

Taken-from-Life: The Tasks of Autobiography for Adult Learners

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EVERY life is a story waiting to be told. Autobiography transforms that story into a written text in which the author reflects on the pattern of his or her life, on the deeper meaning and relevance of certain events and experiences, and on the possible larger story that is revealed. Whereas autobiography is often motivated by some kind of conversion—some radical change—in the writer’s life (Olney 1998) and arises naturally in the course of life review by elderly adults (Birren and Cochran 2001), rarely do individuals have the opportunity to write their life story in the course of their early adulthood, and rarely does this opportunity arise in the course of their formal education. However, in recent years, the “turn to narrative” among educators has signaled a possible reevaluation of the place of story in educational practice and research (McEwan and Egan 1995, vii). Autobiography, in particular, is becoming recognized as an instructional method for promoting personal development through self-reflection and self-definition (Gornick 2001, 14) as well as self-directedness and personal empowerment (Dominicé 2000, 5). Moreover, as a wellspring of research data, autobiography offers educators a glimpse into the lives of adults that

few other research methods can. The potential of autobiography for enlarging the understanding of both learner and educator is the focus of my work, and in this essay I explore the uses of autobiography by adult learners and consider its value for adult development.

Learning That Everyone Has A Story

The practice of using autobiography as an instructional method came to me by pure chance. In a graduate course on adult learning and development, I introduced my students to the book, *Your Mythic Journey* (1989), in which authors Sam Keen and Ann Valley-Fox provoke readers to imagine writing five chapter titles of their life story. In his weekly journal, one student took up the challenge and listed his five chapter titles, among them “Before Prisoner of War” and “After Prisoner of War.” Reading these chapter titles somehow awakened me. How could this student have lived such a life, of which I, his teacher, knew nothing? What might be the stories of the others in my class? In what way might their stories be affecting their participation and progress in this class? These questions prompted me at the next class to propose to my students an alternative final writing assignment: “Imagine that a publisher has asked you to write five chapters of your life story. What would be your title for each of the five chapters?” All the students elected to write on this topic for their final assignment. When the final papers came in, I immersed myself in the students’ stories and their lives, which in turn drew me deeper into the study of autobiography. I began to extend the lifewriting project to other graduate courses at the University of Oklahoma and other locations of my teaching, including Canada and several American military bases throughout Europe.

From the first lines of their autobiographies, these students displayed their facility in writing about themselves in a manner starkly earnest and boldly personal that both fascinated and disarmed me. Their use of humor, wit, and metaphor to characterize their own and others’ behavior as well as the defining moments of their life hardly implied that their narratives were first attempts at lifewriting, possibly dashed off and submitted unedited to meet the deadline. To illustrate the evocative power of their writing, here are the opening lines of a chapter titled “Goodnight Phyllis” from an autobiography written by a young graduate student serving in the military in Germany. I was struck by her facility to cross over into narrative fiction and to enter into the heart and mind of her dear grandmother as she faced the final crisis of her life.

Phyllis Moore was walking home from a hard night's work as a nurse. She got off the train, began her walk to her home and reached into her purse to ready her keys to unlock the door to her apartment building lobby. She was tired and sleepy, working nights were not easy, especially for a 56-year-old woman, who never had luxury in her life. But, as she began her short walk to 1417 New York Avenue, a God fearing woman, she was thankful that God had provided her with the strength to keep holding on, and she was thankful that she still had her life.

She left Trinidad, or actually fled Trinidad to get away from her husband Floyd, who used his fists, feet and knees and any item within arms reach to get his point across. She fled that prison which used to be her home. She used to have a big house, and land and she would sit on her veranda and enjoy the warm breezes that massaged the island. But, a woman pursued seldom enjoys these things, and it was very seldom that Phyllis had anything sacred to hold on to, because Floyd made sure he beat it out of her. But, as she neared her street, none of these thoughts came to her mind. After all it was 1981 and some of her children and lots of grandchildren were living with her, and although it was cramped in that 2-bedroom apartment, she was in a sense free. For once in her life she was happy because she made the decisions and she didn't hurt any longer.

But, alas her freedom ended that night she got off the train. Her happiness ended the stroke of midnight, and her independence ended as she sensed something wrong. That night, two men who demanded her hard-earned money accosted her. Now after years of being the victim, Phyllis was not in a mood to give up easy. She fought back for her money and for her livelihood and probably in a sense for all the years Floyd took from her. But her fighting was cut short, because her attackers placed two bullets in her skull, ending the legacy that was my grandmother and my mother's mother.¹

It became apparent early on that student writers who uncovered an underlying metaphor in their stories, rather than simply recounted events, ultimately presented a more coherent and integrated self-portrait. One African American student beautifully illustrated the power of autobiographical metaphor. In each chapter, she described the various periods of her life through the metaphor of "crossing over": first "crossing over" in childhood from home to kindergarten, later "crossing over" into an integrated neighborhood, and finally "crossing over" to become an educator. She demonstrated metaphor's capacity to draw meaning and patterns from our lives. I began then to encourage students to develop a metaphor that would help to organize their stories. (See the Appendix, p. 165, for guidelines for students' autobiographical writing.)

