

Section D I as creative manager

How does knowledge transformation manifest itself in my practice as a creative manager? How have I found connections between creative writer: creative educator: creative manager roles?

Chapter Ten

Story as crisis: critical incidents in the higher academy

The sustainability of vision

Authenticity

*I am only prepared to act through (my core) beliefs, rather than through desire for power, status, recognition, or fashion. I regard my own authenticity as acting always in congruence with these beliefs, and **wherever they are compromised or threatened I will seek repair and resolution, however hard-earned these might be.***

Well being

I have a responsibility to preserve my own well-being, so my actions are fuelled by an energy which is capable of recharging itself, rather than by a negative and draining energy. It is only in this way, that creative responses can continue to be sustained.

This chapter explores a critical incident that forms part of my story as a teacher, and deconstructs my responses to it as a creative writer and as an educator. Chapter Nine explored ways in which critical incidents formed a catalyst for change in teachers' lives, while Chapter Ten considers my own 'un-ease' when personal beliefs were under threat. The critical incident took place in 2000 when I was 'selected' for redundancy from a team of twenty, along with one other colleague, after eight years of employment. The incident impacted on the health of the team as a whole, and involved major repositioning of self in relation to the institution. The chapter uses the methodology of concurrent evidence to tell the story: diary, letters, memos, poems and personal notes written between February and July 2000, following the example of Whitehead (1993). It also draws on various analyses of the 'critical incident', including Tripp (1993) and Vasilyuk (1991). In exploring this incident, I am also focused on the ways in which it was possible to sustain wellbeing in a situation which was unsustainable; and how it was possible both to survive and be transformed by crisis and the experience of dis-ease.

Critical incidents can be interpreted in a number of ways. Chapter Nine explored 'critical incidents' in the sense researched and defined by Tripp (1993) as the

interpretation of any event as significant. (Tripp 1993: 8). It is “professional judgement” which determines whether or not an event carries profound implications and could be the stimulus for change. The capacity to identify significance and respond to it has been seen as a key factor in the development of reflective practice. Griffin’s research (2003) revealed that critical incident analysis amongst pre-service teacher trainees “increased the degree of -- orientation toward growth and inquiry.” (Griffin 2003: 207). Specifically, interpreting the significance of classroom incidents developed the three attributes of reflectivity defined by Dewey: “open-mindedness, responsibility and wholeheartedness”. (Dewey cited by Griffin: 207) The teacher stories in Chapter Nine were further examples of reflectivity being enhanced by the interpretation of classroom events.

This chapter will explore a second, and ‘strong’ definition of critical incident as “any event that is unexpected, acute, stressful and exceeds the normal coping capacities of individuals” (FEAP University of Virginia 2006). In this sense, the critical incident I will describe lies outside what one might ‘normally’ expect in a working life as a teacher, career-changing events such as redundancy, restructuring, privatisation . Chapter Eleven explores examples of the latter two from the perspective of a manager; this chapter explores redundancy from the perspective of an employee.

Vasilyuk describes two ways in which crises of these kinds can be resolved:

One is the restoration of the life disrupted by the crisis, its rebirth; the other is its transformation into a life essentially different (Vasilyuk 1991: 118) .

However disruptive and dysfunctional the crisis, Vasilyuk defines it as an opportunity

To act on the basis of (my) value system, to actualise and affirm it, to act upon it under conditions which practically and materially operate against it. (ibid: 140)

The critical incident I describe shows the ‘survivor’ response to attempt ‘restoration’ as a first resort, and to reluctantly and slowly accept the need for transformation into ‘a life essentially different’.

As a model for the strategy I use, I have been influenced by Whitehead's account of his battles with the established academic community, both as a researcher and as an educator (Whitehead 1993). This revealed to me:

- the potency of original documents – letters, memos, meeting minutes – in telling the story of institutional attitudes
- the educator's experience of paradox when his/her own deeply revealed values are rendered invisible or unacceptable by the academy
- the importance of confronting negative experience, and of rejecting all inclinations to sanitise this or to suggest easy resolutions

10.1 Redundancy as paradox

In this story my own paradox is this: literary creativity is the thing that defines and distinguishes me as an educator: literary creativity is the thing that makes me a misfit as an educator.

