Rewild My Heart: With Pedagogies of Love, Kindness and the Sun and Moon

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Abstract

The pressing problems we face from wars to pandemics erupt against the less dramatic background of the mundane continued destruction of our planet as a habitable realm. In education, technology can be environmentally destructive in a variety of ways. Educators may feel the urge to address these matters but we also know that EdTech solutionism can create new problems as fast as it fixes old ones. Something in the urgency of the fix may be the problem. It may be that we are too desperate to fill a hole in the world that we only see through a hole in ourselves. Hence, in order to truly escape our colonised and domesticated fates, we need to rewild our very thinking. We need to examine the underlying emotional tones and waves that cause us to act as we do against our own interests and that of our planet. This conundrum is explored here through the device of storytelling using a multimodal speculative auto-ethnography to push into realms beyond mere utility and out into conceptual wilds. No fixes or solutions are offered here for the planet. Lifeless celestial objects such as the sun and moon loom large by contrast. Both have walk-on parts in this tale, and watch us as we watch them, with whatever love and kindness we can.

Prologue

> Form is like a lump of foam, feelings are like water-bubbles,
> Perception is like a mirage, mental formations are like plantain-trees,
> Consciousness is like an illusion – this is what was said by the Kinsman of the Sun. (Bodhi 2000)

On 15 December 2021, as the mercurial covid virus pulsed new waves of itself once again across an icy Europe, the blue of my Twitter feed began to light up with

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red hearts; some full, others broken. Eulogies for feminist theorist and critical educator bell hooks played out across the screen. The fearlessness of her prolific expression through the medium of the written word had left their mark on many it seemed. Her bold thesis, if it could be captured in one word, was elusive and simple: love. It is against this backdrop, dear reader, that I wrote this piece for you. In it, I will ask you to help me with a simple task: to rewild my heart with pedagogies of love, kindness and the sun and moon.

This paper aims to engage with the concepts of love and kindness in education. The contention it seeks to grapple with is whether we can use affective concepts to rewild our thinking. Education needs regeneration because the problems we face, on a planetary scale, are deep-seated. Trees burn, toxins leach soils and plastics clog the seas and the bodies of its creatures. The main culprits of the carnage, humans, spend much of their time embroiled in unskilful activities that stem from toxic emotions and social patterning, which we are often oblivious to, or powerless over.

How can educators, who wish to adopt a critically reflexive stance, respond to this? Or rather where can they respond from? If this response is from the same place that created the problems, we risk the generation of new ones. Our instinct to fix and think our way out of situations may only lead to more problematic 'Ed-Tech solutionism' (Facer and Selwyn 2021). What might a postdigital rewilding instead look like?

Education, in its ways and in its tools, appears premised on the new improved product, service or indeed person. Such futures trap us in consumption and usage patterns that are driven by a basic human unease—the feeling that there is something wrong with us or the world, but that it, or we, can be fixed. This ever present vague unsatisfactoriness of life, or *dukha*, comes about, as Chödrön (2008: 12) puts it, because the 'mind is always seeking zones of safety, and these zones of safety are continually falling apart. That's the essence of *samsara* – the cycle of suffering that comes from continuing to seek happiness in all the wrong places'.

Suffering's counterpoint however is *sukka* or joy, and it is to such affective concepts that we turn next. It is true that we have been colonised, conditioned and domesticated, but we still dream of water pooling in a forest glade under the arrows of the sun; for in our hearts, we are always wild.

Love and Kindness

A recent paper in the journal *Nature* called attention to the 'rise of affectivism'. It argues that by advancing on, and incorporating, previous waves of behavioural and cognitive research, we are entering into a new area of scientific understanding of human behaviour via emotions, feelings, motivations, moods and other affective constructs:

> Such processes have long been marginalised or ignored, typically on the basis that they were irrational, un-measurable, or simply unenlightening. However, it has become increasingly difficult to deny that these processes are not only

linked to our well-being, but also shape our behaviour and drive key cognitive mechanisms. (Dukes et al. 2021: 88)

Sensations, feelings and emotions are linked in feedback loops to our actions. Those actions can comprise spoken words, and we can even regulate each other with them:

A kind word may calm you, as when a friend gives you a compliment at the end of a hard day. A hateful word from a bully may cause your brain to predict threat and flood your bloodstream with hormones, squandering precious resources from your body budget. … These effects might not last long, but research shows that we all can tweak one another's nervous systems quickly with mere words. (Barrett 2020: 130)

This calls us to consider words as primal, close to the actual bone. As Barrett (2020) has it: The best thing for your nervous system is another human being, but the worst thing for your nervous system is also another human being.

