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Talking through Meaning (Chapter 7 of the book Between Gay and Straight: Understanding Friendship Across Sexual Orientation)

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***Between Gay and Straight:
Understanding Friendship Across Sexual Orientation***¹

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7: Talking Through Meaning

I've been on a mission of avoidance. The past several hours I spent screening videos for a media class I'm teaching this summer, catching up on my journal reading, and cleaning everything in sight. I scrubbed floors by hand, dusted light fixtures, even washed beneath the refrigerator. But here I am at last, in front of my computer, pushing on (and fighting the urge to go rotate my tires).

I'm afraid of endings. I'm afraid of what the close of this project will mean for me, for my husband, for the men I've befriended and studied, for *us*. I'm afraid of leaving the field and leaving them. Perhaps I'm even afraid of some difficult issues left to process. I stare into my blue screen, wondering how I can best convey what I've learned along this journey.

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Doug appears at my office door. His mouth drops open when he sees my academic bunker—knee-high piles of books, articles, field notes, transcripts, literature summaries, and printouts of the narrative chapters. “Dare I ask what you’re doing?”

“Trying to write a conclusion,” I say with a sigh. “For months, my purpose has been to *show* readers a series of lived moments, to draw them inside scenes, conversations, and relationships. I’ll continue to tweak the narratives, of course. But I think that much of the hardest work on that dimension of my project is behind me.”

“So what’s the matter?”

“I’ve been immersed in the stories for so long that I’m having trouble stepping back. How does everything fit together? What makes our experiences significant, and how can others put them to use in their own lives and communities?”

He glances down at the Post-It labels atop each stack of materials: Friendship, Narrative Ethnography, Queer Theory, Gender. “You look pretty organized.”

“I *feel* scattered. I’ve studied the narratives so closely that I can recite many chapter and verse. I’ve read and reread articles and books on gay-straight relationships, qualitative methods, and sexual orientation. I’ve summarized findings in computer files and memos. In spite of my efforts, I’m still grappling with two major questions: what does gay-straight friendship require, mean, and do; and how can friendship be a method of inquiry?”

“At least you can articulate the questions,” Doug reassures. When I only manage a half-hearted smile, he clears a path and takes a seat next to me. Caressing my shoulder, he says soothingly, “A step at a time. What’s one way that you could begin to answer these?”

I let this sink in. Hesitantly, I reply, “Well ... I could try to articulate implications of my fieldwork.”

“That’s a start. Implications for whom?”

“The friendship as method question is directed mainly toward other qualitative researchers.”

“And the question about gay-straight friendship?”

“I think that could have implications for everyone—gay, bisexual, straight.”

“Okay. If a straight person came to you and asked, ‘Why should I read your book?’ how would you answer?”

I exhale slowly. “Hmm ... I would say that each of us has a vested interest in recognizing and working through our heterosexist attitudes, behaviors, and practices. Anxieties about homosexuality poison us at every level. They inhibit personal growth; they close off relationship possibilities; and they weaken our social fabric.”

Doug nods. “What if this person retorted, ‘And how can your story help?’”

The words come easily: “by showing the transformative power of friendship.”

“Ah, but won’t some *resist* transformation? Many straight people aren’t open to the *presence* of non-heterosexuals, let alone to friendship with them.”

His statement resonates with much of what I’ve been reading. From my computer’s folder of literature reviews, I pull up a file on homophobia. Scrolling down, I say, “A lot of research supports your observation. Look at this. Woog (1995) cites a survey of high school students in which only 18% of boys and 35% of girls said they would remain comfortable with a friend who came out as gay. And here, Singer and Deschamps (1994) report that, in a survey of first-year college students, 22% admitted they had verbally harassed gay men, 51% said that lesbians and gay men should try to be heterosexual, and only 8% described themselves as ‘approving’ or ‘very approving’ of homosexuality.” I scan

further. “There was one more, Herek and someone ... yes! Herek and Capitanio (1996). Of their 538 heterosexual respondents, 54% agreed that ‘male homosexuals are disgusting,’ and 70% agreed that ‘sex between two men is just plain wrong.’”

* * *

More recently, a 1999 Gallup poll on homosexuality found that people in the U.S. are becoming more supportive of gay and lesbian economic and political rights, but many remain ambivalent about same-sex relations and marriage. Eighty-three percent believed that gay men and lesbians should have equal job opportunities (up from 71% in 1989 and 58% in 1977), and 79% said that gay men and lesbians should be allowed to serve in the military, either openly or under the current “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy (41% and 38% respectively). In contrast, only 50% thought that same-sex relations should be legal, and just 34% supported equal status and rights for same-sex couples.²

* * *

“While disturbing,” Doug says, “those responses don’t surprise me. The first two studies involved high school and college students, who feel enormous pressure to think and act in conventional ways—as you did when you broke up with Trent, the guy your peers called a ‘fem’ and a ‘fag.’³ I also suspect that most of those surveyed had had limited exposure to openly gay people.”

Pointing at my computer screen, I reply, “Herek and Capitanio (1996) confirm that. Their results suggest that homophobic attitudes tend to *precede* rather than follow interpersonal contact with lesbians and gay men.”

² See Newport (1999).

³ See Chapter 1.

This exchange sparks an idea. With an eye toward my Sony recorder, I query, “Do you mind?” When he shakes his head, I insert a new tape and press “record.”

Doug taps the down arrow key. Reading on, he asks, “How did we come to think in these ways about homosexuality?”

“Our apprehensions have roots in everything from traditional family ideology to orthodox religion to popular culture—each a primary source of cultural scripts. It’s a vicious circle: if heterosexuals don’t question the scripts, they’re unlikely to have meaningful encounters with gay people; and if they have no meaningful encounters with gay people, they’re unlikely to question the scripts.”

“Do you think we were open to befriending gay people *before* meeting David,” he asks, “or do you think meeting David was what opened us?”

I ponder this a moment. “I think both are true. Meeting David undoubtedly was serendipitous. He gave us our first real exposures to openly gay people and to a gay community. At the same time, we must have been looking for something—new ideas, new experiences, new *friends*. In his interview study on friendship between gay and straight men, Dwight Fee (1996) describes his heterosexual respondents as ‘*searchers*.’ That term stuck with me because it seemed to fit each of us. What do you think?”

“I would agree, though David certainly broadened the parameters of our search. How else would you explain our visits to places like The Vice?”⁴

“If you think about it, Doug, what we saw of The Vice was pretty tame.”

“Ha!” he responds playfully. “It wasn’t *your* pectoral that was groped.”

“Ha!” I respond in kind. “But my backside has been handled at The Cove, Odyssey—”

⁴ See Chapter 5.

“And there was the famous ‘bra incident’ with Rob,”⁵ Doug adds. “Hmm ... a gay man approaching me sexually seems less surprising than a gay man approaching you. What do you make of those encounters?”

“They subvert the equation of sexual orientation and sexual identity.” When he wrinkles his brow in confusion, I begin rifling through the stack by his feet. “Where is that Katz (1996) book? I had it out yesterday ... got it! Jonathan Katz points out that the terms ‘heterosexual’ and ‘homosexual’ were *invented* by psychoanalysts in the 19th century. Ironically, the term ‘heterosexual’ originally referred to a *pathological* fixation on someone of the other sex.”⁶

“I always knew there was something funny about you,” he quips.