The academic establishment makes different, ever changing demands at each stage of our contact with it: student, scholar, teacher, manager: and the institution as a result seems never to be something that can be fully known. In addition there are specific difficulties women experience as the dispreferred gender in higher education, making their positioning as leader all the more complex (Marshall 1984, Munro 1998) :

The styles typical of women and men both make sense given the context in which they were learned, but they have very different consequences in the workplace. In order to avoid being put in the one-down position, many men have developed strategies for making sure they get the one-up position instead, and this results in ways of talking that serve them well when it comes to hiring and promotion. ---- Women are more likely to speak in styles that are less effective in getting recognized and promoted. But if they speak in the styles that are effective when used by men – being assertive, sounding sure of themselves, talking up what they have done to make sure they get credit for it – they run the risk that everyone runs if they do not fit their culture's expectations for appropriate behaviour: they will not be liked and may even be seen as having psychological problems. (Tannen 2001: 40)

This complexity is in evidence in the story of redundancy. It begins with a happy and successful period of seven years as a Senior Lecturer in a working environment that, at my level (with little contact with Senior Management), was optimal: the range and

quality of teaching and travel opportunities, relationships with my colleagues and students, and the physical environment itself, including a view of the sea from my office window. I was editor of an international research journal, *Reading English as a Foreign Language*, was running a creative project for Malaysian students (as described in Chapter Seven), course leading degree courses in Mexico and the Netherlands, and presenting programmes for local television (as described in Chapter Six). I had had little occasion to encounter Senior Management since the day of my interview, apart from occasional official letters attached to the monthly payslip. This had never worried me: on the contrary, it seemed to be a lucky opportunity to do the work I most valued alongside those who most valued it. The only hint of potential trouble, was that my work was not permanent. Not only was it on a rolling 3-year contract, I had also been required to sign, as part of the contract, an agreement to waive all redundancy rights. In spite of this, I had made a complete commitment to Devon, the community where we lived, and this institution where I worked. It was the place, too, where I met my husband, and where we bought the house which was the first in a lifetime of travel, that felt like home.

10.2 Falling down the pothole: telling the story as it unfolds

Event 1

July 1999: Letter is received 6 weeks before the end of a 3-year contract, informing me that my contract has now been extended for one year only, with all waiver clauses intact.

Immediately on receipt of the letter, I enquire whether the letter has been sent to me individually, to selective members of staff or to all of us. I am confirmed that all staff with contracts ending in August 1999 received the letter.

Event 2

October 1999: Staff meeting: staff express concern that the extension letters were sent without consultation or discussion. Management express the position that there will not be work for everyone after August 2000. We raise the point that we would be prepared to consider flexible contracts and other ways of sharing the work reduction.

Event 3

December 1999: Meeting with line manager, who expresses concern that my literature area of work has declined, thus making my post vulnerable. I emphasise the point that I am currently course leader of 4 other areas, none of which involve Literature and all of which are scheduled for the next academic year. I also point out

other areas in which I would like to participate and develop, such as PhD supervision and distance learning provision.

Event 4

Jan. 11th 2000: Management present at the staff meeting reiterate the position that there will be a reduction in work. They are not able to say how much reduction there will be. We repeat that as a team we are prepared to spread the work, and take reductions in our full-time contracts in order to avoid redundancies.

Event 5

Feb. 1st 2000: Meeting with NATFHE, who to date have not been approached by management or been made aware of any problem within the group.

Event 6

Feb. 22nd 2000: One course of which I am leader (CELTA) is cancelled without warning, through a short memo. I see the Dean who informs me the course is not cost-effective. I discuss with him ideas and initiatives I have formulated for international involvement in the mooted Arts Centre, but I am informed that none of these are viable.

I then raise with the Dean the problem of projected redundancies, and offer to make suggestions for redeployment and skills transferable to other departments. He does not wish to pursue this discussion.

Feb. 26th

Alexander Technique lesson in honey sunlight, and I feel palpably happy – working on creative writing project- a week off mid-term in which I am writing proposals for the *Creative Poetry Writing* project, and planning a conference presentation in March based on ideas from the project. Jumping into the car, I close the door hard against the back of my head, and am stunned by the shock, literally see stars, feel concussed all weekend.

March 1st

John at Art College, writing in March sunlight, dustbins being collected, postman rings the doorbell with a registered letter.

Feb. 29th 2000

CESSATION OF YOUR FIXED-TERM CONTRACT; 31st August 2000

I am sorry to be writing this letter which is to confirm that your contract will not be renewed following its cessation on 31st August 2000.

This decision follows the Dean's consultative meeting with staff on 11 January 2000 and his present best estimate of the level of potential work in the area for which you were originally contracted for. (sic)

We should be happy to discuss the steps that we have taken and intend to take – including the continued search for possible opportunities elsewhere in the College – between now and your contract end date.

Unfortunately, our considerations at this stage do not suggest that natural wastage, recruitment moratorium elsewhere, reduction in part-time recruitment, job transfer, job retraining and/or contract adjustment are sufficiently viable options to remedy the position.

I am scalded, I want to leap into icy water to relieve the burns, but nothing relieves them, I run into the street to find relief and I am running like a hurt animal who cannot speak or scream or understand where the burns come from.

I phone the Principal but am referred to the Assistant Principal: phone the Assistant Principal but am referred to Personnel: phone my line manager but he is in a meeting and doesn't call back.. No-one will talk to me. I have been melted out.

