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How Writing Touches

An Intimate Scholarly Collaboration

Jonathan Wyatt, Ken Gale, Larry Russell,
Ronald J. Pelias, and Tami Spry

Abstract Five scholars, with varying histories together, met as writers at a workshop at the 2007 International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry and made a commitment to write over the following year to, for and with each other in an experiment in the craft of autoethnography, an experiment that led us to explore questions of intimacy and connection manifested through collaborative writing. Each year since then we have returned to Congress to read a small anthology of the year's writing—and to decide whether or not to continue.

This paper is drawn from our third year of writing together across the changing distances, as our bodies moved and lay still in both unfamiliar and familiar spaces. Within castles and beside oceans, on pastures and in homes, at universities and hospitals, we wrote together, between and amongst our group of five, working, as always, it seems, at who and what we are becoming.

The joy of our continuing writing presence in each others' lives, our pleasure and surprise at such friendship, earned through hard writing labor, is manifest alongside an awareness that there is always more to do. We turn and return to love and intimacy as scholarly, messy, complex methodology as we send writing to each other that we, in turn, pick up on—and sometimes do not—in our responses; writing that often affirms and sometimes disturbs.

The five of us met at a workshop at the 2007 International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry (QI). We made a commitment to write over the following year in an experiment in the craft of autoethnography. We have continued to write since, returning each year to QI to read a small anthology of what we have written in the intervening time—and to decide whether or not to continue.

The text that follows is drawn from exchanged, emailed writing of our third year (2009-10) of this collaboration. We offer stories of how writing touches and how it writes bodies into being and in between, returning to love and intimacy as scholarly, messy, complex methodology. It is writing that often affirms and sometimes disturbs.

This is writing as inquiry (Richardson and St Pierre, 2005) into group process, writing as inquiry into intimacy, writing as inquiry into friendship and love. Indeed to

use Tillman-Healy's expression, ours is "friendship as methodology" (Tillman-Healey, 2003): "Inquiry that is open, multivoiced, and emotionally rich, friendship as method involves the practices, the pace, the contexts, and the ethics of friendship." (p.734) One could substitute the word 'love' for 'friendship,' and it would ring true.

In the vein of Ron's *Methodology of the Heart* or Ruth Behar's *Anthropology that Breaks Your Heart*, this book presents hearts open, hearts broken, hearts "guided," as Larry writes, "by an ethic of love." Our engagement may be termed an 'intimate collaborative scholarly praxis.' Within such a praxis, intimacy, collaboration, and scholarship performatively engage one another, pushing through (and sometimes getting caught up in) morays of 'traditional' scholarship. An intimate collaboration in scholarship, whatever the personal relationships, can lay one bare in the academy, where vulnerability may be viewed as a lack of intellectual acumen or professional naiveté.

The following is a selection of our writing during the year. At times, the reader will not have seen the omitted writing that one of us refers to. As context, the paper begins with Tami writing while we were still at the 2009 Congress. At the conference, Jonathan and Ken presented work that they had done as part of a different collaborative writing group. We refer to this.

Unfaithfulness? (May-June 2009)

Tami:

Something in our conversation last night spurred this poem.

Too much.

Too much.

The bitter and the sweet
tracking me
filling me
And making me feel
utterly empty
again.

Bitter and sweet
the sweet and the bitter.

And so I'll endure it.
I'll swallow the bitter pill

eat the sour apple
pour salt in the wound

if it means just a sight
a sound
a sigh of the sweet.

I'll savour.
I'll surrender.

And I'll empty again
to fill
once more
with
too much.

Tami (cont'd):

I'm on the train after the Congress. It does matter. Too much. We matter to me too much and I don't care. Excess be damned or embraced.

What is too much? Maybe such care is just enough, just enough of what everyone needs.

Looking out the window there are bushes of honeysuckle crowding the edges of the tracks. Terrible excess.

Ron:

I have carried all of you home with me and in the carrying I have felt both joy and sadness: Joy in getting to see each of you again and joy in what we have accomplished. Our first night together, reading our script, allowed me to live more fully with each of you, to hear more fully each of your voices, to realize more fully how in our last year we each had to negotiate our personal burdens as we continued to reach out to each other. Our reading was bracketed with deep hugs and a dinner of loving laughter. We were so wonderfully present, bodily, blood red.

Yet, I also carried home a deep sadness. I did not make as much of our limited time together as I might. I'm afraid my family was too much with me. I made the decision to be present but Mimi, who was ill, was in my head and then I found that my Dad needed time as well. I surprised myself with my own tears as I read of Dad's passing. I was physically present but I was not there. And then, rushing off, feeling an opportunity

with all of you was lost, I felt I betrayed our method of care, that, despite the number of times I've said it matters where one puts one's body, I could not demonstrate to each of you that I wanted my body to be with yours. I wanted two bodies.

This sense of betrayal, I think, speaks to our method. It first emerged publicly within our group at our Wednesday night dinner when Tami, Larry and I were teasing Jonathan and Ken for taking on another writing group¹. We joked, "What group do you like best?" knowing full well that our writing does not foreclose other relationships and yet, still feeling this other group as a pull against ours. When I say I feel I betrayed our group by leaving when I did as well as when I own that Jonathan and Ken writing with another group did make me feel, despite recognizing the absurdity of the feeling, a bit less special, I find myself asking what has writing from a method of caring earned? What expectancies do we have of each other? Has our writing across continents, our writing with such intimacy and love, demanded of us a way of being? Having written ourselves into this loving space, what does one do that says my words weren't a lie? How do we measure, across such distances, the truth of what we have forged? What do we take for evidence? How do we judge?

So, yes Tami, let us proceed, caution to the wind, accepting and celebrating that perhaps our group matters too much. But what are we saying when we say that and how has our method brought us to this place, this place of joy and sadness?

