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Risk

by Pamela Richards

The bulk of this chapter is by Pamela Richards, a sociologist who teaches at the University of Florida, but it needs some introduction and explanation. I had been very pleased with the results of asking Rosanna Hertz to write to me about what she meant when she said that some ways of writing were "classy." I was therefore on the lookout for a chance to see what else I could discover by persuading people to write to me about what they meant by their offhand remarks. I didn't have long to wait.

I have known Pamela Richards since she began her graduate work at Northwestern. After graduating and beginning her teaching career at Florida, she continued to do technical statistical studies in criminology, in the style of her dissertation. After several years, she decided to try something different and use her substantial fieldwork skills to do a study of the Florida state women's prison located near Gainesville. She thought

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the study would be more difficult than it turned out to be. The prison officials made her entrance easy, and the residents, initially suspicious, soon talked to her freely and gave her access to most prison activities.

After a year she had accumulated a substantial file of field notes and knew a great deal about life in this prison. She thought she ought to begin writing up her results. We had corresponded earlier about her fieldwork problems, so she confided that she was having trouble getting started. Since she had successfully written up her earlier research, she thought there might be something about qualitative materials that required a different approach, and she asked me about it.

I brought out my standard remedy, mentioned earlier, suggesting that she sit down and write whatever came into her head, as though the study were done, but without consulting her field notes, the literature on prisons, or anything else. I told her to keep typing as fast as she could. When she got stuck, I suggested, she should type in "I'm stuck" and go on to another topic. Then she could read the results and see what she thought was true. In that way, she would find out how to analyze her field materials, because she would have to check them to see if what she thought was true really was and, if not, what was. In any case, I said, she could produce a lot of rough draft quickly, and that would be a start.

I have given this advice to many people over the years. Not many take it. They don't argue with me, they just don't do it. I had always found that hard to understand, but the results of my advice to Pamela helped me to see why they were so balky. She wasn't balky, but, because she was reflective and articulate, she could make clear what others had found troublesome.

For a while, I heard nothing from her. Then she wrote to say that she had followed my advice and was enclosing the fifty pages she had written in ten days as a result. That tickled me, of course. It's rewarding to see

your advice pay off. But her accompanying letter raised what turned out to be an important question, one for which, with a little prodding, she provided a wonderfully detailed answer.

She wrote that she had rented a cabin in the woods to live in while she tried the experiment of writing the draft. "Even though I knew it would be a very high-risk operation," she said, "I decided to try it anyway." I couldn't understand what she meant. She was a well-established professional who had published in respected journals and coauthored a book. She gave papers at professional meetings and had just been promoted and given tenure. She had, in other words, been through the scariest trials that afflict young academics. Where was the risk?

Here was my chance to use the "research method" that had been so successful with Rosanna Hertz. I wrote Pamela, asking her to explain what was so risky about sitting at a typewriter for ten days and writing any damn thing that came into her head. At worst, I pointed out, she would have wasted the time she had spent on it, but that can never be much of a price for someone who otherwise might not have written anything at all.

Again I didn't hear for a while. Then I got the letter that follows, explaining honestly and personally what lay behind that casual remark. I originally intended to use what she wrote as raw material for an analysis of the problems of risk. As I reread what she had written, however, it was clear that I could add very little to her story and analysis. So I asked her if she would be author of the body of this chapter, for which I would simply write an introduction and whatever else was necessary to relate it to the rest of the book. She agreed. It's an unorthodox way of doing things, but it seems the best and most honest way of getting what needs to be said said. What follows is her letter answering my question.

Dear Howie,

I just finished two cups of coffee while thinking about the issue of risk. My meditations have to start with three dreams that I've had in the last week. Two are about risk (among many other things, I'm sure) and one is about pushing through the risk. Actually, only two are dreams, the other is a different sort of midnight event that I suffered through right before I received your letter.

