Susurrations of a swansong

Patrick Alan Danaher

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Introduction

I began writing this chapter on 17 January 2022, the 141st anniversary of the birth of my great-uncle Rex, the British social anthropologist A. R. Radcliffe-Brown (see also Danaher, 1992). In some ways, that coincidence of dates is irrelevant to the concerns of the chapter; in other ways, it is central to those concerns, given that Rex was my late mother's uncle, and that family relationships are integral to the identity work explored in the chapter.

At this outset of the chapter, I need also to note that this is not the chapter that I had anticipated writing for this handbook. The originally proposed chapter, which I hope to hold over for a future publishing opportunity, was focused on the links between autoethnography and alterity, demonstrated by reference to selected critical incidents that encapsulated my developing reflections on my career as an Australian professor of education. Instead, I use this chapter to elaborate some of the susurrations or whisperings of my hoped-for swansong as that professor; in the process, I seek to articulate something of the complex relationship between autoethnography and sense-making (Weick, 1995).

From that perspective, today marked not only my great-uncle’s 141st birthday, but also a day on which I underwent two interviews for potential paid employment, with a further such interview scheduled in four days’ time. I am unsure of the outcome of these interviews, but I feel encouraged and invigorated about having been shortlisted for the positions.

Of course, the interviews and the preceding applications, and my reference to a professorial swansong, highlight my desire to leave the academic world that I have inhabited continuously since 11 February 1991, when I moved from secondary school teaching to my first substantive role in an Australian university. I feel currently in a state of occupational transition, unclear about my future work prospects, but hopeful for the identity shift on which I am working and for the relationships that I reshape.
The chapter is divided into the following three sections:

- Conceptualising autoethnography and sense-making
- Selected susurrations of a partial swansong
- Implications for identity shift work and relationship reshaping.

As with other autoethnographic research, I strive to maximise resonances between the lives of others and my analysed experiences, while acknowledging and celebrating the uniqueness of those experiences.

**Conceptualising autoethnography and sense-making**

This section of the chapter presents a combined literature review, conceptual framework and research design for the broader study reported here. In particular, here I elaborate posited links between autoethnography and sense-making (Weick, 1995) as the foundations of the autoethnographic analysis to follow.

Autoethnography as a scholarly field and a rigorous mode of inquiry is well-established and growing rapidly, as encapsulated by the latest *Handbook of ethnography* (Adams et al., 2022a). This handbook’s 43 chapters are clustered around five sections that synthesize contemporary comprehensions and applications of this corpus of work: doing autoethnography; representing autoethnography; teaching, evaluating and publishing autoethnography; challenges and futures of autoethnography; and autoethnographic exemplars. These section titles betoken a field of inquiry that is mature in its understanding and confident of its significance while still curious to experience current debates and future developments of action and insight.

More specifically, and significantly for this chapter, the editors of the latest *Handbook of ethnography* (Adams et al., 2022a) used their introductory chapter (Adams et al., 2022b) to identify five distinct and distinctive means by which autoethnography affords heightened understandings of the world and of the ways that lives are lived in that world. The second of these means was “(2) illustrate sensemaking processes;” (p. 4), which was enunciated more fully as follows:

A second feature of autoethnography foregrounds an author’s ability to offer insight into sensemaking processes, even – and perhaps especially – how we grapple with experiences that generate discomfort or that do not feel right or make sense. Autoethnographers invite us into some of the most challenging, confusing, and formative events, relationships, and social and political we encounter throughout life. … Autoethnography also creates space for sensemaking that defies logic or sits outside language and sometimes conscious awareness. This is especially true in how affect, or those sensations, forces, and encounters[,] seem to wash over, or hit, or exert a pull on us. Affects are visceral, nonconscious (automatic) responses that move us to feel, think, and relate in new and different ways.

(pp. 4–5)

My approach to writing this chapter aligns with this helpful summary of autoethnography as sense-making in two particular ways. Firstly, although I acknowledge that other autoethnographic accounts have drawn on pain and trauma that is far more extensive than mine, nevertheless I have sought to dig deeply into my previous and current experiences to underpin the analysis presented here. Secondly, affect has certainly been very much to the fore in planning
and presenting that analysis: some of those previous and current experiences have indeed been visceral and have shaken me to the core of my being, challenging my fundamental assumptions about my own identity and my relationships with significant others in my life.

