Exploring the Creative Voice in an Academic Context

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Abstract

Who we are changes what we write about and how we write. Simply stated, if the academy is to change, if our views of reality are to be more inclusive, then we need to take a broader view of authorial voices… Tierney and Lincoln, 1997 This paper challenges the traditional paradigm of densely referenced text and the use of a passive, 'neutral' researcher's voice. It draws on current doctoral research that is using creative modes of data representation to examine managers' experiences of transition in organisational life. Within this research, ten managers from an educational institution are being tracked through an externally-driven amalgamation process, in which their jobs have been spilled and their previous organisation absorbed into a larger entity. The managers have drawn images and told stories over a two-year period as the amalgamation has progressed. The paper invites active engagement with the experiences of three of these managers, through poetic text that has been developed from transcripts of interviews. To engage with research represented in creative form is a creative act in itself. The invitation to the reader in creative forms of representation is different from the invitation in a traditional piece of research. This is based on the belief that meaning is not encountered, but constructed and that the act of constructive interpretation is a creative event (Barone & Eisner, 1997). The use of the language of "writer" and "reader" does not fit in such a model. What were once passive readers can now be invited into an experience, through the lens of their own world. This paper is an invitation to become a co-creator of meaning.

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Tierney and Lincoln, 1997

This paper challenges the traditional paradigm of densely referenced text and the use of a passive, 'neutral' researcher's voice. It draws on current doctoral research that is using creative modes of data representation to examine managers' experiences of transition in organisational life. Within this research, ten managers from an educational institution are being tracked through an externally-driven amalgamation process, in which their jobs have been spilled and their previous organisation absorbed into a larger entity. The managers have drawn images and told stories over a two-year period as the amalgamation has progressed.

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This paper is an invitation to become a co-creator of meaning.

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Introduction

We create new forms of expression when speech is inadequate and we want communication to attain a new level of intensity (Gourlay cited in Bjorkvold, 1992). Through creative forms, we are given the opportunity to see, experience the ordinary and learn to understand in new and different ways (Morgan, 1996).

This paper is about the creation of new forms of expression and draws on the writing of a number of researchers who have been exploring issues of representation, from ethnographic and phenomenological perspectives as well as from the field of educational research (Banks &

Banks, 1998; Barone & Eisner, 1997; Bruner, 1993; Eisner, 1998; Ellis, 1997; Ellis & Flaherty, 1992; Haarsager, 1998; Jipson & Paley, 1997; Lather, 1997; Morgan, 1996; Richardson, 1997; Tierney & Lincoln, 1997; van Manen, 1997). These researchers are challenging the voice of the omniscient academic observer and are exploring creative forms of representation that reflect richness and complexity of data and invite new and multiple levels of engagement that are both cognitive and emotional.

Rich, multi-sensory evocations of experience make it possible to formulate meanings that elude linguistic description (Eisner & Barone, 1997). Building on Howard Gardner's notion of multiple intelligences, Bjorkvold (1992) examines the idea that creative forms invite us to see more clearly and feel more deeply. They provide opportunities to achieve insights and perceptions that leap beyond our previous level of understanding. They invite us to develop insights and perceptions that would otherwise be inaccessible. Literature in the psychology of perception describes creative forms as a process that allows people to think with their senses and to experience a union of perception and thought (Arnheim, 1969, 1974).

Representing the Experience of Transition in Organisational Life

In my current doctoral research, I am using creative modes of data representation to examine how managers' make meaning of the experience of transition. Within this research, ten managers from an educational institution are being tracked through an externally-driven amalgamation process in which their jobs have been spilled and their previous organisation absorbed into a larger entity.

My research questions have been:

1. In what different ways do managers make meaning of the experience of transition in organisational life?
2. In what ways can creative forms of representation evoke the nature of the experience of transition?

The symbols and metaphors of the original data have revealed a rich existential depth to the manager's questions about meaning, identity, responsibility and belonging. In my research, I am using this data as the basis of songs, poetry and multi-media tracks that evoke the richness and texture of the managers' experiences of transition. Live interactive presentations and a CD-ROM are core components of my doctorate. I am choosing to use these creative forms of data representation in my PhD in order to:

* Reflect the original richness and complexity of the data
* Invite new levels of engagement that are both cognitive and emotional, and
* Provide multiple prisms through which to explore experience.

