gift to the world. “Our voice is part of our own personal ecosystem.” (Shaw)

And we use *relationship* to share our story, to step into the roles of first teller, then listener, then teller again, and so on. We cannot be one without the other.

reflection (May 2013)

July 26, 2013

I keep putting my foot in it. I speak up and the proverbial hits the fan. I step over the line, hold up the mirror, ask difficult questions. People take offense. They rebut, retreat, close ranks; they redraw the line and leave me standing behind it with my mirror and my questions. I look into the mirror myself and ask: what now?

I grew up in a city of skyscrapers. My father worshipped these temples of the modern world, these monuments of human ingenuity. Every morning he put on his suit and tie, and travelled by commuter train from the plastic neatness of wealthy suburbs to the florescent sterility of an office in one of those incredible skyscraping towers. His work there fit like a piece in a puzzle, surrounded on all sides: executive, corporate, digital – retail systems designed to squeeze out as much profit from the human herd as possible. His labour paid for our home, our food, our education; it was a necessary and expected demand upon him, this livelihood. How else would we survive?

At that time, the Tower boasted its place as the tallest building in the world. Its symbolic grandeur overshadowed our lives. Aspire to this greatness, it told us; be the biggest, the best. In the fierce winds blowing off the lake, the Tower swayed invisibly. The workers at their desks could feel its balance shift, my father told me, and what's more: this was its secret strength. An inflexible structure would perish against the air's brute force, but this swaying changed the relationship between power and its obstacle, created a moving space around which the wind might travel.

A mere generation later, and that Tower is no longer the tallest of its kind. Others have surpassed it in the pretentious race skyward. The promise of greatness it once held has failed to materialise. Indeed, the most iconic snapshot of our newborn millennium depicts twin towers much like it, facing their own mortality. Nothing lasts forever, that image tells us; this grandeur too shall pass.

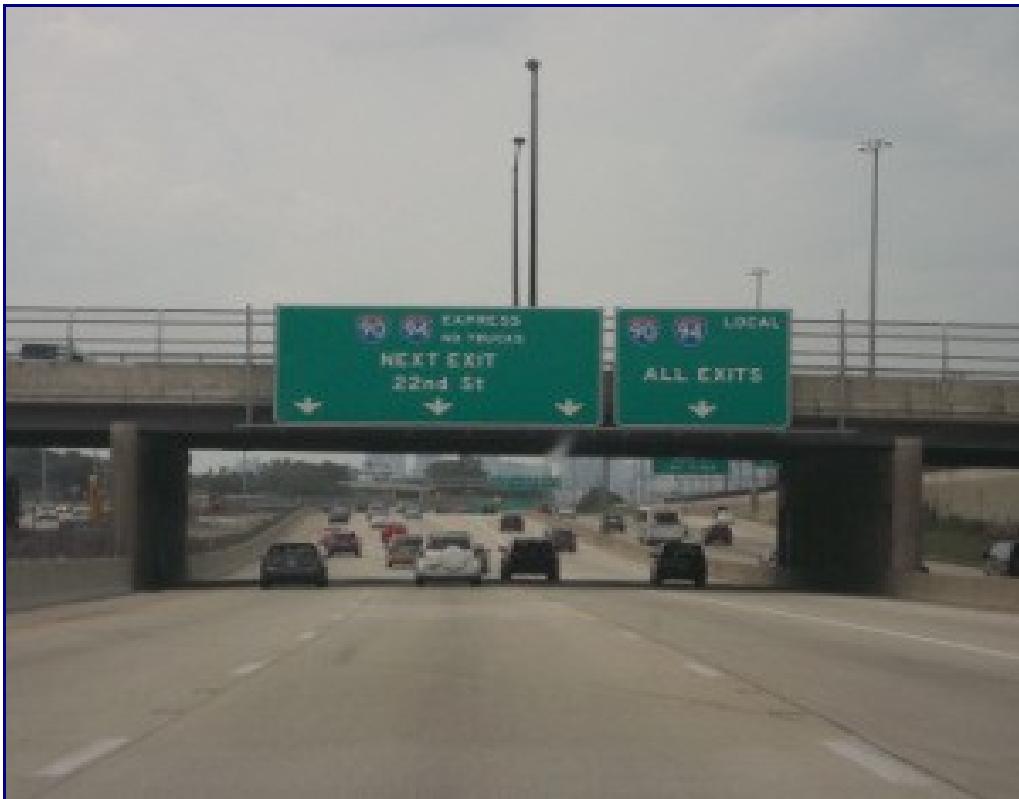
As I move into the future, one step over the line at a time, I ponder the question: what now? What am I building? How will I survive? I am surrounded on all sides in this puzzling world, and I'm not an easy fit. I see the cracks in the bricks, I hear the hollowness behind the plaster.

Again, the mirror: I look carefully at the lines around my eyes, my hair with its first streaks of grey. Nothing lasts forever. I hold out the mirror and ask you too: what now? It's a difficult question.

on roadkill of one sort or another

August 13, 2013

When my daughter and I visited our family and friends in the US last month, our itinerary included a wee road trip.



We drove from East Lansing in Michigan to Madison in Wisconsin, via Chicago, a journey which took roughly eight hours along interstate motorways.



Michigan is the home of the American automobile industry: Ford, General Motors and Chrysler all grew up there; Detroit's nickname is 'the Motor City.' Driving through the state, I found myself taking note of the unnamed casualties of the car industry: the various animals lying twisted and bloody on the hard shoulder, if not ground down into fleshy mush on the tarmac itself. In a macabre mark of respectful witness to these dead creatures, we kept a tally of what we saw – me pointing out each animal, in some cases merely speculating at what species the remains might be, and my daughter dutifully recording it in a pocket journal:

dead animals
deer 1111
raccoon # 11
gopher 11
unidentifiable 111 111
mole 1
possum 1
crow 1
rabbit 1

It was impossible to keep the Knitters out of my head: *Poor little critter on the road, where were you trying to go?*

In between corpse-spotting, we counted down the miles courtesy of a string of billboards clocking the approach of the Lion's Den.



I wonder if the Lion's Den carries *65 Guy Cream Pie*, the porn movie featured in Chris Hedges' book *Empire of Illusion: the End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle*. In chapter 2, *The Illusion of Love*, Hedges explores the pornography industry. He describes the making of *65 Guy Cream Pie*, a film which portrays a single young woman being screwed repeatedly by sixty five different men, one after the other. The young woman, after the filming of this scene, stands awkwardly by herself, ignored by the camera and sound crew men as though non-existent; she is sweaty and trembling, and uses tissues to wipe the considerable amount of sticky wetness from her inner thighs.

In a few days' time, the reputedly final installment of the Dark Mountain Project's Uncivilisation Festival will take place in Hampshire. One of the contributors is Dougie Strang, with his art installation *Charnal House for Roadkill* and an accompanying performance, *Badger Dissonance*. Gender will also play its part on the programme this year, a development I welcome as a long overdue acknowledgment of the conflict and tension that has existed within the project, behind the scenes of its slick exterior. There will be a men's space as well as a women's space, with a selection of sessions under each theme.

I offer the following picture as a salute to this year's Uncivilisation: please imagine your sister or your wife, perhaps, your mother or your daughter. She is lying at the side of the road, limbs twisted at odd angles, the blood and semen on her skin drying in the August sun. It's ugly, I know that – but let's shine a light on that ugliness that resides in all our hearts in one form or another, and let's see it without flinching.

on belonging

August 14, 2013

People need to feel they belong.... Otherwise, who knows what will happen? This civilisation of ours, perhaps it'll just collapse. (K. Ishiguro)

I no longer have the email itself, but its message isn't forgotten. The sender – representing the Dark Mountain Project – paid me a backhanded insult, wishing me well in finding a sense of belonging *elsewhere*. I gathered he was implying, quite wrongly as it happens, that I didn't have any friends to begin with. In any case, the point was that he wanted the last word, and it was his parting shot. Despite my continual support of the project, I found that when I dared to share my own perspective – that is, expressing my *own* voice – it proved to be too challenging. My experience was off-message and therefore unwelcome to those invested in building a successful enterprise around the image of one big happy hippie family.

That happy hippie DM family is like the cast of *Friends*, with the same small collection of names and faces cropping up over and over in every episode of book publication and event programming. What began, I believe, as an honest invitation to conversation seems now to have grown deeply scripted. Belonging is reduced to a piece of marketing bait.

Chris Corrigan has written about the process of invitation. An invitation, he says, is a process of several phases “starting with a flash of inspiration and carrying through all the way to stewarding the dissolution of intention long after an initiative has faded away.” The early stages of this process he calls “crossing the threshold of longing.” The longing – the intention to participate in the creation of something – is what propels and guides those who respond to the invitation.

And what is belonging, other than sharing that experience of intention with others – that is, to *be* with others in the act of *longing*. This is how we create. Tennessee Williams once observed that his writing was “nearly always about people trying to reach each other... because the only truly satisfying moments in life are those in which you are in contact... with some other human being.”

Corrigan ends his reflections with the advice: “Never let anyone arrive at a meeting alone. If the goal of good gatherings is to have people leave working together, then the goal of a good invitation process is to have people arrive so that no one shows up alone.” I confess that I am thrown back to the memory of one of the several Dark Mountain events that I attended: the first Uncivilisation festival in Llangollen. I arrived alone at the pre-festival camp – an act which took more courage than anyone there could realise – and I lingered at the margins throughout the week and ever after.

The fourth and last Uncivilisation event takes place this weekend, and I'm not going. I am home, with my loved ones, and I am right where I belong. That backhanded wish for me has been fulfilled, and all is well.

one more for the Nutter folder

August 15, 2013

One of the most interesting sessions of this year's Uncivilisation Festival will be *Unpsychology*, run by Steve Thorp. Back in early DM days Steve introduced his ideas about unpsychology on the online forum. I'm delighted that he has finally been given some space on the programme to share his ideas; it is one of the talks I will be sorry to miss.

His voice is one of many now challenging the status quo in the mental health profession. In May, the Division of Clinical Psychology of the British Psychological Society issued a Statement calling for "a paradigm shift in psychiatric diagnosis". The Statement coincided with the publication of the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V)* – the hallmark reference volume for those working in the field of mental health.

In his book *Madness Explained*, Richard P. Bentall describes the history of *DSM*, and its origins in the formative period of psychiatry in which the incipient field was establishing itself as a branch of the scientific community. *DSM* is essentially a compendium of conditions and symptoms, attempting to organise these in a taxonomy of illness which satisfies our cultural need to identify, analyse, quantify and solve through treatment the problem of 'abnormal' thoughts or behaviour. The approach fits squarely within the premise that our mental state can become afflicted with an illness – a condition imposed upon it.