Perhaps, there are certain words in particular we need to consider. As hooks (2018: 3) writes, about one of the most polysemous of them all: 'If our society had a commonly held understanding of the meaning of love, the act of loving would not be so mystifying'. When we try to define or circumscribe certain affective constructs, they can dissolve like foam, as if mystery were some part of their essence. In much of our common everyday understanding, the concept of love is mixed up with lots of other things. It may be some romantic ideal we need to achieve or have bestowed on us. Or, it may be, 'as the more astute theorists of love acknowledge, we would all love better if we used it as a verb' (hooks 2018: 15).

For hooks, love is what you do. The concept of kindness generally has more of this active and agentic connotation. It is in our gift, we are its agents and we recognise it in the act, much more than in the intent. In sociology, kindness is defined by Brownlie and Anderson (2017) as an object of research study according to four necessary constituents: its infrastructural quality (low profile acts without which nothing would happen); its unobligated character; its micro or inter-personal focus; and its atmospheric potential (how it subtly alters what we feel and do).

The unobligated aspect of kindness may not fit easily into systems of social organisation. It is, by definition, not required and hence not covered in formal job descriptions or contracts. This has prompted commentators to believe that 'what is subversive in thinking about higher education practice through the lens of kindness is that it cannot be regulated or prescribed' (Clegg and Rowland 2010: 721). That is not to say that it cannot be co-opted. In a review of 'kindness audits' in environments such as libraries, as an alternative to more traditional user experience research, Greenhill (2019) notes that inadequately staffed enterprises might rely on kindness in an exploitative way. This has elsewhere been referred to as 'the weaponization of care' (Richard and Caines 2021), and as a particular issue for women if kindness is commodified and gendered.

Ultimately, for education, there will be tensions between two lexicons: 'There is the language of metrics, and value added, of growth and resource allocation, of regulation, and of impact. And there is the language of kindness and grief, of

loneliness, love and friendship, of the ties that bind, our sense of identity and of belonging' (Unwin 2018: 7). In a piece outlining how kindness can be used in public policy, Unwin (2018: 9) describes typical negative reactions to its promotion, from the slightly dismissive to the outright hostile: 'Somebody is bringing a fairy tale to a meeting about Real Things'. And although academics labour under audits, metrics and frameworks, the responses individuals make to these may vary. Indeed, story-telling in certain guises may be seen as a subversive response (Macgilchrist 2020).

Speculation

This paper attempts to transition soon into an affective lexicon of storytelling. It does this not to necessarily answer questions about love, kindness or rewilding education per se but more to storify them. It uses the body and experiences of the first author—the I so far of this text—and takes them via a speculative auto-ethnography, further into the terrain hinted at in the Prologue. Speculative approaches are being increasingly used in a variety of ways in education (Costello et al. 2020, 2022; Kupferman 2022; Suoranta et al. 2022). In academic literature, they may comprise science fictions of teachers with built-in obsolescence (Jandrić and Hayes 2021), classrooms from the future (Selwyn et al. 2020), explorations of AI educational futures (Cox 2021) and medical education futures where struggling medical schools offer perks of 'comfort animals' (Cifu et al. 2021).

Students can be invited 'to co-create speculative fabulations, science fictions and radically just designs … inspired by feminist or Black SF, Indigenous scholarship or queer theory' (Macgilchrist 2021: 6). Elaborating digital storytelling games may engage students' 'technosceptical imaginations' (Krutka et al. 2022) to interrogate ethical implications of educational technology. The work of Deleuze and Guattari and Margaret Atwood may be used to 'enable young researchers to inhabit possible climate change futures' (Rousell et al. 2017: 657) such as Jasmyne (7) who writes of fellow children with mutations that enable resistance to environmental and social injustice. Entire courses may be designed around speculative approaches such as in Networked Narratives (Nettnarr). In Nettnarr, students develop fictions that challenge post-truth black mirror dystopias, via a course that itself playfully unfolds from a strange 'spine' (Zamora 2017).

Truth however can be as strange as fiction. Higher education can feel 'uncanny', appearing as 'an Academetron' (Bayne 2010). Students may be taught by dead professors who live on for years in recorded videos (Kneese 2021), or by an underpaid lecturer whose students never knew she lived in a tent—'It was cold. There were days when I remember waking up and my tent was in a circle of snow' (Fazackerley 2021). Contingent academic faculty in such precarity are 'disproportionately women and people of color' (Kneese 2021).

