

A Journey to the Death

Book Review of "The Spaces In Between" by Carl Leggo and Kimberley Holmes

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Article abstract

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A JOURNEY TO THE DEATH: BOOK REVIEW OF “THE SPACES IN BETWEEN” BY CARL LEGGO AND KIMBERLEY HOLMES

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Abstract: This book review explores the publication of an email correspondence between Carl Leggo and Kimberley Holmes which occurred over the period of time that Leggo was undergoing chemotherapy and radiation treatment for a brain tumour that eventually ended his life. It observes his role as a super-mentor of graduate students undertaking works in poetic inquiry and life writing, and his commitment to living poetically until his unfortunate passing in 2019. The review considers some ethical issues associated with this publication and the reasons why it provides useful insights to anyone committed to academic mentorship.

Keywords: poetic inquiry; life writing; graduate mentorship; terminal illness; therapeutic writing

Initially not intended for publication, *The Spaces In Between* immerses the reader in a very personal email exchange between the two authors, Carl Leggo and his doctoral student Kimberley Holmes. For Leggo, this is a posthumous publication. The goal of publishing this work was to inform curriculum and teaching through the sharing of lived curriculum—a notion advanced by Leggo’s mentor, Ted Aoki (2004). In it, Leggo enacts with consummate compassion the act of passing on: passing on a tradition, an approach to knowing and being through writing which he characteristically called living poetically (Leggo, 2005), and passing on to spirit, the act of dying with dignity and grace. As such, it provides a surprisingly naked investigation of lived experience through illness toward death, nurtured by care, courage, wisdom, faith in language, and family.

The weave of this braided storying oscillates between Holmes’ frustrations and Leggo’s meditations from life’s precipice. Reading this conversation is like being pulled downstream by a river to some great falls which mark the death of a friend and beloved mentor. At the end of the journey, like being given a shiny, reflective emergency blanket, the reader is wrapped in academic prose, reading Holmes’ hermeneutic perspective on life writing and poetic inquiry.

Here are three reasons to get a copy and read this book:

- You believe guides are critical for anyone entering the academy, especially those who will be entrusted with mentorship (there is simply no equal in terms of Leggo’s performance in this regard as seen through daily interactions with one graduate student, and he supervised many).
- You believe poetry to be a way of healing, particularly of the spirit, and seek its guidance to emerge as an artful, heartfelt scholar.
- You believe in love beyond the call of duty.

Perhaps, as stated by the preaching speaker Ecclesiastes, there really is “nothing new under the sun” (, New International Bible, 1973/2011, Eccles. 1:9). In 1931, Walter Benjamin (1999) noted that “we ought to re-examine the link between teaching and research on which traditional academic activity is based” (p. 419). He arrives at the idea that “in short, we should not look to research to lead a revival in teaching; instead, it is more important to strive with a certain intransigence for an—albeit very indirect—improvement in research to emerge from teaching” (p. 419).

Benjamin (1999) goes so far as to say that “the whole pernicious spectrum of critical methods must disappear to make way for more enterprising researchers, on the one hand, and above all for a less banal, more considered learning, on the other” (p. 419). In many ways, this statement could be the motto and intent of these two authors. Readers are given an intimate close-up of the role of the teacher in achieving this end,

especially regarding doctoral mentorship, a role that hovers between teaching and research within the academy, especially in the field of Education.

Like a guidebook on how to excel at mentorship, *The Spaces In Between*¹ conveys the disquieting sacrifice and dedication of a master mentor patiently advising an acolyte, while enduring and eventually succumbing to terminal illness. Readers enter this intimate space through a poem by Leggo, followed by Holmes' preface, then an essay, "Invocation," comprised of welcoming invitations to write and learn to be a writer within the academy. Invocation, a play on the words *in vocation*, is vintage Leggo, a maverick in the field of arts-based research whose influence continues to gather momentum after his death from a brain tumour on 7 March 2019. Leggo played a seminal role in the awakening of the academy to the potency of poetic inquiry as a method of conducting various aspects of qualitative research. In "Invocation," he runs through the alphabet with 26 reflections on writing. He wraps his thoughts around statements about the writing craft from other famous writers, but his observations are his personal credo. In section "M," he offers advice to young writers, namely:

