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Darkness and Silence: The Dis/connection of Writing Intimacy

Citation for published version:

Gale, K, Pelias, RJ, Russell, L, Spry, T & Wyatt, J 2013, 'Darkness and Silence: The Dis/connection of Writing Intimacy' *International Review of Qualitative Research*, vol 5, no. 4, pp. 407-426.

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Preprint (usually an early version)

Published In:

International Review of Qualitative Research

Publisher Rights Statement:

© Gale, K., Pelias, R. J., Russell, L., Spry, T., & Wyatt, J. (2013). Darkness and Silence: The Dis/connection of Writing Intimacy. *International Review of Qualitative Research*, 5(4), 407-426.


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Darkness and Silence

The Dis/connection of Writing Intimacy

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Abstract Having written as a group for four years, we continue with an emblematic methodology of writing into the dark, writing into a space that has become an intensive, maturing, messy, ethically caring, collaborative venture of changing composition. Our collective self writes into a tentative anticipating trust of our presence in the shades of uncertainty. We have written with desire and labor, intimacy and work, stuttering and stumbling our way through what has been a vibrant and aging transatlantic writing group. And now we have come to the perhaps inevitable question about whether we want to continue writing together. This installment traces the complexity of that question.

Keywords: *collaborative writing, performance, autoethnography*

Preface

Our group contribution to this special issue on collaborative writing asks whether we want to continue writing collaboratively. As some of us began tentatively to suggest the possibility of an end to the group, we of course decided to write into the question, not knowing where we might find ourselves collectively or individually.

A large component of our writing together has been presenting an edited version of our year's writing at the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry (ICQI), which we have done for the last four years. That is where we met, over a beer, years ago, and it is where we have stood together reading our writing, to ourselves as much as to the amazingly generous audience that has followed us through the years. Hearing and feeling the presence of one another's voice and body simply standing close together in performance is as powerful an onstage embodied experience as many of us have had as performance and/or autoethnography scholars.

So what have we gained from these collaborations over distance and through performance? And has the time passed for further gain? What follows is our attempt

to address these questions in front of an audience at ICQI 2011. As part of our method for doing so, we decided *not* to share our writing with one another before performance. We did not stand together, but rather sat up front without a speaking order. We agreed to decide in performance who would speak when. These were new shadowlands for us; we did not know whether we would find one another in the dark this time.

Ironically, this non-collaboration generated deep critical reflection upon our collective self, allowing some initial epistemological and ontological insight about collaborative writing, its possibilities and efficacies.

Tami began with an agreed upon opening introduction. She sat down. We then let the words take their course.

Introduction

We have been writing together for four years now, presenting our work here, at QI, with all of you. In the past we have looked over the previous year of writing and then crafted a text into a collaborative reading. Our title this year is “Darkness and Silence: the Dis/connection of Writing Intimacy.” As a group we are not sure where we are going, where we want to go, or even if we want to go somewhere together. As such, we felt it useful for us to write separately to one another, to hear our voices fresh from the page to give ourselves a different space in which to think and write.

Explanations and Desires, Perhaps: Ron

Perhaps it was the difficulty of the task we assigned ourselves: Write from an ethic of care, from a stance of loving engagement. Write bringing forward your best literary sensibilities. Write in response to others’ writing in a timely manner.

Perhaps it was the guilt associated with not doing our agreed upon task as we would have liked, with not being the people we strived to be within our group. I would carry the latest entry from the group to the office and back home again, meaning to write, meaning to find the heart of the message, meaning to write back with sensitivity and insight. Another missive would arrive, and I would place it in the file. Now I carried the weight of responding to another person, and then another, and then one more. I would try to pull them all in, try to gather, but too much would fall away. I did not like the weight of it all. I did not like myself.

Perhaps it was the burden of our institutional obligations. Our universities have demanded more and more of each of us in the last four years we have been writing

together, piled more and more on our desks, put more and more in our bags as we found our way home each night. There was no time, no time for what could be put off, for what could be understood as a luxury, no time to enact our promises to each other.

Perhaps it was the difficulty of sustaining intimacy across distance and time. Once a year we would gather at the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry. We would read our year's writing to each other before presenting it in our conference slot. We would share a meal, sometimes two. Our gatherings were deeply meaningful, rich, touching and, at times, joyous and celebratory. They may not have been enough.

Perhaps it was that our belief in us fell away. As Rheingold (1993) suggests about mediated communities, "A core of people must believe in the possibility of community and keep coming back to that amid the emotional storms in order for the whole loosely coupled group to hold together at all" (p. 53). Maybe we depended upon too few to do our labor, to do the hard work of holding us together.