Given the power of their narratives and the apparent emotional investment that the students made in them, I began to suspect that they wrote for some purpose other than simply fulfilling an assignment; perhaps they might be searching for some sense or meaning from the events of their lives. I wondered about the experience of writing their autobiographies and its possible effects on them. And finally, I wondered what they were learning from this activity. Guided by these questions, I designed a follow-up, qualitative, interpretive study with a group of fifteen student writers. I also set about to write the five chapters of my own life story.

Scanning the Theoretical Terrain

My research into autobiography in the context of adult education draws upon several theoretical areas—transformative learning, adult education, and literary autobiography—that reflect and support each other as well as jointly provide a framework through which to view autobiography as an instructional method with adults. Transformative learning is a theory of adult learning now emerging in adult education as the one most explanatory of adults' capacity for lifelong learning and development. Initially introduced by adult educator Jack Mezirow to acknowledge the human need to discover the meaning of life events and experiences, the theory has inspired a great deal of research into the process by which individuals experience a "perspective transformation" in response to life experiences. Mezirow (1991, 2000) describes transformative learning as a process by which adults critically examine the long-held assumptions, beliefs, frames of reference, and cultural wisdom that have shaped their view of life. Critical reflection leads to an enhanced awareness of the context of one's beliefs, values, and perspectives, and in turn, promotes the development of alternative perspectives that are more reflective, inclusive, expansive, discriminating, and capable of change. The results are an empowered sense of self, greater autonomy in thinking, a more critical stance in relation to one's social relationships, and greater capacity for service to self and others.

Whereas the primary conditions for transformative learning most likely reside in crisis events that defy the individual's coping abilities, adult educators have identified key conditions and features of the instructional process that promote perspective transformation in formal education. These include opportunities for critical reflection and affective learning that connect with the learner's emotions and feelings (Taylor 2000). The presence of trust, openness, safety, and community in a learner-centered

learning environment and the encouragement of engagement and participation also promote such transformations.

Concerning transformative learning from the psychoanalytic tradition, Deborah Britzman (1998) writes that “The work of learning is not so much an accumulation of knowledge but a means for the human to use knowledge, to craft and alter itself” (4). She portrays education as “a psychic event” (4), and borrowing from Anna Freud, she defines learning as “new editions of very old conflicts” (2), which supports the notion of transformative learning as a process of reframing past understandings, as does Mezirow’s work. Britzman reminds educators of “the complications of learning,” the need for educators to admit to “the tensions of learning,” and the depth of experience and feelings that rest within the learner—old conflicts, unresolved issues, and past experiences with learning. All these will accompany the learner into the classroom and manifest as “lost subjects” (1998, 19), whose expression may take the form of resistance, distraction, and inattention.

Finally, concerning autobiography, Georges Gusdorf (1980) explains, “The author of an autobiography gives himself the job of narrating his own history; what he sets out to do is to reassemble the scattered elements of his individual life and to regroup them in a comprehensive sketch” (35). Writing autobiography requires one to distance oneself from oneself in order to draw the meaning from one’s life (Gusdorf 1980). The French autobiographer and historian of discourse Philippe Lejeune (1989) defines autobiography as “retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality” (4). Lejeune distinguishes autobiography from other kinds of narrative by its claim to provide information about a “reality” and therefore to convey a semblance of truth. He further suggests that the writer of an autobiography enters into an “autobiographical pact,” a contract whereby the writer commits herself to the task of coming to terms with her own life. In addition, Lejeune distinguishes autobiography from the diary, journal, or memoir, specifying that “autobiography is narrative prose in which the author, narrator, and protagonist are identical and a retrospective view is taken of an *entire* life to create the story of a personality” (4). Unlike the memoir, journal, or diary, which may focus on one period of the writer’s life, autobiography alone reconstructs the writer’s life across time (Lejeune 1989; Gusdorf 1980).

More recently, in *Threads of Life* (2001), Richard Freedman compares the processes of living a life and writing one’s autobiography to weaving a tapestry. He writes, “threads are a powerful metaphor for some conceptions

of free will: we are the weavers, and through creative acts of consciousness, we essentially create ourselves” (17). Freadman develops this idea further: imagine that in the case of the weaver of the tapestry, the subject of the weaving is a representation of the weaver herself—her self-image—such that with each thread, some aspect of the weaver’s self-image emerges, and that aspect in turn modifies the way the weaver lays in subsequent threads. In autobiography, for Freadman, each revelation of the self shapes the way the narrative continues. Thus, as my student writers sit down to write their lives, they gather the threads of their lives together so that patterns of those lives emerge on the page; this pattern, in turn, modifies the lines and words that follow. Frequently, students will remark that their story took on a life, often an astonishing life, of its own. “How could I have left out my spouse?” they ask. “Why is there no mention of my job?” “Where are the children?”

