

Appreciating failure, depreciating success: an antidote to the eulogies of departure

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Synopsis: A point of departure provided Ian Stronach with the opportunity to reflect on a career in research. His farewell speech* takes a refreshing look at how research development happens and provides some salutary advice on the merits of learning to fail in order to succeed.

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This account summarises some ‘leaving’ and ‘arriving’ thoughts on moving from Manchester Metropolitan University to Liverpool John Moores University, December 2008. It condenses a farewell speech in which I broke with the conventions of the ‘departure eulogy’ and offered instead of such ‘victory narratives’ a more challenging notion of the ‘failure narrative’, and some thoughts in the light of that about how research development takes place. My departure at the age of 63 was occasioned by MMU’s refusal to let anyone stay after 65: I decided it was better to cash myself in while I still had a market value. Many staff wrote to the VC and Dean paying generous tribute to my contributions, and asking for an exception to be made. The answer was ‘no’, but such tributes triggered for me a ‘Tom Sawyer’ moment.

Tom, as I first recalled it, attended his own funeral and was moved to tears by the tributes. This seemed to sum up the ‘departure eulogy’ ritual as a funeral oration that conveniently preceded death.

‘The congregation became more and more moved as the pathetic tale went on, till at last the whole company broke down and joined weeping mourners in a chorus of anguished sobs, the preacher himself giving way to his feelings, and crying in the pulpit.’ (Twain, 1876/1951, 118)

It’s germane to this farewell that when I went back to the original, I was reminded how chancy memory is. NOT Tom himself, NOT his tears but his triumph. (I blame my 8 year-old self, the original reader, for working up a self-serving “you’ll be sorry one day” displacement. Though perhaps I should blame, as well, a much older self.)

‘..the three boys came marching up the aisle, Tom in the lead, Joe next, and Huck, a ruin in drooping rags, sneaking foolishly in the rear. They had been hid in the unused gallery, listening to their own funeral sermon.’ (ibid.)

‘Twain’ is an apposite departure point for another reason. I start out on this reflection from two different starting points. The first is a colleague’s recent departure and the eulogy rendered by Maggie MacLure and responded to in like measure by Bridget Somekh. Both were ‘deserved’, of course, but they were also culturally inevitable victory narratives, true to the rituals of departure. It is the cultural and not the personal that I intend to subvert. I wish, that is, to dismember that kind of remembering.

The second is certainly a bit weird, yet empirical. I experienced a strange recollection as I cleared out my room, filtering the detritus of 13 years' research activity at MMU. It provoked the memory of an earlier clearing-out. My mother had Alzheimer's and when she died we found a letter in her belongings. It was a blank sheet of writing paper, mostly. But in the bottom right hand corner, a page within a page, in absolutely tiny writing she had started a letter to her already dead sister. It began, 'Dear Meg, I haven't heard from you for a while so...' and then the rest was hieroglyphics. Her mind, for the rest of the letter, was only able to do bits of letters... a loop, a vertical, a dash. A kind of litter of letters. But more like 'litter' in the older sense of what remains for us to lie on, a bedding of sorts, those broken letters as remainders of sense. This was a performance paradoxically unable to say anything yet enacting all that could be said about a mind and the nature of its atrophy.

It was such a performative thing in relation to her disease - the mind representing its own destruction in the blank spaces of the paper, a mind going blank, and also, in an additional confession, breaking up in the course of its own writing in that tiny bottom right-hand corner of the paper. Together, a double inability that was so *able* in expressing its deficit. It was a mind picturing its own disappearance.

That was 17 years ago. I've not thought about it since. Why did it come to mind as I cleared out my room?

Well, who's to say... But the analogy that came to mind was this. You apply for a new job because MMU won't keep staff after 65. You write for your (working) life. It's a last letter of application. CV, RAE record, publications, funding, editorships, blah, blah. And it struck me, as I filled up the black bags with stuff to throw out, that all that 'black letter' achievement (written, recorded, official, evidential, undeniable) was also bottom right-hand corner stuff. (We say, "It's there in black-and-white", but we read the black rather than the white. And, as we'll see, I was filling the black bags with the 'white'.) I thought there were significant blanks surrounding such 'black letter' accounts couched in the genre of the CV, and the like. They covered most of the 'page', if a working life can metaphorically be rendered as such, and they subvert the telling of victory narratives that obscure and displace a much more interesting and extensive hinterland of failure, deficit and ignorance. (I will argue that these three are virtues, the hidden building blocks of 'success'. Think of the 'Three Graces' as the 'Three Disgraces'.)

