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Sharing a Different Voice: Attending to Stories in Collaborative Writing

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Abstract

Through three stories we hope to reveal how sometimes contradictory or unrecognisable aspects of our lives, selves and stories can create tensions in the collaborative writing endeavour. We begin with a story which illuminates some of the narrative tensions that surface during a decade writing collaboratively. In an effort to navigate these tensions we explore two further stories in dialogue as a way to reveal how dominant narratives shape our lives and the stories we might tell. One aim of sharing these stories is to reveal how problematic ways of being are often inseparable from one's cultural legacy. Making previously obscured narratives visible paves the way for imaginary leaps that are necessary for change. We hope these insights are useful for other writers and collaborators and those who seek caring, responsive and nurturing writing relationships yet realise this journey can be problematic.

Keywords: autoethnography, collaborative writing, dialogical research, horizon of interest, relationships, sport, story

Sharing a Different Voice: Attending to Stories in Collaborative Writing

The term *voice* often refers to the possibility of different experiences being heard, valued and given space, possibly for the first time. But, voice can also reflect the tonal vibrations produced when we talk, hum or sing. When different notes are produced simultaneously in the same melody, we refer to it as a harmony. Such a difference is characteristic of our collaborative writing, and to our aspirations to share a voice which is both melodic and harmonious yet retains difference. We echo Lisa Mazzei and Alecia Jackson's struggle to "adequately explain how we collaborate" and that "the limit of experience and self-understanding subverts any attempt of descriptive unity and coherence of our writing/collaborative processes" (Mazzei & Jackson, 2012, p. 457). Nonetheless, we believe it is important to explore the stories we tell about difference because they shape not only our collaborative journey but also the way we understand our participants, our families, our community and each other.

Our choice of a musical metaphor is perhaps an obvious one to colleagues who are either familiar with our work or have seen us perform. Frequently, though not exclusively, songs form an integral part of our performance auto/ethnography both together and separately (see for example, Carless, 2010; Carless & Douglas, 2010a, 2010b; Douglas & Carless, 2005, 2008, 2013; Douglas, 2012). While song writing shares many similarities with poetic representations and storytelling, there are also marked differences. In the process of writing a song, for example, we more readily allow the body to take the lead without an agenda in order to attend to (or become captivated by) the magic of an emerging rhythm, riff or chord progression. Over the past decade as we have begun to explore epistemological questions that arise during the process of knowledge creation through writing songs (Carless & Douglas, 2009, 2011; Douglas, 2012) we have been sensitised and provoked to reconsider other dimensions of our collaborative writing

and how we come to know through other creative approaches (e.g., Douglas & Carless, 2009, 2010).

Our thinking in this regard has been provoked by the effective yet different collaborative writing strategies we see others employ. For example, Mazzei and Jackson (2012, p. 450) speak of creating a *threshold* through a digital space because, in their words, “we live on opposite ends of the United States and we rarely, if ever, collaborate while inhabiting the same physical place.” Not inhabiting the same space frames some of the writing between Ken Gale and Jonathan Wyatt (2008) and Ken Gale and Elise Lamm Pineau (2012). Their narrative exchanges engage us much like the Wimbledon spectator as conversations are served and volleyed back and forth. Other writing collaborations, such as Jackie Allen-Collinson and John Hockey (2008), were spawned when two long-term runners became injured in the same week and decided to study their recovery.

Our collaborative writing began side by side, writing coaching manuals for the Professional Golfers Association (GB), a physical activity guide aimed at users of mental health services, CPD resources for seminars, and weekly articles for BBC sport online. Later, as we began our first ethnographic research project together, we inhabited the same physical space as our participants. Through this research we have gone on to write stories, songs, and poems, performance ethnographies, sing with each other, provide backing vocals and harmonies for each other’s songs, performed ethnographic research live and in the recording studio. Each of these steps has uncovered numerous differences which might derail the creative process, cause disharmony to surface or to fracture our ongoing collaborative writing. Yet, there is little in what we have written to suggest the writing process has caused tensions, disagreement or conflicts. While we often write about tensions and power dynamics that surface between ourselves (as researchers) and our participants, or between those funding research and ourselves, the way we

negotiate disagreement and difference has not been something we have made visible. We are aware that the disharmony in the process of writing together has been very much part of the writing process. By failing to include these aspects of our writing practices we may be cementing or contribute to an unrealistic story about collaborative writing that does not reflected our working relationship.