March 2nd

Phone around and find out if I am the only one. If not, who else? Yes, one more person: a colleague, one year from retirement, snatched from a dignified departure by a whisker. Two women deemed to 'go quietly'; one because she is about to retire, the other because she has been flexible, conciliatory and loyal throughout a seven-year career. It is clear at this level where the thinking lies. The men who had heckled in staff meetings, sent aggressive memos to the deans, and threatened to contact the press, seem to have been invited in to the protected circle. The women, who expect justice to be done without loudly claiming it, have been deemed invisible.

March 3rd

Alexander Technique lesson early morning prepares me for the first day back in.

I felt the blow physically, in the stomach, solar plexus and heart. It was literally difficult to breathe for the first hour after the letter arrived.

I arrived for the lesson with a sense of palpable pain that literally ungrounded me. It was difficult to conceive of having the physical strength to face the day. What the teacher did, through a gentle process of non-intervention, was to draw out the resilience that had somehow moved into a panicked retreat: and through a process simply of gentle presence, coaxing it back into place. I experienced it as a movement of warmth, not externally, but from my own inner capacities: and then, literally, a 'filling up' of the places that had been emptied.

By the end of the lesson, the sense of being 'refilled' had become almost visceral in quality. Having felt like an animal that had been savaged, I now felt I could stand up again with a

sense of almost red-blooded courage. I had a sense of the heat which my own body was capable of generating, and the enormous instinct it had to heal itself.

What also happened in this process, was that the pain which I had internalised, moved out of this non-verbal physical space, and instead became a focused, precise anger which I was able to articulate solidly and effectively.

The process I have described continued over a period of months and helped me to gradually transform my situation. I can imagine no other kind of support which could have been so effective. None of the rational words of support from friends, family and colleagues helped, because it was not here that I had suffered the greater wound.

I went in feeling strong, fighting, angry, liberated by rejection. I see my line manager and let my pain flow: the betrayal, the strong sense of THEIR loss, how much less they will be. I feel that, it has goaded me into self-esteem.

Talk to Personnel. She has a box of Kleenex ready for me: but tears are far away. Instead, I feel an icy precision. How did it happen? who made the decision? What was the criteria? What about the pieces left behind, the lights that will go out with me, the projects unfinished? Everyone is sympathetic but managerial, allowing me no room for grievance, taking care to let nothing slip about rights, conditions of service, appeal procedures, union support. I know all of these are somewhere, but I am too numb to find them. No-one can say: Why me? No-one seems to know.

Event 8

I write to the Assistant Principal, listing my skills and responsibilities in the past 7 years, again enquiring as to why I have been selected for redundancy amongst 8 possible contenders. The point is repeated, that the area for which I was originally employed in 1993, had diminished.

March 3rd:

To: the Principal, Deputy Principal, Dean, Deputy Dean and Personnel

cc. NATFHE

I understand that a Skills Audit was drawn up to assess the future needs of INTEC, and match them to staff skills. It appears that this Skills Audit was used to identify me for redundancy.

My view is that this assessment must have been based on a limited view of my skills. I have worked on every course, at every level, and with every degree of responsibility.

I know that the team, and myself individually, would have been happy to provide management with a breakdown of our skills, and recent experience on which to base their judgements. We were not asked to do so.

*I feel strongly that the decision to select me for redundancy is both unclear and unfair. In 1993, it is true, there was a verbal agreement that literature would be part of my job. This was never formally written into my letter of appointment or into my contract: nor was it ever assumed that this would be my **only** role. I have always offered everything that other staff offered, with literature **in addition**.*

I feel that it is my right after seven years of service, commitment and loyalty to the college, to know on what basis I have been selected for redundancy. Nobody has spoken to me who is prepared to take responsibility for this decision. The only information I have been able to deduce, is that this additional skill has been assumed to be my only one; that my other skills have been either overlooked or dismissed.

I enclose overleaf an outline of skills deployed in my work since 1993, and would like to know in what ways these were taken into consideration when my case was reviewed.

(A list of 12 areas of competency and experience is then listed)

March 6th

On March 6th I receive a bland reply to my message, simply rehearsing again the tired and tinny old arguments. None of my specific points or questions have been answered: because they cannot be. Even the bad grammar was the same as in the original letter. No-one had dared to do any more thinking at all.

CESSATION OF YOUR FIXED-TERM CONTRACT; August 2000

Thank you for your memorandum of 3 March 2000.

My letter to you of 29 February 2000 stated that the principal reason for the Dean's decision was that there was insufficient work available to sustain the continuation of your contract following his assessment of the estimated level of potential work for which you were originally contracted for. (sic)

Event 9

In frustration at receiving no clear explanation for selection criteria, and no debate with management about the redeployment of our skills, the other 'selected' colleague and myself send the Dean a letter.