Coinciding with this paradigm of mental illness is the phenomenal growth of the pharmaceutical industry, and the widespread use of medication as the primary tool of psychiatry. Bentall contends that mental health exists along a spectrum that cannot be categorised so neatly, "classifying people like plants."

Bentall explains:

Clearly people who suffer from psychiatric problems vary in their experiences. The taxonomists have attempted to accommodate this fact by dividing the geography of psychological distress into separate territories, but their efforts have been neither successful nor consistent....Kraepelin's paradigm...assumed a non-arbitrary division between sanity and madness, an assumption that was explicitly embraced by the designers of *DSM*....

You may have come across this division before now: some people are people, and other people are nutters. Our casual language reinforces the fears surrounding this foreign "other" person. That's crazy; it's totally insane; he's nuts; she's mental. Stop and listen sometime: we continually season our conversation with oblique references to our greatest fears, death and insanity.

The voice of the "other" – silenced by our fears and condemned to a separate realm.

Forbidden anger, women could find no voice in which publicly to complain: they took refuge in depression or madness. (Caroline Heilbrun)

Am I straying yet again into a feminist analysis? Perhaps this is because my own experience

of madness abided so closely to Heilbrun's description. It is impossible to separate our mental state from our environment and circumstances.

The idea is nothing new. In 1955, Erich Fromm published a critique of Western civilisation called *The Sane Society*. in it, he described our society's values and norms as an entrenched form of collective insanity.

Whether or not the individual is healthy, is primarily not an individual matter, but depends on the structure of his [or her] society. A healthy society furthers man's [and woman's] capacity to love his [or her] fellow men [or women], to work creatively, to develop his [or her] reason and objectivity, to have a sense of self which is based on the experience of his [or her] own productive powers. An unhealthy society is one which creates mutual hostility, distrust, which transforms man [or woman] into an instrument of use or exploitation for others, which deprives him [or her] of a sense of self, except inasmuch as he [or she] submits to others or becomes an automaton.

Inevitably I return to a person's capacity for both voice and relationship, set so badly out of balance in our patriarchal culture, and the need to reconcile the imbalance in the lives of both men and women.

Our Western culture... constitutes a relatively pure form of patriarchal culture, built upon the power of the father in the family, of the priest and king in society, and of a fatherly God in Heaven.

Neither men nor women can enjoy full mental health or the fruition of their capacities in a patriarchal society. I hope that Steve's *Unpsychology* considers this line of thought.

in context

August 25, 2013

I recently attended a seminar looking at communication from a psychological perspective. Of course, a two-day seminar could only – barely, tantalisingly – scratch the most superficial surface of this topic. We communicate from the moment we’re born, and in every aspect of our existence. We use communication to learn about our world, ourselves, to connect with others and to create our place in this vast universe. How could ten hours in a classroom even begin to delve into the immense subject of communication? Nonetheless, I came away with much food for thought. As I follow leads and research the topics that most interest me, I will no doubt form more coherent views. For the moment, however, there are two issues we touched upon that resonated with me: emotion and values.

Emotion

Unsurprisingly, there are different schools of thought about the nature of communication. Some scholars regard it as a cognitive function, grounded in thought patterns, in order to convey information and ideas. Others regard communication as an emotional function, arising from our feelings and attendant physical state. (Perhaps the difference lies in the distinction between communication and language?)

In any case, can we ever separate ourselves from our emotions? Emotion is frequently conceptualised as a seasoning, an extra ingredient adding a particular flavour to the baseline of communication. What happens if we flip this around, and establish emotion as our baseline? To be sure, our emotional state varies; as a baseline it is by no means static. But still: what if we always start with an emotional state, with our thoughts formed as a vehicle to convey, share and/or negotiate these emotions with others?

Our dominant Western culture reveres thought: I think, therefore I am. Could we not as easily say: I feel, therefore I am? What would be the consequences of this upon our interactions and our culture?

Values

One of the exercises at the seminar I attended demonstrated how our values impact upon communication. This seems self-evident, but the facilitator used a group exercise which put values right into the spotlight. A simple narrative presented to us with a scenario and a set of moral choices (I won’t delve into the details.) Suffice it to say that even a very neutrally-presented and minimal set of facts led each of us in the group to form assumptions, draw conclusions and establish a judgment that reflected our individual values. Remaining polite to one another, and moderated skillfully by the facilitator, we still very clearly seethed with emotion when confronted with others whose values differed from our own. Our words were careful, but we communicated our emotions in body language and tone of voice. When we broke up afterwards for lunch, I found myself outside and walking off the tension that had arisen within me, checking my breathing, relaxing my racing pulse.

Our values are not some abstract reference volume that we open on occasion to position our opinions; they are a visceral part of us, of our identity, of the story we hold within ourselves,

about ourselves and about others. Our values are intimately connected to our emotions, but the relationship often goes unnoticed and unaccounted for.

So what?

So far, so basic; I suppose where I'm going next is into the realm of story. In her wonderful book *Storycatching*, Christina Baldwin analyses the process by which we create the story of our own life. She describes four steps in a spiralling and ever-repeating pattern – the DNA of a life story:

1. *Linking*, in which “huge sorting and discarding is constantly going on in the mind. The self-story is composed of those events, relationships, and reactions that make the cut into conscious memory. We then link these memories together to create a coherent narrative. Linking makes the story: linking is the building block of what we choose to remember and how we make meaning out of recall.” (p.124)
2. *Editing* “ is a constant process of updating who we think we are and how we speak about our histories and ourselves.” (p.128)
3. *Disorienting*: “The gate to any new period of growth or maturity in our lives requires a period of discomfort and disorientation....Plot carries us forward into new territory; there is no going back. The only resolution is to reorient our lives so that we can integrate this experience into who we are.” (pp.131-2)
4. *Revisioning*: “To make a world that can hold us is a universal longing. And we start by organising a story that can hold us.... Making a world that can hold the self requires that we find a... frame inside which we see our life story happening.” (pp.134-5)

Critically, the steps in this process involve our emotions and our values, inseparable from any rational sifting of information.

Again, nothing new: this is the stuff that mindfulness seeks to address. In a mindful state of awareness, one recognises one's thoughts, emotions and values as fleeting phenomena pulling us this way and that. So can mindfulness ever be a relational state? Is it possible to exist or to communicate from beyond the confines of thought, emotion and values? Our self and our story never operate independently of others: we live within a vast network of life, and our identity can only ever be understood in context.

Context – from *contexere* to interweave, from *com-* together + *texere* to weave, braid.

Now I'm writing in circles, it's getting late and I need to sleep. So I'll pull the plug here: goodnight.

it's taxing

June 21, 2014

My clay pit with its warming lit hearth has been idle for months now, aside from a brief ramble to announce the birth of Personal Wealth social enterprise. There has been no time to spare for writing in this space, but likewise no desire to do so. I've been waiting, knowing that the invitation would present itself in due course, that my thoughts would swarm like swallows seeking out the warmest current and return me to here.

This week I attended a 3-day residential course about leadership in respect to the future of social services in Scotland. It was a superbly organised event, taking place under the hills and beside the shores of Loch Lomond. Lovely people throughout, and an intellectual banquet upon which to feast.

One of the sessions on Day 2 involved – ostensibly – the cultivation of ‘personal authority.’ The workshop was hosted by Amanda Wilsher. Amanda is a theatre coach and the session involved presentation skills and techniques for engaging others through one’s public persona. Incidentally, she was an absolutely fantastic facilitator, her lessons intelligent and valuable, her insight wise and immediate. But let’s get this straight: personal authority is not the same thing as the *appearance* of personal authority.

The session was seriously taxing for me. It zeroed in on personal scars, it peeled off protective scabs and left me feeling as though my entire existence was no more than an exposed bloody surface of flayed skin. I got through the session, barely, and I hated every fucking minute of it. But I do acknowledge the good intentions behind it, and the value of what was being demonstrated. We can do things we hate and we can suffer badly and at the same time we can see the view of distant hills and sunlight and appreciate the remarkable gift of being alive, holding all of this together in one moment.

Personal authority cannot be taught in a 2-hour workshop. Personal authority cannot be taught, full stop. It can only be earned, through experience. It cannot be granted by a diploma, it cannot be conferred by a credit card or a spouse or a car, it cannot be faked or tricked with a straight spine and projected voice. Personal authority rises like a phoenix out of the ashes of humility and willingness to understand that one never knows, one only learns, ever.

Okay. So on the final day of the event, within the context of the leadership project challenge upon which we were asked to embark, we were invited to “write about where you’re at.” The invitation was the opportunity to take stock, to find a pause, to wind ourselves down and prepare to return to our ordinary lives of home and work. Here’s a small part of what I wrote:

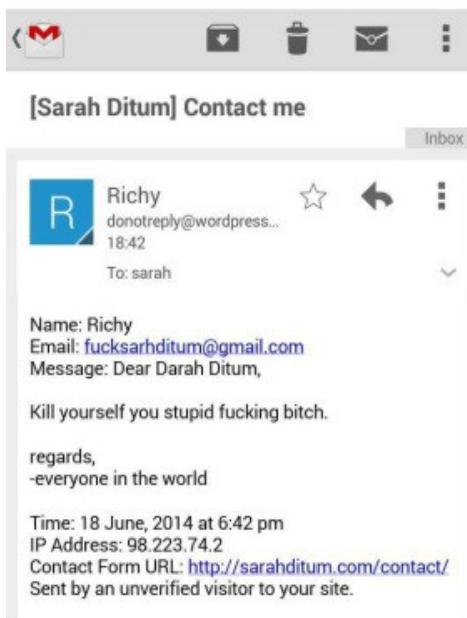
Where I'm at: overwhelmed and lost. Information and ideas and emotions and exhaustion and people and performing and paths and threads and trees and leaves and dirt and weeds and insects and flowers and birds and tiny wee live things scurrying away from me when I move. Intersecting crisscrossing dappled light and dark, dark mountains, light valleys, DMLV, ITF, AOH, PW all intersecting crisscrossing threads tangled up and woven into knots and patterns and nets and reeling back for the chaordic view. Need to regain and

regroup and recover and remember and realise and reflect and write and follow the red thread. DMLV is my satnav, getting lost is my satnav. Leading through reflection? Through a mirror's reflection, through the boundaries, through the opportunities, through the looking glass, through the labyrinth, through the breakdown, through the breakthrough, breaking through, breaking the mirror, breaking the glass, breaking the nets, breaking the knots

And I share it because it is singing the note which calls me back to my clay pit's hearth. I knew that something would pull me back here eventually, and this is it. Because one last piece of the puzzle landed at my feet this morning. It travelled via Twitter:

Sarah Ditum @sarahditum · Jun 18

This is the tax on being female in public. Every unquiet woman pays it.