“About *us*,” I retort. “Anyway, prior to the invention of these terms, sexual behaviors were practices we *engaged in*. They did not confer a status, an identity that defined *who we were*. Since then, the terms have become reified, making this humanly-constructed distinction appear ‘natural’ when it’s arbitrary. Instead of hetero- and homosexual, we could classify people as ‘male-oriented’ or ‘female-oriented.’ Under that system, lesbians and straight men would share a sexual orientation, because both have primary attractions to women.⁷ We also could expand our conception of sexual orientation beyond the sex/gender of one’s object choice. We could categorize sexual practices as the early Christians did—in terms of ‘procreative’ and ‘non-procreative.’⁸ We could distinguish between orgasmic and non-orgasmic sex, between public and private sex, between

⁵ See Chapter 6.

⁶ Of course, as Stein (1999) points out, even my use of the term “the other sex” invokes a problematic binary (that between male and female). Many people are intersexed—they have biological characteristics of males and females.

⁷ See Stein (1999).

⁸ See Hunt (1994).

spontaneous and scripted sex.⁹ The possibilities are endless, but we seldom see outside the boxes that we ourselves have created.”

I continue, “In our culture, we tend to think that people *have* sexual identities. But an identity is not a *thing*. It’s a construct, a *claim*. In theory, when we claim a gay or straight identity, we open a set of relational options and close off another set. In practice, that claim may not—probably *cannot*—encapsulate the expansive nature of any human’s desires.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I call myself a heterosexual woman, but my associations with gay men have moved me to recognize and value my amorous attachments to women, like my old friend Kara. You claim to be a straight man, but you now redefine a connection with a friend from home as an ‘attraction’ of sorts. Likewise, Joe and Rob identify themselves as gay yet continue to respond erotically to women. Not all gay-identified men seem to; David is a good example of that.”

“How do you explain such differences *within* a category?” Doug queries.

“We can question the utility of the category system itself. There are alternatives to the dominant, dichotomous construction of sexual orientation. Instead of two categories, Kinsey’s scale has seven, with zero indicating that one’s fantasies, desires, and behaviors are exclusively heterosexual and six indicating that these are exclusively homosexual.¹⁰ So, at the risk of putting too much weight on numbers, we might say that David is a six while Joe and Rob are fives or fours.”

* * *

⁹ See Sedgwick (1990).

¹⁰ See Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin (1948).

The *two*-dimensional model proposed by Storms (1980) and discussed by Stein (1999) is even more nuanced. One problem with Kinsey's scale is that it implies that one's level of attraction to women varies inversely to one's level of attraction to men. In other words, the more attracted one is to women, the less attracted one is to men, and vice versa. According to Storms (1980) and Stein (1999), these measures should be separated, because the degree to which someone is attracted to men is not related to the degree to which that person is attracted to women. Any combination is possible, from a high level of attraction to both--or neither--to a high level of attraction to one sex/gender and a low level of attraction to the other.

* * *

"So why don't Joe and Rob call themselves 'bisexual'?" asks Doug.

"Perhaps because there are more identity and community resources available to gay men than to bisexuals. You notice that, in spite of the openness we've cultivated to same-sex attractions, we don't call ourselves bisexual either. Ours is a dichotomized society."

"Do you think that can change?"

"I do, but such a change requires us to imagine a world *beyond* the categories that keep us estranged. That doesn't mean denying the unique insights and experiences that stem from particular standpoints; it doesn't mean total assimilation of one group into another. It means *completely altering our notions of self and other*. In *The Book*, Alan Watts (1989) says that the Western conception of self as separate and autonomous is an illusion and one that doesn't serve us well. For him, the only 'true' self is the whole of creation. He calls us to see our fundamental interconnection with everyone, with all of life. This won't come easily or quickly. It will demand openness and commitment; shared experiences and

meaningful conversations; mutual questioning, disclosure, and critique; and sustained interpersonal contact.”

“So how do you convince people to participate in that?”

“By showing others where we’ve been and what we’ve seen, felt, and learned. In the company of these men, we’ve experienced friendship across, through, and beyond sexual orientation and identity. We recognize that ‘their’ well-being and liberation are woven into the same tapestry as ‘our’ well-being and liberation, because ‘they’ are now *us*.”

“I understand what you’re saying,” he responds, “but are there reasons *not* to step outside our categories?”

“Huh, good question. For gay communities, stepping outside could mean losing a place on the margins—where some might prefer to stay, especially if they believe the price is total assimilation. Critics like Harris (1997) suggest that while increased mainstream acceptance brings social and political clout, it also files away the edge associated with gay cultures’ unique spaces, characters, and discourse. That edge defies and contests heterosexist norms and practices, and the more we lose it, the harder it may be for *any* of us to make peace with the shame our culture induces on virtually all sexual matters.”¹¹

I go on, “For straight people, stepping outside requires giving up the power resources that come with being the norm. It’s hard enough to *recognize* one’s own privilege, harder to concede it, and harder still to convince others to do the same.”

“What privileges do you think we’ve conceded?” Doug asks.

¹¹ See Warner (1999).

“Oh, we’re still privileged—legally, politically, culturally. But we’ve given up the comforts associated with our prior ignorance of gay men’s experiences and stories. Our connections have fostered a radically new consciousness about many issues.”

“Like HIV and AIDS,” he says.

“Exactly.”

“All through pharmacy school, AIDS was about drug protocols and patient compliance. I was barely registered as a pharmacist when I met Michael. I played ball with him, laughed with him. I got to know *the person*. I heard him gasping for breath and saw him wasting away—hallowed cheeks, KS on his face and legs. And then he was gone. Twenty-nine years old. God, I can’t believe that was three years ago.”

“Since then,” I respond, “we’ve seen our associates grieve for lovers and friends, and we’ve watched some battle HIV themselves. I often wonder how different our lives would have been without the drug cocktails that are holding the virus at bay.”

“For now,” Doug says. “Their long-term efficacy and side-effects are still unknown.” His statement hangs there a moment.

I take in a breath. “Listening and responding to these men’s stories has helped me develop profound respect and compassion for gay people. But it’s hard sometimes to watch them struggle, with HIV—”

“With coming out,” he adds.

“Yes!”

“Revealing the secret, not revealing the secret, all the implications of disclosure.” He shakes his head. “The whole process just amazes me.”

“Is there an example that stands out in your mind?”

“Look at Al,” Doug says. “Since his father’s death, his mother and brother have all but told him that they know he’s gay. But no one will say the words.”

I reply, “Gordon’s recent disclosure to his mother revealed a similar dynamic. He sat her down and said, ‘Mom, I have something to tell you: I’m gay,’ and she replied, ‘Well yeah, I kind of figured.’”

“Rather anticlimactic after five years of tormenting himself,” he remarks.