It is not quite the way I feel at the moment, or the way I would do it, but near enough, and we need to support each other now. It is a record of her emotional state at that point: whereas it is clear to me we do not need to operate from an emotional standpoint, since all the indicators of clarity, fairness and justice are in our favour simply by recounting facts. However, we both sign it, send it cc'd to all senior managers, hold our breath for the reaction.

March 6th 2000

We wish to convey our extreme anger and hurt at the way our Non-Renewal of Contract notice was handled. We feel betrayed, humiliated and demoralised in a way that is difficult to express adequately. We feel that the decision should have been relayed to us by a member of the management team, before the letters were sent out. The decisions should have been explained and the reasons given as to why we were targeted for non-renewal out of the possible nine people involved. At least it would have given us time to prepare ourselves to deal both with the shock and horror (our own and other people's) that the decision has generated.

This is all the more surprising in a College that prides itself on practising Christian values and which has also gained an Investors in People award recently. It does not augur well for the future of International Education in this College, that the leadership seems to lack the moral courage required to deal with a situation such as this, particularly one that is in no way a reflection on the quality of our work.

March 9th

Colleagues are now beginning to organise themselves into a response. This has taken a few days – because the way the news was communicated has meant the information has taken a while to circulate; and because the response of disbelief has been, at least at first, paralysing.

The first response is from the co-ordinator of my research group to the Dean.

I understand that the College has informed Jane Spiro that her contract will not be renewed later this year. I guess decisions concerning redundancies are taken by the line managers of individual colleagues and that, consequently, you have not been involved in this. However, few of us contribute to just one area of the work of the College and the loss of an individual may have repercussions in other areas of our activity. I think it is important that you should be aware of Jane's efforts and her possible inclusion in our next RAE submission. Jane is very active in publishing and presenting at international conferences. She has been engaged in writing a book, of which RG has spoken very highly in Research Committees -----. Jane has also acted as consultant adviser to local television programmes. I append to this a list of her most recent publications.

It seems very sad that (the college) cannot find work for a colleague with Jane's experience and interests. It is also sad and perhaps meaningful that our collaborative activity to promote the institution's national and international profile and contribute to RAE submissions is undermined by decisions that appear to be based on a rather narrow interpretation of a person's contribution. I am sure that you would agree that if we are ever to develop a scholarly, research oriented culture at (the college) we would need to nurture the enthusiasm of colleagues like Jane. If you are able to do anything to find other areas within the College in which Jane is able to deploy her undoubted talents then I am sure it will contribute towards our endeavours to maintain and raise the quality of teaching, research and scholarship.

On the same day, we receive a brief note from the Dean on his return from abroad.

Dear S. and Jane

Thank you for your joint letter on the 'Non-Renewal of Contract', which was waiting for me today on my return from Malaysia. I think there may be some misunderstanding of the process and my role and responsibility in it and would be happy to meet you together, or separately, to explain what I understand at this stage may have happened.

March 11th

Meanwhile the department are doing the same – a more measured corporate expression of shock, and all are involved, everyone.

Dear B.

We are writing this letter to complain about the discourteous and unprofessional handling of the recent dismissals which has had a profound effect on morale in the department as a whole.

Firstly, we are concerned about the total absence of consultation. In the letters received by those whose contracts were terminated, reference was made to 'consultation' with staff at the meeting of 11th January 2000. In fact, no such consultation took place. As the minutes of this meeting clearly indicate, staff were merely informed of the need for redundancies and were assured that consultation would take place. This did not happen. To our knowledge, there has been no attempt whatsoever to discuss matters with any of the staff involved, and the procedures outlined in the Staff Handbook have not been followed.

Secondly, the lack of transparency causes further concern. We would like to know what procedures were used to select staff for redundancy, and to emphasise that whatever the criteria and process used, these should be fair and seen to be fair. Staff are well aware of the need to restructure the department to meet the changing conditions in international education. We would willingly have given our full support and co-operation in working together towards this end. Instead, we have been excluded from the process and not informed about issues that profoundly affect all our careers.

A third concern is the way in which the decisions were communicated to those involved. Notifying staff by letter without any prior discussion with management appears to us to be out of step with current best employment practice and also the College status as an 'Investor in People'.

To address all of these concerns we request an urgent review of the situation, with all available staff of INTEC, to take place within the next two weeks.

Finally, we put on record our appreciation of our colleagues, SP and Jane Spiro, for the invaluable contribution they make to INTEC, for their hard work, commitment and support of others.

The letter is signed by all staff, both academic and secretarial.

I am fierce now, in pursuit of work. There IS work: I WILL be wanted. I am shameless – pull the Dean of Humanities out of the lunch queue to talk work: and now I am touting myself round the college selling my wares – linguistics, literature, education, drama, tea lady, landlady. Anything. I will be wanted. Most of all, I will be known.

