

LEARNING BY HE/ART

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

My work emerged out of my taking an opportunity, after 15 years of teaching secondary school, to think in depth about my life and practice. As teachers, we are used to gathering elements from all around us to make up the ideas, methods, and materials with which we teach. The creation of this thesis has come about in much the same way. Rather than strict adherence to a single methodology, or voice, I have pulled from a host of tools. Autobiography (Irwin, Stephenson, Robertson, & Reynolds, 2001), reflective practice, poetic inquiry, and creative nonfiction are all terms that fit this work.

Instead of a singular adherence to one theory or practice, I have employed a process that exists in and among the spaces between the roles of artist, researcher, and teacher. Much of my process has been unstructured and nonsystematic. I have created, researched, and reflected in the midst of the moments, as life is lived. I have been developing, as I have gone along, appreciation for those elements that bring meaning to my work and to my life at this time. Through this work I have found inspiration and the capacity to continue teaching with enthusiasm and heart. Telling our stories holds keys to living with sensitivity, compassion, and vision in a world that so very much needs all three.

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Finally, thank you to my son Duncan Bain. He is my reason and he is my rhyme. I love you, Duncan.

## **DEDICATION**

For my father who taught me the ways of the mind.  
For my mother who taught me the ways of the spirit.  
In gratitude for the life they gave me that has taught me  
the merit of learning by heart.

## CHAPTER 1: BEGINNING THE INQUIRY

I returned to school to complete my Master of Arts degree program, not through any measured consideration, but rather because of an epiphany I had one spring evening as I sat in solitude at Jericho Beach. While I'd toyed with the idea of returning for many years, I'd delayed, at times because of life circumstances and at other times because I didn't have a clear question to pursue. But one day in May, toes cooling and dug into the earth, I knew it was time. Although I did not have a definitive question, I could sense the call to questing. All noble quests require wise mentorship, and with this in mind I sought out the estimable aid of Dr. Carl Leggo. I'd had the good fortune to have worked with Carl during my teacher education program some 15 years or so earlier and thought he would be an ideal advisor. I had always felt in Carl a kindredness of spirit, and perhaps I sensed early on that his creative approach to inquiry and his gentle humanity would be the aid I would need on this journey.

Although I embrace formal education and indeed have thrived in that domain, I did not return to school at this stage in my life to approach my learning from that paradigm. This time, I wanted to venture inward to see what might be found on my inner landscapes. I wanted to attend to my immediate experience to find the learning that might reside there. So here I was, welcomed into graduate school with no formal research question. I began my journey in Carl's Narrative Inquiry course. Here I rediscovered my own poetic/narrative voice; the words just came and came. Later, I attended a course on Living Inquiry with Dr. Karen Meyer, wherein I learned to develop a sense of inquiry about my own writing that rendered new appreciations of what I was living and what I was writing. So although I still did not have a formal research question, I now felt I had a field of research and an emerging methodology. When I began to investigate what to call this approach that I had begun to explore, the best fit seemed to be in the realm of



a/r/tography. Dr. Rita Irwin coined this term; the segments of the word represent the three roles of artist, researcher, and teacher.

A/r/tography is a living practice of art, research, and teaching: a living metissage; a life-writing and life-creating experience (Irwin, Stephenson, Robertson, & Reynolds, 2001). Through attention to memory, identity, reflection, meditation, storytelling, interpretation, and representation, the artists/writers/teachers who share their living practices are searching for new ways to understand their practices as artists, researchers, and teachers. They are a/r/tographers who represent their questions, practices, and emergent understandings and perform their pedagogical positions as they integrate knowing, doing, and making through aesthetic experiences that convey meaning rather than facts (Irwin & de Cosson, 2004, p. 34).

Instead of a singular adherence to one theory or practice, a/r/tography is a dialogical process that exists in and among the spaces between the roles of artist, researcher, and teacher.

Irwin and de Cosson (2004) write that

to live the life of an artist who is also a researcher and teacher is to live a life of awareness, a life that permits openness to the complexity around us, a life that intentionally sets out to perceive things differently. (p. 34)

In my research I discovered that during the past two decades scholars have been paving the way with creativity and heart in academia, both publishing many theses, journal articles, and books on the topic of a/r/tography and employing its methods to excellent effect. I was delighted to find that these academic voices were grounded in lived experience, in authentic human experience. There was the possibility to enter into their research in a way that I have seldom felt in more traditional forms of research. There is a dialectic between reader and writer that is often deeply personal. New voices are being heard in the academy. I find it heartening to note that universities are opening up to alternate voices, alternate ways of researching and expressing research findings.

Here was a home for all my selves, I thought. Here was a way to give voice and structure to the inquiry I had already begun. So I undertook my inside-out mode of inquiry. Having no formal question, I have arrived at no formal answer, but what I have rendered are themes for reflection: the necessity for the researcher to slow down, to become attentive; the central link between connection to the landscape and connection to creative voice; personal stories act as, inquiry and learning, teaching and connecting. I have developed an appreciation for a manner of viewing and recording my experience that has been most informative and inspirational to me. I have had to learn to pay attention. I have had to learn to trust my gut. I have had to learn . . . I am still learning, not to judge, but just to watch my own process with curiosity. I have learned to be open, to be receptive.

In reading my thesis, I have been aware of the space between the lived experience and the expression of that experience. There is a tensile relationship between the two. Still, we are tellers of tales, writers of stories, and makers of meaning, knowing that to look again may mean to see anew. In this knowledge I write. Adopting the approach of a/r/tography has meant accepting a level of wildness, of unknowingness. In its questing and continued questioning, I've gone along, not always knowing where to step. The experience of writing my thesis this way has proven to be a true quest in the dark at times, but through it all, a quiet and hopeful song has sung in my ear.

## CHAPTER 2: INTRODUCTION

To situate myself in this thesis I will tell you that I have been teaching in Vancouver secondary schools for more than 15 years. In that time I have taught in a variety of different settings and on many topics. My background in the arts, both performative and literary, has formed a pulse for my practice. At this time I am considering what I have learned, what I am learning, and what I might take with me into a viable continued practice. I am considering, perhaps implicitly, the place of art in school and in our lives generally.

Teaching is a social act. However, the life of a teacher is in many ways very solitary. We seldom experience each other's teaching practice and are left to imagine where we fit in the continuum of teaching. The stories of teachers and their day-to-day experiences are often untold. The emotions associated with the pursuit of teaching go largely unarticulated. The practical constraints of being a teacher leave little time for reflection, and one often does not perceive one's own experience in any way that takes a long view. Rather, we put our heads down and try to *get through*. But the teacher's heart, that which brings many to the profession, needs sustaining as much as do our students' hearts. The articulation of teachers' stories, delights, fears, and frustrations may perhaps serve as a hand extended in what is often too solitary a life. The processes of writing, teaching, and researching with heartfelt engagement may be one way to sustain the teacher's heart and to enrich both the teaching life and life beyond the classroom.

This thesis is comprised of a variety of creative forms (poetry, narratives, and essays); the emphasis throughout has been to render my experience to investigate my life as an artist, researcher, and teacher. Rather than mere navel gazing, I believe and hope that readers will identify with the creatively rendered narratives and poetry that comprise this thesis.

As Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) explain, autobiography, like fiction, reveals to the reader a "pattern in experience" (p. 16) and allows a reinterpretation of the lives and experience

of both the writer and the reader. To be powerful, this pattern must be portrayed in a way that engages readers in a genuine act of seeing the essential wholeness of life, the connection of nodal moments. In seeing, the reader is enabled to see self and other more fully (p. 16). In my thesis I am seeking to spell out patterns.