So perhaps my mother's last letter did not come to mind because of associated metaphors of death (whether professional or institutional) but because of associations of remembering and forgetting, awakened by rifling through old folders, chucking out notes, failed bids, rejected articles, feedback to half-forgotten students, research development workshops and seminars, drafts, and so on. I had found the 'blank' – a 'white-out' world of forgotten initiatives, past students, failed projects, draft articles, job applications, incomplete papers, unused notes. A blizzard of failures. Far larger than the bottom right-hand corner of the page, the so-called CV etc, this was the *unconsidered job*. Like my mother's last letter, truths congregated in these blanks and breakdowns, in what lay behind the black letters of the CV/RAE/departure eulogy. I realised that most of that work-life was lived *through*, and *in*, and *with* failure. It took the physical act of throwing stuff out to unearth the metaphysical business of remembering and forgetting – to invert their customary priorities and begin to

deconstruct the genre of the ‘victory narrative’ on which CV, RAE, and departure eulogies all insist.

Lesson 1: Failure is the rule not the exception. Success is its occasional mistake, not its opposite.

In the spoken version of this account, I illustrated this thesis by looking at the careers of those who came to MMU as Professors, including myself. All had failed in some way or another. (I omit the detail of the others’ failures here out of respect for the dead. But, by way of illustration against only myself, Sally Brown certainly painted me as a disastrous appointment at Stirling.) And all these failures were typically hidden away, denied, repressed. In the actual talk, indeed, one of the professors interrupted in order to deny her failure story, neatly illustrating the corollary of an *active and interested forgetting*.

Lesson 2: Learn how to fail, not how to succeed. Not to be ‘a failure’, but how to be *in* failure (not avoid, not cope with, not overcome, but *through*).

If you don’t, fantasies of efficacy and control ensue. You construct yourself as a victory narrative, then swallow that myth. The myth ingested then asserts a core identity. You become precisely who you aren’t. There are, for example, a growing number of people anxious to claim ‘educational research at MMU’ as their achievement. Each is a fantasist because the achievement was collective, not individual. Least of all was it a managerial triumph, ‘headed’ by anyone. Think hydra, not head –and hydras can’t have victory narratives: their muddy and plural stories can’t be personified and claimed in that way; they are not ‘led’ in any conventional sense, though certainly orchestrated. It’s not very insightful to say that such claimants are dishonest, and much more important to realise that these claims are almost always a matter of the *most sincere self-deceit*, as in all Walter Mitty scenarios. So here’s a tough question for each of us, and especially the growing band of managerialist claimants: where is my most sincere self-deceit?

Lesson 3: Success doesn’t need much understanding. Failure does. Aim to get better at failing.

Victory narratives are designed to confuse sequence with cause. They lay a false trail, and offer an impossible exemplar to those who follow. They are a bad example masquerading as a ‘good example’ to us all. That’s where the ‘departure eulogies’ offer a pedagogic dead-end for those who remain. There’s a literature on this theme – from Hayek’s notion of ‘catallaxy’ (1976: 71) - life as part-skill, part-chance - through to Shermansky’s entertaining and statistically irrefutable hierarchy of football managerial excellence. (Kenny Dalglish came top, but, 10 years on, the only one to remain in the top 20 is Ferguson. The key managerial skill is, Shermansky concluded, ‘luck’ (personal communication)). Or there’s Mladinov’s more recent offering, *The drunkard’s walk: how randomness rules our lives*. In particular he criticises the ‘hot-hand fallacy’ that success *now* predicts success *later* (a point I currently take very seriously). But I do want to offer a saving limitation to the rule of Lady Luck: *don’t think serendipity is just a matter of luck. Make your own by failing often and failing well*.

Lesson 4: Know what you don't know. Knowledge is more useful than ignorance, of course. But knowledge of ignorance is even more useful. An *ignorance deficit* (you don't know what you don't know) is the biggest failure of all.

