

## How I am trying to lead the best possible life: towards a more helpful framing of my practice

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### Abstract

This paper looks at my practice and theorising in the light of a new development of its framing since my publications in EJOLTS in 2008 and 2012. It traces the genesis of this new contextualisation and with the recent emphasis on conscientisation (Freire, 2005) I show how it is enabling my thinking, perspectives and actions to move in new directions. First I look at my paid and voluntary employment prior to 2013 and then report on how expanding the net of my concerns through a growing understanding of the systemic, social and political influences in part through my work with a Ph.D. student I am supervising, have affected both the scope and nature of my work. I further illustrate this by looking at my charity work, and the tuition I offer in English and German to Polish students in the light of the European Migrant Crisis. I am also characterising this account as part of my living legacy (Forester, 2015) as I account to myself about how I am leading the best possible life. I conclude that 'conscientisation' has become a living standard of judgement in the evaluation of my work in the service of humanity as I seek to lead a better life in the direction of particular values, such as love, compassion and now, conscientisation. Because of my emphasis on the latter – amongst other things – I believe I am now contributing to Living Theory as a social movement through living-global-citizenship (Coombs, Potts and Whitehead, 2014).

**Keywords:** Conscientisation; Living Standards of Judgement; My Living Legacy; Integration of new emphases; Living Theory as Social Movement.

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## **Preface**

In the redrafting of this paper before publication, I would first like to say that I am sincerely indebted to my three reviewers, Dr. Pip Bruce Ferguson, Dr. Robyn Pound and Dr. Liz Wolvaardt who have helped me to strengthen the validity of its claims. Where appropriate I have integrated their ideas into the final text, so that the reader can have a greater sense of the growth of my living-theory account. Peer review is, in my opinion, a vital link in something the playwright George Bernard Shaw wrote about: 'Best keep yourself clean and bright; you are the window through which you see the world' (Shaw, 2004, p. 243). If my window on the world is fuzzy, I will see things vaguely or in a distorted way. My reviewers, like all the people in this account, have helped me to see more clearly where my path towards living the best possible life is leading me.

This paper is in two parts: the main text, and two Appendices, one of which is a fairly long story I wrote about a class in an English primary school studying the Holocaust. I have included the story because it touches on the values in the paper and is in part the result of the greater conscientisation of my practice.

## **Terms used in this account**

Robyn pointed out to me that it might help readers if I clarify some of the terms I am using in the paper for greater ease of comprehension. I think she is right and offer the following, although I am aware they may also point to the limitations of linguistic descriptions.

### **Conscientisation**

This can be read as 'critical consciousness' or 'consciousness-raising'. It is used in the paper to mean a way of bringing to conscious awareness issues which systemically make it difficult for people to empower themselves and therefore to reach their full potential individually and in groups. The systemic can be understood as having within it political, social and cultural influences.

### **The Best Possible Life**

For me, the best possible life is one in which I am making the most use of my situations, experience and talents, in order to fulfill my own potential as a human being. I am assuming that 'becoming more human' as I claim in the paper means releasing those aspects of my humanity that lead to joy, love, creativity, social justice, democratic values and empathy. In addition, leading the best possible life is bound up for me in the way in which I work with others to help them release their potential towards their own 'best possible lives'.

## The Flourishing of Humanity

By this I am meaning the bringing forth of values such as love, hope, joy, empathy, creativity and empowerment, which inspire growth and development in individuals and groups and which have the potential to lead to greater joy in being human.

## Introduction

In this paper I seek to frame my current work as a Living Theorist (Laidlaw, 2012; Whitehead, 1989; Whitehead & Huxtable, 2016) through a lens that reflects its greater conscientisation (Freire, 2005). I like Ledwith's (2005) definition of the term that:

Conscientisation is the process of becoming a critical thinker and unpacking dominant thought and oppressive thought which results from the cycle of socialization. (p. 52)...[It] is the process whereby people become aware of the political, socioeconomic and cultural contradictions that interact in a hegemonic way to diminish their lives. (p. 97)

My previous papers for EJOLTS (Laidlaw, 2008, 2012) have gravitated for answers more towards the ontological than the systemic as influences on my practice. In this paper I want to offer an account of how the value of 'conscientisation' is becoming one of my living standards of judgement (Laidlaw, 1996) in relation to the work I carry out in the name of the flourishing of humanity (Briganti, 2015).

I will show how a greater inclusion of spheres which I have, until now, undervalued as contributing to my work, mostly in education, are in fact potentially enhancing its overall quality. These spheres include: the work I do with the Open University as a tutor on Development Management Masters modules; the disability charity, Scope, and various young people on a more informal basis with piano lessons; and my English and German tuition. I will highlight my activities with three Polish immigrants, two of whom work as pharmacists in the East Riding. I teach the piano to one, and the other is learning German after completing a course with me on Academic English for entry into his second M.Sc. programme. The third studied English Conversation with me before leaving in 2014 to settle in Bristol (a town in the southwest of England). In addition I outline how the current migrant crisis affecting Europe at the time of writing (Autumn, 2015) is impacting further on my sense of the significance of the conscientisation of my practice as a national and international educator. I am also accounting to myself about the significance of my growing conscientisation in terms of the values emerging locally, nationally and internationally in answer to the question, 'how am I leading the best possible life?'

I will account for the above through brief narratives of the first 35 years as an educator, teaching children and adults in this country and for six years working as a volunteer in China. I will draw out the particular aspects that reveal (usually by omission) the values that now constellate around issues to do with a conscientisation and reframing of my practice. Then I will look at the ways in which my growing political and social consciousness have enabled me to expand my concerns in the name of the work I do in education in the service of humanity.

## 1978 – 2012 Gradual Shifts in Perspectives and Values

When preparing for this article I came across the following from Fromm (1966) and could relate to it as summarising a lot of my own values in relation to the work I've done since 1978 in the name of education and my contention that it should include the facilitation of students':

...freedom to create and to construct, to wonder and to venture. Such freedom requires that the individual be active and responsible, not a slave or a well-fed cog in the machine. . . . It is not enough that men [sic] are not slaves; if social conditions further the existence of automatons, the result will not be love of life, but love of death. (Fromm, 1966, pp. 52-53)

Some of what follows is backed up only by field-notes and my own, rather subjective, journal – written consistently from the beginning of my time as a teacher in 1978. It therefore lacks some forms of triangulation because I wasn't a rigorous reflective practitioner until I began my Ph.D. in 1991. Furthermore the more recent work at 'Scope' hasn't lent itself to more than journal reflections after the event, because of the nature of the conversations I've been involved in. I see this as an academic weakness of some of the following text, but it's an ethical dilemma and I'll be working in the future to see if I can move forward on this without cutting any ethical corners. In addition I want to say that I have asked permission from all the people whose ideas, words, videos and pictures I have used in the course of writing up this paper.

### i) 1978-1988. Teaching in a Comprehensive School<sup>1</sup>

I would characterise these years as the creation of spaces for the freedom for children to learn (Rogers, 1983). When asked once what I taught I immediately answered, 'children!' without any attempt at being 'clever' because it's always been absolutely clear to me that my subjects (mostly English, German, Music, and Psychology in schools) were merely means to an end, and the end would reveal happy and confident young people with an awareness of how they learned and a delight in doing so. I write this, but can offer very scant evidence for it. Four years ago on Facebook, however, I received an entirely unsolicited message from a student from my first Year 7 class in 1978, who wrote:

I don't suppose you remember me...[I did]. ...You showed me that poetry mattered morally. When my boys were old enough I read 'The Ancient Mariner' with them, and Blake's 'Tyger Tyger'. They drew pictures, made up dramas, talked about the ideas, just like we did back then. I told them about a teacher who made me love poetry and that bringing up children in the way she helped to bring me up was one of the best things in my life, so I wanted to give them the same opportunities to learn from you and from the poets. Tom asks me all the time if we can read the poems. He loves the part about Life-in-Death the most... At night he gets tucked up in bed and with just the bed-side lamp on, I read to him. It's so wonderful and I wanted to share it with you and thank you. (Laidlaw, 2012, Data Archive)

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<sup>1</sup> Comprehensive schools in England and Wales are accessible to children at the age of 11 – 16 or 18 regardless of prior academic achievement.

This is not a victory narrative and I'm not claiming in this instance anything other than the ability, with this one student at least, to have reached a rapport that counts for her in a way I relate to with great pleasure.

I didn't research my practice during those years, partly because I believed that creating a rapport with individuals was all-important and didn't see the point. In fact, I didn't even consider it. I was unable to see how reflective practice constituted more than simply worrying about 'poor' lessons and how to avoid mistakes on an entirely local scale, which I did routinely but without any systematic intention. I wasn't thinking about how my own reflective practice could harness the positive values of love, compassion, a respect for others, ethical considerations, democratising the learning process as well as fostering a love of learning (Laidlaw, 1994, 1996, 1998, 2000, 2001, 2004) and beyond into a more hopeful future. After an M.Ed. at Bath University in 1988 I gravitated towards Action Research with Jack Whitehead and began the very uphill struggle towards a conscientisation of my educational practice and theorising.

**ii) 1989-2001** (also known as, "The-What-Has-The-Holocaust-Got-To-Do-With-Education Anyway? Years"!<sup>2</sup>)

This time span saw the beginnings of a more socially oriented view of knowledge, theory, educational development and practice, with the publication of two articles (Laidlaw, 1994a, 1994b) and my doctoral thesis (Laidlaw, 1996). All three texts show a gradual movement towards an awareness that social structures influence learning, and that education always takes place within some sort of social context. What they don't show at all is a sense of the political nature of knowledge or the wider ramifications and responsibilities of local practices. I was comfortable with accounting for myself, but on my own terms and in my own ways. I undertook post-doctoral research at a local girls' comprehensive school (Laidlaw, 1997-2001) where I taught English and Psychology for 8 years. I was aware of some of the political arguments in favour of schooling for girls (Spender, 1980) and the politicisation of gender (Greer, 1999), as well as epistemologies that inhabited solutions through enhancing different kinds of learning rather than splitting off gender as the determining factor (Dweck, 2008). What I didn't do at the time was see through lenses other than the ones that moved me directly. One example will hopefully suffice to show what I mean.

In 1997, there was a 16-year-old girl in my Year Eleven English class, who was being seriously physically abused at home by her grandparents. She told me about the abuse. I reported – with her knowledge – her situation to Social Services. My immediate reaction was part of the legal codes of professional practice for teachers. I agreed later to be a signatory on

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<sup>2</sup> I wrote a paper in 2001 before leaving for China about my lack of insight into the links that need to be made between the values inherent in processes calling themselves educational and their social contexts (Whitehead, 2008). It has become a standing joke between myself and other action research colleagues from Bath, chiefly Jack, to whom I first said it! I keep it as a title for this section because I think it characterises my tunnel-vision well. I needed to both broaden and deepen my insights before I could move forward. That took a long time.

her proposal to legally 'divorce' her grandparents (who were her legal guardians) so that she could live in a halfway-house<sup>3</sup> in Bath. I supported her emotionally throughout the process, visiting her in her new home and keeping in touch with her in subsequent years. That she was so young and having to be so self-reliant, moved me. That she was Black in a very white city like Bath moved me. That the administrative and bureaucratic contortions she had to go through to ratify her decision to live more safely moved me. I did not, however, develop any kind of political consciousness about what else, other than the obvious unhealthy family dynamics, may have led to the circumstances in which she and her family found themselves. I did not consider the possible influences of class, geography, local and national politics, institutionalised racism and economic factors on the family or the way she was sometimes treated by the system. The social contexts I wrote about in papers during this time remained as empty words. Both Robyn and Pip remarked after my first draft that I was perhaps being too hard on myself. I don't think I was. I was spinning words rather than ideas and I needed to move out of my comfort zone that saw only individuals without social contextualisation, before I would be able to live my values more fully in my practice.

