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Up the highway to campus Optus

Thick traffic

What happens to a person when they work in the environment of pervasive risk and change that characterises the new capitalist enterprise? These transnational, globalised, and networked enterprises are a defining element in what is variously termed by social scientists and others from the humanities as 'high modernity' and the 'late modern age' (Giddens), the 'informational age' (Castells), and the 'global age' and 'new capitalist age' (Sennett). Many of us work in such organisations, and for this reason it has been my interest to ask, how might a writer of narrative engage with the contemporary impacts of risk and change on individuals?

A number of key and in-common elements in the definition of the characteristics of late modernity are present in these sociologists' analyses. Firstly, there is the separation of time and space, in which time and space no longer need to be connected through the 'situatedness of place' (Giddens 1991: 16). Castells conceptualises a new spatial form, the 'space of flows', that is the material and immaterial connections and communications of information networks: 'There is simultaneity, but the spatial arrangement that allows it is a different one [from earlier epochs]. It is based [now] on telecommunications, computer systems and the places from where this interaction takes place' (2003: 56). Organisations, states, communities and individuals are now saturated in, create and are reflexively formed by networked communications. Sennett argues that this complex of disassociations of space and time enables new capitalist organisations to impose and encourage 'flexibility', of time and skills and productive capacity. But, this flexibility requires individual employees to accommodate 'ceaseless change' (Sennett 1998: 51).

A further characteristic of high modernity is the 'disembedding' of social institutions (Giddens 1991), in which a local context need not be present. Sennett's focus recently has been on the individual at work, on self and identity and the 'corrosion of character'; he details the effects of the globalisation of the geography of work and the fragility and transience of relationships that result (2006: 55). Yet, for all this disembedding, high modernity is also characterised by a massive growth in urbanisation. Castells argues that we both concentrate *and* decentralize at the same time, 'precisely because high-speed information technologies allow the formation of this scattered pattern while keeping the concentration of the core' (2003: 55).

A third element of high modernity is its chronic revision of knowledge in the light of new information or knowledge (Giddens 1991: 20); indeed, the 'development of knowledge upon knowledge itself' (Castells 2000: 19). Our informational age has a specific attribute, in which 'information generation,

processing, and transmission become the fundamental sources of productivity and power' (Castells 2000: 21). Sennett questions the effects of the constant acquisition of knowledge, skills and training on character. He wraps it back into a question of time and our sense of the past, asking, how do people cope with surrender, this endless letting go of their past knowledge and skills in the acquisition of new, employable knowledge? This 'superficial' knowledge is now a tool of power at work, as opposed to the 'dense' knowledge that Michel Foucault elaborated (Sennett 2006: 122) in the years before the Internet was invented. It is very different to the traditional institutional knowledge that people held when in long-term employment with individual companies.

These new ways of organising work time, the dissolution of the traditional career which progressed step by step, the necessity to change jobs, and the increase in short term job contracts are having profound effects on individuals. Categories of meaning, such as religion, that historically held individual and local identity together, have little of their former stability. For this reason, people need to be able to create their own self-definition (Castells 2003: 68).

Sennett considers that a significant effect of the new capitalism regimes of 'flexibility' is its negative impact on personal narrative and character. 'Character,' he writes, 'concerns the personal traits which we value in ourselves and for which we seek to be valued by others' (1998: 10). He doesn't mean the more modern notion of 'personality' with its suggestion of momentary desires and attributes, or of an exhibition of behaviours, but character as the long-term aspect of emotional experience, the sustained sentiments of lasting value, and the ethical values we place on our 'own desires and on our relations to others' (Sennett 2006: 10). A sense of self and self-actualisation is needed by the ontologically secure individual. We don't merely perform our identities, or seek to see ourselves in the reactions of others, though this is important, and is clearly a fraught issue within workplaces. As Giddens emphasises, we also need 'the capacity *to keep a particular narrative going*' (1991: 54).

This quick summary glances over only a few of the major themes in Giddens, Sennett and Castells' extensive researches. Still, the overview explains my research decision to work with IT salespeople employed by transnationals, and the conceptual parameters I've been thinking within. Anyone in high-end IT sales is (often uncomfortably) at a nodal point of global and institutional change in relation to time and space, of knowledge and skill and information flows. My aim as a narrative writer has been to capture some of the elements of their lives that speak to the themes of the late modern age; the culture of their work; and to render their individual narratives with some felicity.

