

## The paradoxes of the remote – A valediction

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After many months of working at home, it is heartening to visit campus and be greeted by familiar faces: people whose children I taught in the past; people who have themselves been my students; people who know me as a colleague and call my husband the nickname he earned leading a group of students to teach in the Chapel many decades ago. And, having spent several days now clearing my office, I have reacquainted myself with a working life that has slipped into the past: mounds of paper generated by lecture notes, tests, exams, secondary reading for students; documents relating to the committees, the panels, the task teams, the working groups that dealt with processes and generated policies and plans; records that reflect the trajectory of a long career. It is something of a shock to meet myself again in this way, to reencounter relationships, to remember interactions sometimes traumatic, sometimes sad, sometimes supportive, sometimes shocking, even sometimes funny now that distance has intervened. And, having cleared my office, it is heartwrenching to think of never going back; to see myself out of the building with no acknowledgement or recognition from current colleagues, with no formal farewell.

And yet this is what comes, perhaps, of lives being lived at a remove, as most of our lives are at present, from direct contact from one another. Like many couples, my husband and I, watching TV in the evenings, at times tussle over who takes control of the remote. The nickname this device acquired in our household is the 'struction' and of course its purpose is primarily to tell the television which channel we want to watch; how loud or soft to play it; how fast to forward it or to rewind. It serves another purpose, too, which is to free us to sit together and avoid getting up to deal with dials, although this closeness is disrupted when we can't agree on who gets the gadget. It is a small scenario that is metaphoric, I think, of 'the remote' that we must all contend with now.

Although the media of instruction are different, my teaching in these final years has all been remote, with communication channelled through email, phone calls, WhatsApp, Teams and Zoom. The term Fourth Industrial Revolution held no sway with me until Covid hit, when we were called on to find ways of reaching students that didn't involve sharing physical presence with them. This has posed inevitable problems: how to ensure those tenuous lines of connection remain open; how to ensure we are speaking to the right people; how to get these people to respond when we do so; how to assess students securely and meaningfully; how to assist when trouble comes, as it often does.

And yet this 'remote' has done more: it has complicated and nuanced the nature of academic presence. Its opposite, we have learned, is not in fact 'absence', but rather relationship stretched and extended over space and over time. One can leave a message for a student and find it answered the next day; one can reply, from the site of one's home work space, to a query

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from a student living hundreds of kilometres away. And, provided students are able and willing, one can teach them over time and across space. Their willingness is all.

These remote relationships have reminded me of a theorist whose work inspired much of the research I did in the far past, on character, relationship and identity. In 1962 C B McPherson coined the term 'possessive individualism' (in *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism (Hobbes to Locke)*); in the 1990s the psychologist John Shotter resuscitated and reworked it. Shotter's theories were groundbreaking in insisting that, as Kenneth Gergen recently put it, 'the individualist "I" cannot be separated from the "you" to which it is related' (2019:81). This insistence is close to our African understanding: 'Umntu, Ngumuntu, Ngabantu'. The particular force of Shotter's theory, though, is that it examines the role of language, and specifically conversation, in shaping our relationships with one another.

His theory came intensely to mind when a debate on Facebook about vaccination was foreclosed with the assertion 'My body my choice'. It is a slogan appropriated, as religion studies professor Rebecca Todd Peters points out, from feminist activists of the 1960s campaigning for what is now termed 'reproductive justice'. In this expropriation, she points out, the tradition of liberalism and human rights which informed it has been 'completely eclipsed' by right-wing 'atomistic individualism' (cited by Sostaita 2021). Barbara Sostaita, who dubs herself a 'formerly undocumented alien turned ethnographer and scholar of migration and religion', concurs. The phrase, she says, 'fails to meet the demands of this moment', as its appropriation rejects any kind of responsibility to the other. In the end, she says, 'my body' is 'vulnerable to and caught up in yours, and my choices are shaped by and inseparable from yours'. When, indeed, that body is charged with the particles of a virus, choices made make closeness and interaction potentially lethal to those around us. The slogan also brought to mind John Donne's Meditation XVII: 'No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main'; and, in contrast to the solipsism of that insistent 'my' and 'my', his solicitous stricture: 'any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind'. If Covid-19 has taught us anything, insists Sostaita, 'it's that we belong to each other'.