The poems, narratives, essays, and quotations that populate this thesis are an attempt to voice something of the nodal moments that present themselves in my reflections on my life and practice. Rather than define, pursue, and expand a singular thesis, this work speaks from many locations of the first-person *I*. “One of our tasks in writing narrative accounts is to convey a sense of the complexity of all of the ‘I’s, all the ways each of us have of knowing” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 10). The thesis is written in many voices, it is composed of stories and poems that are examples of my reflecting upon my life and practice. At times the work is derivative of life but not a direct representation of my life. It is creative non-fiction. This thesis does not seek to be the definitive word on issues, but is rather a ‘working through’ of ideas; it is evidence of my evolving reflection. I have arranged this work, leaving spaces physically and interpretively for the reader to enter, to find places to participate. These spaces are meant to make allowance for the way life is lived. It is messy and fragmentary even as there is a tenuous sense of unity to the whole. In the words of Carl Leggo (2008):

Life is abundant and narrative inquiry is a way of focusing on some particulars of that abundance. . . . It recognizes some of the possibilities of meaning that lie always in the seemingly tangled messiness of lived experience. I challenge any notion that in writing stories about experience we can contain the multiplicity of interpretations. Instead, I recommend that we present our representations, and invite readers to make sense out of our stories. . . . Let readers contribute to making meaning out of the stories. . . . Instead of trying to close down understanding, we should be opening up possibilities for wide-ranging connections, questions and insights. (p. 11)

Rather than denying the need to organize my thoughts, I am inviting the reader to consider the connections they themselves might follow in reading this work. Carl Leggo’s (2008) notion of rhizomatic reading is useful in informing one’s understanding and appreciation of my work:

A . . . useful way of conceptualizing narrative is in terms of a rhizome where there is no centre from which everything grows in a specific direction. The rhizome goes in many directions, without a centre . . . there are numerous paths and links, numerous ways of moving along and amidst the possibilities. (p. 11)

Throughout the work the reader will find that I have made decisions to employ the use of quotations and white space. The quotations act as commentary, informing what has been written and what is to come. The white space is to cue the reader to take time to reside with the words and meanings being rendered; they are designed to encourage reflection, connection, and participation.

Each day as I engage in my teaching practice, I carry with me my history. I see the world through the lenses of an artist/researcher/teacher. These roles are not divorced from one another, and each informs how I behave as the other. I believe that being awake to this connection enlivens all that I do in each role.

## CHAPTER 3: INVITATION

The thesis begins with a mythical voice, with an invitation and a provocation. Rather than being mere fanciful stories, myths deeply inform the underpinnings of how we function. Our mythologies, though often unconscious, govern how we view the world. We conduct ourselves according to core mythologies. Given that, it is wise to attempt to become aware of our governing presumptions. I contend that the stories we tell ourselves, what we give words and worth to, constructs a sense of mythology to live by. To read this a/r/tographic work, one must enter into the work with a view to mythologies and to the metaphors by which the voices here are living; indeed, to consider by which myths one is living.

### **Pandora's Provocation**

Call me Pandora and dance a while with me.  
Then sit by my fire and I'll sing you my song.  
I'll tell you it plain so you can sing along.

They sent me here all glittering and comely.  
Dropped me perfected from on high.  
Not intended as a gift but as a cruel trick.  
A lesson.

And so a lesson I gave.  
To a retinue of gods and men who, for their diversion and pride,  
bade me sit, be obedient and pleasing.

But boxes are to be opened and secrets revealed.  
As sister Eve knew, fruits are to be plucked  
their juices sucked from rosy lips  
from wrists and arms.

The 'Golden Age' they called it.  
We did nothing. Knew nothing. Questioned no thing!  
I had to lift the lid.  
I did it for us all.

What issued forth was fearsome and awesome.  
But what remains after the storm is better—fuller.  
Our decent into the 'Silver Age' brought us work—the joy of sweat on the brow.  
Brought the changing of seasons—coloured leaves and fragrant blossoms.  
Brought weather, both mild and harsh.

So that now, we may appreciate what good we meet.

Now, in times of joy and times of rest  
we dance and sing, delighted at being awakened and illuminated.  
And during the now dark and cold times,  
we have what I found dwelling at the bottom of that 'forbidden' box.

Dear Hope.  
She dwells here always.  
Allows rest in the mind and drive in the heart.  
When all else is gone there Hope resides.

*While these stories [myths] may not be factual or historically accurate, they are nonetheless true. (Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, & Leggo, 2009, p. 41)*

The posture or position from which one writes for an audience is usually carefully and consciously chosen. I struggled with this because I am writing chiefly for my own research, but also for a reader. Where to locate myself was an early concern.

### **Getting Started, But as Whom?**

I am aware, as I write, of a potential audience. I find that it stops me. I don't know my audience. I'm aware of words; what I choose to say and how I opt to say it will seem revelatory. Will tell you something about me. I feel guarded about what I am willing to convey. Wish to maintain control over perception.

Only, I don't know who/what I'd like to have perceived. For every story I tell, there are a thousand left untold, all the stories that comprise who I am and am becoming. The recklessness of divulging things only to be read and interpreted without my control is, for me, daunting.

Do I write against who I seem to be on the outside? That is my first impulse. Not the 40-something West-side yuppie with the lawyer ex-husband. White and privileged. Not that only. So who then?

The girl so far from that. *Waseskwan*. My Cree name from my time on the reserve where I learned to dance Pow Wow, where I learned another way of being in the world, where I learned to *listen*.

Or the girl who is a strange confection of Mormon-Anglo by way of Salt Lake City, Utah, and Russian Jew by way of Philadelphia, New Jersey, Atlantic City. Such roots pull and tug at one another; so disparate are the impulses and voices. I embody both.

Do I paint the portrait of the actor, singer, dancer, improviser who sees the world with the eyes of the artist, the heart of an artist, though I've never called myself an artist? I hear a voice in the back say, "Make sure they know you were a professional!" As though you care. As though it matters somehow. That's just insecurity talking, a need for backers.



Shall I tell you I'm a nature lover? It's a category, a title. I eschew those. But it's true. I relish in the natural world. Plants are my friends. I learn their names. I greet them on the streets; I introduce them to my son.

Oh yes, my son! A better parent would have mentioned him sooner. Right? Should have mentioned him first. Like a game show contestant: "Hi, I'm Tish from Vancouver. At home are my beautiful wife and my two adorable children." Grace eludes articulation. My child is Grace.

Hmm. I'm a teacher. It is my job. It is, for me, a calling. I don't lay claim to brilliance, but it is how I spend my days. With heart, soul, and great diligence.

I genuinely care for my fellow human beings. Though sometimes they confuse, disappoint, and even disgust me. I keep coming back to the human family to find home.

My wit is sharp. My tongue could cut if I let it. I try not to let it. My wit has been my protection, my shield. It is a safe place to go.

I've been a traveler. We moved around 10 times by the time I finished high school. I learned to adapt and to fit in. To be resilient. I did not learn how to make and keep long-time friends. That has been the work of my adult years.

My political views, sexual preferences, financial status, favourite foods, musical tastes— which lists will be enough to be known?

To know myself?

Am I woven in between and beyond these selves?

Aren't we all?

And indeed we are richly woven, so even as the content of my work and life is rhizomatic and various, so too are the selves who live in and interpret the world. Being conscious of this multiplicity is part of what I am learning as I work to be an integrated whole even as I find my own way through telling my stories.

*Writing autobiographically is like echolocation. . . . As life writers we are seeking to locate ourselves in a rapidly growing network of contexts. . . . We need to attend to the resonances that we can hear when, in the way of echolocation, we seek to know our locations in connection with the past, the future and others, as well as with our unfolding sense of self-identities. So, our narratives, poems, and meditations are echoes whose vibrations are like lines of connection that guide our practice. These echoes are part of a process of ruminating that dialogically connects with others. (Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009, p. 3)*

## CHAPTER 4: ROOTED IN LANGUAGE

My stories and the stories others share serve as touchstones, locators, signposts. But first one must give oneself permission to share these stories. This has been a delicate lesson for me.