- Believe in your writing and yourself as a writer.
- Commit yourself to writing every day.
- Cultivate a keen sense of your voice.
- Seek to know the world in writing.
- Always read lots of other writers.
- Share your writing with others.
- Learn to listen to your heart. (p. 36)

Leggo practiced what he preached. "Invocation" sets up the pedagogical conditions by which we might see the subsequent email exchange, titled "Alliance," as a strategic practice of mentoring writers within the academy, and see Holmes both as learner and as teaching professional coping with daily systemic and domestic challenges. In the book's preface, Holmes mentions that Lana, Carl's lifelong spouse, had given permission for this publication to go ahead. Yet, her permission presents a complex ethical conundrum. The correspondences from Holmes continue, and, in fact, increase throughout Leggo's downward health spiral, while he was on medical leave from his academic world, undergoing rounds of chemotherapy and radiation treatments that lasted until he suffered a major stroke that rendered him incapable of any further correspondence. He died three weeks later.

Over almost 500 pages (in the e-book version) of a single email thread, Holmes is "Connecting" as the single subject line reads, through private email correspondence. It is like overhearing daily confessional. Holmes states in the "Final Note" to this correspondence, "the email chain entitled Alliance was never meant for publication" (p.

525). At a time when others sought to give him space, Holmes wrote lengthy emails to him on a daily basis, not just to deal with essential matters, more often to complain about how her teaching day had gone, express outrage at those she feels were less caring teachers, to call out science and medicine as unsympathetic to her concerns, or to voice her frustrations, even hatred for an individual who did not extend the kind of educational care she argues her teenaged son, Tris, who has a medical disability, requires in school. In addition, her mother, who was also undergoing cancer treatment, provides a constant source of concern. Holmes was working as an impassioned and outspoken high school English teacher living with her family in Calgary, Alberta. She tends to prioritize personal honesty (speaking from the heart) over relational or professional ethics, which becomes problematized as the story unfolds. Despite his circumstances, Leggo responds to every email, more briefly toward the end of his life, i.e. “I never have enough time to respond in the ways I wish I could. So, I will just respond with a HEARTY HELLO!” (pp. 495–496), but often sharing his poems to respond in kind to hers, which conclude almost all of her email messages—a summation in poetry of her prosaic message.

As circumstances worsen, you feel in awe of Leggo’s dedication. For instance, on January 10, 2019, eight weeks before his passing, Holmes concludes an email with the salutation “in need of a pep talk” (p. 420), after returning home early from vacationing in Mexico with her family and trying to readjust to the demands of teaching. Leggo writes to her twice that day to sympathize and encourage her. The bravery of a soul to confront the greatest challenge there is, to face imminent death, and yet selflessly embrace the day-to-day travails of another whose circumstances pale in comparison to the gravity of his own, seems worthy of sainthood. A month prior, while Leggo was undergoing chemotherapy treatments and long days in the cancer ward, Holmes writes,

I have a pedicure booked in a few days and am considering what color pink I shall paint my toes. Perhaps I will add a reindeer or some sparkly glitter that I can admire while sitting in my beach chair [in Mexico]. (p. 290)

Leggo responds,

Glad to hear about the manicure and pedicure! We need those kinds of experiences, especially in the midst of all the busyness that fills our lives. Teaching and parenting are always emotional enterprises. We must always live with our hearts. (p. 292)

A redoubt of care and compassion, he always offered wisdom.