Although a common outcome of disharmony during a collaborative writing is curtailment, different viewpoints can be a fruitful occasion through which to explore the political dimensions that underlie conflict. For Gadamer, (2005) and Fank (2010) difference brings an essential ingredient to the research and writing process because it is only through difference one is able to expand and or extend one's horizon. With these points in mind, our aim here is to develop our understanding about some of the tensions that arise during collaborative writing through three stories. By being transparent about some of the practical difficulties we face and sharing these tension more broadly it allows other writers and would be collaborators to have broader understanding of the collaborative writing journey.

We begin with a 'stage setting' story in which interpretive privilege regarding our collaborative writing is taken by Kitrina.

Half Sleep

She lay in bed, feeling her body encapsulated in warmth and softness, listening to the wind blowing outside. It was still dark and with eyes that wouldn't focus clearly yet she couldn't be sure what time her watch was telling her. In the blur of half sleep it seemed one hand was towards five, but it may have been four and she didn't want to fully wake up to find out, so she allowed the luminescence to fade and closed her eyes again. She loved lying in bed and listening to a wild storm outside, or torrential rain. That she was 'in here', where it was calm and warm, while 'it' was 'out there' – harsh, violent, and chilling – somehow made her bed more

comforting. Just a few inches away, a storm spat and hurled, yet here she lay, sustained in peace and harmony.

“Everything we do is made better by us working together” he’d said. She had a terrible habit of going over things and having conversations with people who weren’t there. “You write beautiful stories, but you can’t do *this*, I’m quite clear. And it’s a difficult thing to do; most people are crap at it. I find it difficult – really, really difficult. It takes me ages. So isn’t it better that you stick to what you do well? Hardly anyone else can do what you do.”

“Well,” she began to reply to her friend who wasn’t there in body, just in her mind, “just so you are in no doubt, I work with you because I like you.” No, she stopped herself, it was more than a like, she liked cakes, thick socks, catching waves, capturing feelings on canvas; there was something deeper. “I work with you because I love you, I love creating something with you. But I’d work with you if what we did wasn’t very good, its goodness is a benefit, but that’s not why I do it.”

“I expected you to make me a millionaire, that’s why I started working with you!” he jested. Though there was an element of truth to his story, it was a story she didn’t like. She hoped his story might be more like her story.

She thought back to making the CD, recording waves, recording songs, recording the poems, listening to the early takes, on the stereo in the car, on the hi-fi at home, on the CD player in the kitchen, talking about the project on the beach and in the hills walking. She thought about the planning, the drafts, him at one end of the table and her at the other, the moments one would call out, “Listen to this!” She thought about the uncertainty, the discovery, the insights, the surprises, discussions over coffee, taking pictures for the artwork... Why hurry? This was fun.

“We’ve got 17 papers to write...” he’d said in a factual tone. She realised recently that no matter how many they wrote there would always be more. “What I’d like is for you to take the

lead, do a bit more..." *Well I'd do more if you'd let me*, she thought. "Move over," he'd say, as he paced up and down watching her write, seemingly unable not to take over. "It's quicker if I do that bit..." *Yes*, she thought, *it'll be quicker if I leave you to do it all!* "What I look forward to is you sending me a paper that I don't have to do a lot to, so I just have to add my name," he'd joked. But perhaps he was also serious? *What would be the point in that*, she thought, *where's the joy in that?* She didn't much like that story either.

"This is my job," he'd said one time, in order to make a different point. "I need to get these out and we've been a bit slack recently..."

"I enjoy writing..." she said.

"Now, if we chunk this..." he'd continued over the phone, not really listening, "you can add the bits where I've indicated, and that way it will be quicker." He was going to a conference, then somewhere else, and somewhere else and somewhere else... he wanted it ready when he got back. She didn't like these discussions over the phone; she wanted to go for coffee to talk properly. And there didn't seem much point working alone, sending writings off into the ether...

Lying in her bed she began to laugh, it was like she'd been sent in by the enemy to foil his plans: "Ah! Agent W ... slow things down, add an extra twist, turn one paper in to two, flood his head with other ideas." She didn't ever want to get to the end – and he wanted each item off the list as quickly as possible so he could finish work and get on with living. But this *was* living to her – each moment savoured for its taste, she didn't want to let it go, she wanted to tinker with one more sentence, add one more stroke of the brush, try another colour...

