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Everest, the Final Furlong: Completing a PhD.

Doctoral Colloquium
University of Cumbria: July 8, 2009.

Discovering the range and erudition of today's papers reminded me of a theological conference I attended, that included a poetry reading. The poet's work artfully blended humour and provocation, producing a valuable balance of laughter and thoughtfulness.

He was being well-received by his predominantly baggy jumper and corduroy audience, the exception being two dour characters in Calvinist black, sitting near me at the back. After a while one turned to the other with this withering analysis:

'Do you think this is supposed to be the light relief?'

With a title like mine, perhaps this is supposed to be the light relief...

So

1.

Everest – the Final Furlong.

This presentation is about completing an academic mountain; the personal intellectual Everest of a PhD. Each doctorate is different, that is part of its purpose, but I hope any references to my own experience will apply to yours. I will try not to employ the Everest metaphor to the point of oxygen starvation, but hope that some references will prove helpful. Otherwise this presentation is something of a hybrid, between the closing section of 'Gardeners' Question Time' on Radio 4 and a Dublin literary pub tour. There will be 'topical tips', and a few stops for considered refreshment.

Why Everest?

'Why take a PhD?' a staff member was asked during one of our post-graduate sessions.

'I suppose it's a bit like Everest,' he said, 'you tackle it because it's there.'

Tackling is one thing; completion something else. There must be times in everyone's post-graduate experience when it feels easier to give up. I have recently had conversations with two post-graduate friends. One had withdrawn from PhD studies in his first year; the other's PhD

'didn't seem to be happening'. So be encouraged; look back at how far you have come. Your proposal has been accepted and developed to an advanced stage, into something uniquely valuable. Even if the route's steepening and the ice is treacherous, you can only rise. This is, admittedly, a strange place to be, poised between the minute details of those elusive footnotes and the co-ordination of the totality of detail into a resounding conclusion.

2.

For the final stages of a PhD are times of contrast. You're probably some distance from your original title, if anything of it exists at all. Many of your earlier notes will have either been incorporated or discarded.

You may feel, effectively, at base camp, with much of the hard work done, yet the stiffest test still to come. Traditionally this includes two major areas: concluding the writing and facing the viva.

We've reached our first literary pub: The Ian McEwan Moment. The author of the novel 'Atonement' said he faced problems when asked to write an appreciation of the American writer Saul Bellow. How could he summarise such an amazing literary life? His answer was to seek for one word, and that could be helpful for our final furlongs. What is your thesis essentially about? Write that word on a piece of paper that will be, from now on, always in front of you. Its concision can prove amazingly liberating.

That question of 'aboutness' was put to me by my creative writing supervisor, Lucy Collins, as I was working on a collection of poems about 'identity'. 'But all poems are essentially about identity,' said Lucy. (Brackets – discuss!). The more I considered the complexities of this, the more I realised that the essence of the collection, and the critical text that negotiated with it, was really about exile, and once that was discerned, so many other factors fell into place. Above all, it steered the creative and theoretical aspects of the thesis towards an arguable unity.

Then there are the notes, and the insight of The Hogwart's Trunk. For this I'm indebted to my other supervisor, Penny Bradshaw. She said that Harry Potter's creator, JK Rowling, had a trunk packed with details of characters and plots. None of this appears directly in her novels.

3.

Similarly, we will have notes too numerous to mention, but the understandings from them can be incorporated into our theses as they are written, and probably much edited and revised. A page might become a footnote; and we need to exercise constant assessments of the value of the material we are including. Overall, there are probably two schools of thesis composition; to assemble gradually and prune back, or to work to a pre-determined master-plan that can be 'filled in', with writing as the final stage.

Even if we are well enough organised to operate the second scheme, there are always those subsequent discoveries as more is read, heard or experienced. The gradual approach probably works best for most people. However, we need to balance research with drafting, even if we edit furiously later. 'A good thesis is a written thesis', was an axiom I heard quoted approvingly by a young researcher.

What might be called 'methods of assembly' will also depend on the nature of our research. Another thesis I read concerned the sociology of religion. It began with a major question, and proceeded through a literature review, questionnaires, interviews, collation and analysis of statistics, to reach a conclusion.

In contrast, my thesis effectively started in a shipyard phone box and recruited an Old Testament poet-prophet, a drugged-up Romantic, philosophers incapable of agreeing what they were discussing, a copy of *The Times* from 1815, and several Christian and Marxist theologians as we went along. I don't think it ever got round to the discipline of a literature review, but inherently it filled the Hogwart's Trunk.