Perhaps it was feeling we were not sufficiently taken up, that our writing was left hanging, ignored, or addressed in only a perfunctory manner. We felt slighted, hurt. We would pull away, try to minimize our investment, try to convince ourselves that it didn't matter. But, perhaps, each of us felt something was taken away. Perhaps, our vulnerable selves felt diminished, lessened, betrayed. There were times when I asked myself, "Why am I doing this?"

Perhaps it was the unease of disclosure to a group. Disclosing to a group puts into play greater risks, greater levels of trust. We had to account for all the interpersonal dimensions that were at work. We had to negotiate the histories with each other that came before the group, had to consider partners and family members who may or may not be pleased we were writing about them, and had to take into account the audiences at conferences who might eventually hear what we were writing. But most of all, we had to believe we were writing in a safe space. I do not know how safe our space felt. I know I wrote with caution.

Perhaps it was that we lost sight of where to go next, of what could be ethically shared. Altman and Taylor's (1973) Social Penetration Theory suggest that individuals push toward deeper, more intimate exchanges until they feel they have reached the level of penetration they desire. Maybe we've gone as far as we wish, as far as we can. Maybe our group, like most groups, reached a natural end, our task complete, our experiment tested. Or, maybe we need new rules, new places to go, new ways of trying to get there, a new ethic of what it means to be with each other.

So, perhaps, we are here, wounded and wondering. I search our latest entries for answers. I read Larry's comforting and disturbing lines: "Most of the time, I write

for you. I write, knowing that the response, whenever it comes, will be richer than what I deserve. I still write into the dark unknowing space, but I trust that you there in the dark and uncertainty with me." Perhaps we are.

I read Ken's poignant words: "I have been hurt by writing and now if I write I feel myself working hard to write with care, with hesitation, with concern: my madman is locked away." Perhaps we have all, to our detriment, kept our madness locked away.

I read Tami's encouraging words. She suggests that for her we are an ethically sensitive body of writers together. Vulnerable, doubtful, diverse. It's just that we haven't troubled this relationship enough. I would not take away anything we have done together as I think it has set a 'stage' for us to trouble the (f)act of writing, trouble the ways in which our group is a permeable membrane with us moving in and out, together and not.

Perhaps she is right. Perhaps we have more work to do. Perhaps, but at what cost?

I read Jonathan's haunting line: "I think, I feel, we are at an ending." Perhaps.

Then I find my last extended entry to the group, an entry that seemed to get lost in our crumbling. I adapt it here for this occasion, for this occasion of reflection. It was entitled "Desire."

I am deeply saddened, struggling to respond, pulled in many directions. But most of all, I am filled with desire.

I want to have spoken earlier, want to have spoken with urgency to all of you, want to have spoken into our silences.

I want words that provide assurance, that say the scarcity of our writing in this current moment speaks only to how busy we all are, that it does not signal an ending, that it does stand not as a comment on where we are in relationship to one another. I want to say that, but I'm not sure if I can. I am not sure if I would be speaking the truth.

I want to take each of you in my arms. "Here I am," I'd say. I want to sense you'd be saying the same thing.

I want our intimacy, without the work. There are times when I don't want the demands, don't want the feelings of obligation, don't want the insistent urgency. I worry that without labor, we fall away.

I want to say our passed labor has earned us the luxury of knowing we are all here, together, a part of who we understand ourselves to be. I want to say that, but I am not sure if I can.

I want my doubts about who we are to dissolve, to fall away like a bad dream.

I want to know each of your thoughts, stripped of delicacy, about how you want to proceed, how you feel about our ongoing writing, how you feel about us.

I want to have a better sense of what we should be writing, what would energize our efforts. I want to believe that our writing space still is a place where we might productively work together, where we might find ideas that excite and find each other.

I want each of you to know that regardless of where we might go from here, you will remain a meaningful presence in my life. I want to believe the same is true for each of you. I want to be able to say such things without them feeling like emotional pressure, demands that are not welcomed, that have to be negotiated. I want to be able to write what I've just written and for all of you to see it as an opening and not as a request.

I want our friendship to last in whatever form it might take. I need to know you are there, but I can accept it if you are not. I worry that I ask more than I give.

I want us settled. Too much feels unsettled in my life. I know, as I assert such a desire, that we are always in process. Perhaps we can find a place where the process feels peaceful, assured, comfortable. I am not there now.

I want you to read this as a question that comes forward with hope and love.

I want you to hear the perhaps.