Or maybe he was sent in by the enemy to make her more productive: "Ah! Agent X ... focus her mind, move her on, speed her up, we can get more out of her, keep her on track, don't go for a walk and don't sing a song until the work is done, tell her she's not pulling her weight, that it's her turn to lead..."

“How do you describe yourself?” one professor had asked.

“I think I potter, I’m a potterer,” she replied.

“Oh, potterers never achieve anything,” he’d said dismissively, before moving the conversation in another direction. So, wondering if he was right, she began counting. She started with her eight-year-old self and the pink certificate for completing one width in the swimming pool. Then she went onto the medals, certificates and trophies for acting, then trophies from sport, learning to play the guitar, the articles in national newspapers and magazines, the published book, money raised for charity, the nurturing of other players on tour... She didn’t bother finishing the list, it was clear the professor knew nothing. She was doing OK. But why did she feel this need to share it all with *him*?

She thought back to their first project – the money was easy to share, but the writing was tense. She enjoyed writing, but they had to do it his way.

“It’s better this way,” he’d said, “it’s quicker, more efficient.” She thought about the talks they’d given together – his insecurity standing in front of a room full of professional golfers, how he’d come to detest sport – and how that influenced her actions and feelings. She thought about his life experiences, the stories he’d shared, and the way they made her realise how shameful her behaviour had been, her thoughts had been. On that score she wasn’t doing so well – she didn’t like that story at all.

Most of all, in their sharing of stories, she hated the way some of the stories he told and enacted aligned him with clichéd masculine values. She hated that – in some ways at least – they both seemed stereotypically gendered. How could that possible be?

“That would be a problem for me,” he’d said, responding to her saying that no matter what, she would always love, care, and nurture him. She’d tried to live the lines from the song – “*I’ve got your needs at the front of my mind, I put your dreams alongside mine*” – that *he* wrote.

She thought *that way of being* was ethically and morally the right way to be. But their positions when it came to work, it seemed to her, so often lined them up exactly with how Carole Gilligan had described the differences between male and female voices; him describing her value of attachment as a bad thing, something that would hold him back, restrict his movement, and her seeing this attachment as something that would allow him to climb higher, lessen his fall, allow him to feel some security, that some friendships aren't built on whims, desire or attraction and would be there should they ever be needed, in the background, unseen, but providing a firm hand should a hand be needed. She valued more the time spent doing the work. And his story that their work was better in partnership, that the output was more, that they did great work together, held no mention of her personhood, of being nurtured, encouraged, those things she valued, the communion, the intimacy of creation.

But it was also clear to her he was no 'ordinary' male, with few 'ordinary' masculine values. The voice she heard may have been one of striving, of seeking excellence, of not being attached, of evaluating the product rather than the process of creating the product, but she knew the soft caring soul beneath was as warm as her bed, as quiet as the silence of her room against the storm outside, and as comforting as her duvet. As she turned over in the dark of the night for a few more minutes sleep, her last thoughts were of acceptance, of not understanding, a recognition that some things may never be worked out.

Unmasking narrative scripts

Narrative scholars (e.g., Bruner, 1986; McAdams, 1993) have shown how our lives and behaviours are shaped and constrained by culturally available narrative scripts that are embedded within a political and gendered *history* (MacIntyre, 1984). Without becoming conscious of the influence of these scripts, we risk *living* in an uninformed way, blindly following the contours of a culturally dominant, hegemonic story. For Althusser the ideology that informs how an

individual thinks provokes a necessity to respond when we are called (by acting out a set of actions already prepared for us). Yet, as Arthur Frank suggests, people do resist interpellation. To break free or deviate from any script it is necessary, in the first instance, to become aware of its presence (Freeman, 2010).

A second risk concerns a possible (undesired) *outcome* of the collaborative endeavour. By foregrounding particular kinds of stories, values and identities when we write, we risk cementing and finalising not only those Others we seek to understand, but also those with whom we collaborate. We risk entrenching a hegemonic or monological story which forecloses possible alternative ways of being not only for ourselves, but for each other. As a tale about our own working relationship, *Half Sleep* takes a look behind the scenes – ‘backstage’ in Erving Goffman’s (1969) terms – to share the kinds of issues that are often hidden from view. It makes some unseen aspects of (our) collaborative writing visible. Yet in the telling one voice is privileged, certain stories are valued, and aspects of our identities are cemented.

