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Three Stories—And a Writer’s Tale: A Creative Writing Case Study of Workplace Bullying

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I present a creative writing case study of workplace bullying using three stories: Story 1—The Writing Context contextualizes the case study’s development in an Australian higher education institution; Story 2—The Writing Process describes the creative writing process, including interpretation of public domain secondary empirical sources enmeshed with a writer’s imagination; and Story 3—The Writing Product presents a creative writing case study of workplace bullying. Interleaved with these three stories of context, process, and product are fragments of my more reflective and reflexive story—A Writer’s Tale—shared to assist reader understanding of some of the ambiguous, paradoxical, and pernicious outcomes of workplace bullying, while also offering insights into the challenges facing those choosing to use creative writing in their scholarly work. *Organization Management Journal*, 10: 139–147, 2013. doi: 10.1080/15416518.2013.801747

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PROLOGUE: THREE STORIES—AND A WRITER’S TALE

As a scholar, I write creatively to try and help others understand organizational life. One of the advantages of using fiction¹ in this quest is its ability to help portray the essential ambiguity of events and situations. It helps people see ambiguity in action, and in ways that other presentation forms cannot (Domoracki, Keller, & Spicer, 2011; McCurdy, 1973). McCurdy (1995) claimed that fiction can shape policy development, affect people’s behavior, and influence how they go about their work. It does this, he claims, by entering the consciousness of readers and becoming part of their cognitive base for making decisions. In the following, my fictions (creative writing) are shared to help readers see workplace bullying for the ambiguous, paradoxical, and confounding phenomenon that it can be. They are also presented to show the ability of creative writing to inform scholarly organizational analyses. It is hoped that, taken together, the storied collective might successfully assist those who (1) are wrestling with the demands of bullying in organizational life,

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be they targets, witnesses, or those called upon to respond, and (2) those wishing to learn more about the value, and process, of combining the scholarly with the imaginative.

The late Ralph Hummel (1991) contended that the way people interpret their work worlds—via “storytelling”—is a valid means for producing and accumulating knowledge: that storytelling is a credible and significant means of acquiring knowledge of organizational life. So, following his lead, I introduce three stories of a scholarly (and imaginative) developmental journey that resulted in a creative writing case study of workplace bullying.² Story 1—The Writing Context describes *where and why* the creative writing was done; Story 2—The Writing Process shares *how* the creative writing process unfolded; and Story 3—The Writing Product showcases a creative writing bullying case study, the *what* that was produced by the creative writing process. Around these are fragments of another story—A Writer’s Tale—the bits and pieces of my reflective story that have been braided in and around the first three in an effort to share my phenomenological, first-person reflections and concerns around both the events under review and the creative process itself. It offers a post hoc, reflexive commentary to assist readers interested in knowing more about the complexities, ambiguities, and contradictions that frequently surround bullying in organizational life, as well as offering insights into the challenges posed by, and the value that lies with, creative writing in scholarly work. It was during revisions of this article³ that my Writer’s Tale emerged. I have long been a researcher of workplace bullying⁴: I have borne witness to its significant harmful effects; been targeted myself; and seen its perplexing, serendipitous, and deleterious outcomes in workplaces and beyond. I wrote this case study (and, later, my Writer’s Tale) because, having seen so many negative outcomes, for individuals and organizations, I remain concerned that so many continue to misunderstand, underestimate, and mismanage it.

STORY 1—THE WRITING CONTEXT

About 2 years ago, I was asked by the Organizational Development (OD) Unit at my employing university to do some professional training presentations informed by my workplace bullying research.⁵ Senior management members were

concerned that bullying at the University of Western Sydney (UWS) was a potential source of risk for the organization and, as such, were keen to respond. It was intended that furnishing staff at UWS with increased understanding of the phenomenon of bullying, and other organizational misbehaviors, would assist. That first year I gave five 1.5-hour presentations about bullying (and other organizational misbehaviors) to a series of professional and academic staff cohorts undertaking in-house leadership development programs. There was a strong, positive response to those presentations, and the following year I was asked by the OD Unit to continue with these short information sessions and, additionally, to design learning materials and cofacilitate full-day sessions (with a respected senior consultant from the OD Unit).⁶

A Writer's Tale

I was immediately excited by the idea of doing all day sessions. While I thought it would be challenging, I thought we could make a difference; that we could help people who might be being targeted by bullying, as well as support managers in their understanding of misplaced accusations of bullying (i.e., when they were just asking people to do their job). In short, we could help people understand what the “B-word” was really about. Agreeing to cofacilitate, I immediately asked if I might develop the case study materials, knowing I would use creative writing. Once this was agreed, I was immediately nervous. I was being brought in as “the expert” (I was introduced as “an international researcher and expert on bullying”). What would my cofacilitator in the OD Unit think? What would colleagues enrolled in the seminar think? Surely, they would be anticipating stats, and theories, and objective commentary from the so-called expert? I proceeded with my creative writing anyway, although with some procrastination. When the case was written and I e-mailed it to my cofacilitator just a day or so before our first full day session, I wondered what she, and her colleagues in the OD Unit, would think. They had their professionalism and reputations to think of, as I had mine. I guessed they would be surprised by my stories, but hoped they would give me a go. They did.