Now the world is divided into two people: people who will fight and support, sign petitions, set up petitions, stand up at meetings, hammer the table at union meetings, threaten to strike: and those who will not. Some people let their neighbours melt away: some will not. But ultimately I know more than ever that this is like death: you are in it alone.

The union are soft: they stick to the managerial line. They almost share each other's lines. Not once has the word 'redundancy' been used officially. They dare not, of course, because our case fits none of the definitions of redundancy. Our courses, our students, our projects are ongoing, and will need to be either cancelled or picked up by others when we leave. It is clear a case of redundancy could easily be exposed at a tribunal, and Personnel, the union within the college, and all the college management, are at pains to deflect us from this. No, we are simply casual workers whose contract has come to an end.

I am on the edge of the raft, clinging on. Some people are trying to pull me back: but some are trying to prise off my fingers as I cling to the edge. I am trying to climb on, desparately, because everything I want is on the raft.

The Reject Shop

I am returning the enclosed.

It was too long
too short too big too small
too tight too loose
the wrong colour
shape size cut texture fabric fit
disliked by my lover daughter neighbour dean doctor
dog dentist psychic counsellor.

I ordered
two by mistake.
It was used
soiled surplus to requirements
no longer required
not in line with company requirements.
The garment contract
confirms the garment status as
reusable recyclable unusable
reducible collapsible removable
to dispose of
quietly
after use

March 13th

Today we speak to the Dean, in response to his message. It is our first dialogue, since the letter that expelled us. We go downstairs, feeling like we are the wronged ones, we have the monopoly on injustice, and that commiseration is the least that could happen.

Event 11

Our first (and only) meeting with the Dean focuses on his response to our letter. None of our questions and concerns are referred to or addressed. Instead, we are told the letter is libellous and defamatory, and we are to retract it in writing or be prepared for legal action against us.

This further twist is too stunning to quite believe. We agree to do nothing until he does. In spite of this, I contact a lawyer friend and find out precisely what my legal position is.

Practising Present Perfect

You have sunk my ship
Your ship has sunk me

You have broken my castle
Your castle has broken me

My ship is sunk.
My castle is broken.

March 13th – 17th

At all costs I wish to stay in Devon, in the home we have newly bought and loved, the hills and Dart valley, poetry circles and book club, place where John's children grew up, beaches where we have spent the summers, study overlooking the hills where I wrote my novel.

Jobs in Devon: **local paper:**

Nursing assistant in old age home
School cook
Classroom assistant (hourly paid) in school
Live-in help for the aged
Assistant in petrol station shop

The JobCentre

Categories are:
Secretarial
Marketing and business
Domestic services

Jobsearch: education/language teaching

Permanent jobs anywhere in UK: 0
3-year contracts in Devon area: 0
3-year contracts in UK: Strathclyde, Leicester, Chichester, Canterbury, Oxford
Full-time short contracts in Devon area: 1- 3 month summer job in Torquay

Part-time short contracts in Devon area: classroom assistant.

How do people work in Devon? How do they LIVE?

My size is downed
My line is streamed
My crest is fallen

I apply for a job in the local bookshop.

March 20th

Meanwhile, teaching must continue – the students mustn't suffer. This is an anguish – teaching a course for the last time, caring about their moods, assignment anxieties, worries about grades and grants – to stop myself kicking over the table and saying, “Do you know, none of this matters to them!”

March 25th

Not even the local bookshop wants me.

Now it is difficult to go along with everyone's kneejerk optimism: “You know, for every closed door another one opens”. I realise they need to say this, not because it might make ME feel better, but because it makes THEM feel better. In my fate out there, is their own reflected.

Now optimism seems laughable. I don't seem to fit any of the slots out there. Not only that, there are whole hoards out there who do. Even the local bookshop was ‘snowed under’ – SNOWED UNDER! – with applications.

You pour your time, vision, life plans into an application form, tailored CV and cover letter. You are sincere, thorough, describe your experience, your reasons for applying, your special outstanding qualities and match to the job. In return you receive an acknowledgement written and stamped by yourself. Then nothing. You know you have been etherised: you have already been relegated to the Personnel waste disposal unit.

April

During April I descend into the pit. I realise, filling out application forms, I have become contaminated. The leprosy of failure has entered my CV and placed a hint of disease over all the previous years and years of work. Yes, but why did she lose her job? There must be something which her referees aren't admitting. Yes, you can read between the lines – a bit of an individualist. Probably doesn't fit in: not a teamworker, you can tell. Weeks follow of resounding silence from unacknowledged job applications. I realise what I have accumulated over the years is not experience: it is pricing myself out of the job market.

“For every closed door another one opens”.

That's the open door: a black hole going nowhere.