For some, as one reviewer asked, a question that needs to be addressed is: ‘How would David respond? How might he story events differently?’ While these may be valid questions they represent a style of interaction that is not characteristic of how we collaborate. Rarely do we ask each other these types of questions. This is not to suggest that we both fail to explore the tensions in the story or feel a degree of angst with the way the story portrays aspects of our actions. Like Wyatt (2008, p. 367), who “felt stuck” when describing himself as “English, middle class, Oxford” and “straining against this sense of being typecast,” we too experience a degree of cementation. However, we take our lead from Arthur Frank (2010) who suggests a response to a story should be to ask: *what work is the story doing for the storyteller?*

While the story communicates the value, pleasure and joy of collaborative work, it also portrays tensions between the two main characters, as storied by one of us. Our question

therefore is how might we, as Kenneth Gergen (2009) has put it, when faced with difference, find ways to move forward together? In short, *what should we do?* Alasdair MacIntyre (1984) provides one possible answer to this question: “I can only answer the question, ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’” (cf. Gergen, 2009, p, 37). This response draws on the understanding that, in Michelle Crossley’s terms:

our experience of self, others and the world more generally is inextricably tied up with our use and understanding of the linguistic and moral resources made available to us in the cultures we are brought up in. Narrative theories suggest that the primary way in which such meanings are transmitted is through our embeddedness, from the moment of birth, in familial and cultural stories. (2000, p. 45-6)

With these points in mind, we now explore how the actions, behaviours and stories of the characters in the first story are in turn drawn from a cultural reservoir available to the story teller.

In the following two stories we act on a commitment to a dialogical form of narrative analysis which begins “with the interpreter’s recognition of being caught up in his or her own stories” (Frank, 2010, p. 96). The first story, *Doing nothing* focuses on a specific moment from Kitrina’s time at school.

Doing Nothing

Each day, scheduled on the school timetable, was one whole lesson period devoted to practice. If you didn’t play a musical instrument you could practice your drama. If you did both music and drama, you could take turns and, for example, play the flute one day and learn a section of Macbeth on the next day. But, if you were not involved with either music or drama, you could do nothing. Yes, every day St Brandon’s School devoted a whole lesson to the purpose of doing nothing.

One of the places nothing was carried out was the common room, except within this Georgian mansion house the common room was anything *but* common and was referred to as the *Wethered Reception Room* – with the *-ed* pronounced as you would the *Ed* in *Edward*, not *weathered* as in been eroded by the wind. The room was lined with dark oak panels topped with sculpted menacing figures observing the rooms' occupants. The seating was equally opulent. Thick red fabrics covered two chez-lounges, and an armchair, and window seats were adorned with red cushions. A high bay-window provided an open vista across the beautifully manicured grounds. It was the type of room you might see roped off if you visited a stately home.

The bell rang, signifying that it was 3:10. Caroline had been going to practice her drama duologue for the Bristol Eisteddfod with Tania, but Tania was home ill so she wandered into the Wethered Reception Room, where several other girls had already assembled to do nothing. Three were squeezed into one of the armchairs, curled up in each other's arms, two others sat astride an ottoman, facing each other. One girl, with shoes and socks off, had cotton wool stuffed between her toes, and was painting her toe nails, dipping her brush into the bottle held steadily and stoically by the other girl. It was just a typical private girls' school filled with white, privileged, middle-class girls.

“Can I plait your hair Melissa?” asked Diane. “Of course,” Melissa replied still holding the nail varnish bottle. Except these weren't white girls – Melissa was from Delhi, Arhia from Africa and Sui Lui from China. So, it just privileged girls that were unaware of their privilege.

Diane began the hair braid by slowly combing Melissa's hair with a wide-toothed comb. Melissa had jet-black, beautiful, long, exotic hair. Each stroke commenced with Diane slipping her left hand under the hair at Melissa's neck and then, with her other hand, putting the comb into the roots and slowly following the contours of her head, her neck, her shoulders, the curve of her spine and ended only a few inches from the ottoman on which she sat. There was no hurry to

each stroke, and no resistance from Melissa or any strand of her hair, but just in case there might have been, Diane was gentle.

Paula turned to Caroline, holding her hand out with her fingers pulled together in a cone.

“Squeeze my hand as hard as you can,” she instructed her friend who lay across one of the large armchairs, legs dangling at one end, propped up on the wings of the chair at the other. Caroline did as she was told. Taking Paula’s hand in her own, she gripped and squeezed tightly.

