

Community of I

Perhaps autoethnography is not about the self at all; perhaps it is instead about a wilful embodiment of “we.”¹

Alone, despair seems inevitable, paralyzing. Together, we might be able to keep Our bearings toward social justice.²

* * *

[“*The Tree Song*,”³ sung to a finger-picked acoustic guitar]

Come on in and listen to me

Bathing in wisdom, a mighty tree

Shoulders so wide you can lean upon

If you’re looking for answers

I’m the one

Read the book and I’ve seen the film

Bought the record and toured the museum

So much learning I was almost free

Then it’s gone in a moment

And I’m left with me

Just me

Just me

Just me

* * *

I have never before begun work on an autoethnography having already decided on the title. But in the case of this work, that is exactly what happened. The phrase “Community of I” materialized in my mind in late 2019. It captured my imagination. I was intrigued to explore and develop its meanings in the context of autoethnographic scholarship.

Then Coronavirus hit. My own experiences of lockdown in the UK, combined with news reports of global lockdown and widespread fear, uncertainty, panic even, added

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a sense of intensity and urgency. The phrase—and, more significantly, the experiences and ideas that lie behind it—became increasingly important to me. I wondered if they might also be significant to others in the autoethnographic community. Here, then, I share a performance autoethnography that explores the concept of “Community of I” through a collage of story fragments and songs. My exploration hinges on two ideas.

First, the recognition that when I do autoethnography I often find myself venturing into territories where I feel alienated, isolated, or different. I know this is not unusual for autoethnographers—you might feel this way too? I find the act of writing and sharing can deepen any feeling of separation, as I place myself on a metaphorical microscope slide. Alone but exposed to others. I need help to sustain this work. Where might I find this? What do we need to be able to live and do autoethnography in challenging times? What can we offer each other to keep our project on the rails? How might we stand together?

Second, a sense that what is needed may not be amenable to rational description. It is beyond what can be encapsulated in a checklist or inventory. John Lennon famously sang of a need to sing his heart, not just speak his mind.⁴ Bruce Springsteen sang of learning more from rock and roll records than he did when he was at school.⁵ More recently, Tori Amos has written, “Songs are sometimes the only way I can understand emotionally what is going on, not only with me but with others.”⁶ In speaking of their lives, these songwriters touch my experience. I also feel a need for a different “language” to explore, understand, and communicate more fully. And I want to use a different language—the language of song, of music—to “speak” with you here in a different voice.

Experiences of lockdown, between March and June 2020, added a potency to all this—to the necessity of sustaining “community in isolation,” connections with others while we are on our own. The resonance of the idea of “Community of I” deepened for me. I want to dive into all this . . . I want to explore the notion of community in autoethnography . . . I want to *celebrate* community . . . I want, if I can, to *make* a “Community of I” with you, right here, right now, on these pages . . .

* * *

[Opening major 7th chords and chorus of “Who’ll Take This Down?” played on acoustic guitar]:

Who’ll take this down?

We’ve come a long way

Who will witness, please?

Who?

* * *

THURSDAY, APRIL 30, 2020 (FIVE WEEKS INTO LOCKDOWN)

Walk to Seal Cove. Wild seas and a high tide. Twenty or so seals lie out on the stony beach. Just beyond the waves. They wriggle up the beach each time the incoming tide

reaches them. I find them soothing to watch. Last time I was here, two were mating in the shallows. But not today—too cold even for seals! As I’m about to leave, I hear them start to sing. Stop to listen.

My father is diagnosed with Hodgkin’s lymphoma. The doctors say treatment is inappropriate. He has been in hospital for ten days—during lockdown, no visitors allowed.

I watch Elizabeth Gilbert’s TED talk “Your elusive creative genius.”⁷ She suggests we think of “genius” not as the artist, creator, the person themselves, but as something external to them that may visit them, bringing exceptional-ness to their work. Their job is to show up, do their work. But whether or not the work is “good” is down to the external genius. Makes me think that “genius” in an autoethnography should not be located “in” the writer, the researcher, but instead within our community. “Genius” as a property of community. So great work is credited to the autoethnographic community as much as to the individual autoethnographer. I’ll say that again: *Good work should be credited to the community as much as to the individual.*

SATURDAY, MAY 2

Beautiful morning. Calm. Pink sky. Rabbits outside. Grazing, bathing, and running on the grass. They make me smile.