When I was appointed Research Professor at MMU in 1995, I was charged with leading research development. No-one knew what a 'Research Professor' was, including me. So the role emerged from an extensive series of preliminary interviews with research-active or research-interested people, from managers to students. It turned out that people by and large wanted:

dialogue over draft articles
 help with writing research proposals
 seminars and workshops to help 'research-ladder' step-changes
 critique of research activities
 develop theory and methodology expertise
 tighten support and supervision structure to PhD/MPhil
 integrate teaching, learning and research'
 initiate new projects' (notes, December 1995)

And invariably, people would add at the end of the interview, '...and do your own research as well, of course'.

In the bottom right-hand corner of the page on which I wrote these notes – shades of my mother's last letter – also bracketed off from the rest of the page, and also in tiny writing, I've added [OK, that's Monday, what do you want me to do on Tuesdays]. Where's the substantive failure here? No doubt about that: 'integrate teaching, learning and research'. The structural one? I didn't know how to be a Research Professor, let alone a 'good' one. But I knew enough to make that initial failure and ignorance public, and open to negotiated remedy.

Finally, there's another failure, more generically associated with the role of Research Professor. Such a role was divorced from line management. I reported to two faculty Deans, both of whom were persuaded that the role ought to separate management and development roles to an unusual degree. It suited my temperament and postmodernist bent to work 'sideways-in', leading by not-leading, motivating rather than controlling, making rather than taking initiatives, creating spaces rather than filling them, mentoring rather than directing, developing a collaborative and relatively democratic ethos – and no doubt I stray towards a utopian rendering hereabouts. Perhaps it was a crazy way to work, but only the crazy would say that it didn't work. Still, it was an approach that a few top-down managerialist individuals failed to understand, or chose not to recognise. And when a spirited attempt to abolish the role was made last year (it lasted a week, and ended both with a denial that the attempt had ever been made and an offer to put my name forward for a OBE 'in recognition not in compensation' – a superb misreading of everything and everyone..[email from Institute Director, 23.2.07]), I decided it was time to look around. Such a proposed disappearance, in role terms, has after all to be regarded in itself as a kind of failure. Age, then, is only part of my alibi for this story about moving on.

Lesson 5: theorize in the way as well as out the way

A last point concerns a peculiarity I noted when I worked in the Centre for Applied Research in Education (which in many ways MMU has succeeded). The dominant creeds in CARE were ‘democratic evaluation’ and ‘action research’. Neither practice was visible in CARE’s own organisational activity. Such ‘theory’ was what you did to others. It’s weirdly self-contradictory and results in labelling attempts to turn theory or research inwards as ‘navel-gazing’, although often there is an underlying uneasiness that various victory narratives and the meritocracies they seem to imply may be unsettled. So how would I theorise the role of Research Professor? With two disciplines. And two inversions. First, the RAE economy is based on a ludicrous commodification of knowledge, accompanied by an increasingly individualist focus, and bizarre pseudo-criterial measurement (Stronach 2007). It is a ‘paracapitalist discourse’ as I have argued that term elsewhere, mimicking capitalism with its own ‘knowledge economy’ (Stronach 2008). Overall, its outcomes connect better with paranoia than productivity. A counter-strategy? So play the wrong game, the ‘primitive’ economy of ‘potlatch’ – where status accrues the more you give away: destroy your rivals by giving more than they can compete with. Recognise also that this ‘gift economy’ is the subversive ‘blank’ of ‘black letter’ claims to status. And that its attraction is that it covertly addresses some of the neglected metaphors of ‘education’ (always much more of a giving than a selling) and not just those of a so-called ‘economy’ of ‘knowledge production’. Second, take Foucault’s notions of power/knowledge as a kind of inverted working guide (see also Stronach & Piper 2008 for a further example). By working the ‘capillaries’ of P/K you generate much more influence than any management strategy can. Last lesson, then: understand and work with the ‘micro-physics’ of power. Generate influence rather than exercise control (but don’t kid yourself that ‘influence’ hasn’t its own regime). It is a situated requirement irreducible to the generalisations of ‘management’, and an opening to the serendipity of chance - without which no-one’s going anywhere.

Together, these have constituted for me a kind of ‘living postmodernism’ of research praxis that works by dismembering the misunderstanding of the ‘said’ alongside an understanding of the ‘unsayable’ (not the ‘unsaid’) of research development. So, if I have any of this right, I have been most influential as the *ghost* of educational research development at MMU, rather than as a presence denoted by the explicit, black letters of CV, RAE, or valedictory rhetorics. As in my mother’s last letter, you must read between the lines. So a last spectral paradox appears - I’ll only be real when I’m gone.

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