Julia Macintosh @pw_julia

. @sarahditum Every quiet woman pays it too. And whether or not they understand why, every unquiet & quiet man, boy and girl pay it too.

When I started this blog (nearly four years ago now!) my friend – a published author, an activist and feminist – demonstrated her own immediate insight. “Are you afraid of being heard?” she asked me. Hell yes, I responded, and the tweet posted up there just now tells you why. Four years of blog posts here, capturing my response to lived experiences, tell you why. Bloody surfaces of flayed public self tell you why. There is a tax to pay for using my voice, for being myself, for trying to belong and participate as me and on my own terms. The tax is stand straighter. The tax is lose weight. The tax is stop complaining. The tax is we don’t want you. The tax is you’re crap. The tax is you need to get laid. The tax is kill yourself you stupid fucking bitch.

The tax of being a woman, observed by men in a man’s world.

Well, the thing about it is: I’m observing you back. And I’m writing about it here.

Because I can. Because this is on my terms, in my voice, and with my personal authority.

the trophy life

June 26, 2014

So I've been thinking more about the issue of trust. I've been thinking about my brother's recent visit, and his life as a husband and father. I've been thinking about my dad, and about friends I know who are fathers, and sons of friends who are young men embarking on their adult lives.

And I've been listening to Blur.

I've been thinking about how I unravel when I feel observed or judged, how uncomfortable I feel when expected to exercise my physical presence and to display confidence. And then I think: at least I'm not a man. As a woman, I can unravel and indulge my emotional reaction and have a good girly meltdown followed by a cry and a walk with a girlfriend to agonise and to receive assurances and hugs. I can unpack my angst like the weekly shopping and get it all out there, out of my system and into the cupboards.

Do the men I know get to do that? Or are they expected to hold their shit together, to stand up straight and speak up and sound like they know what they're talking about and make a name for themselves and earn a good salary and leave their mark on the world like dogs pissing on trees? Men carry the personal burden and the social pressure to build a trophy life that can be displayed to the world as proof that they are good men, strong men, capable men, unflappable unstoppable un-mistake-making men.

Men are often willing to commit suicide rather than own or embrace their frailties and fears. I can count on both hands the number of men I have heard about who committed suicide (friends or fathers or husbands of my family and friends) and that in itself is scary. Not a one off, not even twice – but several. And here's the thing: I worry about the men I know, about the expectations they carry around inside them. In retrospect, I grieve about my own father and the life he lived, in which he worked himself to the bone to get that trophy life of a successful career, and a wife and children, and a house and a lawn, and good tires on his car. But I don't believe he was a contented man at peace with his life, and I don't believe he died wholeheartedly. I believe he died with his heart still seeking the reward for all his efforts.

Feminists are often wary of bringing men's experiences into feminist discourse. Their reasoning is that men hold public platforms quite enough already and to divert attention from women's experiences will hijack the conversation and the locus of energy. It's a fair point. I've been in those types of conversations myself and it can feel as though my own entirely valid perspective is being sidestepped and discounted by a louder and more confident voice.

It goes back to trust: trust between men and women and between women and men. How do we regain trust with one another and start working together to create a culture of human diversity and compassion? Blur can tell you: we all of us need to admit that the trophy life, it's just so overrated.

one of those stories: five years on

July 17, 2014

A little over five years ago, I typed the name Paul Kingsnorth into the google search engine and hit the return key. I had just finished his book *One No, Many Yeses* and was wondering on a whim if he had an online presence with leads to his other books or projects. Google gave me the link to his website, where his blog described meeting Dougald and the conversations forming the origins of the Dark Mountain Project.

I think at that point the Manifesto was still being written, or at least it hadn't yet been launched. I remember regretting my distance from London, because the ideas in the Manifesto did indeed strike a chord with me, and echoed and articulated many of my own concerns, preoccupations, convictions. I'd have liked to attend the launch and support this creative endeavour.

As it happens, I didn't attend the launch but I did support the project significantly in its first years – contributing to crowdfunding campaigns, buying the books, attending events, volunteering. I tried to engage with it, in ways that are documented throughout this blog. But when the flavour of my engagement changed from cheerleading to challenging, my perspective was edited out of the official history. So it goes. So it has always gone.

I don't support the DMP any longer, but I'm sincerely grateful for how much I've learned from that episode of my life – tagged forever in my mind and memory as 'dark mountain' and 'breakthrough.'

Like Paul, I too can offer five lessons to commemorate those years:

1. #yesallwomen

This hashtag has evolved on Twitter recently to express solidarity among women whose collective experiences inform us as citizens of a patriarchal society. Articulate, educated, well-meaning, left-leaning, self-described-non-sexist white men will often – perhaps not always, but in my experience, often – shift uncomfortably and deflect the testimonies of women with the psychological and rhetorical equivalent of a dismissive pat on the head. Not now, dear, I'm busy writing my manifesto and please don't worry, it includes your perspective too. Trust me. I've spoken to some other women and they assure me that I've got it covered.

2. feminism is for everybody

Feminism is a political movement inasmuch as it is a response to oppressive power structures grounded in individual, personal experiences. Feminism is just another word for many of the same arguments expressed in the Dark Mountain Manifesto: nature counts; 'notman' counts; the 'other' counts; woman counts. Do men suffer from patriarchy too? Hell yes, of course they do – but that doesn't mean their experience of patriarchy is the same or even similar to women's, nor that they have any right to sideline or dismiss or ignore a woman's perspective when it is disruptive or inconvenient to their own ends. We're on the same page, boys. If you want to think about this in more detail, I recommend bell hooks' wonderful book, *feminism is for everybody*.

3. it's best to travel light

For every dark mountain, there is a light valley. For every hero, there is a hearth. The universe contains us all, and connects us all – metaphorically, physically, metaphysically – all within a circle which is both finite and infinite. We all of us belong to what John MacMurray described as “Society, constituted by a common purpose; Community, arising from the sharing of a common life.” I’ve been up that mountain, fellow traveller, and back down again too. In my experience, the peak can only be reached by letting go of all the stuff that weighs you down; letting go and travelling light.

4. sanity is relative

Civilisation – patriarchy – oppression and exploitation and reification and commodification – these phenomena are insane. They lay down barriers, conditions, traps, mental prisons and emotional cul-de-sacs. They enforce separation, they engender fear and hatred, they lie to us all that we are somehow less than exquisite and perfect in all our ugliness and our imperfections. My experience with the DMP played the role of catalyst, pushing me into a total breakdown, a trip through insanity in the form of a brief, painful-and-blissful-both psychotic episode. DMP didn’t cause my breakdown; what caused it was my own defiance of a lifelong adaption to our insane power-driven society. But DMP – for all its wise words and alluring invitations to join in – didn’t hold me as I stood there on the brink. DMP gave me a little patriarchal shove into the abyss. It’s ironic, I think, that a recent New York Times article about Paul Kingsnorth includes this account by Dougie Strang, about a session that took place at the third Dark Mountain festival in August 2012:

at 3 a.m., he said, people were writhing in the mud and singing, in harmony....
“Wasn’t it amazing?” he said, grinning. “It really went mental. I think we actually achieved uncivilization.”

Do you really think so, Dougie? I would say otherwise.

I survived the breakdown, was held and loved and healed by many, many people in my life: family, friends, colleagues, as well as new people I encountered in my navigation through the NHS. They brought me to respite, warmed by the light – the light which reminds us what we already know, deep down: that we’re all of us good, we’re all of us suffering in this crazy place, we’re all of us trying to live our lives with love and dignity and meaning. Breakdown was breakthrough, as they say.

5. we are everywhere

Damn right I’m not alone. When you see your mother, your sister, your wife, your daughter, your girlfriend, your neighbour, your grandmother, your niece, your aunt, your cousin Sylvia, your fifth-year English teacher, your coworker, your hooker, your doctor, your doctor’s receptionist, the woman at the checkout, the girl on page three, the bag lady shuffling past you, the politician’s wife, the female MP, the schoolgirl on the bus, the woman with the pram – when you see them, you see me. You see my sisters. You see *your* sisters. In fact: you see *our sisters*, motherfucker. Think about that please.

And lest you bristle with defensiveness, you heroic folk of the DMP, lest you ignore this post like all my others and try so hard to pretend I’m not here, let me tell you: it’s time to stop pretending. If you listen to me, really listen to this one small chirp of one small cricket, you’ll hear something beautiful.

one grey morning

July 21, 2014

Two opposing movements determine a great deal about our capacity – either we open or close, we withdraw or step forward, we turn toward or away, we look inward or outward. (M. Wheatley)

Wouldn't your time be better spent on days to come, not the ones that went...? (R. Sexsmith)

Today I am standing on the doorstep of the place between stories.

Over the past few months I've been creating a new chapter in my life, setting up Personal Wealth social enterprise. I've been swept and carried along the rushing currents of its early days. It really is early days: the plot isn't entirely established, the characters are still being introduced. We've accomplished a great deal already, but there is so much more to learn, so much more to understand and decide about what actions to take, what positions to hold. So much more work to get on with! It is an exhausting and demanding period to get through, this finding of our feet and making of our way.

This morning it came across me like a cloudbank cloaking the sky of an otherwise contented and rewarding period of my life: God, I'm tired. I'm really feeling it.

It's not the amount of work endlessly generated, or the hours or even the shoestring we're living on while we wait for invoices. It's not even the discouragement of missed opportunities and leads that fail to materialise. We've had our fair share of those and we take them in stride – they are balanced out by a fair share of successes.

No, the fatigue reaching deep into me comes from the effort of holding myself open – holding my mindset open, holding my heart open to everything the world throws my way. The past fifteen years have been contained inside the monumental responsibility of raising a child and keeping a roof over our heads, a meal on our table. Providing security and home for my daughter during her childhood: that has been the glue holding together all purpose and effort. Energy and focus moved largely inward, rather than out there to the world beyond our doorstep. Forays out there into the big wide world of new people and new ideas were met by what Tony once referred to as insufficiency.

But this step into the unknown territory of setting up a new organisation, this new space drawing on my creative purpose and effort – it requires me to hold myself open in a way that these past years hadn't done. The movement of energy and focus has shifted, from inward to outward, from protective to risk-taking, from closed to open.