There are, of course, numerous and highly varied understandings of and strategies for sense-making. Weick (1995) provided a well-known approach in his identification of seven characteristics of sense-making: According to Weick’s (1995) framework, there are seven distinguishing properties or steps in sense-making: “grounded in identity construction; retrospective; enactive of sensible environments; social; ongoing; focused on and by extracted cues, and driven by plausibility rather than accuracy” (p. 17; see also Kimmins, 2022, p. 180). Rather than explaining each of Weick’s seven steps in detail, my purpose here is to elaborate the links between autoethnography and sense-making more broadly, while acknowledging that this chapter was written with these steps very much in mind. For instance, the chapter is intended to be attentive to “identity construction”, “retrospective” and “social” in the sense of highlighting the significance of relevant relationships, and “ongoing” from the perspective of linking prior events with my current identity shift.

Against this backdrop, it is instructive to observe some of the ways in which autoethnographers have engaged in and with sense-making from diverse perspectives. For example, Vickers (2007) applied Weick’s (1995) sense-making framework in her vivid and very concerning account of being bullied at a previous workplace. Given this chapter’s focus on my current identity shift, it was encouraging that Vickers concluded her account as follows:

The writing of this piece was undertaken as an act of sensemaking. It was retrospective and required a challenging synthesis of memories, events and emotions as I tried to make sense of memories, visceral responses and contemporaneously recorded material describing what had happened. The development of some kind of theoretical framework was done in an effort to understand and inform – myself and others – as to how and what took place, and the identity shifts that took place in me as a result.

(p. 235)

Five years later, and drawing on Vickers’ (2007) work, Sobre-Denton (2012) analysed autoethnographically and equally poignantly her own experience of workplace bullying. Her sense-making entailed the powerful innovation of “play[ing] with temporality by weaving between the visceral-experiential and the theoretical”, by clustering her reflections around the distinct time periods of “Then”, “Now” and “Next Time” (p. 223). For Sobre-Denton, her autoethnographic sense-making afforded her the opportunity to “examine the intersections of race, class, and gender in an organizational culture, to make sense of my experiences and, hopefully, to help others” (p. 223).

From a very different perspective, and with a far more productive outcome, Gottlieb and Mosleh (2016) presented the first-named author’s autoethnographic exploration of his successful contributions to developing a cross-institutional initiative bringing together multiple stakeholders. For these authors, sense-making functioned effectively as a framework for navigating “in the field of participatory innovation” and for eliciting the powerful themes of “trust and power” (p. 217) evident in the enactment of that initiative.

More broadly, and in concert with other researchers (see for example Sambrook & Herrmann, 2018), Boyle and Parry (2007) advocated the development of “organizational autoethnography”, whereby “The intensely emotive and personal nature of autoethnography impacts upon the sensemaking of the reader” (p. 185). This nature thereby constitutes a vivid contrast with the formal, public spaces of contemporary organisations.
I conclude this section about the conceptualisation of autoethnography and sense-making with two different applications of these two powerful theoretically and methodologically infused strategies in the context of higher education research. Firstly, Trahar’s (2013) bald statement, “They made sense to me” (p. 370) referred to “those philosophical concepts that informed my approaches to teaching” (p. 370), and was intended to explain why “I never really questioned them. ... They fitted with the way I saw the world” (p. 370). Secondly, Roberts (2021) drew extensively on sense-making to help to inform her autoethnographic account of her identity shift from being a first-generation undergraduate student to becoming a first generation doctoral graduate. “[t]hrough the theoretical lenses of co-cultural theory and critical communication pedagogy” (p. 118).

This necessarily selective evocation of conceptual links between autoethnography and sense-making has highlighted the theoretical and methodological affordances of exploring these links in diverse published accounts. These accounts have traversed workplace bullying, cross-institutional collaboration, organisational autoethnography and higher education research. At the same time, each of these publications exhibited different kinds of identity work, including identity shifts, as well as varied forms of relationship reshaping. Overall, the intersection between autoethnography and sense-making emerges as complex and contextualised, and as generating diverse and richly evocative understandings of contemporary lives.

Selected susurrations of a partial swansong

I turn now to present selected susurrations of a partial swansong. Here I take “susurrations” to denote “whisperings” or “murmurings”, intended to evoke a personal, private voice of internal speaking, rather than the louder vocality of a public declaration (although I realise that this chapter can be seen as assuming the form of the latter). Moreover, I deploy “swansong” to refer to a final or farewell performance – in this case, of my current academic career (although I acknowledge my friend Professor Emerita Janet Verbyla’s characteristically profound insight that such swansongs can roar and groan just as readily as they can whisper and murmur, and that they can constitute contemplations, meditations and musings of a particularly powerful kind).