My research has been predicated on three ideas that have emerged from this debate. Firstly, there are many different ways in which the world can be experienced and represented (Barone & Eisner, 1997). Secondly, some human experiences are so complex and intensely emotional, that creative forms of representation can reflect their texture more evocatively than traditional

academic text. Creative forms invite us to develop insights that would otherwise be inaccessible and they invite us to see more clearly and feel more deeply (Banks & Banks, 1998; Bjorkvold, 1992; Ellis, 1997; Richardson, 1997). Thirdly, each person who chooses to engage and make meaning of the data, breathes new life into the texts (Jipson & Paley, 1997).

In my research, I have wanted the data to have their own life and the capacity to be experienced and analysed in many different ways. In this work, my intention has been to represent and analyse the data through Patti Lather's concept of vivifying rather than proving (Lather, 1991). In the context of reconstructing the coordinates of analytic practice in a post-positive paradigm, Foucault has written about 'fracture areas', in which interesting things can erupt (Foucault cited in Jipson & Paley, 1997). My research uses alternative forms of representation to create spaces in and around the data, from which new things can continue to erupt in this way.

Capturing the Richness of the Data

The managers have drawn images and told me stories about their experiences of transition. I have not been able to do justice to the texture of their experiences through densely referenced academic writing alone.

I have found Laurel Richardson's use of poetry and her openness about the experience of being an academic, inspiring and permission-giving (Richardson, 1997). In her work, she models her own concept of self-knowledge and knowledge grow up through experimentation with points of view, tone, texture, sequencing, metaphor. I have experienced Carolyn Ellis's experimentation with authentic voice as similarly brave and liberating (Ellis, 1992, 1997). I have also been interested in Max van Manen's notion of merging cognitive and non-cognitive ways of knowing and his idea that 'words fall short' (van Manen, 1997).

Jipson and Paley, describe the significance of the debate about representation in their recent book, *Daredevil Research: Recreating Analytic Practice*:

At the moment, questions about the terms and propositions of research, and about ways of encoding experience in analytic form are currently attracting as much attention as any other issue in contemporary educational study. (Jipson & Paley, 1997, p. 3)

Exploring the Experience of Transition

There are many stories to tell about transition and how it feels to be caught up in the wheels of organisational change. Many of us have had personal experiences of restructures, amalgamations and downsizing. Increasing numbers of people know the experience of working in the perpetual shadow of the next restructure. They know what it is like to have their job or their colleagues disappear.

Transitions are an initiation into something new. Every transition also involves loss on some level (Bridges, 1980, 1995; Hopson, Scally & Stafford, 1995; Spencer & Adams, 1990; Stuart, 1995, 1996). Transitions in organisational life have the potential to blast away the boundaries we have created between our personal and professional lives (Everstine & Everstine cited in Stuart,

1996; Herman cited in Stuart, 1996; Meyerson, 2000). We are changed and our relationship to our world is changed also. Transitions can be full of struggle and hurt as well as clarification and understanding. Sometimes they lead into experiences of release and transformation. Sometimes they don't.

William Bridges made a significant contribution to the field of organisational change in his work on the emotional experience of transition (Bridges, 1980, 1995). His construct of the "Neutral Zone" is in wide use as a reference point for describing that period between the loss of the old and the beginning of the new, an uncomfortable place characterised by restlessness, depression and exhaustion Bridges' work gave much-needed permission to introduce the language of emotions into the experience of organisational change.

My research data reveals the transitional experience as a profoundly emotional and highly charged time. The word "neutral" in Bridges' model, does not, however, adequately capture the dynamism of the managers' pain and anger, the intensity of their grief for the past or their anxiety about the future. "Neutral" implies a blandness or even a nothingness. The data from the managers shows there is nothing neutral about their experience of transition.

