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LETTERS 1 & 2 (joint)

Dear Teresa,

About 18 months ago, I started to walk the Leeds/Liverpool canal with an elderly friend. We are doing it in 5 mile stretches and plan fairly carefully as our starting points get further and further away from Leeds. We have to know what trains, buses, taxis we will get to each starting point, and from there back again and then we have to make sure we have snacks and drinks (my friend is diabetic) –and, of course, most importantly we have our maps, both ordnance survey and the specialist canal map.

Dear Jenny

Some years ago – as a younger lecturer, I found myself at a Performance Research Conference called ‘Here Be Dragons’ – which of course refers to a popular belief that medieval maps used this legendary phrase and images of beasts as a way of pointing towards undiscovered territory. At this conference a cartographer said something that has stayed with me ‘*maps lie and that’s why people get lost*’. We all feel safer when we know where we’re going but creative processes also requires us to let ourselves get lost, to force ourselves into leaving the safety of the map behind so that we can surprise ourselves with what we find.

Dear Teresa

We meticulously plan – and yet, every time we walk we I am taken by surprise – by an unexpected landscape, the quirky individuality of a garden or by the sadness of an industrial world lost. My friend and I talk and bare our souls and learn intimate facts about one and other, that if we hadn’t embarked on this particular journey, we would never have known, and our lives are the richer for it. In writing this letter to you about the Cinage project, I find myself comparing my canal endeavour, to the lessons I have learnt – and am still learning from the CINAGE.

Dear Jenny

On facebook this morning I read an article, posted by a friend which told the story of a Finnish mother asking her primary aged daughter what she had done that day for her ‘physical education’ lesson. Her answer was this – ‘they sent us to the woods with a compass and a map and we were told to find our way home.’

Taking back the meaning of being lost in creative practice and Higher Education seems almost a political act, a matter of existential agency that we ought to reclaim in order to feel at home in ourselves. Rebecca Solnit writes: ‘There’s another art of being at home in the unknown, so that being in its midst isn’t cause for panic or suffering, of being at home with being lost’

Dear Teresa

The formal name for the project is Cineage – cinema for active ageing, but those of us running it used the shorthand of ‘teaching filmmaking to old people’! The goals were to find ways to get older people to learn. To really learn. To make the brain work hard, as that is how we age well, by grappling with technology and solving problems and learning new

languages – such as the language of film. The actual outcome of this project was a series of short films but the real learning was in facing up to the realities of aging as a felt experience.

Dear Jenny

When I face up to the realities of aging I still I think about it as a process of getting lost. I'm now, at the age of 50, well aware that I'm mid career. I'm a mid career theatre artist – a mid career academic. I'm mid – I'm in the middle – at the centre – in a position of centrality – at the core. From this position of centrality – I look towards the edges – to the margins. I remember a time when I existed more on the edges than in the middle... And you Jenny – you are a decade further on from me and you are finding new spaces in which to operate and practice and learn – new projects to get lost in

Dear Teresa

As part of the project I was given the most privileged opportunities to not only visit our partner countries – Slovenia, Portugal and Italy – but to meet their volunteers, from those that had been forced to retire at 55 in Slovenia and were now considered 'old' to the 85 year old ex-revolutionary sculptor in Portugal. All those I met were moved and excited to have been invited to be part of this pilot project, to reflect, to tell their stories and, most of all, to share their experiences of ageing through making their own films of their own stories. And the experience has been just as moving and exciting for those of us delivering the project. Or as you would say, about 'getting lost in the project'.

Dear Jenny

I think then the question then about ageing is also a question about how to get lost.

Senior moments

Never to get lost is not to live, not to know how to get lost brings you to destruction, and somewhere in the terra incognita in between lies a life of discovery.

In her book *'a field guide to getting lost'* Rebecca Solnit explores the territory of losing something we care about, losing ourselves, losing control. Losing anything is about the familiar falling away, getting lost is about the unfamiliar appearing. Either way, there is a loss of control which seems, from where I am positioned, in my middle age, to be significant in this discussion.

Dear Teresa

Early on in the CINAGE pilot group – the biggest complaint all the participants had was that they didn't want to talk about being old, or losing anything, or 'senior moments'. They wanted to get on with their lives and learn about filmmaking and all that it entailed. And they didn't want to make films about being old. And our job was to find a way for them to explore their own aging as a field of creative possibilities rather than an experience of deficiency and loss.

Dear Jenny - February 2016

I've been thinking a lot about the challenge you presented me with to run a one day workshop with your second group of CINAGE students whom you felt needed the opportunity to work together and undertake creative exercises and play, in preparation for the collaborative process of filmmaking.. If I'm honest I was a bit apprehensive about bringing a group of 25 students who had signed up for a film making course into the theatre studio for a day of practical work.