Drawing on the explicit temporality enacted by Sobre-Denton (2012) noted above, these susurrations have been clustered around a couple of crucial caveats, followed by selected personal experiences from the years 1981, 2021 and 2022. In addition to elaborating the intersection between autoethnography and sense-making, this section explores certain elements of my identity shift and my relationship reshaping during that period of more than 40 years.

A couple of crucial caveats

At this juncture, it is important to highlight a couple of crucial caveats. Firstly, although the chapter title refers definitively to “swansong”, earlier in the chapter I referred to this swansong in terms of “potential”, “hoped-for” and “partial”. This ambivalence and tentativeness reflect the empirical reality that, at the time of the chapter writing, I am uncertain how much longer I will be employed as an Australian professor of education, or which career (if any) I might hold after this one. Secondly, my “hoped-for swansong” is motivated by the ongoing stress of that position, and not at all by a desire to end the many cherished previous and continuing relationships that I have experienced associated with my current substantive position. Thirdly, my remaining academic writing commitments are such that it is likely that I will publish other publications after this one. Nevertheless, I intend this chapter to constitute a personally
significant transition in my identity shift from my present professorial position to whatever lies beyond it, and the associated change in my relationship reshaping.

1981

On reflection, the seeds of my decision to leave academic life were sown by certain events over the past year, which accentuated trends evident in the preceding two years, and also by particular personal events that occurred 40 years apart. Clearly, these trends and events have been distinctive, even unique, for me, yet they also resonate with equivalent trends and events experienced by many other academics, in Australia and internationally.

The reference to incidents from 40 years ago evokes what was by far the most frightening period of my life thus far. In the second half of 1981, I was completing a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) thesis in Australian history, focused on the interactions among Torres Strait Islanders, English missionaries and South Sea Islander teachers on Erub (Darnley Island) in the eastern Torres Strait that constituted “The Coming of the Light”. Some time during that period, I experienced what I still think of as “my nervous breakdown”. This was characterised by a sustained period of continued, heightened anxiety and stress, and by an incapacity to progress my thesis writing or to conduct any of my other usual activities at that time, including tutoring a secondary school student in English. I recall lying on my bed in my room at the residential college where I had lived for nearly five years, with the sensation that the walls were closing in on me, as well as finding even minimal interactions with other people debilitating and stress-inducing.

I sought counselling support at the time, but I found that of limited value, perhaps because I was unable or unwilling to share more fully with the counsellor. I withdrew from my Honours program, and I left the residential college to return home to my family.

With the passage of time, and also as a result of the erasure of memory of personally unsettling experiences that many if not most of us enact when it is possible to do so, I remember little of that period, beyond being frightened, even terrified, about what the future might hold. I was 22 years old, with my life and particularly my career in front of me. I needed to regain my equilibrium and to rebuild the capacity to be a fully functioning and productively contributing member of an occupational community, both for my sense of identity and for my ability to earn a sustainable income.

Fortunately, within that period, I recovered sufficiently to apply for and gain a teaching position with the Queensland Department of Education, commencing in late January 1982. Also, 10 years after “my nervous breakdown”, the abandoned Bachelor of Arts (Honours) thesis was completed as a Master of Letters thesis at a different university (Danaher, 1991), and 10 years after that I graduated with my Doctorate of Philosophy from yet another university (Danaher, 2001a).

One reading of my personal experiences in 1981 could be in terms of buoyancy and resilience, and my demonstrated capacity to survive, and even thrive, against the odds. Yet I do not regard those experiences in that way. Instead, I am profoundly grateful for the support and understanding that I received at the time from my family and from other friends and colleagues. Through that support and understanding, they gave me whatever impetus was needed to recover from the darkest period of my life to date. This was even more highly appreciated given that they probably understood even less than I did about what was happening to me. Also, as I elaborate below, I see the experiences of 1981 as a continuing and timely reminder, as I go through the current identity shift and accompanying transition in my life, that those experiences could easily recur. It is too easy to take mental and physical health and stability for granted.
2021

40 years after “my nervous breakdown”, my siblings and I, along with other family members, underwent the heartbreaking experience of the dying and death of our beautiful and wise mother, Phyllida Coombes. Early in January 2021, my mother told me of her diagnosis of lung cancer, and that she had decided to forego any treatment except immunotherapy. Like the other family members, I was in a state of shock and fear, wanting to help my mother as much as possible, and also hoping for an improvement in her condition. I recall my mother saying at the time, “I’ve had a good life”, not as any kind of a self-satisfied boast, but rather as a signifier of giving thanks for all that she had learned and for those with whom she had lived and learned. Her statement was characteristic of her loving kindness, of her unfailing consideration for others, of her quiet courage and of her faith-filled dignity.