The traffic's moving again

In the main the men and women that I spoke to were based in the northern suburbs of Sydney. Many of their IT transnational employers are located in the moneyed, congested, vibrant and historically-marked suburb of North Sydney. Situated at the north end of the Harbour Bridge this business and residential suburb is close to trains and buses, Sydney Harbour and via the Sydney Harbour Bridge, the CBD. Many of these North Sydney companies also have administrative offices further up the Pacific Highway at Gordon and Pymble, old bushland suburbs of large, leafy bungalows and multi-story office blocks that rim the highway. (When you get to Gordon you know you're almost out of Sydney and onto the freeway north.) A third site is got to

by heading north-west along the eight-lane Epping Road to the Macquarie Business Park; alongside it (that is, a short drive away) is the much older Macquarie Shopping Centre. As a high school student in the 1970s, I attended an alternative school set in bushland that now lies beneath the vast shopping mall; though, it is hard to be certain exactly where it was with the contours of the earth changed and the landmarks gone. A little further along are the parklands of Macquarie University, where I work.

I pass by the Macquarie Business Park irregularly. I have little reason to enter it; in fact you'd only go there if you had business to attend to. The roads that border it west, north and south are congested for hours at a time each morning and evening. It is ill served by public transport. (The proposed North West Metro with interchanges to Macquarie Park was canned by the NSW Government in late 2008.) Inside the zone, curvy, Canberra-like roadways border driveways into fields of buildings that rise above small artificial hills and carparks. Grassy verges set everything back from the road. Despite or because of these thoughtful pockets of landscaping, it is an architecture of repetition and blandness. When I see the office workers making the long walk to the Macquarie Shopping Centre for a bite to eat, they look hot and bored. You'd be no more likely to find a London Eye here than a circus.

These then, are the three principal Sydney locations from which the IT sales executives work, from which they take their company cars out to see their clients and later return to, to do battle with their emails and sales reports and managers.

Commuting between Macquarie Park and North Sydney

When I arrived at the new Optus quarters at Macquarie Park for the breakfast seminar, early morning sunlight was slanting in through the wide windows. It was 7.45am. The traffic hadn't been too bad. I had found my way to the carpark entry gate, and spoken my name and the seminar that I was attending into the intercom, and had been issued with a ticket, which I was to have stamped. With my interest in corporate cultures I was there to attend a seminar called 'Innovation in Action' (21 September 2007). The move of Optus Sintel to Macquarie Park was the springboard for the event. The office of Small Business in the Department of State and Regional Development had organised it, to spruik the fast growing zone as a 'business corridor'. We gathered outside the Optus Auditorium, munching through the complementary breakfast. Office buddies and other business people spoke together in sprightly tones over miniature tarts and coffee. There was a great deal of milling. A couple of humanities-based IT people from Macquarie University turned up: like me, they were curious to see the new, super-networked HQ. More participants arrived. Stressed glances rippled amongst the Optus staff when the car park ticket registration swiper stopped functioning.

'Optus is changing,' said Paul Kitchin to the auditorium audience once we were seated. A man in his early forties, he was the company's Managing Director of Small & Medium Business. Paul's title was itself a sign of change: in 2005 the company had gone through a major restructure involving layoffs, with four new divisions created including Kitchin's. Now, in 2007, Optus was in the midst of moving thousands of its staff. Over 6,000 people who had been spread across buildings in North Sydney and the CBD were to work in this purpose-built, environmentally green 'campus', in a prime spot of the Macquarie Business Park (On-line staff 2004). Paul Kitchin called the new

headquarters a campus [note 1]. He repeated the word often. He was attempting to bestow Optus with the characteristics that had given Silicon Valley its amazing start-up. Maybe he knew the story. Silicon Valley's engineering inventiveness came about through the proximity of the institutional entrepreneur Stanford University, whose 'raw material' was new knowledge (Castells 2000: 421). Stanford was critical to the processes of entrepreneurialism, collaboration and risk-taking, founding the Stanford Industrial Park in 1951. But other elements were vital to the mix: the San Francisco Bay Area's culture of welcoming new business, migration, and state government support. Together, these players created the synergist relationships that were the source of Silicon Valley's achievements (Castells 2003: 35, 38). Perhaps that was the kind of campus Kitchin imagined was possible at Optus Sintel's new headquarters.

