FOREWORD

HOW I AM GOING TO RE-READ PEGGY'S BOOK

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As hard as I tried the first time to read this manuscript as an overseer, I found myself swept along with it. It was as if I were being carried along by a gentle current or outgoing tide. Where this was taking me, I did not entirely know, but I had no fear. Somehow or other I knew that I had boon travelling companions, even if we were very different ages or at different stages of our professional lives. Against my better judgment, I found myself falling in love with the people in this book. I was reminded of the mediaeval "scholares vagantes" (wandering scholars), with Peggy like a modern day tour guide whose itinerary was to have us travel from place to place, teacher to teacher, seeking wisdoms.

This had to do, in retrospect, with something so companionable about what was unfolding in my reading of the text. How often did I regret that many of the conversations had ended? How often did I find myself with an almost irresistible desire to join them by butting in? And how often did I anticipate what my companions would have come up with by way of their responses? In fact, I felt as if I had returned to the world of that young student appealing to Rainier Maria Rilke for instructions on how to become a poet like himself (Rilke, 1993):

> *You are so young, so much before all beginning, and I would like to beg you, dear sir, as well as I can, to have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in very foreign language. Do not search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything, live the questions now.*
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> *Rainer Maria Rilke, Letters to a Young Poet,
> From letter four, July 16, 1903*

I think I was falling in love again with the questions that I have lived and loved for so long. I suspect what Rilke may have been referring to here was that love associated with the amateur. I am thinking here of the original meaning of amateur – a lover of a subject who takes pleasure in what he or she is learning and not the more contemporary meaning of "lack of professional skill or expertise." Here many of the speakers seemed on the verge of invention or of thinking well beyond anything they might have considered before. They seemed gifted amateurs to me, and their commentaries, I observed, continually referred back to that which mattered to them in living their professional lives.

I have been pursuing Peggy's experimenting with teaching narrative therapy by the means she details in this text for several years now, as have several of my colleagues (Dorothea Lewis, Aileen Cheshire and Kay Ingamells) at the School of

Community Development, UNITEC Institute of Technology here in Auckland, New Zealand). Like them, I have been intrigued by the obvious results of her pedagogy, blending classroom teaching with Internet "conversations." I have been continually asking myself, "How is it possible for such a community of students to engage in such profound considerations of the ethics, politics and practice of narrative therapy in a matter of weeks or months? Why were they seemingly able to integrate what they were learning into the missions for their professional lives and the problematics of their internships and former or future workplaces? What has the blending of classroom and Internet conversations got to do with this?"

I was reminded of many academic conversations over my years that by comparison had been so formulaic, so tendentious and even tedious that I would have been reluctant to join even if I were invited to do so. This led to me taking the *Selected Dialogues of Plato* (Plato, 2001) down from my bookshelf. I wondered if much of the genre of western philosophical inquiry and subsequent pedagogy could perhaps be traced back to those "dialogues" Plato told of between Socrates and his fellow conversationalists in which:

> *"..both parties must be willing to accept at any given moment that they are wrong, to find that their positions have reversed, or simply that they are left with no tenable position at all. What counts is the underlying loyalty and devotion to the quest for truth: this quest constitutes the closest approximation to truth or knowledge we can hope for."*
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> "Introduction," *Selected Dialogues of Plato* (Pelliccia, 2001), p. xvii

I know on my second reading of Peggy's book, I will want to scrutinize the very means by which she co-evolved something so different than that. How had she shepherded such amiable conversations? I, nor doubtless any of the students involved, would suggest that such animated conversations came to pass merely by chance. Like any diligent shepherd, Peggy seemed to ensure that the conversations didn't stray so far as to risk getting lost as well as keeping the "flock" of conversations on the move, always seeking fresh pasture to avoid overgrazing. You may notice, reader, once you get carried away – and I certainly recommend you surrender to this your first reading through of this text – an insistent momentum, increasing week by week, meeting after meeting, and even one post after another. Once again, you may feel a strong sense of heading somewhere even if no final destination is known. Again, I doubt if this was accidental. Surely Peggy had something to do with this! But how was this sustained throughout each of her courses?

When I tried to find analogous conversations to those that were enthralling me on Peggy's various masters/bachelors courses, I was reminded of some, by now, almost lost arts: the scholar's diary and those correspondences undertaken by letter between life-long colleagues. Both of these genres had an intimacy, immediacy and humility about them, one written to oneself and the other to a like-minded person recording the journeys of their thinking, including of course that which troubled them. It seemed to me these genres privileged the inquiry itself over the conclusion that it finally reached in that they allowed the authors to show how they were

making up their minds – a kind of thinking out loud – about the matters that concerned them. In each instance, they left traces of the history of their thought in these texts and made little attempt at final conclusions or grand schemes. Many of those who went on to publish texts out of such conversations would expunge this record, almost as if to admit to the vicissitudes of their thinking was a sign of intellectual weakness. Their final texts were written almost as if its conclusion came first.

If I had the chance, I would ask Peggy, students and visitors, "In your studies so far, had you aspired to the Platonic quest for the truth? If so, at what point in this course did you abandon seeking such a truth for 'truths'? When did you start referencing your inquiries to what mattered to you in the living of your professional life? Can you name an actual point – 'X' – when you replaced the Platonic quest for what might prove to do justice to your moral and ethical commitments? Was there some sort of template underwriting how you went about this course?" If so, might my next reading scrutinize how the genre of "outsider witnessing" practices (White, 1995) flows into almost everything that followed, yielding some form of resolution? It seemed to me that so many of the conversationalists would reference their moral commitments as a significant vantage point for their considerations.