*Everyone underestimates their own life. Funny thing is, in the end, all our stories, . . . they're the same. In fact, no matter where you go in the world, there is only one important story: of youth, loss and yearning for redemption. So we tell the same story, over and over. (Rohinton Mistry; as cited in Goodreads Inc., 2011b, quotation 2)*

“Say somethin’! C’mon, talk!” In our living room in rural Alberta—me two-and-a-half years old and as many feet tall, surrounded by curious faces. My nine- and ten-year-old brother and sister have gathered their friends to listen to the strange baby who talks like a grownup. They explode in laughter when I describe a ball as “circular.” As early as this I understood the cache that language afforded. But, further, it was play. Doctor Seuss showed me the joy in the absurd. I delighted in the connection between the images and the music of the language. Within my family there was the sense that language could be used as a plaything, and it was limitless. We made up words, many of which stuck and became part of our collective lexicon. There were so many family-specific words, in fact, that as the child of a transplanted New Jersey Jew and a Salt Lake City Mormon, in the Canadian North in the 1970s, it wasn’t until I was old enough to watch Woody Allen films that I discovered that the Yiddish words were not solely family words.

Moving every few years, we were cut loose, not connected to a single community or identity, and often the stories that explored this state of *otherness* were the ones that appealed. I was attracted to stories in which strange, wondrous, and sometimes unnerving connections, often fleeting, were made. There was one story in which a man disguises himself as a tree to observe three lovely horses grazing in a field. (I felt that his observation was some kind of a trespass.) Eventually, he unzips himself out of his tree suit and addresses the three horses. One is fair, one is medium brown, and one is dark. He speaks softly to them, strokes their muzzles, then dresses them up in gowns and takes them into town, where he tries to pass them off as “real ladies.” I

remember being at once entranced and disturbed by the idea. Of course, it is fun for a while, but the plan goes embarrassingly wrong, and all must return to its natural state. The sense of displacement, the meeting of disparate elements, and then the need to part to be able to subsist was, and remains, a dominant theme in my own mythology.

### **I Remember Gardens**

I remember gardens planted summers with my family.

Each year or every other year a new town. New faces. Adjustments to be made.  
“Where is your hometown?” they’d ask me. I had no answer for them.  
Homeless wanderers.  
But each year, each place, our garden grew.  
Reassuring repetition in a sea of changing places.  
Each summer I could count on the familiar faces of the flowers; petunias fuchsia and purple.  
Tugging carrot tails hard and out to reveal sweet treats for the taking.  
Delicious dirt and all.  
Sitting hidden among the warm, wet, fragrant earth.  
Crouching pulling peas from their delicate vines.  
A private domain. An embrace.

With autumn came the harvest, the dying days of summer.  
Tilling plants up by the roots for another year.  
And like our garden, we too were often uprooted.  
Off to the next location, until we could return to the garden for another season.

My favourite story from childhood is a book by Laurent de Brunhoff (1965) called *Bonhomme*. (I smile as I remember my American mother reading to me, oblivious of the French pronunciation: “*Bon Home*,” she’d call him). de Brunhoff depicts a little girl who, like myself at the time, wandered freely in the wilderness near her home. Emilie meets a small ‘man,’ an amorphous individual with a long spike on his head. Surprisingly, nowhere in the story is Bonhomme’s species questioned. Emilie, and later her parents, invite his friendship, and he quietly grants it. The conflict comes in society at large, where officials fear Bonhomme’s spike and require that he wear a cork upon it. (I was sympathetic to the idea of difficult alterations made in an effort to be acceptable to others.) Initially, he concedes, but it becomes clear by the

end that Bonhomme belongs uncorked and up on the hill where Emilie first met him and where she is free to see him from time to time. de Brunhoff tells the whole story with a series of line drawings embellished only by shocks of salmon-shaded watercolour. The structure was a departure from other books I'd seen, and the strangeness appealed to me.

In 1972, when I was six years old, my family moved to Montana while my father completed his doctorate. It was a dynamic time in the U.S.; newspapers and radio and television stations, and bumper stickers taught me much about how being literate was crucial to understanding the world of adults. Bumper stickers invited us to "Hang loose," "Keep on truckin'" and "Give peace a chance." They also questioned. "Energy crisis, my ass!" emblazoned the popular distrust that the public felt for the sacrifices that we were all required to make. Each day on my way to first grade I carried my Charlie Brown lunchbox in one hand and a flashlight in the other because there wasn't enough energy to light the street lamps in the morning, or at least that is what They said. This was the time of Watergate, the Women's and the Black Rights Movements. Everywhere people were calling for justice. Even the songs on the radio had instructive narratives that informed my own. It was where I learned what it meant that I was my parents' Love Child. I was more than just a *loved child*. Now I saw that words and ideas were the keys to understanding the world and one's place in it.

Later, as a young adult I found that books were a safe place into which I could retreat. Often a stranger in a new town, I'd find a kind of solace in my books. There was escape and instruction to be found on the shelves of libraries no matter where one found one's self. Books have always helped me ready myself for new experiences. I have benefited from the type of rehearsal that literature can afford. So too have I found that the writing down of my own experiences has helped me construct some understanding of the places and events that have formed my personal landscape.

## **Forts**

I remember forts.

Impermanent places, like clearings replete with mossy beds and giant mushrooms we'd form into cakes.

I remember snow forts.

Long tunnels dug with ice-caked mittens deep and cave-like with just enough room for one. So dark I needed to use a flashlight to continue past four in the afternoon.

I remember tree forts.

Formed from found timber, built with salvaged nails. We'd look for trees situated just right to support our two-story hideaway. One even had a lookout tower. Those brave of heart could climb to the waving tops and sing above it all.

I remember my bed-fort.

Fashioned with a broom shaft wedged between the top bunk and the ceiling. Long weekends spent with my books, writing, singing, dreaming, and petting kittens, one black, one white. At night, like the snow fort, my bed fort required a flashlight. Beneath my canopy, warm, glowing orange and safe, I'd while away the hours until sleep brought the reverie to an end.

For me, literacy in all of its forms has been informed by the desire for mysteries unlocked, for playfulness, and for the seeking of justice.

Books were the major decorating scheme in our house. From floor to ceiling our living room was populated with books. The shelves were made from flimsy metal, painted as a weak homage to wood. I marvel that they managed to hold the plentiful and diverse collection (see Table 1). I cast my mind back to those shelves and contemplate the possible impact of what I found there. Much was on offer, and never was it suggested that any of the books were beyond us children. So, like walking in a garden and learning the names and faces of flowers, I'd walk over the spines and into the leaves of the books.

Table 1

*My Family Bookshelves*

<p>e. e. cummings          Ferlingetti          Robert Frost          Walt Whitman          Shakespeare          Shel Silverstein          John Donne          Edward Lear          (There were other poets whose names I now forget but who made an impact by coupling text with pictures that made social commentary that, as a child and a girl, I found empowering.)</p>	<p><i>The Old and New Testaments</i>  <i>The Book of Mormon</i>  <i>The Torah</i>  <i>The Koran</i>  <i>The Bhagavad-Gita</i>  <i>Baha'i Prayers</i>          (There were many other Baha'i texts, the faith that my mother found and that came to reside in our home.)</p>	<p>There were many books to do with psychology and sociology. (My father's PhD was in educational psychology.)  <i>Time Life</i> nature books, an atlas, dictionary, and thesaurus  <i>The Tao of Physics</i>          Books about school organization</p>	<p>There were science fiction books, or other books that attempted to prefigure a world that might function better than our own.          Ayn Rand          Larry Niven          Doris Lessing          Orson Scott Card          There were popular psychology books.  <i>I'm OK, You're OK</i>  <i>The Book of Sensual Massage</i>  <i>The Joy of Sex</i>  <i>The Joy of Cooking</i></p>
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So all that diversity lived together on our shelves. A great democracy of words. I read, or read in, all of them, and I see how the reading and living I've done since find many of their roots there.