There has been an existential quality to the managers' experiences of transition which has necessitated a deeper dimension of questioning, uncertainty and wonder. In this painful place of anxiety and vulnerability, the boundaries between personal and professional worlds can dissolve. The symbols and metaphors in the managers' images and language have revealed the depths of their dislocation and their questioning: "Who am I?", "How might I live?", "What can I do?", "What matters?", "What matters most of all?".

Context of the Stories

Within this paper, I am going to tell some of the managers' stories of transition. They are the stories of people caught up in the windstorms of externally imposed organisational change. These are people I know and care for and with whom I am connected in different ways. I worked for four years in the organisation before the amalgamation took place and left it in order to undertake my doctorate. In the research, I call the organisation Avalon, a metaphor used by a number of the managers. The relationships I built up with the managers participating in this research have made it possible for them to share with me both the inner and outer shapes of their experiences of transition. I am no longer a part of their organisation but I knew it well before the amalgamation.

The four years leading up to the amalgamation were one of those rare periods in organisational life when a combination of people, ideas and resources form a confluence which is productive and life-giving. Integrated organisational systems of planning, quality and performance management were developed and professional development systems of mentoring and action learning were established at all levels of the organisation. There were exceptions, but generally people in leadership positions got on together. There was a sense of community as well as a healthy external focus.

The organisation was not without its problematic issues and areas of conflict, but in my own twenty-year career up to that point, I had not experienced an organisation that felt so alive. A young senior management team, with a balanced gender-mix, had been appointed from the ranks of upper middle management and they brought a dynamism and a sense of possibility into the corridors of power.

It is hard to know if the dynamism and the aligned systems would have continued if the externally-imposed amalgamation had not intervened. No one will ever know now because it has gone. A nostalgic glow now colours the past. I have been told stories of people drinking too much at parties and crying into their drinks "What we had was great, wasn't it?"

Neither the form nor the spirit of that organisation have survived the amalgamation. The forces of the outside world have swept away both its systems and its old identity. I can appreciate what has been lost because I was there and was part of it. I miss the old organisation too.

Relationships with Research Participants

The 12th Century monk, Alanus de Insulis, wrote: "Every creature of the world is for us a book, picture and mirror." My own role as researcher has, to a certain extent, played out these functions. My role with the managers participating in the research has been symbolic as well as personal. I believe I have represented something of the past that has been lost. My role in the organisation prior to the amalgamation included mentoring and action leaning facilitation at middle and senior management levels. Even then, I played a symbolic role as a person who encouraged critical reflection about organisational events. My role as researcher extended that symbolic function.

To the managers, I have represented a safe and contained place in which to talk, to share their stories. That has been their feedback to me about their participation in the research. I am part of them but apart from them. I am of their organisation, but not in their organisation. We have both experienced a loss of the old organisation, but from different perspectives, mine from outside of the organisation, them from within it.

The relationships I built up over time with the ten managers made it possible for them to share with me both the inner and outer shapes of their experiences of transition, the public events and their private responses.

The Stories

In the years in which I have been exploring the experience of transition, I have been told many stories. Even at social gatherings, when people hear of the topic of my doctorate, they are often moved to tell me their own story of transition.

I am going tell the stories of three of the managers, Leon, Sally and Ruby, each of whom have made unique contributions to the depth and substance of my research. They have contributed poems, dreams, images and stories from their professional and personal experiences of transition.

Leon and Sally are still working as managers at Avalon. Ruby took a voluntary redundancy package and left the organisation in the first year of the amalgamation.

To give a sense of the tone and texture of a creative form of representation, I will give some examples of poetic text describing some of the managers' experience of the amalgamation. Other ways of evoking the experiences cannot be contained within the written word. The other forms of representation that I have developed, such as the multi-media tracks, songs, and mandalas depicting different analytical perspectives on the experience of transition, can only be described, not really felt. The experiences of these creative forms need to happen directly and in real time.

Leon's Story

This is Leon's story. Leon is articulate and widely read. He speaks thoughtfully and chooses his words with great care. His images have been striking, rich in metaphors and symbols. Sometimes Leon would ring me in between our scheduled meetings, when he felt there was something I should know. One of our non-scheduled conversations in the first few months of the amalgamation, led to the development of the following poem.