I recall my horror at reading one of the best studies undertaken so far on becoming a professional practitioner in one of the healing arts – *Of Two Minds: An Anthropologist Looks At American Psychiatry* by Tanya Luhrmann, Professor of Social Thought at the University of Chicago (Luhrmann, 2000). Reading this book helps us consider how various pedagogies have us come to "see" those whom we intend to serve. It is important to note that Luhrmann is not in any way a critic of psychiatry but an avowed sympathizer. During her ethnographic studies, she went through seven years herself of pseudo-training as a psychiatrist. She tells how she "knew I was coming to see people in a different way (p. 4)." She relates the circumstances that contrived to result in such a specific kind of "seeing" of the other. To quote: "Young psychiatrists leave an internship with a clear sense of the difference between patient and doctor – that patients are the source of physical exhaustion, danger and humiliation and that doctors are superior and authoritative by virtue of their role (p. 93)."

I would guess that the experiences of Peggy's students couldn't have been more dissimilar than those reported by Luhrmann. For that reason, I resolve in my next reading to query how these students came not only to see themselves as professional practitioners but even more significantly, how did they come to "see" those who will seek their service? Did the fact that so-called "patients/clients" and their voices made very strong and at times unforgettable appearances, either in person or in their texts (eg., through videotapes, writings, and responses in the outsider witnessing protocol) make them super-real? Unlike the disembodied and frequently de-grading accounts common to many professional descriptions, these "patients" stand on their dignity, "knowledged"[1] and justifiably acknowledged by those of us who are privy to their accounts of themselves.

Luhrmann's ethnography gave me pause to reflect: Under what conditions in which we "train" and work would our respect for those who petition for help be

inevitable? How could we develop intentional practices that might create and sustain mutual regard and the sense of community and solidarity that flows on from that?

Michael White, having accepted such an inspiration, makes a very good point:

And what of solidarity? I am thinking of a solidarity that is constructed by therapists who refuse to draw a sharp distinction between their lives and the lives of others, who refuse to marginalize those persons who seek help; by therapists who constantly confront the fact that if faced with the troubles of others, they just might not be doing nearly as well. (White, 1993, p. 132).

My next set of enquiries has to do with what the Internet, and what it allows for, and has got to do with this. After all, I admit to a prejudice I had held against web-based learning of something as intimate and skill-based as any therapy practice. Perhaps this was based on what I knew of the manualization of courses so typical of the first generation of attempts at Internet pedagogies, some of which were abandoned as both unsuccessful and unsatisfactory.

However, is the Internet as a genre for pedagogies evolving through trial and error? After all, I have known for a long time that my most rewarding university conversations were after a class with a colleague over coffee or a beer when we both were at our ease, could speak without much concern for getting it right or wrong and could admit to our confusions. But such conversations are often ephemeral, lost to the ravages of time, and even if they remain, except for the very exceptional, they are not stored verbatim. What if a verbatim text could be electronically stored and retrieved at will? According to Alex Ross, writing in the *New Yorker* (Ross, 2007), "this is a voice that effectively could never have been heard before the advent of the Internet...it is sophisticated on the one hand, informal on the other, and immediate in impact." Could such a medium of Internet-based conversations yield a distinctive message?

I believe this could be so in some circumstances by allowing for the seemingly contradictory – scholarly rigor commingling with the unaffected enthusiasm and vivacity so characteristic of a "good conversation." There would seem to be a kind of electronic garrulity informed by what Schon (Schon, 1983) referred to as "reflection-on-action." Schon revealed that time itself is a prerequisite for a newcomer to reflect and that such time is available and can be taken in the conversations recorded here. Internet conversations do not discriminate against those who like to or require themselves to take time to think about what they are about to say and be able to reflect on it by reviewing the text of their emails – a second "thinking over their thinking," or a revised draft of it.

I have often wondered if Jerome Bruner's thoughts have any bearing here. I think they do. He refers to the French cultural psychologist Ignace Meyerson's contention that "the main function of all cultural activity is to produce 'works/oeuvres' as he called them works that, as it were, achieve an existence of their own" (Bruner, 2005, p. 22). Bruner refers to "externalizing," the benefits of which he considers to have been overlooked. These collective oeuvres "produce and sustain group solidarity. They help 'make' a community, and communities of

mutual learners are no exception (p. 22-23)." Such oeuvres yield a "metacognition" "and usually lead to lively discussion. Works and works-in-progress create 'shared' and 'negotiable ways of thinking in a group.'" He borrows the term "mentalite" from the Annales school of history/sociology to indicate such styles of thinking, or each community having "a mind of its own."

I recall many of Peggy's students commenting that such conversations were unique so far in the course of their undergraduate and postgraduate studies. In my re-reading of Peggy's book, whenever it is possible, I am going to try to observe how such a "mentalite" forms over time. I suspect I might be somewhat limited in doing so without the electronic records of conversations in their entirety or immersing myself in a similar electronically-documented conversation. But I will see what I can do in what here has necessarily been considerably abbreviated. Are the outsider witnessing practices, so integral to this training programme, implicated in the formation of any such "mentalite"?

Although I have left this to my last consideration, I consider it to be very important; how much bearing must be given to Peggy's obvious exuberant love of the practice she teaches and learns, and her unashamed exulting in it? I suspect that has a great deal to do with students and readers becoming boon travelling companions, traveling from place to place, teacher to teacher, seeking wisdoms.

NOTES

[1] Michael White invented the neologism "knowledged" to remind us there is a multiplicity of "knowledges" including "insider knowledges," and that so-called "expert" or "outsider knowledges" do not hold a monopoly.

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