For many years we lived up North. Way North. Polar Bear North! For seven months of the year the out-of-doors were often impenetrable. At that time we were lucky if we could get even fuzzy reception on the one station that did come in, so television was not a viable filler of our time. There were no malls or shopping centers. We'd sit around and read, periodically moving to a new position on the chair or in the home. Stopping only to squabble (a reaction to being cooped up) or to sit down at the table and talk, often about ideas found in our books. Dinner was lengthy and a time my family came together. Here was where I learned to craft an idea that would tell the contents of my mind and heart. Here was where I learned humour, irony, satire, and comic timing. Sustenance indeed.

I'd moved house many times by the time I graduated high school; I am still not entirely sure why. Some quipped that Dad was a "wandering Jew." I'd joke that we were part of the Witness Protection Plan or running from the law, but really, I think it had to do with my father's abiding wish that the next place would fulfill a yearning he couldn't shake.

Always we hope  
someone else has the answer  
some other place will be better  
some other time it will turn out.

This is it  
no one else has the answer  
no other place will be better  
and it has already turned out.  
(Lao Tzu)

So every year or two we'd pack up all our books, choosing them again and again. Funds were few, and books were really our only luxury. We'd load them into the new house, arranging them and ourselves again and again. Our books were the history and home we brought with us. Books were the only things my Dad took when he left.

Contained in that story are the seeds and roots that will spread and sprout throughout my life and, indeed, this thesis. As a teacher I attend to listening to the deep roots of my students. Providing spaces for life writing and for discourse on those elements that matter in their own lives and in mine sets the stage for empathetic readings of the lives of others. As we work with fictional texts, so too do we read our own stories with similar care. Seeking the lessons found there.



## I Remember

I remember boundless energy, endless optimism, and utter acceptance.  
I remember believing in Magic—believing I was magic.  
I remember running to the radio to hear that song.  
I remember lying in a field, the sun heavy on the backs of my legs,  
bursting sweet strawberries between my tongue and the roof of my mouth.  
I remember being very loved.

I remember, I remember, I . . .  
I'd like to forget.  
I'd like to forget lies told, confidences broken, illusions shattered.  
I'd like to forget a constricted face shuffling papers at the end of a dark hall.  
I'd like to forget sorry sights through half-open doors.  
I'd like to forget my responsibilities  
to worry  
to call back  
to say, "Please," "Thank you," "Would it be OK if . . . ?"

I'd like to remember to forget about tying binds that stop my mouth, eyes, heart  
from teaching me to have,  
boundless energy, endless optimism, utter acceptance.

As David Smith (as cited in Irwin & de Cosson, 2004) suggests:

*[A] teacher who lives well, with a healthy remembrance, is able to talk in such a way that students can learn to see that there is more to life than what appears on the surface that there is indeed an Other side to everything, a silent archeology in every speech, a secret which inspires the saying, indeed an absence which is always present. (p. 58)*

To read one's own life mythologically, with that sort of care and import, may perhaps lend more heartfelt attending to our actions—to our ways of being in the world. Reading this way may be helpful as one grows and faces challenges.

## CHAPTER 5: MEASURING UP

As teachers in the school context, while we seek to live well and to develop a creative, caring community, we are also admonished to evaluate. This evaluation sometimes has unforeseen or unwanted ramifications.

My son is nine years old. He is a bright, creative, enthusiastic student. Duncan reads at around a Grade 10 level. His parents believe in education for its own sake and place moderate emphasis on grades. Still, the shift from third to fourth grade and, with it, from qualitative to standard grading, has Duncan very uncomfortable indeed. This week he came home with a math unit for me to sign; this is to ensure that parents are seeing the work. It was a series of math assignments and a culminating unit test. As adults we understand how standard grading works. We comprehend the rising import of each task in marks-allotment terms. Nine-year-old Duncan did not have such an understanding. His marks were C+, B, A. As he proffered the document, I noted aloud that he had done well. But Duncan responded in a pinched voice and in danger of tears, "I'm sorry about the C, Mom." He focused on the 'low' mark, which he deemed a failure, rather than on the ultimate outcome or on his mother's response. I said, "School is for learning, so what did you learn from that assignment?" "I learned that I need to read the instructions better," was his reply. "Well, that is good enough for me," I said.

Here is a curious and academically advantaged child with parents who take a moderate approach to marks. But still, even at nine years old the pressure to measure up is keenly felt.

I too feel the censure to "measure up." Even as I assess my students, I assess myself. Too often I am far too tough a critic. But measure I do. What results is an elaborate dance involving students, teachers, administrators, and parents.

(The teacher's lounge at lunch)

Caught another one.

What?

Cheating. He took a whole section from this site online; I *Googled* it.

Really.

Yeah. You wouldn't *believe* the stuff I've caught them trying to pull.

What're you going to do?

Well, I'll call him in and get him to try to explain to me what 'he' wrote. That usually catches them up since they don't really know many of the words. Hopefully, he'll just confess. I just hate it when they lie straight to my face. Then I'll let him know that this is a zero grade, he'll be ineligible for the principal's list, and his parents will be called in. They just have to learn that they can't get away with cheating!

Why do they risk it, I wonder?

I have a feeling I know why. They do not trust themselves to be good enough, to know the right thing to say in the right way. They often imagine that knowledge is outside themselves; they are vessels to be filled. Our students must get into university to get a good job. For many of these students, just *any* college or university will not do; they must get into a 'good university', and for them this means at least UBC, but east coast universities have more prestige, and U.S. universities are more desirable still. So the race for the right placement is on. Even Grade 8 students will talk about which university they have to get into and note that their marks must be high enough. Despite the fact that no postsecondary institution is interested in eighth-grade marks, students will not be convinced.

Now the aspiration has become early acceptance. Term 2 grades were sent out to postsecondary institutions in the past, but now some universities are looking at term 1 marks.

Teachers and students have merely begun to undertake the learning in the Grade 12 year by this point. Add to this the pressure of the language requirements for students who may have only been studying in English for two or three years, if they fail to get an adequate English 12 grade they must then take the TOEFL test. This is added stress and expense as one must pay to take it, and students usually buy books to study from and take courses on how to do well on the test. Often students keep tutors for all of their school subjects, and then some besides. So many students attend school all day and then spend each evening in tutorials for math, science, English, art, music, TOEFL. Then they do homework and begin it all again the next day.

As teachers, we worry for our students' well-being, about their lack of 'balance'. The British Columbia government has been so moved to support balance in the lives of our students that new curricula have come out almost yearly for the last decade or so to augment the time that students spend doing physical activities, volunteering in the community, seeking information about various career options, managing stress, working on interpersonal skills, and so on. With each addition came the requirement to assess student performance in each of these areas, to see how they/we are doing. So now students do all the aforementioned academic tasks they have always done for the reasons that they have always done them, and then they try to eke out time to manage the work they have been given in an attempt to find balance. They are balancing, all right, like jugglers on tightropes.

The British Columbia government has also added more and more standardized tests over the last decade. Students who wish to graduate must do well on these exams. In English 12, which I teach, this one test is worth 40% of their final grade.

At the school level we have an awards system that invites still further academic competition among students and the families of students. The types of awards that are attainable are exemplified on one Vancouver high school website:

## School Awards

### Academic Awards

The criteria for all are:

Minimum 60% in all courses

Grades 8-11 must take 8 courses (exceptions decided by the principal)

Grade 12s must take 7 courses (exceptions decided by the principal)

The courses Community Service 11, Peer Tutoring, Career Preparation Work Experience, English as a Second Language, Skills, and Career and Personal Planning are not included in the average but are included as courses.