Anthropologist Marianne Gullestad has remarked upon the growth since the 1950s of scholarly interest in autobiography within the field of literary theory as well as in other disciplines. In *Everyday Life Philosophers* (1996), her study of the autobiographies of 600 Norwegian adults, she credited the study of autobiographies with providing “a new meeting ground between the interest in ‘facts’ (history and the social sciences) and the interest in ‘stories’ (literary analysis)” (4-5). Among literary theorists, James Olney (1980) and William Randall (1995) examined autobiography from the perspective of psychological development; Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (1998) have compiled collections of feminist literary analysis. In the field of general and adult education, Carol Witherell and Nel Noddings (1991) have examined story and narrative as primary tools for teachers and counselors, while in their edited volume, Ruthellen Josselson and Amia Lieblich (1999) have advanced autobiography as a source for narrative research.

On the basis of these writers’ various theoretical propositions, connections may be made among autobiography, transformative learning, and education. Through the course of writing our lives, we structure our memory into the form of narrative. Through this process, we become aware of relationships between our selves and others and among events past and present—we come to know our autobiographical selves, in fact. This is learning *from* life events, relationships, and experiences; such learning promotes perspective transformation and self-awareness as well as insight concerning our selves and the world. As we enlarge our perspective, creating and recreating our selves, we develop.

Appreciating the Uses of Lifewriting

Through the process of reading and analyzing both the students' narratives and the interview data, I have discovered the importance of the "story-taken-directly-from life" (Gornick, 1999, 92), not only as a tool for self-understanding and personal development, but also as a way of understanding the process of the author's personal unfolding. I have come to appreciate the importance and value of story not only to reveal and reflect, but also to re-view their lives. Lifewriting prompts students to revisit episodes and eras of their life, to reflect upon them, to draw meaning from them, and to try to make sense of their own lives and of life in general. Their writings reveal personal legacies, family histories, and experiences of facing challenges, calamities, hardships, and heartbreak so rarely apparent as they calmly sit through class activities. For these writers, the act of putting pen to paper serves various purposes. For some, it brings out moments of order in the seemingly random events of life. For others it highlights moments of decision and choice. Some employ it to depict moments of triumph over trauma. And still others risk revisiting moments of pain, and there they recover what was lost. In the following paragraphs, I briefly explore each of these narrative moments through specific autobiographies and consider them as moments in the story of the writer's personal development.

Moments of Order in a Life Fragmented

Joanne Cooper (1991) has observed, "Telling our own stories is a way to impose form upon our often chaotic experiences and, in the process, to develop our own voice" (97). Writing their stories motivates students to think more deeply about themselves than they usually do, and to consider what they have come to know, either about themselves, about others, or about life. Some begin to see the past in a new way, now noting something different in it that they had not seen before. Others articulate new understandings about their own actions and those of others. As one student, reflecting on her past behavior, remarked, "In retrospect, I played the role of the innocent. I believed tomorrow would always be there." They make observations about the past and about life in general: "The lessons I learned were through pain or loss—very much like life." In effect, these writers theorize and draw conclusions about life. Most often, these insights emerge in their last chapters, which unlike earlier chapters (written mostly in the past tense) are typically written in the present tense. These last chapters

often contain a summary and commentary on the meaning of past events and of life in general, as well as a projection of how the writers might want to live in the future and what they want for themselves and for others.

David, a student in the military stationed overseas, is among those to use his autobiography as a means of affirming the presence of a natural order in the seeming randomness and disorder of life. His narrative, titled "Fragmentary Order," begins in the impoverished rural American South and ends in on a military base in Germany, where he contemplates his future following service in the Gulf War. In recounting the South of his birth, he describes the poverty, isolation, and prejudice in a manner that makes it obvious that these memories still haunt him. He relates the sudden death of his brother, killed at only eighteen by a drunk driver: "He was the cr me of the crop of that there is no doubt [...]. We all took it hard, my mother the worst."

David's subsequent chapters deal with his life in the military. The chapter titled "Lost Battalion" describes the breakup of his own family through divorce. Later, David recounts episodes of the Gulf War and his subsequent disillusionment with the military and the events of the War. He recalls, "Personally it did change me. I lost faith in the institution of the Army and my senior leaders. We had started strong, but we failed to finish well." In the chapter titled "Fort Necessity," he recounts a period of work in the Middle East, where the desert nudged him toward further formal study and replenished him psychologically and spiritually.

In the desert I knew two things for sure; first, you can never trust your future or your hope to an organization. Second, you have to retool for successful [sic] in a second adulthood. What I had done in the past was not bad, but it has a wear date. If I did not go back to school I might be in more jeopardy than I am willing to risk. As you get older courage is tempered by understanding [...]. My courage was running low; I needed time to do things for me that would increase, rather than continue to decrease my account. I needed a sheltered harbor for a few years.

This was a focus point in my life. This was my Fort Necessity. The desert gave me just what I needed and what I was looking for. It gave me time and the unhindered opportunity to think and to look back at my life. I could take stock of what I wanted to keep and what I wanted to throw away before moving forward. It gave me a chance to grieve for my lost family, my lost career and my lost ideals. I went to the Kingdom disenchanting and I came back [...] ready to open a new chapter in my life.