Tami:

Ron, your questions go right to the core, bloody and red, of who we are, who we might be, who we are afraid to be, who we want to be, together. I would like to tuck one more question into the folds of what you ask: what is at stake in this kind of writing, in the kind of writing space that we have created?

So, what has this method earned us and what are our expectancies? My first response is that we have done the work, done the linguistic labor, done the labor to love for this labor of love. We have done the heavy lifting of our bodies onto the page. In short, writing is hard, writing with care and craft is hard; and what ever would be the judgement of the quality of this writing, the fact is, we have done it, and presumably, are committed to continuing to do so.

And it has been demanding, of time, of love, but also deeply reciprocal.

After our panel at QI, I was full of our words and mentioned to Jonathan that our work has made me aware of what is at stake in writing.

There are conditions to this writing as there are conditions to all relationships. There is risk. It is for me, the bitter pill, the sour apple, the salt. It is one of the condi-

tions of writing and writing into and with care and it is, in addressing one of Ron's questions, evidence of care.

And what do we mean by intimacy? Maybe intimacy is created by writing into risk, risking that sometimes we won't be seen by one another, or seen in the way we desire, or that we will not meet one another's eyes in those moments of vulnerability. These things have happened to each of us in the course of our writing, creating interpersonal risk and risk of leaving the group; but somehow we continue.

Because it is hard to be faithful. It is one of the hardest things I do.

Jonathan:

I feel different to how I was last year. I am preoccupied by the questions that we have surfaced during and since we talked, laughed, ate, drank, held, read, and performed together. These questions feel troubling, and I am finding it hard to hold onto the joy and pleasure we shared.

Ron asks, and Tami echoes, 'What does our writing demand as a way of being?' Tami asks, 'What do we mean by intimacy?'

So, for me, now, here:

Our writing demands that I write with shaking hand. It is shaking not only because my home-bound bus shudders as it travels.

Our intimacy means that I bring to you my torn flesh, my passionate heart, my tears, my pleasure. Sometimes I do not bring these to you to their fullest: I hold back. But I know that I can bring them.

Our intimacy means that this—our group—matters too much and, to echo Tami, excess be damned.

Our intimacy means that I love to stand alongside you and share our work with others. Our intimacy means that I am reticent with whom I share our writing.

Our writing demands that I bring my brokenness to our table, strive for truthfulness, show my care through my words; and, if I do not succeed, that I keep writing and striving, writing and striving.

By intimacy, I mean that I am able, if not always comfortably, to use the word 'love' about what we have, share, do and create through/in/with our writing. (Saying the word 'love' never feels straightforward for me. I don't think that I have told you this before.)

I mean by intimacy that I feel sadness when that intimacy, somehow, feels compromised or tarnished or in question, which is how I feel ours might be just at this moment.

Our writing demands that I do not turn away from us when we struggle.

Our writing demands that, as a way of being, I articulate all such demands, and all such claims to intimacy, with awareness—as Tami writes—of what is at stake.

Ken:

My silence is not fuelled by hesitation: worries or anxieties do not trouble my heart.

My ethereal body dances with you all. In the wild spin of my desire to live with and within the body of our group I sense my body swinging with crazy, sweeping movement, my mind racing with always new ideas, my senses tingling with the nettled edge of our touch, my values swept into a million questions and unfinished suggestions ...

I am with you. I am with you all. I have been with you all since our last moments of shared actuality. You have never been away. I live in trust with you all. I have encountered my vulnerability in our words together and each time they appear you give me strength, strength to say, strength to feel, strength to try again, and again...

My silence is fuelled by the heaving weight of my immediate life, the life that waited/weighted for me when Jonathan and I walked off the plane.

I have no hesitation in living with love in my life, with you all, in our group. Our words have woven a wonderful intimate skein of love that has wrapped us and warmed us, has given us little handholds and has felted us together in mysterious, unexplained ways. I can live outside of exposition, explanation and meaning because these 'ways' are findings; foldings and unfoldings that just allow me to be with you in ways that bring me joy.

Tonight, as the moon is waxing high up in the corner of my dark window, as tiredness chases me down, I wanted to try to touch you all and to let you sense that, although my words have not been with you, your presence has been with me and in me, keeping me alive...

Asserting a 'We' (September 2009)

Tami is now in northern England for a semester with a group students and colleagues from St Cloud.

Tami:

A full moon over the ramparts and my entry into dream time here is complete. I'm somewhere else now. Somewhere in and out of time. I look from the computer screen

back to the moon and it has moved another inch out from behind the ramparts of the myth, of the material rock and stone of Alnwick Castle. How can I be living here? I am betwixt and between people, selves, others. I am myself and not myself at once. I am desperately lonely, permeable, exposed; and then I am strong and sure, lionhearted as I have (n)ever been, and then back again small and alert, a mouse slipping in and out of the crags and cracks of the towering musculature.

It is now fully above the ramparts, this moon, and I am attached to it. I am the rain against the ramparts, I am the moon rising. I journey and journey here, wondering where I am and who and what. I am here then (not) there, not me, but not not me as Schekner would say.

We take the students to a 3,000 year old stone circle set on a hill surrounded by highlands in the west of England. Searching for it, trudging up the hill in the pouring rain, we step into its sight, onto its firth, the sun cuts through the thick clouds and light streams through one of the valleys. And we are struck. And I am stuck here in this place feeling a million “collective assemblage” as Ken has taught me, his words grounding me and letting me loose at once. I hear screams and wails and laughter and celebration of thousands of lives in thousands of years of circles of stone.

It has climbed now, this moon, over the last spire of the castle keep and still I am hooked, hooked by the things that I can't say, that I won't say save, through...what. But as I look at this moon, as I am hooked to this moon, I know I will say them. And then you are with me, always with me, this group of five, these five, this one of mine, of my heart, and five. Rising with me, putting words in my mouth, helping me chew them or spit them out, helping me make us.