Curiosity, the narrative writer's essential impulse, had led me into the Optus Auditorium. And curiosity had initiated the first stage of my research a couple of years earlier, when I became intrigued by my friend Ryan's work-life dilemma. He was working in Sales at a major transnational IT corporation in North Sydney, the kind with 50 offices around the globe. He was an 'Alliance Partner Sales Manager' and was selling many millions of contract dollars for the company a year, working out of one of the North Sydney tower blocks that line the Pacific Highway all the way through to Gordon. The company developed and sold 'middle-ware' software to provide coherent systems which could integrate major facets of a client's computerized needs, be that client a university, government department or bank.

Yet up until the mid 1990s Ryan had run barely profitable safaris across Kenya, intermittently returning to west coast America to his co-owned computer company and share-trading. Then, not exactly swamped in money, he'd fly back to Africa, hire a truck and a crew, and take another set of tourists out to the deserts and the savannas. There was no game hunting on these trips, just a seeing of the sights in a low-key, close to the ground kind of way. He loved this work and the places it took him, the Kenyans he worked with, the lions and elephants, all the African fauna. There was purpose to his return trips to the US: to raise finance for the next safari, to see his mother and sister, and the buzz of a bit of share trading (not always profitable). The qualities of his safari work and even the rationale to his work at home in US were the same qualities of his character, an earthy stoicism and a readiness to endure risks, of the physical kind while on safari, and financially. Ryan has a photograph of a long tusked elephant charging forward. It looks like something you'd see from a David Attenborough wildlife still. After taking the photograph Ryan turned and ran for his life.

Through friends, Ryan then met Sonia, an Australian, and he settled down in Sydney for the first of their babies and a less peripatetic kind of life. He started to make good money. Sonia was scratching a living in film from a Newtown warehouse alongside the railway line, a suicide black-spot. At that stage though, their combined earnings were not enough with their growing family, the cost of childcare, his mother who needed his help back in LA, and the need to save a deposit for a house and mortgage in Sydney. First they lived in one or other of Sonia's many siblings' houses, with Ryan commuting to North Sydney from wherever they were living, or commuting to the airport for another training week in the US. They bought a wretched inner-city cottage built by a welder, and lived there with no hope of renovating in the foreseeable future.

Ryan and I found ourselves watching our children swimming at the noisy local pool one day. The morning was hot, and I was tired, and he looked a

little worn out too. The pool was not inviting. I asked him how he was finding things.

'It's hell, absolute hell,' he said in his knowing LA voice.

During the week the adventurer now wore an ironed shirt, two-piece suit, receding hairline and tie. And, he still does. His mortgage is huge. In the years that I have been researching his work-life, he has worked for five IT companies, all of them based in North Sydney. He has survived retrenchments, downsizings, bonuses and spending sprees. The devil owns him, he says.

Michael Pusey's study of 400 low and middle-income Australians' experience of economic reform and restructuring aims to demonstrate (perhaps too stridently) the 'dark side' of new capitalism:

> Despite the great demographic, structural and cultural differences that separate them, the Survivors and the globalised North Shore People have one thing in common. They may not be entirely at peace with the labour market - indeed many of them are also angry - but they are firmly engaged within it: for one group, because it is a principle of survival that they understand; for the other, because it represents an accepted future in which they are actively steering their way. (2003: 57)

Ryan wasn't angry, though he was stressed through the necessity of being highly engaged. He had made a conscious decision to give up the safari lifestyle and become a successful family man. There could be no peace in this choice, or, only a peace negotiated and striven for daily. He was determined to be in that 'North Shore People' category that Pusey identifies as the new professionals, who 'are working in a new, more globalised labour market and who are reconciled to it. Even though they may change jobs and feel insecure, they have objectively good changes of finding work …' (2003: 61).