The world divides into two: there are people who work, and people who don't work. And it seems an extraordinary miracle to be in the first group. The postman has work, the man who delivers our vegetables, the bus driver, the porter, the receptionist, the car park attendant – they have their special clothes, their caps and coats and sacks and blazers: and the people they say hello to every day on their rounds, and their pay packet, however meagre- and the morning routine leaving the house, setting off, saying to their neighbours, "Oh, I work at the post office" or "I'm a milkman". I have nothing to say, except, "I was," or "I ought to be---" or "In my head, this is what I am."

Job interviews: May and June

Bristol interview: running an English language centre

The bed and breakfast has cardboard walls soaked with the stench of bacon. The interview goes sparkingly well in the morning. In the afternoon we talk about money. I realise all the stuff about experience, academic credentials, teaching skills, research activity are a thin veneer. We all know the truth: how silly. What's really wanted is money, someone who will make lots and lots of it. I don't get the job.

Reading interview: running English language short courses

The interview goes sparkingly well in the morning, and in many ways this WOULD be a great springing out of the fire. But in the afternoon, the dean says, "You seem very firmly embedded in Devon cultural life". He lists what I am embedded in: poetry, TV, music, schools,. "How would you feel about moving to Reading?" There is a second's silence in which I scream out, "No!" I don't get the job.

Plymouth interview: working on a new Drama in the community programme

This one is the last in the line. All the other hopes have been downed like a row of skittles. Now I am like the stuck bull before dying, and this is the last stake. I am glorious in defeat. I rise in magnificence to the challenge, telling every story of every talent and desire that has driven me through 20 years of a career. I see their eyes sparkle with admiration and surprise. Even those on the panel who thought they had known me, look dazzled as the dying bull roars its last. I don't get the job.

July 20th

At college, work goes on and on as if nothing runs out at all – nothing is expected to go dry – my energy, my capacity to smile and smile. And now I am letting go of everything – the sense of a career, an office, colleagues, something to get up for in the mornings, something to dress for, the feeling that doing a good job might matter, the feeling that there might be fairness or justice at all, being able to live in my home, being able to pay for a home.

In the morning I say to John, "I'll have to go abroad again".

I think now the carrying on will kill me. Pretending to be well will be the finish of me. I feel my heart pounding like a pressure cooker, and at night I can hardly breathe, as if large rocks have been rolled onto my chest.

I go to the doctor and for the first time admit I am being made ill with stress. I am signed off with stress for six weeks, and never return to my department. It is the first time in eight years I have had more than one day's absence.

10.3 On not living happily ever after

On July 22nd I was offered a one-year half-time post in the Primary Education department of my college, training teachers in the Literacy strategy. This acted as a temporary 'salve' to the situation, and with relief I accepted the job.

The year was exquisite torment. The Primary team were resentful they had not been able to select their own new colleague, but had had one foisted on them by the Dean. They were sceptical that language teaching with international students had anything to do with language teachers in a primary school, and were not prepared to change their minds. They were sure that teaching international students was as far away from teaching in a UK school as teaching on Mars would be. All of this meant that the torment of the 'end of contract' was due to come round again a second time: but this time within a team who were desperate to choose a colleague from their own world, and who saw my language as different no matter how much the truth and the testimony of students proved otherwise.

In this primary team year, I was trying against all the evidence, to "restore the life disrupted by the crisis" (Vasilyuk 1991), not seeing that too fundamental a conflict was in place; and that separation and transformation was the inevitable conclusion. It did indeed emerge that my primary team post was being advertised and interviews were in place even as I struggled to assimilate. Understanding at last that a working life in Devon was a hope too far, I began to apply for posts in an ever expanding radius from home. On July 6th 2001 I was offered the post of course leader for an MA in English Language Teaching in Oxford, and moved onto a 60-foot narrowboat on the Thames to start a new dual life separated by 180 miles.

Whatever personal regeneration I was capable of after these events, in more global and political terms the outcome was the opposite of desirable. It told us all, within the system as it stood in 2000/2001, that there was no meaningful, or legally binding, connection between work success and work security: between what one gave an institution and what one received. The two had come adrift.

10.4 Work and the law

Employment law in the UK up till 2001 was the most biased towards the employer, of any other country in the world. Even countries with notoriously bad records of human rights, such as Burma and Saudi Arabia, offered the employee more basic rights. (Personal correspondence with Coles, Professor of International Law 2001).

In 2001, British universities had exploited every loophole in English law to ensure:

- the employment could remain casual indefinitely and irrespective of quality of the work or length of service
- that employers could force employees to waive their rights to redundancy pay or any appeal in the event on redundancy
- that the banning of such waivers after 2000 could be bypassed, simply by extending the original contract on which the waiver still held
- that such contract extensions did not require negotiation or signed acceptance on the part of the employee, because by continuing to remain in employment a tacit acceptance of the conditions is assumed
- the only condition which would make the institution liable if it failed to be met, is that of offering a minimum of three months notice. This, in my own case, the institution took trouble to do.

