

'Ride the dragon of truth naked, yes naked' by Kate Pawsey

Inside Out - My how-it-was-for-me story of an interactive exhibition of pictures, poems and sculpture by Sam Bloomfield and Raphy Mendoza in Bristol, or - more correctly - in the People's Republic of Stokes Croft, on Friday 27th November 2015.

This article is my offering for the 'storytelling' theme of Lapidus Journal, Winter / Spring editio.

It forms an illustration of story as an aide to meaning-making on the context of Creative Writing for Therapeutic Purposes (CWTP): I was asked recently to meet with one of the collaborating poet / artists to debrief an experience of invigilating an interactive exhibition called Inside Out, in Bristol. I replied that I would write about it and let him have my notes. It became a story. Writing the story of all that happened served me more than I could have foreseen. It is what I offer you here.

Context

I caught this event out of the corner of my facebook eye.

Was curious. Had a couple of mutual friends. Liked Sam's face on facebook-the-catalogue. Read the words. Liked the concept. Decided I'd like to come to some part of the exhibition's events. Volunteered. Wanted to blindside myself, in a good way – distract myself from my work in order to lead me into another facet of my work. I facilitate writing for wellbeing sessions and was in the middle of delivering a group series. Our over-arching theme for this series is Elements. We had already worked with the weekly sub-themes of Earth; Air /Metal; Water. Still to come were Wood; Fire; finally to return to Earth / Integration. I had encountered some things in the group dynamic which I was in the process of reflecting on, wondering what was being asked for, working with the process of not knowing and of finding out.

Whim

It felt good to follow my whim, but then commit to the adventure. I responded to a call for

someone to stand in and be in the gallery on the Friday, so that it could stay open that day. Took the train. Arranged to visit an old friend nearby after I finished at the gallery. I had time while waiting for Sam, to peer in the window, read, look, think, take in the part of the street the building was on, eat a sandwich. To be on the outside, looking in. I had liked Sam in our facebook exchanges and my sense of him was confirmed on meeting. It was his birthday.

Induction

Sam fired up the lights and the heaters. He walked and talked me round the rooms and their contents, the ideas, the interactions, the practicals, the account of being broken-into and the theft of equipment, the invitations to people to participate, the comestibles, the considerations. He set up the laptop and the projected words and they began to walk across a white wall. Different lines and phrases caught my attention but the one that I repeated out loud to Sam when I saw it was 'Ride the dragon of truth naked, yes naked....' It continued but this was the phrase that had caught my attention. During the day, when the gallery was quiet, this was the phrase that I played with. I facilitate creative, expressive and reflective writing for well-being, self-development and pleasure. I take my responsibilities seriously and spend a lot of time preparing for and processing and digesting my experience of each session I deliver. I welcome a chance to be receptive to a new perspective. Spending a day in this exhibition gave me space, gave me a chance to interact with the visitors. I made a small but valued connection with Hannah in the bakery next door, as ally-in-waiting. I have lived in Bristol, not far from this part of town, in the past, but much in the past - thirty or so years in the past - and I am at heart not a city mouse. I become quite quickly saturated by things metropolitan, having few filters for all the stimulus. As I voiced to Sam, I was not anticipating feeling intimidated while I was holding the space for anyone who responded to the blackboard invitation to 'walk in, chat to the artist, have a cup of tea, draw, look etc'. However, I like to know I have an eject button, even if I never have cause to use it. Sam responded beautifully when he heard me ask my question about what support might be available, should I need it. After he left I made contact with Hannah, who was equally accommodating and understanding. She and I inhabited a comfortable space of neighbourliness for the day, exchanging a few words if she passed through the gallery to the shared toilet. Before he left, Sam and I had a small but, for me, rich exchange where I found out about his dance and movement therapy training. I shared a little about my recent MSc research dissertation within the field of Creative Writing for Therapeutic Purposes (CWTP) – my area of training and now,

for the last year and a half, my area of work. Through my research I had explored the value of play throughout the whole of an adult's life, not just during childhood. I told Sam of the place of this subject in the work I do; we discussed overlaps with his experience of dance and movement. I do so love to talk to another writer, especially when there is common ground in our experience - an opportunity for cross-pollination. I had heard the day before that I had been awarded my masters, so was at that stage a very new-born master. I had celebrated by going to a poetry recital by a former tutor – Rose Flint. Wild child that I am. It had, however, been a rich experience, and one which still lingered and informed my day. It had had an element of open mic. I read a couple of my poems, alongside my teacher. One of *my* former participants was also present who sat with us. There was a sense of continuance, of generation, of deep sharing.

Being there.