In my first dream, I had sent copies of three chapter drafts to a close friend I've known since graduate school. They were the same drafts that I'd sent to you. (I haven't really sent her anything yet.) She and I met at the American Sociological Association meetings in San Francisco, and she brought a huge stack of written comments with her. She was angry with me, and the comments were scathing. They went on for page after page: "This is absolutely the stupidest stuff you've ever written. . . . How could you say such things?. . . . Don't you realize the politically objectionable nature of what you've said here. . . . What's wrong with you, haven't you any sense at all? . . . This is nothing but bullshit. . . ." As I read through the stack of comments, she sat there and simply glowered at me, and I felt like she wanted to take me by the shoulders and shake me till my teeth fell out. Naturally I began to cry—silently, with the tears running down my face. I wanted to wail and keen and run away, but because we were at the meetings and there were all these colleagues around, I had to keep as good a face on it as possible. I felt terrible. Betrayed, perhaps, but mostly as if I had let her down. I felt that I had failed to measure up to what she expected of me, and that this preliminary work had somehow demonstrated that I was a shit—intellectually, personally, politically, and morally. I struggled up from the table where I was reading the comments. She leaned back in her chair and watched me. Her face was cold and the anger had turned to disgust. Then somehow I was pushing my way through a crowd of

conventioning sociologists (none of whom I knew), trying to get out. I kept bumping into them, saying "Excuse me," but no one responded much. They didn't even really look in my direction when I ran right into them. Then I woke up.

Now for some balance. I had a second dream that night, it seemed to be right after that one. (I'd been reading Lillian Hellman's *An Unfinished Woman* and *Pentimento*. Over and over and over. I don't quite know why.) In the second dream I was sitting in a chair composing things for the book on the women's prison. I'm not sure what chapter or what topic, but the words were flowing beautifully. I wasn't writing them down; instead I was speaking them, and they just rolled out of my mouth. Everything was perfect, the style was gorgeous, and I was conscious of the fact that it all sounded as if Lillian Hellman were writing it—it was exactly the same style, the same marching sentences, the same feel and expression. It was wonderful. I felt very powerful and fully in command of what I was doing. I knew it was good stuff, knew it was elegant, and even began gesturing as I was speaking, almost as if it were oral interpretation. When I awoke, I just sort of floated up into consciousness slowly and comfortably, very pleased with myself and what I had accomplished.

But then, two nights ago I flashed out of a deep sleep (no dream this time) with a perfectly formed, crystal-line conviction. I knew, absolutely and with complete certainty, that I was a fraud. The knowledge wasn't constructed through some explicit argument; it didn't develop out of anything I recognized; it was just *there*. So I began turning it over in my mind, trying to see what might be on the underside, and it began to take on better form: "I am a fraud because I don't work the way everyone else does. I don't read the classics as bedtime reading; hell, I don't read anything except weird novels and stuff that has nothing to do with my 'work.' I don't sit in the library taking notes; I don't read the journals cover to cover; and what's worse, I don't want to. I am

not a scholar. I am not a sociologist because I don't know any sociology. I haven't the commitment to steep myself in the ideas and thoughts of *The Masters*. I couldn't converse meaningfully about *The Literature* on any topic including those in which I am allegedly a specialist. Even worse, I have the temerity to claim that I am doing a study of women's prisons, when in fact I haven't done it right. I don't know all sorts of things I ought to know, and can't seem to force myself to do it the way it ought to be done. Worse still, I know I have to go back soon and do another data push, filling in the holes, expanding things, and doing it right this time. And I don't want to. I'm too tired."

Not too useful for the middle of the night, right? God, it was torture. I went round and round on these sorts of things, getting angry and frightened by turns. I simply couldn't shake the conviction that I was a fraud. The main reason? I don't "do sociology" the way all my colleagues appear to do it, and the way it's supposed to be done. (And I've had a dry period as far as writing goes—almost two weeks—which leads rapidly to the conviction that I am a lazy parasite who doesn't do anything, anything at all.) The fact that I know that no one works the way they say they do, and that no one hews the perfect methodological line doesn't help much because I cannot translate this knowledge into gut-level belief. I feel vulnerable. Others can get me if I let on that I am a misshapen lump of a sociologist, even if they are equally misshapen.