The fact is, that the laws of 2001 on which my conditions of service operated, were just 2 years later not only illegal, but a contradiction of the tenets of morality enshrined in the European Commission for Human Rights. It also failed in several basic principles listed under the ACAS Redundancy Handling agreements, 2002:

1) Failure to consult :

Where an employer fails in any way to comply with the requirements to consult about proposed redundancies, a complaint may be made to an employment tribunal. Case law has shown that dismissals have been found to be unfair where

a union has been consulted but not the individual. It is therefore best practice that individuals who are to be made redundant are consulted .

2) Unfair selection for redundancy

As far as possible, objective criteria, precisely defined and capable of being applied in an independent way, should be used when determining which employees are to be selected for redundancy. The purpose of having objective criteria is to ensure that employees are not unfairly selected for redundancy. Examples of such criteria are length of service, attendance record, experience and capability. The chosen criteria must be consistently applied -- (ACAS 2002)

In retrospect, what appears to be the most culpable act of the institution and its members, was in **barring me from access to my rights**. They did so in a calculated way by:

- refusing to invoke the term *redundancy*, and thus the conditions pertaining to this
- persisting in a literal return to the notion of casual short-term contracts
- focusing on the legal status of the waiver clause

Laws reflect the regime that generates them. The Nuremberg laws were the opposite of justice, and yet they were law. They offer to us a spectre of how monstrously the law can be used to facilitate injustice. One injustice, like an electric current, connects with all others that have been perpetrated: and the anguish for me lay in knowing that injustice therefore existed for everyone.

memory is no less primary than the prick of a pin, or its silver glimmer, or the taste of the blood it pulls from the finger. The Jew is pricked by a pin and remembers other pins. It is only by tracing the pinprick back to other pinpricks ---- when his mother tried to fix his sleeve while his arm was still in it, when his grandfather's fingers fell asleep from stroking his great-grandfather's damp forehead, when Abraham tested the knife point to be sure Isaac would feel no pain – that the Jew is able to know why it hurts.

When a Jew encounters a pin, he asks: **What does it remember like?** (Safran Foer 2002: 198-199)

10.5 Redundancy and the alchemy of creation

In 2003 I began a second novel, with the aim of placing at the heart of it the experience of redundancy, and exploring the fictional reality of the question “what does it remember like?” (ibid).

In the novel, Joel Elderkind, the main character, has inherited from his father an amber trading company, that was founded by his family in Poland five generations earlier. The amber company had saved the family from the death camps in the 1930s, in that its success had offered them a passport for entry into Britain. Joel's grandfather and father had made a success of the company in Britain, but in the late twentieth century, the forces of the modern business world had begun to bite deep. Cheap plastics and other imitations were beginning to replace the real amber shipped from the Baltic, and Joel is forced to make a bitter choice: to go into liquidation, or sell his company to a plastics manager that will keep the family name. He chooses the latter.

The scene below takes place on the day Joel hands over the company to Blitz, the young and dynamic new company executive.

* * * * *

"Here's to us, Joel, and Elderkind Amber. Neither of us will look back now, you'll see."

Blitz raised the glass to his Cupid-bow lips and poured the champagne down fluently. Fizz swallow fizz swallow down the flute, the chute, the lips loved by Tanya, down into the greasy greedy cesspit of his stomach.

Joel watched and blinked with shame.

When you are middle-aged may you be fat as a pig. May your belly burst your best pants at your most important board meeting. May you have uncontrollable episodes of farting in public.

"Terrific stuff!" Blitz grinned, staring into the empty glass.

Joel watched, holding his glass untouched in his hand like a dead tulip.

"Of course, at the early stages, just for the first few years or so, there will be some gaps to fill, some debts to stop up, of course. Things have been falling apart a little in the past few years, wouldn't you agree, Joel? But I have no doubts I can tide it over of course. Still, it will be a little thin just to start with. Of course, you'll know about that Joel, won't you? After all, all this is about those thin times."

They both looked at the champagne glass in Joel's hand.

I would rather drink my own blood than drink to this.

Joel set the glass on the floor beside him.

"I think we should have a serious talk about that, you know," Blitz continued, wiping the corner of his lip carefully with an initialled handkerchief.

"Just for the first month or so, I can't say quite how long, it might be better for you to step back, so to speak. You know, let me get on with the job, build it back to its old glory. You'll have to trust me, but I think it would be better for us both if perhaps you just left me to it, you know, at least to start with."

"What do you mean, leave you to it?"

"Joel, let me come clean. What with the state of the company just now, I'm doing you a favour taking it over. I can't afford to take you on too."

"What do you mean, take me on? It's my company – mine and yours."