My father’s eighty-second birthday. The hospital say he’s now stopped eating. They’re arranging for him to come home as soon as possible. Not sure if he’ll make it. We speak on the phone, but I can’t understand most of what he says. Not sure if he knows it’s his birthday. He didn’t remember his cancer diagnosis the next day. We speak for two minutes, then he says he has to go. I wonder if this will be the last time we talk.

I need some music here . . .

[Opening chords of “Who’ll Take This Down?” strummed softly]

SUNDAY, MAY 3

A grey morning, light breeze. Calm inside and out after eight hours of sleep. The first time I’ve slept that long for months.

A WhatsApp from an ex-colleague, Jon Tan, in Yorkshire: “Time out of the race is a really important and rare thing. Sometimes we trade our health, creativity, sense of being for a familiarity of present and past. Yet that familiarity can be unhappy, unhealthy and even damaging . . . Often your best work is ahead of you and leaving the singular direction of before is what leads to that opportunity. That, for me, is what leaving the race (or pausing or reconfiguring it) represents. Have a beautiful day, my friend. Pick up the guitar and let the music play you.”

Morning run to the lighthouse. Kestrel suspended low over the cliffs. I stop directly underneath him. I can see his feet, the black bar across his tan tail and his head scanning

the terrain below. We are both motionless, frozen together in time for a few seconds, no sign of any other living thing. Which, I suppose, is why he eventually flies on.

Listen to one of Neil Finn's lockdown broadcasts from his LA home. Blown away by his spare and vulnerable version of Burt Bacharach's "This Guy's in Love."⁸ Learn to play it. See myself as a four-year-old singing it to my father. Kind of funny, kind of sad. I imagine singing it over Zoom at his funeral.

MONDAY, MAY 4

Perfect morning. Still and silent. I know the waves will be tiny but surf anyway. Afterward I return to Seal Cove. The seals are camouflaged today among the rocks. Look funny flapping and flipping about, trying to keep up with the outgoing tide. They don't seem to like being too far from the water. Me neither.

A couple, perhaps in their late seventies, walk slowly down the cliff path toward me. They peer over the edge. "No seals today!" she shouts. He says, quietly to me: "No seals today, then?" I say: "Yes, there's a few . . ." "No, none at all!" he shouts, back to her. I say: "There are! It's just they're camouflaged by . . ." But they don't hear, and they can't see. Me neither.

THURSDAY, MAY 7

A WhatsApp from my mother to say Dad's life is ebbing away. He was given a first end-of-life injection last night. Don't know what to do or say. Pray. Meditate. Sing a song. Write this. Settle on driving to Exeter to be with them tomorrow.

Later, I listen to another of Neil Finn's webcasts.⁹ He covers David Bowie's song "Kooks." Bowie's lyrics are funny: he sings of taking his son to school, being messed up by his time in school, throwing homework on the fire, and heading out together into the city. Neil tells us that Bowie used to sing it to his son, that Neil sang it to his young son, Liam, and that Liam now sings it to his son. The song is passed from father to son, father to son, father to son. I am filled with admiration . . . longing . . . and regret.

FRIDAY, MAY 8

VE Day, a public holiday. Seventy-fifth anniversary of the end of World War II. Wake at four a.m. with a photo in my mind's eye: my father, 1997. He's at the barbeque, a big smile. Cooking food for everyone.

Drive to Exeter. Worried about traveling during lockdown. Hear police are on the Cornish border turning people back. Cross the county border as two minutes of silence is broadcast on the radio.

When my mother opens the front door, the first thing I hear is his breathing. From the other end of the house. Have they put him on a ventilator? It's so loud. But no, it's just him breathing. When I see him, I don't recognize him—I wonder if the hospital sent the wrong person home. Talk to him. Clutch his shoulder. He is past being able to respond.

By the evening his breathing is worse. Pulse weaker, hands starting to cool. Mum cancels the evening care team. Then the overnight carer. She calls my brother in Zimbabwe. “Don’t know if you should see him like this, my love.” “Yes, I want to see Dad. Take me in.” My brother and his partner on FaceTime, 7,000 miles away. Mum and me in the room, beside my father. Mum and I take turns holding the phone so they can see him.

He dies shortly after eight-thirty.

[Chords of “Who’ll Take This Down?” played soft and slow]

I light a candle and put it next to his bed. Go to take a photo to send to my brother. But no! You can’t do that, David! A photo seems abhorrent. My brother calls back on FaceTime, asks to see Dad again. So I sit, pointing an iPad at my father’s body, filming him, for my brother.

THURSDAY, MAY 14

Six days later. A card from Andrew Gillott in Derbyshire. He sends me some lines of poetry and a drawing of “The Shooting Cabin” which, he tells me, “is a landmark of sorts, in the hills above Hayfield, where I live. It’s a place where local people go to think.”