So what does all this have to do with risk? For me, sitting down to write is risky because it means that I have to open myself to scrutiny. To do that requires that I trust myself, and it also means that I have to trust my colleagues. By far the more critical of these is the latter, because it is colleagues' responses that make it possible for me to trust myself. So I have dreams of self-doubt and personal attack by one of my closest and most trusted friends.

God, it's hard to trust colleagues. There's more at

stake than simply being laughed at. Every piece of work can be used as evidence about what kind of a sociologist (and person) you are. Peers read your work and say, "Hell, that's not so bright. I could do better than that. She's not so hot after all." (And, by extension, they decide that your public act of sociologist is fraudulent.) The discipline is set up in such a competitive fashion that we assuage our own insecurities by denigrating others, often publicly. There's always a nagging fear (for those of us who are junior, unknown sociologists) that even peers can make offhand comments about us that will become part of our professional image. If those comments are critical or negative, it's dangerous. This makes it very risky to give drafts of anything to peers. Few people understand what working drafts are. They assume that first drafts are just one step removed from being sent out for review. So if you show up with a working first draft, you worry about what could happen. They could decide that it's shoddy work, poorly constructed, and really quite sloppy. Their conclusion? That you're not much of a sociologist if you pass around such crap. And what if they tell that to others?

But say you can convince them that a working first draft is indeed a working draft, that it has been whapped out in a stream of consciousness fashion, that it is truly just for ideas. It's still terribly risky because the reader may not be looking for great grammar and well-turned phrases, but she is looking for stunning ideas. In some ways this is even more terrifying. It's ideas that are on the line, not ability to write. How often have you heard someone say, "Well, she may not be able to write, but god, is she brilliant!" It is OK to write like a college sophomore if you are bright. If you give someone a working draft to read, what you're asking them to do is pass judgment on your ability to think sociologically. You're asking them to decide whether you are smart or not and whether or not you are a real sociologist. If there are no flashes of insight, no riveting ideas, what will the reader conclude? That you're

stupid. If she tells that to anyone else, it's the kiss of death. Hence the fear of letting anyone see working drafts. I cannot face the possibility of people thinking I'm stupid.

Most of these points also apply to letting sociologists other than your peers see your work, but with something of a twist. There are times when giving your work to senior colleagues seems even more dangerous than giving it to peers. Say you're an untenured faculty member. What is the practical outcome of getting known as a sloppy worker (scenario 1 above), or a concrete brain (scenario 2)? What if members of the tenured faculty reach this conclusion about you and your work? No grants, no job offers, no promotions. That's risky. Professional reputation is tied to professional position, and few of us have the power to say, "I don't care what you think."

To overcome these fears, to take the risk of being thought sloppy or stupid, you have to trust your colleagues. But the discipline is organized in a way that undermines that trust at every turn. Your peers are competing with you psychologically (ah, the perversity that allows me to feel better when someone else eats dirt) and structurally. Tenure, grants, goodies are becoming more and more part of a zero-sum game, as the academic world feels the current economic crunch.

So peers are hard to trust, especially those close to you: those in your department or those in your specialty. It's also very easy to fear your senior colleagues because you feel that they are constantly judging you. They're supposed to, because they are the ones who feel that they have the duty to weed out the good from the bad in this young crop of academics. They do talk to one another about your work and tell one another what they think of your potential. So how can you trust them not to tell tales when they decide that your work isn't very good?