### iii) 2001 – 2007: The China Years.

I have written extensively elsewhere about my time in China's poor northwest as a volunteer with VSO<sup>4</sup> (see <http://www.actionresearch.net/writings/moira.shtml> for details). During the six years I worked in a Teachers' College, which later became a Teachers' University. One of the reasons for its upgrade was the foundation of China's Experimental Centre for Educational Action Research in Foreign Languages Teaching (CECEARFLT), through which most of the work I did there as an Educational Development Volunteer, was undertaken. Together with the Dean, of the Foreign Languages Department (where I was placed), Tian Fengjun, and the support of colleagues Jean McNiff and Jack Whitehead through their writing and visits to the Centre, my work was integral to a process which sought to embed systemic foundations for a democratisation of the learning process of teacher-education students and colleagues and reflective practices (Tian, 2005; Tian & Laidlaw, 2005; Li & Laidlaw, 2006; Sun, 2006).

During my time in China my journal was full of comments about the painful nature of trying to move from an individualistic, and what I saw as a 'western', viewpoint about the self, to one that was more embracing of a collective mindset around issues to do with responsibility, validity and agency. I didn't ever directly discuss the influences of Communism

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<sup>3</sup> A halfway-house is a term used to denote a form of accommodation in which a person lives mostly independently, but whose welfare is monitored by employees of the local council, to ensure s/he doesn't come to harm. This type of accommodation can be used by people with mental health problems who might have difficulty living entirely independently, or by those recently released from jail sentences in order to help them in to integrate back into society.

<sup>4</sup> Voluntary Services Overseas (VSO) is an international Non-Governmental Organisation which recruits volunteers with expertise in education, agriculture, medicine, engineering, conservation and Human Rights Issues to work in developing countries. See <http://www.vsointernational.org/about> for details.

and ensuing un-democratic forms of social control as they affected colleagues, students and our learning. My understanding of power-dynamics was related to my colleagues' and students' sense of their situation with my own observations and reflections, largely uninformed by any literature on the subject. I didn't stitch pathways particularly from the micro to the macro, because I wasn't so interested in the bigger picture. I cared about my colleagues and students and felt that would be the chief way I could communicate my commitment to our work together. I held a rabbinical notion at the time as well:

כל המאבד נפש אחת - מעלה עליו הכתוב כאילו קיים עולם  
מלא, וכל המקיים נפש אחת - מעלה עליו הכתוב כאילו איבד  
עולם מלא

"Whoever destroys a soul, it is considered as if he destroyed an entire world. And whoever saves a life, it is considered as if he saved an entire world."

**Image 1.** Jerusalem Talmud, Sanhedrin 4:1 (22a)

I saw my work there as highly valid in terms of my work in education in the service of humanity. I could point to evidence of individuals' own improved practice, and had plenty of examples of papers, videos, publications that revealed innovation and exploration (see <http://www.actionresearch.net/writings/moira.shtml> for details). What I didn't look at at all, either then or until recently, was the significance of the fact that after about 18 months of my departure from Guyuan the Centre was already no longer offering any examples of reflective practice. One of the key validating principles I discussed with colleagues both in China and in the UK was that of sustainability (Laidlaw, 2004a). As a core-team, Dean Tian and I seemed to have complementary strengths: his political acumen and my experience with democratising the processes of learning are just two of the many examples (Laidlaw, 2008). I felt rewarded by the sense of community that built up around our work and wrote the following in my journal at the time:

One of the key aspects of the work here is sustainability. I believe if we can work together both as individuals and a community, we may be able to sustain the development of our work over and above the time-limits set on my placement here. I know this is something I need to discuss with friends and colleagues. (Laidlaw, Data Archive, June 18, 2004)

Whilst I was honoured to be presented with a 'Friend of China' award in 2004 in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing:



**Image 2:** Sitting in the front row in the blue dress, in the Great Hall of the People.

Premier Wen Jia Bao is seated third from my left.

and to be accredited as a Professor for Life at Ningxia Teachers University, I failed to see that the ways in which power were manifested in terms of social structures and norms might have had a significant and even defining influence on the ways in which after my departure, and without that crucial concern for the individual – which I have always seen as a strength of my practice – the programme wouldn't become generative enough. There will be many explanations for why the Centre ceased to be a productive venture and I have no proof of any claims I am making here. However, my recent thinking and experiences have led me to look back at my China times as having notable limitations of vision and awareness that I didn't see before.

Again, Pip Bruce Ferguson commented on the possibility that I am being hard on myself here. I feel I am simply trying to be honest and as authentic as I can as a narrator of my own educational development. I do not feel guilty because I did not know, but looking back now I am aware of what might have been, had I been more socially and contextually aware with greater strategising ability to compensate for the complexities of individualistic and collectivistic ways of valuing a society.

Robyn Pound suggested that in fact I *did* see a lot of the problems at the time – we met often on my trips back to the UK during my posting in China. She is right, but what I had no sense of was any kind of strategising that might have acted as more solid foundations for future practice when I wasn't there to facilitate and encourage them. My vision was full of values but lacked practicalities and strategies. Working one-to-one and in small groups I could use my influence for successful action research enquiries. What I wasn't able to see was ways of harnessing the systemic influences in the college and beyond to further the values my colleagues and I were working towards. It may be that such a thing would have always been impossible, but I suspect we might have reached further had I been more aware of the systemic influences.



**iv) 2007 – 2009: Endings and Beginnings**

In 2007 I had to come back to England because of a condition that developed very quickly in both feet that confined me to a wheelchair for 6 years. I had to reconcile myself with not going back to China and perhaps even relinquishing my vocation as an educator: the pain was prohibitive. My EJOLTS paper (Laidlaw, 2012) explained, amongst other things, what it meant to come to terms with counter-culture shock and extremes of pain. It was a time of massive upheaval for me, one of the most difficult of my life. Much of my time in these years was spent coming to terms with an entirely unforeseen and unwished-for future. It debunked the myth that I was anywhere near the helm of my own destiny. I felt very small and very lost.

However, I had a novel published in English and German (Laidlaw, 2010) related to my time in China which consolidated some of my longstanding fictional ambitions. The novel centres on the lives of about 25 rural Chinese people, with a chapter for each of six festival days over the course of one year in a large northwestern Chinese town. In it I elaborated on individuals' lives, concentrating largely on people's opportunities and cultural norms. At no time did it become political in the sense of drawing explicit inferences between systemic infrastructures and explanations for the progress of a single life: all the characters were imbued with my own gaps in consciousness. It was an attempt at a narrative exploration of lives with which I was still very much emotionally involved: I was trying to make sense of my past in the light of what I saw as the loss of hope for my future.

The bilingual publication consolidated my lifelong love of German (which constituted half of a joint-honours undergraduate degree (1973 - 1977) and was assisted by a new friend, Anke, whose book about her experiences with the Stasi (Jauch, 2009) had prompted me to get in touch with her personally, and from which an enduring and special friendship has since evolved. She subsequently wrote an article for EJOLTS (Jauch, 2010) which documents some of the damaging influences still lingering on her relationship with her family from the early 1980s when she was imprisoned for 18 months for trying to escape from East Germany across the Bulgarian border together with her new husband. They were both 'bought' (freigekauft) by West Germany in 1981 where they then settled. As I had grown up in a democratic country and had never had to live in fear for my life for any political beliefs and actions, Anke's experiences were a revelation to me that has influenced the tenor of my life ever since. It is one aspect that began the conscientisation of my practice.

**v) 2009 – 2012: Beginning with the Open University (OU)**

During the first three years of working online with the Open University as an Associate Lecturer, I tutored on three different Masters modules associated with the M.Sc. in Development Management. I came to terms with having to work without meeting my students, which, of course, cut directly across one of my greatest assets as an educator as I saw it: being able to relate to individuals and groups through the warmth and immediacy of face-to-face contact. It is what I'd always relied on from the September day in 1978 when I first walked into a classroom. Now I had instead to learn new ways to relate to my students and it was extremely difficult. My paper (Laidlaw, 2012) goes into detail about progress I made in this regard. In some ways, though, the lack of physical and visible social context made it

difficult or even impossible for me to recognise the complexities of my students' lives and the bearing this had on their learning. I had to exercise greater imagination, read more, be more attentive to the nuances of students' words both spoken via Skype and in emails, and develop what Scholes-Rhodes (2002) describes as, 'a practice that encompasses both its own assumptions about the nature of knowledge and about the appropriate methodology for obtaining 'correct' understanding' (p. 268). I am still very much concerned with this endeavour.

### **In Summary:**

I am aware of having had a particular way of doing things when it came to relating to individuals within educational settings, such that I can put them usefully in touch with their own strengths in order to build on them as expressed in each of the EJOLTS papers already referred to. I saw my goal in an educative relationship fulfilled when an individual improved the quality of their learning and sensed a greater trust in the world and the future because of it. Buber wrote about the characteristics of a healthy educative relationship, that it created:

Trust, trust in the world, because this human being exists - that is the most inward achievement of the relation in education. Because this human being exists, meaninglessness, however hard pressed you are by it, cannot be the real truth. Because this human being exists, in the darkness the light lies hidden, in fear salvation, and in the callousness of one's fellow-men the great Love. (2002, p. 116)

I am not suggesting I set myself up as someone to be trusted (that way lies exploitation), but as someone who always does her best to trust entirely that the other is a uniquely valuable human being. Much of what I still do in education is implicitly and explicitly committed to that journey with the other. I know I gain a sense that the world is a better place every time I am involved in working with individuals who seek to improve their practice and thus live their values more fully in it. Their fulfillment is profoundly mine.

I agree with Robyn when she commented that trust is a fundamentally important issue here because it is the grounding of all truly educative relationships (Laidlaw, 1996). What I hadn't seen before was the link between the flourishing of my and others' humanity as trusting relationships were forged, and therefore one of the key elements in the relationships that this paper looks at, is the whole nature of trust that I hope to inspire in others as we both learn something of value. Indeed, trust is so crucial to any worthwhile relationship in my opinion, that it was an oversight to miss it out. I think it becomes vital in the section later about Kieran.