Are the dystopias or utopias we dream about already here? Are we in them? Or are they yet to come, still dreaming of us? To explore this, we can draw on a 'more than real' method of enquiry; one where I can convey the feeling that I am watching a comic strip of my life, where my thoughts and words appear in its panels. Autoethnographic speculative fiction is deployed here to storify issues of the strangeness of

the lived realities of education. My experience as a scholar comprises many mundane things I never talk about at work. Conversely, outside of work, scholarly literature may float into my head as untethered in-text citations. The form of speculative fiction adopted here is hence spliced with, and sprouts from, an autoethnographic vignette. It proceeds from the contention that as much as we can speculate, we should start stories in real life. It asks if we could we accept as our premise that what we have fully available to us as we wake up each day is stranger, deeper and more beautiful than anything we could imagine.

Don't Worry, We Will Get You a Wife

The following speculative fiction was in part influenced by the movie *Dune* (Villeneuve 2021) I saw with my wife on a rare trip to the cinema. I was impressed by its fidelity to the book, though, as my wife pointed out, its core message appeared to imply that a white male saviour would provide a simple fix for ecological planetary destruction. I left the cinema at one point to get some air and the starry sky outside was like an extension of the movie.

At the exit door, I met a man sitting in a blanket holding a paper cup. I have no change, I said, it's all digital nowadays I'm afraid, but can I get you something from the shop? So I ended up getting him a sandwich. I had seen his cigarettes so I got him a pack of those too. I get sad and angry at how much they cost. It's basically a tax on the poor, because rich people don't smoke anymore (Fig. 1).

I handed him the pack, which had a photo on the front of someone's teeth falling out. 'They need an image like this on Coke Zero, because I *really* need to give this stuff up', I said, gesturing to the diet soda in my hand. I crouched down beside him, as he thanked me, and I could see one of his arms ended in a stump at the wrist.

'I was enjoying that movie', I said, 'but my wife kind of ruined it for me'. I tried to summarise the plot but I am so bad at explaining things and I started giving him way too much detail, including my wife's commentary on various aspects.

'Yeah, I kind of take her point I guess', I said. 'Like there is this one bit where the protagonist Paul Atrieds (white male saviour) is trying to win a (black female) ecologist over: I've seen your dream. As Emperor, Dr. Kynes, I could make a paradise for Arrakis with the wave of my hand'.

'Yeah I get it. Beware of the charmers. That's a man thing.'

'True, true. But… if you get someone to do something, and that thing is actually for a good cause, is that not okay? Like Kynes thought she was doing alright, teaching the Fremen to grow plants to regenerate their world, but how much stuff do you need to do at that level to change anything?'

'I used to be a gardener once', the man said, 'and a teacher too'.

'No way', I said, 'I'm a teacher!' But I couldn't grow weeds so you have me there.