“I feel conflicted about Al, Gordon, and Rob refusing to confirm what others indicate they already know. On one hand, these tacit agreements allow straight associates to hold onto old hopes and plans, and in some ways, they protect gay people from the consequences of revelation. On the other, what levels of intimacy might be closed off by these silent contracts? How do you truly know Rob without knowing that his deepest commitments have been with men?”

“But who are we to judge?” Doug asks. “It took you 10 years to begin sharing your struggles with bulimia. You knew that others might react negatively, so you kept quiet.”

“And in keeping quiet, we do nothing to contest our marginalization. Besides, it’s not a perfect parallel. I consider bulimia peripheral to my identity. I think you can know me without knowing that I’ve lived with an eating disorder.”

“Then what does it mean to *know* you?” he questions. “Maybe some of them consider being gay peripheral. Besides, how can you expect more gay people to come out given the social conditions? In Florida, lesbians and gay men cannot legally have sex; they cannot marry or adopt children; they have no state civil rights protections against housing or employment discrimination.”

“True,” I say, “but how do those conditions change if gay people don’t stand up—even to their own families, even to those who *already seem to know*—and say, ‘This is part of my experience’? I’m not suggesting that it’s easy. According to Weston (1991), coming out is almost universally perceived as a family crisis. But lesbians and gay men bravely confront that every day. Look at Pat. Telling his parents was perhaps the hardest thing he’d ever done. I’ll never forget the scene he described:¹² him catching his breath in the bathroom, then sitting his parents down and spitting out the words, and his father growling, ‘Jeezus ChrrRIST!’ Still, he got through it.”

“Not without cost,” Doug points out. “Imagine your father reacting that way: being unable to look you in the eye, telling you not to reveal your secret to others, and suggesting radical ‘conversion’ therapy.” He pauses, then adds, “Of course, the process can’t be a simple one for parents either.”

“No,” I say. “Many have internalized our culture’s associations of homosexuality with illness and sin, and they have to grieve the loss of a future most parents project for their offspring: heterosexual marriage, perhaps children of their own (and grandchildren for their parents).”

Doug observes, “Plus, as Pat says, any parent who’s made anti-gay comments has to eat crow when his or her own child comes out.”

“I’ve done that myself,” I reply. “As we got to know these men, homophobia struck closer and closer. In my growing intolerance of intolerance, I came face to face with others’ heterosexist assumptions. But even more uncomfortably, I came face to face *with my own*. I had to confront my prejudices, my privilege, and my complicity in a cultural system that

¹² See Chapter 6.

suppresses and marginalizes gay experience. My fearful reaction to having Pat's blood on my hands, for example, was one of the most painfully revealing moments of my fieldwork."

Doug responds, "It wasn't long after I met David that I deeply regretted every gay joke I ever told and every time I called someone 'fag' or 'queer.' In high school and college, the jabs seemed funny only because I didn't see 'those people' as part of my life, part of myself."

"How do you feel now when you hear an anti-gay comment?" I ask.

"It stings. My approach has changed somewhat. I've become more confrontational. Two summers ago, you and I didn't verbally object when my college buddy used the word 'faggot' at Stan and Cindy's barbecue.¹³ I wouldn't let that go today."

I nod. "That episode, for me, is just one example of how my new consciousness colored return trips to straight circles. While some family and old friends seemed quietly puzzled by our connections with gay men, others approached us 'as usual,' meaning that our interactions with them continued to include their occasional anti-gay commentary. Sometimes we sat in silence—like at the barbecue—but often I dove into confrontation head or gut first. In retrospect, I was too slow to empathy, forgetting who *I* had been not long before, and I was too quick to defensiveness. The anger I felt toward heterosexism and homophobia was justified, but the anger I *expressed* toward particular individuals often was unproductive. I can't serve as a bridge or ambassador if I alienate straight associates."

Mulling it over, Doug observes, "It's certainly true that we don't have many straight friends here."

"Is that a source of regret for you?"

¹³ See Chapter 4.

“No, we have enough friends,” he says. “That almost all of them are gay is just the way things evolved.”

I respond, “But we also *allowed* things to evolve that way. After we got to know David and Tim, it felt as though we were bringing our straight and gay communities together, but eventually I saw that, in many ways, we’d simply exchanged the former for the latter. David told me once that no one thinks of you as straight, and Pat has said to me, ‘Spoken like a true fag.’ While such comments show the level of our integration, I wonder how progressive it is to trade one separate, limited domain for another.”

Doug says, “For related reasons, I’ve started to worry about leaving Tampa. You’ll be applying for jobs soon, and in this market, your only offer could take us across the country. I try to imagine what our next circle of friends will be like.”

I reply, “We’ve been living a gay life—gay softball, gay clubs, gay parties, gay dinner groups—for some time now, and like you, I wonder what kind of life we might live elsewhere. Would we seek out another gay community? Would it accept us? Would we establish more connections with heterosexuals than we currently have?”

“Many straight couples our age are largely unavailable because they’re caring for young children. In this culture, a child-free straight couple is constructed as ‘queer.’¹⁴ Perhaps this *lifestyle* is part of what attracts us to the gay men we know (almost none of whom have children), and part of what separates many heterosexuals from gay—especially gay male—communities.”

“Lifestyle issues are relevant,” Doug agrees. “Both we and our friends have the time, energy, and disposable income to invest in multiple close friendships. Still, I think other

¹⁴ See Thomas (2000).

factors might be more significant in keeping those communities apart, especially for straight men.”

At this, I pull up another file from my folder of literature reviews. “Check out this summary I’ve written on male friendship. Research by Fee (1996) and Kirch (1997) suggests that friendships between straight and gay men are quite rare when compared to same-sex, same sexual identity friendships.¹⁵ I also recall something from Hassett and Owen-Towle’s (1994) *Friendship Chronicles: Letters Between a Gay and a Straight Man*. It’s in the ‘Friendship’ stack on the far right, if you’re interested. The authors call themselves ‘revolutionary friends,’ a term that draws attention to the unconventionality of their relationship.”

“According to the available research, why is it so unconventional?” asks Doug.

“One factor is our culture’s taboo against male intimacy.¹⁶ Generations of men grew up with strong, silent fathers and in households where touch needs were met almost exclusively by women.”

Reading on, I say, “Popular culture is another factor.” I hit the ‘page down’ key, looking for a remembered list. “Here we go. Male protagonists continue to be portrayed as, in Wood’s (1997) terms, ‘hard, tough, independent, sexually aggressive, unafraid, violent, totally in control of all emotions, and—above all—in no way feminine.’ Think about it. In media, male friends often are unexpressive cops and cowboys who touch only through combat and weapons.¹⁷ And consider that most of those men are constructed as straight.

¹⁵ Also see Nardi (1999) and Price (1999).

¹⁶ See Stein (1986).

¹⁷ See Tompkins (1992) for a compelling analysis of the Western genre.

How many TV dramas or sit-coms, popular films, or novels feature a deep and abiding relationship between a straight and a gay man?"

"There was *Kiss of the Spider Woman*," Doug recalls.

"But the two men become sexually involved, and the gay character dies at the end."