At my best I have, I believe, lived as fully as possible the sense that 'the stuff' of my educational life is the humanity of myself and every child and adult in the classroom. My aims have been to work with them to liberate us all from the shackles of expediency inherent in systems of education that don't keep us as individuals in their sights (IPA, 2008). I came to realise that much of the work I have done in the name of education has, at its best, borne a close relationship with the idea of the art of mentoring (Yamamoto, 1990) in which:

This need to see on one's own has to be carefully, if subtly preserved and enhanced so as not to deprive the individual, who is momentarily under guidance, of motivation and dignity. There must be in both the guide and the guided a delicate interweaving of a sense of seeing and being seen. One complements the other and the two together help each person retain and develop his or her own idea of self as a unique, competent and worthy human being. (pp. 184-185)

Two such examples will have to suffice to illustrate this.



**Video 1:** Learning about Blake's Poetry with Hayley

<http://www.actionresearch.net/living/moira/mlyr8stick.mov>

The link above from 2000 shows Hayley, 12, talking about her work on Blake's poetry. I had set the mixed-attainment class a task from the English National Curriculum syllabus of responding to Blake's 'Songs of Innocence and Experience' (a collection of poetry which is fairly accessible to young people) in any way they chose. Hayley decided to work on a collection of water-colour pictures to depict her understanding. The class was also asked to set their own standards of judgement by which their work should be judged by their peers and by me. In addition, each student was asked to present their work to us all, choosing the manner and length of presentation. I wanted the girls to experience something of their own ability to direct their learning and experience in the classroom.

Another example took place in China in 2004. I was teaching a class of 102 teacher-education students for Teaching Methodology in English and was trying to help them devise tasks for very large groups, using their own experience as a support to their planning. One student, Tian Hua, had for the first time suggested alternatives to my advice. This was a massive step for her as she rarely even spoke to friends during the lesson, let alone to me in front of everyone. Jack Whitehead was on a visit and let the camera continue shooting at the end of the lesson. In the clip below I single out Tian Hua for particular attention but try throughout to maintain a relationship with the rest of the class as they leave. It was a balancing

act, and one I wasn't aware was worth recording, but in retrospect it shows something of my commitment to make contact with as many students as possible before they left the room.



**Video 2:** Taking Leave of my Methodology Class with Tian Hua

<https://youtu.be/Z1jEOhxDGno>

I was aware of wanting to see through their actions and subsequent confidence and greater cogency that a student had found their own way of fulfilling their own goals as human beings. In writing about what can prevent this liberation, Freire writes:

Every prescription represents the imposition of one individual's choice upon another, transforming the consciousness of the person prescribed to into one that conforms with the prescriber's consciousness. Thus, the behavior of the oppressed is a prescribed behavior, following as it does the guidelines of the oppressor. (2005, p. 47)

I didn't want students to be made in my image – or in the image of those with greater systemic power – but to become the best selves in their own lives. This was my version at the time of my living the best possible life.

## 2013 onwards...

Three years ago I started to walk again and manage the pain a lot better. This has increasingly been the case such that by last summer I was cycling 150 miles a week. This summer I have started trying longer distances, and now regularly walk ten miles three or four times a week as well as cycling reasonable distances. My mobility isn't assured from day to day, which means that full-time employment in a classroom still isn't an option. For example short bursts of walking continue to cause me excessive pain and I cannot stand still for more than about a minute without severe, lingering discomfort.

Therefore, I have become reconciled to working from home. I now offer tuition in English, German and playing the piano to local children. Working with children again is a

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constant delight for me. With each of the three children I work with (for English, German and piano tuition) I derive real pleasure in facilitating them to find ways to enhance their natural strengths and talents.

### **i) Scope**

Scope is a national charity for the disabled which operates through retail-outlets, supplied entirely through donations from the public. It aims to dispel ignorance about disabilities and offer educational opportunities through fundraising events around the country. Many larger towns and most cities in this country have a Scope shop, so when my mobility became more reliable, I started volunteering in the [Bridlington](#) branch every Monday. I mostly work on the till, which is a leap out of my comfort zone. I have never worked in a shop before, and dealing with anything mechanical that can bite me or refuse point blank to function with me around, surrounded by customers who want me to hurry up, doesn't fill me with confidence and joie-de-vivre. Everyone tells me the cash-register is a simple operating device. It feels like my own personal nemesis.

It's strange to me, that such a job would begin to show me something of political realities that I hadn't really considered sufficiently before. Pip's comment here in the draft of this paper alerted me to the Zen saying, that when the student is ready the teacher will appear. That has mostly been my experience, although at times I have to say that Jack spoke to me before I was ready, and sometimes by years and years and years. The 'what-has-the-Holocaust-got-to-do-with-education-anyway?' title is a case in point.

During my time in Scope, people started to talk to me when they were looking around, coming up to the counter to pay for items. I started to get regular customers who told me about their lives. Sometimes strangers would come in and end up staying for an hour and tell me what they were worried about. I've encountered profoundly lonely people, some sad, others lost at the death of a loved one, some very elderly people trying to cope with being the last of their extended family and friends alive, and wondering now whether it was worth all the struggle of youth and middle age. I've met people who are struggling to make ends meet, despite working hard. I've met heroin addicts, gaunt like walking corpses, eyes sunken and smudged, that never settle or smile. I've met single parents bewildered at taxation, benefit-claims, and entitlements and worried about the future. I've met homeless people, convinced no one can ever respect them or care about what it's like to live in their world, expecting the worst and usually getting it. I've met disabled people dealing with prejudice and financial difficulties. I've met a poet who has a life-threatening condition that makes it impossible for him to work, and he brings in his poetry every week for me to read. I've met people who just need someone to listen to them and take them seriously and I can do that. Listening with no judgement whatsoever about the person talking, is the job I've ended up doing, although it's not the one I applied for.

On the way to and from Scope I regularly see a woman in her late thirties with learning difficulties, whom I first met one morning crying at the bus-stop where I got off in town. When I sat with her and asked her to tell me what was the matter, she described in graphic detail what it was like to be bullied by another resident in her halfway house. It had clearly been

going on for some time. We worked out strategies together to enable her to set boundaries and to involve the management staff as well. Whenever she sees me now she runs up to me, flings her arms round my neck and tells me I'm her friend. She says she's happier at home now. At the time of drafting this paper I met her and she told me in great excitement about her happiness at being invited to her niece's christening. She told me about having her hair done and buying a new dress: 'I'll come into Scope next week and see you', she said. 'I'll bring the clothes I'm going to wear!'

I've begun to realise that this time I put aside every week (whatever else is going on) as much as anything I've done in my life, is turning out, I believe, to be very worthwhile work. I was initially motivated by wanting to 'give something back'. Having been disabled for six years I was aware of some of the privations and psychological scarring this can cause. I felt grateful for a National Health Service that had given me a lifetime of excellent medical care and grateful that I could walk again at all. I believed working in the charity shop would be a way of not taking such privileges for granted. What I found myself doing, however, was focusing increasingly on social needs I hadn't known existed so close to my own front door. As Pip noted, I was helping them, but they were helping me too.

Being prepared to listen and to offer time has meant that people talk to me. I'm mindful of Yamamoto's (1990) words: '[People] can react sharply to the process of being seen' (p. 184). That is certainly my experience. Many the time people have come back after such a conversation, in a week's or a month's time and said that our encounter has made a difference for the better.

My work at Scope has sensitised me, I believe, to the plight of others in ways I might not have configured without it. In July I wrote a short story which is overtly sociological and political in tone (see Appendix One). In addition, during a journey to Cornwall (10 hours each way) in August I met three school-aged boys and their guardians, whose experiences of education and nurturing were so starkly opposed that I wrote at length about it in my journal (see Appendix Two). What filled me with anger was the sense of the unfairness of how geography and politics even within this small country, can exert such a powerful influence on the quality of life and education for individuals, families and communities. This writing is anecdotal, and I don't claim any lasting truths from it. It has acted, however, as a further spur to a greater conscientisation of my practice. I agree with Pip that I was broadening my ability to combat injustice at a systematic level that has always permeated my work and writing at an individual level. She may be right that these reveal the kind of conscientisation I am claiming in the paper.

## **ii) Kieran.**

I tutored Kieran three years ago on a one-to-one basis at home for English grammar and punctuation. Fiercely intelligent he found the mechanics of writing boring and time-consuming. He wanted to immerse himself in facts and scientific ideas, not have to concern himself with semi-colons, or, heaven forbid, stories. 'Stories are for wimps!' he informed me! After I'd spent weekly sessions with him for about six months, I told his mother he'd learnt everything he needed to in that sphere – but I offered him twice-monthly Sunday afternoon

slots (no money exchanging hands) to come and tell me about his world, what he wants out of life – he wants to be a pharmacist. I knew there could have been a natural break in our encounters, yet somehow I also knew there was more to be done and that both of us would probably benefit from continuing to meet. I sensed a very engaged mind that wasn't being stimulated by the examination-oriented schooling he was receiving. I also detected a really creative spirit underneath that yearned for expression.

In the last two years we've talked about various political situations in the world, we've swapped jokes and silly anecdotes, we've enjoyed each other's company, watched videos and 'deconstructed' them. He's taught me about Formula One Racing and Video Gaming and I've learnt a lot. Now at the age of 15, he's beginning to link his circumstances with those of others in the world. For me perhaps most moving of all is that now he is at the beginning of writing his second novel! Every time he visits he gives me his latest writing and we go through it together, talking about characterisation, plot, use of language and motivations. He cares about details, asks me whether this character would be likely to do one thing or another. He listens to what I say, but he always makes his own decisions and takes responsibility for them: this is his novel, not mine, and to be with him as he engages in another dimension of his humanity is absolutely thrilling for me. He doesn't get bored with stories now! I find it incredibly rewarding being a catalyst in his development.



**Image 4:** Kieran holding a certificate for Outstanding Progress in Geography from his school.

I accept the Ubuntu belief that in one sense I am because he is (Lief, 2015), just as I now realise there is a potential of such connection with every person I choose to work with; from them I gain a greater sense of belonging to the world and of being an integral part of it. Paradoxically, I also gain a sense of my own uniqueness which focuses my attention as well on

the uniqueness of others. It is a Möbius-strip<sup>5</sup> in educative relationship form. And it is belonging to the world that enables me to do the work I need to do and will continue to do. If I am not connected to the world as much as I can as an individual human being, i.e. becoming more conscious of those aspects of human life that influence it, then I am merely constructing a fragment of a mosaic and believing it to be the whole picture. Robyn helpfully pointed out at this point in the draft-version that my later section, 'Living Theory as a Social Movement' may be being prefaced here. I think she is absolutely right. An individual's Living Theory is not intended, to my understanding, to be split off from the world of others; indeed it is from being with others as well as with ourselves that we grow, hopefully in the direction of the values we espouse as enriching our own and others' lives. This is a social activity.

