



Daniel Doherty

## Smudges

I am an accidental coach.

Your brain is faster than your hand.

'Your brain is faster than your hand.' That was the frequent refrain heard by the much younger infant me, both in school and when among family. Much of the inspiration behind that remark was caused by the smudging caused by this young left-hander dragging the outside of his hand across the once pristine page, with much mess resulting.

'Stop staring out the window and concentrate on the task in hand,' scolded the teacher, 'not on some fine thought that's going on somewhere else in your wayward brain.'  
Daniel's Vision Quest: late September 1994

(I recently excavated this piece, written over a weekend in my new home in Cape Town, alone and on retreat, after a summer of vast upheaval and change.)

Some important things to note about the Daniel Conundrum: what needs to be exposed and what may be hidden.

I am highly seductive as well as highly seducible. The latter is not fully appreciated. This dynamic can apply to institutions ideas as much as relationships.

I am intensely curious to explore what lies behind 'what is presented.' I know there is always more, and I want to explore. I trust my intuition. I know this is a gift.

I am keen (not always) for people to know a lot about me. I wish them to hear me say the truth.

I am capable of accurate and compassionate articulation of my own and other's dilemmas and passions. I release passions, without quite knowing the mechanism, but it works.

I am capable of searing honesty in a relationship at the early stages. I can provoke equivalent honesty, including others self- honesty, including self-insights that might be hidden from view.

I seem to deal well with life's external structures and processes, create pathways out of nothing, carried by passion, brilliance, capacity for challenge.

There is a strong rescuer in me, nearer my warrior than my magician.

I am very good at brand new starts – of all types.

My freedom urge is healthy most of the time. Sometimes I feel I carry freedom for all of us, even

though I am somewhat blamed, demonised by the victims at the time.

In the trade offs between freedom and security, freedom and advancement, then freedom and excitement always wins. It is scary even for me.

I do 'worry.' I do have fears. But they seldom stop me. Not even fear of hurt or of disapprobation, which runs pretty strongly.

Work is my ally and my monster, my Gollum. We are deeply co-dependent, and where there is doubt or torment that needs to be shared, or is too pitiful to be shared, we and the monster will shut others out.

I am thinking of leaving behind the TOAD called work that squats on my life, but the thought fills me with terror.

I do test and I wish to be tested.

I am capable of listening, attending, giving my time, but find it hard to do that in the face of attack. I do not deal well with women's anger. Few men do, I believe.

## Re-attiring

A necessary part of my leaving my final full-time academic post, after twelve years served in a variety of institutions, was to drive my trusty Volvo onto campus and load it up a random collection of largely forgotten books, trophies and artefacts, including my silken doctoral gown, which I found stuffed unceremoniously behind the office door.

My next stop - post this exhumation and sealing off the scholarly tomb - was to point the car towards my next destination, a song leaders' workshop conducted in an ancient abbey. On an impulse, at breakfast the next day, I decided to make some use of my much-neglected gown before it was ultimately mothballed, with no more graduation rituals to grace, no more stifling in the summer's heat, mechanically applauding as a procession of young lives pass out before their proud parents' eyes.

I rescued my gown from the car and slipped it on, marvelling at the creases, stains and general lived-in look so characteristic of all my wardrobe, now enhanced with a whiff of stale exhaust. Sitting down for breakfast on the ancient bench beside a song leader renowned for her wit and wisdom, she asked, not unnaturally, 'what's with the gown?' I spoke of my impulse to give the gown one last airing, by way of a symbolic ending, in the setting of this ancient seat of learning. 'Ah' she reflected 'So you have just retired?' Rather shocked by the utterance of this taboo term, I blurted 'No, Not all, I do not recognise the R word,' although her conclusion was factually accurate, and her inquiry kindly.

'Ah, I see' she countered. 'So you are re-attiring, not retiring?'

I loved that reimagining of the R word and gave her a full swirl of the reclaimed garment in recognition of her sharpness and accuracy of thought. She asked of my twelve years before the academic mast. I explained that it all began in my mid-fifties, when I was occupied with writing a narrative doctorate that was ultimately - after much struggle - to gain me the licence to inhabit the hooded gown. The doctorate was eventually titled 'On becoming an academic.' I speculated that at this turning point in my life that I may well be in the process of reversing the engines, to un-become an academic, to shed that skin.

## 'What did you used to do?'

As I grow older, I cannot help but notice that, during casual encounters with relative strangers in a social setting, I am often asked the question, 'what did you used to do?' I do not enjoy that question at all.

As I grow older, I find that there are ways in which I can turn memory loss to my advantage, being able to take pleasure in experiences seen repeatedly anew, through fresh eyes, “when in conversations fluency seems undiminished - the words seem to flow easily enough, as if drawn from old well but come up fresh”.

In the process of pursuing my tightly crafted ‘becoming’ plans for this year, I was brutally interrupted by the deaths of three colleagues, one after another. Two of my friends were prodigious, transgressive writers whose work had inspired me deeply at various points in my career. Neither was much read by others, though treasured by a small few. I realised that their writing would die with them soon enough. Both would unbecome. As will I, soon enough. And my writing.

The third death was of an old colleague decades ago moved to deepest France. After forty years we rekindled our friendship, by chance encounter on Facebook. We planned to meet, all excited, then she died of a horrible cancer which she traced in conversation with me through the socials until she died. Months later I was getting Facebook messages from her. Nonplussed, I found they were from her younger husband, whom I had never met. He simply said he wanted to chat to one of her oldest friends. For both of us to take comfort from clinging to whatever wreckage remained.

## Legacy

As I get older, I hear some contemporaries growing anxious about their ‘legacy’, and the fact that there is increasingly little time left for them to cement their memorial to self in place. I do not share their worry that I may return from whence I came, leaving the firmament undisturbed, but then sometimes legacy finds you. Last week on the crammed London to Exeter train, I was sat beside an Exeter student and got to talk of my time teaching there, and of her passage into her third year. I spoke of some of the crazy projects my business students did, including one group who went to help the nearby Donkey Sanctuary craft a global marketing strategy. I know. Before we knew their plans grew grandiose, and a plot was hatched to bring a posse of donkeys onto campus for charity and awareness raising purposes. The backlash from this was bad, really bad, as the Vice Chancellor, Dean and assorted ground staff beat a path to my rarely disturbed door to ask what in name of thunder I thought I was doing. The uproar was not the legacy. In my history uproar is commonplace. What delighted me most was to hear from the student on the train that now, every year, the donkeys come on campus, to the shared delight of all. Now that is what I call legacy.