Honourable Mention: 80% average, inclusive

Honour Roll: 86% average

Principal's List: 90% average (English must count in the calculated average)

### **Passport to Education**

The Passport to Education (British Columbia, Ministry of Education, n.d.) is a Ministry-sponsored program that recognizes the top 30% of students in each grade, 9 through 12. Successful candidates are students who obtain the highest average final grade on their best five courses taken at the school. These students receive stamps with a cash value that may be applied to postsecondary tuition fees.

### **Year-End Academic Awards**

The top students in each grade receive Certificates of Academic Merit at the school award ceremony in September or graduation ceremony in June, depending on the grade. Scholarships are awarded to the top graduating students in June. These awards are provided through donations from school fundraising, community service clubs, the U-Hill Support

Society, the PAC, education associations, and local businesses and professional associations. To qualify for year-end academic awards, graduating students must have been attending University Hill for Grades 11 and 12 and be enrolled in seven courses with a Grade 11 or 12 designation.

### **Athletic Awards**

Athletic awards are given for participation in the extracurricular athletic program. Students are awarded up to 5 points, and extra points may be given in the following circumstances: Playoffs: 1 point; Finals: 1 point; Provincial Championships: 1 point. The number of points needed to qualify for athletic awards and medals are Bronze (15), Silver (30), Gold (40), pewter medal on a plaque (50).

### **Service Awards**

Certificates and medals for service are presented to students involved in activities which provide a service to the school and fellow students with no course credit attached. Students are selected for service awards by the Awards Committee, on the recommendation of staff members. The number of points needed to qualify for a Service Award and Medal are: Certificate (15); Bronze (25); Silver (35); Gold (45). The Top Service Student is awarded a Pewter Medal on a Plaque. (University Hill Secondary School, n.d.)

Add to these awards the frameable certificates that some individual courses award and the fact that all of these awards bring with them accolades in the form of posted lists, plaques, photos, on-stage acknowledgement at schoolwide assemblies, and eligibility for financial awards at graduation as a result of cumulative success, and we have, in our attempt to reward excellence, made it very difficult to live with being average.

So why do they cheat? “How can we not?” they might answer if they could articulate the pressure that they feel. The risks of not achieving are far greater than those of getting caught.

As a teacher, I have felt the pressure of mixed loyalties in the face of the issue of plagiarism. Certainly, academic integrity is something I *do* value. But I am alive to that pressure to measure up. I feel compassion for the students and the tremendous pressure they feel. I take it

on as my problem to solve. Still, I worry about the ramifications of students who take this route. What might be the result of a generation of young people who don't trust their own voices? What lessons might I learn about this issue by looking at my own history as an emerging writer? Is there anything in my own experiences that might help my students today?

My life as a writer started when I was eight. From my office at the back of our doublewide 'teacherage' (trailer) in Northern Manitoba, I would set down my impressions of life to that point. Outside my window the rough bush laid dormant, while the snow silently piled, often literally, up to the windows. Warm inside, I wrote. To the song of the wringer washer (my office mate), I wrote. No. I *Painted* with words. Trying to capture and then lay down on the page the potent landscape that held me. I sensed somehow that there was more there than just what could be seen; that there was something in the land and our place on it that warranted expression. My words were Love that I wrote down and gave away. I was driven with purposes for writing. In writing, I imprinted and was imprinted upon.

Now, so many years later, as I write amidst Vancouver's effusive foliage, so far from the austerity of that early landscape, I reflect on the writing of the students with whom I work in secondary school. I note the ironic juxtaposition between the lushness all around us and the Personal voice often seems unimportant to students, set against the increasing mechanization of education. Students are encouraged on all sides, both overtly and systemically, to get in, get the grades as quickly as possible, and get out. Rather than exploration, the goal is economics.

The result is stressed-out kids, a lack of educational integrity, and, perhaps worst of all, a lack of intellectual curiosity. How I wonder might students be encouraged to pursue their education from a more organic perspective. How might they be encouraged to find and use their own voices?



## **CHAPTER 6: LEARNING BY HE/ART**

So I've gone looking for methods to engage students, to encourage them to become invested in their own learning, and to create opportunities for them to explore and employ their own creativity as a means of doing well in English class. I contend that a/r/tography is a type of literacy. It is a literacy that invites a living process-oriented way in the world. It invites compassion and continual looking and relooking. It invites one to live one's life with curiosity, dexterity, and heart. Reverence for this form of literacy is why I teach now with more questions than answers, why we find/use/create our own metaphors, both concrete and abstract, as a means of making meaning and exploring our understandings

## Angling for the Authentic

Some years ago I was searching for ways to enrich the analytical skills of my students. I found that the traditional model of the linear conception of plot led to limited and predictable written responses from the students. They often failed to engage with texts on a personal level, and there was little depth to their discourse. I was bored, and so were they.

In my own readings I had come across the writings of Joseph Campbell. Campbell had studied widely across cultures and traditions and had noted a common tale among the stories around the world:

In 1949 *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* introduced Campbell's idea of the monomyth, . . . outlining some of the archetypal patterns that Campbell recognized. Heroes were important to Campbell because, to him, they conveyed universal truths about one's personal self-discovery and self-transcendence, one's role in society and the relation between the two. (Art & Popular Culture, 2010, Heroes and the Monomyth section, ¶ 1)

Having read *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, I thought that this conception of story was a richer paradigm through which to discuss literature and, indeed, our own lives. So I rendered Campbell's ideas into an accessible graphic organizer and shared it with my students. First we'd plot well-known fairytales, then we'd apply them to our own experiences, and then on we went to broader texts. Students' engagement with and analysis of the stories then seemed to deepen. They began to recognize processes at work and elements that brought about character development. Discussion moved beyond the linear.

It is key to note that this way of considering story is not an end in and of itself but, rather, a way into rich discussions about literature and personal and communal mythologies, as well as a means by which to derive meanings around transformative experience and the capacities that create such transformation. This model makes room for multiple stories/voices and how they intersect and depart. There is room here for continued stories; indeed, in Campbell's model there is no such thing as "happily ever after." Rather, there are opportunities for challenge, learning,

teaching and then more challenges. This model emulates more closely our lived experience. Plotting a story on this cycle and then discussing symbol, theme, character, and plot with reference to the cycle makes it very difficult to Google the answer. These are just not answers that one will find online, because they stem from one's own engagement with the text.

### **Concretely Conveying the Conceptual**

Less and less do I ask questions for which there are 'right' answers. Students know how to retrieve information, but the problems of our age defy merely *sourcing* current answers to simple questions. So as much as I can, I seek out work that requires us to do something with information/ideas, to make connections. We co-opt paradigms and apply them in new milieux. We use symbols and metaphor to touch upon the abstract in the concrete, or we take the concrete and use it as a metaphor to touch upon the ineffable. We gather and construct microcosmic and macrocosmic meanings.

1. For example, as students are grappling with the theme of *The Power of One* by Bryce Courtenay (1989), I ask them to bring in an item that they think embodies in some way the themes that we are inferring from the text. They cannot 'cheat' per se, because, to choose an item, they have to exercise their own apprehension of the text, to be able to choose and then to articulate what they have chosen and why.
2. Another activity that we do is with a particularly difficult poem called "A Warning to Children" by Robert Graves. Therein the author binds the reader with a circularity of logic as well as a circularity of poetic structure. The result is a claustrophobic and dizzying, infinitely repeating series of images. I ask the students first to discuss the poem with regard to intention and structure and then to seek a marriage between the two. Next I ask them to bring in something that they think relates conceptually or aesthetically to their experience of this poem. I don't 'solve' the poem for them. They

come back with an array of excellent examples that act as ways into discussions and analysis. So, although they can certainly read up on the poem, they must engage with their *own* experience of the work to render something aesthetic to present to the class.

