

**Psychic distance, consent and other ethical issues:  
reflections on the writing of “A Gentle Going?”**

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**Abstract**

*A Gentle Going?* is a story I wrote in the summer of 2004 about my father, who died in 2003. I have since been preoccupied with the experience of producing it – the story of the writing. It is this story that I explore in this conference paper.

I begin by examining the choice to write parts of *A Gentle Going?* in the third person and, secondly, discuss the experience of consulting my family about the story. Although the first is in part a technical matter, at its heart – as with the second – are issues of ethics. The second is more than simply about seeking consent: the experience gave rise to broader questions that remain on my mind.

I end the paper with outlining what I discovered in the writing of *A Gentle Going?*: about myself, my father and the process of writing.

*A Gentle Going?* is a story I wrote this summer about my father, who died in 2003. In the story I describe events from his last few days, his funeral, and my childhood<sup>1</sup>. I have since been preoccupied with the experience of producing it – the story of the writing<sup>2</sup>.

I am aware that it will be incomplete. The reflexive process is endless, like a hall of mirrors<sup>3</sup>, and there are elements of the writing of *A Gentle Going?* that I was unconscious of. To an extent I am “foreign” to myself<sup>4</sup>.

I begin by examining the choice to write parts of *A Gentle Going?* in the third person and, secondly, examine the experience of consulting my family about the story. Although the first is in part a technical matter, at its heart – as with the second – are issues of ethics. The second is more than simply about seeking consent: the experience gave rise to broader questions that remain on my mind.

### The narrator’s point of view

In the literature ‘voice’ often connotes the act of individuals and groups claiming their capacity or right to speak. Its meaning, in that context, is political.<sup>5</sup> Here I wish to focus upon voice as a metaphor for that which

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<sup>1</sup> Wyatt, forthcoming

<sup>2</sup> Ellis, 1995

<sup>3</sup> Davies et al., 2004. See also St. Pierre, 1997; and Foster, 1996, who writes that each time a “subject” writes a different subject always “rushes back as witness, testifier, survivor”, p168.

<sup>4</sup> Belsey, 2002; Kristeva, 1991; Freud, 1901, 1905, etc.

<sup>5</sup> See Motzafi-Haller, 1997; Hertz, 1997; etc.

contains our sense of self<sup>6</sup>; and to the idea that we each have not a unified 'self' but a variety of 'selves' to whom we might choose, or by whom we are impelled, to give voice<sup>7</sup>. This, in turn, affects our choice of narrator *point of view*<sup>8</sup>. I accept that we give ourselves (and our selves) voice through language and that we are therefore always culturally and politically bound<sup>9</sup>.

Some sections of *A Gentle Going?* are told in the third person; initially I wrote it all in the first person. Carolyn Ellis tells the story of the chronic illness and eventual loss of her partner in the first person throughout<sup>10</sup>. At the end of the book she tells her writing story, explaining how she spent years experimenting with form, trying out dialogue and setting scenes; but she does not suggest that she considered the third person. Other autoethnographic writings that I am aware of are told in the first person<sup>11</sup>.

There are dangers writing in the third person. John Braine exhorts new novelists to use the first person because it "gives your tale veracity"<sup>12</sup>; by implication, the third person carries the risk of sounding untrustworthy. It can, in certain forms, sound distant and disembodied. The third person *objective* is the voice of traditional academic writing, the tone of the invisible, omniscient author<sup>13</sup>. The third person risks, in the case of someone talking about him or

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<sup>6</sup> Hunt, 1998

<sup>7</sup> See Stone, 2004

<sup>8</sup> Gardner, 1983

<sup>9</sup> Belsey, 2002; Elbaz-Luwisch, 2002; etc.

<sup>10</sup> Ellis, 1995

<sup>11</sup> Bond, 2000; Brettell, 1997; Conley, 2000; Denzin, 1999; Ellis and Bochner, 2000; Gray, 2004; Richardson, 1997; Sparkes, 2001, 2003; etc

<sup>12</sup> Braine, 1974

<sup>13</sup> Gardner, 1983

herself, sounding narcissistic; a voice that dictators and boxers have used to talk about themselves.

In contrast, Stone writes about the notion of writing “without power”<sup>14</sup>, where we seek as writers to be tentative, to avoid that which is full of doubt – in his case the experience of madness, in mine the experience of loss – sounding certain and as if it can be fully understood. Such writing without power allows readers to make their own judgement; it allows space for ‘otherness’. He suggests that writing without power is authentic and therefore ethical.