I had, before he left, a chance to witness the way Sam interacted lightly, but with a quickly formed connection of welcome, interest and invitation to a small group of Graphic Design students. They had drifted in off the street and were exploring the exhibition. It felt as if their brief had been to go out into the city and see what you find. This exhibition seemed to be a gift to them. It was an invitation to interact as well, to draw with crayons, or to paint, to comment, to read, to consider. 'Do take pictures if you wish to' Sam had urged, and also pointed out, without been overly directive, what the space offered them. Then, after last minute checks that I had all I needed in terms of instruction and comfort, he left to go to his placement for the day. I drifted about among the students, feeling halfway between a visitor and a host. We moved around each other, taking in the images, the words.

Throughout the day people came in, or stayed outside. I stayed in, receiving the visitors with more or less interaction, depending on the signals I picked up, or how more or less engrossed I was with whatever I might be in the act of doing when entered the gallery space. Some looked for contact with me, others shunned it. Some seemed to take in and absorb and be absorbed by what they found; some seemed more waterproof. One woman commented on the price of the pictures to me in a way that made me realise that I was probably perceived as the artist. A young woman came in, smartly dressed, crisply direct, saying that she was looking for full time work with lots of responsibility. I was sorry after she left, carrying with her only with my explanation of the event and my ephemeral presence there, that I had not

somehow managed to share a cup of tea with her on the sofa, and watched her transition into noticing Sam's selected words, taken from his book of poetry, projected on to the white wall. As I had had the chance to do.

I delighted in 'spying' on passers by who either walked the pavement just outside the biggest of all the gallery windows, paused on their bikes at the traffic lights waiting to turn right, spoke on mobile phones in their cars, ate sandwiches in the cabs of their trucks. I watched from the doorway of the middle room where I could lean against the door jamb, invisible to most in-lookers. I was waiting to see what effect catching sight of a line of poetry had on them, as it caught their eye, or another of their senses, through association, through memory, through imagination, through a small chink in the rolling film of their day. I was on the inside, looking out.

Drawing. Writing.

Throughout the day I played with crayons, paints, pencils, paper. I followed the line 'Ride the dragon of truth, naked, yes naked', drew it with red, yellow and orange crayons. Thought about it. Wondered why it had caught my attention. I dipped in and out of the poems in the volume which Sam had kindly given me, as thanks for my presence there that day. I looked at the pictures. Read the captions. Boiled water. Made a small cafetiere of coffee. Poked around. Drew patterns. Examined all the pieces laid out on the floor in front of the two conversationally-arranged sofas. Dropped the lock on the outside door when I went to the loo. Listened to the woman on the other side of the loo wall, in the next-door shop. Wondered about her. I let my thoughts brush over, or bore into the things I found, or noticed in the exhibition. I even had time to become bored. I so rarely have the chance to be bored. I messed about, I did funny walks to stretch my body, verging on dancing, without music, daring someone, perhaps, to come in and catch me in the act just to make something happen. I mooched around the gallery space, looking for amusement, between my own activity and the activity of those who came, and those who went. After drawing the 'dragon of truth', as I imagined it, I let flow the following words on scraps of paper in response to the line which had first caught my attention:

The dragon of truth. The Dragon of truth. The dragon of Truth. Ride the dragon of truth naked, yes naked. Scales. Tail. Char-burned flesh – dog-bad smell, trolling my nostrils. Stear-riding,

hanging on for dear death, with thighs which sting and shout. My tight-rope walking arms reaching for railings in the air; my skin chafed and raw, dust and mud and flailed grasses whipping around a halo of strimmings, and still you buck and lash, and I, naked, yes naked, hold tight, knowing you are my best bet, and that sometimes, sometimes, even you (and I along with you) do sleep. The sleep of the just and the fucking knackered. Sometimes, I whisper, sometimes, just tell a lie and let us kip together, wearing a grizzly bear suit, an eye on the escape route. So does this mean unclothed, or does it mean naked , bare, un-embellished, un-toned-down. As it is - I am – my real outer covering. I am not naked when I am alone. I simply wear nothing over my skin. My beautiful outer covering. This is my nakedness and it wears me very well. Wears me on the inside of it. Like a hidden pocket. Ride the dragon of truth naked, yes naked. Naked truth. Un-contrived. Un-false. Un-artificial. Shed all contrivance, all falsehood, all artificiality. Ride your fiery dragon of truth naked, yes naked.

And some people even stayed. Some were still there when Raphy arrived to take up the hosting baton from me towards four o'clock. I had made tea for a fresh-faced young man from Gloucester, visiting his sister in town, but with time to himself before she got back from work. I made tea for an open and lovely Canadian woman, exploring her world with a good camera around her neck. Sam's cue earlier in the day gave me leave to invite her to photograph and we spoke about taking photographs and being a photographer. I was reminded of Ted Hughes' answer to a question about Sylvia Plath. 'She does not write poetry' he had answered: 'She *is* a poet'. It is a distinction I think about from time to time. I cannot claim to be a cellist, and yet I play the cello. Furthermore, I prefer to say, rather than ' I play the cello' that 'I play with the cello'. I am ever a process-led writer. Which does not mean to say I do not complete. Completing is as much part of the process as all the other parts. And each part requires a different set of skills, circumstances, attention. I was regretful that not more of the people who passed, some of whom looked as if a hot cup of tea and a chance for some human interaction, either in the form of the work on the gallery, or from me, might have been in short supply. I watched the rain. I watched the sun dazzle through the large leafless tree visible from the doorway, on Ashley Road, connecting me to the environment I am more accustomed to, being a bit of a country mouse. I heard the sounds of the city passing outside, and sometimes shouting in through the open door.