3. The method of the Verbal Visual Essay is not my own, and I have been unsuccessful in finding out who the originator of this method is. However, I have found it very useful to balance abstractions and interacting elements to convey and control meaning. This method allows students who are less verbal but highly reasoning to convey the depth of their appreciation for a subject. This method also allows students for whom English is a second language to demonstrate their ideas visually as well as through language, and they often demonstrate a greater richness of thought than they can, as yet, convey with language alone. These visual essays really give both me as the teacher and the students as a community a clearer understanding of what the community of learners is gleaning, which enriches and broadens our discussions. When students have this level of engagement, they seem, ultimately, to be freer to enter the sphere of writing, and thus the level of written work improves. Further, each visual essay is necessarily distinct. The verbal component is based upon the visual. One cannot cheat.
4. I teach some critical theory. We cover some basics of gendering the text, Marxist theory, and psychological and cross-cultural readings. Their writing on a given text, viewed through these lenses, not only prepares them for university and requires them to take a perspective, but also, again, makes it very difficult to source ‘the answers’ online.

## Reflective Research

One final illustration of a method that I have employed in an attempt to enrich students' work and minimize plagiarism is one of the ways that we do research papers. Having spent the year practicing working in the ways illustrated above, I invite the students to take a key theme from the novel *The Power of One* (Courtenay, 1989) and to take note of this theme as it is found in the documentary *When We Were Kings* (Sonenberg, Gast, & Hackford, 1996), which depicts the story of Muhammad Ali's comeback fight. It emphasizes the aspects of Ali's life story that demonstrate the elements that readied him to become the figure of influence and excellence that he became. The film forms the model for the research paper.

I then ask the students to research the biography of a figure who embodies this notion of the 'power of one' (excellence and influence), the theme from our novel. I ask them to write a paper charting only those aspects of the biography that articulate the development of the qualities that create this theme and these qualities of excellence in the life of their subject. So, although the students will source biographical information and cite it accordingly, they must, to be successful in this assignment, filter all information through the provided paradigm. They must engage with the story and chart the trajectory of the story as it adheres to the theme and, again, to the monomyth. Students draw connections and avoid, to some extent, the mere reproduction of others' ideas.

Do I still encounter students plagiarizing? Yes, sometimes, but it happens less and less. I just try to keep finding ways to prevent them from being tempted. I recognize the kind of desperation that some of them feel to achieve what they don't believe they are capable of achieving academically. I want them to believe that the answers they need are in them, that they are smart enough and creative enough to find and make the understandings that they require to do well. I want them to be the kind of individuals who will use their ingenuity well; I hope that

they will help to preserve this planet. It seems to me that just catching them when they are being dishonest won't achieve this. I like to think that intellectual and emotional empowerment could.

My goal in using art in the English classroom is to find our way into understandings that we might not garner otherwise. In doing so, we welcome other voices, other ways of telling and of knowing.

Lynn Sanders-Bustle (2008) writes:

*A contemporary shift from a modernist to a postmodern paradigm challenges educators to revisit and revise practices to include experiences that . . . cross disciplinary boundaries, encourage conceptual development, and foster creative and critical inquiry, all within the context of an ever-changing contemporary world. (p. 9)*

## CHAPTER 7: WALKING WITH CARE

Parker Palmer (1998) sees teaching as an act of hospitality:

*Good teaching is an act of hospitality toward the young, and hospitality is always an act that benefits the host even more than the guest. The concept of hospitality arose in ancient times when this reciprocity was easier to see: in nomadic cultures, the food and shelter one gave to a stranger yesterday is the food and shelter one hopes to receive from a stranger tomorrow. By offering hospitality, one participates in the endless reweaving of a social fabric on which all can depend—thus the gift of sustenance for the guest becomes a gift of hope for the host. It is that way in teaching as well: the teacher's hospitality to the student results in a world more hospitable to the teacher. (p. 51)*

### Blooms Bright

We are out on the lawn journaling in the sun's last pre-autumn rays;  
storing up warmth and light before we dive into months of grey of wet.

I see you there, perched on knees, on bottoms, heads hung over your pages  
nestled among the grasses and dandelions  
like a garden of bright blooms  
a garden of children, a *kinder garten*.

And I think, May the sun's rays sustain your bodies  
may the earth beneath you support you  
may the rains that will inevitably befall you prove nourishing.

And then  
may you pour all your goodness out over the page over your family over this planet  
who need you.

Forge a future filled with gardens full of kinder—a kinder world  
where moments like this are the norm and not the exception.

Is this too much to ask from one moment in the sun?  
Not ask then.  
A benediction, a prayer.

*This is the balancing act of a pedagogy: to retain the exquisiteness of this child's life  
while at once cracking it open into the textures of the Earth. (Jardine, 1993, p. 20)*

*I want research that hangs out in the spaces between a poetics of possibility and poetics  
of impossibility. (Leggo, 1999, p. 122)*

## Tread Lightly

The other day my son, who is entranced by detail, taught me something new about the moon. He said, “Mom, did you know that the footprints the astronauts left on the moon will never disappear because there is no wind on the moon?”

There is poetry in that, I thought.

I’ve been thinking a lot about footprints.

The ones my son may follow in, the ones we are leaving on this planet.

My ‘carbon footprint.’

In fact, I’d say I am preoccupied with my carbon footprint.

Fearful. Watchful. Paranoid.

Does leaving my cell phone charger in the wall draw power all day? Why must everything we consume come double wrapped in plastic that will lie in landfills long after my son and I have ourselves become the earth? Do the little alterations that I make, make any difference—cloth shopping bags, walking my groceries home, carrying my cups? Am I trying to plug the sinking ship with my finger? Does biodegradable dish soap really matter when industry works its wonders daily? Am I at all part of the solution?

Aaahhh. There is that word again.

Like all of life is a math equation that we can make come out right?

Make balance.

It is tough to have faith in this as a model for modern life.

The footprints we leave

are made

with heavy toxic boots.

Can the winds our earth boasts over the moon, blow smooth



the footprints we've marched into this planet?

It strikes me that this notion of footprints is a good metaphor to consider. What paths we walk, how and where we tread and how often will leave traces both concretely and abstractly. That to which we give our attention, where we choose to pause, and upon what we work will have influence. The buildings we build and how we use them, the language we employ—all of it resonates, makes a mark.

## Nounsense!

We are 'Visioning' for our new school.

Yes, 'VISIONING.'

One more in a litany of nouns forced awkwardly to become verbs.

Prodded and teased into action

Dis-allowed from just being the person, place, or thing they were formerly.

'Visioning,' 'networking,' 'dialoguing,' even 'languaging'!

*Anti* languaging I say!

I cringe at many vagaries of modern diction.

"NO, I'll not *speak to* that!" I cry inwardly at meeting after meeting. I'll speak about it, or even on it, but TO it?

I'm not a purist.

I admire creative play in language; I am a fan of Dr. Seuss and Lewis Carroll.

If you need a new word, by all means create one!

Indeed, at times it *is* "brillig," and "slythy toves" are somewhere "gyring and gimbling," but this diction held up as a signifier of efficient meetings being held . . .

Spare us these.

Please.

Let the poor nouns alone; they just want to Be.

## Functional Phonemes

So we are, ahem, visioning for our new school. Discussing how schools work. What the rooms say about teaching and learning, about our lack of bells and PA announcements, about 80-minute blocks of discrete subject time.

What does this ‘language’ of public school say about how we learn and what we learn, with whom and why?

All this is language. It is the subspeak of public school.

It is constituted of functional phonemes—what we are, in fact, *able* to say, to convey, to learn.

To ask us to write an extended or altered alphabet would be magic if we had the ability to alter it all. If we also controlled the ‘teeth,’ the ‘tongue and the breath.’

But we soldier on relearning our *own* language, pulling it out and holding it up to the light. Shall we keep it like a collection of gathered stones? Should we discard something?

It demands that we articulate what we think is important and worthwhile.

That many voices are heard.

The bureaucracy of schools can make it difficult to create change. It can be a slow and frustrating process. This is often the way with important things that involve many people. Still, process, though difficult, can be as much the focus of fruitful learning as the product hopes to be.