2021 was filled with visits to my mother’s home in Bundaberg, Queensland, Australia. It was fortunate that my then work supervisor had previously approved that I could take most Fridays in that year as long service leave days, meaning that I had long weekends available to drive the six- to seven-hour journey between my home in Toowoomba and my mother’s home in Bundaberg. We all made the best use that we could of those visits, restrictions from the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic on freedom of movement notwithstanding. It was a delight to be able to spend Mother’s 85th birthday on Saturday, 17 July with her, her husband Ced, other family members and friends. I recall growing closer to my siblings throughout this time, including my amazing sister Christine, who cared for our mother in knowledgeable and practical ways that eluded me.

Our mother died in the late morning on Saturday, 11 September; Christine was with her at her moment of dying. The funeral service was held on Wednesday, 15 September, was conducted by Ced’s daughter-in-law Jenny, and was attended by extended family members and invited friends. Mother was cremated. At the time of writing this chapter, we are planning a trip to Bundaberg to scatter her ashes and to erect the plaque that has been created to remember her, next to the ashes of her mother in the crematorium’s tranquil memorial garden:

In Loving Memory of
PHYLLIDA NINA
COOMBES
née RADCLIFFE-BROWN
formerly DANAHER
17 July 1936 – 11 September 2021
Requiescat in Pace

2022

And so I come to January 2022, the time of writing this chapter. As I noted above, this period is characterised by considerable doubt and uncertainty on my part about what the future might hold, as well as by the associated sense of dislocation and stress. At the same time, it is precisely the feeling of burnout and unrelenting stress related to my current work position that has prompted my recent job applications.

At this juncture, I reflect that I am surprised and disappointed by what I perceive as a general lack of support from the employment agencies that I have contacted (with a few notable exceptions to this sense that included very helpful conversations with an experienced university
leader and a recruitment agency owner). Naïvely, I had expected that such agencies would be able to provide an individualised service of working with prospective employees to explain the current employment market, to identify likely occupations with vacancies, and to advise on potential retraining requirements and opportunities. Even when I have offered to pay for such a service, none has been forthcoming. It seems that employment agencies work with and for government and other large employers, and that individual potential employees need to rely on personal connections for specialised assistance.

Probably equally naïvely, I had hoped to receive a number of offers of shortlisted interviews, and potentially of some job offers, given the large number of positions for which I have applied. These roles have ranged from academic tutors and administration assistants to community workers and courier drivers to customer service officers and library officers to office managers and post office workers. I realise that I have had no direct experience in most of these positions, but I have sought in my applications to highlight my hopefully transferable skills from my university experience to these roles. Furthermore, I take heart from recent reports that job vacancies in Australia are increasing against the backdrop of the hoped-for economic recovery from the continuing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021, 2022; Hannam & Butler, 2022; Yates, 2020).

I might well be misreading the situation, but I have a sense of occupational silos in operation here. This is exacerbated by an equally strong sense that, in the much bigger non-academic working world, academic qualifications, experience and expertise often seem to be regarded as being from a parallel universe, and hence as being irrelevant, value-less and valued-less. This is frustrating personally and also an indicator of a potentially large-scale wastage of human capital at a time globally and nationally that economies are under significant threat owing to the pandemic. There might also be evidence of ageism at work, given that I turn 63 in June this year. These feelings are offset by the affirming and encouraging conversations that I had during the aforementioned job interviews that I completed a few days ago, and also by the continuing support of family members and friends.

In reflecting more extensively on my current frame of mind in January 2022, and in looking forwards to what the future might hold, my thoughts are clustered around the following seven organising devices, oriented around three themes (very helpfully proposed by Professor Emerita Janet Verbyla after reading a previous iteration of this chapter):

1. **Situation: stress and strain**
   - This job is killing me
   - Nothing left in the tank/Running on empty
   - No margin for error/No room to manoeuvre

2. **Demotivation**
   - Nothing matters (any more)
   - The game is no longer worth the candle

3. **Realisations**
   - This is (not all) my fault and my responsibility
   - Life is for learning/Life is a teacher

1. **Situation: Stress and strain**

   *This job is killing me*

   For the last several years, I have had the unremitting sense that my job is killing me – or, perhaps more accurately, that the way that I seek to enact this job is killing me. For all
of that time, I have had a sense of unrelenting tiredness, however many hours of sleep I might have had. Often, when competing commitments converge, I find my brain telling me to wake at early hours – sometimes 3.30 a.m. or 4.00 a.m. – in order to complete the ‘homework’ required for that day’s meetings. For as long as I can remember, I have worked seven days each week, and I cannot recall having a ‘real’ holiday where for several days at a stretch my thinking has not been directed by email messages and by the need to complete academic work of various kinds.