Larry:

Moons and castles and the sea. It's beginning to feel like a Victorian painting. I'm still alive, just restructuring my life after having returned to my experience of coming out. The past two pilgrimages have really knocked me for a loop². They were quite wonderful, but they required a tremendous amount of inner work. Through it all I had this sense of the four of you as a loving family who would be there when I got back from a long journey. More, I hope, of that later.

Ron:

We continue to lean in, to carry each other with us, to carve intimacy with words. We have come to cherish our space, our space we have made. And we continue to name

it such a space, to continually call it out so that it will not go away. We allow ourselves the luxury living in that space, in intimacy, in desire. As Tami says, “I find my self, I find who I am, in intimacy. I find my self in desire” and as Ken’s Deleuzian reading of Tami’s remarks so eloquently explicates, each us might best be seen as a “being of sensation,” living in what Tami suggests is our “liminal intensity.” Such claims we do not take lightly. We’ve come to see our group, as Larry suggests, as “a loving family” who waits for our return.

I remain amazed that we have forged such a space, that it speaks to our desire, that it names us. Yet, I wonder about this wonderful space we have made. I do not wish to return to the theme we have addressed before—should we worry that we have invested too much in our group?—instead, I am drawn to the question of why we keep asserting what the group is to us. I suggested above that perhaps it is because we do not want it to slip away so we continually point to its weight, to its hold. How does this continual assertion pull on us, make us, obligate us? Does it by its repetition, ironically, make us trust it less? What might be at play that we need such assurances? Is there a time when we might just relax into the benefits of our labor, when we might just be friends instead of constantly making friends, making space? Isn’t our space made?

Ken:

Ron, I love the questions that you pose at the end of your attachment. It is questions like these that entice me to write! I love the play in Deleuze, when he talks of the *fold* (e.g. Deleuze, 1993), of its folding in, its unfoldings in terms of *voluptuousness* and *agonistics*, of how we can both luxuriate and struggle in and with the materiality of the shared existence of our group life. So yes Ron I think sometimes it is good for us to be able to take time to ‘just relax into the benefits of our labor, when we might just be friends instead of constantly making friends.’ The rich voluptuousness of this experience constantly intoxicates me; I read yours, or Jonathan’s, or Larry’s or Tami’s writing and I feel that rush and I can’t help myself as I indulge in the warm, sensual flows and tides that your writings wash over me.

However, it is not always a relaxing, mellow high. Sometimes my teeth are on edge, my brow furrows and my mind races like an over wound clock; it is at these times that I love the challenge of your words, of the ideas that take me to somewhere new, where the creation of concepts is inevitably laced with our world of affect, feeling, value and emotion. So it is at these times, Ron, when I want to *make* our space, I want to ruffle our feathers, to iron out a few striations to make a new smooth space for us to carry on our rough and tumbles!

Ron, when you ask ‘Isn’t our space made?’ I am excited by your rhetoric, your tease, your provocation. I can think of this space in terms of Bourdieu and his use of *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1999), the space which we are associated with, the space in which we are recognised. So it feels that our ‘*being* of sensation’ that Ron articulates here is also a *habitué* or an *inhabitant* of our constantly shifting, transmutating (writing) space. It feels that these shifts and transmutations are inextricably woven with the ‘liminal intensity’ that Tami has so wonderfully represented for us in our writing. So that whilst in one sense our space *is* made it always has the potential to change and this is, of course, its essence. It is here that again we can draw on the fluidity of space that Deleuze encourages us to work with. On the one hand, our space is *extensive* (Deleuze, 1991, p.16), we can see it, we can conceptualise it, we can represent it to others. On the other hand, our space is *intensive*, it is intangible, it continually shifts and becomes through the presence of our vulnerable selves, sharing our expressions of love, living with our continuing desire as ‘beings of sensation’ to both inhabit and create a shared world of sensuality, intuition and affect.

So, I wonder Ron, do you feel we have a need to ‘keep asserting what the group is to us’ because in these respects it is always changing?

Ron:

I want to respond to Ken’s beautiful response to the little probe I sent. My probe came from a simple observation: My, we sure spend lots of our writing time telling each other that our shared space is meaningful to us. Perhaps it was the writer in me that saw this discourse as a bit repetitive, rhetorically earned by previous assertions. But Ken takes my simple questions and turns them into something significantly more substantive. That is, of course, what good scholars do and once again, Ken proves he is not only a dear friend but also an impressive thinker. So, the simple-minded Ron would just like to say back to Ken—yes, yes, yes—I think your analysis is right on the mark.

Tami:

Yes. I see what Ron means. There is a current of often “refreshing the page” technologically, as if we just hit “refresh” to make sure we have one another, that we are still there, that we have not left the page from the last click of the mouse.

For me, Ron’s questions point continually toward performativity, that this group is a motile illustration of performativity, it is what it does, we are what we do; it is that continual process of becoming that Ken so eloquently speaks of. Surely, there is

repetition involved in performativity, but we chose to decide whether we enact performatively through *mimesis* or *poesis*. I do not see us mimetically repeating our commitment to one another, or just reiterating how much we mean to one another, if not in more eloquent ways; rather I see our performative writing acting through poesies where we continually engage one another in making a “better argument” about who and what we are and what writing is and what effect the making of bodies present and absent has on writing what we are.

Again, I find performative writing as interpretive evidence of bodies in a space, place, and time. For me, Ron, part of the evidence of this poesis is the ways in which I know you differently since we have been in this group. It’s not that I know “more” about you, it is that I am engaged in a negotiation of who you/we/I am/are on the page. A performative-I disposition enacted here where our narrative subjectivity is incoherent/heteroglossic/multiple and as such, we create knowledge through negotiating language liminally, betwixt and between one another. You and I, as well as other twos and threes and ones and fours of our group, bring the bruises and embrasures of our own history into this group where it becomes, for me, transformed, reset, reconfigured. You and I are different to one another having made meaning of who “we” are collaboratively with all others in the group; and, surely, I would say the same for my relationship with each of us.