Loss of Faith

I have lost my faith that the ticket tells where we are going
There are rumours that the driver is mad …
From the observation car
I stand looking back and watching the landscape shrivel
Wondering where we are going and just where the hell we are …
A D Hope

The changes are deeply disturbing
They're difficult and exhausting and the people are angry

Like an endangered species
They have been through a bushfire and only just survived

There is a sense of defeat in the air
An atmosphere of quiet despair

People have moved into self-preservation
Wariness and weariness

The stuffing has been kicked out of them
The people have gone a bit quiet now

Things are in chaos
We work in a state of emergency

Systems and policies are not in place
Everything seems unique, urgent, exceptional

Managers are trying to conceal their panic
But I can see it

People are running
There is fear in their faces

Laughter is getting nervous
Hysterical even

People are dealing with panic in different ways
Some are drinking, some have closed right down

Others are simply exhausted
We talk about workload a lot

Even if we worked sixteen hours a day
We wouldn't get on top of it

We try to make a dent in it
But every day, more and more piles up

The rhetoric talks of fantastic opportunities
How wonderful and big we are

Win, win, win
Gold, gold, gold

It's wearing a bit thin
I just feel tired and sad

Sometimes I'm tight and I shut right down
Close it up, keep it in, hold it all back

Disengage from the people
The work and the pain

Sometimes it's safe to disclose how I feel
And move out from the shelter I've made to survive

Feel the need to be known by another
To tell the stories and talk for awhile

And talk at a depth never entered before
About my fears, my needs, my life

Why do I work and how should I live?
What do I need and what do I bring?

Does it matter what I do?
What does it matter at all?

And if it matters, what matters most?
What matters most of all?

* * * * *

In the first year of my doctorate, when I began experimenting with different kinds of creative representation of data, I developed two early prototypes of multi-media tracks. One was based on the poem "Loss of Faith" and the other was called "Birth." The second track, "Birth," in which I attempted to represent the journey to self through images was problematic for a number of reasons.

I showed Leon early prototypes of the two tracks. He found "Loss of Faith" a powerful and accurate evocation of the experience of transition, but "Birth" did not move him in the same way. In "Birth," I had used Gorecki's Sorrowful Songs as the soundtrack. Leon gave me the feedback that that was not how the experience sounded to him. It was too lyrical and bordering on the sentimental. For him, the experience of transition sounded more like a Janecek symphony: discordant, dynamic and unpredictable. The track "Birth" did not get past the prototype phase.

In the second year of the amalgamation, Leon rang to say that another job spill was imminent. The organisation was in trouble. Here is the essence of what he told me.

Telling the Truth

A review of all management positions has just been announced
The organisation is in trouble
People and jobs will have to go
The place is subdued

The people are saying their voices are not heard
We used to come up with ideas, they say
But if you speak, you're told to mind your place
It's using the correct channels that matters now

People who were valued
Now feel deskilled, degraded, depressed
There are pissed outpourings at parties
What we had was great wasn't it?

Be prepared to take risks and make mistakes, they are told
But the people are scared
It's easy to get picked off in this environment
No one knows if their colleagues will support them

There'll be losers in this latest spill
People in the corporate area will go for sure
I'll just go with the flow this time
I used to feel attached to the place but I don't anymore

I'm more tired than I was two years ago
Proximity to pain is very taxing
I try to support others to deal with their exasperation and embitterment
With their sense of loss

It's important to have empathy
To use the pain to understand how others are feeling
I don't have many outlets for talking about my own feelings
But I try not to do harm with my pain

I'm getting older
I think more about loss and suffering
Loss is a common experience in anyone's life
Where we are conscious, we are going to suffer

But I don't want to be overwhelmed by the pain
I want to make decisions and choices
I want to tell the truth of what I see
So I do

* * * * *

I showed Leon the poem "Telling the Truth," that I had written based on the transcript of my interview with him. In response, he wrote a poem of his own. Some of it included words that identified specific people and to ensure confidentiality, I edited out those references. I read the edited version of his poem back to him and he liked it. Here is Leon's poem.