Moreover, despite my previous efforts with physical activity, and also despite my continuing twice-weekly gym sessions with Sam Davies, my excellent long-term friend and personal trainer (see also Davies & Danaher, 2017), I have continued to gain weight as a consequence of an even more sedentary lifestyle during the working from home mandated in 2020 by COVID-19, and by my successful application to be a “remote worker” rather than returning to work on campus after the working from home mandate had ceased. This application reflected my much greater pleasure doing academic work at home rather than on campus. At home, I have the amenity of the largest office/study (a formal dining room when I purchased my apartment/unit in early 2006) that I have ever had, and a sense of enhanced autonomy compared with working on campus. Nevertheless, I acknowledge my weight gain as unhealthy and unsustainable. I long for a new life in which I can spend time walking, at the gym and exercising in other ways without the current shadow of guilt occasioned by spending time away from my academic work.

Nothing left in the tank/Running on empty

My friend and personal trainer, Sam, is fond of encouraging me during our more strenuous exercises by adjuring me to “Leave nothing in the tank”, by ensuring that all my available energy is expended in completing the exercises. While I do my best to comply, and leave the training session with the sense of having completed the exercises as fully as possible, the equivalent feeling from my current work position is less positive. From that perspective, having “Nothing left in the tank” corresponds to driving a vehicle that is “Running on empty”, with no guarantee of sufficient fuel to complete the journey. A crucial corollary of this sensation is the perceived impossibility of ever “getting ahead” in my work. On the contrary, I see that work as Sisyphean in character: regardless of how many hours I expend, I can never complete the backlog of tasks expected of me, and, if I take some time out to try to regain some energy, more work has entered my email inbox in the interim. It is for this reason that I view mantras such as “Work smarter, not harder” as impractical and somewhat insulting.

I retain two vivid memories that illustrate how long running my present exhaustion has been. Firstly, in mid-September 2014, I was in hospital for two days for the removal of my uncooperative gallbladder. While I was pleased to be free of the pain that I had experienced off and on for the previous few months, I recall the delicious pleasure of sleeping long hours in my hospital bed, freed temporarily from the responsibilities of the outside world. Secondly, in April 2017, I was presenting a conference paper (Danaher, 2017) at a well-appointed hotel in Sweimeh beside the Dead Sea in Jordan. I had planned to meet some potential doctoral candidates for my university after the conference, but that meeting did not go ahead. Instead, I used my unexpected free time of a couple of days of leisure lying on a hotel sun lounger beside the Dead Sea, luxuriating in my favourite recreational reading of a detective novel – in this case, an excellently crafted narrative written by the British author Julian Symons. I remember alternating among gazing at the historically significant Dead Sea, reading the novel and sleeping in the sun, and also thinking, “This is the life!”.
No margin for error/No room to manoeuvre

In addition to the emotions outlined above, I have a strong and continuing sense of “No margin for error/No room to manoeuvre”. I see this as a direct corollary of “Nothing left in the tank/Running on empty” discussed above. Furthermore, I associate this with my ongoing supervision of higher degree by research (HDR) students, one of my very favourite parts of my current position, but also an area where there is a great deal at stake, including the students’ sense of self-efficacy as researchers, as well as their prospects for career development.

For reasons related to my previous roles as Associate Dean (Research [and Research Training]) and then as Acting Dean of the Graduate Research School at my present university, for several years I have had a large number of HDR students – recently, more than 30. I have held different roles as principal, co- and associate supervisor for these students, most of whom have been enrolled part-time. Likewise, the students have varied considerably in their circumstances and requirements. I have worked hard, in concert with the other supervisors, to support these students as fully as possible in their development as independent, successful and confident scholars.

I have particular admiration for HDR students who, for various reasons, need to engage with complex and sometimes seemingly overwhelming challenges to complete their degrees. Sometimes these challenges relate to issues associated with their degrees, such as supervisory relationships and confirmation of candidature concerns. At other times, these challenges pertain to family relationships, health and wellbeing, and work pressures (given that most of my HDR students are enrolled part-time and carry out full-time paid work). I take special interest in working with students to enhance their sense of being able to complete their degrees – it requires courage, determination and resilience to work through occasionally seemingly insuperable difficulties to graduate with high quality theses written and examined externally.

