

Quaint Memories of Puzzling Through Mysteries

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The incompleteness of meaning and the finitude of understanding suggest that the subject matters (*die Sache*) of understanding are mysteries rather than problems. Mysteries are not subject to the methodological solutions problems are. A problem denotes a difficulty demanding a solution. Mysteries however can only be understood more deeply. They are not to be explained away but are to be discerned as an ever-present limit to our understanding. They invoke an apprehension of a radical limitlessness. (Davey, 2006, p. 29)

I had the good fortune of supervising John's thesis—a mysterious venture to be sure, because when we started, neither the path nor the destination were clear. Memory and the workings of time have robbed me of the exact sequence of things--as Ricouer (2004) noted in his last great work, there is a “shadowy underside to the bright region of memory” p. 21). The “bright regions of memory” that remain are what Ricouer (2004) called the “memory-events,” where something in particular *happened*, and they arise in perception again, not as simple recollection, but as an “evocation of the absent-present” (p. 35). This is to say they re-occur as events, mixed inevitably with forgetting, imagination, and a trace of consequences. One suffers them, undergoes them in their “presence” anew. It must be said that the “suffering” involved in the case of remembering how John's work unfolded is what Ricouer (2004) called a “happy memory”: the joy and the learning that resulted from the event are fused to the occurrence itself, lending significance, supplying a surplus of pleasure, engendering, once again, the joy of “being there.”

But enough of that, for this is not meant to be a treatise on memory, but a *re-membling* of what

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happened, and what was learned from it. I wanted to set out a brief description of what I mean by the phrase, *I remember* when I use it, not so much as a claim to recalling “exactly what happened,” for that is impossible, but more as an attempt to stay true to the shards that remain: what is *still* felt, the learning and thinking that persists, that is, the *application of the memories that remains in play*.

I remember what was “there” from the very beginning of John’s dissertation, in the Heideggerian sense, so also “not there,” but certainly “there enough” that it spoke the loudest to John, was this phenomenon that would not go away/constantly slipped away: those students designated by the system, by many of the teachers, by many of us in academe, as “slow learners.” There they sat, smack in the middle of John’s practice, staring back at him, calling out to him, but more pressingly, “calling him out,” as Ricoeur (1992) might have said, and then disappearing.

I remember being drawn into the topic, listening to John as he unfolded what he faced in his practice: *these particular students were in a fix, and it wasn’t one of their own making*. The stakes were high; these were largely forgotten beings, concealed in a system that recognized them, unofficially—but then, briefly revealed, quickly abandoned them to their own devices. Many, far too many, of these students struggled silently and disappeared into oblivion, quietly jumping out, falling out, or being pushed out of the system. As John so passionately maintained, this was our loss as well: These were students with hidden talents, in need of cultivation, talent that John could see, and marvelously, helped me see. Listening to John, I could sense his desperation and frustration; he wanted to help, and in his own way, in his own school, in a room that invited everyone in that needed help, he did. But that wasn’t enough, not for John, but more importantly, *not for us*, not if we were going to declare that we were educators that didn’t just care for those that did well, but also the less fortunate. Ethically, we were enjoined by the topic.

I remember in the process of listening, being summoned by this realization: these students were calling out to the part of our selves that was hidden from us, or at least from me. Listening to John, my “slow self,” our slow selves, came into view, and a question bubbled up to the surface: Which one of us can claim that he or she has never been a slow learner? Who hasn’t been *that character* in a technologically-accelerated world that moves so fast as to be designated “post-human” (Kroker, 2014)? And then another question came, hard on the heels of the first: Haven’t we always, when we try to understand, been slow learners? “The owl of Minerva flies at night,” for all of us, does it not? More essentially, *shouldn’t we all be slow learners?* What is “dwelling” for Heidegger, or “whiling” for Gadamer, if not the *necessary*, slow, lived-through, suffered experience required to understand things differently?

I remember the question of how to proceed rearing its head. What to do, with whom, when, and how much, in the face of this intriguing “practical mystery,” full of appearances, disappearances, dead-ends and detours? There was a point where the “method” for the study, and the structure and genre of the thesis were still completely undecided, not that we were dumbfounded, nor plunged into Nietzsche’s abyss, because the topic had its solid leads, and its intrigue, but the way forward did not yet exist. This is where the experience of working this out really took on the shape of an *adventure*. We were being launched into something, and while I might not have realized it at the time, it was as Romano (2012) wrote, *a journey of no return*. I no longer think of dissertations, nor being a supervisor, in the way that I did, there are now new possibilities in

front of me. Partly the need for adventure was of our own doing, because John had proposed, and I agreed, that he do something different, in form and in structure, with his dissertation. Mostly though, I think we realized that we had to attend to this as a mystery, to *remain true to its mysterious character*, and not, as Davey (2006) reminded us, treat what confronted us as a scientific problem to be solved through method, but rather as something that must be *ventured into*.