### iii) Working with Arianna

For the past 18<sup>th</sup> months I have been working with Arianna, a Ph.D. student at Lancaster University UK and the University of Cumbria UK, who graduated with her M.Sc. in Development Management, taking her Final Project module with me as her tutor at the Open University. As a development economist with Cultural Heritage without Borders now working in Albania (she has also worked in Ethiopia, Afghanistan and Georgia) Arianna has evolved a very keen set of insights about the purposes of her work as she wrote in a recent paper (Briganti, 2015):

Being a development practitioner means that I have been engaged in development work in practice ever since I've lived development from its embryonic stage and witnessed the various and complex scope of development and its impact on people's daily lives in developing countries. It's about sharing and collaborating, it's about creating peace and peaceful spaces where people feel at ease and secure and foster their own capabilities; it's about inspiring and learning from each other; it's about caring, listening and being listened to. It's about seeing the broader picture and working for the building of a fairer world in which resources are equally shared. It's about commencing a journey alongside people from different cultures, some of which are alien to the socio-historical context I've been born and raised in. The journey is about building trust with my fellow travellers and with the people I meet along the way. This trust is based on a mutual exchange of practical experience, wishing to do no harm and bearing in mind the one and only imperative common goal: working together for the flourishing of humanity (Whitehead, 1989).

In the following video-clip, Arianna talks with me about the complexities of her work, weaving in the cultural, social, economic, contextual and human dimensions that influence it.

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<sup>5</sup> A Möbius strip is made when a strip of paper is twisted once and then the ends joined. This leaves a structure that has only one side, as one can run a pen along its length and never have to go over an edge. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Möbius\\_strip](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Möbius_strip) for details.





**Video 3:** Arianna in Conversation with me in May, 2015.

<https://youtu.be/8xhSYyLrLKg>

In my journal afterwards I wrote:

Working with Ari is continuing to stretch my assumptions about how wide to cast the net of my own practice. She is so aware of how things influence each other; and seeing the big picture, which she refers to a lot, is, for her, normal practice. It hasn't always been for me. I need to start both standing back from what I am doing to see it more clearly and also to home in on those aspects, like the political in this country and elsewhere, like the systemic and institutional, which Ari does as a matter of course, so that I can create a more substantial and authentic living-theory... Joining the Labour Party<sup>6</sup> is, for me, a big step because it says that I am accepting as a legitimate parameter for accounting for my own work those systemic influences that up until now I have always seen as subordinate to the individual educative relationship. It's much more complex than that.

#### **iv) Immigration, Migration and Refugees.**

Another factor that has helped me to focus on a conscientisation of my practice, is the work I now do mindfully (Epstein, 1999) with Polish and English students. The author writes:

Mindful practitioners use a variety of means to enhance their ability to engage in moment-to-moment self-monitoring, bring to consciousness their tacit personal knowledge and deeply held values, use peripheral vision and subsidiary awareness to become aware of new information and perspectives, and adopt curiosity in both ordinary and novel situations. (p. 833)

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<sup>6</sup> The Labour Party is one of the two major parties in British Politics. It is described as 'left-wing' in the UK and was instrumental in our National Health Service after the second world war. See Ken Loach: 'The Spirit of '45' film for details.

The English counties of The East Riding and Lincolnshire have seen many arrivals of Polish workers in the last ten years, some of them labourers paid by the hour, others professional workers with specific qualifications (Hassell & Shaffheutle, 2009). I have tutored three adult emigres – two a married couple, Tadeusz and Karolina, and a third, Wodek – for English. The latter wanted help with conversational English. In his late twenties, he had come to England to earn money by doing a variety of labouring jobs. He'd had to abandon his psychology degree course at Warsaw University as he wasn't able to afford it anymore. His girlfriend had become a General Practitioner (GP)<sup>7</sup> in Bristol. We talked about anything he wanted to and I would follow up lessons with emails of grammatical and lexical points. Mostly we talked – at his instigation – about psychology. We exchanged theories and speculations about human nature and recommended to each other textbooks and favourite authors. He was particularly interested in the work by Tomasz Witkowski on the psychology of pseudo-science. Throughout the year I taught him I was impressed by his enquiring mind, a desire to understand people and cultures and his quickfire and sometimes self-deprecating sense of humour.

Most significant for me were his descriptions of the racism he encountered in the East Riding on a daily basis. He had been spat on in the street, and once been knocked down in a pub because someone 'didn't like his accent'. He was regularly discriminated against in casual assumptions about his background, speech, English, looks, attitudes, motives and abilities. We discussed the psychology of racism and I referred him to several articles and books. He touched my heart. He seemed in some ways to be a vulnerable young man, who could not really understand why, when he tried to be friendly, he was met with such aggression. Given my own experience of six years in a wheelchair and how ridiculed and a couple of times even attacked physically as I had been, I wasn't particularly surprised at some local people's propensity to externalise their uncertainties about the world. He further suffered from being a highly educated and well-read young man who was, in his words, 'in a ghetto with other Polish men who don't want to learn and who spend most evenings getting drunk. They make fun of me. It's lonely here. I'm an outsider in two places at the same time.'

Both Karolina and Tadeusz encounter racism in various guises as well, never as physically aggressive as Wodek's experiences, but still alienating and disconcerting. They have been 'politely informed' on several occasions that they 'ought not to be in this country taking jobs from English pharmacists'. The East Riding may be one of England's poorest counties, but a political analysis that says Karolina and Tadeusz are personally responsible for the slump in job prospects in this area for pharmacists shows a certain lack of nuanced insight! I am, of course, understating the case here! There are parts of the local seaside town they won't enter after dark, and they avoid the town-centre every Friday and Saturday night. A friend of theirs

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<sup>7</sup> General Practitioner (GP) refers to a local medical doctor who works at a medical practice, usually consisting of several doctors, and who is responsible for the general health of the population. S/he is independent of, but with close connections to, local hospitals. S/he will, if necessary, make home visits. Their services are free due to the National Health Service, paid for through taxation.

landed in hospital once after ‘having the audacity’ to go into a pub on a Saturday night. A local customer objected to having to wait to be served.

### v) The European Migrant Crisis:

As I begin this section I am mindful of Pip Bruce Ferguson’s comments on an earlier draft of this paper about the effects on individuals, communities and nations of trauma that may contribute to an outsider’s inability to comprehend at all what it is that others may be suffering. This, of course, may well stand in the way of effecting lasting and helpful change. This paper has neither the scope nor the insight to deal with this important aspect head on, but it is informing my reading and reflection and actions into the future and will probably surface again in subsequent papers. It is deeply concerned with my desire to lead a better life.

One of the most insistent claims on my attention and sense of purpose in the world recently, has been the problems encountered by vast numbers of migrants entering Europe who have become world-news. The increasing numbers of migrants and deaths of hundreds are sustaining international attention, as I believe they should (Statewatch, 2015). ‘The Guardian’ (2015) – a British newspaper – wrote on September 19, 2015:

Many are beginning to ask whether the current crisis represents a temporary peak in displacement or presages a new, long-term trend. On what basis can we know? Will the dystopian images we see at the Hungarian-Serbian border of desperate families being beaten back by armed guards or [the shocking image](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/02/shocking-image-of-drowned-syrian-boy-shows-tragic-plight-of-refugees) of Alan Kurdi become “the new normal”? The simple answer is: it depends. It depends significantly on us, and the policies we, and our leaders, choose to adopt nationally, regionally, and globally. (<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/02/shocking-image-of-drowned-syrian-boy-shows-tragic-plight-of-refugees>)



**Image 5:** Alan Kurdi’s body

The power of this picture for me is that it graphically and viscerally thrusts into my consciousness the horror of the death of a child *and* helps me to understand that there, but for the gift of geography, might go every single child on the planet. If it is possible for this one child, then it’s possible for any child. Rather than an idea, this has become an immutable

reality to me. I cannot bear the thought. I must try and do something. You see, I am now thinking about the promise of Kieran's and other young people's right to a hopeful future as they find out who they are and who they want to become because they are – in my dreams – all surrounded by people who want them to succeed. I am realising that in different circumstances, in different political and geographical contexts, Kieran could have been one of those dead children. The thought is simply unbearable. *So if it's unbearable for me because I know him, then what does it take for me to widen my vision sufficiently so that every child's death becomes unbearable?* I cannot save the world, but I can approach it in a more aware way. That is what I am trying to do. So, as Peters (1966) might have asked in response to a moral imperative, 'What ought I to do?' I think this paper and the actions surrounding it are beginning to answer that question for me as a Living Theorist.

One of the things I have done, which is directly connected to the migrant crisis, is to write to various organisations offering my help as an English teacher – free of charge of course. I have also responded to appeals both online and through requests at my door for clothes and kitchen implements by The British Red Cross for this crisis. I am also canvassing people locally who have links with charitable organisations in this part of England to offer help for Polish migrants seeking to improve the quality of their English.

I have sponsored two charities for many years now – ActionAid, through which I sponsor the education of Dolat, a 10-year-old boy in Pakistan, and The British Red Cross for their work in inner cities in the UK. However, giving money requires almost no personal engagement at all; and as valuable as offering Aid money is, it does not stretch my sense of how I can develop in more productive directions in order to respond to the world's and my own ontological needs more profoundly and productively. I feel there is more I can do with who I am.

## Living Theory as a Social Movement

### i) Beginnings<sup>8</sup>

As I have come to write this paper and do the reflection, reading and discussion-work necessary to bring it to this level of articulation, I've realised that I'm beginning to categorise in my own mind Living Theory as a social movement. I am mindful as well of Archer's work<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> I first talked about this issue with Arianna Briganti in one of our weekly Ph.D. tutorial sessions. I am finding that my work with her seems to be characterised by both of us learning things of value. They are certainly not one-way conversations.

<sup>9</sup> There are four different types of reflexivity that Archer refers to in her work. Caetano (2014) writes: 'Communicative reflexivity stems from internal conversations that require confirmation by others before resulting in specific courses of action. Autonomous reflexivity is defined as self-contained inner dialogues that lead directly to action without the need for validation by other individuals. Meta-reflexivity refers to the reflexive critique that subjects direct at their own internal conversations, which intensifies personal stress and social disorientation. Fractured reflexivity is exercised by individuals whose inner dialogues do not allow them to deal properly with social circumstances.' (p. 3)

(2007) about reflexivity, particularly as she articulates ‘fractured reflexivity’ which she sees as being exercised by individuals whose inner dialogues don’t allow them to deal appropriately with social circumstances. I feel that touches on my own experience very closely. I am hoping to move, however, to more of a sense of a communicative reflexivity, which stems from internal conversations that require confirmation by others before resulting in specific courses of action. However, for that to happen my internal dialogues have to be better informed. In the following YouTube Still you can see a group of colleagues and friends from the UK, Ireland, Canada, and India discussing our latest Living Theory research. Each of us is involved in work embedded our social contexts and a sharing of values and experiences underlines the significance of both individual and group influences.



**Image 6:** Still from a post-doctoral weekly discussion about our individual Living Theory research enquiries

In their forthcoming article, Whitehead and Huxtable (2016) write:

Questions may be asked about the social significance of making public the[se] narratives of the lives and influences of individuals. Our response is that it is through the lives of individuals who are committed to holding themselves to account for living [certain] values as fully as possible that creates a social movement that can contribute to transforming the world.

I am beginning to understand that more deeply now and will be taking it more into account as I seek to live out my values to a greater extent in my practice.