Bodies in Writing: Tami

It's messy. A lock of hair here. A bit of bone there. Pieces strewn about the page. Writing in the dark with a blood red methodology, collisions were inevitable. The dark of the earth, of the womb, of the unlit room is fertile, creative, insightful, but also sightless, fearful, fraught with trips and turns and crises of representation. As much as I can find a hand in the dark, I can also lose my way, make a wrong turn, trip on my words.

Why write in a group? Why do it? Oh sure if you are moving towards a goal; maybe a collaborative play script, a committee's budget report, a feminist methodological exploration into the embeddedness of patriarchal hierarchy and dismantling a phallogocentric language system. I'm down with that. In all of these cases the direction and audience are fairly clear. But why did *we* decide to do this? There was no project due; in fact many of us had many other projects we needed to be

concentrating on. There was no look toward dismantling of hegemonic sociopolitical constructs; though I think we were doing that. But we have come to a point where our deeply fertile writing in the dark has become silent. We can't seem to find out why. And so in living a critical life, which we have always done as a group, we must turn back upon ourselves and ask why write in this group? What is our purpose? What are we *about*? Who are we writing to? What are we making? And at this point, should those questions be asked in the past tense?

For me the pedagogy of this group is elusive, we have no set agenda, task, or method. As such, it has allowed us to go in many directions, to pick up the threads and strands of thought and word and body. Through our four years together, we have created a body of writing that reflects what is at stake when writing relationally. The writing is deeply vulnerable, textured with representations of our lives within and without the group. We allow theory to lead us into a heuristic conglomerate of ethics, representation, grief, intimacy. And that in itself is in academia pedagogically transgressive. Ontologically, within the writing of this group I have been able to bring bodies of understanding into being about myself and others that I could not have engaged in any other way.

Here it is for me, poet Marge Piercy asks: "Do I still live if no one knows my body?" (2011). Now, my husband and my family know my body; but outside of familial intimacy, Do I still live if no one knows my body? One of the reasons I live, one of the reasons I write, is because they know my body. They have pulled it from the wreckage over and over by inviting me to write my body out of the darkness and onto the page, my broken body, my grieving body, my articulate body. They know my linguistic body because through our work, our construction of selves and others has become interdependent, interwoven, the borders of our bodies bleeding, as Conquergood (2004) might say, into one another.

Though the writing we have done together is academically arresting, complex, epistemic, it is the process of writing together, the images, intimacy, intensity, the aesthetic acumen that has allowed us, and I believe our audiences on page or stage, to consider the epistemological import of embodied knowledge and how that might operate in collaborative writing. Simply, I have wanted to write with *these* men, to *these* men. And for years after I live in the words we create, in the selves made present through this embodied process. I live more fully on the page because they know my body. Here's an example:

In a scene in the 2011 version of *True Grit* Maddie flings herself and her horse, Little Blackie, into the deep brown fast moving river to get to the other side where two men who sought to leave her behind will soon be doing her bidding. The water

swells over me and I am suddenly and completely in the deep blue gravel pit, 14 years old, hanging on to the mane and reins of my big white fearless appaloosa Gray Don, wondering what would be on the other side for me. She is not fearless, Maddie, nor was I, hearts beating hard underwater, feeling four hooved strong legs pounding the water under ours, their nostrils flaring. We are so small in the water that we float above their strong backs, hanging breathlessly onto rein and mane our legs go out from under us, our bodies stretched out in the water as if in midair. The myth of horse and girl floating with us ready to reduce our lionhearted girlishness to a cliché if we start feeling our oats, or finding our stride.

But we make it to the other side, clamoring up the bank wet and strong and dripping with a feeling of accomplishment centered inside the bones of girlhood. The Texas Ranger drags Mattie to the ground and begins whipping. She does not cry. Rather she asks Cogburn if he is going to allow this. His gunshot strong arms Texas off of her. Texas says Rooster is “hoo-rawed” by this girl. And he is right. He is “hoo-rawed.” Our bodies flying through the water, through the air, with mane and rein. We are not fearless, but we do not fear ourselves.

Now, I like that piece of writing. It does some interesting things with gender and hierarchy. But more importantly, I also know that that body created on the page would not be alive without these men. I would not have written this piece if I were not in this group. I didn't write it to them; they have never heard it. But I feel the embeddedness of the group's work, or my work within the group, is in that piece. Body alive because of their knowing.

But the fact is that we have come to a standstill. Somehow, our ethic of care, so carefully crafted and theorized, so deeply embodied, has brought us to the edge of a cliff, and we don't know what to do. Do we jump? Together? Bodies flying through the air holding on to main and rein? Nostrils flaring?