'Weeds are just flowers in the wrong place', he said, 'and gardening is a lot like teaching. There are some ideas you want to grow and others you want to get rid of. At least that's what people think teaching is, but I gave up on all that eventually. I stopped killing things; in gardening and in teaching. For plants that was relatively
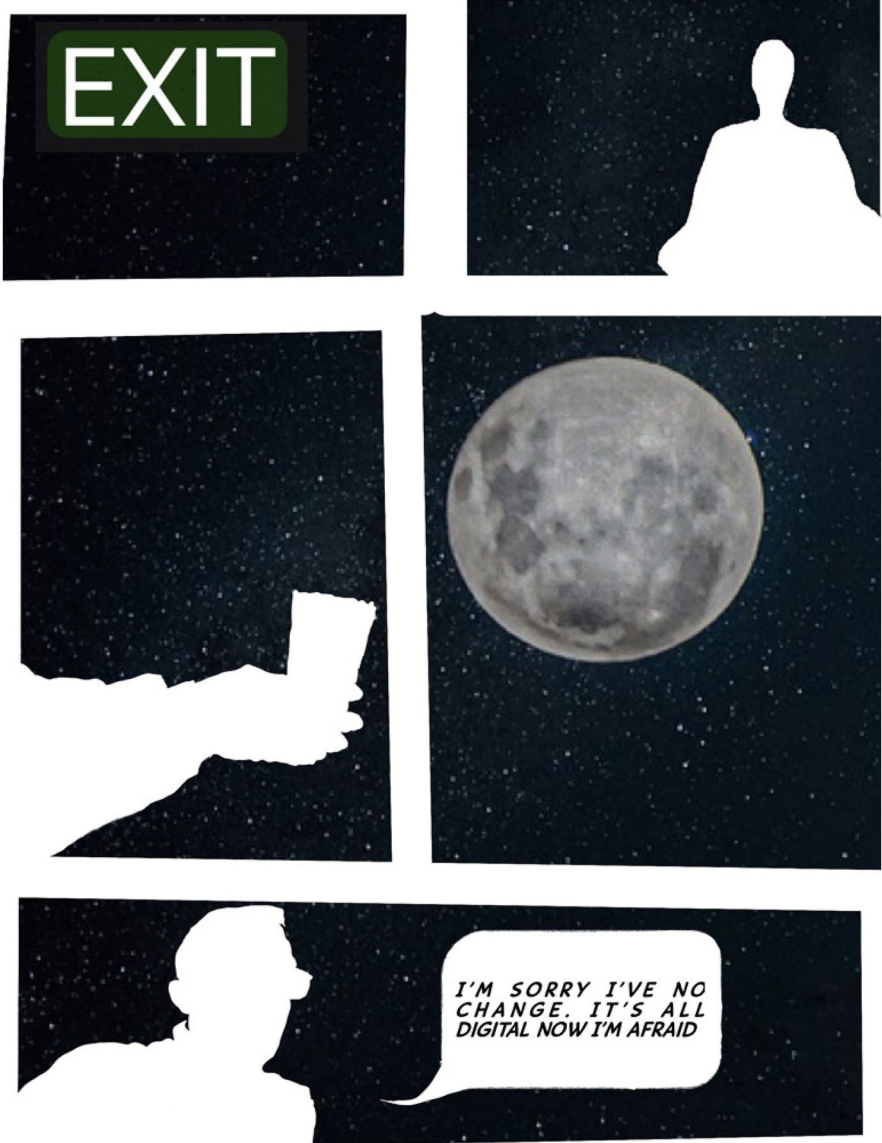
Fig. 1 All digital now

easy, learning to work with weeds, but to let ideas run wild, to even know what a truly natural idea is, that was different'.

'Okay you lost me there', I said. I shook his hand and got up to go but he kept talking so I paused for another moment.

'You see', he said, 'plants find it hard in the wrong environment and people are like that too'.

'Okay, I think I know what you mean', I said, 'like this interesting "warm spaces" initiative for refugees and migrants, which is from the title of a paper I think' (Baker et al. 2018), 'and I gather the idea is about creating inclusive spaces in higher education. Like you can have infrastructure, scholarships and so on, but you need to make people feel welcome and connected in some real sense. And, now that I think about the title, a lot of experiences are just somatic. The need to feel just your own bodily warmth is pretty primal'.

'I know that story', the man said, 'it's like my wife when it comes to the central heating! Just don't go there, I would tell myself'.

'You're… married?' I blurted before I could stop myself. It felt inappropriate to pry and also, why wouldn't he be? He was like me. Just a man sitting on the street.

'I was', he said, 'once upon a time. It was an arranged marriage'.

'Oh…'.

'I was applying for a promotion in the University', he continued, 'and my tenure document was about, I dunno 250 pages - I've read shorter PhDs. The review panel were impressed but there was one more thing they wanted me to do: get married. I was a bit miffed at this, as I was pretty happy on my own. Also, there were very few perks in my job - I mean at Christmas one time we got a branded USB memory stick from the University as a thank you. I was sliding it out of the envelope and I thought it said 128 gigs but actually it was 8! So, when they said, don't worry we will get you a wife, I was like okaaayyy…'

'But my worries were unfounded. She was beautiful, smart, funny, kind and a wonderful mother to our children. I can still see her now smiling and being so attentive to them and so tactile and just… warm y'know? Every day, as soon as she got home, I would start talking non-stop. Honey, this Wikipedia article my students are editing is sooo amazing - they are literally building knowledge and seeing what it's made of'. Or, other days when the students just wanted spoon feeding : 'They hate this group-work stuff', I would tell her, 'throwing my arms up to show the scale of the problem. That study - where students who thought they were educational consumers ended up not bothering (Bunce et al. 2017) - I assumed it was academic click-bait but I'm starting to believe it's true'.