## **ii) My understanding of conscientisation as a living standard of judgement.**

In the last few months I have consciously been extending the framing of my work and have found Freire’s notion of conscientisation very helpful in enabling new perspectives. As I did with many school-students as they articulated their own standards of judgement by which they wanted themselves and others to evaluate the quality of their work (usually in the form of adjectives) I would ask them to write a description of the quality they were focusing on so

that we could all be sure we were sharing the same meanings of the word. When I ask myself to do this in terms of the living standard of judgement – conscientisation – I wish to apply to my own work, I realise I am including with the extension of political frameworks, and a liberation through escaping or lessening of inappropriate systemic influences (Freire, 2005) the quality of empathy (Krznaric, 2014). I may start through the motivation that arises from my empathy with the humanity of individuals, but that is no longer sufficient to account for the question, ‘Am I living the best possible form of life?’ I need to spread the net wider – towards political and social and other systemic influences in order to be able to answer that question in the affirmative.

## Conclusion:

And as I struggle to find out how I can best respond to the legitimate demands of the world, I begin to realise that there are links between my sense of a living legacy, my responsibilities and educational activities, and Living Theory as a social movement. The fundamental question: How am I leading the best possible life? helps me to unify the apparently disparate aspects of my work, which I am now beginning to see as a seamless whole. If I am the material I have to work with in my responses to the world, then any conscientisation with its inclusion of empathy as a spur to finding out more, will remain, I believe as a significant developmental goal. By using this living standard of judgement as a means to evaluate the quality of my responses to the world and to my own and others’ humanity, then I anticipate with real enthusiasm much productive work that will enable me to walk down this particular path in the future with greater fulfillment and purpose.

I have always liked the saying, ‘it is our purpose to work the fields that we know.’ My fields just got bigger!

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## Appendix One.

### The Picture.

Graham sits at his desk, head supported on his cupped hands. Story time. Again. Oh joy! He purses his lips. These teachers. The same crap everyday. 'Now children!' he mimics Miss Warski's high, sing-song voice in his mind, the voice she uses to blackmail the children into doing what she wants. Her voice has a quality of vulnerability that means if you disobey her, it's like booting a kitten, or knocking down Johnny Jones – he's a cripple that everyone bullies so that's all right. But he goes to a Special School because he's really thick, his dad says. So you just can't do it with her. All the rest of the Year Six class agree, Miss Warski's all right really. Nice for a teacher anyway. Graham sighs again. Story time. Anyone would think they're babies the way she treats them. 'Let's end today with a nice story, shall we children?' How old does she think we are anyway?

'Now, children,' Miss Warski said, flicking her nut-brown hair back from her angular and rather stern features.

'Graham, are you going to sit in the circle?' It isn't a question: it's a royal command. It's a criticism. He dragged himself over to the empty chair next to stinky-pig James. The chair next to James was always empty of course. All the children laughed derisively at Graham as he took his place, and some of them pointed at him as well. James was used to it and only flushed a little. His thoughts were far away, probably with his dead parents or something.

He's going into care, they say. Going into care because he smells, Graham wondered? The thought passes through his mind in a flash, that perhaps if *he* smelt, *he* could go into care too. If he didn't wash for a week, or a month or something, perhaps Social Services would come and take him away. Yeah, right! *That* was going to happen in this world. No, what'll happen is, his parents'll continue to act as if he's not there, and scream and shout at each other all the time. But if you can be taken into care for smelling, why not for having to watch *that* every day? And they say life's fair really. Things work out in the end really. It *is* all right, though, when his grandfather's there. His mum's father, that is. When he's there the parents don't argue and it's quite nice to be in the house.

Graham scuffs his feet and kicks at the legs of his chair.

'Settle down, everyone,' Miss Warski says in her rich, brown voice, looking at all the children, 'but meaning me,' Graham thinks. 'She doesn't like me. Nobody likes me. Except Granddad, but he can't be there all the time, not with Granny being so ill. He feels the tears coming. That would be the last straw. They laugh at me enough already. Just another excuse to get at me. And Rob, he's the worst of the lot. Always going round with his mates, never on his own. Coward! Spends his time picking on Iqbal and anyone else who doesn't fit into his pathetic excuses for friends. Always sniggering and poking fun at Iqbal's family when everyone knows his own dad's inside and his mum's no better. Tart, they say. Bet she is too with those low-cut blouses and lipstick on too thick and those made-up eyes that look like spiders' webs.'

Graham shudders.

'Now, are you all paying attention?' Miss Warski says again. 'Today's going to be a different *kind* of story. Because it's not a story. It really happened.'

'Oh, great! Just what we need. A fucking documentary!' Graham sighs again and looks out of the window.

'Graham, pay attention please, dear.'

'Pay attention please *dear!*' Rob mimicked, but was instantly quelled by Miss Warski's look.

She's got a lot of different looks. She can bring them out at the drop of a hat. They must practise that at Teacher School, looks. She's got some nice ones, he admits that, but mostly she has those looks that freeze your balls off when you're only *thinking* of doing something wrong. People must become teachers because they can do that stuff, rather than doing that stuff when they learn how to become teachers. He sits up straight and pretends to pay attention.

'We're starting a story today about something that really happened.'

'Is it an adventure story?' asked May enthusiastically. Why doesn't someone sit on that stupid girl's head?

'No, well, not the usual kind. It's not one of those happy stories.'

'Oh Miss!' said Daniel. 'Can we have one of those really good adventure stories with guns and swords and stuff? And blood and guts all over the place. Entrails sliced up?' The boys cheered and the girls made disparaging sounds.

'All this stuff we're *supposed* to know about is so *boring!*' (Daniel always spoke in exclamation marks!) The children all cheered at this truth, but Miss Warski raised her hand in a pacifying gesture, and the children were silent.

'It's about a boy called Samuel,' she said.

'Hey, Samuel,' Rob jeered at a small, shy boy with freckles called Samuel, who wore glasses because he had a squint. 'They've written your life-story: How I got rid of my UGLY squint!'

All the children laughed, but this time Miss Warski's look was an angry one, and directed fiercely at Rob, who was immediately quelled, though trying to pretend he wasn't by looking at his cronies and shrugging nonchalantly.

'Any more of that nonsense from you, my laddo, and you'll be in detention.'

'Already there today,' said Rob. 'And tomorrow. And the next day.'

'Well, that's lovely!' said Miss Warski with calm assurance. 'We'll be seeing a lot of each other, won't we? I'm on detention-duty this week!'

She looked at him, straight in the eyes, and all his swagger melted away. She then smiled at Sam, who smiled back, cheered by his favourite teacher's encouragement.

There is some muted interest at the idea of an important story. Children squirm round on their chairs, so they are all paying attention. Graham too, watches from the sidelines. She certainly does have a way of raising one's interest, he'll give her that. And it's about time someone stood up to that prick Rob.

'Samuel was 10 years old in 1943. He lived in Warsaw. Remember where that is, children? We talked about it in Geography last week.'

'It's in Poland, Miss,' said May, smiling happily at knowing the answer.

'Yes, that's right, May. Well done for remembering.'

The teacher stood up and walked over to the world map that covered the whole of one wall. 'In 1942 it had been taken over by the Nazis. Who can remember who the Nazis were? Hands up, don't shout!'

She looked round at the sea of waving hands and picked on Alison.

'The Nazis were the baddies in the war, Miss,' she said simply.

'Yes, they were, but why?'

'Because they tried to take over the world,' said Samuel.

'Yes they did. Anything else?'

Silence.

'Well, this story is about the answer. It's a story about good and evil. I want you to listen carefully. You might never hear a more important story in your life, but I think you're grown-up enough for it.'

Good and evil! Sounds like a bloody fairy-story. Most important story we've ever heard? Don't think so. Graham sits back, sighing in sheer boredom now. Just another fucking, boring story. And then it's, 'let's all go home now, children, and have a lovely evening!' Yeah! Why not? *That'd* be nice!

'Samuel was about your age, ten, when he and all his family were moved into a ghetto. What's a ghetto?'

Blank stares. Something stirs in Graham, but he can't quite grasp it.

'Well, watch out for the descriptions in the story and see whether you can answer that question later on. Samuel was a normal boy, a normal child just like all of you.'

'Except for Samuel in our class, Miss,' said Rob, but was instantly silenced with a look.

'*This* Samuel liked playing football with his friends. He liked playing with his model aeroplanes. He liked building tree houses in the woods. He liked making a lot of noise and being a nuisance, just like you lot!'

She laughed and everyone joined in. Even Graham.

'He liked doing what boys like doing,' she said, and looked round at her audience. She raised her eyebrows at some of the boys and the girls laughed. Some of the boys did too, and indeed, most of the children were hooked. Graham had to admit, she could tell a story.

Yet Graham suddenly wants to go home. He wants to know how his mother is after last night. She looked so unhappy this morning. So did his father, but he deserved to, the bastard. He comes back from the pub and has a go at her. He enjoys it. He hits her and sometimes he even kicks her. Once, Graham tried to protect her but his father beat him up so badly, he had to stay off school for a week and his mother wrote a letter to say he was ill. His father is a coward, a fucking coward! He hates his father, fucking *hates* him.

'When they moved to the ghetto, they were only allowed the clothes they stood up in. All their jewellery, all their valuable possessions were taken away by the German soldiers.'

'Stolen, Miss? Taken away by force? What did they do?' Alison looked worried, as if it were happening to her family.

'They shouldn't have let them, then,' said Rob with absolute certainty. He wouldn't have. They must have been cowards. '*I wouldn't have let them,*' he said, and grinned at his friends. '*I would've killed them. I would've gouged their eyes out and spilled their guts all over the floor, I would!*'

His cronies cheered their admiration, but soon were silent when Miss Warski raised her eyebrows at them. Graham wondered how she did that. If he raised his eyebrows at them, they kicked seven shades of shit out of him.

'No you wouldn't, Robert,' she said calmly to the boy. 'Because you wouldn't've had any weapons, or spears, or anything at all to defend yourself with. Only the soldiers had weapons. Only the soldiers could say what happened to you.'

'That's stupid!' Rob said, nettled, but Miss Warski smiled gently at him and continued. He was strangely pacified and decided to listen after all.

'Six families shared a single house in the ghetto. They were packed in like sardines. Look,' she said. 'Here's a picture of some children in the ghetto. Have a look. Pass it round. Some of you have brothers and sisters that age.'

'They look so young,' said Emily, passing it to her neighbour, Angie, who studied it for a moment, frowned and passed it on.

'They've got funny hats on,' she said.

'And this is where they lived,' Miss Warski continued, passing round another photograph.

Yeah, like we all want to know where they lived. God, this was going to be mega-boring after all, Graham thinks, eager to hear the bell for going-home time, yet with a sinking feeling, realising he doesn't want to be there either, and then feeling rage and wanting to hit someone.

'Who are all those people,' asked Kevin, peering closely at another picture. He gave it to his neighbour and eventually it came to Graham.

The boy looks at it intently. The house is so bleak-looking. All those families stuffed in there. It must have smelled terrible and he looks across at James, who's biting his nails again, and sits there as if he's not there at all really. Graham knows what that's like, and he wants to hit James suddenly, and violently. He wants to kill the stupid, smelly, stinky PIG.