I decided to begin the day teaching everybody a relatively easy 'social line dance' called the slosh – which I hoped would enable each individual to move in time and space to music and feel very quickly like an ensemble. As Samuel Beckett says 'If all else fails – Dance'

I worked in exactly the same way as I work with undergraduate, MA and PhD students – with a series of proposals and exercises which I know, from experience, will develop creative encounters encouraging risk taking, problem solving, personal discovery, failure, flexibility and fun.

I was surprised by the openness of the group to try things out – to have a go – to generally be up for it – without the usual anxiety around meaning and endgaming that is now so prevalent throughout undergraduate educational contexts. Of course the levels of experience and expertise in the group were tremendous but nevertheless – I was particularly impressed by the quality of engagement in the proposal made which directly addressed the questions of 'where am I now', 'where am I going', 'where have I been'. If you were to write a letter to your 16 year old self, what would you say?

Dear Terry

It must be barely credible to you that I'm writing from 2016 – science fiction to you in the heady days of 1967! Contrary to what you think, you will last, so start thinking about looking after yourself, and lose that romantic death wish – it's simply not better to burn out than to fade away, despite that rush of blood to the head that suggests otherwise right now. It's just quicker.

Don't be so eager for extremes of experience, particularly the drugs everyone's talking about – there are vivid experiences every moment if you know how to look.

Your family and heritage are valuable, those generations of miners and railway workers, though they seem like a millstone now, especially your delinquent, jailbird brother. You can learn from his fearlessness. One day it will be a source of pride to you that you came from Seacroft Council Estate, where you wrote Bob Dylan quotes on the wall.

You already love life, learn to love yourself, you're included in it.

From your loving self in 2016,

Terry

Dear JZ,

Since the age of twelve, you've wanted to be sixteen. So here you are, you're sixteen. I know you are thrilled at being almost grown up, like your big brother's girlfriends you so much admire. I also know that somewhere inside you, there's a small voice that says: 'You're not there yet, you'll never be, you'll never look as splendid as these girls, confident in their perky bras, and bright Brigitte Bardot skirts.' Listen to me: use this day, your birthday to put aside a few things that get in your way and prevent you from truly enjoying being you. Stop thinking that you are not pretty enough, that you are too thin, that you've hardly got any bust, that you're not attractive to boys. Do you realise how gorgeous you are? So don't wait, JZ. Now is your time. Make a move. Be bold. Sure, there will be ups and downs coming later. For just now, enjoy being 16. Love yourself, be yourself.

I love you.

JZ XXX

Dear Mary

Do not worry about being expelled from school. What do the nuns know anyway !

Put all that behind you. Full stop . End of that story.

Look on it as an escape from a place that made you very unhappy, where you never fitted in. Here you are at the start of a new life, a new beginning and a chance to be who you want to be.

Take a while to plan your brilliant future and then Go for it !

And don't look back.

Lots of love

Your self.

Dear Teresa

Thank-you for your lovely exercises, especially our letter to 16 year old selves. I didn't read a sentence from my letter because it was too sad, and everyone else had provided such positive advice. I didn't want the session to end on a sad note. My mother died when I was 14 leaving me and my two sisters in the care of our father who was an extremely dictatorial and

bullying man, hurt by experiences in WWII and his own early life. I was advising my young self to try to understand why my father was just so hard on us, but also to follow my interests and put myself first. At the time I felt I couldn't because I felt I had to contribute financially to the home. Also, my father was of the view that we had to put ourselves last. Wrong of my father to impose that burden onto me. This exercise has brought it home to me why I am like I am, a rebel. Thank-you Theresa for this enlightenment. Thank-you.

Dear Teresa

I can honestly say that the CINAGE project is the project that goes on giving. The project culminated last year in a Film Festival and small Symposium where we invited other people working on similar initiatives to come to Leeds and discuss their experiences with us and our partners and the volunteers who had been part of the CINAGE project from all four countries. This was a brilliant event –our volunteers took the lead in organising events for the volunteers from our partners which included a Silver Screen tour of Leeds (led by 82 year old Sian Batchelder who does the tour for Leeds Civic Society) showing all the buildings that used to be cinemas, a visit to Saltaire – as well as the symposium where we met the organisers of the Silver Screen Festival in Frankfurt and Generation to Generation here in the UK – both of whom we have now developed partnerships with. The Film Festival invited films that either featured, were made by or were about age and ageing and we are now growing the festival and have signed a partnership agreement with Leeds International Film Festival.

CINAGE Film Festival is going to be an annual event with the next one being held on Older People's Day in October in partnership with Bradford City of Film who are running an Older People's Film Festival in association with UNESCO.

To feed these festivals we need new films, and we are currently running two projects – which I consider the true glory of the pilot project. CINAGE 2016, has 21 participants over the age of 65 – and they are the people that took part in your brilliant live, creative development day. They are learning how to develop and make films – screenwriting, directing, editing and filmmaking, and along the way are developing all the other skills we pride ourselves on giving to our undergraduates – project management, communication, creativity, technology, problem solving....and they are having fun and they are telling their stories, remembering their lives, finding metaphors for living.