They Weep in My Office

They evade the counting of the dead
The perpetually insecure
The tight of throat and exhausted faint at heart

They drink the poison chalice of the bonus
The seductive recognition and reward
The soothing lies and greed

Irony the cooler face
Of institutional contempt
Offered as cover for the contradictions

They weep in my office
The women of a certain age
Whose wrists can no longer flutter their fans at requisite speed

They weep poor losers
Coralled off from Win
And instead with me they share

The loud snap
Or the wearing thin
The hollowing out or the thickening in

* * * * *

Leon's writing is dense and captures the complexity and anguish of the experience. It is tighter writing than the poetic text I develop based on his spoken words.

In the last interview of the two-year cycle, we spoke about the amalgamation experience as a whole, reflecting back on the transition as a whole. Leon had drawn an image of a waterfall a metaphor for the organisation. This is the way he interpreted his image.

The Fall

Three tributary organisations came together to form a waterfall
Which flowed into a series of descents

As they came together, there was some lacerating and wounding
You can still see the blood in the water

Last year, the water broke into a management stream and a teaching stream
They became separate from each other

The management stream lost its vitality
It became pallid

As the cascade descended
The power of the waterfall diffused

It lost its sense of direction
Its power and force

Algae grew in the rivulets
Colourful but not healthy, vaguely polluted

Now, the water is trickling off in different directions
Being absorbed into the arid soil

* * * * *

The on-going dialogue with Leon over the two-year research period was a continuation of a conversation we had begun during the time I worked at Avalon as well. The quality of our relationship contributed to the richness of the data. Leon's active engagement in the research by initiating conversations at critical times, by providing on-going feedback on my experiments with representation and by his own poetry writing all contributed to the texture and vitality of his data.

Sally's Story

Sally is a highly capable, well-regarded manager. She has the most extraordinary dreams. She also has a remarkable capacity to remember the details of her dreams. Her experiences of transition are alive in her dreams: from the vulnerability and sense of responsibility during the initial job spill through to a reclaimed sense of self and freedom two years later. Here are two poems drawn from a transcript of an interview during the first job spill of the amalgamation.

Watching the Fall

I am with another colleague
We are watching someone walking out along a crane
Suspended high over the city streets

The person is smoking a cigarette
Seemingly unconcerned
About the precariousness of their situation

To my horror
The person keeps walking along to the end of the crane
Falling off it to certain death

I feel a terrible sense of responsibility for the person
I feel guilty that I had not prevented the fall
I think that the person was probably me

Bones Will Be Broken For Sure

I am in a lift with a group of others
We get in on the sixth floor

I try to get off on the seventh floor
But the doors won't open

I try getting out again on the eighth and ninth floors
But still the doors won't open

As the lift moves up to the tenth floor
I realise that something is very wrong

I feel that the lift is about to free-fall
From the tenth floor to the ground

I start talking with the others in the lift
Advising and making suggestions

About how they could best position themselves
To minimise the injuries they will sustain on impact

I feel they will not be killed
But I know that bones will be broken for sure

I wake myself up to avoid the fall

* * * * *

Sally's exploration of these dreams revealed a deep layer of questioning and awareness.

It is a vulnerable time for us all and our vulnerability is on show.
It is dangerous around here and there is no safety net.
How high do we aim?
How do we protect ourselves if we fail and fall?
How do we take care of ourselves and of each other?
Where do our responsibilities begin and end?
How much pain can we bear?
Will I be strong?
Will I even survive?
This feels like life and death.

In the second year of the amalgamation, Sally told me about two more dreams:

I Dreamed that I was in Prison

I've been having staggering dreams lately
I dreamt that I was in prison
I was there with a black man
A lovely person

And both of us were going to be hung
The gallows were outside

We both knew we were going to be hung
For whatever crimes we had committed.

And the black man knelt down in front of me
And I said: I forgive you
No matter what you've done
I forgive you.

I did the same.
I knelt down in front of him
And he said: I forgive you.
It was so easy. So lovely.