The relevance of my strong sense of “No margin for error/No room to manoeuvre” to working with these students is that, owing partly to my large number of students and partly to the aforementioned challenges that often mean that they have limited time available to complete their degrees, we need to make decisions about the conduct of their studies and the writing of their theses that mean that sometimes a Plan B is simply not feasible if the agreed Plan A is not successful. To date, I have co-supervised more than 40 doctoral students to graduation, so I have developed some sense of the criteria for ensuring that Plan A is likely to be effective, but there is always the risk that it will fail. I share the students’ anxiety and stress in these situations, and I hope for their success during the thesis examination process, and for the consequent affirmation of their identities as researchers, based on the relationships that we have built together and with the other supervisors.

2. Demotivation

Nothing matters (any more)

I feel unable to assess the extent to which my current sense of burnout and stress is exacerbated by my mother’s death in September 2021, nor whether I would be applying for new positions if she were still alive. I do know that I have felt burnt out and stressed for several years, and that the structural and systemic elements that I articulate below have been evident for all of that time. At the same time, my mother has always been encouraging and supportive of my academic career, but equally she would support my desire to move to a less stressful and hopefully a more fulfilling work environment.
Regardless of the contribution of my ongoing reaction to my mother’s death to my current state of being, one of the dominant emotions that I continue to feel is that nothing matters (any more). In some ways, this is a negative sensation, associated with a sense of bleak emptiness, encapsulated in my realisation that my mother is no longer here to talk with by telephone or by email message. This loss of “my longest continuing teacher, influence and friend” (Danaher, 2001b) is profound, and it is something that I will feel for the rest of my life. On the other hand, “nothing matters (any more)” can have a more positive valence, in the sense of the final line of John Milton’s poem Samson Agonistes: “And calm of mind all passion spent”. (This was the final line in the list of quotations on my mother’s funeral order of service.) From this perspective, “nothing matters (any more)” denotes a sense of gratitude (see also Sacks, 2015) for an amazing array of opportunities to work with a large number of gifted individuals on a range of academic and research projects – akin to my mother’s statement in early 2021, “I’ve had a good life”. Certainly, I see this meaning as a source of courage, and of approaching whatever the future might hold with hopeful confidence.

The game is no longer worth the candle

In the past few years, I have delivered two presentations with the aspiration of “Making the game worth the candle” in the presentation subtitle (Danaher, 2019, 2021b). This is a metaphor that had been in my consciousness for a long time (for example, I had used it in an earlier presentation at my current university [Danaher, 2010]). During the later presentations, I cited this definition of the metaphor and the accompanying account of its genesis:

The returns from an activity or enterprise do not warrant the time, money or effort required. For example, The office he is running for is so unimportant that the game’s not worth the candle. This expression, which began as a translation of a term used by the French essayist Michel de Montaigne in 1580, alludes to gambling by candlelight, which involved the expense of illumination. If the winnings were not sufficient, they did not warrant the expense. Used figuratively, it was a proverb within a century.

(dictionary.com, n.d.)

The concluding slide to one of these presentations contained the following proposition:

And finally …

… one of the (few? many?) benefits of ageing is to develop a more experientially robust and hopefully more philosophically rigorous reckoning of whether the game is still worth the candle, of strategies that might help to render it so and of what to do if and when it is not so!

(Danaher, 2019, slide 24)

At the time of these presentations, my implicit response to the challenge inherent in the end of this proposition was that the game was indeed still worth the candle – that, despite the long hours and the increasing competition for scarce resources, it remained feasible and sustainable to be an academic. By contrast, at the time of writing this chapter, and for the past year at least, I have ceased to believe that, and now I no longer believe it to be true for me. On the one hand, I feel immense sadness in articulating this counter view;
on the other hand, I am grateful that it was worth the candle for the great bulk of my academic career, and I am really pleased that so many of my fellow academics still find the game worth the candle.

3. **Realisations**

This is (not all) my fault and my responsibility

Currently, I am working through a strategy, agreed very helpfully with my current work supervisor at the end of last year, of divesting myself of a number of my current HDR students, and of helping to reassign them to replacement supervisors. This process is ongoing at the time of writing this chapter. On the one hand, the students and fellow supervisors with whom I broached this idea late last year have been uniformly accommodating and understanding, for which I am very grateful. On the other hand, it is not necessarily straightforward finding new supervisors, given that potential candidates also face the ‘cap’ or ‘quota’ (which I elaborated below) of no more than 25% of their workloads being allocated to HDR student supervision. Additionally, I retain a sense of considerable guilt at needing to enact this strategy, because it entails breaking close relationships that the students, the other supervisors and I had worked hard to develop, and it has the ‘look and feel’ of abandonment and disloyalty on my part, thereby vitiating my ongoing sense of obligation to these students and fellow supervisors.