Careworkers attending the dying know this well: the suffering of Covid-19 patients in hospital, isolated and insulated, is unbearably intensified by being deprived of touch. While contact with family and friends can be supplied by cellphone or tablet, the remote connection does little to ameliorate the stark loss of company, the hand held, the hug, the warm embrace. And worse, perhaps, because more lasting, is the effect on those who remain behind, unable to reach their loved ones at the moment of death, and, during the worst of the pandemic, unable even to bury their dead after the event. The image of isolated suffering is then replaced by an intensity of disconnection, as the loved one slips through the hands, as it were, into the remoteness of death. Perhaps the most acute loss is that of letting go, of relinquishing hope, of registering that this person's life has ended, at this time, on this day, at this place, in this way – that this person will never again be present as before, will never again be present as 'you' to 'me'.

John Shotter was a founding member of a far-sighted group of some 22 key academics from around the globe, who called themselves the 'Virtual Faculty', and responded to the remote by availing their work generously to researchers and students and people like me who would never get to meet them. Although not updated, the website and all the resources it assembled are still there, hosted by Andy Lock of Massey University in New Zealand. Its home page is located and still accessible at <https://www.massey.ac.nz/~alock/virtual/welcome.htm>. Shotter himself was an enormously prolific writer who explored a range of topics, and ventured, unbounded, into many disciplines and domains of knowledge: dialogism, duality of structures, embodiment, intentionality, knowledge of the third kind, memory and forgetting, narrative therapy, practical consciousness, social accountability, the ordinary, the ethical domain. He collaborated liberally, and believed in open-sourcing much of his published work, which is also available on

Researchgate and Academia.edu. As mentioned above, crucial to his thinking was an insistence on the importance of language and specifically conversation in shaping our realities. Thus he speaks, for example, of 'the moral proprieties, the "ethical logistics" of the exchanges between "I's" and "you's" – to do with who has responsibility for what activity in the social construction of the meanings of any communications between them' (2019:67, first published 1989). As persons, he says,

we are always 'you's', always essentially second-persons. The 'thou' is older than the 'I' in the sense that the capacity to be addressed as a 'you' by others, is a preliminary to the ultimate capacity of being able to say 'I' of oneself, of being able to understand the uniqueness of one's own 'position' in relation to others, and to take responsibility for one's own actions (2019:73, first published 1989).

And, lastly, '[i]t is not so much how "I" can use language in itself that matters, as the way in which I must take "you" into account in my use of it' (73). His opposition to, his confrontation with 'possessive individualism' is, in such formulations, amply clear – and imply an inexorable answer to the solipsism of 'my body my choice'. In separate articulations he treats of 'joint action', and, drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin, the 'superaddressee', which we take into account in 'what we do and say', and which functions as 'the witness and the judge' of what we say and do (1995:50). The ethical, claims Shotter, is built into the very essence of our interactions as persons; is seminal to our relationships with others.

When, in 1985, I was first interviewed for a job at the University of Zululand, I walked into a room on the fourth floor to be met by an array of professors who are now, mostly, no longer with us, who have passed on into the remote region of death: Professor Nkabinde, Professors Thembela and van Eetveldt, perhaps Kitshoff, perhaps Boshoff; certainly Reid Maynard who was to become my boss. Despite my nerves the interview went well until Maynard's question: 'Are you a good teacher?', and, when I answered, 'Yes I am', his challenge, 'How do you know?' It is a question that has remained with me. Perhaps, if I'd had Shotter at my fingertips then, I might have riposted, 'I know because I am "you" to my students, and that's what they tell me I am'. More recently, at a particular point in the trajectory of my career, I decided to reinvent my role as an academic in particular ways: I would serve where I was needed; I would be kinder; I would research only what was meaningful to me; I would be a good teacher. In our last two years as teachers, we have, of course, not been able to meet our students face to face. I do not know what my students look like, how they dress, what their manners are, how they would respond to me in a classroom, in my office, in the corridor, in the open spaces of the campus if we were to walk past one another, on the street. Our relations have been entirely verbal, with lecture notes on Moodle and assignments and exams submitted on that platform or by email. Teaching has all been remote, and our closest contact tutorials on WhatsApp. But these conversations, as Shotter contended, have been defining. When, in their farewells this year, students say to me: 'You were there when I needed you'; 'Thank you for being with me'; 'I am grateful for being part of your last year'; or even, simply, 'I have learned from you', the 'you' I have been to them assures me that, despite 'the remote', the reality of our conversations has made a difference. And this, in some way, makes up for the formal farewell 'the remote' has denied me.

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