'I'm coming to that,' Miss Warski replied to Kevin, allowing the children time to absorb something of the pictures before continuing. She knew she had everyone's attention now, even Graham's. She was aware that he was terribly distressed. She wished she knew how to reach the poor child. He was one of the unhappiest little boys she'd ever taught. He touched her heart.

'Have you had a good look?' she asked kindly, seeing him poring over the picture's many shadows. He looked at her, the shutters coming down again, and with a look of indifference, he passed it on.

'Yeah,' he said, in the tone of one who has seen that, done that, sold the T-shirt, and is utterly, utterly bored. Miss Warski sighed. Graham caught the sigh and wondered if it could be because of him. That didn't make sense. That would mean she cared. He pushed the thought away, because it would hurt too much when it turned out not to be true.

'Let's find out more about Samuel then, shall we?'

Oh yes, let's! What a great idea. How come teachers keep having such great ideas all the time?

'The records by the Allies, that's our side of the war, are not very clear from those times. But the Nazis kept very good records. They weren't ashamed of what they did. They wanted every detail written down. It's sickening! They even kept records of the things they stole. In great big ledgers. What's a ledger? Keith? Alison? Anyone? O.K., it's a great big book for writing down lists in. Lists of names and objects, addresses, that kind of thing. They wrote down a name, and then a date and then next to it a description of every item they stole. Like a fur-coat, a necklace, scarves, hats, anything really. Shoes. Piles of shoes they had. All accounted for. All stolen.

Graham looks intently into his teacher's face as she's speaking. He sees a slight twist at the side of her mouth, as if she's trying to restrain herself. He's seen his mother look like that when she's trying not to cry. A ledger? Keeping a list of all those things. That's got to be mad, hasn't it? Anyone could come along afterwards and find out what they did. And then a thought hits him like one of his father's stray fists: *they didn't expect to lose the war*. They thought they were going to win so they didn't care about being secret. They didn't have to hide anything. Something stirs in his mind. He feels suddenly as if he wants to be sick. His parents hide stuff all the time. He can't make the link yet, doesn't want to see, but something is churning inside him and he wants to throw up. They have nothing to hide if no one can beat them. He gulps and feels bile rising in his throat. But he has to listen. He has to listen. Because they don't win, do they? Not in the end. They didn't win. They don't win. They lose. They lost.

'Samuel had a younger brother, Nathan,' Miss Warski continued. 'He helped his mother look after him, but his mother died because the conditions inside the ghetto were so bad. She drank some bad water and it killed her.'

'Bad water?' said Rob. 'That was stupid!' Then he paused as he thought. 'Oh, they poisoned it, you mean?' This was interesting. Perhaps as a going-home, end-of-the-day story this wasn't so bad after all. 'The Nazis poisoned it. Cool!'

Miss Warski closed her eyes to gather her temper.

'No, Rob, it was cholera. A disease. It was very common at the time when people's accommodation was filthy. Thousands of people died in the ghetto.'

'So why didn't they leave, then?' Graham asked, his voice belligerent and coming as a surprise to the other children: Graham rarely spoke out in class, certainly not to give an opinion that was so antagonistic.

'They must have been stupid not to leave. Why didn't they leave? Why did they put up with it? They were cowards. They should have beaten the Nazis up and escaped. It's pathetic!'

'They were locked in,' Miss Warski said gently. She wondered what was making this generally too-quiet child so angry? What was he hearing that made him feel so defensive? She needed to have a closer look at him and his home-life. His behaviour had been getting worse and worse recently and it was clear he was unhappy.

'So they should have escaped, then,' he said bitterly. 'It's their fault!' He folded his arms protectively in front of him and looked at her as if to say, 'go on, then, explain *that* one!'

'They couldn't leave, even if they'd fought back. Everyone hated them outside the ghetto as well. The Nazis had told everyone lies about them, so that everyone believed those people were their enemies. They had nowhere to run *to*. They had no money, no friends, no one to help them.'

'So a ghetto's a kind of prison, then,' said Alison. 'But you said thousands died. How many people were *in* there? How could they let thousands die in a prison?'

'They treat them like shit in there,' muttered Rob darkly.

'Watch your language, Rob,' Miss Warski said, but not in an angry tone. He sat back, pretending not to care.

'Yeah, I'm just saying, people in prison get treated like shit!'

'Let's talk about Samuel first,' Miss Warski continued. 'So, he's ten years old, like you. He likes football and he likes helping his mother, but after she dies he has to look after Nathan as well.'

'What about his father?' asked Rob. 'Karked it as well, did he?' He was going to laugh, but saw her expression and thought better of it.

'The father was killed on the night they were taken to the ghetto. He tried to fight with the soldiers, you see, and a group of them stabbed him and killed him.'

A frisson percolated through the classroom and not only from the girls. The next part would have to be handled very carefully indeed.



'Now here,' she continued, 'I've got a copy of something he wrote, this Samuel. His mother had smuggled in some paper and luckily, no one found it. You see they weren't allowed to have pen and paper in case they wrote to someone outside and the world found out what the Nazis were doing to them. But he and his mother and brother had paper for a while. And he used it. He was very clever, rather like you lot!' The children laughed warmly at that. 'He wrote little details down about what he did every day. Very concise. Anyone know what 'concise' means?

'Brief!' said Graham simply. Miss Warski looked at him, her head slightly on one side. She could see the mass of swirling feelings washing over his face and wondered what was going on behind the mask.

'Well done, that's it exactly!' She smiled affectionately at the boy.

Graham pretends not to see, but he can't help being warmed inside. It's been a long time since anyone smiled at him like that. Miss Warski has nice, brown eyes. They're really unusual. The shape is like almonds, but they glimmer in the light. He stares at her face as she continues.

*March 18<sup>th</sup> 1943. Nathan not very well. What if we can't get anything to eat tomorrow? I'm so hungry. I'm hungry all the time. I want to eat something nice. Anything really. I'm so hungry.*

'Didn't they feed them, then?' asked Rob, leaning forward in his chair, his eyes gleaming now with ghoulish interest.

'Not enough. Lots of people died of starvation. Now, just enough time to read one more diary-entry by Samuel, and then that's enough for today.'

She turned the page of the book and straightened the spine when she reached the correct place.

*It's April now. It would be Father's birthday today. Nothing to eat. Nathan's stopped talking. I'm so afraid. I'm so afraid. There are soldiers everywhere.*

'Right, that's it for now!'

'Oh Miss!' protested a chorus of voices. 'Don't stop there. What happened to Samuel? Does Nathan get better? Tell us!'

'Tomorrow,' said Miss Warski with a smile. She had engaged their interest. This boded well for the next day.

The children groaned their disappointment.

Graham moved his chair back to his desk and sat down. James moved to sit next to him.

'Get lost, Smelly PIG!' Graham said cruelly. James slinked away. No one sat next to Graham, and that was normal, so why would anyone want to sit next to him? He can understand Samuel in the story. Samuel-in-the-story and him have a lot in common.

The next day, Graham arrived at school a little early. He'd come without breakfast as last night's row was developing into today's war. He went into the classroom directly, rather than hanging out on the fringes of the playground where the girls usually congregated, watching the boys at play and scoffing at them from a safe distance. He rarely made up a team for football. In Games lessons, no one picked him willingly. He and James were the class-outcasts, but he was better than James. At least he didn't smell and he was allowed to mock James and play cruel tricks on him when everyone else was doing it too.

Miss Warski was already there, and Graham realised that's why he was early after all. She was finishing up putting up photographs, old black and white ones, on the long wall opposite the windows. They were ghetto-views, people's faces, close-ups, soldiers with guns on the streets, babies in a pile. Babies in a pile? Graham tore his eyes away and looked at his teacher's face.

'I came to, er...' and then he stopped. Graham frowned. 'Do the pictures make you sad, Miss?' he asked.

'Yes, dear,' she replied softly, staring straight ahead. She looked sad like his mum. Her mouth turned down at the edges. He didn't understand why, but that made him sad too.

'What are you doing here so early?' she asked.

'Oh, nothing,' he says awkwardly.

He's suddenly shy, He suddenly doesn't want her to laugh at him. He can't bear it if she does. He doesn't think she will, but she might. He's here to help her and he wants to look at the pictures. They've got a message for him. He can see the message in the children's faces. What are they telling him? He stares into their eyes, these children who look like him. He wants to talk to them. He wants to ask them how they can bear to be so hated, how they can bear to live where no one wants them, everybody hates them. He wants to ask them. Ask them what? This is stupid.

'I can't talk to pictures,' he mutters.

He looks quickly across at Miss Warski, but she's not looking at him.

'Are we having the rest of that story today, Miss?' he asked to break the silence. He looked away from the pictures. He couldn't meet their eyes anymore. He didn't want to see them.

'Yes. Are you finding it interesting?' she asked him.

'I think it's really...' he paused. 'You know,' he added non-committally, moved over to his desk and put his bag inside it.

He left the classroom, then, to walk the short distance to the assembly hall. Miss Warski looked after him and shook her head.

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Later, the children had come back in from the afternoon break and it was time for the story to continue. When Miss Warski asked them all to bring their chairs to form a circle no

one had to be told twice. All of them scraped their chairs in a cacophony of movement to the centre, set them down and sat on them, all facing her, eyes eager for the next installment.

Graham's heart is beating fast and he feels very uncomfortable, but doesn't know why. He's spent most of the lunch-hour poring over the pictures until he feels he knows every face, every mood, every feeling in those eyes. There's a mob in their eyes, all shouting and screaming at him. He believes that whether he ever sees these faces again, he'll hear them pleading with him. Asking for what? To save them? How can he save them? Why is she making him look at these pictures? He can't swallow very easily at the moment. He feels he's got something stuck in his throat. He hopes no one notices.

'Now children!' Miss Warski said. 'You've all had a chance today to look at the pictures. I want you to tell which one you think tells you a story. What can you see about the person from their picture? Anyone to start?'

Several hands flew into the air.

'Rob? Would you like to start, then?'

'I choose the one with the soldiers shooting the children.' All the children followed Miss Warski's movements as she got up from her chair and retrieved the picture from the wall, pulling it easily away from the blutak. She handed it to him.

'Look!' he said. 'They're enjoying it. They're killing these children and they're enjoying it.' What had begun with Rob relishing the horror, ended with his realisation of what was actually happening. His voice lost the swagger.

'What Rob says is right,' Miss Warski agreed with him, and shot him a look of real approbation. He couldn't but be delighted with this. She'd never smiled at him like that before. Graham wanted to kill him.

'The soldiers don't seem to have any problem with what they're doing. They're not afraid or disgusted with themselves. They're going to shoot these defenceless children, who are vulnerable and small and weak. They look pleased with themselves, don't they?'

'That's disgusting, that is,' said Hannah, her face screwed up in horror. 'They're no better than animals, although my granddad says, animals don't actually enjoy torturing each other. He says we can be worse than animals.'

'And that child,' said Miss Warski, pointing to a little boy standing next to his mother, just before, presumably, she was shot. 'He could be your brother, Rob.' She turned her face away from him, and the child tried to laugh.