This possibly irrational response – a continuing sense of unremitting guilt at not being able to complete all my work in the available time – illustrates a broader point. On the one hand, I regard the present situation as being a personal issue of my own making (and certainly not the responsibility of my HDR students and the other supervisors, or of my colleagues in the research projects that I am also not progressing at the rate that they should be taken forward). For instance, it was my initiative to agree to supervise every HDR student with whom I am working, and I understand and accept the accountabilities for me attendant on that agreement. On the other hand, it is important to record that this situation reflects also wider structural and systemic issues related to the funding of Australian universities and the administration of academic workloads in those universities. In my case, a key concern is the ‘cap’ or ‘quota’ applied to my HDR student supervision, which cannot exceed 25% of my workload. In some ways, this might seem a reasonable requirement of my university, designed to share opportunities for such supervision equitably among academic colleagues. From a different perspective, not all potential supervisors have equivalent experience of and demonstrated success at supervision, and similarly not all potential supervisors wish to supervise HDR students up to their prospective ‘cap’ or ‘quota’.

In my situation, as I noted above, most Fridays in 2021 I took as long service leave days, in an effort to restore some balance in my life. Unfortunately, in addition to my visits to my mother outlined above, I found that I was still completing academic work on those Fridays when I remained in Toowoomba, and the next two days of the weekend as well. This disappointing outcome reflected my incapacity to set and maintain achievable boundaries around my work, as well as my inability to reduce my workload to fit the available time; instead, the workload seemed to continue to grow, with the consequent need to take over time officially designated as leave.

In 2022, my current work supervisor has approved for me to take 15 weeks of continuous long service leave between July and October this year. This will have the effect of reducing my official workload for this year. It remains to be seen whether I am able to exercise the self-discipline needed to use the extended leave effectively for its intended purpose: to enable me to recreate and rejuvenate myself. Part of the difficulty with that
is my awareness that, as of the start of the 2023 academic year, I will need to increase my teaching (non-HDR student supervision) load by 57.5%, based on the current academic workload guidelines at my university. This is a prospect that fills me with dread: given that I was last teaching in a secondary school classroom in 1990, I have no credibility or currency to be able to teach successfully the pre-service teacher education courses that are likely to be allocated to me.

**Life is for learning/Life is a teacher**

I hope that my writing tone throughout this chapter has not been too querulous or self-obsessed in character. I reiterate my profound gratitude for the diverse and multiple opportunities for collaboration, development and transformation that I have experienced throughout my academic career since February 1991, when I began working at my previous university. One of the most valuable lessons that my mother taught my siblings and me was that life is for learning, and concomitantly that life is a teacher. From this perspective, everything that we do contains the potential to enhance our current understandings of ourselves, one another and the world that we inhabit together, and also life is about the joyful expression of those understandings. It is this lesson that continues to encourage and sustain me through the uncertainty of my current employment transition.

Moving forwards, while I am unclear about what the next few years might hold for me, I am clear about the kinds of activities that I am hopeful of undertaking during that period. These are centred on maintaining and perhaps accelerating my current identity shift, in order to recreate myself. In terms of paid work, I am interested in building on the limited work in proofreading that I have completed to date, such as by working with a publishing company. I am also open to exploring the option of helping to coach HDR students — not to replace or subvert their supervisors, but rather to proffer a potentially different perspective on the students’ work.

From a non-work perspective, I have two distinct goals as part of learning through living. Firstly, I want and need to devote consistent and focused time to regaining a measure of physical health, hopefully including regular gym sessions, walking and perhaps bicycle riding. I realise that I have had this aspiration for decades (Davies & Danaher, 2017), and that I find it far more difficult to achieve than progressing my academic work; at the same time, I realise also that my life depends on it. Secondly, I yearn to have the equally consistent and focused time to explore my dream of experimenting with creative writing of diverse genres. Probably in common with several scholars whose writing careers have been devoted to academic texts, I have lots of ideas for writing much more creatively and imaginatively; it remains to be seen whether any of these ideas might be of interest to anyone else.