Though I guess I do on some level experience our group as needing assurances of our commitment, this work seems necessary, perhaps, to do the work of intimacy. I know things differently about the world, about grief, truly about Keller³, that I would not have known without our continual “becoming.”

However, any aesthetic form or norms or conventions surely limit what we can know and how we can know it. From this perspective, I too wonder what else we might do or be within different relational norms. But always, my dear friend, your questions activate, motivate, invigorate.

Pilgrimage (November 2009)

Larry:

Blue is asleep on the sofa. His paws twitch, and he moans in his dreams. Sophie, nestled at my feet, raises her head and twitches her ears when a child runs past our iron gate, yelling. The light comes through the blood orange, silk curtains from a fabric store in Jackson Heights where Indian women buy material for their saris. And I am sitting in a leather and oak chair where I balance my computer on the arm. I’ve been here a lot

lately, restricted to a corner of the living room and with my foot on a stool. I have been working on a memoir of pilgrimage, and the writing task has unexpectedly propelled me back into my experience of coming out thirty years ago. I want to join Blue in a moan, but instead, I sigh as I ride the crest of pain. I am surprised by how much sorrow I had forgotten. That experience was painful, as most liminal experiences are. It violated the boundaries of the pale. Once I came out, there was little more I could lose, so I embraced outrageous behavior. If my Victorian society didn't mind what I did as long as I didn't do it in the streets, I would take to the streets and scare the horses.

My behavior spewed frustration, but the release was not healing. So, I took to the road. My life was punctuated by failures. Every time I did not create a home for myself, I closed the door on the room where I had been living and moved on. When I finally began to read some texts on postmodernism, I confiscated their descriptions of lives made up of shards and fragments. They were apt for the life I was leading and not leading. My self-image was a collage—no master narrative or theme. I gave up my *telos* when I gave up my vocation as a minister. In the wreckage there was no vestige of ambition or even intention. I could not make a contribution to communal life from that pastiche of scraps.

Twenty years later I took to the road in New Mexico and entered a sublime flow as I walked pilgrimage. I have no other way to describe it. There was continuity in the movement of my life, a kind of grace without being graceful. I felt impelled to walk in that way, but not from an outside force. At times it seemed a dream, and yet the movement was familiar. It issued from a stream of memory my body could recall. I had travelled this way before. The two events were worlds apart, and I was accustomed to a kind of personal amnesia as I slipped from one world into the other as I had learned to shift from a gay to a straight world.

My earlier mystic journey began in a very different way. When I completed my first year in graduate work, my partner wanted us to take a trip together in celebration. Most of our vacations had emphasized aesthetics and cerebral pleasures with an occasional hike or day at a beach. After I had spent nine months in a static pose hunched over my computer and textbooks, he wanted us to shoot the white water rapids in the canyons of the Green and Colorado rivers in Utah. We joined a group of gay jocks who took our adventure in stride. Their sleek tents opened as easily as umbrellas. They scampered up and down cliffs and shimmied through rocky chutes as though they were scaling the rock-climbing wall at their health clubs. I trudged and stumbled along, jumping only when I heard a rattlesnake. The average water flow in the river was 6,121 cubic feet per second, give or take a few hundred boulders and a lot of turbulence along the way. We learned to throw our bodies against the gunwales of

our inflated rafts as a Greek god (or so he looked to us) steered us through the torrents. When, on the last day we shot the cataracts, I experienced the first adrenaline rush of my life. I had never felt so frightened nor so alive. When it was over, we coasted along a quiet, glassy river through canyons a few hundred feet high. We glided in a peace passing all understanding, lying on the rafts, looking up at walls the colors of squash and pumpkins. In the peace and the glassy reflection of the river and the Mozart on the headphones of the oarsman I was immersed in a life more beautiful than anything I had ever experienced. We lay on the rafts like boys in those 19th paintings of river life. The narrow walls of the canyon opened up to the world, and our movement along the river was pure love. There was room for everything on that raft, even the contradictions of life.

That fall, I performed an autobiographical piece called "Peace Like a River." I wrote it as I was trying to understand what was happening to me. I was in my mid-fifties, and the pieces of my life were coming together in a design beyond anything I had imagined. I had spent years trying to determine a purpose for my life, but my effort yielded no story, no quest. I could taste the dust, and finally, I had given up the search and accepted a humbling lesson. The trip in Utah was also dusty; I was not very good at hiking or balancing the raft. My lack of skill prepared me for a lesson. I didn't have to be at the helm. My role was to respond to the wonder of it.

When I arrived in New Mexico, I could hear echoes from other scenes in my life. I thought my opportunities had slipped through my fingers, but here I was I gliding down a winding road in New Mexico to the shrine of healing dirt. I could not "place" the experience because I had no words for it yet. The movement was familiar, and I was returning to a place within me. So I returned to New Mexico repeatedly, and each time I was ravished by that ecstasy. I was beckoned, not by the canyon or the autumnal colors or the dust, but by a readiness in my body and spirit. I had traded the raft for a car and the car for the shoes of a pilgrim. I went from a shared rapture to an overwhelming compassion. Each discovery opened an old wound, but even the pain was healing.

Repeatedly, I was on my knees with the tears streaming down my face in Mass as I responded, "Only say the word, and I shall be healed." When I joined my fellow pilgrims each year, I was choosing to be with Hispanic, Roman Catholic, mostly heterosexual males doing the work of healing. On some days, we did not know if we could make it, but we found our strength through walking together. The men arrived in my life as New Mexico and pilgrimage had arrived—without my bidding. It was peace like a river. That river prepared me for the road in New Mexico, and the road led me from estrangement to the shared toil of rafting and peregrinating.

