

The telling of a tale: a reading of "A Gentle Going?"

A paper presented at the First International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry,
UIUC, May 5-7, 2005

Jonathan Wyatt

Institute for the Advancement of University Learning
University of Oxford
(and student on EdD programme, University of Bristol)

jonathan.wyatt@learning.ox.ac.uk

Abstract

A Gentle Going is an autoethnographic short story, due to be published in *Qualitative Inquiry* in 2006. It is the account of the death of my father in 2003. The paper for this conference will be an oral – ‘performed’ – presentation of this story.

The account tells brief tales of my father’s life, my – and my family’s – last days with him, and his funeral. It may be a story of loss, of disability, of illness, of families, of masculinity and of Englishness; it may also a story about a father and a son.

This conference paper seeks to explore the experience – and impact – of telling the story ‘live’: the telling’s impact upon those who hear it, its impact upon the teller, and its impact upon the story itself as it is rewritten in the participation of the event; the plotline “restoried..., relived and retold” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p165).

A second paper for the conference explores the story of the writing of *A Gentle Going*.

Clandinin, DJ and Connelly, FM (2000) *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research* San Francisco: Jossey Bass

Today

He would be amused at this. Outwardly embarrassed, but secretly proud. That I am standing in front of you telling you about him. That I have brought him over to the United States, a nation he never visited; packed him in my bags and brought him to you. Maybe now he would be standing over there, by the door, as if ready to leave. Tall, straight backed, leaning against the wall, walking stick in folded hands in front of him. Listening.

1972

The grey waves broke fiercely and retreated; the shingle rattled. The beach was scattered with people – children chasing each other with seaweed, tightroping along the groynes and hiding from the sunshine under towels. Buckets full of water were being carried from the water's edge to moats dug round spaceships, while older children squealed in the shallows as the bitter water slapped their waists. In the near distance, the heads of the stronger swimmers appeared and disappeared in the swell, uncertainly.

Through the crowds a man and a boy made their way together tentatively towards the water. The man leant on the boy's shoulder, occasionally tightening his grip and pressing his weight down on him as the pebbles dug in to the sole of his lame right foot. Some children stopped their games and stared. Their parents looked too, but discreetly, before issuing whispered commands to stop being so rude. The man's embarrassment was obvious in his hurry to get into the water.

His grip on the boy's shoulder slackened as they waded out beyond the paddlers. There was sand under their feet now. The cold crept higher the further out they went and they drew short, quick breaths.

And then the countdown. They had done this so often that, once it began, they both knew there was no turning back. He let go of his son's shoulder and moved a pace away:

TEN! NINE! EIGHT! SEVEN! SIX! FIVE! FOUR! THREE! TWO! ONE!

And in they went.

End of September 2003

It is calming to walk in the graveyard. I notice its tranquillity. Reading the graves' inscriptions, I understand how people remain alive in the memory of those who knew them. And then catch myself: the people here are long dead, and their loved ones gone too.

I hear the crunch of shoes on gravel as mourners approach the church. Their voices are muffled the other side of the thick stone walls. The bell is striking a single, solemn note. The pine trees that surround the church reach up above me as I move in their shadows and, though autumn beckons, the air is thick with warmth.

I stand still, breathe, loosen my shoulders. I brush the lapel of my jacket, adjust my tie, and take out the script from my pocket to run through, once more, what I am planning to say about my father. For years – his Parkinson's was a part of our lives

for nearly two decades – I have imagined what it would be like to speak about him at his funeral. In the scene I had painted for myself I hadn't realised how much I would carry the voices of my brother and sister as well as my own.

I look at the pages, mouthing the now familiar words. I wonder if I can do this from memory – he would like that – but accept that I will need to read it. My anxiety will be too great.

Enough. I leave the graveyard, reluctantly, and return across the grass, weaving my way between the headstones, around the church to the driveway and his friends – I am sure he never realised how many he had – arriving to say goodbye.

I stand at the front, my father lying behind me. We have sung a hymn, heard prayers and my brother has read from John's Gospel. The air is cool and still. I look up and around briefly. The pews are full; family in front of me, behind them faces I mostly do not recognise.

I look back down and begin. My voice is thin. I am afraid. I begin to tell people about Dad, that I want to relate why my siblings and I are pleased and proud to be his.

My voice splinters. I have to pause. Swallow. Breathe.

I describe his battle as a young man against polio – Peg Leg Pete he called himself – and then, at the end of his life, with Parkinson's. His obstinacy and determination. I remember the games he made up for us and latterly his grandchildren, his lethal accuracy with his walking stick in games of soccer, his irritating adherence to

punctuality, his insistence on reciting lines – the same lines – from Macbeth each morning as he left for work. There is laughter and I begin to enjoy myself; can see surprise in people's faces, hear their delight at a picture of him that few present knew for themselves – as vital, physical.