Have we become “hoo-rawed” by one another? So taken by an ethic of care for one another that we won't allow ourselves to write against the body of writing we have created. We don't trouble it; we don't contest it. What does it mean for example, to write against our bodies of writing, our bodies in writing, against one another's bodies, against the tide of care for one another that threatens to drown the group of us. What are we waiting for? What are we wanting for this group?

The darkness is not the end of the story.

Wait, Larry said that.

I said that.

We said that.

Always Becoming: Ken

We sit here stranded/though we're all doing our best to deny it.

(Dylan, 1966)

I sit amongst the debris that I perceive these words of Dylan evoke.

For me these words are not simply sung, listened to or repeated in the complex contradictory spaces of epistemology, explanation and meaning, they seem to exist in diffuse worlds of imagery that are to do with intuition, fleeting glances and sense.

So I repeat these words not to provide some dialectically conservative expression of logic or causally emergent literal condition, or even of how the world is to me within certain specifications of space and time. I repeat them because somehow they work. I repeat them because I have a sense that as I write myself into this strange, troubled and anxious place they have to be said and that in their saying they ring out and flow within and around the concepts, affects and percepts that play around me now as I find myself on a desert island of not knowing.

I began this writing a few days ago sitting in the sunshine on a small island off the coast of Morocco. It was the first time for many months that I had come to this writing to and with you with any sense of purpose and feeling that I wanted or would be able to write. I was on holiday with my three children and my young grandson, still less than one year old. I suspect that the relaxations of loving and sensing, laughter and sharing, singing and dancing, the uniqueness of this experience of being with my immediate family in this world of warmth helped in activities of undoing and disconnection. Somehow as my re-connections with this happy time unfold and as I attempt to fold them into the reality of this space that I share with you, I have a growing awareness of flowing movements that both blur and vivify: ontology and grace.

Just as the line from Dylan's song pervades and becomes my life as I write here now so does my sense of you, of you all. In my notebook I wrote:

I am thinking of you all writing into the space that we have identified as our group. I am imagining the struggles and the sweat as this writing comes alive on your page and on what might become our future collective pages. I am wondering about how this writing is going and how I might be able to contribute to the changing tides that our writing together always seems to generate.

As I read this again today and as I try to write myself into this space that is always becoming us, I sense a kind of washing, a shimmering mercurial and therefore elusive kind of transmutating. I no longer feel able to use the word 'group' to describe

us and, similarly, though I have you, Tami, Ron, Larry, Jonathan in my mind, with individual signifiers to help me re/collect who you are, it makes more sense to talk of your singularities as they drift in and out of the ever changing assemblage that forms the living, shifting and always contingent sense that I have of who we are.

As our becoming aware of difference emerged in our recent writing, the repetition of this sense of fluidity and change, increasingly underscored by anxiety, concern and even crisis, seemed to rise like a strongly flowing incoming tide. I find Jonathan writing some weeks ago now: "In collecting together our work I have become scattered, which feels commensurate. Our writing is not neat and tidy and nor am I."

As I work my frail, present, living self reflexively into this space for, I have to admit, the first time in ages, I find this self agreeing with Jonathan's words, "Our writing is not neat and tidy and nor am I," but I feel this self also disagreeing with what this seems to imply, and I can't stop myself wanting to say, "nor ever has been." Over recent years, our shifting, highly multiple and collective selves seem to have grown into something that discursively we have chose to call our "group" or our "transatlantic writing group." It seems to me that what Deleuze and Guattari (1988, p. 306) talk about in terms of "singularity" and "assemblage" is a far more appropriate way of commenting upon the creative evolution of our always contingent and never completed becomings.

Our writing is not neat and tidy and nor am I.

There have been so many actual occasions in the virtualities of our writing together when the words "incommensurate," "scattered," "included," "excluded," "congruent," "incongruent," and so on could have been appropriately and accurately used in describing and perhaps accounting for how we have been in the past or how we are together here and now. Last year as we came together immediately prior to the conference the actuality of our living breathing bodies, touching, laughing and crying together around the table that we shared was so full of power, so immense in its proportion that fleetingly I felt the tangible presence of our bodily organs, for a hesitant electric moment I sensed what Ron has called (our) methodology of the heart. And then, again perhaps, later, like islands we began to drift, a sense of scattering entered our relative tangibilities and our collective desert began to be less populous, multiplicities became less apparent.

The Atlantic here seems so different to the sea that I swim in at home: it is not just the warmer temperature or the views of the dormant volcanoes in the distance, there is something about its mood, and it captures me in different ways. I present myself to its luxuriant swells in similar ways, and it still receives me differently: I swim out of my depth with hesitation, a small amount of fear and an eye to the horizon.