The use of creative nonfiction in scholarly work is not new. Academics have been making worthwhile contributions to the scholarly literature for years by interrogating existing works of fiction, creating their own, or using the “tools” of fiction writing to bring nonfiction events to life. Such approaches can assist in portraying social events of concern, and in a useful way that increases reader knowledge and understanding. (Readers wanting to read more about the numerous scholars using fiction may wish to consult: Czarniawska, 2008; Frank, 2004; Freeman, 2004; Gutkind, 2007; Harold, 2003; Kettle, 2004; Lewis, 1959; Miller & Paola, 2005; Park, 1982; Phillips, 1995; Rinehart, 1998; Rolfe, 2002; Rowland, Rowland, & Winter, 1990; Schmidt, 1981; Spindler, 2008; Tierney, 2003; Vickers, 2010, 2011, 2013.) Creative writers are focused on the world, relentless researchers, and able to engage imagination, as necessary, to share the implications of their discoveries. They also need courage to write around details that may not be available, and to accept the uncertainties surrounding the process: that gaps in knowledge can be a story too, and worth sharing (Miller & Paola, 2005). Creative writing can include characters

and events that are compressed, changed, combined, added to, or imaginatively re-created (Roorbach, 2008), and creative writing can—and does—significantly influence policy, especially where empirical evidence is inconclusive, by presenting different viewpoints and perspectives, and widening the scope of debate (McCurdy, 1995). McCurdy (1995) uses as an example Ken Kesey's novel, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962/1973), as being responsible for one such dramatic shift in public opinion, away from incarceration of the mentally ill, to deinstitutionalization—a policy change with enormous repercussions for individuals and communities subsequently affected.

A Writer's Tale

Story 1 shows evidence of my continuing insecurity as an academic doing creative writing including my obvious need to defend—at some length—the value of doing it. It is the case that so many before me have utilized creative writing in their scholarly work, but still I find myself defending it. And why wouldn't I? My off-submitted articles and proposals are routinely tossed out, highly praised as innovative, even worthwhile, “but not really right” for “this journal's readership” or “this publisher's list.” So, here I am again, defending the credibility and value of such work, and on and on and on. I remember how I trembled—yes, really shook, so much so that an audience member commented on it—when presenting my first scholarly conference paper that included creative writing. Of interest, I won an award for that paper at that international conference, and still another award, more recently at another international conference, for further work using the same methodology. And yet still I feel compelled to defend my creative writing—such is the lingering power of what McCurdy (1973, p. 53) describes as “the positive science paradigm, heralded by the European scientific revolution, with its search for inviolable laws based in mathematics.” I am one who remains increasingly “impatient with the narrowness and irrelevance of its findings” (McCurdy, 1973, p. 53)—and still fearing its persecution!

The creative nonfiction case study was developed for use in a professional training session entitled “No Nastiness Please—We're at Work!” (UWS, 2012). The day commenced with my cofacilitator capturing the concerns of participants, and their reasons for attendance. More than one participant wept while recounting their nasty workplace experiences; all were concerned with the numerous and various forms of workplace misbehavior.

A Writer's Tale

I remember, during these “icebreaker” sessions, being surprised by the immediate, and palpable, level of emotion in the room. What did I expect? Having been the subject of bullying myself, I should have realized this would happen, but I hadn't prepared myself. I remember consciously looking away from one weeping individual, refocusing on my notes, and reminding myself to stay calm and not to engage with her pain. Alternatively, I recall another, right in front of me, becoming very uncomfortable, shifting in her seat and looking around the room while I was explaining the consequences to bullies if evidence was presented against them. I learned later that there had been several complaints of bullying against her.

After the “icebreaker” discussions, I presented research-based information about various forms of workplace misbehavior,

including workplace bullying, corruption, discrimination and harassment, incivility and violence. After a break for morning tea, I handed out the first case-study scene (Story 3, shown later), and asked participants to read it. When participants started reading the scenes (which were handed out, one scene at a time), initially, the energy in the room was low. Participants were certainly not engaged, although they dutifully started reading within a short while. I watched, hoping for a shift in interest in the room.

With each scene, the energy levels rose considerably. From low energy and mediocre interest at the outset, participants became very engaged. I listened as more and more of the details of the case were picked up and deliberated on, during small-group, then full-class discussion. When handing out the third scene, there was complete silence as participants started to read, punctuated by groans and gasps, and comments pertaining to the case. In between the fourth and fifth scenes, I announced a lunch break; that we would finish the rest of story after the break. Participants' protests were robust, and good humored: "Oh, no! We can't stop now!"; "You're not going to make us wait are you?"; and "I *have to know* what's going to happen!"