I'm not complaining! It's good for me. It feels right and true and utterly secure in all its uncertainty; I feel that I'm operating with sufficiency. Still and all, I'm tired. I'm really feeling it. It's time for rest and sleep now. What shall tomorrow bring, when I step outside my doorstep?

the secret of divine wisdom

July 23, 2014

It is human misery and not pleasure which contains the secret of divine wisdom.

(S. Weil)

Following my brief spell of insanity two and a half years ago, when I was discharged from hospital, I returned home to my flat and my mother stayed with me. She had dropped everything to fly over from the USA in order to be with me, and she was enduring it with tremendous fortitude: the crisis, the disruption, the ignominy of my plight. She was really wonderful – patient and supportive – and I understand and am grateful for how deeply fortunate I am to have had her and others in my life to help me.

It is interesting to me (and unsurprising, actually) how she coped with the weirdness of my situation. With brisk determination, she grabbed onto normality, familiarity, the reassuring focus on practicalities and routine. Within days she had prescribed her own best remedy: why don't we go get you some new housewares, honey? It always feels good to freshen things up at home. Some new table linen will help you to feel better, don't you think? (Good call, Mom. 3 hours in Ikea will soothe my troubled mind, for sure.)

Letting her take me shopping was the least I could do, to help her hang onto her own touchstones. She wanted me back from the land of craziness, back in her world – the real world. Dutifully back I came, surrendering to the crushing intense weight of the mundane. I stopped reading, stopped writing, stopped thinking and fretting about existence and purpose and my moral relevance or lack thereof. I bought housewares. I focused completely on the day-to-day and the minute-to-minute. And that was okay.

Like a traveller returned from a strange land, I found that my experiences were meaningless to those who hadn't ventured so far away from home. When I made any reference to what had happened to me, it was met with the discord of unease, a polite shift toward safer ground. My desire to sift through the contents of my hallucinations was met with discussions about prescriptions and wellness plans.

Please don't get me wrong: medication and wellness plans helped immensely too, in the long run. They helped me to regain my equilibrium, and rejoin my fellows here in what we tacitly agree is the real world. I have no desire to live in the throes of insanity, and I sincerely hope it doesn't ever happen to me again. But at the same time, I don't want to deny or ignore what I experienced, or dismiss the insights that it offered me. It was a hell of an experience – I assure you – but I learned so much; how can I just set that aside?

My trip was typical: it was bound up in religious and spiritual imagery and metaphor. I believed I was damned. I believed I was saved. I believed I was living through the second coming. I believed I'd been left behind. I believed I was alone. I believed I was evil. I believed I was sacred. I believed that everything I did had significance. I believed that nothing I did had significance. I believed I was being punished. I believed I was punishing everyone else. I felt terrified, guilt-ridden and full of regret at the constant petty ugliness of my character and the countless mistakes and hurts I had caused throughout my life.

Believed is really not the right word. It was all too fluid and surreal to be contained in something so fixed as a belief. It was more that these were my realities, transient realities that rushed through me and past me like views from a train.

Yet in the middle of all this horrific negativity, let me tell you: there was a spell of bliss, which even now feels more relevant and real to me than much of the more common evidence I've collected throughout life. There was this spell of bliss, during which it seemed a layer of obtuseness had been lifted, and I had become aware of and sensitive to my connection with everything else – everything and everyone in my immediate vicinity, everything and everyone beyond me, and throughout me on into the universe. It was a physical sensation, a matter of physical perception, like suddenly being granted a sixth sense or hearing a pitch of sound that had been previously out of range. Everything flowed from everything else, and every moment, every movement, everything, was infused with meaning and goodness and a vivid buzz of serenity. Nothing could be wrong because everything was connected.

Am I rambling now, raving like a prophet in the desert? Well, you decide. It makes no difference to me whether you take in or understand or care about what I'm describing. It's just a story I'm sharing with you, about something that happened to me. And rambling it may be, but all the same: it did happen to me.

Now. Was I insane? Yes, I was insane: clinically psychotic. And?

Was it a taste of spiritual enlightenment? Yes, that too. For me, it was. It changed my understanding of spiritual traditions, from a rational and conceptual approach to an irrational love for something beyond my understanding; from a backlash against organised religion, to a benign willingness to consider the wisdom there, beneath all the crap of dogma and doctrine and culture and history and human interference. It's the difference between imagining a place that you've read or heard about, and imagining a place from the memory of your visit. It's not even that one perception is better than the other; really, it's just information. And it hasn't transformed me that much, like some sort of pilgrimage into beatitude: I can still be a real jerk.

It's valuable information, though: it has made me realise how precious it is to be here, alive and conscious and feeling and connected.

on clarity

July 24, 2014

*“Then you should say what you mean,” the March Hare went on.
“I do,” Alice hastily replied; “at least – at least I mean what I say...”*

A self-declared idealist-dreamer recently posited a world of clarity, in which people expressed themselves simply, and without obfuscation. Is such a world possible? Is there anything simple about communication? Or, to be more precise: is there anything simple about human beings communicating with one another? Don’t we all carry the internal baggage of thoughts, feelings, values, assumptions, fears and foibles – tripping us up in their context?

Again I’m reminded of a long-ago Educational Philosophy course, taught by Dr. Timothy Riordan, in which I learned to painstakingly pick apart the assumptions and logical fallacies so liberally scattered throughout the rhetoric of the education establishment – such as, for example, the following: “I think it’s appropriate that we simplify, clarify and strengthen, so instead of this nebulousness, we have clarity and authority invested in teachers once more.” (Michael Gove)

Actually, a fantastic illustration can be found in this essay by my friend Tony, contained in a collection of speculations about the future, gathered under the banner *The Future We Deserve*. Tony unpacks the many layers of information and potential meaning hidden behind each of these words, and in so doing pulls the rug out from under the whole value-laden premise.

Dr Riordan was a wonderful teacher – one of those who made the entire degree programme worthwhile, for having encountered him in that one course. He encouraged skepticism and rational inquiry, and at the same time he shared an enthusiasm for learning that clearly bloomed from his heart.

Where else have I encountered this? Why, only today, in this lovely essay on Ragged Online, which suggests that “Education in its highest form does not set people up to fail but constantly revisits its last known communal point and endeavours to extend that horizon.”

But here’s the thing: Dr Riordan is both professor *and* poet. While he taught his students to interrogate the language for precision, he invited his readers to relax into its yielding folds. And where have I encountered this? Why, only today, in the pages of a book:

A meeting of minds
occurs simultaneously –
transitory proof
of the other’s existence,
a peripheral glimpse
of kindred spirits.

(exerpt from “Proof of Existence”)*

So I must ask this idealist-dreamer, who are the people living in that world of clarity? Do they speak only with the precision of a rational mind, and never the twists and tangles of a poetic heart? Do they not ramble on and stumble around in self-conscious stream-of-consciousness, like most humans? Do their words not ever collide?

*“Proof of Existence” can be found in Dr Riordan’s *The Urge to Migrate* (2006) – a copy of which arrived in my post this very morning. Isn’t it fascinating how all these stray threads can come together like so?*

all sweetness and light

July 29, 2014

So: today.

Today I need to remind myself again not to lose heart. The knockbacks are coming thick and fast, one after the other, throwing me off-balance and onto my knees. Get up, stand up. Take another step, hold out my hand. Keep it on my tongue: *may the road rise with you*.

I walked from Tollcross to Leith, through the merry mayhem erupting on Princes Street (tourists clogging the pavements, checking maps, snapping photos) through well-heeled George Street (suits and ties, linen skirts and boutique bags, two-course lunch and a glass of wine) and along Leith Walk (patkas and salwar kameez, DMs and tattoos, coffee bars and charity shops.) And every few blocks: people with nothing but the blanket over their knees and a paper cup holding coins.

I grew up inside a safe secure suburban box, and I remember well what happened when I pushed at its walls, peeled at its edges. The voices of parents and teachers and priests and peers knocked me back: you can't do that. You can't do that. This is how the world works, this is how you play the game. You have to do it this way or you will suffer. You'll suffer. You'd have to be crazy to think otherwise....

Another knockback, and another. A spasm of self-doubt, a flood of anxiety. "Courage, dear heart." Get up, stand up, again and again. Stay on the breath, rephrase the pitch. Build a bridge from here to there. Keep my heart from growing bitter; keep it there, sweet on my tongue for all to taste: *may the road rise with you*.

only connect

July 30, 2014

Two forces rule the universe: light and gravity.... What is the reason that as soon as one human being shows he needs another (no matter whether his need be slight or great) the latter draws back from him? Gravity. (S. Weil)

*I wasn't drinking to forget
I was drinking to remember
how I once might have looked
through the eyes of a stranger
(Gravity by Freakwater)*

I have a memory – a mother's memory. My daughter is seven or eight years old. I'm beside her, sitting on the edge of her bed. She's drawn me to her room with the sound of weeping, and now I am sitting there beside her, listening to her and sharing in her sorrow. Over the past months she has been slowly gravitating into a treacherous phase of her childhood: the sly and spiteful politics of girl-friendships.

Those first years of nursery and early primary school were full of simple, joyful engagements with other children, boys and girls all together – large merry romps of chasing and tig and jumping rope and pelting one another with raisins from their snack boxes. But over these past months, I have noticed that she speaks increasingly about spending her time among the girls. The girls stay in one side of the playground, the boys on the other. More than this: the girls are starting to peel off into smaller units of two and three, becoming inseparable, establishing their BFF (best friends *forever!!!!*) and creating impregnable fortresses of togetherness. She has several good friends and she loves them all, but she hasn't got a BFF, and the playground politics are beginning to get to her. She feels left out, and unwanted – she is always the one tagging along, always the one seeking out the others. She blurts it out unhappily: "Why is it always me asking them?"

And my instant response rolls straight off my tongue

Get used to it.

where I catch it just in time and shut my lips, holding it in – literally holding it in – with a mental hand clamped over my mouth.

Good God, did I nearly just say that out loud? How fucked up can I be? I came this close to unleashing my twisted, cynical self onto this sweet, open-hearted little girl whose bewildered tears cry out the genuine grief of the human condition. Life is just so fucking unfair, and it hurts. It really hurts.

Well, shit. I'm a good enough mum, after all. I swallow those words and instead I stroke her hair, and sit close beside as the storm passes through her; it passes, and she is soothed.

Tony says it all, right here: "What I do want more than anything is to connect."