In our recent writing, working and playing with death, the death of what we call our group, seems to have grounded us, seems to have acted as the zero datum point from which all our subsequent writing has emerged. I am drawn to considering how being grounded as a person is often viewed as virtuous, somehow signifying stability and reliability, whereas being grounded as a ship is suggestive of being run ashore, stranded and, at best until the next high tide, unable to move. This ambivalence fascinates me. Whichever way we look at it what we call our group is special to us. This is reflected in so many passages and the resounding echoes from all the words we share.

"I think, I feel, we are at an ending": the jarring effect of Jonathan's stark and minimalist language still seems to permeate all our doings. I hear Tami saying: "I do believe that our writing has come to an end in its present form and trajectory." I sense the desperation in Larry's voice as he seems to express the feelings of others: "I'm afraid to look at it, afraid Jonathan is right ... Frankly, it's hard to think of losing the rest of you and this relationship just now." And Ron, also living with the sense of loss but offering a proposition that expresses a productive desire when he says: "I see us struggling, wanting more, but unhappy where we are. If we are to continue, I want us to write ourselves out of the box we currently find ourselves in." And in my own notebook I find:

It is astonishing me that I am thinking these thoughts of death and yet I am an agent in its coming to life in our collective writing. I am aware that in recent months my contribution to the writing life of the group is virtually nil. I feel myself being tempted to write an explanation, to build an epistemology and instead I veer from this path and find myself here, stuttering, trying to live with 'and' ... and ... and this living thing goes on and am I still allowing what I have abandoned to die? How can I continue to let the relentlessness of this condition persist? I sense the life giving force, the simple sensual beauty of this shared life and yet I feel myself allowing this life to slip through my fingertips like the icy tentacles of a drowning man.

Ron says, "I believe my Mother is tired of looking at all those fuzzy-looking things, tired of the daily struggle." As I read these simple powerful words and think about a view of life as it might draw to a close I am drawn to resist the phenomenological inevitability of Heidegger's (1962) "being-for-death." Equally I am drawn to Deleuze's reading of Spinoza when he says, "Death involves only the extensive parts; 'the reality of the intensive part remains'" (Dosse, 2010, p. 149). I am stranded, left sensing that perhaps the nature of ever changing singularities in an assemblage is that possibility,

the potential for becoming something new, something other and something vividly and vibrantly alive. That is always there, that is something not to deny.

Dropping the Thread: Larry

In 1890, William James finished his work, *The Principles of Psychology* just as his sister was diagnosed with cancer and a defective heart valve. He was writing for himself and for her when he said,

Thus not only our morality, but our religion, so far as the latter is deliberate, depend on the effort which we can make. 'Will you or won't you have it so?' is the most probing question we are ever asked; we are asked it every hour of the day, and about the largest as well as the smallest, the most theoretical as well as the most practical things. (p. 579)

James is not calling us to "rage, rage against the dying of the light" (Thomas, 1959), but to move toward a deeper and more profound acceptance even in the face of misfortune and suffering. So he goes on to say, We answer by consents or non-consents and not by words. What wonder that these dumb responses should seem our deepest organs of communication with the nature of things! What wonder if the effort demanded by them be the measure of our worth as men [and women]! What wonder if the amount which we accord of it be the one strictly underived and original contribution which we make to world! (p. 579)

I don't want to end this experiment in writing with the four of you. I am writing this on a sweet day in May, and the color of the sunlight is an ablution. I am awash in hope. There is a birdsong that provides a musical theme for the scene. This is my world when I set about the task of writing one last time with all of you.

When I read what we have written this year, I consider the warmth of Tami's tone, the gentleness of Ron's writing, the tenderness of Jonathan's perception, and the passion of Ken's voice. How or why did we drop the thread? Was it the long silence, the burden of personal troubles, the difficulty of responding to increasingly complex life situations, the darkness to which we have returned again and again since we first began to write?

What is there in these threads of ideas that has been worth the struggle these past few years? We never came to a group consensus about what we were doing. It was the act itself spun out of a quiet moment on a hillside there in Illinois that could reach from Cambridge to St. Paul and from New York to Bristol to Carbondale. We

were innocent of the workings of our conversation—we just knew how to keep it going. And so we did—email by email.

I would say that there was a magic beyond the words themselves. It was in the performativity of what the words were doing. There were times when I admired what Jonathan described or Ken exclaimed or Tami sang or Ron murmured, times when I sat back and reflected. It was an unspoken rule that not one of us dwelt long on one idea. That gave a space for the reader, for the audience to enter the conversation and make of it what they would.