"*Philadel*—no, the gay friend dies there too. We just rented ... what? *Kiss Me Guido*."

"A potentially ground-breaking film, but how many people saw it? I don't even remember it being in theaters."

"I see your point," he says, "but the climate seems to be warming. Movies like *Basquiat* and *The Full Monty*, while not centering on gay-straight friendships, have them in the background. And what about *As Good As It Gets*? That was a blockbuster Hollywood film in which a gay man befriends both a straight woman and a straight man."

"I hope you're right about the climate," I tell him. "Still, in both popular culture and everyday life, we find few straight men who journey into gay communities—and even fewer who achieve honorary membership."¹⁸ Again referring to the literature summary on my screen, I say, "Michael Kirch (1997) writes about staying at the apartment of David, a heterosexual friend, and socializing with him in a college pub, and Michael Rowe (1996) describes being immersed in the family of his straight friend Chris. In other words, Kirch and Rowe have found acceptance with straight men, but in mostly straight contexts. Therefore, in these 'cross-over friendships,' to borrow a term from Dwight Fee (1996), it is the gay men doing much of the crossing over."

"To what do you attribute that?" asks Doug.

¹⁸ For an exception, see Dan Woog's (1999) story of Stefan Lynch in *Friends & Family: True Stories of Gay America's Straight Allies*. Lynch is a straight man whose mother and father are gay. "I've never seen myself as separate from the gay community" (p. 77) he says. In fact, Lynch considers himself "erotically straight and culturally queer" (p. 72).

“It may be the path of least resistance. ‘Crossing over’—into straight contexts of work and family—is an everyday experience for many gay men. For most straight men, ‘crossing over’ is unfamiliar and even threatening, because gay contexts challenge the performance—and the linkage—of heterosexual-masculine identity.”

“Is this what happened to Bruce the night of my bachelor party?”¹⁹

“I believe so.” Pointing at the pile labeled ‘Gender,’ I say, “In that paperback on top, Fitzgerald (1993) argues that orthodox masculinity is defined less by what it *is* than by what it is *not*, specifically not feminine and not homosexual. Bruce’s encounter can be seen as violating both aspects of his ‘oppositional identity’—Fitzgerald’s words, not mine. Another man first assumed that he was gay and then made a pass at him, which put Bruce in a position usually occupied by women.”

* * *

Thomas and MacGillivray (2000) discuss orthodox masculinity in terms of impenetrability. Part of masculine identity, they posit, is being impenetrable—emotionally and physically. This explains some of the anxiety many heterosexual men feel in the presence of gay men, who remind them that men, like women, *are* penetrable.

* * *

I continue, “Bruce probably never had experienced being an object of the male gaze. In our culture, we expect men to be gazers, not those gazed upon—especially by other men. He felt as women often do: on display, maybe even vulnerable.”

“Yes,” Doug says, “but over time, that gaze can become flattering and validating.”

¹⁹ See Chapter 3.

I smile. “I even think you *court* it. Before we go out to gay clubs, you spend extra time on your hair and are careful about your wardrobe, which now includes body-hugging shirts and flashy pants.”

“Some nights, I *do* feel like dressing in a way that will attract attention, even if most—all—of that attention comes from men.”

“Gay men offer a kind you won’t get from most women,” I observe.

“Unless they’ve learned ... what did you call it? A gay gaze.”

I shuffle through the papers cluttering my desk until I spot a fieldwork memo on gazing. “Malone (1980) and Pearlberg and Wilder (1994) write about the ‘playful cruising’ women can learn from gay men. As a woman, I wasn’t socialized to objectify others, but in the presence of our gay associates, I became an active spectator. Unlike a dominant male spectator (straight, white, middle-class), we were gazing from the margins—looking across, perhaps even up rather than down, not to possess and control but to admire.”

“But what about the *objects* of your gaze?” queries Doug. “What if they feel, as you often have, ‘on display and vulnerable?’ Or what if they also are marginalized, say by race or social class?”

“That gives me pause. On one hand, it feels progressive to reclaim and revalue gazing as a normal part of sexuality; on the other, perhaps it’s unethical to reproduce for others a shadow side of women’s public life, however valuable exposure to that might be for some. Can there be ethical gazing? I suppose it would depend on the relative social positions of the gazer and the gazed upon, on their relationship, and on the context.

“What about you?” I then question. “If there is something we might call a ‘gay gaze,’ do you think you’ve learned it? Of all the straight men I know, you seem the most comfortable and open about looking at other males.”

“Looking at men now feels natural to me,” Doug says. “I can see them as attractive, even beautiful. All straight guys study men. Some of that is competition: is he bigger or taller than I? Some of that is admiration: wow, he’s well built or has a cool hairstyle. But these are things most straight men wouldn’t say in the presence of other men.”

Returning to my notes on male friendship, I respond, “And, as writers like Miller (1983), Hassett and Owen-Towle (1994), and Kirch (1997) indicate, for all straight men’s unease about looking at men, nothing compares to their reticence about *touching* men.”

Doug nods. “Before I met David, I wasn’t nearly as open physically with other men. Ever since graduation, my Drake buddies and I always hug ‘hello’ and ‘goodbye.’ What the hell? It’s only once a year! But our embraces always seem a little stiff and withdrawn, and my straight male friends are a bit quick to pull away. In contrast, when I hug David or Rob, it’s warm, strong, and close. There’s a different level of comfort, for them and for me.”

I say, “I think that friendship with gay men has a lot to offer straight men. Dwight Fee (1996) says that such relationships help straight men face and even transcend their fears about being close to other men.”

“That certainly has been true for me.”

Doug pauses a second, then asks, “And what about straight women? They—you—don’t appear to have such anxieties about connecting with gay men.”

“Straight women do seem to have an easier time forming friendships with gay men,²⁰ perhaps because women’s attitudes toward homosexuality tend to be more favorable than men’s.²¹ But heterosexism isn’t absent from straight women’s consciousness. The ubiquitous saying, ‘What a waste!’ implies that, at some level, many women think that all men—or at least the ‘best’ men—rightfully belong with women.”

He responds, “I’ve even heard women who already are involved or married make this statement, and I always think, ‘Why do you care anyway?’”

“Ironically, it seems to be intended as a compliment: these fine men would’ve added something to the—or *my*—gene pool. But it’s hard not to read it as naïve and self-serving.”

I continue, “Besides heterosexism, other issues may complicate relationships between straight women and gay men. My experience contests the popular wisdom, espoused by authors such as Rauch and Fessler (1995), that the sexual tensions of straight cross-sex friendship are absent in friendships between gay men and straight women. Early on, I believed that wisdom and felt free to explore my sexualized feelings toward gay men. I assumed that these couldn’t be reciprocated and therefore wouldn’t be acted upon. But my talk with Joe on the swings²² and my ‘crossing the line’ with Rob²³ taught me that a straight woman and a gay man *can* become erotically attracted, and whether the attraction

²⁰However, the frequency of these friendships is difficult to ascertain (see Werking, 1997). In *Straight Women/Gay Men: A Special Relationship*, Malone (1980, p. 4) says that “large numbers of straight women from widely different backgrounds form close friendships with gay men,” but the term “large numbers” is left ambiguous. Later, this author reports that the average gay man has between three and four straight women friends (p. 50), but he gives no comparable statistic for straight women. Of Nardi’s (1999) 161 gay male respondents, 10% said that their best friend was a heterosexual woman; about 60% reported having two or fewer close female friends (of any sexual identity); and only around 3% indicated that the majority of their friends were women.