From an archival point of view, we must admire Holmes' lack of selective editing. Her messages seem unexpurgated. She rails against political correctness in a manner that seems unconscious of positionality as a privileged white woman in a conservative white world, and, while this is perhaps an intentional rejection of the current climate of social justice in the academy, it invites the reader to question her more vitriolic statements in that regard. After one particularly vituperative email, blasting her teaching colleagues for not agreeing with her urging to effect educational change, Leggo responds

Thank you for writing with the kind of frank and confessional truth that can singe eyebrows! I appreciate your commitment to your heart, and your unrelenting devotion to writing what you need to write. Never surrender your commitments! I have had a few busy days, and this morning I had a tough meeting with my oncologist. She informed me that the brain tumor has returned—fast and furious! She will call me later today to let me know about plans for radiation—probably the only treatment that is left. So, I live with this difficult news, and Lana lives with it, too. The cancer journey just grows more challenging with each day! (p. 314)

She responds adamantly,

Thank you for understanding my 'confessional truth.' I have the unfortunate habit of speaking (or writing) what I think and feel without much regard to potential outcome or impact. Sometimes this offends people immensely, and at other points it earns me great respect for authenticity and honesty. At this age and stage, I am okay if people are offended. It means it is probably not someone I can be honest and authentic with. (p. 318)

The reader is therefore treated to statements that were intended for an ideal listener and confidante, as if reading a case study of context collapse, having suddenly too broad an audience. It certainly gives the book authenticity.

Leggo repeatedly demonstrates how to be critical yet nonjudgmental. Leggo's mentorship was motivated by love, a leitmotif, which connects them: Love for poetry and writing but also love for family, and with it, the expression of hope, even against all odds. As Walter Benjamin (2011) writes, "we must first of all speak of what is properly the sole right of love: expression. There is no love that would not be constantly impelled to become visible" (pp. 140-141). Love is the compass of their lived curriculum as witnessed through poetry, as defiance of a world dominated by desultory prosaic mindsets, by logics and differentials. Poetry is the vent, and it is the healer.

Art is the best remedy for misfortune. The conversation of the genius, however, is prayer. As he speaks, the words fall from him like cloaks. The words of the genius make naked, and are coverings in which the listener feels clothed. Whoever listens is the past of the great speaker, his object and his dead strength. The speaking genius is more silent than the listener, just as one who prays is more silent than God. (Benjamin, 2011, p. 146)

Despite his illness, Leggo managed to contribute his fair share of new and older poems to the weaving of their voices, although Holmes is much more verbose. Leggo's poems are reified, capturing lived experience playfully without pretense, and openly without ornament. Comparing their styles, it is as if Leggo's trees grew few but deliciously sweet apples, and hers are larger, more abundant, but less concentrated in their sugars. At one point in the text, after a particularly great Leggo poem, I was disturbed to see the bracketed attribution of (Holmes & Leggo, 2019), when clearly from context the poems were exchanged without collaboration. In all, seven poems, his and hers, are thus accredited, and ones that are reprinted from other books have no attribution. This misappropriation occurs after what is my personal favourite poem in this book, which Leggo describes as "a 'somewhat grim' poem, but a poem that evokes much of my spirit these days: If I Knew I Was Dying" (p. 307). She responds "Dear Carl, 'If I Knew I Was Dying' brought tears to my eyes. Your relationship with Lana is so beautiful as your first thought was to write her a poem and tell her how beautiful she is" (p. 310). Clearly, this was not a collaboratively generated poem. Why, then, would the publisher allow it?

Through her relentless productivity, she earns her mentor's praise, and my preference is for one poem, "The Ride" (p. 384), about her sons going parasailing in Mexico. Leggo typically responds by suggesting the line he likes best. "I love the poetic line, 'quickly disperses into the wind swirling and whirling with the birds in the sky.' May we always swirl and whirl" (p. 386), he writes. Toward the end of the correspondence portion of this book, Holmes' husband is given a job offer in Germany, and the family are determined to join him, although she remains anxious waiting on the Calgary School Board to grant her leave. Leggo encourages her to go on this adventure throughout the final emails they exchange, telling her "May you always be ready to say 'yes' to adventures!! . . . I send hope for calm in making decisions. With love, Carl" (p. 452).