'You are getting old Mr. Mole', she would say. 'That was her pet name for me because I'm shortsighted. But also I'm always asking her where my keys or my staff card is. And, *apparently,* I look like a subterranean creature first thing in the morning, fumbling around for my glasses. I have absurd levels of body hair ha ha!'

'Yeah so I was Mr. Mole. And she was Kitchen Knife. Because she was so sharp and also because she really cut up the dance floor. I mean, you should have seen her move. And also because she was so intelligent and sharp-witted. But also it was kind of ironic, because she was the softest, gentlest person you could meet'.

'Anyway, I didn't mind being called Mr. Mole but I didn't love being called old… *And* it kind of irked me that our conversations were so one-way. My wife worked for that big EdTech company, CompellU, which I always wanted to know more about, but there were all these NDAs so she couldn't talk about it. I have no real idea what she even did there'.

'On top of that were the legal agreements with the University about our marriage. I couldn't know anything about her background, about where she came

from, about who her people were. And that was all fine, but sometimes I would start to feel like there was this part of her that was walled off to me. All I knew was that she had been a Roman Catholic, so I kind of grabbed onto that aspect. I started going to mass, praying, and reading religious books. My favourite was Simone Weil, at first for the Christian stuff, but later for her pedagogy (Sharp 1984)'.

One day, I turned off the heat for a lecture, like Weil used to do, and I told the students: In this class we only enjoy that which the lowliest can afford. I tried to create a spirit of solidarity. I told my students, education is not preparing you for life. Nope. *This is life*. Right here in this class. Pay attention to what you do here and what *we are* here.

'Right on man!' I shouted, 'That is education as social justice! I've done similar stuff. Well, not exactly but I've been using ungrading with my students which basically involves not giving marks (Kohn and Blum 2020). No grading or ranking just passing the course. Students are rewarded for the time and effort they put in. They even get a labour contract'.

'It worked okay… ish, but it was tough explaining to exam boards. Or sometimes even students - one guy was like: "Sorry Dr Costello, but do you know what the f*ck you're doing?" "It's participatory praxis. And you are actually *damn* lucky I am not giving you a grade!" I shouted at him (later in my head as I walked home)'.

'He was not wrong. I didn't know what I was doing. But I persisted. I know people who are using it. Well, when I say - I *know people,* I mean I've seen them on Twitter'.

'Sorry, go on, you were saying, about Simone Weil'.

He continued: 'Well she said that giving someone who is unhappy your attention is one of the best things you can do. But also real hard because "warmth of heart, impulsiveness, pity are not enough" (Weil 1973: 118). So attention to things is key for her, being aware'.

'Okay, but is this like mindfulness?' I interrupted, 'Some wellness stuff the University is pawning off on us instead of addressing an actual workload issue. Also, the University owns my body now? That would be a biopolitical no thanks from me (Jackson 2020)'.

'Perhaps', he said, though "any body whatsoever—past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle, common or sublime, far or near: every body—is to be seen as it actually is with right discernment as: This is not mine. This is not my self. This is not what I am"' (Bhikkhu nd).

'Her approach was not about relaxation or feeling better', he said, 'it was about seeing God'. And he looked at me directly when he said the word God, reading my face.

'You believe in bigger pictures though?' he continued, 'You talked about creating sanctuaries for people seeking new worlds, coming from places where some part of what a country should be is collapsing? When we fashion those spaces we do it from the fabric of what is best of us. We take what we have and we make it better, make it go further. It's like that recent study, of immigrants in schools that analysed 2,047,633 student records (Figlio et al. 2021). Like, think about the beauty of one person. Okay, got that? Now imagine 2 million souls! They found that care used in

teaching immigrants actually makes the education better for *all students* in the class. Imagine that!'

'Okay but is this like Universal Design for Learning?', I said, 'That started out to help students with disabilities but has been hijacked by the let's-make-everything-amazing-for-everyone brigade (Murphy 2021). Bigger pictures can hide small stories.'

'Well… as I used to say to my wife, when I grow up I want to do large scale replication experiments', he said and we both laughed.

'But I did try to copy one study', he said, 'It was on welcoming students to classrooms (Cook et al. 2018: 145). You know the one about how a simple human act of greeting each person warmly can transform outcomes? So I did that with my students and I imagined myself to be Simone Weil (but I turned the heating back on as I thought it might be counterproductive to be smiling at them as they entered a big ice-box)'.

'I followed the protocol of the original study closely. As the *sutta* says "practice is firmly grounded when it is performed for a long time without interruption and with zeal"'.