Although I admire Ellis’ account of her relationship with her partner I had times reading it when I felt that I should not be there. (I accept that my discomfort with this intimacy may be about my pathology and cultural background.) When I wrote the hospital scenes of *A Gentle Going?* in the first person I felt that I brought readers in too close both for them and for the characters in the story; it had resonances of confessional television, where we are invited into the intimacies of strangers’ lives. In telling this story I was asking readers to share the private experience of my father’s dying and this made it important to consider both how to allow the reader to witness without intrusiveness and to maintain the dignity of those involved in the story. The experience was personal but the first person neither allowed the reader sufficient distance nor the protagonists sufficient respect.

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<sup>14</sup> Stone, 2004, p23

My sense is that the third person voice in *A Gentle Going?* is 'soft' enough, offers the appropriate *psychic distance*<sup>15</sup>, to acknowledge and give space to the unknown<sup>16</sup>. This may be helped by the use of the third person *subjective* as well as objective; the story is at times presented to the reader through my eyes alone (for example, in the scene when I visit my father in hospital and read to him). "I" could be exchanged for "he"<sup>17</sup>. The final scene (as my father dies) and the beach scene are told in the third person objective.

I gave *A Gentle Going?* to two close colleagues. One responded:

"I read (the story) and then responded to my next thought/feeling by going to the photographic exhibition at (a nearby gallery). Afterwards I realised that using the third person in your autoethnography gave the description a photographic quality for me. Reading the description of your father's death I felt as if I was in the room, above the doorway, slightly to the left and looking obliquely down on you and your family around the bed. I could see everything clearly but in monochrome... The seaside story had a similar effect but I was behind you and your father and the scene is in colour."<sup>18</sup>

My second colleague's comments alluded to his discomfort as he began to read the story: I am a work colleague, and another man, and the story was moving but – initially – uncomfortably intimate. However, he added that the third person felt to him as though the narrator was stepping back from the events being described to position himself closer to, and therefore in support

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<sup>15</sup> Gardner, 1983

<sup>16</sup> Stone, 2004

<sup>17</sup> Gardner, 1983

<sup>18</sup> Judith Secker, 2004, personal communication

of, the reader. This eased his discomfort and contributed to making it possible for him to stay with the story<sup>19</sup>.

There is another angle on the third person voice that I wish to examine: which part of me is s/he? Which one of the “dozen strangers who live in my head”<sup>20</sup>? Where did he (or she) come from? I had not planned to find him in setting out to write; he appeared when I was distracted by my discomfort with what I had written. Until that time he had been “waiting silently in the wings”<sup>21</sup>.

Brettell has written a paper that tells her mother’s story<sup>22</sup>. In reflecting upon the telling she considers two questions: does her position as the subject’s daughter make her own voice more authentic or less? And is she able to maintain enough distance?

I was indistinctly aware, during the period of my father’s dying, of a part of me watching myself having the experience of losing him but could not – did not need to – pay attention to ‘him’. (I have a colleague whose mother is seriously ill. She told me that she feels she needs to write about the experience, but at the moment, in the process of it happening, she is unable to.) The writing of *A Gentle Going?* placed me, as researcher, next to my *observer self*: listening to him, trying to understand and to capture what he had noticed happening, at

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<sup>19</sup> Richard Brooke, 2004, personal communication

<sup>20</sup> Elbaz-Luwisch, 2002, p404

<sup>21</sup> Elbaz-Luwisch, 2002, p425

<sup>22</sup> Brettell, 1997

the time, for my *experiencing self*<sup>23</sup>; and giving him, my observer self, voice in the story.

Brettell does not answer directly her questions about authenticity and distance but notes that these are dilemmas that all researchers have in studying their own culture. I would go further to say that the struggle I experienced was whether I could gain the appropriate detachment not only from my family but also *from myself* to analyse and convey the experience authentically. In adopting the third person voice I was aspiring to attain what the novelist Bernard Malamud described as “that beautiful distancing”<sup>24</sup>.

An established concept in psychodynamic discourse is that of *object relations*, derived originally from the work of Melanie Klein and developed by Winnicott, Balint and many others<sup>25</sup>. This set of theories postulates that relationships, beginning with the mother-infant dyad, are primary and that interpersonal and group experiences lay the foundation for the development of individual identity. Crucially it is our experience of these relationships and the sense that we make of that experience intrapsychically, both conscious and unconscious, that becomes the basis for our relations with others. We develop *internal objects*, imprints of our experience of the people with whom we relate, especially in early life, and these internal objects are in constant, dynamic relationship with each other.

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<sup>23</sup> Casement, 1985

<sup>24</sup> Plimpton, 1984, p154

<sup>25</sup> Klein, 1975; Winnicott, 1975; and Balint, 1985; etc.