Paul Kitchen acknowledged that some Optus employees were baulking at the move further out north. Some were saying they wanted to stay in the city. I had read business news reports of a 'flurry' of senior staff exits as the relocation approached. As one blogger wrote about the move in SkyscraperCity.com, 'does north ryde had [sic] a city grid layout or just low rise with big carparks and the odd stingy lunch bar?' (Perthwa 2004).

Like other Australian business parks, Macquarie Park covers land equivalent to a large suburb, and yet there are no pubs, restaurants, brothels, clothes shops or beauticians. Unlike the environments of the CBD, North Sydney and Gordon, there are no primary or secondary schools, milkbars, cafes, libraries, rubbish, public toilets, graffiti or loiterers, no residents, old folk, youth centres or teenagers. There are no signs of decay. Renewal pre-dates decay; decay isn't given the chance to settle in. It doesn't have the visual or structural leftovers and traces of the histories of buildings, bodies and lives lived in the place; and it is hard to see how it will ever give rise to them. One is there to work, and then to leave and make your way to your other life, your private life.

The place is wholly public, a 'society of strangers', without the collegial nature that other work locations and communities attain. Kitchen's repeated naming of the Optus headquarters as a campus showed (whether or not he knew of the Silicon Valley synergies) that he imagined it to be a place where individuals genuinely collaborated and communicated their research. But the

relationships within it were too reduced in their kinds and types by the monotony of the place itself. Will place here be irrelevant to the space of flows, of synergistic relationships and innovation? (Only time will tell.)

Giddens offers the notion of the 'pure relationship', one that is internally referential and fundamentally depends on satisfactions or rewards generic to that relation itself. He intends it for use in intimate relationships, but it can be put to work to conceptualise the work relationship. 'At one pole of the interaction between the local and the global stand what I call the 'transformation of intimacy.' Of key importance here is the emergence of 'the pure relationship' as prototypical of the new spheres of personal life' (Giddens 1991: 6). Unlike localities such as North Sydney, with its clusters of kinds of people, institutions, movements and histories, sites which employees might be pleasured by and grow a range of attachments to, Macquarie Park relies on individuals' acceptance of the single relationship, that of employment: there is no other reason to place oneself there.

Having isolated its workforce, contact between Optus people then needed to written back in. To counter the social and cultural dearth, Optus had been at pains to build in work focussed incentives: employee child care [note 2], pre-tax child care payments, a gym, and over 2,000 car spaces, along with showers and change rooms to encourage employees to walk or cycle to work. The open areas were landscaped with trees, wooden walkways, and seating for outdoor lunchers. 'The spatial relations of human bodies obviously make a great deal of difference in how people react to each other, how they see and hear one another, whether they touch or are distant'; this is common sense. But, by moving a population from the dense urban areas of the CBD and North Sydney, to the thinner space of Macquarie Park, the designers have risked the less tangible effect of 'weakening the sense of tactile reality and pacifying the body' (Sennett 1998: 19).

Voice-over IP and wireless communications had been embedded throughout the 8 acre campus. There was less individual desk space, Kitchen said, but this change was going produce more collaborations. Collaborations need *frisson* and commitment from the staff. Friendly seating will bring people closer together, and maybe engender new ideas. But, decentered work spaces do not always achieve what they are intended for.

The cornerstone of modern management practices is the belief that loose networks are more open to decisive reinvention than are pyramidal hierarchies such as ruled the Fordist era (Sennett 1998: 48). A claim made for the new organization of work is that it moves power away from top and other centres of management, giving people in all ranks of the organization more control over their own activities and initiatives. The physical design of the new office, such as the Optus headquarters, suggests a decentralization of power. But by enabling rapid tracking of communications and movements, 'The new information systems provide the comprehensive picture of the organisation to top managers in ways that give individuals anywhere in the network little room to hide …' (Sennett 1998: 55).

I recalled Ryan's workplaces. The immersion I undertook with him had been with a large IT transnational. I recalled stories he had told me that on the one hand, he and colleagues enjoyed using embedded, cutting-edge communications technology - but not the culture of surveillance by their managers that their use of these technologies enabled.