In the last chapter of his narrative, as his overall title “Fragmentary Order” hints, David returns to his opening chapter and the death of his brother. But in this second telling, he adds an unexpected ending:

The drunk driver that killed my brother came to our home to ask my father if it would be all right if he joined our church [...]. My father stood up for him in church and made the motion for his membership. Stan [the drunk driver] had two daughters. My brother had two sons. One of my brother’s sons married one of Stan’s daughters and my father has another grandson from the union of the two families. My brother’s life was ended by a drunken driver and a generation later another life was added by the union of the two families.

In this last chapter, David tells the story of the marriage that brings the two grieving families together. He brings past and present together in way that demonstrates how life can preserve and create order. He does not actually verbalize this awareness or explain it, but through his placement of these events in his narrative, the structure of his story, and its title, “Fragmentary Order,” he voices his sense of events coming full circle and of the circle closing.

Moments of Decision and Choice

Life has been described as a series of turning points that seemingly redirect our lives down path or another. Such turning points in the lives of these students are captured in the various chapter titles of their autobiographies: “From the Himalayas to Halifax... and Beyond” recounts a family’s relocation from India to Canada, “The Loss of Innocence” opens the story of childhood abuse, “Trying to Fit In” details the challenges of racially based discrimination in school, “Vulture Culture” describes the efforts of a Puerto Rican child to settle into the United States, and “Bring in the Clowns” highlights a nurse’s moment of discovery of his own power through humor to alleviate fear. Some writers describe experiences such as parental divorce and geographic dislocation, which presented challenges and upheavals often unnoticed by those close to them. Others recount their efforts to adjust to life without a father or mother or to “fit in” to new schools or surroundings. Still others review events that required decisions and difficult choices and then reflect on these choices and their consequences.

As an illustration of such review and reflection, Angelina titles her auto-

biography “Looking Back,” indicating its retrospective view, its re-viewing and re-living of the past. Writing from the perspective of a woman about to give birth to her first baby, she looks back to selected scenes of her life and the choices she made. She begins her first chapter, “Expectation,” with a scene from the kitchen of her grandparents’ home on a tiny island in the Caribbean, observing herself as the little girl, aged twelve, who is beside herself with joy and excitement at having just received the delightful news of her mother’s coming for Christmas (still six months away). Although narrating past events, she writes in the present tense in the voice of the child: “I attend the Secondary School and am in the sixth grade. As far back as I can remember in my twelve years of living things have always been the same.” She falls back into the narrative present at various times in her life story, especially when recounting a memory of intense pleasure or pain. For instance, the present tense appears in the chapter titled “Going Back” when, now an adult, she returns to her island to discover that life has changed her so much that she no longer feels that the island is home.

Literary theorist Phillip Lejeune (1989) highlights this use of the “narrative present” and the “indirect free style” in his analysis of the autobiography of the author Jules Vallès. Lejeune asserts that the narrative present constitutes a “small revolution”—a solution that permits Vallès to talk about his childhood. The narrative present similarly defines Angelina’s turn to her childhood and voice of the child: “Now the thirst to know my real mom has become more intense and seems to consume my every waking moment.” Indirect free style integrates the two enunciations of child/present and adult/past through a kind of “dissolve” from one voice to the next, in the case of Angelina, from her adult voice to that of the child she was and back to the adult voice. I draw the reader’s attention to Angelina’s use of the “narrative present” because this rather sophisticated technique, which she applies so naturally and apparently unconsciously, is one generally reserved for professional writers; her use of it illustrates the capacity of these students for narrative expression.

Unfortunately, Angelina’s meeting with her mother does not go as expected. For one thing, Angelina has completely forgotten that her mother has had another baby girl, now six years old and who clutches her mother’s hand as they get off the plane. Moreover, her mother, being so preoccupied with reconnecting with her siblings and parents, hardly notices Angelina standing by, either at the airport or later at home. In her grief, Angelina runs off to be alone with her broken heart and her bitterness toward a mother who missed every important event of her life and who evidently cares so little for

her. After her tears are spent, she begins to feel better. And at this moment, the child makes a decision that seems to be years beyond a twelve-year-old's capability, one that takes most adults a lifetime to learn. Note again her turn to the narrative present:

I have come to the conclusion that my mother is not the way I wanted her to be but I have to accept that. I am incapable of molding anyone's character and that is a fact of life. I went back to my grandmother's home as an inner changed person. No one had missed me and that disappointed me a little but I pushed that to the back.

Throughout my mom's two-week visit we got to know each other. There was never that motherly bond that I wanted but I learnt [sic] to deal with it. When it was time for her to go I was happy but sad. Happy that I had finally met her but sad that she was not what my expectation dreamt up.

In her closing chapter, Angelina remarks that while the tears and turmoil of life have been often more than she could bear, the choices she has made have made her a stronger person. She ends her story in anticipation of her soon-to-be-born child and pledges to be the sort of mother that she never had—one who builds a strong foundation of care and unconditional love for her child.

Moments of Triumph

Charles Taylor (1989) observes that it is in our nature to orient our lives to the good and therefore to understand our lives as "a quest" toward the good (52). Some student writers define their quests as becoming lifelong learners or educators, highlighting the influences of family, teachers, and mentors. Others detail their growth as critical thinkers, and some describe their journey of emancipation from the dictates of family and culture. In each case, they comment upon coming to an appreciation of who they are, what has enabled them to be where they are, and what it will take for them to continue to flourish as learners, educators, and citizens.