Above all, perhaps, our final furlong demands compression and concentration. You do not advance from Everest base camp with Rowling's trunk, but with McEwan's single, backpacked idea; the essentials for survival on that last push to the summit. Everything needs to be refined down, to relate to that dominating word, title or phrase on the paper in front of you.

4.

It is reminiscent of an interview with a singer, that I read. When performing, she said, she invests all that she is in that song; she becomes it. When once discussing photography with a journalist, I happened to mention 'cheap film'. He exploded. 'You never use cheap film,' he said. 'That might be the one day when you take the most important picture in your life.' Similarly you cannot afford 'cheap thought' at this stage of your thesis. You have to become it.

There's a pub near Bolton called *The Last Drop*. Think about organising a study equivalent; something that marks completion of the drafting process. The creative core of my thesis was a collection of poems that needed a conclusion. As the collection had effectively begun at the Eastern end of Hadrian's Wall, it seemed reasonable to go the Western end to complete it. At Bowness on Solway there emerged a palette of possibilities. It included the Wall and the garrison that safeguarded it, and founded the geographical axis of the current community; that stormy March afternoon, the rainbows, the downpours, Scotland coming and going through the weather, the trembling primroses and the low-level cormorants, skimming the firth.

I left, after two or three hours, with lots of notes but nothing definite, but over the next few days a poem did emerge, about the 1,000 year-old tradition of channel fishing- Haaf netting- along the Solway. The activity of seeking out that poem allowed an intellectual milestone to be established, to move the whole thesis from one stage to the next; from assembly, through revision, towards completion.

So, out of *The Last Drop*, and on to some topical tips.

First, whatever your theological stance, know the scriptures.

5.

Your guiding light has to be the MHRA Style Guide, a slim volume that makes a tractor maintenance magazine read like an airport thriller. This is the pedants' paradise, but, like Rumpole's wife, must be obeyed. If some of you today are new to the research process, please start using it immediately so that it becomes less of an irritant and part of your drafting practise. It is no more possible to negotiate the writing of a research degree without this smug and infuriating little book than to hope to reach the summit of Everest in bedroom slippers.

Second, limit your reading: the intellectual road is never-ending, but we cannot immediately travel the whole way. I remember finding fascinating material about the immediate circle surrounding Wordsworth and Coleridge, during the final edit of my thesis, but it had to wait for another time. Again, that sheet of paper above the desk helps. Does this later reading fit with this subject you are making your own? If not, it can become one of those scintillating conference papers you will later be presenting.

Another essential is the master- (or mistress-) plan. A large piece of paper and coloured pencils helps. You will probably have devised one of these, perhaps on a more limited scale, for each chapter, as a gazetteer of contents. Now it is time for the whole picture: bold, ambitious and expansive. It could consider.....

How, in your thesis, is the argument being refined?

What are the contributing factors to each stage?

What do they share, or how do they usefully contrast or conflict?

How might they be useful, in a viva, as summary or illustrations?

Within, or alongside this flow diagram, could be key quotes, cuttings, symbols perhaps something pictorial.

6.

My sheet included a quote from the French philosopher Jean Francois Lyotard, which is not as direct a route to Pseuds' Corner as you might imagine, and a picture of Rembrandt, with his quizzical, shrewd and ultimately humane gaze. Lyotard we will encounter shortly; Rembrandt featured in the title poem of my research collection.

Similarly, in these final months and weeks, it's useful to assemble a support team. If, like me, you occupy the outer rings of computer comprehension, have a technical expert on hand, for when the printer jams, or when the printed pages refuse to correlate with what is on your screen. Print in short runs. This limits disasters and frustration.

A proof-reader is another essential team member; someone who has completed such a thesis, and knows the mental crevasses this entails. By now a yawning danger to ourselves, as writers, is over-familiarity. We can read the text so often that we glide over the damaging literal, or the incorrect footnote, a dozen times.

Again, alongside your university supervisory team, an experienced post-graduate will be able to advise when an extra footnote might be needed, or when what you imagine to be a dazzling array of footnoted erudition could safely be discarded. They can provide a second opinion on what is written; on what might need clarification, reduction or removal.