Paul Kitchen soon finished and introduced the keynote speaker, Professor Roy Green. Green heads the Macquarie University's Graduate School of

Management. A consultant to governments and industry he has worked with the OECD, European Commission and Enterprise Ireland. He was alert and confident and organised. Big pictures energized him. Like Finland, Singapore, and Silicon Valley, Ireland, his most recent commission, was a tremendously successful new knowledge economy. Green's topic in part was the practice of clustering: in which there is a productive proximity - not necessarily geographically based - of educational, technological and government communities (Green 2007). Institutions and industries don't have to cluster for long, only as long as the project requires.

Needless to say, workplace stability and longevity of employment contracts don't belong in this kind of environment. But many younger workers are attracted to the model, and Ireland was having no problem attracting skilled workers from overseas, in part because of the temporary character of Ireland's new workplace management systems.

'How has Ireland succeeded so well?' Roy Green asked. Ireland had learnt to *cluster*; software was a proxy for *diffusion* of knowledge in society; innovation was a non-linear process; knowledge is embodied in people, who then *diffuse* it. 'Is the world spiky or flat?' he asked, borrowing from Thomas L. Freidman (flat), and Richard Florida's (spiky) populist debate about globalisation [note 3]. Freidman has proposed that an effect of economic, technological and social globalisation has been to link people, creating a 'level playing field' of action, unimpeded by the historic impediments of time and space. Florida disagrees, proposing that globalisation has produced densities of opportunity in global cities such as Mumbai, New York, San Francisco, or Melbourne, cities well served by both technologies and populated by the highly productive 'creative class' that includes gays and lesbians, women, artists, and immigrants. These creative-class cities make the globalised world spiky, not flat, according to Florida. Professor Green's suggestion was that Australia's economic future demanded it become both spiky and flat.

During morning break I wolfed down finger-sized crepes filled with salmon and something else that seemed vegetarian. There's nothing like free nosh.

The morning finished with a Ryde City Council development officer returning us to a sense of the place we were in today. Pictures of mid-century strawberry farms and empty fields indicated where we now sat. Aerial shots of today's new roads and buildings followed. Ryde planners aimed to have the business corridor outstrip North Sydney both in square office metres and in linkages and networks. By superimposing pictures of Macquarie Park onto North Sydney he demonstrated that it would be possible to outgrow North Sydney in spades. With a workforce of 29,000 the North Ryde/Macquarie Park precinct was the most significant contributor to the local economy. The Optus move had grown that by 20 per cent.

Green, quoting from an Enterprise Strategy Group report, had said, 'it is the quality of the human resources that will determine the success or otherwise of firms and economies in the years ahead.' There was no mention on the day of the 2005 company-wide Optus survey, which found that 60 per cent of employees were 'not engaged' and 'not contributing in full to the achievement of the organization's goals' (Sainsbury 2005). Needless to say, Optus is in no way the only Australian company to have such survey results.

Nor was there talk at the Innovation in Action day of employees' experience of work, in either its older or contemporary forms. I thought about what I'd learnt from my interviewees, the everyday work stories they'd told me, and

the character of the places that we had met in. The advice I had been given from the outset of the research was to use a good quality microphone because invariably I would be speaking to the executives in cafes. This turned out to be the case. We met in outdoor cafes with buses roaring past, and in foyers with the white hum of the building loud behind their voices, and inside cafes with coffee grinders roaring again; we met amongst the noise and crowds of other people shopping, eating, drinking, working, resting, hurrying. We met in the city and in North Sydney and it was always convivial. This was how these men and women did their business, moving between their cubby-hole partition offices, walking the streets and cafes, or to their cars, on and off planes, on and off their technology. Stressed and harassed but nevertheless in contact with others - their colleagues, clients and the great masses of people that populate these vibrant centres. This produced accidental meetings between past and future colleagues and clients, the spontaneous networking that also characterizes the internet networking that is necessary to their work. The constancy of recognition, of one's presence recognized by others both stranger and colleague ameliorated to varying degrees the ever present risk of retrenchment, the churning that was the downside of their employment on individual contracts that could be ended at any time.

How very different was the Optus telecommunications environment now that it had moved to the business park. The city vigour was not visible amongst the threads of workers making their way from highway bus stops into the buildings, nor on the tiresome walk to Macquarie Shopping Centre, or when they were stuck in the lines of afternoon traffic leaving the Ryde business corridor, lines that snaked for miles and miles, as if they were a caught along a spider's leg pinned for display to the City of Ryde's regional development work-sheet.