We all do. In fact, that's all we want to do, more than anything, throughout every moment of our lives. We want to connect with others. We want to belong. We want to be recognised,

and valued. We want to be part of something greater than just ourselves, we want a taste of transcendence, and the only way we can taste it is to connect.

And we all feel the sting of disinterest, misunderstanding, outright rejection. We all feel the sting and we all deliver it too, even to people we like and even to people we love. Those missed connections, they're like particles of dust that billow out from all our interactions. They're the dust of matter that clumps together, forming shadows, blocking out the light, generating gravity.

I am reading a fantastic book right now: *Individuals, Groups and Organisations Beneath the Surface* by Lionel F. Stapley. He suggests that “the dominating feature of human psychology is the impulse to form relationships” (p14) and that “perhaps the most outstanding and the most continuous of human psychic needs is that for emotional response from other individuals.” (p.31)

What I like about his comments, and his analysis throughout the book, is his acknowledgment of the inseparable nature of thoughts and emotions, existing simultaneously within the physicality of our brains and our bodies, and beyond us, throughout all our relationships. Paying attention means aligning oneself fully within one’s humanness, in all these aspects. I like how Stapley coins it: “we may say that human being is an activity. It is not about the doing that a human does, it is about the doing that a human is.” (p9)

So I raise my glass of lemonade in a toast: to my friends, to my never-quite-made-it-to-friends, and to friends-unknown – and to enemies too if I’ve got them (?!)

I raise my glass to you all in the spirit of human friendship and with the wise words of E.M. Forster: “Only connect!”

on breaking rank

August 5, 2014

I've just started reading a book, which I came across when I was visiting my family in the US last summer – one of several that I crammed into my suitcase and lugged back home with me. The title caught me instantly: *Somebodies and Nobodies*. I had used those very terms myself, in an email I once wrote, trying to explain why I was upset.

I had used those terms because they described how I felt: invisible, used, and consigned to the role of Nobody among others who were Somebodies. The response to this email was overbearing in its denial of my perspective: I was sowing discord, and I was well out of line. Well out of line. Only now, in hindsight, do I realise that yes, actually, I *was* out of line. I had stepped out of line and had broken rank and had taken the first step of claiming my own power, which is to use one's voice and name one's experience for oneself.

The subtitle of this book is relevant too: *Overcoming the Abuse of Rank*. Abuse is a verb that Tony has brought to my attention, in past discussions around the issue of power and strength. In the book's first pages, author Robert Fuller says this:

It is crucial to get one thing straight from the start: power differences, in themselves, are not the culprit... And rank differences merely reflect power differences, so rank differences are not the problem either... Typically, the abuse of the power vested in rank-holders takes the form of disrespect, inequity, discrimination, and exploitation.

So I swing back to feminism, which I have described [here](#) as something that happened to me and which I have just now decided I might visualise as a door, leading off a corridor. Remember that long corridor at the start of *Yellow Submarine*, in which Ringo and Old Fred wander about opening and shutting doors to various psychedelic rooms, in search of the other three Beatles whom they wish to rally to the aid of Pepperland? It's like that. All those doors. And you're Ringo and I'm Old Fred, and Pepperland is in danger.

One of those doors is feminism. It's a way through, to a greater truth in which every living thing has worth and meaning, and should be treated as such.

Fuller's book elaborates his thesis regarding rankism, which he defines as "rank-based abuse.... [which] insults the dignity of subordinates by treating them as invisibles, as nobodies." My own question here would be: how do we identify 'subordinate', when our relationships and interactions are so complex? Hierarchies are a conceptual and mutable framework in which our thoughts, feelings and behaviours are constantly shaped and reshaped by new information that we gather through interaction with one another.

Allowing for rank but not rank-based abuse – this allows for misleading notions such as noblesse oblige and the redeeming benevolence of charity, which ultimately maintain and service inequality. I'm not sure if his thesis is going to get to the bottom of this – but I'm only on chapter one, so we shall see.

In any case, he calls for a Nobody Revolution and a Dignitarian Society. You can find out

more about these ideas at his website, *Breaking Ranks*. I like the idea of Dignitarianism. It sounds like the sort of word one might find among the pages of the books written by Jeremy Hilary Boob PhD, the Nowhere Man discovered by Ringo in the Sea of Holes. It sounds like the sort of word one might find dropping down in giant vibrant colours onto the heads of Blue Meanies, shooting rainbow sparks of flowers and love into the atmosphere.

So come on, then: Pepperland needs our help. H is for Hurry, E is for Ergent, L is for Love me and P is for p-p-Please!! As Ringo would tell you, “The first time I saw that nobody, I knew he was somebody.”



on the unnamed penultimate track

August 16, 2014

And all I really want is to be an honest-to-goodness teenager! (Anne Frank)

On Thursday night I revisited my youth. My friend Chloe and I joined hundreds of teenaged and twenty-something hipsters at the Corn Exchange to see Neutral Milk Hotel, with opening act Owl John. It's been years since I've been to a gig. Yo La Tengo at Queens Hall in 2011. And around the same time I splurged on tickets to see the Dickies in Newcastle, but then mislaid them and didn't go to the show. That was just as well: it would've required the added expense of train tickets and possibly even a night at a hostel. All that fuss, just for a show? What was I thinking?

Neutral Milk Hotel are a curiosity. They recorded two albums back in the 90's and met with critical acclaim but limited success. After the second album they split up and stopped performing. But their music gradually gained traction among the indie underground and developed a cult following. One might say they're the Big Star of this generation.

Strictly speaking, they're not a band from my own youth. I only know of them via my brother, who sent me their second album, *In The Aeroplane Over The Sea*, circa 2000. At that point I was the lone mother of a young toddler. I had neither money nor inclination to buy or explore new music other than nursery rhyme compilations and the Singing Kettle, and I certainly didn't get out to gigs. But I loved the album and it became one of my favourite pieces of music. It really is a beautiful creation, with surreal lyrics full of imagery based loosely on *The Diary of Anne Frank*, and with music and voice together evoking grief and longing and frustration and affection and a sort of dazed joy.

They're not a band from my own youth, but the show took me right back and set me to communing with my teenaged self. It touched the same nerves, standing there in the crowd: the clashing impulses of attitude and insecurity, togetherness and separation, belonging and isolation. Only this time around, the clash doesn't distress me. I hold the impulses together, in a paradoxical balance of positive and negative charge.

We scan the crowd, Chloe and I, people-watching and remarking on outfits and hairstyles. We must be the oldest ones here. We've been standing a long time and find ourselves bending our limbs and shifting our weight, to relieve the fatigue. Money on it that no one else in our vicinity has clocked the danger of deep vein thrombosis. At nine p.m. the main act still hasn't started, and we marvel together that we're out in a club at the hour we're usually getting into bed. Later, during the performance, I fret that Julian Koster is wearing too many layers under the stage lights; he's dripping sweat onto his synth equipment and risking electrocution. My teenaged self is no match for the mother-of-a-teenager in me.

So really: add to the heady mix of my evening the paradox of youth and age. Why else is Anne Frank's life story so stingingly poignant? She desired so much yet lived so briefly. She dwelled in hiding yet lived so wholeheartedly. She wrote about her own tragic circumstances, in her own unique voice, yet reflected hopes and fears and wishes shared by everyone, young and old. She died a teenager and missed out on all the following chapters

of her life.

I love the entire album *In The Aeroplane Over The Sea*, but I have a special place in my heart for the penultimate track, an unnamed instrumental to which I always imagine the same: Anne Frank hiding among a crowd of modern-day teenagers in the mosh pit of some dark club. She's wearing black tights and DM's, and thrashing herself back and forth with utter abandon among the sweaty and throbbing kids crammed together in front of the stage.

Did they play this unnamed song the other night? They did. I stood only a few feet from the edge of the thrashers, and I watched out for her. Yes, yes her ghost was there among them: I saw her fleetingly among the different faces. I felt her stirring in my own heart – in the undertow of longing and the upsurge of joy. Deeply satisfying, and very much alive.

on learning to knit a new public discourse

August 21, 2014

Yesterday I attended two of the three talks hosted by Bella Caledonia, Scottish PEN and the Saltire Society, as part of their event *A Public Press: Reclaiming the Media*. The line-up included: *Power and Print. Misrepresenting Women in the Media, Onslaught and Fightback* with Margie Orford and Caroline Criado Perez and *New Democracy New Media?* with Mike Small, Lesley Riddoch, Peter Geoghegan, Robin McAlpine, and Michael Greenwell.

I brought along my new project: knitting. I taught myself to knit a mere 3 days ago. I know only one stitch (which I've dropped frequently) and the result is a slightly mangled but still coherent stretch of what will eventually become a ratty-looking, mustard-coloured scarf. But it will be *my* ratty-looking, mustard-coloured scarf – and to me it will be an emblem of our infinite capacity to learn. I'm not being facetious: this is what it will mean to me, and serve to remind me. We all have the lifelong ability to learn new skills, new mindsets, new behaviours and new dynamics of relating with others.

I brought along my project and discovered how soothing it is to knit while listening to people speaking at events of this kind. Both talks were disturbing in their own ways. In *Power and Print*, we learned of how viciously women can be treated when they exercise a public voice. Nasty, graphic rape and death threats, for daring to expose the systems of discrimination that silence and demean women, for daring to express ideas which challenge the status quo – really, for daring to demonstrate that they have minds and views of their own.

Then in *New Democracy New Media?* we learned about the aspirations for a publicly-owned press in Scotland. The aspiration goes far beyond the Scottish Government's plans for a Scottish version of the BBC (which is essentially an instrument of the state) and looks instead to a cooperatively-owned public service with a staff of journalists covering public policy. The purpose of professional journalism, Robin McAlpine reminded us, is to scrutinise power and hold check over it. (Is it?? I'm reminded of Andrew Marr's interview with Noam Chomsky, well worth watching, in which the patient Chomsky explains the thesis of *Manufacturing Consent* to a bewildered Marr, and gives multiple examples of how the propoganda model operates in the modern press.) It was a great talk, about an important subject – yet as ever, the goodwill was hamstrung by habit: an all-white panel of four men and one woman, and a discussion with primarily men speaking. Lesley Riddoch was acknowledged as the sole female on the panel, and accorded respect for her right to "rant" about gender imbalance. The guys on the panel were all good men, radical thinkers, and I doubt they would any of them deliberately discriminate against anyone. But the habitual paradigm was there, and it was easy to dismiss and accept as 'just the way it is'. So who exactly will be the voice of this publicly-owned cooperative press? How are we going to change the paradigm?