## **Knots, Loops, and Ladders**

During this degree program I worked on a project in which I revisited Brian Greene's writing about the work going on in quantum physics to search for a unified theory of everything that attempts to reconcile quantum mechanics (using string theory) with general relativity. It is a wonderful tale in its implications, but also in the application of inquiry, imagination, and collaboration.

How wonderful inquiry is when it is exacted with a sense of possibility, wonder, and creative openness. I find it particularly inspiring when it makes its way into typically linear rational places.

I see a connection between what string theorists are doing and the sort of maverick faith and creativity exhibited by narrative inquirers and a/r/tographers who work within the contemporary empirically focussed context of the academy.

Like physics, narrative inquiry is a process fraught with complexity. Quickly, if one tries to smooth the rough edges of these sorts of entangled and shifting models, the process breaks down, or it ceases to be a living process.

Then I made a connection between the paradigms that I imagine fit the feelings I have had when I puzzle over problems, whether they are interpersonal, societal, environmental, scientific, or political. Often I've imagined a kind of knot: an intricate, intractable, finger-paining knot. I thought about the myth of the Gordian knot. This is the story wherein the gods tie an unravelable knot, and the one who can loosen it will become the rightful king of Phrygia. After many others try to no avail, Alexander the Great comes along and slices through the knot with his sword. This tale has been held up as a positive symbol of a decisive solution to an unsolvable problem. For me, however, it seems to model the simplistic and harsh rational approach to complex problem solving that ignores the players in the story. If, to extend the metaphor, the

threads are people or the environment, for example, then merely slicing through the knot of contention leaves fragments, wounds, and disarray in need of mending.

In addition to the knot, I've entertained images including a Mobius loop, a Rubik's cube, many other children's games—all of which include a sense of endless questing with perhaps more than a little frustrating repetition. Another image that I had was Jacob's ladder, a toy that employs a series of looped ribbons, strings again, that create an infinite cycling down of wood blocks. Jacob's ladder in the biblical tale was a rope ladder to and from heaven. So, I wondered, what do these images have in common beyond questing without end? Well, the acts themselves are enthralling. There is a sense of play and elegance about each toy/model/paradigm. These puzzles and knots are captivating. We don't want our puzzles ready solved, our knots cut. It is the play that entrances. It is in this spirit of play that discoveries are made.

So, stepping back, I thought about how I am talking about the human heart's desire to know and to be known. Narrative inquiry and a/r/tography connect to those places that linearity cannot necessarily go. Just as quantum mechanics goes beyond the bonds of empiricism and into what some, perhaps a little damningly, call philosophy, so our seeking to learn through storytelling and the arts takes us beyond where we could go by using a straightforward system of hypothesis testing. Narrative generates its own phenomena. Narrative inquiry, like a knot, takes attention to nuance, and a lot of trust and patience.

I imagine a landscape of hearts connected by strings again, those difficult, playful things that get tugged upon, that knit us together. And at times what we get for our efforts are unifying ideas and bits of knowing that reside even as the questioning and questing continue.

I note, for what it is worth, that *untie* is an anagram for *unite*. The search for unity—perhaps THAT is Jacob's ladder.

## CHAPTER 8: LIMINAL SPACES: WHERE THE MAGIC HAPPENS

*Research operates in the preparation and discoveries of “findings,” whether intended or serendipitous. Both tend to lie beneath the surface or hover behind the scenes but at times, fortunately, scramble to the foreground. . . . Nevertheless, real synthesis is rarely achieved in art and life, and or in teaching. There are extraneous pieces, lumpy bits, things that are messy or unresolved. (Irwin & de Cosson, 2004, p. 196)*

### The Messes We Make

We work to make it come out right.

I am, as many teachers are, a Planner.

I pride myself on well-organized lessons and units,

a tidy and orderly classroom, students who remain engaged and on task.

Each year is methodically mapped out in months, weeks, days

80-minute increments of time and still smaller units,

transitions from aspect of lesson to aspect of lesson—

a regimental waltz born of seasons and seasons of practice.

But the really *good stuff*,

the fleshy parts of learning and of life seem often to arise

when cracks show in the regimen

through the cracks seep light and the luminosity of wonder.

What is left is often the mess of unresolved issues, questions, and concerns that resist definition, that won't sit still for a proper dissection, so we poke at them with our questions like kids at the river's edge with sticks.

Some are washed downstream, and other bits stay, wash ashore to reside. We polish these bits of knowing, carry them in our pockets like pebble treasures.

The messes we make, the detritus of learning and living together at school, sometimes worries us. One sits silently in a classroom when children have gone and says things to oneself like:

“What the hell happened today? That was not where I thought we were going today.”

“It was good, . . . I think (assessing and judging always), but I'm sure glad no grownups were around to see how off topic we got.”

We teachers sit at our desks, secretly worried that we've transgressed, that we've wandered so far afield that it bespeaks a sort of wantonness that is unseemly.

Quietly, we pack our book bags full of marking—the evening's work. And as we turn out the lights to leave, we reach into our pockets and take out the polished treasures we pulled from our day at the river's edge. Rubbing their smooth surface, we head wistfully home.

The space between fear and daring is at times a vast chasm; at others it is the space of a breath. In the beat of a pulse one will fall from the high diving board; one will lean in to seal the kiss; one will savour the leap in the stomach at the apex of a swing. It is this sense of inbetweenness that we try so hard to banish as adults, but it is exactly those brave delights that feed the spirit.

*Having covered over our true childish selves, we have ever since been afraid of being revealed as the unruly beings we actually are. Fear of exposure, of being found out, does not have its basis in any real inadequacies either of knowledge or intelligence on our part, but rather in the performance model itself which, in separating our behavior from what we really [feel creating] a kind of false self. (Tompkins, 1990, p. 654)*

For my students, as for myself, I try to recall the wise words of Marianne Williamson (1992) and to remember that when we stop ourselves from being fully present and creative, we deprive not only ourselves, but also the world:

*Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others. (pp. 190-191)*

Oh to fly!

Even the caged bird has wings it stretches in honour of flight.  
Surely the sky loves the beating of wings, the swoop and the glide.



## **Liminality**

The space between

the thought

the word

the deed unseen

the river's edge

the bridge pristine

the unanswered question

the word ungleamed

*Like organ music, the whole exceeds the parts. There is something ineffable that holds the parts together. This ineffability is not possible without the parts, but the parts only become organic in the instance that they sing out this ineffability. (Leggo, 1999, p. 121)*

## Reverie

“Where am I?”

“I am right here.”

This moment . . . mature student.

Searching . . . she knows not what.

Early—time to rest and collect . . . phew.

Solitary amid public space . . .

My open book does not invite a visitor.

It is my sequestering influence.

“*Squidge, squidge squidge squidge*” Someone wearing rubber shoes comes and goes.

“*Clong clong clong,*” resonant chime of steps on metal stairs.

Hollow voices above—as though I’m down a well . . .

Like that baby so many years ago now. What was her name? Baby Jessica? Two or three days down a well and pictures of rescuers and onlookers as they pulled the resilient child from the depths . . . a miracle.

I think of her once in a while, and the African woman.

Mozambique?

Where were the floods?

Anyway, she went into labour while her world washed away. Climbed up a tree and hung on through labour, birth, torrents, hours and hours until a helicopter came to pluck her and her infant from disaster. A miracle.

“Where am I?”

“I am right here . . . and there.”

A world away, years apart.

I am both places.

Though the details have grown foggy, what remains with me are images of courage and resiliency in the face of disaster.

And the notion that help *will* come.

“Where am I?”

“I am right here.”

We train ourselves or are trained out of being childish. For my part, life has given me plenty of reasons to shore myself up, to become controlled and careful. Parenthood challenges all that.

## Ambivalence and the Milky Way

“Why?” she asked herself, did her poise and reserve abandon her when she gave birth to her son?