I now ask readers to rewind to Story 2—The Writing Process, where I share *how* the creative writing case study was developed.

STORY 2—THE WRITING PROCESS

The creative writing case study presented is my qualitative interpretation of events that unfolded at another Australian university. The scenes were developed from careful review, re-review, and interpretation of secondary source data available from the public domain. I combined this with my long experience as a researcher of workplace bullying and other misbehaviors in organizational life. My primary goal, as a creative writer, was expression of the "emotional truth" (Miller & Paolo, 2005, p. 83; Roorbach, 2008) of reported empirical events, based on evidence from secondary data sources available (Neuman, 2011, p. 481). Zikmund (2003) describes secondary data as data gathered and recorded by someone else prior to, and for purposes other than, how it is currently being used. One of the identified advantages of using secondary data is that it shares evidence that may not be obtainable using primary data collection techniques, such as in circumstances where events are sensitive, confidential, or controversial (Zikmund, 2003)—as these were. In the absence of firm rules for the use of secondary data (Neuman, 2011), I have documented my creative writing process as comprehensively as possible to assist readers who may choose to use it as a heuristic of value for their own future work.

Secondary sources were repeatedly consulted to understand the reported empirical events, noting commentary from actors involved, or bearing witness, as well as details of appearance, professional interests, and histories: I sought to construct an image of the people and events under consideration. I read and reread sources, making notes and highlighting pertinent

texts to clarify understanding and aid recall, and this extensive interrogation was combined with my past experience as a creative writer, bullying researcher, and educator concerned with the damage done by bullying in organizational life. When writing, it was necessary to pare away certain details, and to make interpretive choices (Miller & Paola, 2005), and references to persons and places were disguised, as necessary. I make no claim that the scenes shared in the following actually took place *exactly* as described, or that the actors in the case actually said and did the things depicted, exactly as is shared. On the other hand, scenes were intended to engage readers with workplace events that were plausible, and to promote critical discussion, while also showing readers the complexity, ambiguity, and paradox surrounding events. Scenes were intended as provocateurs, as an aid to learning, and (hopefully) to develop more useful, critical response.

A Writer's Tale

I was very conscious of not wanting to offend powerful people in my industry sector. However, I felt strongly enough that I took a deep breath and still wrote about it anyway—though with great care. I recall sitting in a café with the week's newspaper in front of me and laughing aloud at the latest "ridiculous" installment of the case, and shaking my head. I remember another patron nearby turning and looking my way. Of course, I wasn't laughing because it was funny. The reported events were just so terrible, so bad, and the situation appeared to be going from bad to worse—and for everyone involved. And with every new installment I read, it seemed to me that if a really bad choice could possibly be found, and by anyone involved, they were finding it—and taking it.

When doing creative writing, one needs to engage with, and utilize appropriately, various technical elements to assist in the sharing of one's imagination: setting, scene-making, characters, scenes, dialogue, action, beats, the building of tension, plots, subplots, and emotional truths, as well as deciding on the respective virtues of narrative, voice, description versus showing-not-telling, working with memory, lyrical writing, and other political, reportage, and writing minefields. And when doing all this—especially as a scholar—it is also important to adhere to the empirical evidence underpinning the case. And I did this, though it is confirmed here that, as it is for much case-study research, learning outcomes are not intended to be generalizable, or reliable. What is suggested, though, is that the case is valid in that it shows what it is supposed to show—the emotional truth of the bullying (and corruption) that was going on in that organization.

Then I opened up a word-processing document on my computer to see what would emerge. Specifically, I was engaging in what Neuman (2011, p. 546) calls "freewriting," where the writer engages in writing down everything she or he can as quickly as it enters the writer's mind—and deliberately without editing those ideas along the way. I did not stop to reread as I drafted the initial scenes, but continued to record the rapid flow of ideas (Neuman, 2011, p. 546). Within a few hours of starting this process, several scenes had arrived on the page that were worthy of revision, and formed the basis of the case

study presented in the following. I iteratively returned to the secondary sources, to my bullying researcher's imagination, and to the interpretative process; as I continued writing, more scenes showed up. They are presented next.

STORY 3—THE WRITING PRODUCT⁷

The Cast

- Dr. John Jolly, Director, School of Ethics and Professionalism (recently appointed by University of Super Education [USE]).
- Ms. Sue Stanton, School Manager (recently appointed by Dr. John Jolly).
- Ms. Sally Sonin, Senior Lecturer (recently appointed by Dr. John Jolly).
- Ms. Donna Davison, Senior Administrative Support Team Leader (existing staff).
- Dr. Bill Woodlands, Lecturer (existing staff).
- Dr. Don Dunphy, Lecturer (existing staff).
- Professor Libby Jasper, Dean, Faculty of Super Social Sciences (Dr. John Jolly, and the school, report to her as dean).