²¹ See Herek and Capitanio (1996).

²² See Chapter 6.

²³ See Chapter 6.

is one-way or mutual, it has implications, both for the friendship and for any romantic partnerships involved.”

“What else do you think your experience can teach straight women?” he asks.

I collect my thoughts a moment, then say, “Because we lack the anxieties associated with masculine identity, straight women are more likely than straight men to serve as bridges between gay and straight communities. We can and *should* help straight men—and other straight women—cross over. That’s a responsibility I haven’t always fulfilled.”

Doug replies, “We’ve only known one other woman so deeply immersed in this community, and that’s Mia. At the time you were introduced, you both were accustomed to being a ‘diva,’ so neither of you knew how to react to the other.”

“I agree, though I think my ‘crime’ is more of omission than commission. I don’t believe I actively pushed away Mia, your teammate Anna, or Tim’s friend Linda; I just don’t think I made extraordinary efforts to get to know them.”

I go on, “The past year changed my thinking about my ‘special’ status. In August, my colleague and close friend Christine moved to Texas, and Jennifer, our old housemate, died in February. I *pine* for feminine closeness like never before. I miss the gut-level empathy. I miss my mom! I think I expected my friendships with gay men to fill the void of feminine companionship. I thought our speech communities and our ways of experiencing relationships and expressing emotions would be more like female friendships than straight cross-sex friendships.”

“Now what do you think?”

“I think the gay men we’ve befriended are strikingly similar to my straight male friends. My relationships with them are playful, active, and intellectually stimulating, but I

find myself, as Wood (1997) says many female friends do, giving more emotional support than I receive. You remember how crushed I was when Al responded to my disclosure of bulimia with, 'I'd have no problem telling my parents something like *that*.'²⁴ Moreover, when I was grieving Christine's departure, none of these men noticed; when Jennifer died, no one sent a card or called to check up on me. In contrast, I've spent hours at a time counseling Rob and Tim about their relationship, hours shoring up Pat after his love interest moved to Memphis, hours listening to Al and Gordon talk about their struggles to come out. Don't get me wrong. I love these men; they're brothers to me. But sometimes *I* don't feel loved in that deep, feminine way, and given the masculine socialization and identities of these *particular* gay men, that's something I probably cannot expect."

"Would you expect it from other gay men?" Doug asks.

"Possibly. We met most of our friends through your softball team. On one hand, the Suncoast league was founded as an alternative to the hyper-masculinity and homophobia often associated with athletics. On the other, a competitive sports league tends to attract traditionally masculine people. Had we become part of a gay community through a political group or an AIDS support network, we may have encountered men with more varied mixes of masculine and feminine qualities. In any case, I'm not pulling back from these relationships, but I am committed to developing more female friendships."

"What about you?" I then query. "Do you like being the only straight guy around? It does confer an exalted status. Everybody's always fawning, 'Doug is so great; he's so rare!' You must find that flattering."

²⁴ See Chapter 5.

“More than anything,” he says, “I find that sad. At the same time, I like to think that I’ve given our friends some hope when it comes to straight men. Maybe my example will move them to keep reaching out, to keep giving straight men a chance at friendship. I like to think that I’ve given Suncoast Softball that same hope.”

“However,” Doug adds, “there’s no denying the unique position each of us currently occupies in this community, and the one we occupy together, as a straight couple.”

“As I read over my account of this journey,” I reflect, “I’m struck by how deeply ‘ours’ the project is. This community is a shared community. Neither of us could have become part of it without the other.”

He predicts, “If I’d been single when I met David, we still would’ve connected. Maybe I even would’ve gone to Tracks that first time. Beyond that, it’s hard to say. I do think that some of my willingness to venture out came from you and our relationship.”

“When I married you,” I tell him, “the differences in our educations and careers concerned me. I wondered what we would have to talk about. What would be ‘ours’? Part of my motivation for studying this group was that it enabled me to get to know and spend time with you, time I otherwise would have spent in places removed from your life and experience.”

“I had those concerns too. We often talk about ourselves as bridges from our friends to straight circles, but in a sense, *they* have been a bridge between you and me. They’ve become our common interest.”

“These connections also have engendered a radical honesty,” I say. “They’ve moved us to confront each other’s repertoire of desires and talk through fear and uncertainty.”

Asking if you were curious about sex with men²⁵ and disclosing my ‘crossing the line’ with Rob felt unsettling and risky, but on the other side were mutual learning and growth.”

Doug reaches over and rubs my hand. Then, glancing at the rolling tape, he asks, “Where are we?”

“Well, we’ve talked about how these friendships have impacted our identities and relationship and what implications our experiences might have for other heterosexuals.”

“What about gay men?” he asks. “What lessons does your project draw for them?”

“Hmm. For a time, I thought that heterosexuals bore all responsibility for improving the cultural climate. Such one-way blaming denies that the chasm between gay and straight communities is what Bateson (1972) and other systems theorists might consider a *relationship* problem. That doesn’t mean that straight and gay people contribute equally to this problem, but it recognizes that gay people’s attitudes and behaviors play some role in the construction and maintenance of the cultural systems that keep us divided.”

“So what are you asking gay men to do?”

“This is such an old argument, but first, I’m asking them to come out.”

“I know you understand their reluctance,” says Doug.

“Of course. Some fear for their relationships with straight people.” I take a book from the floor and turn to a marked page. “This is Chris Shyer in *Not Like Other Boys*: ‘I had convinced myself not only that my homosexuality would decimate my family, but that coming out of the closet would mean losing all the straight friends I had. It meant being kicked out of my safe and solid universe for keeps.’”²⁶

²⁵ See Chapter 6.

²⁶ See Shyer and Shyer (1996, p. 193).

Doug replies, “And even if straight associates don’t reject a gay person, they still may be unable to provide the kind of support needed for close friendships.”

“That’s true. I remember this from Kirk and Madsen: ‘Few straight women, and fewer straight men, will be bold enough to defend homosexuality.’”²⁷ I then turn to another chapter in *Not Like Other Boys*. “Along these lines, Chris Shyer says that ‘being accepting falls a bit short of being my advocate. Telling me to roll with the punches is not like throwing one, or wanting to, when I am reviled or stigmatized. Supporting me is different from expecting me to conform to community standards when they’re repressive, unenlightened and unjust.’”²⁸

“So, yes,” I continue, “coming out entails vulnerability. But what’s the alternative? Take this case: Rob’s brother and sister-in-law are staying with Rob and Tim this weekend. Rob just came out to his brother, but the two agreed not to tell the sister-in-law because they don’t believe she’ll be accepting. Tim’s furious because Rob offered to sleep on the couch for the duration of their stay so that this woman will think that the two are only roommates. Apparently, Rob and his sibling have little faith in her perceptive abilities. The Ryan brothers may be right about her attitudes. She may react negatively, but if she does, perhaps she has no business staying at their house. Then again, she may surprise them. My point is this: how can true friendship develop between gay and straight people if gay people don’t give heterosexuals the chance to know them *as gay*?”