In terms of object relations theory, what I have termed my observer self, on reflection, had the feel of a good – or good enough, at least – *containing* object<sup>26</sup>: ‘he’ seemed watchful, concerned, calm; keeping enough distance though not too much; involved but not immersed in the events taking place.

I think that I can go further: he was a *paternal* object, an aspect of the imprint of the experience of my father that I have made my own.

My internal father.

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<sup>26</sup> Bion, 1987

### The complexity of consent

Sparkes draws attention to the risks to both oneself and others in writing autoethnography<sup>27</sup>. Richardson cautions:

“Writing about your life brings you to strange places; you might be uncomfortable about what you learn about yourself and others. You might find yourself confronting serious ethical issues. Can you write...without serious consequences to yourself and (others)? What about your family? Who might be hurting?...How up-front and person-in-your-face become the ethical questions, the most important of all questions, I think.”<sup>28</sup>

The process of consulting over *A Gentle Going?* brought these issues into focus; it gave rise to “ethically important moments”<sup>29</sup>.

I emailed the story to my mother, brother and sister to ask what they thought. I explained how the story was written “from my perspective, told through the lens of my relationship with him”. I notice the defensiveness in this statement, behind which – I now realise – is my feeling of guilt that in writing the story I was claiming my father for myself. There was competitiveness involved in my writing it, a desire to demonstrate not only that my father was special to me but that I was special to him.

I was anxious about how my brother would react to a tale that concerned the relationship between his – our – father and me. He has not said anything yet

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<sup>27</sup> Sparkes, 2003

<sup>28</sup> Richardson, 2001, pp37-38

<sup>29</sup> Guillemin and Gillam, 2004

but it would be difficult to do so. Ours is not an easy relationship. And my mother and sister have teased me about the incident that I describe in the story where I arrived at the hospital and my father ‘surfaced’, recognised me and smiled. At the time, when they had been by his bedside for almost two days, they sighed, “Typical. He doesn’t acknowledge us and smile like that for us”.

I think that the email also hints at my concern that I have commandeered my family’s collective experience of my father and his death, *our* story, and made it my own.

My mother, when I next saw her after the email, returned the story with corrections, as she called them; one of these was a sentence that began with ‘and’. He wouldn’t have liked that, she told me with a smile.

She wondered whether I shall write about her when she dies. She had decided that this would be unlikely as there will not be much to say. I protested, and offered to start writing it now so she could read and approve it before the event.

I know that she was being ironic – and I understand how genuinely pleased she is to have the story – but I have worried since. What kind of dynamic have I set up? If I do not write something for her – assuming she predeceases me – what will that mean? How will others, my siblings particularly, interpret that? And this is not only a dynamic between my mother and me, nor even my

family of origin and me: a friend asked me what my two teenage children will do when I die. I replied that I had no idea but they had better do something. I was only half joking.

My family's consent to *A Gentle Going?* being published has been given. However, in thinking about my "relational responsibilities"<sup>30</sup> I am struck how seeking consent is never only about *procedural* ethics, not a once-and-for-all process completed by the ticking of boxes and the signing of forms, but about ethics *in practice*<sup>31</sup>: responding to the immediate, emotionally intricate, spoken and unspoken interactions within intimate relationships. I am glad that I have written a story about my father but the question remains for me: how any of us – researchers and participants – can predict the implications of negotiating consent and, fundamentally, of undertaking such autoethnographic research in the first place<sup>32</sup>. I am convinced that such research is worth attempting but it has consequences.

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My brother asked me whether or not writing *A Gentle Going?* had helped me in becoming reconciled to our father's death. It reminds me of Richardson's point that writing is discovery<sup>33</sup>: what have I discovered, beyond the issues covered in this paper? I remain uncertain about much but I think that I can say the following:

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<sup>30</sup> Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p177

<sup>31</sup> Guillemin and Gillam, 2004

<sup>32</sup> See Sparkes, 2003; Richardson, 1997

<sup>33</sup> Richardson, 1994

I now realise how significant the sea is to me in my experience of my father, and I cherish this insight;

There was a wonderful – in its literal sense – quality to my father’s dying;

And, finally, I have learnt that the writing of the story is another loss. I was swimming in the Atlantic off the west coast of France this summer, alone, out of my depth, beyond those bathing close to the beach. I thought about my father, as I knew that I would, imagining his swimming alongside me, but what came to me were words from *A Gentle Going?*. I resented that. It was almost as if the story had usurped my memories, had *become* my memories. I have “cannibalised (a) remembered truth and replaced it with a new one”<sup>34</sup>, which I regret.

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<sup>34</sup> Dillard, A, cited in Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, pp143-144

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