The Setting

The University of Super Education (USE), Faculty of Super Social Sciences, School of Ethics and Professionalism; a capital city in Australia.

The Time

Some years ago.

Act I: It Begins

Sue

Sue Stanton looked out the window of her third-floor office, gently tapping the top of her gold and tortoiseshell fountain pen on her lower lip as she stared out into the distance. Turning back to her desk, she pushed a couple of loose blonde streaked hairs that had had the temerity to fall out of place back behind her ears.

She had now been with USE for about a month, and things were going to plan. She would even have said she was enjoying herself as she pondered her day. Certainly, the benefits package John Jolly had put together for her with HR [Human Resources] had more than delivered.

Gathering up her coffee cup, some of her papers, and, of course, her trademark pen, Sue strode with purpose out of her office toward the director's office, past Donna Davison's workstation, which was sensibly situated in the middle of the office, adjacent to Donna's team of staff.

Passing Donna's desk, Sue plonked her coffee cup, with the remains of some tepid coffee still in it, onto Donna's desk. Looking back over her shoulder in Donna's direction as she kept moving, Sue said, "Thanks Donna. I'm off to see John. And, Donna, could you hold all my calls please. I'll be in a meeting for the next hour with the director. Thanks."

Sue, who knew full well that Donna was not her secretary but a senior team leader and professional administrator in the School of Ethics and Professionalism, noted that Donna had not acknowledged Sue's latest request, but had bitten her lip instead, probably in a determined effort not to be baited.

Sue smiled and kept walking.

A Writer's Tale

When I wrote this, one of the things that I was trying to highlight was the intention of bullies in their efforts to harm others. The inclusion of Sue Stanton's smile in the scene, for me, confirms her intention to hurt Donna, and her potential pleasure in doing so—key elements of a bully's behavior that have been described in the literature as "hurting fun." I was pleased when this detail was picked up during discussion, as it enabled me to raise the question of inferred (versus known) motives of bullies. While not claiming that anyone can *know* what is in a bully's (or anyone else's) mind when bullies do what they do, we can infer an intention to harm when bullies keep doing things that are hurtful to another, over and over. I urged participants to concern themselves less with *why* bullies do what they do and more with *what* is actually happening to a person or persons—and deal with that.

Donna

Donna was getting very fed up with Sue Stanton, the new School Manager, treating her like a dogsbody, but she had decided to always remain calm and cool, despite what were now frequent assaults on her professional pride. Just this morning, Sue had told Donna that she was to distribute the mail around the office when the mail bag arrived. And now the bloody woman was dumping her dirty cups on Donna's desk. I am not here to do the washing up, Donna had thought, fuming, but said nothing.

"And it might be a good idea for you to put the dishwasher on too, would you please?" Sue had added, striding away, not waiting for a reply.

Donna slumped back in her chair, looking from the dirty mug on her desk to the tyrannical School Manager's ample, Dianna Ferrariclad, backside as it marched toward John Jolly's office. Since Sue had joined the school, Donna had also found that she never got to speak with the director anymore; Sue was taking on more and more of the senior administrative responsibilities in the school, and leaving Donna with the hack work. Distributing the mail was just the latest insult.

Donna watched as the director greeted Sue with a hug, before slamming his office door closed behind them with a cracking thud.

Donna, her concentration now completely cleaved from the spreadsheet she had been working on, decided she needed a break. She also wanted to speak with someone about how things were in the school these days, since John Jolly, and now Sue, had taken over.

After carefully saving her work, Sue got up and headed down the fire-escape stairs to the lower floor, where most of the academic staff members in the school were located. Donna noted that, in fact, the only academic upstairs was the new Senior Lecturer, Sally Sonin, whose office was located alongside those of the management team.

A Writer's Tale

In this scene, I wanted readers to see that bullying is often not about yelling and screaming but involves more subtle behaviors, and is often undertaken by perpetrators with a smile. Casual observers may see nothing amiss in routine interpersonal communications such as these. However, deeper thought can show targets (e.g., Donna) being routinely demeaned and humiliated. These are common bullying tactics. A frequent (and usually unhelpful) response by targets is

also shown here: Donna chooses to say nothing, perhaps hoping that the problem will stop if she doesn't react. Of course, Sue won't stop (why would she?). Staff members targeted by bullies often have their work responsibilities seriously eroded over time, and their capacity to influence management is minimized—in sum, tactics designed to negatively affect a target's career momentum, opportunities for skill development, and future promotion. What better way to harm a person that by undermining their livelihood through minimizing (or at least delaying) their chances of promotion? Few recognize that the implications of delaying someone's promotion, even for a short while, can have significant and cumulative effects on both short-term quality of life and plans for retirement. Yes, simple undermining and reduction of opportunities, and the hiding of another's achievements, can sometimes have catastrophic effects on careers, especially over time. Bullying enacted this way also overlaps with corruption: Use of Donna's time in this publically funded organization should be commensurate with her senior skill levels; it would not ordinarily include washing dishes and distributing mail. Deliberate use of Donna's time in low-skill activities, when she is qualified for, and employed in, a far more senior role, is a serious misuse of her skills as a resource in a publically funded organization. It is corruption.