Research colleagues can vary widely. I have a friend with whom I walked regularly throughout the degree process; I estimated that together we covered some 7,000 miles. In the early stages I would sometimes start by posing a question to be examined as we walked. Later, I would often use the exercise to look across the thesis, like a landscape, or a frayed map that needed repair. My companion's research interests were radically different from mine, and have changed in recent years from the velocity of hares to the composition of cat food. He is, of course, a border collie.

7.

Intellectual, technical and emotional support; we need to be honest and welcome all the assistance available.

Marshall what helps to concentrate effort and attention. Park yourself for a moment in a snug corner of The Mars Bar and Tea Factory. Dietary experts in this university might argue this is not the optimum form of nourishment, but I found it a consolatory combination when wrangling with diffuse arguments and a rebellious printer.

The walks I did daily with Brendan the collie were equally important, not only to salve the dietary conscience but also to award thinking time, and space. You need both the discipline of the desk, and the complementary discipline of being able to walk away. Think about when you work best, and try to maximise that time.

I imagine most of us develop our PhDs alongside full-time employment. During these later stages, inquire if your employer offers, or could be persuaded to offer, some study leave, or a sabbatical. I have been trying to develop- with an appalling degree of failure- an agreement for

lay employees in the Church of England to be awarded the sabbatical opportunities that ordained clergy enjoy. It is high time the Established Church ended such intellectual apartheid.

The average PhD involves the contribution of thousands of hours, and thousands of pounds, by students, and it is equally high time that employers recognised that investment by contributing to their gifted employees a gift of time.

Time is probably our shortest commodity. Work out your final programme as precisely as you can with your supervisory team. Everyone needs a balance between urgency to finish this never ending expedition, and space to maximise its quality. I remember suggesting a short-cut, to our younger daughter, during some final revisions I was attempting. 'But this is your life's work,' she protested. She was right.

8.

Remember to avoid the temptation of the cheap film, but plan towards a realistic conclusion. Such realism includes building in some insurance time, but not enough to encourage unlimited prevarication.

Such 'insurance time' also needs to include the soft binding process. Check in advance that the binder can do the work, to the size, specification and dates you require. Give yourself time to check the paging of each copy before you submit it to the examiners; it's your life's work; your responsibility. Don't let your research be marred because page 173 is missing, or appears twice, or is upside down. Clarity of presentation, like clarity of style, helps to lubricate the communication of your ideas, and will aid the examiners' appreciation of your unique contribution to knowledge.

Another time consideration is the gap between handing in your thesis, your mock viva, and your viva with the examiners. We need a balance between having a break, and maintaining momentum. The relief of handing in your thesis should not be sufficient to remove the need for continuing thought and preparation. If you relax too long over a self-indulgent picnic on the upper slopes of Everest, luxuriating in the view, you'll be overtaken by darkness, or storm, or run out of oxygen.

In the run-up to your mock-viva, read, read, and read again. This is your work; be proud of it, and be thoroughly prepared to illustrate its integrity. Make sure your mock-viva includes time with your supervisors for discussion, including both strengths and difficulties, and take careful notes of what they say.

Go away and work, in red ink if necessary, at what they discern as weaknesses in your responses. These are not negative criticisms but insights to be valued. Remember, for we live among post-modern thought patterns, this is both the real thing and not the real thing. The value of any dress rehearsal is not necessarily the applause, but what you learn from the less enthusiastic responses.

9.

The viva is a very different method of communication from everything you have achieved so far. It reflects the difference between compiling the evidence and drafting the court papers, and delivering that evidence in the tense atmosphere of the courtroom.

Some academics refer to the viva process as a 'defence'. You might equally see it as a prosecution of your major arguments. Another model could be a dialogue. One of our first tasks in a viva is to try to 'read' your examiners, and decode the way in which they respond to opening statements and answers; to assess the climate in which they appear to be operating.

Before that, of course, you will have researched who they are, what they have written and where on the intellectual map they are likely to be coming from. This should be information, not domination. Remember the Hogwart's trunk, replaced by the rucksack for the final assault. Now we are down to what fits in padded anorak pockets; perhaps some postcards, paring your 100,000 words to the skeletal essence of your arguments, with appropriate illustrations.

Let's march confidently up to another bar. We've reached The Viva Moment, and we have the right to be confident in our viva conduct. We have researched and devised this thesis to the point of arguing it makes a unique contribution to human knowledge. Our confidence includes the right to maintain the dialogue on our own terms.

