

chapter 1

introduction

a real story — not a hollywood film

2nd edition

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chapter 1

introduction

An old teaching saw goes: ‘Tell them what you’re going to say; say it; then tell them what you said.’ There is no, ‘Tell them what you said’ in this book, but if you want to get on and ride the rails and skip this, ‘Tell them what you’re going to say’ go to the next chapter straight away.

For more than ten years I have wanted to write about two subjects: my family history and a person centred existential (PCE) model of therapy, learning and life. The model made its first appearance on the FACETS Counsellor Training Course at City University, London, in the late eighties, when Barbara Brown and I jointly launched the Course in an existential leap of faith.

Recently, it struck me that the two subjects might well go together in the writing and so this series of books was conceived. In a story-telling way, this book describes some of my early encounters with existential and person-centred experience.

What is this book?

When I set out to write just about a year ago, I inscribed in my notebook, on the top of each new page “THIS IS FOR ME”. I think it was more a declaration than a statement of fact. A declaration of intent or policy: (or insecurity?) that I didn’t want to be influenced by any particular audience, nor constrained by any accepted norms of what a book should be like. That it should be for me, whatever the reasons for the initial drafting, has turned out to be true in ways that I didn’t imagine; transcending the truth and aims of that original statement. I suppose I knew intuitively that the unexpected would lie around the corner.

First of all it is an experiment in writing: a book of stories; a love story of my mother and father in wartime; my mother and father together; my father’s story and spin-off from the secret and unknown aspects of his life; stories of families in Waterford City in Ireland and West London; an autobiographical account of growing up as second generation Irish immigrants in Paddington after the war; some written sketches of my adopted grandmother’s family. My own experiences are described in detail: life with my mother and sisters and without my father; how my mother shaped our lives and how my father’s absence/presence affected it; the search for my father’s ambience, influence, love; looking closely at men as father substitutes in crossing from childhood to boyhood; life in the street, at school, in the scouts and beyond; until I left home to go to university. Effectively, my own book of life that, potentially, anyone and everyone has in them to write, to describe their childhood and upbringing.

Secondly, it is the first of a series of books in which I intend to discuss the (PCE) model pragmatically and to use it to interpret and sometimes to make sense of my own experience. It is my purpose, in this series, to show how well existential ideas and person-centred principles go together in the mix of therapy, learning and life.

Fact or Fiction?

I do not remember seeing or experiencing my father when he was alive, and he died when I was nearly three years old and when my sisters, Mary and Jean, were less than a year old.

I relate this her/his-story as it was handed down to me, or as I experienced it, as a series of short stories or anecdotes. In the repeated hearing and the telling, as in the game of chinese whispers, I may have misheard, misunderstood, embellished a little here and there, forgotten plenty and remembered what suited me or struck me as interesting or important. Or I may even have made some of it up.

I have become aware as I write about my family just how many gaps appear in the story. And how curious I am about it. So I see this account as a starting point, and I welcome and will include, additions and corrections in future narratives. As yet, I have not researched any of this material apart from racking my brains for recall. The story as it stands comes entirely from my memory, and I take responsibility for any factual errors — and there must be some!

I think it is significant how often some stories were re-told; certainly the repetition helped me to remember, and

saved me from wondering whether I had imagined parts of it. I have had to contend with the possibility that memory, imagination and fantasy may have become intertwined. Who knows for sure? I intend to find out more, when I have finished emptying my head by writing this first draft.

Which Facts?

Existence derives from the Latin “*ex sistere*” meaning to stand out. I acknowledge that the facts that I have selected will be the ones that for one reason or another stand out for me from the background. In fact, the ones that exist for me: different, odd, ridiculous, amusing, embarrassing, bad, ... peak, learning, meaningful to me, ... and perhaps, not to others.

Many happy repeated experiences may fuse over the years and appear humdrum — they may not stand out, and may therefore have been omitted. Any omission of the day-to-day experiences that I took for granted in my life, doesn't detract from their meaning or importance to me. I hope that this book reflects the appreciation that I have for those unrecorded experiences which are the very stuff of life.

The bulk of the material in this book is drawn directly from my memories of experiences. It is clear to me that my awareness of my father derives from: what my mother told me directly; her reactions and mood when the subject of my father came up; informatively, what she refused to talk about; and finally, some Inspector Clouseau-like investigations combined with intuitions that I have through being their son.

Occasionally, in this story, in order to throw some light on the family life in the thirties and the war years, I have used my imagination and my own experiences as a young child in the forties.

Storytelling

One reason for setting down this history is for my extended family which includes friends. When I relate some of the events described here, I am surprised by how often the listener, from my sisters to my children say, “Well I never knew that.” I enjoy telling of the events in this story especially, to someone who hasn’t heard them. However, I don’t want to become a sad case burdening people who have heard them before, or who don’t share my enthusiasm.

It would be good to have a record for my grandchildren who might want to have a history of their great-grandparents and further back. This is for them — when I’m not around to tell the stories. Further, it may give them some idea of the history of childhood of their grandfather and their great aunts in the environment of West London in the 1940s and 50s.