Act II: It Continues

Bill

Bill Woodlands looked up from his computer when he heard the knock on his office door. He had been engrossed, typing the editorial for the upcoming issue of the International Anti-Violence-and-Fear Newsletter, where he was editor. It was Donna, his mate and conduit to the hallowed halls upstairs. And she was not her usual smiling self; that was for sure.

Bill saved his document and suggested they have a chat in the lunch room. He was wondering what had upset her this time.

"That bloody woman!" said Sue. "She's just so rude and she just seems to do whatever she wants. I am not paid by USE to do her bloody washing up!"

"Well, you know what I heard, from my buddy in HR?" said Bill, pushing a chipped blue mug full of tea across the faculty kitchen lunch table in Donna's direction.

"What?"

"Sue's been mates with Jim Jolly for years; she used to work with him at the Mates Club Public Administration Office," said Bill, shaking his head. "And, here's a surprise—not—there wasn't even any proper selection process when she was hired. It was just Jolly signing off on it all."

"Yeah, that'd be right," said Donna, nodding up and down with vigor, swallowing a huge gulp of tea and reaching for yet another Arrowroot biscuit which she dunked into the remains of her tea. As she raised the now soaked biscuit to take a bite, her timing was just out and half the biscuit plopped back into her milky tea. "Damn," said Donna, fishing the sloppy biscuit-remains out of her tea with a grubby teaspoon before dropping the sodden blob onto a paper napkin nearby. She reached again for the plastic biscuit jar.

Bill, trying not to count how many biscuits Donna had already consumed in the wake of Sue's latest series of insults, went on.

"Yes, and not only that," said Bill, swirling his remaining coffee around a stained gray mug, "when Jolly appointed her, he appointed her as a Senior Lecturer when she's actually an administrative manager and has no PhD. He also arranged a top-up bonus for her, to take her salary up to over \$150,000."

Donna looked up from her pile of biscuits and shook her head. "Can they do that? I thought there was a policy . . ."

"Of course there's a policy," said Bill. "But Jolly just seems to flaunt the rules and noone does anything about it." Bill swept his

hand through unkempt wavy gray locks, before reaching for his mug and draining its contents.

"And it's not just her either," said Bill. "Sally Sonin, the new Senior Lecturer, has no doctorate either, and yet she got the job—and is being paid accordingly—despite not being qualified."

Bill, who had been unsuccessful in his attempt to get the Senior Lecturer position himself, went on, leaning forward now, holding his still warm mug in both hands and looking down into it as if had all the answers he needed. "Not only that, Sally has just had three months overseas travel approved. And they all fly Business Class, despite the travel policy which says only really senior people, like the VC and DVCs,⁸ can do that."

Bill put his empty mug down on the table, more loudly than intended, and shook his head. "The worst of it is that Jolly asked me to supervise Sally's doctorate. She's not the most diligent doctoral student I've worked with, that's for sure. And I saw Jolly's announcement that Sue is coordinating the research students these days as well. This may well prove to be the classic pincer move, from my perspective."

Bill got up making a rough scrape with his chair. He picked up his own and Donna's now empty mug, and took them to the sink to rinse, before putting them in the dishwasher. He noted that his left arm was tingling a bit and he felt slightly nauseous and headachy. I must lay off the grog tonight, he thought to himself.

A Writer's Tale

The literature is alive with evidence of the negative impacts of bullying on worker productivity. I can recall how difficult it was, during periods of being bullied, to maintain a productive work focus. I have also witnessed its impact on others, and interviewed targets about their experiences: increased stress and agitation; the onset of acute and chronic health conditions; career disruption—all things I wanted to depict in Bill and Donna's behavior. I also tried to include some examples of bullying and corruption that, again and unfortunately, many of us have seen in our workplaces: corrupt appointment processes; failures of confidentiality; discrimination (whether age, race, gender, or disability related); and policies and codes of conduct ignored. And critical to illustrate, from my perspective, was that when there are no negative consequences for bullies, what onlookers (including targets) see is not just injustice, but wrongdoers being *rewarded*—a nasty paradox indeed.

Act III: The Midnight E-mail

Bill

Bill quietly drew back the bedcovers so as not to wake his wife and got out of bed, grabbing his dressing gown off the doorknob on the way out to the kitchen. Once again, it was 3 a.m. and he was wide awake.

He stood by the boiling kettle in the kitchen, readying a cup of herbal tea, staring into space. He was remembering a conversation with his mate, an academic from another university, earlier that day. His mate had been horrified at the goings-on in Bill's school.

