

Gilly Adams

That's Not It!

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sometimes protecting us
and sometimes limiting our
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The belief in my own
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*Will my name be nothing sometime?
Will I leave no thing behind me in the world?*

*At least flowers, at least songs!
How is my heart to work?*

Anonymous Aztec poem, circa 1450

For the last few years my interior life has been dominated by an obsession, an overwhelming need. It is an urge which will not be denied yet cannot be answered. I am looking for "the meaning"; a subversive activity which is simultaneously banal, in the sense that everyone does it, and profound, because there is no more important quest. What is the significance of my life? If I can understand that, perhaps I will know what it is that I should be doing and be able to do it, thereby conquering the pervasive unease that tells me that I haven't got it right yet.

It may just be the fact of reaching fifty, but recent events have conspired to intensify my search. The experience of October 3rd 1998 provides an arbitrary starting point: all day I am uneasy. Something about this date is significant but what it is eludes me. Late in the evening an image insinuates itself into my brain: I see a young woman, nervous but smiling, resplendent in a halter neck dress, attending the opening of a theatre as her first official function as an employee of the Arts Council in Wales. This is the me of twenty-five years ago and I cannot believe that so much time has passed, although I see the triumph of gravity when I look in a mirror. Perhaps the spirit doesn't change or ages at a different pace? Something about this anniversary makes me want to find the thread which connects that girl to the woman she has become. Can I tell myself the story of my life in a way which will make sense of what has happened? The main legacy of my Christian upbringing seems to be an obsession with the Parable of the Talents. Can I be kind to myself if I discover that I have buried my talents under a bush?

How to begin? Chronology seems to provide a way in. I am a child of the 1960s and my attitudes were shaped by that decade. I can remember understanding that I would never marry or change my name, that I did not want to accept a man as my "master" in any sense of the word, and then having these beliefs confirmed by the women's movement. I can remember fighting the linguistic battles for the use of "her" instead of the automatic "his", for the right to be called "Ms" instead of "Mrs" or "Miss". I can remember the passionate desire for new structures which would be non linear and non hierarchical... In these post modernist times it is easy to deride, dismiss and fear feminism but many of the freedoms which women take for granted now were won by small and large acts of courage then, and I know that my life would have been different had it not been for those changes. Our beliefs are our invisible armour, sometimes protecting us and sometimes limiting our actions and weighing us down. The belief in my own autonomy, in the necessity for me to provide for myself has been an imperative, sometimes difficult but always sustaining. (And I'm baffled by the current notion that feminism automatically implies a hatred of men.)

The chronology of what we might call my "career" is straight forward. My early passion for acting somehow subsided into a training in arts administration, which led me to become the Drama Director of the Arts Council in Wales and then to abandon that in favour of more creative work as a director and dramaturg working with playwrights and new plays with a company called Made in Wales. Latterly this same pursuit has taken me to the BBC in Wales where I am a script editor. This is the work for which I have been paid, but as great an investment in the last fifteen years has been my voluntary work with Welfare State International, a celebra-

tory arts company of thirty years standing, based in the North of England, and the international women's theatre project, the Magdalena, based in my home town of Cardiff. For both these organisations I have been an active Chair of the Board of Directors with a hands on involvement with the shaping of artistic policy and events. This work has often been more important to me than anything for which I have been paid, perhaps because it has more nearly chimed with my own ideals and aspirations.

In the context of my search for meaning, this description of the bones of my "life in art" does not satisfy. It obscures as much as it reveals and an encyclopaedic knowledge of twenty-five years of Welsh theatre seems arcane and not particularly useful. How else to assess or take stock? In a workshop I am shocked by an exercise which asks the simple question, "When you were a child what did you want to be when you grew up and what is the connection between that child and the person you are now?" The door of memory opens with a clang and I have a vivid image of myself as a child of five, six or seven, dressing up and dancing the Can-Can, desperately wanting to express something through my performance. In my family this was regarded as "showing off" and yes, of course, it was a narcissistic impulse in one sense, but it seems to me that it also connected with the soul. So many of us experience the need to express and communicate something of our deepest longings and this is surely one of the reasons why we involve ourselves in the arts. (This feeling is confirmed some forty years later when I take my eight year old god-daughter to a magical performance of *The Nutcracker* at Christmas. As the music soars in the divine yearning of the *pas de deux*, tears fill my eyes. It is the impulse towards beauty, the voice of the soul which is silenced by the demands of everyday life.)