Parked at home

Leaving the Innovation in Action seminar I thought of Thomas, who had lost his place in the public world, who nowadays had no reason to be in North Sydney, Gordon or at the Macquarie Business Park.

An American, he had moved into IT in his early 30s in the 1990s, having worked in cinema management. The arc of his IT career had extraordinary moments, including some years working for NASA's space program when still studying computer programming at college. A series of fortuitous work events brought him to Australia to represent a major US IT software product. Within a couple of years Thomas had earned enough to purchase a house, and then to be mortgage-free within another few years. He moved from one software giant to another, from success to even greater success. When I met him he was 48 years old and unemployed, youthful-looking and clean cut. I'd found him through Ryan, and we'd agreed to meet at his home. This was unusual, as all my other contacts met me in public places close to their work. During the course of our first meeting, I realised that now that he was unemployed he was wedded to the phone. He was waiting for calls from companies he'd interviewed with, and the head-hunters who were handling him. Whenever the phone rang, he was up instantly to answer it. He had been doing this for six months.

In between these calls (a couple from friends, another from his wife), he narrated the story of his life. It was his work that had lifted him out of the Californian renter lifestyle, brought him to Australia, introduced him to the woman who became his wife, and gave him reason to become an Australian

citizen. His sense of self was intrinsically formed by his work biography, more than any other participant that I spoke with. Then, from one day to the next, it came to an end.

> So the last two years were great at Sun. What they said was, 'Okay well you guys are our software sales specialists. There's really no point in having a partner account manager because we've already got them, so what we're going to do is we're going to give you a product portfolio. You're going to have a revenue target for your products. How you sell it is your problem. There's your number. Go get it. See you in a year.' So they gave me this product portfolio and we blitzed it. So two years ago I was at 100 percent of quota. Then in the second year I was at 200 per cent of quota. Which is phenomenal … [But] Sun was restructuring again. So I was waiting for the restructure … They hired people and people moved, blah-blah-blah-blah. Lots of lay-offs and so on … The good news was, from a product point of view, I blitzed it. But overall, the entire professional services organisation lost money. So because the whole organisation lost money, they were looking for ways to cut. They retrenched. I got caught up in the retrenchments, even though I was 200 percent of quota the previous year … That's how I got out of work. So I haven't been able to find work since then. So it's been six months.

My interviews with Thomas were the hardest because he was so vulnerable. There were moments when he was clearly very distressed and once, tearful. Yet he was also glad to be telling his story, to give this part of his life-story a shape. Voicing his successes and failures was understandably important to him. I wasn't an ex-colleague, head-hunter or potential boss to be wooed. In me, Thomas had found a listener and perhaps a medium through which he could come to an understanding of his failure. His every declaration that, 'I'm great at what I do,' contained the silent declaration of his failure to convince the men and women that mattered, the employers, of exactly that.

Writing about fatalism, Giddens suggests that the most challenging situations for individuals to come to terms with are those that have consequences in which

> alarms coincide with consequential changes - fateful moments … In such circumstances, [a person] is called on to question routinised habits of relevant kinds, even sometimes those most closely integrated with self-identity … Many fateful moments by their very nature oblige the individual to change habits and readjust projects. (1991: 131-32)

Thomas was not yet able to do this, to 'readjust'.

He was well and truly out of the swim of accidental, fortuitous encounters that could have brought him back into the world of work. At home, beyond the real and immaterial perimeters of the internet and physical places that still linked his ex-colleagues, Thomas was no longer a player in Castells' space of flows that had been his territory for over 15 years.

Placement agency men were keen to meet him because his resume was outstanding, although his experience was in an area with a narrow band of available positions. However, one recent discussion ended within some ten minutes of their meeting, with this exchange:

> 'I can't put you forward for the job.'
> I went, 'Why not?'
> He goes, 'You're too old.'
> [Interviewer] Is he looking at you and saying that?
> Yeah. He goes, 'You're too old.'