Nestled in this story, like Sophie nestled at my feet, is the story of finding Tami,

Jonathan, Ron, and Ken. We didn't know we were looking. Once we agreed that we would write to each other and to all, we began to glide. The revelations tumbled out of us, and we were captivated by fierce discussions of matters that mattered a great deal.

I needed the tactile, kinetic metaphors of a religion like Catholicism to talk about what was happening to me on the rivers and roads of the Southwest. With all the writing about Deleuze, I didn't see room for William James' concern for the varieties of religious experience, especially in a world damaged by the fearful rigidity of conservative Christianity. When I wrote in the metaphors of Christianity, I interpreted your brief comments and silence as an embarrassment over my content. Yet when we gathered again at the conference, you greeted me with open arms. We all were basking in the deep sharing of each other's lives. You were like those gay boys draped on the raft, looking at the cerulean sky and the autumn tinged walls of the canyon. Together. We didn't need to share the same vision. We just needed to share the visionary experience. So I'm claiming you as fellow pilgrims, and I'm thanking you for waiting for my return.

Tami:

Larry, this piece is...beautiful. Its voice has a tone and timbre that I haven't heard to this extent in your writing, a different kind of agency. It sings, it moves lyrically and stridently at once...it swings, if you don't mind that label. I'm floating in your raft looking up at the sky.

Ron:

I am drawn to the page with feelings of both obligation and desire. It has been too long since I wrote anything of substance to the group.

I write now to hold on to each of you. I have allowed individual entries to sit without response, writings that deserved full attention and engagement. I have let the four walk ahead while I, the fifth, lingered. I think of Ken's moving piece on love and becoming. How his words honor us: "Living in our group for me is about the fulfillment of desire, not in terms of any kind of need but rather in terms of what I can do, what I can achieve, and who I can be." Yes, Ken, for me too. We are a doing, a becoming, an inchoate breath.

I think of Tami's eloquent response to Ken, her sense of being "cracked open" by his words. And when she writes, "It's my heart. It's the heart. It's always the heart," I am cracked open, wanting only to sit with her in loving silence.

I think of Jonathan's "Torn Right Calf Again" piece that so beautifully carries him

back to us with such naked vulnerability. How he returns—so open, so present, so much a part of us all.

But most of all, I think of Larry's "My Return" entry. I had been worried about Larry's health, about the current demands on his time, and, quite honestly, about his desire to continue writing with us. It never occurred to me that I should be worried about whether I had been sufficiently welcoming, sufficiently present to Larry. And now I've let too much time pass without comment. I feel embarrassed, ashamed I have not lived in keeping with our ethic of care. So yes, Larry, there is room here, in this spiritual religious experience we share as we write together. I stand as a fellow pilgrim, searching, and thankful for your return and for the gifts that this group brings.

Jonathan

I've been in Norwich, in the east of England, this weekend, visiting our Joe. Each time we're here I make a point of walking the ten minutes to the cathedral along the river from our hotel. I went yesterday (Saturday) afternoon, after we had said good bye to Joe until evening. We had stocked him up with food supplies and seen him off in a taxi, surrounded by goodies, back to his shared house. He didn't want us to go with him because he and his five housemates have not cleaned the house for a while. Tessa and I didn't argue.

The cathedral's steeple dominates the city. I walked the grounds, enjoying their tranquility in the midst of the city, through Cathedral Close and its ancient houses, glimpsing lives through windows and wondering, slightly envious. I passed the statue of St Julian of Norwich, the 14th century mystic and writer and, apparently, the first woman to write a book in English; then I rested on a bench in the dusk before heading to rejoin Tessa.

I wish to talk, tentatively, of pilgrimage.

The faith that I once had was a faith of binaries—heaven and hell, good and evil, right and wrong—and stasis. I believed in a personal God who loved and knew me. I talked to him (yes, 'him') and I believed that he spoke to me. I felt him with me. My life stretched before me, and beyond that was an eternity with him and with others who believed.

I had faith but I was not a pilgrim. I understand pilgrimage, from Larry, to be characterised by the travel, by the slow, painstaking commitment to journey. According to my faith, I had already arrived and, though the evangelical discourse included talk of a 'walk with God', the message—as I received it—carried a tone of certainty and complacency. That's what fuelled my dissatisfaction.

I associate my ten years of faith with my influential and fundamentalist brother. I have contradictory images of him. When I picture him sat at the piano, eyes closed, I hear the beauty that results from, technically, the regulation of pressure on fingertips and feet but also from something within that is close to divine. As we were growing up he would practise and I would sit by him, captivated. But I also have the memory of him tight-lipped, cheeks drawn in disappointment and disapproval, as I tell him that I no longer have faith. I do not have the faith I once had. I still feel the relief of having kicked away the baggage that came with it. I do not equate that faith with pilgrimage. There was no “grace”, no “winding road” down which to glide.

Geoff is in his mid-30s. A huge man, he fills the room when he walks in, all beard and bulk, slinging his coat onto the chair like a shot animal. He has come because of his anger, which scares him⁴. He tells me about his growing up as a younger brother, his strong, disabled father, his asthma, his work with vulnerable young people, and his exasperated partner who makes all their decisions and with whom he refuses to make love. As I sit, I wonder where this will go over the coming weeks. I feel compassion for this big, wounded man. It’s love, yes, and faith: that making contact will lead us somewhere. It is not pilgrimage, perhaps, but since Larry’s most recent writing I’ve wondered: the understated rituals, the potential for *communitas*, the voyage we make, the pain and, sometimes, the healing for us both. Yes, maybe it is.

And then there is us. Larry welcomes us four as his fellow pilgrims. Each year, we make the commitment to each other and to our journey with words. Writing, over the years, has renewed my faith; and in our careful, joyful, difficult, reflective and profound journeying together, I can see that it is something I would be honored to call pilgrimage.