MONDAY, MAY 18

A WhatsApp from Christa Welsh in London: “I hope you are weathering the storm of your father’s death and the fall-out that comes from this. I would like to give you a hug but . . . Sending you lots of love. Know our thoughts are with you.”

TUESDAY, MAY 19

The day before the funeral. Wake to a still morning. Anxious, getting more so. Head out for a walk. Stop on the headland, looking west. Grey. Cloudy. Light onshore. Spits of rain. I go through some yoga moves facing the ocean. Sun salutations. Mindful movement. Every now and then I find myself shouting out—like a bark. As I move a body part, it seems to release tension as a shout. Its primal, unconscious. I check—there’s no one around. My body begins to feel free. My anxiety lessens. I start to feel energy. It’s like some kind of block has been released, a block to life.

Climb down to the beach. Shoes off. Barefoot into cold water. I walk the long wide sand. A jangling dog bounds up, smiling, laughing, all over me. Paws on my shorts, my chest, nuzzling, gambolling. He gently tries to take my hand in his mouth. It’s a bit much, so I turn away, but I’m laughing.

Words to speak at my father’s funeral tomorrow start to arrive. The poetry and “Shooting Cabin” that Andrew sent show me a place to begin. I rehearse out loud, on the beach, in the vast empty space.

A WhatsApp from Jason Butler in Massachusetts: “All of the layers. How to say some things that need to be said while not saying the things that can’t be said. Difficult task. I’m sure you will do it beautifully.”

THURSDAY, MAY 21

The day after the funeral. A WhatsApp from Hannah Shakespeare in Buckinghamshire: “Well done, David—you made it through. Kitrina said you spoke very beautifully. This part is over now.”

Get in the ocean with Kitrina at dawn. Wash yesterday away. Small waves, but wonderful. Later, I need to pick up my guitar—it feels like a song is ready to come through. Play around some major 7th variations, different rhythms and keys, probably inspired by Neil Finn’s version of the Bacharach song. Kitrina encourages me to keep going when I lose faith and feel like giving up. I keep going. By the end of the morning I have a song¹⁰ . . .

Who’ll take this down?

We’ve come a long way

Who will witness, please?

Who?

Films can’t roll, notes don’t ring

Poetry’s cracked, my songs won’t sing

It’s a tale of hell and majesty

It’s a tale . . .

Would you know the difference between a lion and a roar?

If I soothe you when the night comes or leave you feeling sore?

Who’ll take this down?

We’ve come a long way

Who will record me?

Who?

Walls fall down and roof blown off

Windows smashed, belonging lost

It’s a tale of hell and majesty

It’s a tale . . .

Would you know the difference between a cabin and a cage?

If I covered him in kisses or smothered her with rage?

Who?

We've come a long way

Who?

Would you know the difference between a promise and a rock?

If I found you in the morning, or called to say I'm lost?

Who will witness?

We've come a long way

Who'll take this?

We've come a long way . . .

I join the Congress of Qualitative Inquiry online gathering that afternoon. We share stories, poems, songs, and thoughts with each other, autoethnographers all over the world. Jackie Goode reminds us of the freeze response to shock: how in times of severe stress, the response of our nervous system can leave us unable to think rationally, be creative, to function at all even. Minutes later, Bryant Alexander tells us: "I am more in love with all of you, now, more than ever."¹¹ He means it. I feel it. It's plain for everyone to see.

SUNDAY, MAY 24

Kitrina suggests a morning walk. The Horse Box Café on the beach has just re-opened. We both fancy a coffee. Neither of us have brought money. We ask for credit, an IOU. The café owner happily agrees: "Come back any time, I'll be here all week," he says. "No need to pay today." We sit on the pebbles and enjoy the treat of coffee out, in lockdown. We become regulars.

A WhatsApp from Marcelo Diversi in Washington: "What a beautiful song, music and lyrics! Sorrow and soulful, it feels to me. My lady and I are listening and watching you sing and play on the dock across the street."

A WhatsApp from Jane Smith in Yorkshire: "Your new song is totally beautiful and so are you . . . Just listened and watched you again . . . If you can feel it I am hugging you right now."

I wonder if people loving my songs is the same thing as people loving me.