The jailers came
And took him away
The door must have been left open
And I walked out

The next thing I knew
I was driving down to the beach
My side of the road was absolutely clear.
The other side was full of cars heading into the city

And I thought
I'm free, I'm free
Driving down the bay
On a lovely sunny day

All of a sudden
The black man dropped into the seat next to me.
The police were on the other side of the road
I said: Duck down, so they won't see us.

We passed them and they didn't see us
And there we were
Both of us free
And I woke up.

* * * * *

In explaining the dream, Sally made the following comments:

Maybe I'm just forgiving myself for any guilt or fault that I may be carrying
Maybe having done that
I can allow myself to do something else
I'm not sure

The Dark Side

I had another dream

I had a sister
This sister was like my step-sister or half-sister
She used to be a real terror
She would pinch and bite

Steal my food and tear my clothes
Make me make mistakes
And get into trouble
But no-one ever noticed really

And I never told on her
Never said: It was her fault
I used to wear all the flak
I used to think: She'll get better

Apparently two old ladies had died down the road
And the police said:
It's your sister who's done this
You really should watch yourself

And I said:
No no no
She's naughty
But she's not bad

Some time later we were at some kind of ceremony
We were in were in a little bathroom
And she pushed me over and started to strangle me
She had her hands around me and she was strangling me.

And I said: This is silly. Don't do this.
Then she said: I'm going to kill you.
And she was really serious
And I shouted: Mummy, mummy. She's killing me. Come quickly.
And then I woke up

* * * * *

Sally commented: It's probably the dark side demanding attention.

Ruby's Story

Ruby and I became close when she was diagnosed with cancer three years ago. We have discussed issues of change and meaning through a number of significant transitions in both our lives. Ruby was very close to me throughout the period of my mother's dying and her death, eighteen months ago.

Ruby's experience of having cancer and her subsequent treatment and recovery raised many questions for her about meaning and the appropriate place of work in the context of her whole life. One of the most pressing questions which emerged during that time and which has stayed with is: "How does one live?" Her decision-making process is a very conscious one, made with a heightened sense of mortality, and a full awareness of the fragility and poignancy of the human condition.

The job spillage that followed the amalgamation at Avalon raised issues of identity, values and life direction for many of the managers within the research. For Ruby, the experience had another edge. There was a part of her that had disengaged from the work processes and the politics of power at the time of her illness. She confronted the deep terror and the big questions that a life-threatening illness generates. Since her illness, Ruby has been dealing with the issues of re-engaging with life in new ways.

Here is a poem drawn from transcripts of an interview with Ruby in the early days of the amalgamation.

I Cannot Become One of Them

Even with careful tuition
I cannot become one of them

When they do the numbers
They can't be sure what I will say or do or think

* * * * *

In the first round of interviews, Ruby had drawn an image of a pale blue bubble that was only just visible on the page.

The Formless Future

What does the circle represent to you?

It's my future

What's the emotion when you see the circle?

I'm pleased that it's there
It's nice to have a future
Even if it's pale and doesn't have much form

When you look at that future how do you feel?

Mostly things like disappointment
And insecurity
And goodness me

* * * * *

Another image which Ruby drew for that first interview depicted a group of people on a high cylindrical stage. There were small groups of people on the top of the stage working under strong stage lights. At the base of the large stage was a small figure moving around some short ladders, which were entirely inadequate for reaching the top of the stage. There was no possibility that the small figure at the base of the stage would ever reach the top of the stage where the action and decision making was taking place.

The image revealed a great deal about Ruby's experience of marginalisation, powerlessness and meaning. She told the story of the image and some childhood memories of hurt and frustration started to pour out. Some time later, Ruby wrote about the experience. This story has become the script of one of the CD-ROM tracks.

These are Ruby's words.

Making the Links

For my image of what best described what was happening in the organisation at the time, I had drawn a tall, round stage, where the favoured managers were seated under bright spotlights. The structure looked a bit like a silo and I had drawn myself as a pathetically small figure at the base. There were some good-sized ladders there that reached or nearly reached the stage but they weren't for me. My ladders were flimsy, tiny things and I knew I couldn't get anywhere near the top of them.