This problem of trust is critical because it undermines the kind of emotional and intellectual freedom

that we all need if we are to create. Who can you trust? I imagine there are a few people who are so confident that they don't really worry about what colleagues think, but they're a special breed, a very uncommon type. They just charge ahead, dropping off manuscripts left and right, filling up people's mailboxes with page after page of interesting and useful ideas. How is it possible? Some of them have the kind of personality that gives them this ability; others (most) have the structural freedom that gives them more power to say, "I don't give a damn what sociologists are 'supposed' to do, I'm doing what I want." I've noticed a little bit of this (a very little bit, I'm afraid) in myself now that I have tenure. It's not that I necessarily trust anyone more, it's just that I can be less concerned about the impact of their negative judgments.

But trust—. Who can you trust? When I think about the people I trust to read my work, I realize that they are people who already know how stupid I can be: the people I went to graduate school with, the people who taught me sociology while I was in graduate school, and a few people since that time whom I have come to know as friends as well as colleagues. People who knew me in graduate school have seen it all, and I know that with them there's only one way I can go: up. They've seen my early attempts to write and think, supported me through that, and believed that there was something lurking there beneath all the confusion. So I trust them. And, not incidentally, they trust me. We share things back and forth because of those early bonds. After all, nothing could rival the pain involved in those first attempts to sneak out into the world, scribble a few notes, and then come home and try to make something of it. And nothing can rival the exhilaration of having someone tell you that those tiny, tentative offerings were *good*. The colleagues since then who have also become friends are few but precious. Our mutual trust comes from having struggled to overcome the structural barriers that originally divided us. Like all friendships,

they're the product of those cautious little dance steps that move you close together and then apart, near again and then farther away, each approach creating a bit more trust and concern. I have no prescription for creating those trusting friendships, though I wish I did. With me it's highly idiosyncratic, although it sometimes comes from working on a shared research project.

So these are the people I trust with working drafts. The professional risk is minimized by our common history. Their responses to me do something important, something absolutely critical if I am going to be able to continue to construct working drafts. Their responses convince me to trust myself, because for me, there's another great risk involved in writing. It's the risk of discovering that I am incapable of doing sociology and, by extension, that I am not a sociologist and therefore not the person I claim to be. The risk of being found out and judged by colleagues is bound up in the risk of being found out and judged by myself. The two are so closely interwoven that it is often hard for me to separate them. How can you know that you are doing OK, that you are a sociologist, unless someone tells you so? It's other people's responses that enable me to understand who I am.

These then are the twists of risk: I trust myself (and can therefore risk writing down my ideas—things that I have made up) primarily because others I trust have told me that I am OK. But no one can tell me that until I actually do something, until I actually write something down. So there I am, faced with a blank page, confronting the risk of discovering that I cannot do what I set out to do, and therefore am not the person I pretend to be. I haven't yet written anything, so no one can help me affirm my commitment and underscore my sense of who I am.

I need to mention something else about gathering confidence from the feedback of trusted friends. You have to trust these people not just to treat you right (not to be competitive with you, not to tell tales when you

mess up), but also to tell you the truth. I must believe *absolutely* that if I write crap or think idiotic thoughts they will tell me. If I can't trust them to tell me the truth, then their feedback will not help me trust myself. I'll always wonder whether my ideas are really good, or whether they're just trying to be nice. The feeling that someone is humoring me is more damaging to my sense of self than outright attack. Sure, we all tell little white lies to each other. But there's got to be an underlying honesty, or I really start spinning. We must believe that it's no sin to make mistakes and no sin to criticize, otherwise feedback is useless.

How do I try to deal with all this risk and get myself moving? To begin writing at all, I sometimes have to look backward. I say to myself, "Well, I may not have written about prisons before, but I did write about juvenile delinquents, and people seem to think that was acceptable." It's at least a small bit of comfort. Or I look far to the future: I call trusted friends and tell them about my work. I run on and on, they make appropriately comforting noises, and then I feel a bit stronger. Sometimes I feel strong enough to begin writing. There's something that I think many of us believe: talking about work is less of a risk than writing about it. In part that's because no one remembers the ideas that you speak. But it's also as if we have an informal agreement not to hold one another responsible for anything we say. So I can throw out some safe comments, gather reinforcement, feel better about myself, and maybe take that first risk. But there is a catch here too. Because what we say doesn't count, it is easy to think of these conversations as inconsequential bull. But if I think that, then the listener's positive feedback is not credible, because I conclude she is responding to my act, my sociologist's facade, rather than to any meaningful ideas. If, however, I can learn to take talk seriously, people's responses can help me get the first words down on the page.