**Implications for identity shift work and relationship reshaping**

Lest readers reflect that what I have discussed in this chapter is “a storm in a teacup”, and that this is a case of an academic who has taken on supervising too many HDR students, some of whom need simply to be reallocated to other supervisors, my response to that reaction is two-fold. Firstly, at a personal level, the unrelenting anxiety and stress that I outlined above relate to much more than supervising “too many” HDR students. I find that almost every aspect of my current work takes much more time than is acknowledged in the present academic workload system, particularly if I wish to conduct that work to the best of my ability, and as wholeheartedly as I admire seeing exemplary colleagues living their academic roles. Recently,
my new cardiologist (see also Davies & Danaher, 2017) joked with me that it is not possible to do my job to “70%” of my ability. Similarly, this is why moving to part-time employment status is not feasible: my inability to set and maintain work boundaries would mean that I was receiving a salary for say 50% of my current salary, but that I would still be working at least five, and potentially six or even seven, days a week. Furthermore, my individual anxiety and stress are of the magnitude that sometimes I encourage myself by saying that “At least you are functioning at some level”, and that I am fortunate not to be undergoing another “nervous breakdown” such as what I experienced in 1981.

Secondly, many of the experiences recounted here are not unique to me, but instead have been highlighted in a growing corpus of research focused on the intensification of academic work, in Australia and internationally. This work is in turn part of a strand of scholarship directed at equivalent intensification and other changes in the lives of other professionals (see for example Trimmer et al., 2019a, 2019b). Specifically in relation to academic work, recent publications have traversed the deleterious impact of the global university rankings game (Yudkevich et al., 2016), the importance of (re)claiming pleasure in such work in contemporary universities (Riddle et al., 2017), the characterisation of universities as “toxic” and as sites of “zombie leadership” (Smyth, 2017), the intersection among social stratification, work patterns and research productivity in 11 European higher education systems (Kwiek, 2019), a call for academics to reinvigorate their engagement with the communities served by universities from a values perspective (Hassel & Cole, 2020), and a sociological analysis of boredom and academic work (Finkielsztein, 2021). Moreover, current publications about the effects of COVID-19 on academic work include studies of the gendered dimension of that work (Yildirim & Eslen-Ziya, 2021), the opportunity afforded by the pandemic to foster a rediscovery of an ethic of care in academic work (Corbera et al., 2020) and the prospect of potential new ways of thinking about the relationship among academics’ locality, mobility and presence (Shelley-Egan, 2020).

Significantly for this chapter and this handbook, there is also a growing literature about academics using autoethnography to reflect on their work in contemporary universities that in turn accentuates the wider relevance of my analysis here. For instance, Tienari (2019) drew on autoethnography to interrogate his discomfort in moving from a Finnish-speaking to a Swedish-speaking business school in Helsinki, Finland, in the process investigating the primacy of the link between academic identity and language. Echoing the previous cited accounts of workplace bullying, Zawadzki and Jensen (2020) presented a co-authored account of bullying of a junior academic from the perspective of the neoliberal university. Finally, Lupu (2021) constructed an autoethnographic analysis of the intersection among COVID-19, the birth of her son and the generation of overwork in her academic role prompted by her over-commitment to academic publishing despite her family responsibilities.

Assembling these references here is intended to demonstrate my intention that this chapter goes beyond solipsism (Danaher, 2021a) and an excessive focus on me to evoke the broader implications of this chapter for identity shift work and relationship reshaping. I trust that my autoethnographic sense-making of my experiences in 1981, 2021 and 2022, and my current efforts to forge a new career, resonate in diverse ways beyond the narrow confines of my life. I hope also that the critical reflection in which I have engaged in the chapter moves beyond the personally therapeutic effects of this reflection by opening to scrutiny others’ views of my situation and my decision-making. Certainly from my perspective, this account has affirmed the initially posited value of exploring in some depth the complex intersections among autoethnography, sense-making, identity (shift) work and relationship reshaping.
Conclusion

This chapter has presented selected susurrations of my potential swansong as an Australian
professor of education. These have been framed methodologically by a combination of autoethnography and sense-making (Weick, 1995), which helped to provide clarity and structure around the critical reflection of the selected events reported here. This reflection in turn was clustered around elements of my current and continuing identity shift work, and around the diverse relationship reshaping in which I have engaged during different periods of my life.

More broadly, the chapter has explored my concomitant traversing of three divides: personal–communal, private–public and self–other. It is one of the distinctive affordances of autoethnography to navigate these divides and to place them in a different perspective by demonstrating the intimate and interdependent connections between the two analytical categories in each pair. In this chapter, that affordance has been augmented by the additional application of sense-making (Weick, 1995), and also by the particular analysis of the complex intersection between identity work and relationship reshaping being investigated more widely in this section of the handbook. Swansongs and their susurrations, while inherently personal, private and self-focused in character, can also speak to the communal, public and other dimensions of our shared experiences and our common lives.

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Susurrations of a swansong