It was only as I was explaining this drawing to the researcher that I began to see a close parallel with an almost forgotten experience from my primary school days when I couldn't "see" the Queen.

I remembered one playtime. One of the big kids, a boy, was sitting on an old water tank. The top of the tank sloped into the middle where there was a small hole and he was looking into the hole and saying that he could see the Queen and describing what colour hat she was wearing and how nice she looked.

The girls I was with were immediately interested and so was I. They put their toes into the ripples on the side of the tank and he helped them but he didn't help me. I wasn't that good at climbing and I was probably heavier than they were. Anyway, my curiosity was even greater then because the other two girls were also looking at the Queen and "oohing" and "aahing" about her finery. But I was excluded.

I realise now that the game wouldn't have worked without someone who couldn't see into the hole. I also know that from the start I was pretty sure you couldn't see the Queen from there but I still wanted to find out.

Telling this story then led to another and another of what seemed like an inexhaustible supply of incidents, experiences and feelings from childhood and therafter, of me feeling inadequate and out of place. I remembered being the only one who couldn't climb the tree that all the other kids sat in to eat their lunch. And I remembered the terrible guilt I suffered when a boy injured himself falling off his bike after being teased by the whole school. And how desperate to belong I must have been, to have taken myself off home after school one day with the most popular family and my parents didn't even know.

These memories surprised me because until then I had remembered my little country school of nine kids as totally idyllic.

Seeing these new aspects of my childhood experiences led me to new questions and wonderings about my work situation. For a long time, I was wanting to be involved and recognised at a management level, feeling I could make a contribution, but not being able to quite do it. Where did this reservation come from? I recognise a resistance from the system and others at that level and a resistance from within me.

How much was my lack of influence as a manager a result of people not be able to "help me up" or accept me? And why didn't I try harder, ask for help, protest, "take them on" to earn their respect in the way they do it. Why do I see and "create" silos and situations where I am alienated?

At the time of the amalgamation I had worn out and run dry. And I was beginning to loosen the bonds of striving that had driven me for so long. In fact one morning I surprised myself by announcing to my husband, "You know if I'm not going too good at work, maybe it's not entirely my fault."

Through my drawings and the compassionate listening of the researcher, I have connected with feelings and truths that had previously eluded and confounded my logical mind. Best of all, making contact with the little girl that was me has brought comfort for my deepest ache - my longing to be good enough. I have reached back and rewritten her story without the shame, for in her heart I see only goodness. And she tells me, my heart is still good. This is her gift to me and I love her for it.

This is how Ruby told her story. There is a dynamic interplay between the professional experience of feeling devalued and the childhood memories. The telling of the current story unlocked the older memories. The pain runs deep and old. Old childhood wounds long forgotten can hurt again when the protective scab is knocked off. With intense experience and a protracted sense of vulnerability, the protective layers can wear thin and the boundaries between the personal and professional can blur. Ruby's experience mirrored Steven Levine's concept that grief tears us open and exposes us to ourselves. It is the process that drops awareness into the ancient reservoir of fear and holding (Levine, 1982).

Seven months later, during the job application process, I asked Ruby to draw some more images about her responses to the transitions she was experiencing. She told me of a recent dream in which she had been talking with the Queen and had the Queen's full attention. She could see very clearly what the Queen was wearing, a blue dress and matching blue hat. The metaphor from the image-making and story-telling session had endured subconsciously.

Two days after hearing she had not got a job for which she had applied, Ruby drew a picture of a burst bubble. This corresponded to the image she had drawn in the first round of data collection of a very pale bubble that she had described as a view of her future.

In interpreting the image of the burst bubble, she described the process of applying for the position as publicly being out there on the bubble. The higher it floated the more likely it was to burst as it rose. As she prepared for the job, though, she felt that progress was being made and a possible future was being created. The bubble was at its highest point when it burst. She did not get the job. These were the words she used to describe how she made meaning of the experience.