This book also presents a perspective of spirituality—not religion per se, although that is present in various ways throughout, and appropriate given that Leggo attended seminary school and had, at one time, entertained ministry as an occupation. But the spirituality of this book is about faith that is firmly rooted in language. At 7:20 p.m. on New Year's Eve, on the verge of 2019, Leggo writes back, "Thank you, Kimberley, for all your wonderful gifts of love and language, of spirit . . ." (p. 395). Holmes, while a

staunch defender of Christmas and full of prayers, both to her deceased grandparents and to higher powers, occupies a hybrid spirituality, capitalizing Essence, speaking of portals, spicing conversation with Buddhist concepts and yoga practice. Upon reading that Leggo's radiation treatments were unsuccessful, she offers her opinion that perhaps you may be 'returning to your starting place.' Maybe we are all just energy that temporarily takes up a physical body and then returns to energy of the Universe or maybe even home to God. I don't know if I believe in a God, but I would like to. (p. 511)

Leggo, however, has a resolute faith, a faith in words and what language may teach those who listen and write: On January 24th he proclaims, "I linger always in poetry. I know poetry will show me the ways I can journey" (p. 457), knowing that his earthly journey was to be cut short, and it was time to begin preparing for the end. Holmes has a moment of grace realizing Leggo's end was near:

Our correspondence has been a bit of a lifeline for me...writing provides a type of release, a point of surrender where I can share my thoughts and feelings and have another bear witness to the journey. (p. 472)

Pouring her thoughts into the confessional inbox, she reaches out with poetry to her ever-attentive supervisor. In response to her fears about his imminent passing, he shares this famous biblical passage with her:

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails. (New International Bible, 1973/2011, 1 Cor. 13:4-8)

This parting gift from Leggo—biblical, poetic, from the heart —feels very much like he was delivering some final spiritual guidance, for these words sum up what Holmes most needed to hear, as suppliant, as fellow poet, as friend, as teacher, and as student.

The end of the exchange occurs in February when, after two days, Leggo has not responded to Holmes, for the first time throughout. Her fears that he no longer can respond are realized. I found myself wanting to know how her part of the story concluded: Did she go to Germany, carry out the last urging of her beloved teacher? She chooses not to reveal this information. Instead, she follows her enthusiasm for exploring the German hermeneutic philosophy which had excited her when she was planning for the journey. These philosophers become the theoretical framework for her essay "Requiem: Living Writing" which concludes this book.

The closing essay performs a complete about face. It is back to academic discourse, drawing on philosophers such as Gadamer to connect notions of life writing and poetic inquiry with teaching and autobiographical research. It provides a sense of closure to their journey. All traces of intimacy in this essay are put aside, adopting instead the pseudo-objectivity of more traditional academic texts, like the cloak of Discourse is back on the bare skin of confessional honesty. The abrupt change is like a rupture; the inspiration that drove a freedom with words in the living exchange between teacher and student, between writers reflecting on and sharing their stories, vanishes. Such freedom was the core of Leggo's spirit and philosophy, and you feel the loss. In prosaic reflection, Holmes comments, "we write to understand this journey of life, and we read to recognize the other seekers who travel beside us and share the experience" (p. 537). In many ways, she has absorbed the teachings and is now infusing them back into the wheezing and rumbling of the academic machine. This closing essay lacks the rebellion of spirit that characterized the work of her mentor, about whom she writes, "Dr. Leggo lived with love and was my committed teacher to the very end. His life was a love story that shall live on in all those he touched and inspired" (p. 525). His life was dedicated to writing and teaching as healing art, and as a model of research in the academy. We have much to be grateful for, having such an intimate example shared so that others might model it.

If you find yourself questioning your faith in language, your motivation as a teacher and poetic inquiry researcher, your capacity to be a good mentor, or your love for poetry as healer and bridge to the great beyond, then this is an enlightening book and will provide the motivation to carry on.

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ENDNOTES

1. Unless otherwise specified, all citations and page numbers are from the e-book version of Leggo, C., and Holmes, K. (nd). *The Spaces In Between*. Apple Books.