TUESDAY, MAY 26

Misty morning. Walk to the beach for an early surf. Take my 7'3" board. Head high swell, overhead on some sets. Hard to catch at first, I miss a few and get pummelled on the inside. As the tide drops, I start to catch some fast exhilarating rides. High up the face, looking down into the chasm, sweeping turns, getting lost in the arcs. I'm following my

body which is following my board which is following each line of swell as it follows the contours of the sandy ocean floor. I notice I'm holding my breath as I ride. Each second is too precious, too primal, too quickly vanished to risk a breath.

As I paddle back into position, a big bull seal swims past me, almost breaking the social-distancing regulations. He could have been a slow-moving dolphin, but for the absence of a dorsal fin. Slow and graceful, he breaches the surface, glistening grey with darker spots, his huge back rolling out of and then into the water. Big enough and assured enough just to *be*. I am a guest in *his* ocean. *He* swims close to take a lazy look at *me*. I paddle after him, following the trail of bubbles breaking the surface. He's sauntering, but I can't keep up. I watch him surface, look around, roll and dive again.

TUESDAY, JUNE 2

Morning walk to Seal Cove. Low tide. No seals at home. I begin to turn away at the moment a kestrel drifts lazily up the cliff face. He rises beside me and flies a chest-high circle around me, six or seven paces away. Close enough I can look him in the eye. He seems to be looking me in the eye too. I hold my breath, rotate on the spot to keep up with his travel. Then he flies off, landing on a fence post 100 yards away. I like to think it was the same kestrel that I met two weeks ago. Coming back, coming close, checking up on me.

A WhatsApp from Alec Grant in Sussex: "In the end, underneath it all, underneath the shit-pile of life, there's the diamond of loving human contact. That's what you, me, us, our intersubjectivity and our work, stand for. We must keep the diamond polished."

[Chorus of "Who'll Take This Down?"]:

Who'll take this down?

We've come a long way

Who will witness, please?

Who?

OVERWHELM

Happenings that are too much or too big to write about, to put down on paper. Shock. Reverberations of trauma. Freezing whatever processes are needed to seed songs or carve stories. But during the spring I found myself able to write again—in the form of a simple diary. Writing the events of my days was possible. These events were not overwhelming. Writing them, I was not overwhelmed. I consider them to be blessings. Both in the moment and in the writing.

SACRED SECONDS

Moments of meaning. Precious time immersed in the same saltwater as a seal. Time suspended, cutting and curving across a North Atlantic wave. Coffee given in trust and shared on pebbles with a soul mate. A kestrel's swooping return, hanging then swirling about my

head. Why do I find a kestrel's visit magical—why not a seagull or sparrow? Is it something in the bird itself? Something in the material of kestrel? Or is it something *between* us, particular beings together in time and space? I write these moments to preserve them, to reinforce their meaning, and to share them with you. But there remains something in the moments themselves. Even if I never wrote them down, they would still hold meaning, they would still have something to say. There is something sacred in these seconds.

COMMUNITY OF I

Writing autoethnography draws attention to my alienation and aloneness, my deficits and dysfunctions. But over the course of five weeks—in springtime, in lockdown, in Cornwall—I was given a means to keep going, to come through, to survive myself. I picture that means of survival as a community that extends across natural and virtual worlds. A community that helps sustain me to keep doing the work. A community that sustains its own work. I couldn't have got through this alone. I can't sustain myself or this work without our community. And I suspect I am not alone in that. ■

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1. Tami Spry, *Autoethnography and the Other: Unsettling Power through Utopian Performatives* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 15.
2. Marcelo Diversi and Claudio Moreira, *Between Autoethnographies: A Path towards Social Justice* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 1.
3. I wrote *The Tree Song* some years ago, and draw on it here as its sentiments seem, once again, to fit the moment. © D. Carless 2003, lyrics used with permission.
4. John Lennon and Paul McCartney, *Julia* from *The Beatles* (Apple Records, 1968).
5. Bruce Springsteen, *No Surrender* from *Born in the USA* (Columbia Records, 1984).
6. Tori Amos, *Resistance: A Songwriter's Story of Hope, Change and Courage* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2020), 192.
7. Elizabeth Gilbert, Your illusive creative genius. www.ted.com/talks/elizabeth_gilbert_your_elusive_creative_genius
8. Neil Finn, *Fangradio Friday 1st May 2020*. www.neilfinn.com/fangradio
9. Neil Finn, *Fangradio Wednesday 6th May 2020*. www.neilfinn.com/fangradio
10. David Carless, *Who'll Take This Down?*, © D. Carless 2020, lyrics used with permission.
11. Kitrina Douglas, *Collaborative Voices Part Two*. www.youtube.com/watch?v=rKwT2LU1924&t=1732s