

THE "REAL VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY": AUTO/BIOGRAPHY, REFLEXIVITY AND SPIRITUAL JOURNEYING

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Introduction

The real voyage of discovery consists not in
seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes.

Marcel Proust

The auto/biography *Someone You Know* (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1991) is a voyage into the lives and worlds of two people. Jon is in a gay relationship; he is from an Anglo-Saxon Seventh Day Adventist background. Maria is a feminist, married, and from an Italian-Catholic background. They are teachers at a single-sex Catholic boys' school in Adelaide. Despite, and perhaps because of, their differences, and framed by the Catholic setting of the school and the ethnic and gay subcultural settings of their worlds outside the school, they become strong friends: their various worlds and emotional and spiritual journeys begin to interweave. This "real voyage of discovery" begins to appear part of some larger pre-destined tapestry as Jon discovers he has AIDS and Maria discovers she is pregnant. The book follows their interwoven emotional and spiritual journeys to birth/death and the discoveries that await them at their points of arrival.

This paper has three major purposes. First, the text itself will be examined in relation to T.S. Eliot's poetry of spiritual journeying focusing on contemporary issues such as AIDS, homosexuality, feminism and multiculturalism. Second, the textual reflexivity theory of Robin Usher (1993) will be utilised in examining the spiritual journeying of the text and its author. Finally, I will propose an additional dimension to Usher's model that examines the continued vital spiritual voyaging of the readers in response to the text. Throughout the following analysis, I will be present as three personas: the narrator/character/voyager Maria within the text; the

auto/biographer/voyager Maria who wrote the text; and the Maria who appears to you now as analyst/reflector/voyager of the text just over two years after its publication.

"Do I Dare Disturb the Universe?"

I sat on the teacher's desk, my throat dry from talking. Students raced outside at recess. Why didn't any of them stop to ask me questions? I had just spent forty minutes reading and interpreting T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and now they all rushed out eager to eat. Weren't they hungry for emotional or spiritual food? A few had said Eliot was depressing, weird.

I began to arrange my books. "Great stuff, miss," and there was Jon. "I heard your voice through the wall" ... Jon sat on the desk, picking up my anthology of Eliot's poetry. "I can identify with so much of what he wrote. Especially Prufrock". He leafed through the book until he found the poem. "I feel like Prufrock sometimes: restless, afraid, misunderstood". (*Someone You Know*, pp.12-13)

T.S. Eliot was Jon's great-uncle. Eliot's poetry, particularly his character, J. Alfred Prufrock, seemed to voice the various life experiences and spiritual questionings that Jon faced. As a homosexual man, Jon often felt the eyes fixing him "in a formulated phrase", often felt himself "sprawling on a pin ... pinned and wriggling on the wall" as his sexuality was used by many to define, objectify and deny him fundamental human rights such as the right to love and be loved, the right to family unity, the right to self-integrity and social acceptance, the right to a meaningful vocation in life. The constant "decisions and revisions" regarding whether to disclose his homosexuality and later his AIDS status or construct identities palatable to various others were summarised by Prufrock's question: "Do I dare Disturb the universe?"

Indeed, women and men who have dared to challenge any social and or religious prescription or ascription of what one is meant to be, of how one is meant to think, feel, behave, are faced with countless moments of "decisions and revisions" in relation to "coming out" as one's true self. What will be lost? What will be gained? Does one compromise one's own integrity? Does one maintain a constructed

identity in order to fit in to the "formulated phrases" of others and thus reap the benefits of social and religious belonging and conformity? But at what cost to oneself? And if those prescriptions and ascriptions are not challenged or modified by the lived realities of individuals, will they ever be shifted?

Feminists often "disturb the universe" with their challenging of limiting gender stereotypes. Individuals of non-English speaking backgrounds often "disturb the universe" by challenging the mainstream's perspectives of importance and correctness in lifestyle, culture and tradition. I remember once disturbing Jon's universe of what feminists were and what Italian women were. He said to me, "You can't be a feminist. You're Italian" (*Someone You Know*, p.7).

I remember growing up in the sixties deliberately editing stories about my family's activities for the consumption of the Anglo-Australian children and teachers at school. I learned my lesson quickly as a six year-old after giving a talk explaining how my family had shot a pig, hung it upside down to drain the blood which was collected in a bowl to make pudding. I didn't get to describe the cutting up of the pig to make prosciuttos and sausages. The howls of derision and disgust from the students and the teacher's look of anger were enough. Her note home to my parents stating that witnessing such macabre activities would not be good for my psychological development also convinced me it was easier to make the "revisions" to my identity for the outside world while being truly myself in my real world of family and community. The links between ethnic and gay identity-formations are quite significant, as Jon and I found out in our friendship. "We're a couple of chameleons, changing colours to survive" (*Someone You Know*, p.21).