“Their coming out could impact more than just their own relationships,” Doug says. “There are too few examples of openly gay men in general and even fewer of openly gay

²⁷ See Kirk and Madsen (1990, p. 187).

²⁸ See Shyer and Shyer (1996, p. 258).

men—and I stress *openly* here—who defy the stereotypes, who are, for example, masculine and athletic.”

“Key components of many straight men’s identities,” I respond.

“Right! I know you hate the terms, but it may be the ‘straight-looking’ and ‘straight-acting’ gay men who have the most potential for bridging gay and straight male communities.”

“Not long ago,” I recall, “our brother-in-law was talking about your bachelor party. He referred to Tim and Brandon as ‘good exposure’ and the entertaining-yet-purse-carrying Larry as ‘bad exposure.’ I don’t like those categories, but the conversation made me think about timing.”

Doug nods. “Perhaps meeting Larry would have been less shocking if he and my college buddies already had experienced several interactions with gay men who looked, talked, and acted more like them.”

I put my hand to my forehead, trying to call up a thought. “Oh, what’s the quote from Kirk and Madsen? Could you hand me that book by your right knee?”

“This one?” he asks, holding up *After the Ball*.

Nodding, I take it from him. “It was in the middle someplace ... here: **‘You hammer in the wedge narrow end first.’**”²⁹

But then I reconsider this line of reasoning. “On the other hand, how do you know what’s ‘good’ or ‘bad’ exposure until you’ve had it? What does ‘bad exposure’ mean? Bad for whom? Is exposure ‘good’ only when it keeps you safe and comfortable? How does that constitute exposure? And how much homophobic commentary, like Bruce’s about The

²⁹ See Kirk and Madsen (1990, p. 146) (emphasis theirs).

Cove, stems from genuine negative feelings, and how much from internalized expectations to perform orthodox masculinity?"

Doug responds, "So Bruce may not be reporting what he *felt* so much as reporting what he thinks others *expect* him to feel as a straight man in a gay context."

"Sounds plausible to me."

On a different note, I predict, "In terms of potential relationships with both straight women and lesbians, I think that gay men could benefit from a more feminist consciousness. As Hassett and Owen-Towle (1994) observe, sexism can be as rife in gay male communities as in straight ones. Misogynist labels like 'fish,' one of David's favorite terms for me; drag shows that may caricature femininity, like the Miss Suncoast Softball pageant;³⁰ and spaces that all but exclude women, like Blasphemy,³¹ do little to foster cross-sex connections."

"Not many men are well-versed in feminism," Doug says, "and there aren't enough women in gay male communities to point out assumptions and correct offenders. As a result, the locker-room mentality can run amok."

"Hadn't thought of it that way," I reply. "I guess what's needed are feminist women and sensitive gay men committed to bridging our experiential worlds and working together to combat sexism and homophobia."

I then posit, "Another limiting factor is gay men's adoption of our culture's obsessions with appearance and youth. Perpetual anxiety and dissatisfaction sap us of the kind of energy it requires to build and maintain strong relationships and communities."

³⁰ See Chapters 5 and 6.

³¹ See Chapter 6.

“I know what you mean,” he says. “The frequent talk of weight lifting, The Zone, and steroids made me more conscious about my physique than ever before. I sometimes wonder, ‘How do they see *me*? Can *anyone* measure up to their standards?’”

I reply, “This is a potential dark side of a gay gaze. When projected outward, it can feel empowering, but when turned inward, it can feel debilitating.”

Doug suggests, “Maybe gay men turn inward because, in so many ways, their outward reality is difficult to face. They see and experience rejection, harassment, even violence. Perhaps the body is something they believe they can control; perhaps some women turn to bulimia for similar reasons.”

“The ‘body projects’³² of straight women and gay men do seem to share roots,” I say. “They have similar consequences as well. Media circulate impossible physical ideals. Straight women and gay men acquire cultural capital by striving toward those ideals, but the process promotes little more than an internalized sense of ‘never enough.’ We exhaust our emotional and financial resources on superficial pursuits, leaving none for the bigger fights: cultural harmony, civil rights, social justice. In the end, our self-absorption serves no one but our political enemies.”

Doug responds, “And whatever sense of control you gain is illusive and temporary anyway. After all, bodies age, become ill, and die.”

“Maybe that’s part of it too,” I say. “Wrinkles, HIV, an ‘undisciplined’ body—these are signs of mortality. Perhaps our body projects are also what Becker (1973) considers immortality projects—means to repress our sense of finitude.”

“That doesn’t sound healthy.”

³² See Brumberg (1997).

“Becker might disagree. He believes repression is central to our survival because we’re not equipped to face the human condition. But I suspect he’d recommend less destructive campaigns.”

When I say nothing more, he asks, “Have we covered what gay-straight friendship requires, means, and does?”

“For us, at least.”

Doug settles further into his chair. “What about your idea of friendship as method?”

“I’ve written a series of memos about that. Could I run them by you?”

He smiles. “Go ahead, but qualitative methods isn’t exactly my area.”

I dig out the pages, remove the paper clip, and put my notes in order. “Okay, here goes:

In many ways, friendship and fieldwork are similar endeavors. Friendship, after all, *is* fieldwork. It’s being in the world with others. To both friendship communities and fieldwork communities, we first must gain access. We might stumble in accidentally, or we might find an ‘informant’ who introduces us to her or his collective. But somehow we’ve got to get in. Once there, we negotiate roles. How much do we participate; how much observe? Will we be relative insiders or outsiders? We learn new ways of speaking and new codes for behavior. Then, as we deepen our ties, we meet trials and challenges, and we cope with relationship dialectics, negotiating how private and how candid we will be, how separate and how together, how stable and how in-flux. One day, depending where life takes us, we even may face ‘leaving the field.’”

I look up from my notes to gauge his reaction.

“I think I understand,” Doug says slowly, “but what does it mean to say that friendship is a *method* of inquiry?”

“In terms of my study, friendship is not only a subject but also the way I conducted it. Friendship as method is not a completely new idea. It builds on several established approaches to qualitative research.”

“Like what?”

Shuffling through, I respond, “Let me find that page. All right. First, it’s based on the principles of interpretivism, which according to Schwandt (1994), stem from the German intellectual traditions of hermeneutics (interpretation) and *verstehen* (understanding); from phenomenology, a research tradition focused on the everyday meanings that construct, maintain, and transform a social world; and from the critiques of positivism.”

“Can you explain those critiques?”