Holly’s birthday (December 2009)

Jonathan:

I realise that I can’t leave work this afternoon without making contact.

This past hour I’ve been putting together our writing since I last did it, six weeks or so ago, in order to see the pages of our writing again, to get a sense of where we’ve travelled during this time, and so that I can feel both where we are and where I am. I have printed those pages, wandered up the corridor to the photocopying room and stapled them using the Norman Denzin of all staplers (because only that super-powerful stapler has the zap to pin all 41 pages). Now I shall place them in my bag and head home, to read them and find where they take me.

It won't be this weekend that I write. It is our Holly's 18th birthday on Wednesday and I have decided that I am going to write for her, so I shall be working on that tomorrow and Sunday. I am not good at buying presents. Writing is what I feel I can give to her, just from me, that she might experience, if not immediately then at some later stage, as commensurate with her becoming 18. On the day, though, I imagine that she might not see it like that. What she really wants from me is a car.

Ron:

Yes, "What she really wants from me is a car." How I know that space! But she will read and she will take note and you will live inside her beyond the days of any car.

Larry:

I love Ron's note. I'm sitting here laughing as I think about it. I wasn't an at-home dad when my daughter was old enough to want a car. So there's Jonathan wanting to give her something more lasting, something more of himself than the usual material gift. I think we all have acknowledged the depth of Jonathan's gift. I'm thinking of asking Jonathan for a letter when my birthday rolls around. Just a little description of his day would do—what he saw, what he felt.

Ken:

'... and you will live inside her beyond the days of any car'

Yes, I guess that is the hope that I live with as my children grow.

I think it is grand that you are going to write something for Holly, Jonathan. I am going to hope that my children will read my writing in their days of living beyond the car. Somehow I can't imagine them wanting to read it now but it is always there if they want to. I always help them to know that. For me simply being with them is enough and there are always times with them when everything comes together in moments of timeless joy: so I will always be an 'at-home dad' with my children just to experience that.

Larry:

My daughter is now 38. She was 30 when she read my thesis. It had an impact upon her. Later, she told me that it was very important for her to know her dad's thought and experience in that way. In a way, it's become the basis for our adult relationship.

Here—March/April 2010

Tami: (now, since January, returned home)

I'm not sure where to enter our space. Looking back at some of our first entries, I remember using Giddens book title, *Where and When I Enter* as a threshold through which to enter into our space.

I think of this predicament, this feeling of being at odds with the group most every day. And truly, what I or any of us mean by "the group" is, of course, understood differently by each of us, but it is also so deeply co-performed.

So I'll try and move my way around in the dark as I seek to describe where and when I am now.

Somehow, while in England, I got my feelings hurt concerning the group. I experienced a land/air/sea change while there. I wrote so much, so much to all of you because you were all so present for me there. It was surely wonderful to spend time with Jonathan and Ken, but it was the group as a whole that seemed so palpable. And I wrote so much. And I wrote so much. Freed from the constraints of everyday life, I seemed to be able to seep into ideas and experiences differently than I had before. And I wrote so much.

And it seemed to me that the group responded so little.

I know that we have developed differing and often unpredictable rhythms in our responses. But I wrote so much. Much of it raw, much of it crafted. And I felt as if I were stumbling through the darkness of writing without feeling connected. I tried awkwardly to address the lack of contact, but never felt like I quite touched upon a clear explanation.

I recognize this as a part of a methodology of love.

That's all I've got.

Ron:

Oh my, Tami. Your email broke my heart. I wanted more than anything else to simply hold you, to tell you that our lack of response, although can be read as a lack of care, is not an indication of how we hold you in our hearts. I think too that all of us have felt at different times that we have not been sufficiently collected by the group, that we have been left wondering. I've also come to believe that this may be a cautionary footnote to the promise of our method. Maybe our writing together has exhausted itself but our friendship, our care for one another, has not. The work we've done has earned us a place beside each other.

Larry:

I'm on the Long Island Railroad traveling to Hofstra. Someone behind me is snapping the pages of their newspaper. Bellrose. Floral Park. Stewart Manor. Nassau Boulevard. Country Life and finally, Hempstead. The towns hurry by. Several are named after places in England. I look across the snow at an old brick building with a clock tower, but it's nothing like Tami's castle on a moonlit night.

We've visited this question before. The silence is full of the words that didn't reach the computer screen. Sometimes I think it's a matter of distance. We are coming from such different places, and the level of intimacy we have assumed has led to a great deal of self-disclosure. I know that I am slow to respond. In my head I continued a discussion with Jonathan about intensity and the places from which we write. Ken's references to the bittersweet times with his children in their reconfigured family deserved more discussion. I kept waiting until the time I could say more than "and this is how I felt about loss." There have been several times I was still working through my response when the group had moved on.

Ron is right. We have this response-ability. We have demonstrated our ability to respond to each other at a deep level. And then we miss the catch. Our bodies don't make that reciprocal movement in the dance. And yes, it hurts to realize she is standing there waiting. You break our hearts. No, we broke your heart. Or your trust. We can't leave each other out in the cold. I'm traveling on a bus now, and it is gray outside the windows. We speed by the pedestrians. Self involved. Tami has the courage to stop the bus.

Jonathan:

I climbed the stairs, turned right at the top, walked the short distance to my room and am now at my desk. It is a space that Tami has sat in. She and I talked here one Saturday in October. Tessa brought us sandwiches while we worked. Behind my shoulder to the left I can glimpse the blue chair where Tami sat. Ken has seen this room too. I used to work downstairs until Tessa needed more space for her art and I was banished. This is not much of a writer's room—a cupboard looking over the front gravel and the road—but it is mine and I love it.

You are all here this Saturday evening and are very welcome. I picture Tami on the blue chair, with Ken, close together. Ron, standing, leans against the door frame and Larry is by the window. We're together. My lines appear on the screen with you here as witnesses.