For one writer, Rhonda, who titles her life story "How You Sow, So Shall You Reap," the life quest is represented through the seasons of gardening, detailed through years of planting, years of barrenness, challenges of the soil, and finally, harvest. She begins with a memory of herself as a youngster, full of laughter, hope, optimism, and aspiration for the future. She ends her story with a sense of pride of accomplishment and hope for a future that is bright and bountiful. But between these times of

childhood optimism and adult fulfillment unfolds a story of abandonment, betrayal, and abuse. Deserted in childhood by her father, pregnant and married at age sixteen to a family friend many years her senior, by whom she is abused and belittled for most of her married life, she enters dark, barren years during which her dreams of childhood die:

There I was sixteen, with a cruel husband, and a bleak future to look forward to. I married a man nine years older than me. He had emotional problems, two ex-wives, three ex-children, and no job. The dream of college popped like a bubble, gone [...]. I could hardly face a day so how could I look into the face of the future? If I could have looked what would I have seen? I was a worthless person who had nothing to offer the world.

In the midst of this despair, a catalyst for change appears in the form of a chance event, which in turn leads to her enlistment in the military. She recalls that the military “promised me the world, and it made good on its promise.” In the course of service, she acquires her GED and from there moves on to university. Presently in graduate studies, with a successful career behind her, and on the threshold of retirement from the military, she looks back at her own unfolding and observes how much it was all worth: “If I had inherited a green house full of blooming flowers, I would never have known the satisfaction of the hard work and the subsequent harvest of the fruits of *my* labors. I did this; this is what I accomplished.” In the last chapter, “The Harvest,” she concludes, “This wasn’t a story about an inspirational teacher but about the inner resolve of a learner, a person who never thought she would ever be worth anything. A person who believed she was a loser but found hope to rise above hopelessness [...] finding the inner resolve and strength to rise above the life I had [been] given.”

Moments of Healing

At the close of his own autobiography, author Carlos Gébler (2001), having come to terms with the painful memory of his father, comments upon the value of an autobiographical re-visioning of our lives: “You can’t change the past but, with understanding, you can sometimes draw the poison out of it” (405). Through their narratives, these adult learners too relive and confront past experiences of trauma, grief, and loss. In some cases they retrace moments of childhood pain and the steps toward later resolution. Writing their stories engenders the possibility of each coming to terms with and accepting a past event *as something that happened*, and thereby to

integrate it, that is, to incorporate this experience into their present sense of self. And some know that they have gained strength and quality of character from having undergone and overcome past experiences. Such strength and resolution to continue living is revealed in Lori's autobiography, in which, in a chapter titled "Changed Forever," she revisits the sudden death of her infant son and her subsequent efforts throughout the years to cope with and to recover from this tragic loss:

Nothing I had ever learned, read or imagined could have prepared me for that day or for the following days, weeks, months and even years. It will be eight years this October and although I have made quantum strides in dealing with the loss, I will never be the same and I will never "get over it." I realize now that people don't get over the pain and grief of death, they "go through it." The pain is not as constant, nor as sharp, but it can sneak up on you unsuspecting and cut you like a knife [...].

Since his death many good things have happened to our families [...]. I don't think I would have had a third child and Margie is a treasure I can't imagine living without either. Other times my emotions take over and I look at his pictures and my heart breaks again. I know this will be a lifetime struggle, but I am a fighter and I know I'll survive.

Lori's autobiography, titled "Friends—The Threads of Life," examines all those who have befriended and helped her through the various stages of her life. She begins with her mother and moves on through her friends, her husband, her surviving son (who offers to buy her a new baby at Safeway), and finally, herself. She closes with the following lines: "[A]t a higher level I have discovered that my very best friend has always been me. I am self driven and totally committed to whatever I tackle in life. I know there is no limit to what an individual can learn."

Another writer, Susan, illustrates the process of healing and the integration of an experience, albeit painful, into her identity, her sense of who she is. This integration is affirmed in her subsequent interview, which will be discussed below. She opens with the following observation: "in my adulthood I've learned that remembering is healing and it's only until we understand who we were that we know who we are." She titles her autobiography "Patterns of My Rope"; in it she recounts her history of childhood abuse. While never detailing what happened between her and her father, but rather, writing as though its meanings were apparent, she works with the significance of this experience in her life and of her mother's failure to intervene. She begins the autobiography with her organizing

metaphor: “The rope of my protectors, my parents, was a somewhat cruel one; it tied itself around me and my heart, violating the trust a child automatically gives to their parents.” Throughout the narrative, she draws on the metaphor of ropes, which initially tie themselves around her, later make themselves visible for her exploration, and finally become unraveled and “Undone” (the title of her last chapter), thereby allowing her the freedom to move on to a life of marriage and children. She begins her closing chapter with the words, “I am taking those knots, which have been undone and making my new bowtie. My sense of who I am in the world is expanding.”