Graham wants to hit the stupid little prick. Sitting there with his big grin and his little thoughts. He feels his hands making fists. Just one more goading and he'll kill him. He looks over to the wall where the pictures he doesn't want to choose, but must choose, are looking at him. Miss put those ones up after school yesterday when he stayed to help her. In the first one there's this little boy with big eyes – he's probably only 7 or 8 years old. He's holding a scrawny teddy-bear in front of him. Does he think it will protect him? Miss Warski says it must be the only thing he has that belongs to him and hasn't been stolen. In the second picture, the teddy-bear is on the ground and the boy isn't there at all anymore.

Graham spent ages yesterday looking closely at the first picture and then at the second one, trying to find out if the boy is somewhere in the background, or if there's any evidence that he's not dead. He stood so close to it, his face was almost touching the fading print. He feels his fists flexing again. One more fucking word from that tosser and he won't know what's hit him.

'Graham? What about you?' Miss Warski's words hit him with finality. He doesn't want to talk about this in front of all these cretins. He shakes his head furiously. Please don't make me. Please don't make me. And the relief when she nods in understanding and moves on to James instead.

'Yeah, what you got to say, Smell?' Rob jeers, and that's it. Even before he's really conscious of moving at all, Graham is out of his chair like a rocket, propelled by pure hate and starts flailing with his fists in Rob's face, who can't believe what's happening to him.

'Graham, love, Graham!' Miss Warski exhorts him. 'Don't do that!' She speaks crisply, authoritatively, but without rancour. Graham has never heard such a tone in a voice before, and it stills him in an instant. She understands, he thinks. She knows. His fists fall to his sides, and Rob picks himself off the floor in an angry, single movement. He's ready to fight back, fists at the ready, righteous indignation fully engaged.

'You saw what he did, Miss,' he rails, as Miss Warski puts out a hand towards him to prevent him from lurching full throttle into Graham.

'He went for me, Miss. He went for me!' Rob raged, anxious to have his pound of flesh.

Graham is standing limp by his teacher's side now, all fight gone, all hope of justice extinguished. His feelings have exploded into infinity and now he feels nothing at all.

'Are you all right, James?' Miss Warski asks gently. The boy smiles through his tears. He's always the cause of rancour, and all he wants to do is have a friend. Any friend. It doesn't really matter who. Even Rob would be better than the no-man's land he lives in.

'You shouldn't have said what you did, Rob, as you well know. Now apologise!'

Rob looked truculent.

'Now!' she said with asperity.

'Soz,' he said reluctantly, so quietly, it was difficult to know whether he'd really said anything at all, but Miss Warski knew this was probably the best she was going to get in the circumstances.

'Now you say you're sorry to Robert, Graham,' she said, turning to the quiet boy beside her. His silence was so entire, the teacher was concerned. Something was radically wrong. She'd never seen him respond to anyone like that before. Perhaps she had been wrong to bring these pictures into the classroom.

Graham muttered something, and went back to his seat. He raised his stony gaze onto Rob's face.

'He shouldn't laugh!' he explained dully. 'He laughs at everything. He shouldn't bloody laugh at that! He's a stupid PIG and I HATE him!'

No one laughs now. Everyone is shocked at this turn of events.

'You're dead outside!' Rob mocks him, pointing his finger and twisting it at him in the air as if he's cocking a handgun. 'You wait!'

'Yeah, you and the usual army is it?' asks Graham. 'Well, I don't care. I don't FUCKING care!' His eyes are blazing with a rage no one in that classroom has ever seen before. Miss Warski feels a frisson of fear.

'Graham, that's enough,' she says in even tones. 'I will NOT tolerate outbursts like that in my classroom. I will see you after school today. Is that clear?'

Graham shrugs as if he doesn't care, although he thinks his whole little life depends on her approval and now he's lost that as well. He looks around the room, not at the people and not at the pictures, but everywhere else. Why is he such a failure? Why doesn't anybody love him?

'Now, let's get on with the pictures,' she continued. 'Alice, is there one you want to talk about?'

'Yes Miss, that one with the pile of shoes. What's all that about?'

'That's difficult to answer,' the teacher says, retrieving the picture from the wall, and sits with it facing the pupils.

'What's so interesting about a pair of shoes?' asked Iqbal.

Robert snorted, but Miss Warski darted a look of such anger and force at him that he immediately crumbled.

'You, young man, will not behave like this anymore in my class. You will treat others with respect. You will speak when you're spoken to. You will listen to other people. And they will listen to you with respect and they will not speak when you are speaking.'

Robert turned away.

'Please look at me when I'm speaking to you. It's rude to turn away. I want to see your face.'

She waited. The class held its breath. No one ever spoke to Robert like that.

He turned back to face her, eyes hitting her somewhere at waist-level.

'Understand?' she repeated, and then again, more softly, more gently, as if she actually liked him: 'Rob, do you understand?'

He was shocked at her gentleness.

'Yes, Miss,' he said, as if he could hardly believe he was being so polite.

'Good boy!' she said and held his gaze a moment longer than was necessary, smiling at him with her eyes.

She turned back to Alice.

'You were saying, Alice?' she said.

'I just think it's really odd, that's all,' Alice said. 'Why did someone take pictures of just shoes? I don't get it.'

'You're asking what it means and that's a very, very intelligent question, Alice. Very clever indeed.'

Miss Warski was praising her. Alice felt pleased. Miss Warski was a nice teacher.

'What you can see here, girls and boys, is a picture of the shoes taken from people before they were murdered.'

The word 'murdered' ricocheted into the circle like an exploding bomb. Eyes widened. Murdered?

'You mean that all the shoes belonged to people who were murdered by the Nazis? But some of them are children's shoes. Those ones in the front must be babies' shoes: they're so small. There are millions of pairs there. All murdered? All of them?'

'Yes, all of them. In gas chambers. Over one day. And then every day for years and years and years.'

Not a pin dropped. Every face turned to her face, then to the picture and then back to their teacher's again. Checking for truth, for exaggeration, for something that might make it easier to hear.

'Why?' It's Graham's small voice, coming from a long distance, pained and searching. He's only whispering it, but it seems to him as if his voice is bellowing. He holds his breath. He doesn't really want the answer. Why did he ask the question.

'Because they were Jewish,' she says. 'Like me. I'm Jewish. My surname, Warski, means I am a Jewish person from Warsaw in Poland.'

'Jewish? What's that mean?' Graham asks. The silence is growing louder as children lean forward to catch every nuance.

'It's a kind of religion. A kind of culture. A very ancient culture and religion. One of the world's oldest. And the Nazis didn't like the Jews. They said we were clever and dangerous. Dangerous? Do we look dangerous?'

No one cracks a joke. Everyone is deadly serious. They shake their heads. 'More like they were jealous!' said Rob.

Graham launched out of his seat again and Rob, who had only meant to agree with Miss Warski flinched, but then realised the boy wasn't after him. Graham went to the wall.

'This one!' he said, hardly able to prevent a tear falling down his cheek and he didn't care who saw him. He brought the picture of the teddy-bear to the front and showed it to the class. He stood beside his teacher. He had to talk about this picture and right now.

'Where's the boy? Where's the boy?' he said as if he were talking about himself. 'He was in the first one, but now he's not. Where's he gone?'

'Don't shout, love,' Miss Warski said kindly, placing her hand on his arm to bring him back to himself again. Everyone can hear the warmth, the love, in her voice and no one is laughing anymore.

'Where is he? That's what I want to know?' he asks, tears flowing freely down his cheeks now. He doesn't care who sees him cry. He has to know if his worst fears about the world can possibly be true after all. 'Where's the boy in this photograph? He was carrying the teddy-bear and now he's not. Where is he? Where is he? Is he dead?' The tears continue to fall and the snot runs from his nose and he doesn't even notice.

'We don't know, love,' she says tenderly, holding him gently by the arm, and then moving her hand in a stroking gesture. Sit down, but first bring the picture of the boy with the teddy bear so that everyone can see. Perhaps not everyone has seen the one you mean.'

Graham wiped the back of his hand across his face and cleared his nose and throat as best he could. He sat down and showed both pictures to the class. His voice was dull and without hope.

'In this one,' he said, waving the picture a little at the audience, 'there's this boy, see, holding a teddy bear? And then in this one, the boy's gone and there's the teddy-bear on the ground. There's no boy there. He's dead, isn't he? They killed him!'

He can't get past it and it's all her fault. Miss Warski feels herself trembling. She's never had this depth of emotional response before. The whole class is galvanised by the mountain of feeling. Even Robert has lost his sniggering veneer and sits almost dazed looking at the two pictures Graham is holding out still to the class. She allows the moment and then realises she mustn't carry it on any longer. If there was any point she wanted to make, she's more than made it. Her original ending doesn't need to be the one she envisaged. Graham's picture will do just as well. Perhaps better.

The bell rang and the children clattered their chairs back under their desks, ready for the end of the school day.

'May, put your chair under the desk,' she reminded the usually absent-minded girl, who readily complied. As the boys and girls filed past the pictures one last time before leaving the room, Miss Warski reminded Graham he needed to stay behind, but her reminder was unnecessary. He hadn't moved from standing behind his desk, looking at the two pictures on its surface, his face a mask. Miss Warski's heart bled for him. He seemed to be feeling so much that he wouldn't be able to understand, and she had caused that. However pure her motives, her actions that day had wounded the child. She had to make amends.

'I'm sorry, Miss,' Graham says before she can speak.

'Sorry for what, eh?' she responds kindly, and pulls a seat over to the wall. 'Come over here, love and bring your chair.'

He'd rather stand, but he doesn't want to make her angry with him again. She's being very nice to him and he really likes it when she's nice to him. Mechanically, though, he lifts his

chair and scrapes it along the ground to the front of the classroom where she's sitting with her back to the pictures on the wall, so he has to sit opposite her, facing the pictures. Why has he sat here? Why is he looking at the pictures again? He doesn't want to be looking at them.

'I'm sorry, Graham,' he hears her voice saying to him. 'I'm really sorry. This has upset you, hasn't it?'

He nods bleakly. Crying during the lesson somehow feels easier than if he does it here, alone with her. That would be unbearable.

They sit for a few moments in silence and he struggles not to cry again. He thinks he will never forget those precious few moments.

'Violence isn't the answer, Graham,' she said softly. 'Do you understand?' His eyes jerked back to her face. He wished himself far away again. She was just going to tell him off. She just wanted to tell him off after all. Nothing better than that. Just the usual then. With sudden intuition he asked the question he'd wanted to ask before when he'd first seen the picture of the teddy-bear without the little boy.

'What happened to Samuel? Did he survive?'

'He died.'

The words cut him to the quick.

'And Nathan? What happened to Nathan? I suppose he died as well.' His voice was belligerent without wanting it to be. The tone took on the feelings that were stronger than he was. And it's all her fault anyway. Why had she told them this story? It was a *horrible* story.

'He was my great, great grandfather.' Her voice was steady, strong. Graham glanced at her quickly and then instantly looked away.

'So he didn't die, then? He got better?'

'Yes. Well, he did die eventually. When he was very old. I never met him. My grandparents moved to England. I suppose there are still some of my relatives there or their descendants in Poland somewhere. I don't know. But that's not the point, Graham. Violence is *never* the answer.'