I hear the rhythm of Larry's train and mouth with longing the names of the stations he passes—Bellrose, Floral Park, Stewart Manor.

As I search for words, I hear Ron's, "we have always been there, the five of us, writing words that have wanted to reach, wanted to connect." They lead to me to the image of Tami, writing at the alcove in her castle in Alnwick: her writing space, which I saw last autumn. I picture her writing and sending, writing and sending, looking out over the fields and up at the moon and hearing the storms that pass, "stumbling through the darkness of writing without feeling connected".

And I ask, what else can my heart do but break?

Yes, it is, as Ron and Larry say, about response-ability. It is the 'missings' that we spoke of this time last year⁵, the perhaps inevitable implication of five bodies committed to engagement. It was Ken, at that time, who drew our attention to his experience of this, when we had failed to be as responsive as he had hoped we might be.

I remain struggling to find words.

But maybe all that I can do is to bring my body forward to you onto the page and say that if I have not been here sufficiently then I am wanting to be here now.

Ken:

I live in this cold misty winter morning with all of you in my heart.

So now as the mist is beginning to clear off the lake and the sun is slowly beginning to shine through, I sit here and write. I offer no excuses for not writing even though it would be easy to do so. I have these words. I have these words that have caused me grief. I have these words that I know have sometimes stopped me writing to you. Sometimes, like Tami, my heart ached because the words from you didn't come. But now as I have these words I have a celebration; they do somehow talk about a struggle in the dark but they have brought me alive this morning; living in these words is living with you all and that earned place is a beautiful place to be.

Ron:

I've been sitting with Ken's latest post, wanting to respond in a way that finds Ken. I'm not sure I can, not because Ken has kept himself from me—quite the contrary—he has made himself beautifully open to us all, but because we all keep finding ourselves in the same place—guilt for the slowness of our responses; fear that our writing falls short or, worse, does damage; hurt that we have not been sufficiently taken up, held; and love, however conceived, that keeps us coming back, keeps us trying to reach out to one another. Our own sense of our own and others' efforts holds all these dimensions in play. Perhaps we have been unfair with ourselves. What expectations have we placed on each other? What does it mean for us to say that we are

there for each other, across such distance, such demands on our lives, and so on? What expectancies should loving friends carry and how do those expectancies work for or against the loving friendship? Does our sense of guilt, fear, and hurt hold the potential for damaging our relationship? Should we be less demanding on ourselves and each other or, if we decide to do so, would that diminish what we have together? Such questions have been circling for me since Tami's email arrived a few weeks ago and have gained force for me with our correspondence since. I end with a final thought: What might I do, my dear friends, that would lessen our sense of guilt, fear, and hurt? Should we be thinking how we might be kinder to each other?

Larry:

Our discussion now reflects that first autumn when we were searching for the particular level of relationship of our writing. I was not yet ready to apply the word love, and Ron pointed out loving qualities that we were showing toward each other. Two years and several crises in all our lives later, we are struggling not just with the qualities but with the responsibilities that attend those shared feelings. I was just reading *The Palm at the End of the Mind* by the anthropologist, Michael Jackson.

“Understanding others requires more than an intellectual movement from one's own position to theirs; it involves physical upheaval, psychological turmoil, and moral confusion. This is why suffering is an inescapable concomitant of understanding—the loss of the illusion that one's own particular worldview holds true for everyone, the pain of seeing in the face and gestures of a stranger the invalidation of oneself.” (Jackson, 2009, p.233).

As generous and tender as we feel toward each other, we are still centered in our own universes. It's a shock to realize that what we did or did not do caused pain. It comes during a “pause” when our usual correspondence is “on hold.” A fiction. It isn't possible to bracket our relationships, and we continue in spite of ourselves.

Several months ago I felt that I had completely bared myself when I wrote about the way in which I had to revisit all the issues that confronted me thirty years ago when I came out as a gay man. One of the problems about getting naked is that I can get pretty cold standing there if someone else doesn't move closer. Of course, it's not that simple. Their choice comes at the end of a process. I have not acknowledged the time that others need in order to deal with my bare facts.

Once I had returned to the chasm that opened before me when I identified as a gay man, I was unable to move. I was frozen—not in that time period but in the space of

my alienation. My social movement was arrested. I didn't know how to go on from that point. Then Jonathan sent a quick note to say that he was preparing a response. That was enough. It didn't matter so much what he wrote as that he wrote. I had written into the darkness of my past and present, and a voice had answered.

Ron:

Larry, I found your latest entry deeply moving and wonderfully rich. Thank you. Your penetrating analysis allows for so many places for response. I'll start with a more academic one.

The Jackson quote is an insightful reminder of the kind of reach understanding may require and it seems perfectly accurately when thinking across cultures—differing cultural views often do provide “invalidation of oneself.” Perhaps this too speaks to understanding people within one's own culture. I often feel, however, that as we pursue differences, often in the name of social justice or self protection, we forget or neglect similarity. I may be speaking from my position of privilege, but I become saddened when our collective sensibilities seem to fall away. When I think of the issues that we have put before the group, I feel that while individually located, they have a human resonance. Our stories, our laments, have currency in the human condition and that is, in part, why we can understand one another, albeit, never completely. I find myself needing to believe in the possibility of connection. All other choices seems empty, too cynical, too destructive. When you mention the time when Jonathan reached out to you after you felt you had made yourself vulnerable, there was connection. And yes, it does “get cold standing there if someone doesn't move closer.” The times in my life when I feel I have made myself vulnerable only to be left there in the cold, give me reason to retreat—it's painful there. Why take such a risk? But I insist on doing so. I feel I must if I am to be an authentic person who acknowledges his frailties, his inadequacies, his errors. As I do so I often see that I share the company of many. Whatever I share, my risks are others' cliché—they've heard it before, in part, because we all live human lives. The cliché marks a pattern, until of course, it happens to you. The difficulty of understanding for me is reaching beyond the cliché. Perhaps the times when we have failed to fully enact our ethic of care, we took others' nakedness as familiar.