Eliot's many evocations of the spiritual journeying through life are also powerful echoes of the experiences Jon and I faced. In "Journey of the Magi", the Magi asks —"were we led all that way / for Birth or Death?" (Eliot 1974, p.110). Jon did die. I did give birth. And yet, in our experiences, the supposed dichotomy of Birth and Death was challenged. I will give two examples of this from *Someone You Know*. The first pertains to the spiritual connections between death and birth as Jon and I discuss:

"I know that somewhere out there, in those infinite cycles of life and time, there is meaning in it all. It's bloody awful getting there, but once I've shed this troublesome flesh, I'll be free, at peace with myself, and powerful. Part of God's

universe."

"No longer afraid of death?"

"I'm afraid of the getting there, not being there" (p.121).

Thus, death would be a birth into true life for Jon.

The second pertains to the potentially similar physical experiences of birthing and dying as Jon lay in the Sacred Heart Hospice in Sydney:

Robbo places a hand firmly on Jon's shoulders to prevent the body shaking and with the other arm he encircles Jon's head, hugging it to himself, to stop the knocking and subvert the panic. I clutch both of Jon's hands and struggle to prevent them from swinging away. His fingers close tightly around my own, crushing, hanging on.

I know that need. I remember the pain of giving birth, the panic of the pain, and the need to crush Rob's hand in order to keep a hold on my sanity and life around me (p.170).

After continued onslaughts of fits, the final moment of death was really a birth:

Jon's eyes roll back into focus and he looks at each of us.

His face radiates joy, his mouth gives a smile of pure delight.

His look of absolutely pure rapture seems to lift us and we find ourselves standing, smiling with him, trying to talk to him.

What is happening? Something wonderful is happening.

And then we imprint Jon's final smile and joyful eyes into our minds and hearts for the rest of our lives.

We say goodbye. We tell him we love him. We ask him to stay with us always.

There is no more breathing.

Jon's eyes are open. He has seen what he was waiting to see before he would let go. He has found his destination.

He looks peaceful. His smile of wonder and bliss and the confirmation of his expectations is his last lesson.

(Someone You Know, p.177).

T.S. Eliot's poems such as "East Coker", "The Dry Salvages" and "Little Gidding" explore the supposed juxtapositions inherent in spiritual

voyaging, such as "beginning" and "end", "departure" and "arrival", "ignorance" and "knowledge", referring to human beings as "travellers" who must "consider the future / And the past with an equal mind" and discover "the pattern more complicated / Of dead and living", ("East Coker" 1974, p.203) so that:

what you thought you came for
Is only a shell, a husk of meaning
From which the purpose breaks only when it is fulfilled
If at all. ("Little Gidding" 1974, p.215).

Indeed, it was only about a year after Jon's death when the publishing of a book based on all our experiences became a possibility, that the deeper meaning and power of what had been experienced came to light: "There is a task ahead" (*Someone You Know*, p.188).

Textual Reflexivity Theory and *Someone you Know*

Robin Usher (1993) has developed the theory of textual reflexivity to analyse auto/biographical texts, that is texts which are about both the self and others. This theory analyses the textual interconnectedness of the personal (the personal identity of the auto/biographer), the functional (the realities, histories, cultures that are being constructed); and the disciplinary (the style and structure).

According to Usher, textual reflexivity involves the analysis of four elements: con-text (the positions of the writer and other characters in the writing of and living with the published text); sub-text (the underlying discourses, traditions, and paradigms of the text itself); pre-text (the roles of individuals in the preparation of the publication); and inter-text (the influence of other texts, histories and cultures). I will briefly apply these categories to the analysis of the spiritual journeying within and of *Someone You Know*.

Con-text

This may refer to the spiritual journey of the writer and other characters in the writing of and living with the published text. As Marcel Proust wrote:

a sort of cutting taken from one person and grafted on to the

heart of another continues to carry on its existence even when the person from whom it has been detached has perished.

The writing of the book aptly fitted Proust's metaphor. Jon's life, friendship, love, frustrations, anger and death had been grafted onto our hearts and travelled with us. As I sent out drafts of various chapters to the other "characters", they would be returned with additional comments and reminiscences that could be built into the story. Thus, we felt we were immortalising Jon's life and experiences to be shared with others. We were fulfilling what Jon had said to me on the day he learned of his HIV positive status, "When it's all over, tell them about me so that they may understand someone they know".