“No, tighter,” Paula laughed in a high pitch, “and hold it, you’ve got to hold it for a minute!” She nodded to Sui Lui who started her stopwatch.

Diane, having finished the comb, began stroking Melissa’s hair. It felt like silk and was mesmerising, she couldn’t help running her palm down first one side then the other. Then with artistry which wouldn’t have seemed out of place from a magician, she began dividing the wave of hair into two oceans each with three rivers and began to braid.

“You’re not squeezing!” Paula said to Caroline, their faces close but both were looking at their hands which were now blotches of white and red.

“I ammmm!” Caroline squealed, as her whole body tightened too. The others laughed.

“Wait till you see what she does next,” Sui Lui, the time keeper chipped in.

“Anyone got a band?” asked Diane interrupting and holding up the first finished plait.

“I have, in my purse,” said Arhia who was, with the intricacy of a brain surgeon, still painting her toe nails. “But I can’t stop, help yourself.”

“I can’t move,” said Diane holding up a braid.

“Neither can I,” said Melissa holding up the nail varnish pot.

“Will one of...”

“I will!” said Sui Lui who, still holding the watch aloft crawled over to the brown briefcase beside Arhia and started pulling things out with one hand in search of a purse. As she did, her watch began to beep. “That’s one minute!”

“OK, now don’t move your hand but I’m going to remove my fingers from your grip,” said Paula. She then took Caroline’s arm in her free hand and then very carefully slide her fingers from the vice-like-grip. Caroline’s hand was now a living sculpture, locked in position, which she dare not move until further instructions had been provided. While she waited for these she inspected the claw hand as if it was not her own. Paula then took Caroline’s arm and gently moved it to a position where she could work it more closely. She began tracing the contours of her friend’s fingers and hand with her own index finger, up over the back of her hand, up the finger, over the nail, around the tip, down the inside, along the palm, to the wrists, circling the wrist several times. The moves were rhythmic, relaxing, some might say mesmerising, some might say sensuous.

Jock looked in from his weeding chores in the garden. He straightened his leathery body and waited for the pain to release from his back. It failed to depart so he lit a cigarette and sucked in the tobacco – it felt good. He laughed as he watched the young women, their bodies touching, caressing, giggling, female entanglement among armchairs and cushions. He puffed out and bent over to carry on digging, cigarette still in his mouth.

“OK,” Paula had finished, “now try moving your hand.”

“Oh my gosh!” Caroline said as she felt the muscles in her hand resist her call to move and flex. The group laughed in unison. “That’s so weird!” she shrieked, after applying just a tiny bit of muscle extension to her fingers. She didn’t give it a full thrust, she knew *that* wasn’t the game, at least not to start with. The sculpture remained.

“Aahhhhh!” she hollered, laughed and then thrust her muscles through the tension and looked at her outstretched fingers. They all laughed, Melissa fell off the ottoman on to the floor.

And then the bell went. It was 3:50, time to go, the timetable had some important lesson scheduled.

Contrasting tales

Returning to MacIntyre’s point that, “I can only answer the question, ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’” (cf. Gergen, 2009, p, 37) our third story, *Leader of Men*, recounts a series of events surrounding David’s place in his school’s rugby team. This story, in contrast to *Doing nothing*, illuminates a different and potential more powerful narrative that shape both women’s and men’s lives and expectations.

Leader of Men

I slip off my shoes, walk along one end of the sports hall, round the unused multi-gym, and knock on the brown-painted door. A slightly shabby curtain hangs across the window on the inside so I can’t see in, but that familiar musty smell somehow seems to drift through the door. The smell gives away the fact that the head rugby coach’s office doubles as an equipment store. The door opens twelve inches and a face peers out through the gap, breaking quickly into a broad smile.

“Dave! Thanks for coming over, come in mate, pull up a seat.” Mr Motford, dressed in an immaculate tracksuit as usual, holds the door for me before turning and taking a seat on the corner of his desk. “I heard you took a couple of good catches last night, nice going,” he says, eyes focused on me intently.

“Oh, yeah, thanks. Seeing I don’t bowl and never score more than about three runs, it’s probably a good job that I do something in the field!” We both laugh. “I’m always a bit surprised

when Mr D. picks me really. I'd have thought he'd want a bowler or a batsman, rather than just a fielder."