At the end of the talk, I fell to chatting with a young man who studied journalism and works as a freelancer. He is at the start of his career, still full of idealism and hope that his future work will help to change the world for the better. He's only 24 but he's already worried by

the spectre of compromise he must face, ‘in order to survive.’ This is, ironically, precisely the point made by Caroline and Margie in the first talk. Challenging the status quo is dangerous work. You can only go so far before it’s too far, and then the backlash will kick in from all those who are afraid of change. For this young man, the backlash would entail a stalled career as a journalist, leaving him unable to practice the profession for which he trained. For Caroline and Margie, the backlash entails rape and death threats.

Caroline’s voice and hands shook as she described the fear and anxiety produced by the onslaught of violent verbal retribution she received for daring to campaign for women’s greater representation in public life. She admitted that she has recently declined invitations to appear on television, unable to currently muster the stamina to endure the reprisals she knows will follow. She conceded, quite frankly and openly, to being silenced in this regard, and wondered how many men find they must choose their personal safety and mental wellbeing over the opportunity to participate in a publicly-broadcast discussion.

I sympathise enormously with Caroline. My voice and hands shake too, whenever I speak up in public space – particularly when I am presenting a perspective which challenges the received wisdom of those to whom I speak. I’ve also been on the receiving end of challenge (almost constantly these days by my teenaged daughter!) and I understand the defense mechanism that kicks in, the mental and emotional resistance I feel toward the demand to reconsider my position on whatever issue is at stake. What I’ve learned through experience is that if I accept the emotional charge as inevitable and legitimate, and then allow myself the time and space to take on the new information, together this then leads to internal change. The challenge and the resistance and the fallout and the resulting adjustments all contribute to learning and growing.

I’ve written recently about creating a holding space. We need a space where we might express the anxiety and fear and stress and frustration and anger we all (men and women both) feel at the injustices we suffer in our patriarchal society, where this can be acknowledged and allowed without being shut down, or denied, or silenced by ourselves or by others. When forbidden and denied, these ugly and negative aspects of our experience fester deep inside and exacerbate ill will. We need a space where we can explore our unique and diverse perspectives – all of us – without blame or shame. I’m not sure what I mean by space.... help me out here.

Perhaps we could knit a holding space within our mutual discourse. Stitch by stitch, choice by choice, in the public press and in personal conversations and in online discussions and in workplace meetings and in queues at the shops.

That’s what I mean when I call my scarf an emblem of our capacity to learn. It’s full of mistakes, my scarf: gaps of dropped stitch and wonky edges where I’ve somehow created shorter and longer rows; but all the same, it is holding together, and the mistakes are fewer and further between the longer I work at it. A compassionate public discourse can be created the same way.

At the event yesterday evening, the woman beside me admired my knitting. I responded with a self-deprecating response that rolled off my tongue without thinking: “I don’t really know what I’m doing.” She replied instantly: “Yes, you do!!” And she’s right.

heaven and hell

Posted on October 1, 2014

I spent a truly wonderful weekend in the village of Trefin on the west coast of Wales. Thirteen hours there and thirteen hours back. A world away, actually. Beautiful landscape and country lanes, seashore of rocks and coves, farm pastures with cows and walking paths with nettles.

I found myself among a small, cosy company of friends old and new – relaxed, affectionate and charming all. We shared thoughts and stories and meals, music and singing; we foraged for wild plants and seaweed; we burned wishes in a bonfire and took sips of the most incredible green walnut wine.

Entirely worth the journey there and back.

If the weekend was a little more like heaven, then today offered me a visit to someplace a little more like hell.

I was attending an event for work which took place in the city council chambers, a large, imposing room decorated with heraldry and oil paintings of nobles in ornate gold-leaf frames. The hundred or so delegates filled cabaret-style tables, people from public and third sector agencies, all convening to hear about the city's employability strategy. I was gatecrashing, in a way – scoping out this particular network.

The moment I set foot in the room, I felt like a fish out of water, gasping for air and flapping about in turmoil. Lots of men in suits and ties. Of the fifty or so women attending, there were twenty two wearing black polyester trousers. TWENTY TWO! I counted! There was a top table and a screen, and over the course of the morning we watched four PowerPoint presentations full of minute text and copious bullet points and blurry, illegible graphs. There was one slide with an image – of men in construction gear, looking employable. Well, I suppose there may have been more that I missed while I closed my eyes and tried not to whimper.

Did you know that Edinburgh has an EMPLOYABILITY PIPELINE? It does. The council follows, and I quote, “the Pipeline Approach.”

I sat beside a young woman who works in “an anti-poverty charity” and when I asked about it she explained that she “helps them with their benefits and that kind of thing.” Them. Their benefits. Bad poverty, bad!! Go away!!

A woman across the table told me she works for an agency that “provides employment solutions for people on benefits.”

Are you feeling tense yet?

We heard about “labour supply and demand.”

The “integrated service model.”

“Giving confidence to youngsters to be a part of the job market.”

You do realise I’m typing from my notes verbatim?

“We need a serious flow of good quality candidates.”

“It is critical to have intelligence on the programme of activity.”

“So like it says there on the slide, I work for a leading global contracting and development company that builds, engineers and maintains property and infrastructure around the world. And at the bottom there, that’s [our company]’s strapline: *Built to Outperform.*”

“We look at attitude and approach. By attitude I mean, the enthusiasm you need to display in the workplace and to fit into the culture of the workplace.”

“We’re looking at categories of actions to improve our sector.”

PEOPLE SAID THESE THINGS. Real people, made of flesh and bone and blood, people with brains and lungs and hearts and families and friends. People who are paid to say these things, about other people of flesh and bone and blood, with brains and lungs and hearts and families and friends – but no job. Put them through the pipeline!

Doesn’t that.. isn’t that just... what the fuck?!

I had to escape at the midmorning coffee break. I couldn’t bear it – I was starting to feel chest pains. I fled to the ladies room and dry heaved over the sink. Other women glanced over in concern, and one kind lady – wearing black polyester trousers – came to stand by me and ask if I was alright. Heaven and hell, we make them ourselves.

I haven’t had a panic attack in over two years. Until today. Perhaps it was shock caused by the contrast between the loving earthiness of my weekend in Trefin and the synthetic absurdity of this conference agenda.

I take a deep breath. And another.

And another.

break down the door

October 3, 2014

The moment I say it I want to take it back.

“Damsel in distress.”

Fucking fuck, no no no. NO.

In any case, the door has jammed and I need assistance. Two men have materialised. Game on.

The feisty feminist deals out rope to hang herself. “I’m a damsel in distress,” I say without thinking.

Yes, I am in distress. I am complicit. I don’t have the answers. It’s easier to just go along as I’ve gone before. Challenge and change are so fucking exhausting for everyone involved. I’m getting tired.

My head is still buzzing from the earlier part of the day. My dad is in my head again, sitting at the head of the table, talking at me, telling me what he thinks, expecting me to listen and to agree. He holds his nightly bowl of ice cream and waves the spoon around in the air for emphasis. My mom is up on her feet, clearing the dishes from the table and running hot water into the sink for the washing up.

Mom and I did the food shopping earlier, she had picked me up at the house en route from her day at work. We stayed for a few minutes in the car park after loading the groceries into the boot, sat together in the front seat and shared a secret bag of popcorn. “Don’t tell your dad, okay? He doesn’t like me to eat popcorn. He thinks it’s not good for my weight.”

Popcorn? Seriously?? Enjoy that ice cream, Dad.

With the exception of my mother, on her feet clearing the dishes, we are all trapped at the table listening to Dad tell us about what he thinks. It goes on too long and there’s no room for anyone else.

At Dad’s funeral, my brother delivered the eulogy. He too remembers those interminable monologues.

My father liked to lecture us. We all knew the agony of hearing him go on and on about some article he had read; we all learned to listen for his train of thought slowing down as it pulled into the station so we could de-board without hurting his feelings. Because if you weren’t quick on your feet, he’d get on another topic and you’d have to ride to the next town with him.

When I was young and angry I’d stalk off, or I’d nod my head and ignore him. But as I grew older I learned that if you had the intellectual energy to meet him head on, you could turn the lecture into a discussion, and even if you didn’t, you could filter out the rhetorical excess and come away with some remarkable insights. If you believe, as I do, that a man’s only true legacy on earth is what

others learn from him, then my father left behind a great deal.

I'm not young anymore but unlike my brother, I'm still angry. I had the intellectual energy all along but I wasn't supposed to use it. Whenever I tried to meet Dad head on in discussion, I was told to calm down.

However, let me make this clear to you. Guys – men, boys – I'm not angry with *you*. Really I'm not. I'm angry with *me*, for being complicit – for allowing so much of my life to be molded into the shape of a good girl, a pleasing woman, an *unthreatening* woman, a damsel needing rescue.

And you? What shape have you spent your life trying to fit into?

The sort of compassion that is useful to men and boys seeking to escape a world of violence, misogyny and emotional constipation is not the compassion of a priest who forgives sins, but of a doctor who looks at a suffering idiot who waited too long to get an oozing wound checked out and says, firmly and accurately: I'm afraid this is going to hurt.

Of course it's going to hurt. But then, it hurts already.

(Laurie Penny, *Unspeakable Things*)

Seriously, guys. This is a truly heavy door. I'm going to need some help to get through it. And yours is pretty heavy too.

Perhaps we can help each other?

empowerment is

October 5, 2014

Last weekend I learned about push notifications. A ‘push notification’ is digital design jargon, referring to a type of online interface: one of those immensely irritating pop-up boxes which will only disappear from the screen if you click on it somewhere – like a cookie banner, for instance, demanding that you accept cookies on your web browser. A push notification, I was told, “forces the viewer to take action.”

Viewers taking action? That could be a good thing. Less passive resignation and more active involvement. The meek inherit the earth!

But force? No one should be forced to do anything. Not even accept cookies.

Today I attended the Women for Independence conference in Perth. There were around a thousand women there, travelling in from all over Scotland on a dreich and dreary wet Saturday. A thousand politically engaged women demanding a more compassionate and democratic social order. How many more were there with us in spirit, unable to attend in person?

The first half of the programme involved an open mic opportunity for anyone who wished to contribute. The tone throughout this session was unfailingly gracious, hopeful and courageous; the individual voices of women collectively articulating their thoughts and aspirations. No forcing, but likewise no backing down. As one speaker said, “We’re not here to seek power. We already *have* power.” Another spoke as though reading from the script of my heart: “Empowerment is about not being invisible.” (Well shit – that sums up four years’ worth of blog posts in a mere six words. Succinct I am not.)