'But one day in class, I raised my hand in *kitkara mudra* and closed my eyes for a minute, just to re-centre myself. When I opened them, a student was standing before me, and because my hand was still up, and he was drawing towards me, I did something wrong. I did something that is forbidden in every contract and code of conduct - I touched the student. I just high-fived him on instinct. And we must have connected really hard as my hand was tingling afterwards. Well, there goes rigour I thought, and weirdly my hand was still pulsing a bit when I got home that evening'.

'What took you so long', my wife said? 'I started explaining that after I said goodbye to each student as they left the lecture I met the man who cleans the classrooms. And when I was almost home, I met this lady at the bus stop and I gave her my coat as it was raining'.

'Well now you are late home!', my wife said, 'A-gain. And you are soaked'.

'She took off my shirt, put a towel around me and shook her head. I was putting a lot of time into my teaching I guess. My wife started to get anxious and upset about it. And one evening she came out into the streets looking for me and I was picking up earthworms that had strayed out onto the pavement after the rain. Pavements are not meant to be here I was thinking. I know, I should have left them for the birds. I am not sure what got into me'.

'When I got home one day my key didn't work and my wife was throwing my clothes out the top window'.

'"I love you", I shouted up'.

'I saw her disappear from the window'.

'"What about the kids?", I shouted'.

'Silence, just more clothes falling down. So I shouted again, "You are reneging on your contract to the University you know!"'

'And that was a really shitty thing to say. We loved each other - end of. So I still feel huge regret about saying that. I think about it a lot. There were nicer things I could have said. Or - and this is not rocket science - I could have just sucked it up and said nothing'.

'Jesus', I said to the man, 'I am sorry to hear that. Wow'.

'So I had to leave', he said, 'but it felt like she left me. It's funny the way words work that way'.

'Around that time the University started falling apart. It was regressing back to the land. Stones would fall out of buildings and it started to get unsafe so we had more classes outdoors'.

'I noticed a change in the students. Inside is full of nice stuff: books, colour schemes, furniture. "Oh I like what you've done with the place". But you don't say that to the sky when you go outside. In there you can be jealous of someone's shoes, or their looks, or their grades, but outside… You can't impress the rain, you can't possess the sun or a pink sky. You can't do anything with the longing that might arise in you. You can't pin that on someone when it's just the sun in front of you'.

> You just see the sun.
> It's just you looking into the sun.
> And after a while,
> It's just the sun.
> And then,
> eventually,
> it's the sun looking into you.

'Is it the longing of the sun that you feel? No, it's not. The sun belongs to itself and longs for nothing' (Fig. 2). 'You think you belong to that group of ungrading professors? You don't. They can't run wild in your heart. Your belonging belongs to you' (Williams 2021).

'But I still had this nagging worry about kindness. How can I be sure I'm doing things for the right reasons? Not just for some part of my ego, some image of me. It's like what Rumi says about love, it's the place we meet when we are longer there, when we take leave of ourselves somehow. So I practised kindness every day, but with the things that couldn't care, that couldn't like me for it. The sun and the moon are watching, but they never tell me what I really want to know: am I a good person or not? So I was kind to those things first. I tried to start from the least human. I was kind to the sun until it rained and then I was kind to the rain. And then I expanded to other things like words. When I wrote I tried to write with kindness'.

'Sometimes people get tangled up in writing. It feels painful. But those are just the briars that are trying to rewild your heart. We have all these ideas about creating cultures of feedback literacy (Carless and Winstone 2020) but there's an earlier step. You start by being kind to your own writing. Believe in it as a thing of beauty trying to grow and unfold itself for you'.

'But then… you must forget that too. Your writing is not for you. You think it's just you and the page? Think again. You are weaving loose bits of the universe back in so readers can pull them out again. And when I got essays from my students I thought about them as intergalactic messages, wrapped in bottles that somehow floated down through space to me. The first part of my feedback was always "Thank you so much for getting this far and for getting these words to me"'.

Fig. 2 Looking into you

'I told my students, don't worry about grammar, structure, idioms; hell, forget the essay itself. Just be kind to the writing; And the writing will be kind to you. Try to imagine yourself, he said, turning to look at me, writing with kindness'.

I sat back against the concrete wall beside him and tried to imagine writing but I just spaced out looking up into the night sky. It's hard to think about writing without words in front of you.

He continued: 'I used to tell my students to shorten this, or cut that, but now I say: I need you to say goodbye to these ones, let these words leave'.