The words accomplished something. They kept moving so they might make the leap from here to there. They did not prove or plod or even argue much, but the tone of their movement was searching—heuristic. Yes, that was the task: discovery. So we spoke into the dark. We were all searching, and in this conversation, we were not searching alone. This affair of our writing, this love affair, took place mostly in the dark. I'm not sure we could have said all these things to each other, especially in the daylight and at the beginning of our relationship. But we could do it as we shut our eyes and leaned into the task, writing into the darkness. And it took continuous courage—this belief we might discover something in the act of writing to each other.

I just listened to an interview with Anne Lamott on National Public Radio. I'm laughing when she says, "I think that the best thing about getting older is it's like editing your work. It's throwing stuff out of the airplane. It's keeping you flying too low, and you're tired of it" (Lamott, 2001). We combined the two. In our writing we edited our lives, not editing out the embarrassing stuff but editing the stuff we didn't need anymore. To do that, we had to fly into the dark, our darkness. Remember when I was writing about that darkness earlier this year?

"Hello, darkness, my old friend" (Simon & Garfunkel, 1965). Simon and Garfunkel were 25 when they wrote that. How did they know? I used to think that they were whistling in the dark. Bravado. I've struggled a long time with silence and darkness. After coming out of the closet, then a divorce, and finally, the loss of my career and direction in life, I wandered in the dark and silence for about 15 years. It was writing (and reading) that began to pull me out. Not writing or reading in general, but journal writing (to myself) and reading the works of people who had "been there" in the dark. In spite of fear, I had to learn to be comfortable in the dark, silent space. No, it wasn't space; it was a place, and the place was inside me.

I once thought the darkness was a lack of light in the world, and the silence was emptiness, meaninglessness. I had this darkness and silence inside. When I first entered it, I went there out of necessity. There was no other way. Hope was killing me, and I had to realize that nothing was going to save me. For a while I raged (with

Dylan Thomas) “against the dying of the light.” I tried to use sex as he used alcohol... with the same degree of success. I’ll never know why I didn’t die of AIDS when better men than I were taking their last breath.

The darkness was for me a beginning. It was a valley through which I walked. I was carrying a lot of bitterness, but life continued to surprise me. The darkness was not the end of the story. Oh, that goes against the grain of an Anglo Saxon. *Beowulf* culminates in a pyre. Wagner’s “Ring Cycle” ends with the destruction of Valhalla. Eliot’s “Waste Land.” Their belief in an ultimate defeat was in my marrow. I was burning the candle at both ends to see what happened to the wick.

When I was 57 and went on my first pilgrimage to that healing site in New Mexico, I was scared to be with a group of strangers and setting out on a 100-mile trek. We were to meet on a Sunday afternoon and head out Monday morning. When we left the parish hall, it was pitch black. We walked past four or five streetlights, and then we were in the darkness. The air was heavy with silent prayer. The truck in front of us had a blinking, yellow light, but that was insufficient illumination to light the path. We found our way by following the man in front of us. The only sound was the crunch of our feet on gravel.

I had thought the challenge of pilgrimage would be to walk with strangers...of another religion, another culture, another sexual orientation. So I was surprised that morning when it was just me in the dark. The silhouette in front of me was not company. My fears and anxieties were my companions. Each succeeding morning it began that same way. We walked in silence for an hour or two in darkness with no buffer. I would have turned the experience into a metaphor for my life if it had not been so physical. Then I realized how metaphors could hurt. By the second day, my feet had blisters all over them. I was stiff and my muscles ached. This was no place for an academic. A week prior to the walk I was hunched over a desk, writing. I was writing about pilgrimage, but I didn’t expect I was going to feel those conditions that I theorized. The pilgrimage thrust me out into the world just as coming out had thrust me out into the world. It was not the world I wanted but it the world I had.

At first I just walked in the darkness. Then I realized I had choices about the way I walked. When I winced and tried to avoid the pain, I made it worse. My avoidance was affecting bones and cartilage, a much more serious issue than skin. Of course, all the lessons in physicality were metaphors for the ways I had chosen to walk through the world. Now I began to pay the price. Nothing was dodged, nothing delayed. My body responded immediately to every mistake. Circumventing took much more energy and brought more pain. There was no way out.

The physicality of these metaphors was more powerful than anything I had ever read. Pain was a profound teacher. I did not easily relinquish my foolish ways. By the time I walked my seventh pilgrimage, my feet and knees were a mess. It's funny to think that I have enlisted a podiatrist, orthopaedist, pain specialist, and physical therapist to help me keep walking the past few years. My feet and knees are slightly better, but I have a long way to go. Each time I walk, I learn a few more things about my body and my choices.