"Hmm. Well, perhaps there isn't one?" he replies, eyebrows raised, head tilted to the left. "But anyway, don't do yourself down – fielding is a pretty important part of the game too. On a different day, those two catches could have been enough to turn a loss into a win."

"I suppose," I say thoughtfully, before breaking into a grin. "But come on Mr Motford, don't tell me I'm worth a place in the team just for fielding? Who are you trying to kid?"

"Alright, you've got me Dave," he says, holding his hands up in mock surrender. "I was just trying to take a positive slant on things. Maybe it is time to call your glittering cricket career to a close after all," he replies with a warm laugh.

I like Mr Motford. I like that he doesn't wear a tie and that he doesn't try to bullshit me - some teachers do. He seems to call it as he sees it. And I like that he's so enthusiastic about what he does, he wants everyone to enjoy sport, get a taste of doing something really well. He actually seems genuinely happy when we pick up some new skill he's been teaching us. But I also like him because he's not afraid to have a laugh – to laugh at us and at himself sometimes too.

"Anyhow, I didn't get you over here to reminisce about the highlights of your cricket career Dave." There's a moment's pause. "We're not far away from the start of the rugby season and I've been doing a lot of thinking about who to ask to be captain of the 1st team next year. I wanted to have a chat with you about that."

"Oh, OK," I say, feeling a bit surprised. *Why would he want to talk to me about that? I'd have thought he'd have been able to make that decision without asking my opinion on it.* There's another pause. I speak my other thoughts, "There's been a bit of chat flying about – most people think it's between Rich and Jase. From what I've heard, the lads are saying Rich would be the

best man for the job, he's a strong character, pretty loud, would really get everyone going. But I reckon Jase would do a good job – he'd really inspire the team with his own play.”

“Yeah, both of them have crossed my mind” he replies, “And, you're right, either of them would probably do a good job.” Another pause. “But I've decided I'd like you to take on the role.” I search Mr Motford's eyes, his expression, for a sign of jest, the give-away twinkle of another little joke, perhaps made to lighten the conversation. But there isn't one. He looks completely serious, totally sincere, and is staring straight at me. I feel I should say something, but I'm not sure what.

A few slow seconds pass “Wow,” I say as I try to come up with something more significant. “Wow. But ... but I'm not even sure I'll make the first team. Do you really think I'm the right person for the job?”

Three months later, and I'm back in Mr Motford's office again after the first match of the season. We'd lost heavily.

“Dave, I chose you as captain because I believed you were the right person for the job. And I still believe it now.” He's standing, I'm sitting. He's talking, I'm listening. “But the captain's job is to *lead* – to make decisions, to lead the team. On Saturday, I didn't see you doing much leading. And I didn't see you making many decisions. And that is what this team – any team – needs. Now Dave, I don't much care if you make wrong decisions. And I don't mind if your leadership doesn't bring results. But I *do* mind if you *don't* make decisions and if you *don't* lead. Doing nothing is *not* an acceptable captaincy strategy. The team needs a decision-maker and it needs a leader. And I expect that, at least, from the man I've chosen for this job.”

Mr Motford pauses. I swallow and look away, towards the half-open bottom drawer of the metal filing cabinet. *Maybe Jase or Rich would have been a better choice after all?* “Well, if you feel...”

He interrupts. “Now, you know and I know that I could have chosen Jase or Rich as skipper. I could even ask one of them to take on the job now. But I still believe you are the man for the job. All I’m saying is I need to see some action from you. Can you do that, do you think?”

“You can’t be what you’re not Dave. And there’s no point trying to do it if it doesn’t feel right,” Johnny, a team-mate, says as we sit in the sixth-form common room, a U2 album playing on the stereo.

“Yeah, but that’s what he said. He wants a leader, he wants decisions, he wants action. That’s what he said.” The piano intro to *New Year’s Day* fills the long pause in our conversation. “So what else am I supposed to do? Other than resign as captain, maybe?” I think back to Rob Bowler, last year’s captain, how he screamed and shouted at the entire team – voice cracking, spittle flying from his mouth – before the away match when I was on the bench. I remember, two years earlier, that 18 year-old corporal in the school Army Cadet Force who had – for four Friday afternoons, before I prematurely quit – tried to jolt me into action by stamping his feet, F-ing and blinding, and now and then resorting to physical ‘coercion’. And I think back on twelve years of assemblies and supposedly inspirational speeches that made no difference whatsoever to my motivation, achievement, performance, or competence.