Revisiting the Authors of Lifewriting

Six months following their original autobiographical writing, I invited one group of students to resubmit their life stories and participate in the follow-up research, in which I inquired into the writing process they used in their autobiographies. I asked such questions as: “What was the most difficult part?” “What was the most enjoyable?” and “What did you learn from the writing?” Fifteen Canadian writers, along with their stories, became part of this study. Through taped interviews, they described the pleasure, pain, and gains of revisiting the past and narrating past events. I analyzed the responses to the interview questions and then identified the main themes that emerged from the data. In addition, following the methodology used by Gullestad in her Norwegian study (1996), I studied each of the narratives as an extended case, paying close attention to how the writers represented themselves, their choice of titles for their narratives as well as for each of the chapters, and each writer’s overall motive or purpose.

Many writers acknowledged that the writing process was much more difficult than they had originally envisioned, but they also affirmed the sense of accomplishment that came with writing, as well as from the later reading of what they had written. Looking back over their lives permitted these writers to validate them and to honor what they had undergone, learned, and become. As one recalled, “I was really sort of going back in the particular work that I did, went back right to the very beginning and worked my way forward. It was amazing to recall, and sort of how good it was when I was doing it.” One commented, “I learned about myself—that I have a very rich life, which I never ever realized.” And another discovered, “Where I have had the most difficult times is where I’ve grown.” Finally, one summed up, “I needed to look at my life in order to move forward.” For

several, writing autobiography offered the opportunity of “re-experiencing the feeling of an earlier time” and to bring closure to painful events.

Susan, who wrote of her childhood abuse, recalled in the interview the painful process of this writing. She had inclined to avoid writing about the abuse, and after she managed to get something down, deleted as much as she could. Writing her story entailed looking backward and then looking forward, integrating her past life with her future. In her words, “because I knew [the autobiography] was important and that I needed to do it, so [it was] almost like to help give me some kind of closure to a stage in my life, and to look back in order to look ahead.” She also spoke of what she gained: “The exploration of the knots somehow gave me an increased capacity to love and feel. My body could feel love and emotions fully, and I permitted myself to be vulnerable to those I felt safe with. The giving of myself allowed me to receive so much more in return.” She looked ahead to her life with optimism: “I am looking ahead and wondering what we can do with our lives, where will we be, where will we live. It certainly isn’t easy to decide what path to take, but I plan on enjoying myself along the way and making the very best of it. I have hope, faith and look forward to the future.” Importantly, now an educator to adults, Susan details the changes to her own approach to teaching since she wrote her story. Realizing now that students, too, have a story, she is much more open to their experiences and more accepting of what they have to say:

I try and relate to people now more as people than what I used to, probably because of writing my story, of going through that process. You are almost more effective, more acknowledging, affirming of what other people have had, because everyone, when they interact with you, they are giving you little bits of their story [...]. So when people put up their hand and want to relate an experience, they are giving you a little bit of themselves [...].

In the case of Lori, who had written of the death of her infant son, healing followed from the act of the writing itself. In the interview following her autobiographical writing, Lori recalled how hard it was to write her story and how much emotion she invested in it. Yet, most significantly, she acknowledged that through the writing, she had gained a sense of closure regarding the loss of her son nine years ago. In the aftermath of the life-writing, she affirmed its function:

up until last year I had written something every year on the anniversary of his death, usually a poem or something. And this year, for the first year I

didn't. I felt that I had reached a point where I didn't have to do that. And when I was writing this [her autobiography], [my son] was just a big part of it, and I really felt that this was kind of for him. And in some crazy way it was my way of showing him that I was OK now, and that I had gotten through all of this [...].

Concerning her view of the value of lifewriting, Lori states, "in writing the paper I think it was one of the first times I looked at my life critically and looked at different issues critically, and questioned values and beliefs that I maybe hadn't before. So, it was a very, very deep learning."

My own autobiography, written after a lengthy avoidance, began in the bomb-ridden, war-torn former Czechoslovakia and passed through my early life in post-war Austria. Several chapters then claimed their place: "The Scythia," the liner who transported our family across from Austria to Canada, who sunk most of our parents' life, and who left my brother and me to teeter between two cultures; next, "The Marriage"; then, "The Unmarriage"; and finally, "More Crossings."

My post-writing reflections centered on what had come out and what had been left out of the writing: how come this tone of loss and struggle? And where is mention of happiness, attainment, friendship, and support? How come I am so forgiving of others and their transgressions, while being so unforgiving of my own? These reflections prompted me to go back to my autobiography, to say something about my life now, which has in many ways transcended the turmoil of the past. And yet, in my daily life, as I relate to family and friends, as I cope with stresses and strains, I know that despite all that I have gained and all of the skills and wisdom I may have acquired, those bones of the past are still there. The relics of the past protrude into the present; that child's face and frown reappear with each new emotional crisis. I know now that though we might excavate those bones through our story, we never remove them. Whatever we do, a good part remains behind. Perhaps the difference now is that having written my story, I know that they are there and what they look like. Perhaps I have become my own "bone-setter."