I've learned that boundaries and limits are not a bad thing. They are the cutting edges of reality. When we come in contact with them—when I come in contact with them—I learn about myself. I'm always afraid I'll learn that I'm a fuckup or a failure, but that's my fear talking, not the boundaries. Limits teach me where the strength is, where the value lies, what's worth it.

This is a story about learning to live in the darkness each morning. There are many things I don't want to know about myself. And I still struggle to deal with them not as imperfections but as realities. Yes, I made a mess of things because of my choices, but there is grace in this chance to look at my life, to look into the dark, and to try a different Way.

There is one requirement, however. You/I have to laugh. Sometimes when you have knelt beside the road and you're trying to stand up, you wobble and stagger, and you have to laugh because you do look funny. Once we pilgrims were kneeling in the formation of a cross, and these little brown paper bags with candles caught fire, and we were stamping them out, and we laughed at how foolish we were.

I'm not suggesting that any of you walk a pilgrimage. My story happened in this way, and so I learned along the road. I tell the story because there are things to learn about darkness and silence. Our group has come to the darkness and silence at the end of our long conversation. These limits are forcing me from the safety of this deep friendship to the thing that comes next. Darkness and silence are not conditions of abandonment. They are the circumstances of our deepest learning, our pain, and our deepest joy.

Turning: Jonathan

The first decision is which way to turn. There is never only one way, never a simple binary choice. Whom to hold in mind; whose eye to catch; the details of whose face, whose body, to rest upon. There are five of us: I could turn to you all, my gaze traveling across from one to the other; or focus on one, aware of the three's presence; or

there is our audience, I could turn to you. Although I might have pretended otherwise over the years, I have known you've been there. I'm going to turn first more towards you.

(To audience)

We have written, we five, for four years. This is our fourth presentation here; there a journal paper (Wyatt et al., 2011) and a book (Gale et al., 2012). If only in terms of quantity, we have accomplished something.

We have written with passion, desire, and love; and with pain, sadness and guilt. We have shared much with each other, and some of that with you and those others who have sat with us each year at this conference.

I have, we have, aspired to be open; and we have wondered at times what openness means. There is much we haven't disclosed to each other; yet there have not been many words that we have written to each other that we have decided to keep amongst only the five of us.

You will know this story, or it will not come as a surprise, those of you who have been our witnesses in the past.

Now, this year, we are—I don't know where. Stuck in a groove, in a scratch in the vinyl that feels like it is trapping us within a discourse of repetitive self-contemplation: What are we doing, we ask? Why aren't we writing? Where are we? Should we continue? We have, differently, become dissatisfied; unease manifested in the lengthy intervals between one person's writing and the next.

We have over the years often rested upon the metaphor of sexual relationships to describe the dynamics of our writing. After our first year, which was intense, we met in the café of the Student Union at the University of Illinois at 6:00 PM on the Wednesday evening before the conference, having not been together in the same room for twelve months. We greeted each other with excited hugs and gestures, and a slight awkwardness, almost as if we were uncertain where to look or how to be given the intimacy of our writing through the year. One of us commented, something like, "It feels like waking up next to someone after a one-night stand," which relieved the tension.

One year, Ken and I came to the conference having been writing in a writing group. We joked, with seriousness, amongst us five about Ken and I having an "affair."

Now, perhaps, we are in the difficult stage of an established relationship. The early flush of lust and passion has dissipated; desire has diminished. In our dressing gown and slippers, watching the evening's repeat of "Friends," we wonder what more we have to say to each other. Our "five year itch." We have love and respect in

abundance, we know we will remain friends, but we are stale and tired. Our ways of being with each other have run their course. We need to find renewal or we need to end. End *this*, this way of writing, this pattern.

Maybe it's sex therapy we need, not divorce. It may be the end of our writing lives together; or it may be as simple—and as difficult—as learning to touch each other again; trying different positions. The question is, what do we have energy for?

Our context is crucial: ours is an assemblage created with and within the academy. We are not a group of friends that coalesces around a shared interest in stamps or hiking. We are a group that, five years ago, were drawn to each other to write together in order to inquire, critically and reflexively, into writing as an intimate, collaborative, scholarly endeavor. Our *raison d'être* has always been (though perhaps I have not seen this so clearly till lately) that we believe we might have something to say—about writing, about scholarship, about living—that will make a contribution. The questions that are with me now are therefore: What more does our community want to hear from us? What more do we have to say?