I sit down next to my family and notice that I am shaking.

Later, we walk out into the brightness, wait hesitantly, then go to our cars and follow the hearse to the crematorium.

Three weeks earlier

The private Catholic hospital smelt of new wood and fresh paint. Observing the prints lining the walls, treading on recently laid carpet, and walking past offices it was easy to imagine being on commercial rather than hospital premises. Only the icons would be incongruous. St Hugh's ward resembled a suite of single hotel rooms fanning out from a comfortable lounge. Nursing staff moved slowly between patients, and Sister Mary, in her pastoral role with patients and their families, sat in one corner of the sitting area talking quietly to a relative. This was a calm place to be.

He had been with his father for an hour. They had spent some of this time trying to do the crossword, something that they had attempted – and occasionally completed – most weeks for the last few years. In the past the father had answered ten clues to his one, explaining patiently to him how each worked, enjoying the satisfaction that still being sharper than his boy – now over forty – gave him. Over the years the son

had improved slightly as his father's concentration and lucidity had diminished. Cryptic had become unfathomable, for both of them.

*Earlier, they had read poetry. The father's books of Christian verse lying beside the bed invited a conversation about faith, and the father expressed sadness that his son no longer believed. Both parents shared a strong faith; his older brother too. The son used to believe, but not for twenty years, and this exchange was familiar. Today he said simply that he knew it made his father sad. In his discomfort the son had taken another book, an anthology, and found the *Ballad of Reading Gaol*. He read the first line aloud, and paused. His father continued, eyes closed, with the rest of that verse and then the second. He stopped there. It was not clear what halted him: failing memory, loss of confidence, lack of energy, or some other distraction. It was as if the poem, that he once knew by heart, had ceased to matter.*

Now the son was leaving. For ten minutes the father had been telling him to go, not wanting him to be late for his mother. The son was working on the basis of it being an approximate arrangement but no plans to meet were approximate for his father.

He was sitting, propped on pillows; glasses, dense white hair, chest still tanned. He had been a big man once but he seemed so vulnerable now: not frail, but fragile; weary. Only his hair remained robust.

The son remembered that he hadn't kissed his father goodbye. He went back, and gently touched the father's forehead with his lips. From his early teens they never used to kiss, or hug, or shake hands (though he proudly remembered the hand on his shoulder as they walked down to the sea). In the last few years, when his father seemed to have become like a child, kissing had become permissible again.

As he leant down, his father spoke:

“When I’m back home, maybe next time you come, I need to go through some things with you. Things in the garage and in my room.”

He wondered for a moment what things they could be – his father was so organised – but slowly registered what he was intimating: there was little time. The son replied,

“That’s fine, Dad. Let’s do that.”

Leaving, he moved alone through the corridors, seeing no one but the receptionist, and walked into the sunshine.

He felt relief.

I need to go through some things with you. Let’s do that.

Their last conversation.

One week later

The son knew that he would be the first one in.

He sat beside the bed. The father’s breathing was regular, but the gap between each breath was long, much longer than the day before. The son noticed that he was holding his own breath, waiting for his father to inhale each time.

He held the father’s hand, stroked his hair, placed his head on the once-strong chest and wept.

An hour later, by mid-morning, the immediate family was with the father. The eldest grandchild had joined them; Sister Mary, too, standing slightly removed. There was silence, at times, and talk, amongst themselves and to the father.

Sister Mary enquired if she could pray. She asked that he be released to continue his journey. The elder son said he, too, would like to say a prayer. He spoke of God's victory over death.

The father exhaled once more.

Moments later they realised he had left them.

Softly, Sister Mary and the grandchild moved out of the room. The others remained, touching him still.

"It's as if he was waiting for us to finish praying," one said.

"His timing was always good," replied another.

They sat in silence. There was traffic noise from outside and the sound of comings and goings in the corridor.

Stillness.

And then the father began to sit up. Not far, but further than one might expect of a dead man. Startled, the daughter stood and her knee released the button under the bed that it had inadvertently pressed. He came to a halt. They giggled uncontrollably.

Outside, later, as they left his room, the grandchild was confused. "Grandpa has just died. How could you laugh like that? What was it about?"

They explained but she remained unconvinced.

Today

This morning I woke early. I am jet lagged still and in unfamiliar surroundings but that does not fully explain my disturbed sleep.

I think that I was anxious about my sense of responsibility. To my father, to my brother, sister and mother, to me. I have left my own family to be here.

And now, in offering you this story, I am also conscious of my responsibility towards you, colleagues whom – largely – I do not know but who have fathers, mothers, partners, children.

And know what it is like to love and to lose.