Through Autobiography to Adult Development

Paul John Eakin (1999) observes, "autobiographies offer a precious record of the process of identity formation, of the ways in which individuals employ cultural models of identity and life story [...] to make sense of their experience" (27). According to adult development theory, the process of

identity formation and development continues throughout the lifespan; a person never *is* but is always *becoming* his or her self. This development is directed towards greater inclusiveness, complexity, and coherence of personality (Mezirow 1991). Jung (1954) described this process as “individuation,” of becoming all that one is capable of becoming, and Erikson (1980) called it “integrity,” accepting one’s life as the one and only life one could have lived.

As is evident in the above highlights of the student narratives, people have various motives for writing their life story: to highlight moments of order in the seeming random events of life, to focus on moments of decision and choice, to depict moments of triumph over trauma, and to revisit sites of painful losses to recover what was lost. Through the narratives of one such group of student writers and in the subsequent interviews with them, I note, albeit to various degrees, the development of their integrity, authenticity, self-knowledge, and consciousness.

Integrity is revealed through their acts of drawing meaning from life events and finding order in their lives and in life in general. One student described the writing as “A process of unraveling, pulling [my life] in a bunch of pieces and then putting it back together.” Out of the scattered fragments of their lives, the authors manage to create a pattern, a rhythm, or a set of connections. Consistent with adult development theory, most of the students show increased self-acceptance and appreciation of their uniqueness—*of a life that was their own*. Others demonstrate progress in the process of integrity, as Erikson (1980) has defined it: the fulfillment of the task of coming to terms with and integrating those painful aspects of one’s life.

Their stories emerge as moments or instances of authentic life. There are instances of accepting responsibility for themselves, determining what has meaning for them, and discovering what they had done to shape their lives. Susan, who had earlier described her abuse, decided to write about it over her husband’s objections; she determined that “I had reached that stage where [there would be] no more lies. [...] so I wrote it really for me as to what I was feeling, and I knew what was important for me to do.” I was repeatedly surprised by the willingness of these individuals to write so earnestly about their struggles and shortcomings. For instance, I was initially disarmed by David’s description of his loss of family, career, and ideals quoted above, and later by his graphic expression of the personal anguish associated with the loss of his hair: “It is not so much being bald that I mind, it is going bald that I do not like. I wonder sometimes what held

the hair in yesterday? Women cannot really understand. It is like losing your breasts, but very slowly. Finally, when they get to your knees they would just drop off. See my point? It is a painfully long process.” It is precisely this sort of authenticity that Jung (1954) describes as being an essential ingredient of midlife adulthood and of the individuation process. Many of these autobiographies seem to contradict the observations of some writers on the differences between the autobiographies of men and women. For instance, in the introduction to their collection of essays, *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader* (1998), Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson describe the tendency of men to aggrandize themselves and to emphasize their independence, autonomy, and success in contrast to women, who characterize themselves in terms of interdependence, relation, and self-consciousness. My students’ writings do not conform to this distinction; rather, both men and women tend to reveal their respective struggles for independence, autonomy, success, and vocation, and writers of both sexes appear to be forthcoming about their need for acceptance, respect, connection, and love.

Gains in self-knowledge represent aspects of personal learning that foster and support further development. For many of these students, this autobiographical writing was the first opportunity they had ever had to recollect and recount their chaotic histories and to recognize the crossroads in their lives that had led them to become graduate students and future educators. They were able to characterize, largely through their metaphors, the experiences that shaped them and to discern how they were now re-shaping themselves as adults. These abilities are well illustrated by one writer through the metaphor of a puppet becoming a dancer. Casting herself as a character named “Star” in a story she tells in the third person, Gisele describes her lifelong struggle between having her strings pulled by others and becoming the choreographer of her own dance. Hers was a life of being pulled by the need for love and acceptance, on one hand, and the need for vocation and agency on the other. Finally, her desire for vocation and autonomy prevails, permitting her to become the choreographer at last. She closes her narrative with an affirmation of her need to be aware and vigilant. “Now fifty two years old, Star is again the choreographer of her own dance. This last experience has taught her to be more watchful for puppet strings. She knows that some probably remain, but being aware of it she is more likely to see them and to cut them off as she notices them. As long as she is happy she knows she is on the right track and shining!”

It has been said that every philosophy, every theory, even every practice is an aspect of one's autobiography. Through the course of this lifewriting, these students were nudged into reflecting upon their present position in life and toward articulating their own philosophy, theory, and stance regarding their personal and professional lives.

Finally, writing a life story—bringing the events and experiences of their lives to awareness and composing a narrative about them—serves the growth of consciousness. This feature of autobiography is affirmed by the work of neuroscientist Antonio Damasio (1999), who characterizes consciousness as “stepping into the light” (3). Based upon years of controlled experiments with patients, Damasio shares insights into the growth of human consciousness, which he defines as the individual's awareness of her own self and surroundings as well as of her lived past and anticipated future. It would follow that student writers' autobiographies, because they reactivate memories of situations and events in their lives, would illuminate their lived pasts and anticipated futures, thereby serving the growth of consciousness as it evolves over their lifetime. One student notes precisely this. Describing the memory of past experiences as a “landing site,” he writes, “you develop from that landing site. You sort of use that to go on to the next point. You use that to build your next landing site.”