I end, Larry, by quoting in complete agreement your last lines: “We fail with the best of intentions, and suffering is inevitable. But we can choose to go on. Together.” Yes, we must.

Jonathan:

This line of Larry's, "It was going to be possible to talk about these things", sings to me.

It's possible to talk about these things. And, as Ron says, it's the love that keeps me coming back.

The past progressive tense is what does it: "It was going to be possible". Hope observed retrospectively with implicit confirmation that it has been and continues to be realised. Yet, this was not so long ago in our writing, just last autumn. It had taken writing together for two years for Larry to notice what was going to be possible. And this awareness came, if I remember, after a time when Larry had believed that he had sent us the writing to which he refers, about coming out as a gay man, and had heard nothing: he was surely doubting us. Out of concern at his apparent quietness, Tami had called from her northern English castle. Larry re-sent his piece.

Tami writes of her pain, which she had begun to experience around those same autumn months. She brought it to us, noting that she did so because it was there, within her and therefore within our group. I see her reluctantly laying it before us, having held onto it for many weeks, perhaps wishing that it had not been present. Yet it was and she therefore had to bring it.

Together, we are folding her words into what we are becoming. Uneasy though it may be, it was and is possible to talk about these things. Our kindness to each other, to pick up Ron's earlier questions is, for me, embodied by our commitment to keep naming what we see.

Finishing this on Good Friday, I am waiting to catch sight of Joe and Holly driving into view through my window onto the road. Holly has been with him in Norwich for two nights, providing sisterly support during yesterday's 22nd birthday celebrations. A text has alerted me that they will be home in a few minutes. He has not been home since Christmas.

You have all been in my room again, writing with me this past hour. Will you please stay and talk amongst yourselves while I go downstairs to greet them? I will return.

Larry:

I am still laughing after reading the last line of Jonathan's note to us. Shall we talk about Jonathan while he's gone? Shall we talk about what he has done for us? It's a beautiful spring day here. I'm happy that you are in my life.

Tami:

Today, April 15, is the anniversary of Wordsworth's composition of the poem "I wandered lonely as a cloud" and I find myself back in the Lake District of England, sitting in the small garden of Wordsworth's modest home looking out over the lake with a sheer blanket of fog floating on the water. And though Ken and Jonathan were surely close geographically, you were all sitting there with me, as you are now, as you always are. Though I haven't written lately, and though the fabric of our group has strained, your voices are always with me full of thought, repair, recuperation.

We put a friend of ours to rest on Saturday, she moving on after a long and arduous bout with breast cancer leaving us to fend for ourselves here together, survivors of cancer in those we love. Our neighbor Kate sat at the bottom of our hill on the swinging bench looking out over the river recuperating from the eulogy she had delivered earlier for her best friend who moved on, moved out of a body whose dark trickster cancer decided to sustain her no longer. She wandered, it seemed, our Kate, lonely as a cloud even as she sat staring, swinging, swaying.

I love Larry's passage of Michael Jackson's. The suffering I felt in our interaction did seem, even then, inescapable; it seemed a natural yet messy part of who we are, who we are always, as Ken says through the mist, becoming. And though it is, I believe, a "loss of illusion" as Jackson says, when we realize that we are not all of one mind or heart or body, it is also a gaining of texture, light, love. I'm sitting in Jonathan's fun chair in his office, I'm sitting with Ken in the midst of the mist in Cornwall, I'm sitting next to Larry on the train wafting past English names, I'm sitting with Ron wondering what is possible. And I am, surely, wandering lonely as a cloud, but harken, as Wordsworth's walk continues, he encounters a thousand daffodils, and our knees buckle at the sight, through the mist, through the pain, of what is possible together. Always together. My loves.

author: I am sure you mean "wandered lonely . . .", don't you?

Notes

1. Davies et al. (2009)
2. Larry has been doing research in New Mexico for ten years on pilgrimages at a site of healing—Chimayo. The particular pilgrimage he studies is an annual walk of a hundred miles to an adobe shrine of healing. See Russell, 2004, 2008.
3. Referred to in Gale et al. (2008)
4. Jonathan works, for part of his time, as a counsellor within the UK's National Health Service.
5. A subject that formed part of our writing during 2008–2009.

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About the Authors

Jonathan Wyatt is head of professional development at the University of Oxford, United Kingdom, and a counselor of adults within the National Health Service. He is interested in the performative and collaborative writing and autoethnography of life and loss. With Ken Gale, Susanne Gannon and Bronwyn Davies he is the author of *Deleuze and Collaborative Writing: An Immanent Plane of Composition*, published by Peter Lang.

Ken Gale works in the Faculty of Education at the University of Plymouth in the United Kingdom. His particular teaching and research interests are located within the philosophy of education, poststructural theory, and the application of narrative and autoethnographic approaches in education. With Jonathan Wyatt he has recently (in 2009) published a book: *Between the Two: a Nomadic Inquiry into Collaborative Writing and Subjectivity*, Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Ronald J. Pelias, Professor, teaches performance studies in the Department of Speech Communication at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale. His book, *Leaning: A Poetics of Personal Relations*, is forthcoming with Left Coast Press.

Larry Russell, Associate Professor, teaches performance studies in the Department of Speech Communication, Rhetoric, and Performance Studies at Hofstra University. He has written about healing performances in ethnographies of ritual practice at Chimayó, a pilgrimage site in New Mexico.

Tami Spry is a professor of performance studies at St. Cloud State University. Her print and performance work focuses upon critical theory and performative autoethnography. Her book *Body/Paper/Stage: Writing and Performing Autoethnography* is forthcoming with Left Coast Press.