On the basis of being in his forties, and for other never to be revealed reasons (the indeterminacy of which created yet another layer of anxiety for him), Thomas was being pushed out of the work he knew. From the head-hunter's point of view, 40 year-old dinosaurs at work die slowly, then leave a huge carcass. Better not to keep them. Writes Sennett:

> 'Who needs me?' is a question of character which suffers a radical challenge in modern capitalism. The system radiates indifference. It does so in terms of the outcomes of human striving, as in winner-take-all markets, where there is little connection between risk and reward. It radiates indifference in the organization of absence of trust, where there is no reason to be needed. And it does so through reengineering of institutions in which people are treated as disposable. Such practices obviously and brutally diminish the sense of mattering as a person, or being necessary to others. (1998: 146)

Creating a narrative about one's work-life or life story offers the possibility of coming to terms with failure. Sennett argues that a narrative of failure can assuage the pain of unemployment, if it is a story that contains both the individual's mastery and failure. Having spent time with retrenched IBM programmers Sennett concluded that,

> The programmers needed to answer that question by finding ways to confront the reality of failure and self-limits. That effort of interpretation is also…the spirit of 'mastery', of ceasing to suffer change passively and blindly. To be sure the action they take is talking to each other. But it's real action nonetheless. They are breaking the taboo on failure, bringing it out into the open. (1998: 131)

I met again with Thomas some six months later. He had not secured work. He'd been sure he was going to get a position at IBM, but hey, he hadn't. He wasn't exactly buoyant, but he was certainly not as depressed, because he'd turned things around and had recently bought into a software franchise, established by an associate of some years back. He was working from home, with all liaising, training and consultations transmitted online and by phone. He was yet to physically meet a client. The business was entirely wired from a house in the Inner West of Sydney. Still establishing the ephemeral networks with his clients, Thomas was working in a highly isolated, if physically comfortable, location.

We talked about risk: the risk of working for oneself and for others.

> Working for other people is never a guarantee. I think when we talked last time, I mentioned I was 200 per cent of quota for Sun, but I still got retrenched. So what do you do, you know? ... Working for myself, I can put enough pressure on myself without somebody else doing it as well.

While there was uncertainty, hesitations of the voice if not in the actual words during this interview, Thomas's himself was broadening the questions about

what happened. His views on the transnational, globalised, and networked enterprises he'd worked for had changed considerably. There was bitterness but also analysis. And while not his first choice, he had taken action by starting the new business. He was able to integrate this new work with changes that he had made at the onset of unemployment, such as walking his kids to school and participating in daytime school events. I considered his experiences in the light of Giddens' belief that, 'existential isolation is not so much a separation of individuals from others,' - and Thomas was certainly aware of being left out of the networks of talk amongst colleagues - 'as a separation from the moral resources necessary to live a full and satisfying existence' (1991: 9). Thomas's efforts to secure work for himself, to not succumb to inaction, the resourcefulness that he demonstrated in this thoroughly difficult year demonstrated that he had the resources to sustain his identity, and revise the narrative of his work-life without resorting to evasions or lies. To an extent, the year of unemployment had encouraged social action. The ethical scope of his discussion had broadened. He was closer, I felt, to an ontological acceptance of his situation than he had been when still without work.

Thomas was no longer a 'North Shore People' kind of person; and Ryan continues to be churned (often profitably) from one company to another, with all the attendant anxieties of change for him and his family. This is not an opening for nostalgia, however. It's not a case of returning to the regimes of the old, of routine, hierarchy, seniority over merit and strict codes for individuals based on their gender or their marriage status and so on. This paper (and others in my larger project) gives a local perspective to a multifarious global experience, grappling with the writer's art of evoking the prosaic and the conceptual. As Sennett says, 'if change occurs it happens on the ground,' with words (1998: 148).

Notes

The interviews and immersions were conducted between 2003 and 2007. The interviewees requested that they remain anonymous, and so all personal names and certain identifying features including the names of their employers have been changed. The interviews were digitally recorded and professionally transcribed and are held by the author.

Endnotes

[1] In the 18th century Princeton University was understood to be a campus, and contemporary use allows for universities and other institutions. return to text

[2] Many Australian companies' employee child care centres were ABC Learning Centres. ABC Learning went into receivership in 2008. return to text

[3] In The Information Age Castells offers a challenging and engaged analysis of the network society that Florida and Freidman discuss, taking fuller account of the historical and geographical factors. But being denser, Castells is less readily put to work in quick-communication forums. return to text

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