'I never got to say goodbye to my wife—not the actual word. But after everything, when there was no university left, I would sit on the beach and look out into the sea. There was a wedge of light on the horizon under the moon, on the sea, made of smaller triangles turning on and off. It was like two feet were touching down, right where the moon and the waves met, toe to heel, activating panels of light. And I thought I could hear dance music and see this tiny figure out there with her head thrown back. It was my wife! She was dancing the moon onto the top of the sea. And that was how I got to say goodbye' (Fig. 3).

I saw a smile on the man's face. Then I noticed that I was still holding his hand, from the time I went to shake it to leave. It is a strange feeling to hold hands with someone for a long time, especially someone you don't even know. I said goodbye and as I got up I felt a warmth in my hand and my arm and all around my body like a glowing field of energy. I walked back into the dark cinema and tried to crouch down so people wouldn't be distracted by the glow all over my body which was gold with sensation. I ducked into my seat and kissed my wife. She snuggled towards me and then away in one movement, as if to say, you're 44 not 14, just watch the movie.

Epilogue

I often thought about that man. It was so surreal. I mean, what he said was absurd. Did he make up details based on things I had let slip about myself? Was he trying to mirror things back to me? I went looking for him sometimes, walking around that part of the city down by the cinema, but he was never there. My wife would shake her head—and it's true, she's right, I was idealising and romanticising a three-minute interaction with a stranger: ha ha!

That thing he was trying to say, about Rumi, that we would meet up again, somewhere out beyond everything. Maybe there are places you only go in your heart. I imagined where I would meet him again. It was a place like music. Its stars were hit-hats following the drumbeat of the moon. And this is a song, of such a place, where you and I will meet someday.[1]

Conclusion

Stories are not explicable. They are not sets of instructions. Ideally, they do not moralise, for such stories are rarely much fun. Stories rather should be puzzles that try to unpack us. Academic forms however by contrast usually demand explanation and

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[1] See https://open.spotify.com/album/4MDXncdz4gocAg1fhdQmp2. Accessed 18 May 2022.
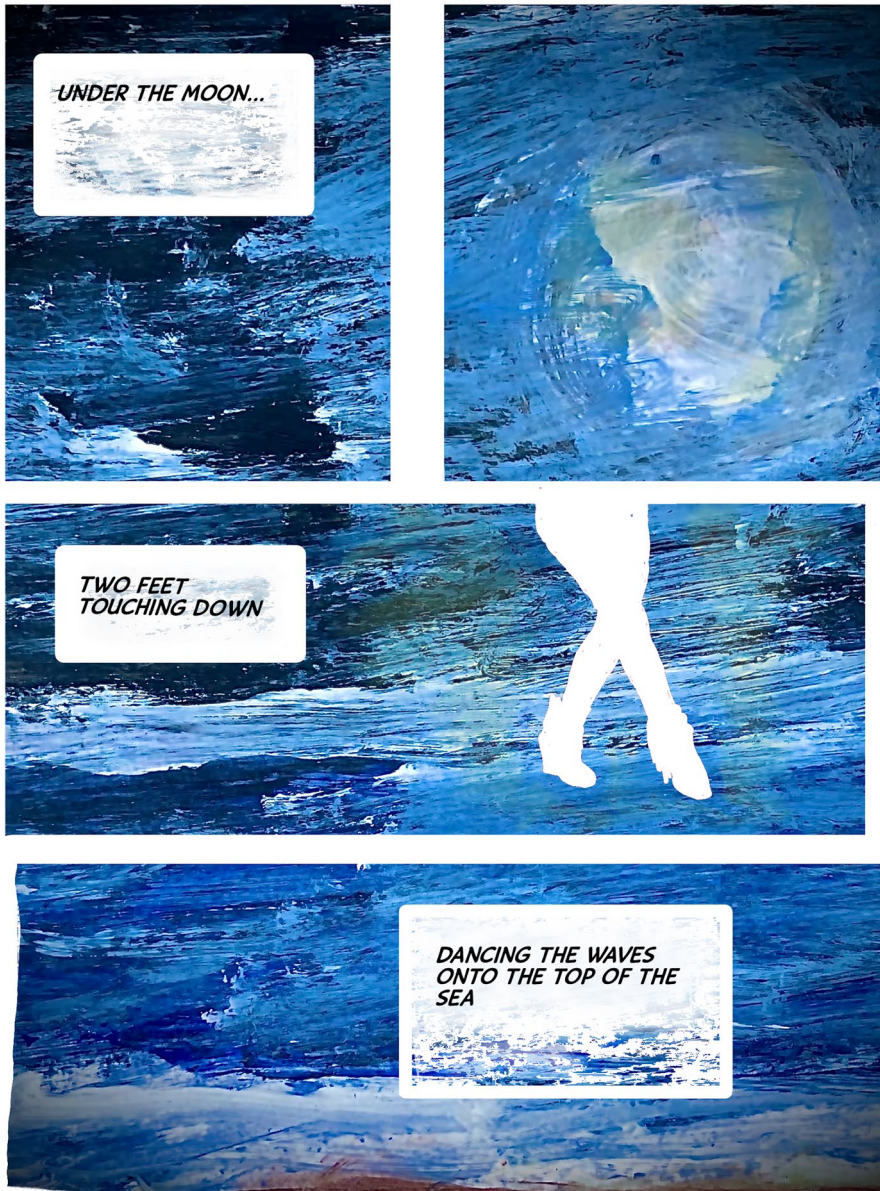
Fig. 3 How I got to say goodbye