'Yes it is, though,' said Graham, in a matter-of-fact tone. 'I wanted to kill Rob.'

Miss Warski smiled ruefully.

'I know, Graham. We all get feelings like that, you know. It's normal. I want to kill him sometimes too,' she whispered in a conspiratorial tone. He almost smiled at that. 'But of course I don't. He's like that because he's unhappy. If you're happy you don't want to kill anyone. And we have to learn how to control our darker feelings, because if we don't,' and she swept her hand in a gesture to include all the pictures on the wall, and added with a small smile: 'I have to control them with you lot every day.'

He smiled at that, an open smile that lit up his face and made Miss Warski's heart contract at his courage. He was one of the unhappiest children she knew, and yet his smile would light up the world.



But then his smile is gone and something far less edifying has taken its place.

'Yeah, like adults always control themselves, you mean. It was adults killing those children, wasn't it?'

He indicates the wall scornfully.

She leans forward and places her hands gently on his arms.

'Yes, Graham. They were adults. And they were evil. But we have choices.'

She lets the words sink in.

'We. Have. Choices.' She is whispering almost. 'We can choose whether to live at war or at peace. We can choose to kill or not to kill. We can choose to bully or to protect. It's our *choice*, Graham.'

She released him. He sits back but he's still looking at her. He feels something mounting in his chest but isn't sure what it is. He gets to his feet and looks closely at some of the pictures again.

He turns to face her.

'You say that everyone has a choice. They didn't. They didn't have a choice. We don't always have a choice, you know. We don't always have a CHOICE!'

Then his rage erupted.

'What do you know, you stupid cow?' He kicks his chair over and stands in the echoing halls of his fury, in the chaos of his feelings, unable to move anymore. He stands there, legs and arms gangly and uncoordinated, as if his whole body and mind and feelings were being wrenched apart.

'Hey,' Miss Warski said with gentle kindness, balm to his wounded spirit. 'Come on lovey, sit down, eh?' And she reaches her hand out to him, and gingerly, he takes it and sits down close to her.

'I'm sorry, Miss. But sometimes I get so angry.' He looked at the floor, lost, broken, like a puppet in a toy-shop window, the one that nobody will buy for Christmas. He knew he was in for it, there was no way she would let him get away with being so rude to her. And the irony was, he really liked her. He knew he would get a letter home like he had the year before when he'd broken a window playing football when he'd been told not to.

'I know things are difficult for you sometimes, Graham,' she said, and he flashed a look at her. What did she know? What had she heard?

'I know that sometimes you feel no one's on your side. But I am, love, I really am, you know. And you're right. We don't always have choices. Children rarely have free choices. Sometimes wicked things happen and we can't change them. But sometimes we can. My great-grandfather set up a business and kept his whole family and we became teachers and lawyers, judges, business-people, shop-owners, artists, engineers. I wanted to teach. I always wanted to teach. I love being with you lot even when you drive me round the bend.'

They shared a companionable laugh.

‘Even us lot, honestly?’ he asked, spluttering with laughter now. Keen to feel the contours of his laughter after such sorrow and despair.

‘Especially with you lot!’ She reached across and took his hand and squeezed it. ‘Now, come on, give me a hand clearing up this pigsty. Can you clear out those paint boxes and I’ll do the pictures.’

‘No!’ Graham said. ‘Can I do the pictures? I’ll be really careful with them.’ His voice was small in the empty classroom, and Miss Warski nodded.

She begins to clear away the paints and boxes and brushes and other paraphernalia of their morning art-lesson. Every now and again she looks across at the boy reaching up to pull the pictures gently away from the wall and laying them carefully on the table beside him. With each picture she notices how he strokes the surface as if imbibing them through his fingers, before placing them separately on the wooden surface. He works diligently and scrupulously. She’s never seen him try so hard to get something exactly right before and realises she’s underestimated both his sensitivity and his ability to do good work. When he’s finished he stands motionless, staring at a single picture in his hands, lost in a world as personal and yet so universal, it is as if it’s not just himself now, but an ancestor as a child wanting his teddy-bear back. Her heart skips a beat.

‘Do you want to keep that one?’ she asks him. He jumps at the unexpected voice.

‘Yes please,’ he says simply. He doesn’t want to speak. He’s staring at the barren picture, a single toy in the rubble. Discarded? Confiscated? Torn away? Lost?

‘Then you keep it, dear,’ she says. ‘Not a word to the others, mind, otherwise they’ll accuse me of favouritism and that wouldn’t do, would it?’ She smiles at him and realisation dawns in his expression. He breathes a sigh of pure joy at the implication.

‘Thank you, Miss,’ he says. ‘Thank you.’

‘Off you go then,’ she tells him. ‘But remember this, Graham. Violence is never the answer. While you keep that photograph close to you, remember that if nothing else comes from today, remember that violence is always wrong, and if you ever want to talk to me about anything, you know where I am, yes?’

They exchange a look of pure trust.

‘Yes Miss,’ he says, knowing that one day, he will tell her about what it’s like to be him at home, but he senses she already knows more than he’s told her and although that doesn’t change anything particularly, he *feels* different now, because he has a friend.

He said cheerio and left the classroom, closing the door behind him on the way out.

## Appendix Two: The Train Journey

The few days travelling to and from Cornwall are life changers for me. I had three encounters on the long (10-hour each way) train journey, that told me something about the state of this country. On the way down a boy (Adam, 10) and his father, Nigel, going off on

holiday as Adam's grandmother was ill and the parents wanted the child to have a stress-free holiday. This brilliant child, so gifted, sweet, cheeky and funny, is one of the country's youngest campanologists, ringing the local church bells with his father. I rather barged in on their game of I-Spy (an English game) The person whose turn it is has to think of a word and tell the other what the initial letter is of the word s/he's thinking. I realised very quickly that this was a very gifted child, so I made my words harder and harder, more metaphysical in fact. After we'd been playing for about 15 minutes (we played for three hours altogether), we had stopped at a siding, looking down into a valley where there was a beautiful little village with its church clustered by cottages, a real stereotypical English village. I told him my word began with C and that you couldn't see it physically, but you'd feel it and that it existed outside the train, perhaps in the valley, but perhaps also in the train with us.

'Community', he said straightaway. I was bowled over. This little boy was just amazing. So happy with his world, his lot, his dad, the trip, his life. He is going to be a chemist when he grows up, the scientific rather than apothecary kind!

On the way back I met Charlie (16) and his father Philip. This was the day before Charlie would get his examination results, which would determine how he would spend the next two years preparing for university. He was expected to get all As and A\*s for his 11 subjects (7 or 8 is the usual number and it is rare for anyone to gain so many very high scores). He goes to a private<sup>10</sup> school and Philip is a financial advisor. A man with heart, enthusiasm and a sense of fairness and fairplay. Charlie was quiet, his father voluble. Now and again, Charlie would inject a mordant comment or two, clearly with affection. I have a problem with private education, believing that all children should be taught in excellent state-run schools. It's why I taught in comprehensive schools my whole life. But I had no problem with these two individuals. And Charlie? He wants to work with Medicine Sans Frontieres because, in his words, 'I've had everything given to me. I want to give something back. My parents have made me and my sister the purpose of their lives' (the dad's eyes were watery at this point), 'and I want to give back to the world because I am so lucky.' His eyes shone. I have no doubt of his abilities and his sincerities.

Then at Sheffield, two adults (women) and assorted children got on the train for Bridlington. They were loud, their accents being clearly West Riding accents. The children - five boys - were unruly, loud, and quite frankly, for a confined space, obnoxious. The adults sat down and the boys rampaged about, screaming and shouting. I knew, just knew, that nothing I said or did would stop this barrage of assault in sound. I looked out of the window and tried to read.

Then it started. One of the older boys - about 11 - did something that one of the adults didn't like. I couldn't see what it was. She called him a 'fucking little bastard', and slapped him round the face. He began to gurn and moan, a wild sound, seeming to have little relationship to actual crying. It was the sound of a child who has mental problems. I've heard deeply

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<sup>10</sup> A private school is paid for by parents/guardians direct to the school. Sometimes scholarships are given for 'bright' youngsters from less affluent families, although it must not be supposed that only rich people send their children to private schools. Many make sacrifices in lifestyle to do so.

mentally retarded children gurn like that. It was an unearthly and deeply disturbing sound. A younger boy, sitting adjacently, caught my eye and I smiled at him. The next thing I knew, he'd come to sit next to me. He wanted a cuddle. It was etched all through him, 'I need love', riven like the words in stick of rock. Then his mother came and dragged him off his seat, leaving the train without seeing if he was following. I whispered to him before he that he was special and must never forget that. I knew there was so little I could do, but perhaps that would be a memory for him to enable him to cope when life became even darker, which it would do. Someone had, at the very least, recognised him. We all need to be recognised. If we're not then life becomes monochrome and two-dimensional and despair is the likely outcome. He looked at me hopelessly (my interpretation) and said blankly, 'I'm Joe!' Just that. Nothing else. It was, I suppose, all he could give me. The adults pushed and jostled the children off the train with shrieks and moans and jagged cries. They had talked to each other the whole time about their social circle, who said and did what, all high drama. The children were swatted away with fists and blows and cruel words. I am trying not to be judgemental, but I don't know how.

And the point of this? Well, we live in an ostensible democracy where there are, apparently, equal opportunities to succeed, to flourish, to become what one can become. We have an education system that is for all, apparently, and yet there was Adam at his state primary, Charlie at his exclusive private school, and those boys at one of the 'sink' (governmentally-designated as failing) school in Hull. Working class, middle class. And yet each one of those systems, state and private, are in a dialectic, and Charlie's school system undermines everything about state education because if it is feasible to send a child to such a school, then some parents will do it whatever the sacrifice. Not everyone who sends a child to private schooling is rich by any means, but make huge material sacrifices. Yet someone, somewhere, somehow, has to take responsibility for the Joes of this world because without someone saying, 'the buck stops here', the cycle will never be broken. If there were no privagte schools, all schools would have to be healthier places to be.

This isn't new, unfortunately. The above paragraph could have been written about Britain after the Second World War in fact. So little seems materially to have changed in profound ways at all. The class system is alive and 'well', and so is the education system. Privilege and deprivation living hand in hand and being so because we have a polarising attitude to social reforms. Whilst money is at the heart of our longings, when profit is seen only as a virtue and not as having dangerous and paradoxical depths, when everyone is to blame and no one is responsible, then Joe will continue to yearn for love and take it wherever he finds it, (and this scares the shit out of me) whatever the giver's actual motives might be it. He will likely grow into a rough, brutalised adult whose fathering will show imprints of the damage being done to him now.

...The whole thing rather unravelled me. I don't mind being unravelled. It's good to be shaken out of complacency, but I have to say, Joe's dilemma doesn't go away. I wanted to bring him home. There I was, on a wonderful trip down to Cornwall to be F's godmother, a child who already has such a loving, giving, gifted, kind and sensitive family, and to those girls more has been given. And for Joe more keeps being taken away taken. It's just not bloody *fair!*