This image of the little dancing girl persists. I wanted to perform, to be the greatest actress on the British stage. What is the connection between that desire and the place at which I have arrived? Is there a logic to the path? Why am I a facilitator and not a performer? Is this the wisdom which acknowledges my own limitations or a failure of courage? Have I recognised how I can be most valuable or have I abandoned my own aspirations in favour of supporting the dreams of others?

On the plus side I can look back at more than twenty-five years of work and know that I have been faithful to my passionate conviction that the arts are essential, not optional, in a civilised society; that artists must be supported as a precious resource and the repository of our hopes and dreams. There is a greater good to which the needs of the individual should be sublimated but I can also see that, in a modest way, my contribution as a facilitator has helped to shape the development of drama in Wales, sustained the complexity of Welfare State, nurtured the women of the Magdalena and a generation of writers in Wales... And yet, and yet; a lingering sense of frustration and disappointment; a suspicion that I have not been sufficiently courageous. When I call myself to account for how that little girl who wanted to dance became this woman, I look at the doors which have opened in my life and the work which I have done and think, "that's not it, that's not it at all". Something is left in the shadows, something has not been fulfilled.

There is another fact: I am a woman without biological children, and this is an absence in my life. Comparisons between the creation of children and the creation of artistic work are trite and yet there is a connection. If there is no-one to come after, it seems to me that it is more difficult to define the "meaning" and the need to do

so is more acute...

In the last year circumstances and choice have colluded to force me to detach myself from organisations and relationships with which I had mistakenly believed I would be connected always. The bleak process of separation, of saying goodbye in different ways to loved ones, began like a bereavement, full of grief and loss, but, as it has gone on it has been transformed into something positive. I have understood that the time has come to "spring clean" my life, to remove physical clutter from my house, emotional clutter from relationships, and the clutter of obligation and duty from everywhere else. To symbolise this clearing out, and to mark my desire for a new beginning, I did something that I have never done before. I made a journey for six weeks on the other side of the world entirely alone. For younger women such travelling is a commonplace, but for me it was a challenge which took me literally out of my comfort zone. I was so frightened when I arrived in Bali that I did not want to get off the plane and the first few days were agonising. Having resisted the desire to go straight home, the magic of the adventure gradually took over and gave me a glimpse of the person I can be when I am empowered, and that was wonderful.

Now I need the courage to build on that experience. George Eliot wrote memorably, "It is never too late to be what you might always have been", and my challenge is to find out whether that is true. Western society tends to define us by our work: I am an administrator, a director, a facilitator, now a script editor. A more creative approach might be to examine the threads which connect all these different activities and say that I am someone who helps to sustain and transform the process of artistic creation, and that at last the time has come to include myself in that process. My greatest fear is that I will uncover my own mediocrity. Since



Gilly Adams. Photo: Brian Tarr

GILLY ADAMS (Wales) lives in Cardiff where she currently edits drama scripts for the BBC. She is also involved in celebratory arts activities with Welfare State International and was closely associated with the Magdalena Project from its beginning.

adolescence I have been haunted by a quotation from the poet T.S. Eliot:

I have heard the mermaids singing each to each.

I do not think that they will sing for me.

I need to push through the pain barrier, the one that says that the mermaids will never sing for anyone as ordinary as me; I need to confront my fear of rejection and criticism and discover what it is that I can create which is my own; I need to come out of the shadows and dare to do.

So, at fifty-two, I am preparing to start again. It is not yet entirely clear what I am going to do although an increasing preoccupation with using theatre skills for domestic celebrations and rites of passage suggests a certain path. As I embark on this next stage of my life, I am sustained by a vivid memory from the last night of the first Magdalena festival in 1986: a packed auditorium, the audience waits for the performer to appear in front of them. Suddenly from the back of the hall a voice begins to croon. Ida Kellarova "comes on down" in a bright pink frock and the colour of her dress and the sound of her voice somehow encapsulate the exhilaration of what has been achieved and enjoyed in that week.

Maybe, if I can be bold enough, it is not too late to get to wear the pink frock!