Our own understandings of love, friendship, death, human connectedness developed. Some of the characters faced risks from the publishing of this book but they were risks that were felt had to be taken in order to fulfill what Jon wanted and test their own strength and inner conviction. For example, Matteo, a gay man of Italian background, used a pseudonym rather than not let his story in its connection with Jon's be told, knowing the risks he would face if his family should make the discovery. Kevin, Jon's ex-partner, and his Catholic family in Adelaide were prepared to face whatever repercussions would come. The Catholic school where Jon and I had taught allowed the book to be published, and the principal, deputy and various teachers allowed themselves to be written about, knowing what the personal and professional repercussions may have been. The strength, sense of unity, and confidence to stand up for issues we believed in were spiritual leaps in our own developments.

Sub-text

The underlying religious connections, discourses, traditions and paradigms of the text itself can be referred to as the sub-text:

My God says we should love one another, not judge, or condemn. Who am I to deny someone else's opportunity for love? I think we label gay men and lesbians through fear and ignorance (*Someone You Know*, p.9).

I state these thoughts when I am challenged in the text on how I can reconcile my Catholic religious beliefs with my attitudes toward

homosexuality. When I discuss taking time off from work to be in Sydney with Jon before he dies, the principal decides:

At recess-time, I'll call a staff meeting and ask people to donate money towards the flight, and whatever is not raised will be put in by the school. It's the Christian thing to do. (*Someone You Know*, p.140).

And after Jon is dead, and I return to work, I follow Jon's request and inform the staff of his real cause of death:

They [the principal and deputy] understood and would explain to the School Board if necessary. Peter called the staff together and told them the truth firmly and compassionately. I stood near the back wall where I could see everyone. Afterwards I was hugged and comforted, but I couldn't help wishing the hugs and comfort could've been for Jon when he needed them.

Kevin sent a letter for the staff, and thanked them for the support and friendship shown to Jon. "He wanted to be closer to many of you but unfortunately a gay way of life is not often accepted within a school and he feared discrimination. I ask you to remember him for who he was" (*Someone You Know*, p.187).

And examples of spiritual faith in action in the nuns of the Sacred Heart Hospice in Sydney:

She pats Kevin's hand. "Will you be all right?" She's a nun, middle-aged, plump, motherly. She could be anyone's Mum. She cares. She sees humanity in its nakedness and knows there is no hierarchy. We're all the same at the end (*Someone You Know*, p.154).

The text also presents the more dogmatic rules and regulations of religious institutions. Jon told us of his "coming out" to his parents:

My father walked away from me, not wanting to know, reciting comforting religious verses under his breath. Later, he said he never wanted to hear me mention that word again in his house. I was his son and always would be, but the other

thing was not to be given a voice. My mother held out her bible. She wanted me to read the preachings on homosexuality. I wanted to read her the words about love and acceptance (*Someone You Know*, p.17).

The book examines how religious faith can be a barrier to love and connectedness if its dogmatic, life-destroying potential is allowed to surface. Kevin is angry at how Jon's parents are not able to provide what their son desperately needs as he dies—the comfort and love of parents:

They come here with a bible and sing hymns and pray over him and just don't see what he's going through! What kind of God do they believe in? Doesn't sound like the one my parents and I believe in. Or the God that the Sisters of Charity who run this hospice believe in." He shakes his head. "I know they love him. They do love him. But it's the kind of loving he could do without right now" (*Someone You Know*, p.154).

By the time of Jon's death, his parents had also journeyed spiritually beyond the narrow confines of religious dogma:

As we returned to the room, Jon's mother was coming out, face mottled and strained ... "I'm just realising how proud we should be of him. Should've been" (*Someone You Know*, pp.182-183).

"I don't know why I was born this way. I just am this way", Jon would often say. "So only my Creator knows what all this is about." The people at the funeral would be praying to that Creator. Jon's parents seemed to have accepted that his sexuality was certainly out of their parental hands, not for them to condemn even if they couldn't condone it. I thought about Christ's teachings, and the way humanity is selective in its interpretations...

I received a card from Jon's parents. "Thank you so very much for being such a good and true friend to our son. May God richly bless you" (*Someone You Know*, p.186).

Since their son's death, Jon's parents make annual contributions to the

Bobby Goldsmith Foundation which raises money for people in the last stages of AIDS who lack familial and other support.

Pre-text

This can refer to the spiritual journeys of the many people, both lay and clergy, in the preparation of the publication. At the back of the book, I try to acknowledge this:

The publishing of this book has also been an incredible journey ... it's been an inspirational journey of networking and faith. It is also a celebration of how unity in diversity is possible in this world of ours that insists on separating us under sexual, social, racial, political, religious labels.