After the show.

Now, twelve days after my experience of manning {manning – me, in this woman's body that contains my ostensibly womanliness. Womanning? Master of Science? Mistress of Science? Bachelor of Arts? Spinster of Arts? But I digress....and am in any case informed that the word derives from hand, as in 'mano', rather than man as in man. Oh.} I have just delivered the session in my Elements-themed series in which Fire was that day's theme. Wood had been the theme for the previous week, following Water, which followed Earth – the opening and closing theme.

Fire. Phew. I have been rather bowled over by the strength of my chosen themes in this current series. Each element has been powerful, for me, and I have been very immersed in the themes between each session, to great effect and benefit. Fire was no exception, and was not altogether an easy ride. But ride it I did. And only recently have I connected this experience with my day in the Inside Out exhibition. At the end of our Fire- themed session, the day before yesterday, after a very creative, edgy and ultimately triumphant three hours of work, I read my participants Sam's poem from his collection *Human Ocean*. It is called *When We Say* and is where the phrase 'ride the dragon of truth naked, yes naked' was taken from.

***When We Say* by Sam Bloomfield**

When we say

I feel.

We invite the heart,

the love, the joy

the passion of human vulnerability

to dance in the space

between us, we suckle into faltering steps

the frail winged bird of compassion.

And when we deeply listen, listen beyond words

lose ourselves in listening

we invite the spirit, the love, the ecstasy

our reverence for all human beings

to transform the most broken life,

the heart tearing open, again and again,

to heal again.

Mine and yours.

And when we consciously speak

with tongues, hands and feet,

the truth,

that we can only ever hurt ourselves.

And drop our masks, shake off the armour

of our self judgements and

ride the dragon of truth naked,

yes naked, even through the clinging mist

of our pretense sodden culture,

then we are alive you and I

then we realise death is coming

closer with each breath

and if not to live now, then when,

then when?

I read them the whole poem. It seemed to resonate with the many elements, with a lower case 'e', that we had encountered together that morning. It had not always been comfortable, but with enough in place, just, to hold our discomfort. It was certainly my most challenging experience of the series. But I was ultimately proud and pleased with my work as facilitator. I had spent many, many hours preparing for this session – much more than is normally required - as there was a dynamic at play which required my considered intervention around the working alliance – the ground rules – the safety net. These could translate as the notional smoke detectors, fire alarm, number for the emergency services, fire bucket, inflammable protective gloves and apron, a knowledge of where the first aid box was located and last but not least, the fire escape. I had chosen and used my words with much care, even giving myself a 'script' which I do not usually work with. I worked as well as my ability, experience and personality allowed. I had carefully considered how much of my truth to share, how much to disclose of my own story, my own state, and what words to use if pressed to share more than I wished to. To be congruent, *and* empathetic. What more can a gal, or a guy, do? These more or less adequate words functioned for me to hold, stimulate and direct the session,

which held not inconsiderable challenges for me personally, safely enough. It was not, at certain stinging points, easy. However, I emerged at the far side of the session both quietly exhilarated and pretty worn out. Riding 'a dragon of truth naked, yes naked' exacts a certain toll. And I paid that toll. But I had not been consumed. In fact, on reflection, as I write this, I know that I gained great strength and satisfaction from the experience. All of it. I also heard how the creative, expressive and reflective writing had been a rich and powerful experience for the participants. The purpose of the intervention had been adequately realised therefore: safe enough conditions for exploring the element fire, at this particular stage in the group's dynamic.

When my partner arrived home in the middle of the afternoon he caught me unawares. I called down to him 'I'm up here, in the living room. I've been drinking port and am dancing naked to your Christmas present'. Which was all true. I had broken into the CD, the would-be gift. Yesterday, as is my wont, I took off on my bicycle for the day. It has no mud guards. I wore no waterproofs. I took no money. I cycled deliberately recklessly on occasion. I rode Dances-with-Wolves-style with my arms outstretched on my perfectly balanced steed. I returned covered in mud, wheezing and ready for food. I did not dismount in the bits I was supposed to. Spoke to scary teenagers in Trowbridge. Left my bike unlocked. Stole a teaspoon from Cafe Number one. I'll give you wild child. 'Oh Mum' laughed my daughter to me when I described the above paragraph to her, 'That's so middle class.' That old chestnut.

Thank you inside-outers, and outside-inners, for giving me this opportunity. It is not every day that I get an invitation to 'ride the dragon of truth naked, yes naked', and to answer the call.

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