"No, it's no good talking to the boss, Bill. He's not going to change. You have to do something; stand up for yourself," his friend had said.

Bill took his cup of tea into his study, flicked on the table lamp, then pressed the ON button of his laptop. He sat down at his desk and, once the machine had come to life, opened a new Word document and started to type. He noticed his left hand was kind of aching and tingling again. So was his jaw. He tried opening and closing the fingers of his left hand, to no effect.

After speaking to his friend, Bill had gone around to the rest of department to speak to the other academics who were on campus that afternoon, to discuss the situation in the school.

Dr. Don Dunphy, one of the other Lecturers, had reminded Bill of an episode when Sue had bawled Don out during a school meeting. Don had been speaking quietly to his neighbor about an agenda item during the meeting, while Sue was speaking. Sue had stopped her presentation and insisted, loudly and angrily, that as penance for Don speaking while she had been speaking, he was to repeat aloud—like a naughty schoolboy—everything she had been saying for the last five minutes. She had gone around to where Don had been sitting and dragged him physically by the arm to his feet to do this.

Bill had remembered how terrible a scene it had been and how humiliating it must have been for Don, who had walked out of the room in disgust. He also remembered that John Jolly's response had been not to stop Sue's outrageous behavior, but to publicly support her public attack on Don instead.

Most of the school had been there to see this, and several of them had told Bill they were prepared to support him. Whether they would or not, Bill realized, would remain to be seen. But that so many of them had said they would was a significant indicator of the strength of feeling.

So, Bill had decided to go over Jolly's head and write the letter of complaint to the Dean of the Faculty, Professor Libby Jasper, to let her know what was going on in the school, especially Sue Stanton's latest behavior:

"Dear Prof Jasper," typed Bill, then took a sip of his tea. His jaw and left arm were still vaguely aching. He typed on anyway.

A Writer's Tale

How easily, and horribly, things can go off track for well-intentioned targets of bullying. They may be intending to "make things right" for themselves, and for others (including the organization), but if their actions are imprudent, misplaced, or ill-considered, the actions can result in shocking, paradoxical, and pernicious outcomes. I wanted to highlight what I saw in this case and have learned over many years researching bullying: that targets frequently don't know the best way of approaching the problem of being bullied (and while I am unsure of any immutable "right way," I am pretty sure I know when I hear of a "wrong way": e.g., Bill's unsubstantiated midnight e-mail). I wanted this scene, and those that follow, to show the ripple effects of how one or several small, misplaced choices can snowball into surprising, unintended, nasty outcomes. Bill's collective of poor choices included writing his e-mail at 3 a.m., fueled by his nonexpert mate's advice (and possibly after drinking the evening before); sending the e-mail without any concrete evidence of wrongdoing, such as signed statements from witnesses; sending something in writing to his employing organization without discussing this with an expert (either internal to the organization, or outside, or both); commencing a process that may not have been capable of any kind of "successful" outcome (and depending on how he defined "success"); naively starting something that might, instead, fast-track a career, health, and employment disaster for him and others; and sending the complaint to Libby Jasper, Dean of the Faculty and Bill Jolly's boss, without talking to her about it first. Readers might well be able to think of many more.

John Jolly

John Jolly sat at his office desk, across from Sue Stanton. He passed across a printout of an e-mail that he had received earlier in the day from his Dean, Libby Jasper. It was an angry, yet vague, letter of complaint about his and Sue Stanton's management of the school, their handling of various processes and responsibilities, including inappropriate recruitment processes and staff payments. John had been asked by Libby to respond.

Sue read the e-mail without speaking, then looked up at the director, passing the paperwork back to him. She sat back in her chair: "What are you going to do?"

"Well, there's no substance there. My only concern is that he claims he's got most of the staff on board to support him—but there's no evidence that he has," said Jolly, who had been gazing at the desk in front of him, unperturbed. A moment later, Jolly looked up toward Sue, changing tack: "I understand there have been some complaints from doctoral students about Bill's efforts as a supervisor. Is that right?"

Sue suppressed a smirk. "As a matter of fact I did hear something along those lines. The new lass, Sally Sonin, told me informally she'd been having problems with him. Would you like me to have a chat with her in my capacity as Higher Degree Student Coordinator and see how things are going?"

Jolly nodded. "Thanks Sue, that sounds like a plan. In the meantime, I'll write back to Libby and ask what evidence has been provided by Dr. Woodlands to support what seems to be a vexatious complaint on his part. If he doesn't have anything, we can proceed from there."