analysis. In a search to conclude or contextualise this story academically, a recent piece by Jandrić (2022) appeared to arise as a ghostly companion. I next use this article to contextualise and link the story above to the wider conversation about the affective turn for in his piece the author expresses a 'deep conviction that feeling is just as important as thinking' (Jandrić 2022).

The article explores the affective experiences of academics around the curious axis of human connection: 'While most of us desperately need more alone-time, it is hard to find a person who actively seeks loneliness. But the two are not distinguished easily… especially because spending extended periods of time alone seems to be crucial for creative work (Jandrić 2022).

The article goes on to speak about the curious way we draw towards and away from other beings, like a tide. This of course happens to the characters in our story. The protagonist leaves a crowded cinema, presumably to be alone, but then immediately engages a stranger in conversation. Responding to Jandrić's provocation that we need to speak more about academic loneliness, I can certainly say I sometimes feel lonely and disconnected. I can also say that I often feel that everything I will ever need is fully available to me, at all times, that life is sublimely beautiful when I touch it.

The elusive nature of true human connection in the academy is well described as an interplay between loneliness and alone-time. Similar to our story, the professional boundaries with students, perhaps simply because they are there, can make us feel we are missing something. The boundaries of our professional relationships can create artificial reefs of disconnection. Or as Ball (2003), in his inimitable style puts it, an academic isolation from the self is found in 'the teacher's soul and the terrors of performativity'.

But relationships can also be deep and rewarding. Fellow academics may be collaborators with fates inseparable from ours, to whom we wish the greatest of fortune. We may be networked together as co-authors. The Postdigital Science and Education journal and book series[2] have pioneered the publication of ambitious multi-author articles where contributing voices talk to each other across the text and image (e.g., Jandrić et al. 2020; MacKenzie et al. 2021; Networked Learning Editorial Collective et al. 2021). These academic collectives should be bound by seemingly loose ties but the feeling of pride should not be underestimated in having played a part in something as strange and intangible as a few hundred words together. Authors can feel affinity to co-authors they have never met or interacted with. Via the paper, they feel connected. For, after all, who would be a sole author? Who would be the lone wolf?

No one wants to be the lone wolf, for as Jandrić (2022) rather eloquently puts it, there are always colleagues who will stab you in the back. To guard against knife wounds, it usually pays to run with the pack. In nature, the lone wolf plays an important role, however, in seeking out new territories. The conundrum of leadership in its various forms is that it is often a lonely place.

Part of me certainly craves the wild. In a recent project meeting, I arrived a day early, determined to take some time hiking by myself, before a few days of work. The people I would meet were warm, likeable and inspiring but the intensity of these days of meetings is nonetheless never easy. Off I set on the road for a 20-km walk. It rained for the first hour and I did not meet a soul. Then I met a dog who joined me for fifteen minutes during which time I told him that, while I was deeply appreciative of his company, I was becoming increasingly concerned that he should

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stop following me lest he become lost. After two more hours of rain, I met a fellow pilgrim coming in the opposite direction. She wore a poncho over herself and her backpack. As we passed each other, we smiled. I wanted nor needed nothing from her and she wanted nor needed nothing from me. That is as much human connection as there can ever be I thought, I am done with this quixotic walk and ready for the meeting now.

Declarations

Ethics Approval This study was deemed to have no ethical approval requirements.

Competing Interests The author declares no competing interests.

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