“I know you feel that way ---“

Joel found himself on his feet, standing over the desk, leaning over with the sudden advantage of height, his blood drumming into his head, into his eyes,

“**Feel** that way! I am talking about what we agreed, you and me. You put in the capital, you put in your own staff, I manage. I’m talking about what we agreed.”

“Sorry, Joel. I know it’s tough. That’s of course the way I’d like it. But for the moment it just can’t work out like that. I’m going to staff it with my own team, just for the moment. That’s the way it is.”

“Staff it with my own team. Is this management –speak for firing me?”

“Well I wouldn’t quite put it that way, Joel. I don’t like to use that terminology.”

“No, you don’t like to use that terminology, of course you don’t. Let’s try this. Our agreement was a sham, right? I’m not convenient to have around any more, right? You’ve lied and wheedled me out of my name, my company, my life, and now I’d better stand aside and let you walk over me. Have I got it right now?”

“Don’t take it like this, Joel, I-----“

“Don’t make a fuss you mean? Go quietly you mean? Blitz, do you know where this company would be if my family had just gone along quietly? Do you, Blitz? Do you know where you and your little scheme would be now if my family had gone along quietly without making a fuss?”

“I know what you’re saying, Joel, --“

“Oh no you don’t, you cosy little yuppie. My family have nursed this business for five generations, a world war and two continents: your staff team have been around five minutes, and all they know about are cheap imitations and quick fixes. This business is just a load of pretty coloured smarties to you. I bet your ‘staff’ think five generations is some rock band. After five minutes, they’ll trash you and walk over you to the next quick fix money spinner. What you’re doing isn’t just stupid, it’s inefficient, it’s ignorant, it’s ---“

“I’m sorry you feel this way, Joel, I knew it would be hard for you but -----.”

“It’s murder, it’s murder,” and Joel was sobbing now, because the wound had done its journey from the skin into the blood and coursed itself round his veins and it had reached his heart and stabbed him there, sent his heart and all the memories mixed in it into spasm.

He crashed out of the room, knocking over the champagne glass, kicking the visitor’s chair, wrenching the door handle on his way, and just as he reached the hall, the wound turned into animal groans of pain, and he was holding his heart like an animal warming itself as it fell, savaged, its heart an open gash of raw and twitching muscle.

As a coping strategy within my own repertoire, I have chosen visceral engagement with the specificity of the situation: a ‘not letting go’ and a revisiting of the specifics of the ‘beloved’ - the amber, the working environment, long beyond the moment when transformation rather than restoration would have been the healthier option. In following this through in fiction to its bitter physical finale, I have worked it through my own psyche and emerged from it ready for the change that followed - unlike my less fortunate fictional hero.

Please see Appendix Reading 16 for a paper on the sources and pedagogic implications of this novel extract.

10.6 Critical incident as transformation

I have learnt and been transformed by the critical incident described in this chapter, in the following specific ways:

- 1) I am more aware of the difference between situations which are capable of restoration, and those which are not. I now understand that it is a matter of survival and self-preservation, to understand the difference between the two and to arrive at this understanding early enough to remain ‘well’ and proactive. Paralysis and ‘un-wellness’ all suggest that the psyche is still trapped in a situation which will offer no solutions.
- 2) Transformation of a critical incident (in the ‘strong’ sense) includes the capacity to learn from negativity whilst walking away from it: ‘to eradicate, in real practice in the sphere of the senses, all traces of the spiritual organism’s infection by the now fading false values” (Vasilyuk 1991: 140). Chapters Seven, Eight and Nine all explore projects which arose from this re-affirmed self in my new post at Oxford Brookes University; whilst Chapter Eleven considers the specific struggles of this re-affirmation in my role as Head of Applied Linguistics.
- 3) I am aware of the danger of visibility too late – of not being known fully to decision-makers until decisions have been made. Tannen (2001) and Marshall (1984) suggest that women are less likely to make their successes visible to managers, or if they do, they are regarded negatively. Yet this critical incident has shown me that trusting that one’s work is known and appreciated can be a fatal error. Specifically, I am more aware of the importance of communication with Senior Management and of making one’s successes visible
- 4) I am aware of the importance of information in being fully armed and supported through a critical incident. Not fully understanding my rights, and not recognising early enough where and how support might be found, was a block to my success.
- 5) I am aware of the importance of wellbeing as a mode of survival This can, and did in my case study above, derive from: physical therapies such as the Alexander Technique lesson, the solidarity of colleagues, ‘writing it out’ fictionally, ‘writing it out’ factually, recognising the symptoms of stress and responding to it.

Chapter Eleven looks at how the transformations described above nourished and informed my role as Head of Applied Linguistics, a post to which I was promoted in 2004. The chapter explores the paradoxes of the management role, and the ways in which the ill-health described here offered powerful models of its opposite, as well as strategies for dealing with critical incident from a different, and more influential, positioning within the institution.