“Sure. Positivism is a philosophy of science based on several assumptions: that there exists a single, universal, and fixed reality; that inquiry should be neutral, dispassionate, and apolitical; and that our purposes as researchers are to discover unmediated facts and causal relationships, to predict and control the physical and social world, and to formulate general laws and grand narratives. Interpretivism rejects all of these. If you’ll permit me to read again:

Interpretivists take reality to be both pluralistic and constructed in language and interaction. Instead of facts, we search for intersubjective *meanings*, what Geertz (1973) calls the ‘webs of significance,’ and instead of control, we seek *understanding*. According to Denzin (1997), we research and write not

to capture the totality of social life but to interpret reflectively and reflexively slices and glimpses of *localized* interaction in order to understand more fully both others and ourselves.”

“Does feminism factor in somewhere?” Doug asks.

“Ah, you’re right with me,” I say. “Much of feminist thought draws from this tradition, combining interpretivist assumptions with political commitments to empowerment, consciousness-raising, and social justice. On this next page I’ve written:

Feminists like Cook and Fonow (1986), Reinharz (1992), and Roberts (1981) have been instrumental in debunking the myth of value-free inquiry; in calling researchers to acknowledge their interests and sympathies; in questioning the traditional, hierarchical separation between researcher and respondents; in promoting caring and just relationships in the field; and in encouraging as much emotional sharing³³ and vulnerability³⁴ from the researcher as from those researched.”

Feminist standpoint theory³⁵ has been especially instrumental in showing how one’s location in cultural categories such as sexual identity influences social position. This position, in turn, shapes and constrains what one can know and do. Because each person views the social world from her or his unique standpoint, intersubjectivity between researcher and participants only can occur when each understands the other’s social position and its emotional, relational, and political consequences.”

³³ See Ellis, Kiesinger, and Tillmann-Healy (1997).

³⁴ See Behar (1996).

³⁵ See, for example, Collins (1986) and Harding (1991).

“Keep going,” he encourages.

“The following section pulls together my sources on queer theory, which has been equally instructive.”

“Read it.”

“All right. It says:

A project or text is ‘queer’ if it challenges heterosexism and heteronormativity—the idea that heterosexual is normative and all other sexualities deviant³⁶—and it problematizes the binary construction of hetero- and homosexualities.³⁷ ‘The key to liberation,’ writes Gamson (1998, p. 222), is ‘*muddying* the categories rather than shoring them up, pointing out their instability and fluidity along with their social roots.’”

“How has queer theory influenced your work?” Doug asks.

“Like feminist theory, it has encouraged me to be reflexive about the challenges and opportunities of studying a marginalized community to which I don’t belong. It has moved me to recognize my heterosexual privilege and to work against cultural practices of ‘othering,’ where we silence, suppress, and shame experiences and people that somehow challenge the dominant ideology.”

Scanning ahead, I say, “Along similar lines, I’ve been influenced by Fine’s (1994) notion of ‘working the hyphens.’ Like other interpretivist approaches, hers rejects scientific neutrality, universal truths, and dispassionate inquiry and moves toward social *justice, relational* truths, and *passionate* inquiry. Through authentic engagement, the lines between researcher and respondent blur, permitting each to explore the complex humanity

³⁶ See Butler (1999) and Thomas (2000).

³⁷ See, for example, Sedgwick (1990) and Stein (1999).

of both self and other. Instead of ‘giving voice,’ researchers *get to know* others in meaningful and sustained ways.”

“I’ll read you the next passage:

Fine’s philosophy shares much common ground with participatory action research. According to Reason (1994), this type of inquiry emerged from the tradition of liberationist movements. Through genuine collaboration, it promotes the understanding of knowledge as an instrument of power and domination, honors lived experience, and aims to produce knowledge and action *directly useful* to those being studied. Research, under this model, can be judged by what Lather (1991) calls ‘catalytic validity,’ the degree to which it empowers those researched. Key to this approach is dialogue, where the subject-object relationship of positivism becomes a subject-subject one, in which academic knowledge combines with everyday experience to produce new and profound understandings.”

Nodding, Doug inquires, “Is that what you were trying to accomplish in your interactive interviewing project with Carolyn and Christine”?³⁸

“That project differed from traditional participatory action research because all subjects involved are academics. Also, interactive interviewing demands more sharing of personal and social experiences on the part of the *researcher* than does PAR. But, like participatory action research, interactive interviewing is an interpretive practice, calls for intense collaboration, and privileges lived, emotional experience.”

He asks, “After interactive interviewing, is friendship the next step?”

³⁸ See Ellis, Kiesinger, and Tillmann-Healy (1997).

“Methodologically, yes.”

“What does it involve?”

Consulting my notes, I say, “First, we research with the *practices* of friendship. This means that although researchers might use traditional forms of data gathering, like systematic note taking and informal and formal interviewing, our primary procedures are those we all use to build and sustain friendship: conversation, everyday involvement, compassion, giving, and vulnerability.

“Second, it demands that we research at the natural *pace* of friendship. As with interactive interviewing, often this is slow, gradual, and unsteady. Both cultural immersion and true friendship are long-term commitments. It’s difficult to know others in meaningful and sustained ways when feeling rushed or pressured by deadlines. I suppose I could have tried to begin writing sooner, but the result wouldn’t have been *this* narrative ethnography. With friendship as method, a project’s issues emerge organically, in the context of going for walks and sharing meals. The unfolding path of the relationships becomes the path of the project. This approach may frustrate a researcher who needs everything spelled out in advance. I know, I used to be one of those. But if we have or can cultivate an openness to—and a *patience* for—surprise and serendipity, new and unexpected dimensions are added to fieldwork experience and relationships.

“To other qualitative researchers, I would say that the most important aspect of this methodology is that we research with an *ethic* of friendship—a stance of mutuality, caring, justice, and even love. I realize that ‘friendship as method’ sounds somewhat tactical. But what I’m suggesting, and what I’ve been trying to practice, is not a *program* strategically aimed at gaining deeper access. It’s a level of investment in participants’ lives that requires

putting the relationships on par with the project. We give up a day of writing to help someone move—and are grateful for the opportunity. We set aside our reading pile when someone drops by or calls ‘just to talk.’ We keep secrets, even when they’d add compelling twists to the narrative. We consider our participants an audience and struggle to write both honestly and compassionately *for them*. We put ourselves on the line—going virtually anywhere, doing almost anything, pushing to the furthest reaches of our being. We never ask more of others than we are willing to give. Friendship as method demands *radical reciprocity*, a move from studying them to studying *us*.”

“What do you see as the benefits of this approach?” Doug asks.

“Personally, the most significant benefit has been the relationships themselves. My ‘subjects’—and it feels strange to call them that—became our best friends, our family. Academically, the friendships permitted a level of understanding and depth of experience I don’t know how else I could have gotten.”

I then say, “Throughout the cycles of talking, reading, and writing, my researcher and friendship roles wove together, each adding depth and breadth to the other. Because I was studying them, these men always could assume that I wanted to understand their experience. But because I cared about them so deeply, they always could assume that I would value their stories and try to use them in ways that promoted liberation and justice. When I talked to my classmates and students about our experiences and wrote about them in conference papers, I felt I was doing just that.

“In addition, my writing seemed to foster conversation and connection among *them*, as illustrated by the encounter at Gordon’s apartment,³⁹ where my papers were being

³⁹ See Chapter 6.

passed around the room. My hope is that someday my work will spark such dialogue *outside* our friendship circle.”