You don't make meaning in your head. You connect with what's happening with your true self. In your head, you say, oh well, this is what's happened to other people. You try and look at it rationally and logically as though it's an essay or a maths problem. But when you draw, you connect with some of your other senses and ways of making meaning.

As she described the burst bubble, she talked about feeling 'a bit depressed and disappointed'. Her questions were:

1. Why did you come second?
2. How come you can only work part time?
3. How come you can't do more when others can?
4. What have you been given to work with?
5. What are your unique sets of experiences and limitations?

Ruby struggled on in the organisation for a while longer and then it became clearer and clearer to her that it was time to leave. She applied for a redundancy package and after an agonising wait, was eventually granted one:

On Deciding to Take a Package

The trees and stones
Are shouting with joy
All around me.

They're leaping about.

I just can't believe
That I'm so lucky
But I am.

<p.* * * * *

Ruby experienced enormous relief in leaving the organisation. She separated out from the organisation and reclaimed her sense of self, or more accurately claimed a new sense of self. She started to feel freer and her perceptions of the boundaries between the organisation and herself began to shift.

Expectations

When I left the organisation
I didn't feel appreciated or valued

I did not leave with a sense of satisfaction
Of having done a good job

But I think I had unreal expectations of what organisations can give
As if they were somehow human

As if they were going to fulfil my needs
Or take good care of me

I remember the longing
But now, I don't think it's reasonable or realistic to expect so much

* * * * *

Ruby's questions about the meaning of work and how to live her life have continued. She is keenly aware of the poignancy of the human condition and the on-going struggle to find ourselves along the way.

We Try So Hard

<p.My colleagues are approaching retirement
They are retiring and it's big for me
When we started out
We were going to change the world

And then suddenly it's all over
And the sadness is:
What we did was pretty good
But it didn't solve the world's problems

I still feel a pang of sorrow
When people start out full of hope
And then things don't work out.
I know the good intentions that people start with

I could almost cry at the start of the school year
When I would see the children come in
And their shoes and their uniforms would be new
And they would open their books on the first day and they would look so good

But things always move on
They get messier and big holes appear
And it's not what you thought it might have been
It touches something in me

I think of how hard we all try
And how we still can't control the outcome
And I feel sad because as human beings
We are such fragile needy creatures

* * * * *

In my final interview with Ruby, I asked her how the last two years had been for her. She spoke about how her cancer and the amalgamation had come together and how she had thought she was going under. To her great relief and surprise, a new and gentler life emerged for her out of the fear and despair. There was a sense of being pardoned and set free. Her sense of freedom is mixed with the awareness of the pain that it took to get there.

What I Know Now

What has been the gift of the last two years?
The life I have now
The life that I'd never thought I'd have

Does the gift have a shadow?
I wish I'd known then what I know now
I would have lived and thought differently

What we know comes so slowly
And seems so rationed

But I also know there wouldn't be much point
If I knew everything there was to know at the end of today

I might as well as hang up my socks
Because that's the whole thing that gives life meaning

I could have told you this fifteen years ago
I could have told you in words

But I didn't live out of that experience
There's a difference between knowing and living out of the knowing

I know that now

* * * * *

Conclusion

Representing qualitative data in this way builds on Eisner and Barone's concept that multiple forms of representation allow meaning to take shape in different ways.. While meaning-making can be done privately, artistry is required for making the transition between the interior life and the public domain (Eisner, 1998; Barone & Eisner, 1997).

The use of creative forms generates the potential to dissolve the distinctions between inner and outer and between personal and professional perspectives. This leads to potential richness in the work, but it also raises the possibility of work being judged as "lacking in rigour" when compared to more established research paradigms.

Issues of power and control emerge when boundaries are stretched in this way. If we challenge the conventions of representation and engagement with text, then where does the authority to evaluate it reside? Who guards the gate of the academy? Is it possible to reframe the paradigm of exclusivity and adversariality so that it is possible to question dominant forms of long-revered paradigms?

Creative representation of research data seeks to explore a deeper understanding of the complexity of human experience through the use of a new vocabulary. It also challenges many of the conventions of the academy.

It represents a transition in itself.

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