In some ways, writing gets easier the more you do it,

because the more you do it, the more you learn that it's really not as risky as you fear. You have a history on which to draw for self confidence, you have a believable reputation among a wider number of people whom you can call on the phone, and best of all, you have demonstrated to yourself that taking the risk can be worth it. You took the risk, produced something, and *voila!* Proof that you are who you claim to be. Though I must also admit that it's not as easy as I'm making it sound. My writing history gives me some confidence, but I look at my past work with mixed emotions. It looks awkward and full of errors, and I tell myself that I must do better. My expectations change constantly, and I continually redefine what I consider to be good work. This means that every time I sit down to write I find myself wondering whether I can really do this stuff at all. So writing is still a risky activity.

But what I seem to be learning as I spend more time writing is that the risks are worth taking. Yes, I produce an appalling amount of crap, but most of the time I can tell it's crap before anyone else gets a chance to look at it. And occasionally I produce something that fits, something Lillian Hellman might have written, something that captures exactly what I want to say. Usually it's just a sentence or two, but the number of those sentences grows if I just keep plugging away. This small hoard of good stuff also helps me take risks. When I feel as if I simply cannot write, I sometimes go back and reread sections of something I've written that I like. It reminds me that there are two sides to risk. You can lose, but you can also win. I tend to think only of losing, and that makes me fearful. Rereading some good stuff can sometimes get me started when other stratagems fail. And I'm also seeing that the negative side of risk-taking isn't as bad as I fear. I can hide the worst of the writing I do. No one besides me need ever see it—and I throw it out as quickly as I can. What I show others are things that I think have some merit, and even the occasional paragraph that rolls beautifully off the

platen. In other words, I have some degree of control over the risks involved in writing and letting others see what I have done. I am not completely at anyone's mercy, not even the mercy of my own impossible demands for perfection. I am allowed to throw things away.

So. But it's the complexity of risk, its dual nature, that allows me to dream of being attacked by a friend and of writing like Lillian Hellman, both in the same night. As I write more and more, I begin to understand that it's not all-or-nothing. If I actually write something down, I'm liable to win a bit and lose a bit. For a long time I worked under the burden of thinking that it was an all-or-nothing proposition. What got written had to be priceless literary pearls or unmitigated garbage. Not so. It's just a bunch of stuff, more or less sorted into an argument. Some of it's good, some of it isn't.

I have nothing to add to this analysis. Pamela Richards has explored in detail the organization of peers and superiors characteristic of the world of the young academic and shown vividly how it affects one's willingness to take the chances that trying to be a professional intellectual confront you with. Having two personal stories in this book gives you a feel for what is peculiar to the person and what is generic in the situation and process. I don't know how typical these feelings are of other fields. I think they afflict most academics and intellectuals.

Seven



Getting It out the Door

Tracy Kidder's *The Soul of a New Machine*, an account of an engineering team creating a new mini-computer, taught me a useful expression: "getting it out the door." People in the computer industry commonly use it to refer to the final stage in the development of a new product. It takes a long time to create a new product: conceive the idea for it; translate the idea into plans for hardware and get the hardware built; simultaneously create a software operating system to control the hardware and the applications and programs that will make the machine worth having built; write the instruction manuals from which people will learn how to use it; shrink wrap the books and disks; and finally see the product shipped out to dealers and users.

The industry has a special expression for completing the process because so many things can interfere with it happening. Many projects never get out of the door. The hardware doesn't work the way it's supposed to.