Presentation

Some of my children went to a Primary school in Harlow called The Downs. They used to play netball against a school called Fawbert and Barnard, which was referred to, by The Downs’ children, as, “forwards and backwards”. I am sure their school, in return, was referred to as, “ups and

downs”. For a school called Roundwood I have added the nickname, “round and round”, in order to complete the set of phrases which describe accurately the process of writing and presenting this book and it’s sister volume.

Most of the names of people in this book are real. Where I have judged a possibility of causing offence I have changed names so that the people concerned can’t be identified.

In the stories, as I remember them, even when writing in the past tense, I have tried to recapture the life and feel *of the moment*; as I would have described it then, writing in a mixture of the vernacular at that time and whatever descriptive language I can articulate now.

Frequently, in order to re-enact an episode, I try to reinhabit the experiences by writing in the present tense. This is indicated typographically by this italic font.

When I am involved in time travel I have made use of heavy slant typeface.

When using “direct speech” and “quotations” I have used double quotes. For my ‘thoughts at the time’ in a story, single quotes.

With the benefit of hindsight, I have indulged occasional asides, seasoning comments from an adult perspective and dropping them into the pot — when I *couldn’t* resist it, or when I just *had* to intervene in the story while I was writing. Sometimes I can justify these comments as essential to the narrative; naturally they are written in upstanding typeface

...

However, in order to maintain the story-like quality of this volume, I have tried to keep the more serious, lengthy re-

flections to the next volume where the interaction with the stories and the thoughts so derived are from an adult perspective in the present.

Person-centred Existential Recall

In the narrative I have concentrated on my own experiences; my subjective reality; me and all the paraphernalia that goes with my being in the world; essentially because that is what I, potentially, really hold.

Where I have made a leap of imagination to describe another's experience I hope it has been with empathy. In keeping with my commitment to a person-centred existential basis for relationship, I have tried, at the same time, to temper empathy with realism. The realism afforded by interaction with my genuine responses, feelings and internal conversations for that person and his/her world. And yet striving to hold that person in regard and respect. In much the same way that a person-centred therapist would attempt to hold those conditions simultaneously in relationship with a client. It is always a struggle to juggle and entertain those conditions simultaneously — the very heart of person-centred therapy.

I have to add that, in my experience, and perhaps not so paradoxically, it is most difficult to hold to and inhabit these conditions for those who are closest to me — myself included. As a result of writing this book, I have come closer to my aim: to extend these conditions of relationship and growth from myself to others; from myself to myself — the persevering imperative, the *sine qua non*, to all thera-

pists: heal thyself. That I have called the writing of this book person-centred recall, reflects my commitment to that process, not my success in it.

I acknowledge now, with some humility, that the reality of others' views and their retelling of (even the same) events will be very different. I welcome and respect that difference. That is why, as a rule, I haven't tried to describe others' perspectives and reality. It is difficult enough to be accurate and true to my own. For these reasons, if for no other, I am the director and have the starring role in this "enterprise."

Changing the Past

The writing of the stories is a departure from my story telling and has made me think hard, and reflect on past events and on my own life. It has given me greater resolution in my life in relation to my father and mother and the truly remarkable Mrs Bowden, a woman who was, and I would wish to choose as, my adopted grandmother. It has brought me closer in spirit and perhaps understanding to my grandparents, Tommy and Katie Sargent in Ireland and to my grandparents Ruth and Isedore White.

The work and thought of R.D. Laing have had a significant impact on my life and work. Many years ago, I listened to a radio broadcast of "In the Psychiatrist's Chair" in which R. D. Laing recalled in obvious distress that he had never been able to (nor wanted to?) assimilate some aspects of his childhood experience.

This broadcast affected me deeply on a personal level; now I can see why it has stayed with me: in the second vol-

ume, “Changing the Past” I recall experiences, some planned, some fortuitous, which enabled me to reflect on and work through some of the issues and events in my own childhood. Volume one is a description of the experiences in my childhood; together with volume two, it is my attempt to understand and assimilate my childhood past into my life.

Volume two is/will be an account of journeys in time, backwards and forwards in my childhood past, accompanied by my fellow traveller D. It is my exploration of myself and my presence in the world through person-centred and always existential therapy and can, I think, be accurately described as: ‘Changing the Past’.

‘Saving Private Ryan’

This book was helped on its way by two films: the first was, ‘Back to the Future’ which provides the springboard for volume two, ‘Changing the Past’. Volume two is the sequel, in some senses the prequel, or is it more accurately described as a companion volume to this book? That’s the paradox I invited when I embarked on travelling in time and why I include volume two in this introduction.

When I saw, “Saving Private Ryan”, I cried. For myself and my family. It took me, in memory, straight to my adopted grandmother; it jogged my memory of the tragedy of her sons who were killed in World War II. A submerged memory which, as a boy, hadn’t fully impacted on me. It is a true story and has no climactic happy ending nor the sense of manufactured adventure of the Hollywood film. It has a place in my heart. The film provided the final nudge to write

about my grandmother in the first instance, and inspired the title of this book.