“Are there any risks or drawbacks to approaching research this way?” Doug queries.

“Such fieldwork carries all the risks that friendship carries. Both researcher and participants will be vulnerable to one another, and that means they can be profoundly disappointed, angered, or hurt. Distanced, ‘objective’ ethnographers might experience embarrassment at their initial ignorance of ‘native’ customs; they might feel disoriented or lonely in the field. But they never bare their souls and therefore never risk the pain of being disconfirmed by someone embedded there.

“When I told Al of my bulimia, it wasn’t a strategy aimed at inducing disclosure from him. I opened myself because I sensed that my friend was hurting, and I wanted him to know that I could be his companion in pain. I wanted to comfort him; perhaps I even wanted *him* to comfort *me*. It just didn’t work out that way.

“But often it did work out,” I reflect. “Not long ago, a chapter to which I’d contributed was published.⁴⁰ Pat was over when I brought the book home. When he asked to see it, I hesitated because the piece contained an excerpt from my autoethnographic account of bulimia.⁴¹ I couldn’t get Gordon and Al’s reactions out of my mind. Pat took the book home and called me as soon as he read it. ‘It brought tears to my eyes,’ he said. ‘I’ve never known anyone bulimic before. I had no idea what it was like. Even though our situations were completely different, I saw my struggles with sexuality in your struggles with food. I understand what it’s like to feel so completely alone—when you’re dying for someone to come to you, when you don’t know how to tell others what’s wrong.’ It was a

⁴⁰ See Bochner, Ellis, and Tillmann-Healy (1998).

⁴¹ See Tillmann-Healy (1996).

risky but deeply affirming conversation. Sometimes vulnerability brings closeness—but not always.”

I continue, “Another uncertainty of this kind of research is that you never know what you’ll learn about yourself. When your life and experiences are some of the ‘primary data,’ to borrow Jackson’s (1989) words, you must examine yourself in ways not required by traditional qualitative inquiry. I learned, for example, that in spite of my ardently feminist sensibility, I haven’t yet shed my ties to traditional feminine beauty and my need for male validation. To recognize my continued complicity in our culture’s obsession with appearance was a difficult and discrediting process. It brought to light a chasm between who I’ve been and who I’m trying to become. Sometimes I would have preferred not to look so deeply into myself.

“I’ve also considered how this project might have impacted our marriage,” I share. “In probing our own and each other’s identities and desires, we may have opened Pandora’s boxes for which we weren’t prepared. What if you’d ‘discovered’ that you needed to experiment sexually with men? What if I’d ‘discovered’ that I needed to explore other attractions?”

“But we didn’t discover those things,” Doug replies.

“No, but we *could* have. Perhaps we don’t *have* desires so much as we *find* or *create* them through certain kinds of experiences.⁴² It’s something that might give others pause.”

“In terms of the writing,” I say, “friendship as method has additional considerations. Relationships are ongoing, but at some point, the writing has to stop. That point always is arbitrary and involves leaving out what comes after.”

⁴² See Warner (1999).

“What’s been left out that you’d like in?”

“I ended the narrative section in the summer of 1997. In the fall, two lesbians joined The Cove. Holly and Kelly played only one season, then moved away, but I shared some interesting moments with these strong, talented women. Because I had to stop somewhere, those moments were not included, so as it stands, this project is disappointingly devoid of lesbian experience, voice, and cultures.”

“Unfortunately,” Doug suggests, “I think it’s fairly understandable given that lesbian and gay communities can be as separate as gay and straight communities.”

“A topic worthy of another project,” I say. “In addition, I’ve been asked to keep secrets about attractions, relationships, and crises that would have added significant layers to this account. There are a number of experiences and conversations I’d love to invite readers inside, but I can’t because I value the friendships as much as the project. A traditional researcher probably wouldn’t feel such a forceful pull.”

Doug replies, “Remember, though, a traditional researcher may not know those secrets in the first place. You have that information because you’re also a trusted friend.”

“That’s true, but the dual role of friend/researcher often made it difficult to decide what to divulge. I’ve had the most trouble writing about incidents that potentially discredit or stereotype my participants. I felt much more uncomfortable *writing* about The Vice,⁴³ for example, than I did experiencing it.

“Unlike a conventional researcher,” I say, “I assumed that my participants would read—and care about—what I wrote. In part, my project was a testament to our friendships. So how could I admit that I felt disconfirmed or disturbed?”

⁴³ See Chapter 5.

“But writing an honest account required me to deal with my negative feelings. On early drafts, Art kept commenting, ‘You’re romanticizing them. Is that *all* you felt? Didn’t that hurt you, make you mad?’ Adding the darker aspects of my experience was really difficult for me. It felt as though I were betraying the friendships.”

“I have to admit,” Doug shares, “that’s something I’ve been concerned about. While Art sometimes thought you didn’t push them far enough, I sometimes thought you pushed them *too far*. I worried that your questions would make them uncomfortable, that your encouragement for them to come out would backfire, and that they might not like what you wrote. If any of those proved true, it could impact not only your relationships with them but also *our* and *my* relationships with them as well.”

I reply, “I was troubled by those prospects too, and I see how your position differed from mine. I had to juggle the demands of a study with the demands of the friendships. You didn’t.

“For me, weighing those demands required a sometimes difficult balancing act. After all, this became more than just my life or just a project. It became a *life project*, and one that projected us toward an uncertain future. These men gave us a sense of home, and sometimes I thought it would be easier to leave higher education than to leave the field of their friendships.”

“What do you think now?” Doug asks.

“I’m torn by what Art describes as a dialectic between two worlds of experience: the academic and the personal. In ‘It’s About Time: Narrative and the Divided Self,’⁴⁴ he reflects on how these collided for him when he received word at an academic conference

⁴⁴ See Bochner (1997).

that his father had died. Art recognized a gulf between his successful yet ‘tame’ professional life and the profound emotional intensity of his personal loss. His interests in lived experience and narrative grew out of a desire to bridge that gulf.

“As a student of his, I’ve always been encouraged to bring together my personal and academic selves. This project certainly reflects that. However, the grand narrative of academia still dictates a rather inflexible path: graduate students are socialized by one institution and hired into another, often one geographically distant. Art’s mentoring has allowed me to merge the personal and the academic for my dissertation, but once the project is finished, those worlds, in all likelihood, will be ripped apart. In a sense, I’ve done what he asked so well that no academic job seems worth the sacrifices.”

I go on, “On the other hand, these men have changed my professional interests and investments. What I’ve learned from them is too important not to share, and perhaps the best place for me to accomplish that is the university, where I can be an agent of and for social change. But to do that, we will have to leave this community, and that will tear my heart from my chest.”

Glancing at the clock, Doug assures, “We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it. Right now, it’s late. Shut off your computer and come to bed.”

“I will,” I say. “But first, I have to write up our conversation.”

With an exasperated sigh, Doug asks, “*Then* will you be finished?”

“I’m not sure I’ll *ever* be finished,” I reply as he disappears into the darkened hallway. “That’s the thing about life projects.”

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