Writing Ourselves into Wholeness

Literary theorist Barrett Mandel (1980) summarizes the significance of the process of remembering in the continuing process of shaping one's personality:

In ratifying the past, the autobiographer discloses the truth of his or her being in the present. Thus, personal history is put forth in a certain light. The past may be an illusion, but the light of now is never an illusion. What it illuminates, it makes real. Now is the only source of light. Anything it shines on may be clarified. The image of one's personal history in autobiography is simultaneously in time and timeless [...]. (65)

As a literary genre, autobiography has become familiar to more people over the last century, and adult educators are recognizing its value as an instructional method that promotes self-reflection and self-knowledge among adult learners. For example, adult educators Pierre Dominicé (1999), Irene Karpiak (2000), and Marsha Rossiter (1999) have worked with

autobiography in the context of adult education and adult development. Professor of English Catherine Hobbs's *The Elements of Autobiographical and Life Narratives* (2005) describes promoting autobiographical writing to her students as a means of self-expression and personal growth well as a means of gaining insight. Judith Barrington's *Writing the Memoir* (2002) suggests recording personal stories in the form of memoir and challenges writers to search for meaning and truth in storytelling. Tristine Rainer in *Your Life as Story* (1997) encourages readers to reveal through personal narratives the important messages found in their life experiences.

Through their five-chapter autobiographies, my student writers affirm that *every* person has a story, not only those rare exemplary figures prominently portrayed in literature and popular media, but also those whom we encounter in our daily lives. As adult learners write their autobiographies, they take the opportunity, perhaps for the first time, to affirm the presence of order in the seemingly random events of their life, to focus on moments of decision and choice, to recount moments of triumph over life challenges, or to heal old wounds. Through their written narratives, adult students can reveal both the richness of their lives, the challenges of telling one's story, and the benefits to themselves and others of putting pen to paper. Each life has had its risks and opportunities. Some people have enjoyed carefree and caring childhoods, some have enjoyed good fortune later on, some have had strong models providing clarity and direction, and others have had little or none at all. Their stories detail their unfolding personalities as individuals, as learners, or as professionals. They address the tasks Lejeune (1989) says autobiography sets writers: to answer the question "[W]ho am I?" and to explain "[H]ow I became who I am" (124).

As the instructor and reader of their narratives, I have been given a glimpse into the lives of my students, learned what has been central to their lives at various points, and discovered their approaches to life, as well as the idiosyncrasies they have acquired. Through their stories, I have come to know their vulnerabilities as learners. I learn about their first day in school, their experiences with differences related to race, class, culture and abilities (frequently their own), and the origins of their coping strategies (which persist long after their immediate purpose is served). I have come to understand how a comic was born out of "Coke bottle" eyeglasses, how a shove by a schoolteacher could silence for a decade, and how a family move could secure a place for one child and forfeit it for another. The importance of this learning for me as a teacher is not so much that I now know about the particulars of my students' lives, since they will move on, but that I have

become sensitized to the lives of those students who follow them. Through reading the autobiographies, I have begun to look at students—and people in general—in a different light, as individuals with a story. I have found that this newfound awareness has changed my work as an instructor, and it has shown up in my course syllabi, my classroom environment, and my interactions with students. I encourage learning that connects us as individuals with one another and with the class materials. I do this largely through story. I reach for their stories, make the telling of their stories a part of the early stages of the course, and use their stories to connect and enlarge our understanding of the class materials.

As approached by these student writers, autobiography reflects a more complex and closer connection between education and adult development than do many other educational approaches. As an instructional practice, it enriches those personal and transformative approaches that integrate the emotional, rational, and spiritual dimensions of human experience. As Jo Anne Pagano (1991) has observed, “Education should bring people to the place from which they can go on alone and make up their own stories” (202). As an educational method, autobiography can inspire learners continually to find their own ways of encountering and constructing their world—to become the co-authors of their lives.

Appendix

Guidelines for Using Autobiography in Higher Education

- Have students imagine that a publisher has invited them to write their story in five chapters; what would be the titles of the chapters?
- In order to guide their work, ask students to prepare an outline with the titles for your review.
- Encourage them to seek out a metaphor or a central theme that runs throughout their life story and that might then be reflected in the chapter titles.
- Encourage them to avoid a simple chronology of their life, such as “The Teen Years,” but rather, to give these periods an identifying quality or character, such as “The Teen Years: Lost in a Wilderness.”

- Offer examples of chapter outlines that others have written.
- Encourage them to create a title for their entire story, such as Christopher Reeves's *Still Me* (1999).
- Trust that writers will go as deeply into the various options of "telling" as they are ready to.
- Encourage individuals to use this opportunity to reflect on their life, to take something from this exercise. Ask them direct questions, such as "What is your story?" and "What is your life about?"

Note

1. I quote here and below from the students' unpublished autographical essays. I have received their permission to cite and draw upon their essays and have the permission of the University of Oklahoma to carry out this research. In this essay, I have changed the students' names and omitted identifying data to protect their anonymity.

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