It is my experience that both endings and conflict, sometimes together, are, as in life, difficult phenomena for collaborative writing groups to handle. Jane Speedy and colleagues make reference to their “turbulence” (Speedy et al., 2010). The collective biography work of Davies & Gannon (2006) had its moments. Ken and I have, too (Gale & Wyatt, 2009). Our group has had its share of conflict, though our habitual, constructive practice of being scrupulous in honoring and complimenting each other might both have and have not come to our aid. Too respectful, and with too much at stake, to fall out over petty matters, we have perhaps been reluctant to engage with what might risk coming between us. The dilemma in distant, online writing groups is how do we communicate our passionate disagreements without the reassuring, affirming signals of eye contact, expression and touch that would convey, alongside that which we are in conflict about, our continuing valuing of each other? The challenge, if we continue, may be how, as Pullen and Rhodes suggest, to write “dirty,” how to draw as they do on Kristeva's (1982) abject in our writing, that which we might see as dangerous, uncontrollable, unmanageable, disorderly and disruptive (Pullen & Rhodes, 2008, p. 251), yet remain intact?

Another dilemma I notice is this: How do we know what is ‘in’ and what is ‘out’ of the group? I say “we,” but I am extrapolating from my own experience, when I wonder, what is fair to bring? What “belongs” or could belong within this group? What aspects of my life does it feel possible and productive to bring? What has to be brought in order for me to be able to be present and available? I may not know that

this is a decision I am making, yet it always is one. What happens, for example, when there is dissonance or intimacy outside the group between two of us, between me and another member of the group? How can I be open in the group while maintaining the boundaries of other relationships?

Turning this way has seemed awkward. Almost a betrayal. Being turned to you and talking about us.

I have enjoyed it, but it's time. Time to turn more this way.

(To Ken, Larry, Tami, Ron)

I am away from home, writing in a cottage at the foot of Tennyson Down on the Isle of Wight, a few miles off the south coast of England. We have just walked up the steep, wooded hill behind the cottage, emerging onto the grass at the top, turning west to walk the gentle slope of the down towards the monument to this 19th-century poet. To the east we could see the curve of the chalk cliffs, dipping to a cleft at Freshwater Bay, before it rose and then receded in the Spring haze. Now, Tessa rests, and my mother and sister are next door. I suspect that they are watching footage of William and Kate getting hitched in all their finery and fanfare.

I have been trying to write about both what I have come to understand from writing with you all and my sense of where we might go now. We have always turned to each other first, then arranged ourselves once a year in an arc before witnesses. Just for now, I wish to close that line into a circle, though I know that our witnesses remain. I wish to turn to you. I am hoping that you are still here.

I have been laboring over this writing, finding my voice hard to find, uncertain, not knowing what I need to say to you and to others. That earlier writing was how I started, but it's not how we have ever written, and I felt discomfited. I found myself doubting the warrant I had to speak in that way. I felt presumptuous turning that way alone, without you.

This year's writing, and this year's not writing, has felt so different. As I have said to you, it is the absence of urgency that I have noticed most.

So, what now? Here some possibilities:

Let's reverse the pressure on ourselves. Let's promise not to write for three months, or till Christmas. A trial separation perhaps. (Will we feel unable to bear it? Or feel the relief?)

Let's write only on Mondays.

Let's write only poems for three months.

Or only sonnets.

For six weeks let's agree to write only the shit.

Let's write quick and dirty.

Let's write fast and loose, short and sweet, back and forth and forth and forth and back and round and round and round till we spin, out of control, shot to pieces.

Let's fix on a single theme, or concept, or author, or question. One we have explored before but left too quickly, like intensity.

Or like those that Tami suggested some weeks ago.

What is creativity?

What is the body in the classroom? Mine? The student's?

What happens in the *middle* of performance, I mean right smack dab in the middle? Whose eyes am I looking out of? What is a persona in autoethnography?

I am 50. Really, what kinds of things *mean* here? What is it? Middle Age. Middle Earth. Middle Ages.

Let's ask the audience: (*Turning*) What do you want us to write about?

(*Turning back*) Let's stop writing. Just stop. Let's tell each other how enriching, how inspiring, how exciting, how tough this has been. And stop. Let's end and end well. Let's be like the professional athlete who quits while still at the top of his or her game. Let's not continue only because we do not know how to end nor what we will do afterwards. Let's not continue only because we are unable to face our wonderful but brief mortality.

Let's keep writing, as if—because—our lives depend upon it: urgently, passionately. As if these were the last words we would ever write. Let's write, we five, as if we had only five years, five months, five minutes, to live. None of us knows. These might be the ones.

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