Push notifications themselves are not the problem. Every moment of life contains a push notification of one sort or another. We can click on the screen as directed or suffer the fate of the cookieless... but we might also take things into our own hands, just shut the screen off altogether and speak with a fellow human instead. We might choose to step away from what has been constructed to contain and direct us, and do our own thing.

there she goes again

October 15, 2014

I'm walking home in the crisp autumn sunshine, along a Royal Mile crowded with the pedestrian traffic of visitors, buskers and tour guides bedecked in 18th century garb. It's such a beautiful day, but I'm struggling to enjoy it. At the moment I feel utterly lost, physically sick with the dread of it, and I'm trying hard not to panic or give in to the despair whispering to me from my own dark corners. I'm trying hard to simply stay with this surge of exhausted negativity – not fight it, just allow it to flow through me and past me.

I have a friend who is going through a difficult patch in her life these days. "What's the point of me?" she has asked, and right now I wonder precisely the same thing about myself. When my friend asks me this question, I tell her the truth: being you is the point. You don't need any other. You don't need to justify your existence. You're my dear friend and I love you and you're meant to be here. Why can't I summon the same certainty for myself?

This isn't depression. It's more to do with my work and my livelihood, with the burden of peddling an ethos that the average citizen regards as farfetched and up its own idealistic ass. It's not practical. It doesn't pay the bills. I'm inviting others to join me in beating against the bars of an invisible cage. Who would want to buy that?

I've got headphones on and have gravitated to the bard of lost souls, Gram Parsons. "One hundred years from this day," he sings, "will the people still feel this way?" Heeding the words of a man who lived in drug-addled emotional solitude before overdosing at the age of 27... is this really going to get me anywhere? Apparently so, because by the time I arrive at my doorstep I've regained my inner balance and like a byrd I've thrown myself back into the arms of fate. I'm my dear friend and I love me and I'm meant to be here. "Everybody's so wrong, that I know it's gonna work out right."

on daring to be impolite

October 23, 2014

Walk. The drum begins. Follow it. Follow the drums of thunder. Follow the sun. Follow the stars at night as they lean their long slant down the far side of the sky. Follow the lightning and the open road. Follow your compulsion. Follow your calling. Follow anything except orders and habit. Follow the fire-fare-forwards of life itself. Go where you will burn your bridges if you must, leave the paving stones smouldering and singe the gate as you leave, leave an incendiary device by The Wall, and scorch your way upon the land. I dare you. (Jay Griffiths, Wild)

I've just been delivering a session on the topic of living systems and workplace unions, at the marvellous Edinburgh Radical Independent Book Fair hosted by Wordpower bookshop. One of the things we discussed involved the participative and relational nature of the universe (as explored in quantum physics) and how this may be reflected in organisations.

This reminds me of the book I read recently about the psychology of groups and organisations. Individuals exist in relation to others. Our inner psyche is relational – we simply do not exist in isolation. From the moment we are conceived we are in relation to another human, our mother, and to the sounds of others through the wall of her belly. We kick occasionally to mark our awareness of the information we receive from the outside: voices, music, changes to gravity as she moves, chemical responses to food or drink or drugs she has consumed and her own physical reactions to stress or fatigue or pleasure. During life we conceptualise a self that is bounded by our personal space – our body, our mind, our genetic makeup – but we never, *not ever*, exist outwith our connections to others.

During our discussion, someone described their organisation as being fairly successfully “flat” in its hierarchical structure, and arranged to allow maximum autonomy and decision-making power among its members. What interested me most in the comment, however, was an aside made about this freedom and power: occasionally people “misbehaved.” The remark was made in reference to people for example misdirecting allocated project money – and in any case the observation was made lightly. But isn’t that interesting, I thought, how easily the word “misbehaved” rolls off our tongues and makes immediate sense to everyone. How much our good behaviour and/or misbehaviour is implicit rather than explicit. We have social codes, thousands of them, which govern our interactions with one another.

And isn’t it interesting as well, that the notion of someone making the wrong decision may be cast as misbehaviour? People make mistakes, errors of judgment, and sometimes just misunderstand the social cues which inform all those invisible codes. We all do this, at various times and in various degrees. We call it misbehaving in order to tie personal responsibility to individual choices and actions. Ched Evans misbehaved when he raped a woman; his victim misbehaved when she prosecuted because it disrupted his career. He has publicly acknowledged his “incredibly foolish decision”; she has been publicly hounded by sports fans and now lives in hiding. Women misbehave when they protest or complain about harm done to them, because they are kicking up a fuss and demanding that we see what would otherwise remain comfortably invisible.

Which leads me to Caitlin Moran's popular book, *How to Be a Woman*. This is feminism lite, written with good humour and one foot very solidly and safely in the middle-class-wife-mother-and-media-professional camp. She offers food for thought in a very easy-to-swallow format, and that's fine. When I read it, though, I was pulled up short by her Humanity Guideline, which follows on from her sexism rule of thumb, which is:

... asking this question: 'Are the men doing it? Are the men worrying about this as well? Is this taking up the men's time? [...]

Almost always, the answer is: 'No. The boys are not being told that they have to be a certain way. They're just getting on with stuff.' [...]

All along, we must recall the most important Humanity Guideline of all: BE POLITE. BEING POLITE is possibly the greatest daily contribution everyone can make to life on earth.

Is that it? Be polite?? I know she is trying to capture something there about being kind, being considerate of others, being aware of one's own impact. But given the myriad complexities of individual beliefs and expectations, and the myriad subtleties of social interaction, how can we always manage to be polite, unless we live within a profoundly narrow sliver of social space? Be polite – according to whose standards? Who determines what is or isn't polite?

Caitlin Moran is well-meaning and funny, but she is no match for Bill Hicks on this issue: "This idea of "*I'm offended*". Well I've got news for you. *I'm offended* by a lot of things too. Where do I send my list? Life is offensive. You know what I mean?"

A friend recently circulated the passage above, by Jay Griffiths, via social media. We romanticise the idea of wildness – throwing off the yoke of civilisation and following our guts, our impulses – yet what does that really mean? I couldn't help but think about the ripples of discomfort I sometimes cause (or imagine I do) when I make a feminist case. Following my compulsion and my calling, shrugging off orders and habit – I do dare, Jay, and I can be a real pain. Am I being wild, or misbehaving?

Miss Behaving

October 26, 2014

So I went along to Sarah Browne's session at the Radical Book Fair, launching her new book which is a history of the women's liberation movement in Scotland.

The book is based on Sarah's PhD thesis, research which involved the interviewing of many women across Scotland who had participated in the movement in the 1960s and 70s. Several of these interviewees attended yesterday's launch event, and shared snippets of memories with the audience.

One memory involved a demonstration in Aberdeen (outside a beauty pageant??) in which women dressed up in suggestive costumes to highlight various women's issues, and wore corresponding sashes with names such as Miss Demeanour, Miss Used, Miss Laid and Miss Conceived. A timely anecdote, I thought, given my own musings the other day exploring what we mean by 'misbehaving.'

Another woman described a campaign that she and "a gang" of other young women had conducted at the University of St Andrews, in which they stationed themselves publicly outside the student union for a week, catcalling and whistling and commenting on the appearance of any men that walked past. A male fellow student had later confided to her how terrified he had been to go past them, how uncomfortable and unsafe it had made him feel. Point made.

She also described the experience of being in a packed lecture hall, listening to a male professor refer continually to the human experience as "his" and the human person as "he." When she finally gathered her courage and raised her hand to point out that she felt alienated by his male gendering of humanity, and that this was interfering with her learning, the entire hall of fellow students burst out in laughter.

What struck me most about the reminiscences of these women, and the collective heritage of the movement they had participated in, was the relative intimacy of their interventions. Long before social media, and mainly outwith the attention of public media, they questioned and challenged the assumptions of those around them. They donned the sash of Miss Behaving, and stirred up conceptual trouble among their own peers. Following on from her story about publicly questioning her male professor, this woman invoked, with deep feeling, the connection between the personal and the political. Politics isn't just marches and slogans; politics occurs in our most casual and daily and intimate interactions.

I left the session both disheartened and encouraged: disheartened by the enormity of the sexism still rampant in our lives, even these many years on from that mid-20th-century movement; but also encouraged by the path forged by these women, and their good example of collective activism. Overall, I felt comforted to recall that I reside within a sisterhood, and that when I stir up wee storms by speaking my mind, I'm part of something far, far larger than my own small life. Keep on keeping on, as my mother might say. Yes I do keep on misbehaving, I think – for my daughter's sake, and her daughter's too.

on losing the albatross

October 27, 2014

I have a dear friend who was my job-share partner when I was working as a conference organiser. He's a lovely, generous, giant-hearted man who made me laugh constantly – still does, actually, when we get together. Whenever I exclaimed over some passing irritation in our daily work, he would put it to me, in his amused Scottish brogue: "Are you raging?"

Am I raging? No – on the contrary: today I am gliding along in a vivid rush of carefree insouciance, following a train of thought that made its final connection as I walked home from town, like the tumbler inside a padlock falling into place with a whisper and thunk.

I had been musing about yesterday's concluding session at the Edinburgh Radical Independent Book Fair, a discussion with Kathleen Jamie and Esther Woolfson on the topic of *Women, Nature and Wilderness*. Esther gave a prepared talk at the beginning, in which she alluded scathingly to the dominance of male voice in the field of nature writing. At one point she referred to the Summer 2008 issue of GRANTA magazine which celebrated "The New Nature Writing" – with male contributors outnumbering female by 9 to 1.

What I was recalling was the reaction of the man sitting a couple seats away from me, as Esther gave her talk. He had snuffed indignantly a couple times, and when I glanced at him sidelong his face wore an expression of deliberately disdainful boredom for her remaining points.

This wasn't the first visible shutdown I'd witnessed at the Book Fair. In our circle discussion about workplace unions, a woman volunteered at one point that she had been the Branch Secretary of her trade union for some years, and observed that as a woman she had been in the extreme minority. The branch office, she commented, had been composed mainly of middle-aged men, with predominantly adversarial approaches to what they perceived to be workplace battles. The middle-aged man near her rolled his eyes at her remark, and shifted himself in his chair in order to face away from her. She had clearly offended him by identifying this culture of male dominance.

There they go again! these men seemed to be saying in their body language. *Another woman squawking about how unfair it is.*

Indeed, a large part of the commentary in the *Women, Nature and Wilderness* session centred on the disproportionate male voice in nature writing, and the enduring archetype of the lone-hero-conquering-the-wild which recurs in the genre. So much of the session explored this problem of sexist prejudice that the panel chair felt compelled at one point to ask the men in the room how they felt about the turn the discussion had taken, and hoped aloud that they weren't being made too uncomfortable by the opinions being voiced.