I remember John's e-mail proposing to do the dissertation as a hard-boiled detective novel, and it immediately struck me as the right thing to do. Within the hour—at least as I remember it, I wrote him back and said, simply “Go for it.” We were off, and I remember feeling ecstatic, but also, more than a little intimidated. I was haunted at times by questions, visited at late at night, as “hauntology” (Kroker, 2014) is wont to do, with doubt: What if it didn't work? What if we got half-way in, or a year down the road, and had to abandon the project entirely and start over? Would the dissertation survive a train wreck like that? Would John survive? Would I? Even if the work flourished between us, there was no guarantee that it would survive formal examination. The question of how a dissertation like this would be received was with us for a long, *long* time. Would other academics see this as a foolish, undisciplined flight of fancy (We constantly asked, toward the end of the drafting process when the piece approached 400 pages, “Who the hell will we get for an external?”), or would the rigor of the work be visible to an academic eye not familiar with the tradition and the genre? I certainly did not excuse myself from the ability or inability to see “goodness” or potential in a piece of work—blindness, as Heidegger reminded us, is part of the human condition of caring deeply, of being right there for someone, fully and deeply engaged, with the best of intentions. I would have to be able to see and say something more than “Go for it” at the bottom of every draft. Was I up to this? Was I up to helping John fulfill the hermeneutic warrants for the study, the requisites of a good hard-boiled detective mystery, as well as allow him to shape something that was uniquely “John's,” *and* pass muster in academe? *Hmmm*: The topic, had arrived, kept arriving in fact, in all its “horror and charm” (Sartre, 1939).

Now this might sound a little overstated, it might fall prey too much to the work of imagination, so let me step back for a minute here to try to dispel the existence of states of boundless courage, blind faith, and recklessness on both our parts. I had been on John's MA thesis committee, so I knew that I could bet on John's capability as a writer and thinker, his solid understanding of what hermeneutics was about, and his capacity as a skilled, thoughtful, and careful practitioner. John did not pull the idea of doing a noir detective mystery out of thin air, or other places, for that matter, and I didn't agree to go with him on this adventure simply because it was a bright, shiny, new idea, although that is exactly what it was. I am not sure how it became apparent in our conversations that both of us loved dark, detective mysteries, but *I do remember* rollicking discussions about them. I had been struck previously about the parallels of detective work with hermeneutics—careful, vigilant, disciplined inquiry, that slowly built its own case for proceeding by dogged, persistent fieldwork, dependent upon the clues that appeared, as questions, by the unanticipated events of the pursuit, by what the investigation revealed, and not by predetermined “police procedure.” Good detective work, of the hard-boiled kind, was strikingly similar to what Romano (2012) called “evential hermeneutics: Elucidating the meaning of the human adventure using events as the guiding thread” (p. 48). The engine of this kind of hermeneutic inquiry is the “profound upheaval” that events provide, and what is revealed when things of import happen to us:

Existence, understanding, truth come into view as events that happen to Dasein, and thereby to Being as such. Understanding is a *work of truth*; truth is *uncovering*. These existentials denote, in some way the very event of Being. (p. 13)

Part of the courage to do this came through *undergoing*: talking things out, working back and forth from what hermeneutics required, to what “hermeneutics warrants” could be fulfilled by the detective noir, and to how to do the “non-fictional” things dissertations require: critical literature reviews, interviews, document analyses. I think the only thing we sacrificed, probably with a little too much glee, was APA style—that we had to sneak through the bureaucratic requirements of doing a PhD. Fortunately, we had a good committee that saw the value of the work and looked the other way, or maybe it might be more accurate to say they were dazzled by the brightness of the quality of the work, and the style fell into the shadows.

One last important point *to remind us all of the danger* of a hermeneutics that simply ends in the bon homie of agreement: there was a threat to the study that made the hard-boiled noir, and a hard-boiled detective, necessary for both of us. We worried, familiar as we were with each other’s thinking, and with both of us operating out of the same hermeneutic tradition, that there was a danger that we had too much in common, took too many of the same things for granted, saw things too much in the same way. Philosophically, theoretically, pedagogically, John and I were on the “same side,” we were for and against the same things. *Where was the Other in our thinking, seeing and conversation?* Who or what would be “the event” that would shake us out of our slumber, keep us on the “right path of looking” (Heidegger, 1999, p. 62), preserve, ironically, through endangering, the authentic, *valid* character of a journey?

Enter Max, from the other side of town, who could show up at night, like lightening, and expose what was in the shadows of our taken-for-grantedness. You don’t have to like him, there were times that we didn’t, but he is as necessary to this story as trouble is to hermeneutics. I will leave you to him now, and the “horror and the charm” of his hermeneutic trouble-making...

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