They are all there for different reasons – one is a retired 86 year old actor, producer and director, who wanted to see how it 'is done now', another a 65 year old librarian, about to retire and terrified, wanted to meet people as her whole life has been her career and she has no clue how to enter 'old age'.

Both of these have benefited from the wonderful world of collaboration and self reflection and learning something new that has allowed them to be honest, and scared and discover parts of themselves they never knew they had. Next weekend we are going to read all 21 scripts that they have been developing with their individual tutors and choose the ones for production.

Letter 5 – (Teresa)

Dear Cineage Students

I thought it most appropriate to write you a letter to share some reflections about our day together. It's now around 10pm Saturday evening and I'm back in Manchester, thinking about how much territory we covered in today's workshop. The activities of reflecting, remembering, reading, listening, witnessing, drawing, writing, conversing, moving, composing material etc are all connected with the act of creation which is essential for film making and art making.

For me there were a number of new creative projects that I was able to get a glimpse of whilst we worked today and I hope you were able to seed some of your own. In my work, I am very accustomed to material and ideas emerging from live encounters which involve people moving in time and space, as opposed to sitting and writing a script or imagining a solution. I suppose I am trained in and trust the opportunities that present themselves when improvising – which is in truth the art of 'making it up as you go along'. This practice of being in a place of uncertainty is also a constant reminder that 'not knowing' and 'being lost' are parts of any creative process and I welcome both with open arms.

'If we knew what we were doing it wouldn't be called research would it' – Albert Einstein

That said it is also worth dwelling on what we do know and what we have found.

I *know* that the 'letters to your 16 year-old selves' are a really interesting way of accessing an approach to autobiographical writing, which connects individuals to previous, and future versions of themselves and others (in other words fictional characters).

I *know* that when these texts are shared, exchanged and 'bartered' with; written over and written through, and offered up to the collective writing process that often happens in film creation with the same generosity and investment that was evident in the session today, that there is the potential for some new and meaningful collective outputs.

I also *know* that outcomes are only part of any learning and growing process, and that the experiences of being in the moment, of getting into flow, of playing around and of putting oneself in the environment where novelty and discovery abound, enables us to connect to different versions of our present self. A present self that is flexible, open to changing direction and persuasion and position (physically, intellectually, emotionally, perceptually) and also a self that finds pleasure in an embodied understanding of the differences between a 'human doing' and a 'human being'.

Those spaces, wherever we find them, that enable us to connect with ourselves and others in ways that take us (for a short while) away from our habits offer the potential for us to develop new movements (*neurological pathways*) in our brain, in our physiology, in our experiences, in our memories and also in our imaginations.

I conclude with a short piece from Anne Bogart entitled 'resistance' and it offers, I think, some brilliant advice for all of us.

LETTER 7 (joint)

Dear Teresa,

I have had to find ways to deliver material to students who are hungry to learn but terrified about whether they can tackle something so seemingly difficult and outside of their experience. This part has been my major learning curve. In fact, of courses, they have so much to offer in comparison to the usual undergraduate, richness of experience, humility, excitement and no sense of entitlement....as a result I have become a passionate advocate of making the university a space that is available and accessible to older people. The students who have worked on the film crews making the older peoples' films have told me that this has been the best experience of their time at film school – they have enjoyed working with the older people. They were given respect for what they knew, loved being able to teach and lead, and learned to respect these old people who turned up at 6:00 in the morning and worked full days to 10 at night with energy and commitment and good humour to make their films. All those involved last year are clamouring to work on this year's films. We are now working to get the University to commit to being an Age Friendly University and are looking at ways to develop similar programmes in other areas- such as your performance. For myself, how can I begin to describe how important this has been. I have learned that I have to plan to age well and that starts now. That I need to value my experience, what I have to offer and what I have to learn from my peers, my elders and the young people I teach and learn from. It has restored my joy of teaching. To work without assessment, with no agenda or learning outcomes other than to pass knowledge on, to share expertise, to give opportunity for self expression and to find new ideas to develop...my own practice has become more reflective and I feel as though I have found a rich seam that can be mined for many years to comecertainly for as many years as I have left!

'Your attitude towards resistance determines the success of your work and your future. Resistance should be cultivated.

How you meet these obstacles that present themselves in the light of any endeavor determine the direction of your life and career.

Allow me to propose a few suggestions about how to handle the natural resistances that your circumstances might offer.

Do not assume that you have to have some prescribed conditions to do your best work.

Do not wait.

Do not wait for enough time or money to accomplish what you think you have in mind.

Work with what you have right now.

Work with the people around you right now.

Work with the architecture you see around you right now.

Do not wait for what you assume is the appropriate, stress-free environment in which to generate expression.

Do not wait for maturity or insight or wisdom.

Do not wait till you are sure that you know what you are doing.

Do not wait until you have enough technique.

What you do now, what you make of your present circumstances will determine the quality and scope of your future endeavors.

And at the same time, be patient.'