“No. You don’t need to resign,” replied Johnny lounging back on his seat, “and you don’t need to be what you’re not. You just need to find a way of giving him what he wants, *your way*.”

Matthew “Meathead” Murray: 5 foot 10 inches, 14 stone 2lb, 1st team front-row forward since the age of 15.

“Matt, we need to talk,” I say as we pass in the corridor later that morning, “about next Saturday’s game. Have you got ten minutes to spare at lunchtime?”

“Yeah, Davo, of course mate,” he says with a grin. “Meet ya at half-twelve in front of the common room?”

Saturday afternoon, 2.20pm: Meathead screams and he spits. He kicks the metal locker doors and bangs on the benches. His face turns crimson and the veins on his neck bulge. He eyeballs the forwards and glares at the backs. He rages about pride and promises us we could take any team in the county. He grabs the backs of necks and squeezes a-hold of shoulders. He shoves then he hugs. Finally, he draws us all into a tight circle and tells us we’re in it for each other.

Throughout, I look at the ground, saying nothing, just clicking my studs on the concrete floor and wondering if all this hullabaloo really makes any difference. Then – when Meathead is done – I lead the team out onto the field.

Maintaining Dialogical Stories

Mattessich *et al.*, (2001, 59) write that collaboration is, “a mutually beneficial and well-defined relationship” with a commitment “achieve common goals,” “a jointly developed structure and shared responsibility; mutual authority and accountability for success; and sharing of resources and rewards.”

The first of the three stories suggests we haven’t always been able to achieve mutually beneficial, jointly developed, mutual authoritative writing with sharing of resources and rewards, and in part at least this is due to different horizons of interest.

Recognising that horizons are not rigid frontiers but rather serve to invite advancement (Gadamer, 2005), we have attempted – by putting these stories in dialogue – to ‘shift horizons.’ That is, to bring to the fore the cultural and political dimensions of the stories we live and enact in our collaborative endeavours. The point being that by sharing and discussing the stories here, we hope to stimulate and support similar change in others. To do so perhaps requires specific consideration of the broader (sociocultural) processes that underlie these (personal) stories.

In all three stories presented here powerful *grand* narratives are at work. One narrative script is perhaps the need to work harder, stay focussed on the task, pay attention to time management and to value productivity – such a narrative seems to currently frame many academic departments and is perhaps most visible in *Leader of Men* and the expectations of a young man, a rugby player and team captain. The alternative narrative thread is to invest time in relationships, to touch, feel and respond to people – such a narrative frames the stories of many academics we speak with who feel the pressure to produce ‘outputs’ to be in tension with their desire to spend time with students or participants.

Mark Freeman (2010) suggests that if a person internalizes an ill-fitting cultural narrative, s/he risks foreclosing her or his identity options. As a result, one’s actions and horizons of possibility become constrained. To resist this danger, the challenge, in Freeman’s terms, “is to identify the ways in which these cultural narratives have permeated one’s being and, in the process, to break away from them and sap their coercive power” (p. 12).

Stories can be important in this process by *disrupting* a problematic cultural narrative in order to move the collaborative project forward and avoid a severe rift or fracture. The right story at the right time can help us see how we ourselves are internalizing – through our actions or words – a dominant narrative or political position. The preceding stories have helped us appreciate how aspects of the hegemonic form of masculinity that dominates sport culture (see

Sparkes, Partington & Brown, 2007) can be internalized in ways that threaten a writing collaboration. Thus, writing and sharing these stories has been one way we might each become aware of broader issues that were previously hidden from our view. This is an essential step in paving the way for the imaginary leaps that are necessary for change.

Outside any personal agenda for sharing these stories, a greater peril exists from failing to share stories that offer alternative templates for living life relationally. That is, without reminding each other of how empathy, care, connectedness, sharing, communion and compassion are central to our humanity, we enhance the pervasive power of the dominant hegemonic narrative to impinge on how both women and men may seek to live their lives.

With specific regard to the relational dynamics of the collaborative endeavour, sharing these stories and reflecting on them has helped us to better work *with* each other, incorporating each other's (partially visible, partially hidden) cultural legacies in ways that nurture and support not only our work but also ourselves. When it comes to recognising our own malleability to culturally dominant yet potentially threatening narrative scripts, we resolve to resist when we can, accept when we cannot, all the while striving towards understanding – just a little bit better – how and why we are each the way we are.

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