Gay, lesbian, bisexual and heterosexual peoples, of diverse cultural, social, political and religious backgrounds travelled with me on this journey to make the publication of this book possible. The book launch of about three hundred people was a microcosm of this unity in diversity, this crossing of difference to acknowledge our human connectedness and journeying as members of the lesbian, gay and bisexual community, AIDS organizations, church members, Catholic Education Office members, my Italian relatives all gathered.

Inter-text

The influences of other texts, histories, cultures can be referred to as the inter-text. I have already examined the influence of Eliot's poetry. Other textual, historical and cultural influences were significant in the spiritual themes of this book. Italian heritage and culture is significant ranging from the words of the philosopher Gramsci, "Pessimism of the mind, optimism of the will", with which Jon said he lived, to the simple peasant faith of my parents:

"Well, if that's the way God made you, what could we do?" Dad said. "I'd feel sorry for you. It would hurt me to think you'd have to face so much trouble but ... " He shrugged, holding the palms of his hands to the sky. "There's an old saying, 'Il mondo è bello perche è vario: The world is beautiful because it is varied'" (*Someone You Know*, p.24).

Thus the book also presents alternative perspectives to stereotypical images of cultures and ethnicity, as in presenting Italian migrant parents as non-homophobic and indeed respecting and caring for the homosexual friends of their daughter (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1992).

In coming to terms with AIDS and its personal, social and professional implications, Jon would turn to literature, "seeking consolation and comparison". He consumed Emily Dickinson, William Shakespeare and Albert Camus:

"Dickinson knew death, Eliot knew death in life, and Shakespeare knew the storms of living" (*Someone You Know*, p.84).

Post-Text or Continuing Text

As I have illustrated, Usher's model of textual reflexivity is a useful tool in analysing spiritual voyaging in an auto/biographical text but a further dimension that needs to be added. I would call this the "post-text" or "continuing text" which examines the spiritual voyages of discovery of the readers, as evidenced in the great number of written and verbal responses I have received, as well as anonymous telephone answering machine messages, and the impact of the book on other people's lives, from past friends and colleagues of Jon, myself and other characters to the responses of parent and student members of the school community, to the responses of senior secondary students using the book as part of their studies.

I have received communication from parents of HIV positive and or gay men telling me how useful the book was in connecting to their sons. I have received communication from HIV positive and or gay men saying the book made an excellent gift for family members and friends so that they could talk about reactions to a possible "coming out". I have received communication from past students wishing to express how much they respected and loved Jon as their teacher and how this has escalated further since reading the book. I have received communication from people who have drawn parallels from the book to their own lives, dilemmas and spiritual voyaging, even though AIDS and social acceptance may not be their particular issues (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1993).

After such correspondence, I am often left overwhelmed, overjoyed and in tears at the extent to which Jon's spiritual journey has become a

significant sign-post in the spiritual journeys of so many others. It has indeed fulfilled his aim of helping others understand "someone they know" even if that someone is themselves.

One of the most poignant and blatant examples of this was an anonymous message on my answering machine late one night from an adolescent male who said in an awkward, gruff voice:

"I'm ringin' cos I just finished yer book about AIDS and poofers - uh, gay men - and it's made me do a lotta thinkin' and I feel like a fuckin' shit for having bashed one. It sure won't happen again. Yeah, well, thanks."

Conclusion

There is one further issue I wish to raise: the significance of my being a wife and mother, socially appropriate and safe qualities, to the success and acceptance of the book and its content. If I had been a gay man caring for a HIV positive lover, or writing about my HIV status, would the book have found a place in secondary school libraries and reading lists, especially in Catholic and other private schools? Would I have been invited to the numerous school conferences to talk with students and teachers about AIDS? Would I have been employed as Gender and Equity Officer for the Catholic Education Office? Would I have been invited to be the keynote speaker for the National Loreto Federation of Australia where an eighty year old nun stood up and announced, "After all my years in this patriarchal system, I have learned an important thing. That to be Catholic is not necessarily to be right", and keyspeaker for the Catholic Women's League National Conference where another nun stood up and declared that she had spent so many years of her own life silencing many personal issues and she would do so no longer (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1993).

Hence, the "real voyage of discovery" that stems from the lived experiences that culminate in the writing of an auto/biography and emanate from the reading of the book can be very powerful and uplifting, both spiritually and emotionally. The book *Someone You Know* positions itself as a guide or sign-post in the spiritual growth of interconnected human beings, from the characters in the narrative, to the writer and supporters in the process of publishing, to the readers in their responses to the text and its meaning in their own lives.

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