Consider first a Banana Moment. Arrive in good time for your viva, without adopting the timetable of neurosis. Give yourself time to read through your ultimate, concise summary of your thesis, which you may have reduced to a shuffle of flashcards. When I met the Irish poet Micheal O'Siadhail (Mehawl O'Shield) he was chewing a banana before his reading: 'just taking on a bit of nourishment', he said. It's a good recipe for vivas, also.

10.

Preparations include books. Once we've Googled the name of our external examiner and seen what he or she has written, how seriously do we take this?

While it's important to know the work of external examiners, it's equally important to stay on your own territory. It's your ideas that are under debate. Don't allow an external to tempt you into their private minefield.

During my viva, my external examiner started referring to the French post-modernist philosopher Jacques Derrida. I replied with the Lyotard quote I mentioned earlier and I think he acknowledged the point, and we moved on.

Preparations will also include some post-it notes, marking key points in your thesis to which you may want to refer. Different colours could usefully refer to different chapters, or themes. Don't assume an examiner has read your thesis with the meticulous concentration you contributed to its composition. At least one question during my viva was answered already by an appendix note. Markers provide a ready reference point to disclose such information. Being able to guide examiners quickly and easily to passages you wish to emphasise enables you to maintain your place in the overall discussion.

We need stereophonic minds: to both maintain our concentration on what we have written, and discern the examiners' attitudes, less familiar with our work and therefore capable of differing interpretations.

Try to feel comfortable; think about what to wear. This might depend on your subject and the type of examiners you will face: a business studies candidate might not be best advised to adopt slashed jeans and a well-worn Sex Pistols t-shirt.

During vivas you need disciplined concentration, but it's not a speed speaking exercise. Try to take an informed mental- and you may find it helpful to jot down a physical- note of the essence of the questions.

11.

You don't need a whole scene of pregnant pauses, like a Harold Pinter play, before replying, but you don't have to dive in with an immediate response, either. Here again you can use those sticky labels to refer the examiners into the thesis.

This shows you know your own work, can combine written and verbal responses, and provides valuable illustrations, all the while allowing time for you to frame a follow-up idea, and assess where the questioning might be going.

Answer questions as directly as you can, smile, make eye contact; be interesting. You are on the doorstep of The Academy, talking to scholars in the vocabulary of equality. Equivocation is damaging; it illustrates uncertainty and will only irritate and frustrate. I gather vivas have lasted at this University between 30 minutes and eight hours. Don't go in equipped with a packed tea and a sleeping bag; it betrays a whiff of uncertainty. Be entertainingly authoritative; professional but personable.

Also, be prepared for goodwill. Astute examiners are there to test, but not to destroy. They may even, in a moment of kindness, offer an open goal. Accept such invitations, phrasing your answer perhaps more fully than when on more dubious ground, without extending your confidence into a sermon or diatribe. Even when the questions appear poisonous, have the confidence to answer from your own research experience. The question must have come, in some way, from within the thesis; your thesis, that you have developed. The answer, equally, must be there.

Finally, one for the road at The Two Postscripts. First, remember that what you are doing is vitally important to wider academic integrity, particularly at this time. Rowan Williams has described the writing of novels as a gift; it doesn't need to be done; it is not utilitarian. Recently universities and further education were (I quote *The Guardian*) 'swallowed up by Lord Mandelson's business department'.

12.

Some people study for PhDs because they are needed professionally, but many still value that concept of knowledge for its own sake; those ascents of Everest 'because it is there'. The gulping down of academia by the City suits has, I believe, made such intellectual inquiry all the more valuable, perhaps all the more vulnerable, also. We need to pursue it with determination and integrity.

Second, enjoy the moment. Savour that instance of the positive recommendation when all those library hours, false starts, intellectual cul de sacs, frayed ropes, blunt ice axes- you know all the cliches by now- have been vindicated, and proved worthwhile. Your name will change, and you will have been changed, and you can change the world because of what you have experienced; where you have been.

After my viva, I rang my wife, who was out, and walked to the station somewhat bemused, and wondering why everyone was not applauding. I caught a delayed train and ate my sandwich, and finished *The Guardian*. When I arrived home my wife was still out, so Brendan the collie and I went out on the hill under a sugar crust of stars, and when we came back I started revising a poem; because that is what you do.

Dr Martyn Halsall.