Holy heck, I thought: let's just make sure the men are all feeling okay. Let's make sure they haven't been discomfited by this entirely valid critique of existing literature and the publishing industry which produces it. As long as the menfolk aren't too badly put out, the women can just take it all on the chin.

So back to that whisper and thunk: the lock that sprang open as I was walking home today.

The realisation came over me in a joyful rush that I no longer care what men think. The tremendous albatross I've carried around my neck for so much of my life, trying to discern and meet the expectations and presumed needs of men – it's been growing lighter and lighter for years, until it has now, finally, just dropped off altogether. Just like that.

That's not to say I don't care what the individual men in my life think about me as an individual person; like anyone, I hope for the respect and care of my friends and family members. But do I feel any need to deny myself – my views and my right to voice them – for the sake of male comfort and ease-of-mind? I don't. My feminist skin is growing thicker by the day, and my self-respect with it.

And for the record, you two middle-aged men I described above, you who both reacted so disrespectfully to what you heard women saying? I'm not impressed by you. Not a bit.

on dancing in the dark

November 1, 2014

Being asked to describe my skills, I nearly wrote down “communicating.” After all, that is the role I’ve assumed in my work – info and comms – while my partner focuses on training and development. False distinctions, both: we roll up our sleeves and do everything between us based on what’s happening, what’s needed and who’s on hand. But the world likes labels, and job titles, and so we accommodate. We’ve got enough to explain without adding “why don’t you have job titles?” to the list of questions.

Anyway, I’m glad I didn’t claim communication as a skill, because really, to be honest, I’m not always that good at it. I can use my voice – yes indeed, at long last. Persistent and determined practice over the past few years has taught me to say what I want to say, and to consciously disregard that constant nagging whisper of self-doubt and self-criticism that has crippled me with so much worry and regret throughout my life, so much concession to what others might think of me. But using one’s voice isn’t the same as communicating.

Communicating involves understanding. Communicating involves amending, compromising, reaching out and above all, connecting.

Communicating also involves an exchange of power, to some degree. Setting the parameters for what may or may not be said, for what determines polite/acceptable/unthreatening discourse or impolite/offensive/dangerous discourse: that’s about power. Mild reprobation rests at one end of the spectrum, censorship at the other.

So what should I do? There I am, lost in the full flowing freedom of my smartass train of thought, enjoying my own brand of humour, throwing out wee wind-ups and making earnest arguments or sarcastic asides or weird little quips of self-referential irony. That’s me. That’s what I sound like to myself. What’s the problem?

Just this: it’s not the first time I’ve hit the send button and received a startled apology on the back of it, a bewildered misreading of where I’m coming from. Communication breakdown! Emergency service call, repair crew to the rescue!!! A rewiring of words to restore enlightenment.

Maybe the Brits just *don’t do sass*. Maybe that’s what it is.... in fact.... yeah, actually, that probably is very much what it is. Either that or I’m just an unnecessarily rude bitch.

Oh well. There’s nothing else for it. I dance around in the dark by myself, occasionally cackling and just enough out of step that no witch bottle may contain me. Miss Communication, that’s me.

at the walls of Troy

November 9, 2014

It's Sunday morning and I'm sitting in my dressing gown with a cup of coffee, but I'm not relaxed. I'm distracted and uneasy, finding it impossible to focus. Butterflies in my stomach, I'm staring out the window at the morning light and the occasional birds flying past, breathing deeply to ground myself. What is going on? Only this: the spaciousness of Sunday morning has made room for something to come down off the shelf, something that I stashed for later. Now later has arrived.

I've recently two-stepped in a wee merry dance of miscommunication, flirting with membership in a group which promotes social change and funds grassroots groups whose aims are often too radical to attract traditional funding. An interesting process, being called to account for my views: it felt uncomfortable and frankly adolescent. *Are you one of us?* In the end, I pulled out. Not because I disagree with their purpose; on the contrary, I wholeheartedly agree with the aims and values of this organisation, its strategy to support groups that advocate strategic and systemic social change. But I'm not sure how to evidence it, and in any case I was applying on an idealistic whim, rather than with any project or agenda in mind. "I'm not a radical anything," I told them, "I'm just me." Clearly I hadn't thought it through, nor read their published criteria closely enough. In the end I merely wasted time for people who have more than enough to do already.

But something still nags at me about this. What is the point of radical activism, if not to connect to the mainstream at its edges and change the parameters of social expectation? And how does one connect with that conceptual barrier of personal identity (eg I'm a radical activist, and you're not) in place? How do we connect with others while maintaining our differences, our criteria and identity? And what is the aim of political activism? If radical views become mainstream, do they then become compromised, suspect? What is the difference between successful collective action and the mainstream? What is the difference between membership, participation and engagement?

At the Soulmakers Gathering I attended at the end of September, someone made reference to the Trojan Horse: in this case a metaphor for slipping new or challenging ideas into mainstream discourse in order to affect widespread change. Is the metaphor apt? Are we at war?

Many people would say so. Capitalism is at war with the natural world, power and privilege are at war with the dispossessed and disenfranchised. The traditional third sector operates to mop up the casualties, but it still plays by the rules of the game – a game which is ultimately rigged. This ship we're on will go down eventually through the weight of its own malign hubris, and we'll go down with it. The number of birds flying past my window grows fewer every year.

Once there were a billion passenger pigeons
So many flew by they darkened the sky
I can't believe how easily
A billion birds can disappear
Handsome Family, "Passenger Pigeons"

Meanwhile, here we are. We do what little we can while we wait for that little black train to arrive.

So here's the kernel of my Sunday morning unease: how little a difference I make. I'm not a radical anything, I'm just me. My contribution and influence in this world are circumscribed by the limitations of social participation and personal choice, by the tiny space in which I dwell and the brief spell of my life with its candle flicker of existence. I haven't got a strategy to fix the world. I haven't got a strategy to save myself or those I love. We can't be fixed and we can't be saved, we can only live out each moment at a time as truly as we know how and marvel that we're here at all. I don't want to spend my life at war; I don't want to play tricks or conquer Troy. That's not the real challenge.

The real challenge is to admit how vulnerable, how inconsequential I am, how easily my security may be sacked and overrun. Those butterflies in my stomach, they're telling me that I'm inside the city walls already, and the most courageous and radical thing I can do is to open my door in the spirit of trust and friendship, even with – indeed, most particularly with – those who are *not one of us*. Loving our neighbours and even our enemies and even ourselves: the most radical activism ever.

on ismism

November 16, 2014

all we are saying is.... John & Yoko

I had the most curious experience last night: someone who came to my session at WordPower's Radical Independent Book Fair offered me some feedback. I'd given the impression somehow that I was covertly rightwing in my perspective. Huh? Where'd that come from?

The session had posed a question, rather than offering an answer: a question with its origins in Margaret Wheatley's *Leadership and the New Science*. In that book she offers a broad outline of three areas of science (quantum physics, chaos theory and self-organising biological systems) and conjectures about their possible implications on theories of organisation. From there I wondered how these ideas might advance our understanding of unions and how they operate.

Ah, now here's where my acquaintance probably lost me: when I suggested that unions have failed in the big game. Unions aim to protect workers from exploitation – utterly admirable and worthy – yet they've not managed to prevent the horrific steamroller of damage and corruption caused by capitalism over the last centuries. In my opinion, unions are fighting battles in a war which has already been lost, fighting for the crumbs of dignity and survival within a paradigm of reality which condemns the living world to a one-dimensional existence as material and product. I don't think that recognising the limits of unions is the same as criticising their value or purpose, nor a signal of rightwing political views – but I can see how big a bite I suggested we chew during that session, and how easily it could catch in the throat – a lesson for me to take away for the future.

In any case, my initial response when this acquaintance suggested that I'd come across as rightwing, was an immediate gut-level flinch: *yikes! That's not me!* A vivid flood of indignation at this challenge to my sense of self. Who am I if not my political persuasion? Who am I if not a reflector of my values, as communicated by the positions I take on issues? Who am I, if not a collection of touchstones telling you about me: my favourite books, my favourite bands, my nationality, my birth order, my zodiac sign and my affiliation with the political left or right? Who am I if not the proud possessor of a unique and personal combination of isms?

Then this morning I came across this article on Bella Caledonia, which tugs at a similar quandary: how do we acknowledge and accommodate complexity and nuance while at the same time taking a position and acting upon it? At what point does uncertainty and openness become fuzziness and lack of commitment? What happens when we draw our lines in different places? What happens when our frames of reference capture different angles, one speaking apples and the other speaking oranges? Does it mean necessarily that one angle is good, and the other bad? At what point does open-mindedness and flexibility become moral relativism?

Finally my friend Tony has pointed me to this intriguing and utterly resonant post about

coherence, in which the author writes:

Coherence [might be understood as] meaning leads to values leads to actions.

When we aren't clear, we aren't coherent, and our actions testify to this.

Howard Zinn said it best: "you can't be neutral on a moving train." Our choices have consequences no matter which way we move. Being alive means making a difference, having an impact, in some way or other – and however small that difference may seem, it contains a monumental and sobering responsibility. But uncertainty isn't the same as being neutral, just as being quiet isn't the same as having nothing to say.

Well, at the end of the day, my opinions and choices are as riddled with contradiction and variability as anyone. We're messy, and organic, and our experience as humans – existing together in a mysterious and complex universe – binds us all far more closely to one another than anywhere we stand on the political spectrum. Life-ism. Love-ism. Taking-each-breath-as-it-comes-ism. Clear and coherent, I am.

goodbye

December 3, 2014

This has been a very important space for me over the past few years. But I've been evolving, growing, changing – learning to see and to say in new ways. I've reached a new stage, and it feels right to move to a new space. I'm taking my stick of green candy with me and setting out to a new blog site:

The Necessary Game

and I warmly invite you to visit me there.

about cricket7642

I am normally very quiet but occasionally I chirp; sometimes you can hear it at the end of the recording.

The name cricket was inspired by an especially favourite song, “Cricket Versus Ant,” by an especially favourite Freakwater. 7642 holds a particular meaning for me which is frivolous and needn’t be explained.

Loving credit to Jane Bowles for inspiring the clay pit: “She was shocked, and her heart beat hard against her ribs, but she went on.”

*But witness for her land,
And witness for her sea,
The cricket is her utmost,
Of elegy to me.
(Emily Dickinson)*