A Writer's Tale

Another lesson I hope to have conveyed is that bullies do not go quietly when challenged, and become expert, especially over time, in constructing a reality that suits their purpose. Long-time bullies will do and say just about anything to maintain their preferred "status quo." Of interest, Libby Jasper didn't help matters by sending Bill's complaint back to John Jolly for response (and, in so doing, identifying Bill), but I also wanted to show that in many bullying cases, managers sometimes don't make the best decisions. The literature confirms that poor handling of bullying cases by HR or line managers is frequent, and that such responses make things worse, for targets and for the organization. Finally, I hoped readers might learn that, often, one bad choice by a target (or anyone else caught up in things) can quickly and easily be compounded with another, and another. Meanwhile, the bullies sit back—often largely or completely unimpeded—and plot their revenge.

Act IV: A Surprise Package

Bill

Bill opened his staff mail pigeonhole in the corridor just along from his office. In it was a very official-looking envelope from Human Resources.

At first he was excited; he guessed that Libby Jasper had taken his concerns very seriously, and had probably referred his concerns on to HR or the university's complaints handling unit. Perhaps there had already been some kind of investigation into the inappropriate recruitment processes he had alluded to, he thought to himself. It had now been weeks since he had written his late-night e-mail to Jasper and, until now, there had simply been no response to him about his complaint, or his concerns, from anyone.

But as he opened the envelope, he started to feel quite ill. Then his hands started to shake. He read, and reread, the letter before him, typed on official USE letterhead. It was from the Director of Human Resources (HR):

"Dr. Woodlands

"We are in receipt of an allegation against you that involves your engaging in professional misconduct . . ."

Bill read on in disbelief. It was an official letter of complaint against him; Sally Sonin had apparently complained about him not fulfilling his duties as her doctoral supervisor, and provided evidence of him behaving in an unprofessional manner that had contravened the USE Code of Conduct.

The letter from HR also confirmed that Sally had witness statements to support her allegations, from Ms. Sue Stanton and Dr. John Jolly. Both had signed statements confirming they had personally witnessed Bill being rude to Sally. Sally Sonin had also furnished HR with copies of several e-mails, written by Bill to her, that offered further evidence of his unprofessional and uncivil behavior toward Sally; these were with regard to her having to cancel some supervisory meetings as a result of her recent bout of the flu.

Bill felt his legs go weak, and the ache in his left arm returned. He made it back to his office and flopped into his chair. He thought back to the couple of e-mails he had hurriedly written in response to Sally's whining in the last couple of weeks. He remembered Sally had been unusually difficult lately, ringing him to change meeting times over and over, then not showing up, or not doing what he asked her to do to progress her studies. Of course, none of his side of the story was on the record, he realized: just his irritated e-mail responses.

Tears pricked his eyes. He was gobsmacked. They got me this time, he thought as he reached for the phone to ring his wife.

"It's time, Bill," said Bill's wife. "You've been getting chest pains, not sleeping, drinking too much. This can't go on, Bill. We've talked about this. You can get a job somewhere else. Get out of there."

"Yep, you're right," said Bill, close to tears. "I can't do it anymore."

After hanging up the phone, Bill turned to his laptop and drafted his letter of resignation. He then got up to go and tell his colleagues down the hall what had happened, before heading home. He decided he would collect his things another day; he just couldn't deal with it right now.

EPILOGUE: TYING OFF THE BRAID

As with attempts to braid unruly hair, at some point, one must have a go at tying things together and hope that the process has helped a bit. I invite readers to consider the final scene from the case, which, I believe, confirms the ambiguity, serendipity, and harm that can arise from workplace bullying that I hope has been vivified in the case.

Act V: A Final Word

- Nine out of the 10 complaining staff resigned from the School of Ethics and Professionalism, including Bill Woodlands; another staff member's contract was not renewed.
- The ombudsman was contacted about events in the School of Ethics and Professionalism at USE. USE was asked to respond.
- There was an external, independent investigation undertaken by the Independent Investigator of Bad Organizations (IIBO), but this didn't commence until all the staff who had resigned had left the organization, including Bill. Two of these people had gone overseas to live and work.
- IIBO's report stopped short of suggesting corruption had taken place at USE, but did detail evidence of inappropriate recruitment processes, staff salary payments, and travel and cab-charge use. Its report also recommended that the USE should have responded to the bullying allegations made by staff. IIBO's report suggested a number of remedial policy and structural changes be undertaken at USE to prevent the situation from arising again. IIBO's report also noted that all staff complaining about the bullying and corruption had already left UNE at the time of its investigation.
- Events at USE's School of Ethics and Professionalism featured in newspapers, the Internet, and other high-profile media outlets

for weeks after the report from IIBO was released. One very-high-circulation newspaper showed USE's VC smiling broadly and claiming he hadn't been informed of the problems in the School of Ethics and Professionalism.

- Student numbers were likely to be well down at USE the following year, especially in the courses run by the School of Ethics and Professionalism, given the negative media coverage. A lot of new staff needed to be appointed, well after the media lost interest, including a new Vice Chancellor.

I hope that the storied collective just shown has been useful in two ways: (1) to offer substantive insights for those wrestling with workplace bullying—targets, witnesses, and those called upon to respond—especially recognition of the potential for ambiguity, paradox and harm; and (2) to show the value, and process, of combining the creative and the imaginative with more traditional scholarly work.

Regarding the first objective, the case enabled me to depict some of the routinely undiscussed aspects of bullying (such as its potential overlaps with corruption in publicly funded organizations), and the notoriously poor outcomes that usually transpire for those courageous enough to complain. "Seeing the events in action," I hope, offers a powerful learning vehicle. The case also enabled the portrayal of numerous different perspectives on bullying, as well as depicting the contribution of many small (but poor) choices to a downward spiral of events, resulting in obvious harm, and for so many. Different choices might have included: Bill Woodlands gathering evidence; Bill seeking expert advice, internal and/or external; Libby Jasper seeking advice, perhaps from Human Resources or a complaints handling unit, rather than sending the complaint back to what was claimed to be a source of the problem; John Jolly and Sue Stanton viewing Bill's complaint as a something to be professionally responded to, rather than a flag prompting them to create a vexatious complaint against Bill. Importantly, *someone* should have notified HR, a complaints unit, and senior management at USE as to the escalating events in the school long before any external investigative organizations were approached and an external investigation was required. The case enabled depiction of the nasty ripple effects that arise when events snowball and are not responded to constructively: how an escalating series of seemingly "minor" incidents can result in considerable risk to the organization, the reputation of its management, and anyone involved.

The case also enabled me to show what the literature is increasingly saying: that targets, and third-party witnesses to bullying, all suffer. Stress is increased, chronic illness worsens, acute illness occurs, and careers are destroyed; some are left unable to work, others contemplate suicide. The case also enabled me to show how organizational reputations and profitability can be jeopardized by organizational actors failing to act, or to act appropriately. The existence of policies, such as antibullying and staff codes of conduct, while vital to the successful management of negative workplace events such as bullying, have also been shown to have the capacity to operate in paradoxical ways, perhaps encouraging management to

“make problems go away,” or serving as vehicles for bullies to further punish naïve targets. The case also enabled me to portray the damage bullying can cause to business opportunities (such as reduced student numbers) by jeopardizing the organization’s standing in the community.

Finally, and returning to the second purpose, showing the value of creative writing in scholarly work, while writing this piece I found evidence of an ongoing need in me to justify the use of creative writing in scholarly contexts. The fear was that my work would be viewed as “merely” a collection of fables, and not of real value—but my fear was misplaced. I learned that the lack of confidence stemmed from past experience as a creative writer located in a scholarly environment that still tends “to measure credibility in terms of theory, detachment, and measurability” (McCurdy, 1973, p. 53). However, the case has enabled further evidence that creativity and imagination can serve as worthy inputs to credible, scholarly research. My confidence is bolstered, and I hope others wanting their writing to be about people, and for people, are also encouraged to employ imagination in their scholarly work.

NOTES

1. I follow McCurdy’s (1973) idea of fiction, as encompassing all art forms utilizing imaginative narration.

2. Discussed elsewhere are my claims around the overlap between workplace bullying and corrupt behaviors. However, while examples of this emerge in the stories that follow, corruption is not the focus of this article.

3. Three anonymous reviewers, and Professor Michael Elmes, are sincerely thanked for feedback on an earlier version of this article. Engaging with their feedback moved this article to another zone: The shared ideas and candour gave me the impetus I needed to think about what I was really trying to do, what the creative writing process had been about, and why I submitted the manuscript to First Person at all. Thank you all.

4. Anyone wanting to read more about bullying might wish to consult: Dawn, Cowie, and Ananiadou (2003), Duffy and Sperry (2007), Einarsen (1999), Farrell (1999), Felson (2000), Hockley (2003), Hoel, Cooper, and Faragher (2001), Hoel, Einarsen, and Cooper (2003), Hutchinson, Vickers, Jackson, and Wilkes (2005, 2006), Mann (1996), Mikkelsen and Einarsen (2003), Vartia (2001), and Zapf (1999). However, a full analysis of bullying was deemed outside the scope of this article and is not considered necessary for readers’ engagement.

5. I confirm that the case study reported is *not* based on events that might have taken place at my employing university. I note this because a reader of an earlier version of this article incorrectly assumed that the case was based on events where I work; it is not.

6. My UWS cofacilitator, Leone Cripps, is an outstanding professional. I elected to write this piece alone because I wanted to report *my* journey as a bullying researcher and creative writer, and because I was the sole author of the creative writing case study presented here.

7. Author’s note: This creative writing case study includes reference to characters and events that may have been compressed, changed, combined, added to, or imaginatively recreated, but that are all based on reported empirical events. Names, places, and some events have been altered to protect the worthy and the unworthy.

8. VC refers to the role of Vice-Chancellor (and DVC to Deputy Vice-Chancellor), equivalent to the chief executive officer of an Australian university—both very senior management roles.

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