Here is a woman who others lauded as unflappable. Cool in a crisis. Stoic.

At 34 years old she'd been with the same man for over a decade. And with statistics about the increase in defective births by mothers over the age of 35, she was faced with a question: “If not now, when?”

It's not that she didn't like children. In fact, she works with children. It's just that she never experienced those maternal longings all her friends had complained of. Her husband accused her of not wanting children. It wasn't that she was against having a child. “I am ambivalent toward the idea,” she'd protested. In the society of breeders in which she ran, this was considered a very suspect stance. Anti-feminine, irresponsible. She contended that you'd have to be irresponsible *not* to be at least *a* bit ambivalent about creating a life and taking responsibility for it. “I mean, it's not like you're getting a kitten!” she grumbled to herself.

Still, she had agreed to the notion in some far-off fictional way when she agreed to marry, and now she was open to letting fate take a hand. So they ‘pulled the goalie,’ as she termed the cessation of birth control, and a bottle of Shiraz and one month later, she was pregnant.

“Pregnant!” How could she be pregnant? All her friends who'd so longed for a baby had to wait months, sometimes years to conceive! Formerly tepid women hunted now reticent husbands through the house, hapless victims in the fight for fertility. Usually amorously keen, all desire for coupling has faded, and they take their pleasure like pills. Then they do take pills, and temperatures, and tests.

But not Miss Ambivalent. Pregnant! It's not like she is exceptionally fertile; a youth in the '80s, she'd had her share of unprotected sex. ‘Dodged the bullet’ as she thought of it later

when AIDS taught us what there was to lose. She's not exceptionally fertile, but she was pregnant. Of course, everyone was ecstatic. At work, people who'd had nothing to say to her in the seven years she'd worked there were now joining her lunch table. Offering insights and quizzing her on her 'birth plan.' Sharing well meant, but disturbing gynecological details.

She felt like a fraud. She was being invited into the secret society of parenthood. People were reaching out to her. They'd smile beatifically at her swelling belly. But she just felt claustrophobic. She felt, in the kind gazes, a kind of blanket being lowered over her. A heavy, itchy blanket of expectation and definition. As though at any moment, the Mommy Police would come and buckle her in. Tight. Tucked. Done. She longed to talk about something else, . . . anything else. Just one of her myriad other interests. But for months all anyone wanted to discuss were birth stories and baby rooms. "Barf," she thought.

Having dutifully attended birthing classes, she was prepared for a lengthy, progressive, and arduous labour. But, three weeks early, as she sat in a darkened theatre watching a favourite comedian, she literally 'busted a gut.' Something gave way, and she knew her water had broken. There were no other symptoms, so she waited an hour before telling anyone.

Four hours later she'd given birth to her son. The boy gave one squawk and then looked around wide eyed. This puny, furry, ruddy Halfling. This person plucked from under a woodland mushroom. He looked up at her, his head dwarfed by her enormous breast.

Miss Ambivalent experienced what she describes as "Big Bang Theory for the Heart." Here was the one person she did not have to learn to love. In an instant and in full bloom, a universe of love.

What came after were weeks of staring at her boy, saying over and over again, "Mom, isn't he cute? Don't you think he's just so cute?" "Yes, dear, he is very cute." At less than six pounds and covered in loose skin, with a thin coating of dark hair, he was perhaps slightly less

than *perfectly* cute. But the eyes of love looked kindly on what she called his “little furry flesh suit.”

So no longer ambivalent. Oh no! Now she became anxious. While walking with the pram, she'd envision cars jumping the curb and crashing into the carriage. While nursing, she was paranoid that her mountainous flesh would suffocate him. Later, it was fears of choking; she'd sit tense and watchful when he ate. Every hard or sharp edge around the home could potentially put his eye out!

Where had the savvy, sanguine woman gone? Who was this edgy wing nut who'd taken her place?

Her son, now seven, woke up this morning, complaining of small, painful lumps under his armpit. Despite feigning calm, her mind immediately went to lymphoma. Her best friend's dog died of it last year. They rushed to the clinic!

He's fine, of course. A lymphatic reaction to some spider bites.

A world of love. A world of worry.

She reflects that being poised is, perhaps, less perfect than being passionately connected to another human being.

Big bang theory for the heart. A lot of noise and mess, but oh, how the stars twinkle at night!

As I teach, I experience my students more richly now that I am a parent. I treasure them more. Increasingly the selves I am out of school commingle with the selves I am at school. At the start of my career I would have worried more about this. Would have carefully buttoned my blazer against being ‘found out,’ but as Kozol (1991) suggests

*Good teachers possess a capacity for connectedness. They are able to weave a complex web of connections among themselves, their subjects, and their students so that students can learn to weave a world for themselves. . . . The connections made . . . are held not in their methods but in their hearts—the place where intellect and emotion and spirit will converge in the human self. (p. 234)*

After all, it is the human selves we are attending to, isn't it?

Much can be learned about my own 'complex web of connection' by ruminating over a series of moments I spent propped at my front window.

### **A Sense of Place**

I live in a tree house—not literally, but it feels that way, looking out my window on the top floor of an old Victorian. I sit nestled among trees and the tops of other houses. So when the leaves are in bloom, it is very like the tree houses I built in my childhood.

From my lofty perch, partially hidden, I can see without being readily noticed.

I reflect that for 20 years in many moves, I've chosen tree house after tree house; each home has had me slightly raised, tucked among the branches and leaves, enjoying light and life from up here. Today out my front window the park across the street is winter white. Lunar. At intervals a buzzer goes, releasing squealing children. Their screams are testimony to their continued delight at the snow. In stark contrast to this fray, in the foreground a retiree skis silently down the street. Somewhere just out of sight an engine keens as tires spin. "Another one stuck on the corner." I roll my eyes. Twenty years away from the North, and I still shake my head at West coast drivers when the snows come. As though I am impervious to the troubles of the terrain. From my window I can see the clear space where I've laboured to dig my car out. I say labour, but really it is a pleasure. I enjoy the sense of community with my neighbours—a reason to talk; a script written to make discourse easier. I enjoy the way it makes me warm; my cheeks flush. I enjoy the symmetry of my careful shovel strokes. I enjoy the powerful way my body will do what I want it to. And I relish the way shovelling sends me back through the years

to days of my youth in the far North, where there was far too much snow to ever clear, but we'd cut a path from the door to the road.

These acts of today—these places—how they take us back—how time folds in on itself. Like I fold up on my chair here in my tree house.

I watch the Canine Congregation arrive through spring and summer, 5:00–7:00 p.m. every night at the dog park across the street. The dogs' names I've learned: Digby, Keyso, Herbie the Love Pug. The human names I still struggle with. What of that? My son, Duncan, and I go and pet the dogs. When asked which one is mine, I smile and point to Duncan and say, "That one."

When spring comes to my window, it is a parade of cherry trees whose heads burst with cotton candy blossoms so profuse that my prairie self continues to be astonished by such abundance. By the sheer immoderation of it. When the winds come, pink confetti fills the air and runs in rose rivers down my lane. The stuff of fairy magic.

Speaking of magic, I've hung chimes by my front door. They are long metal chimes that ring low through the spring and summer. When I got them I asked my neighbours to let me know if they were a bother. I enjoy them from my bed at night. A reminder that I am in, safe and warm. But I did harbour a worry that my boon was someone else's bother. Then one day as I climbed my front stairs to my door, I found a small carefully written note which read, "Your chimes sound magical. Thank you." I actually wept. Delicate tears like the cherry blossoms that kiss the spring winds, touched that we'd shared something, we strangers, something tender—a wind song.

My tree house sits on the street rather than the avenue so I can follow the sun from room to room throughout the day. Sitting on my bed at the back of the house, I look out at a quadrangle of colourful houses, all with peaked roofs. These are the homes of children's



drawings, all tall and pointy, with smiling faces in windows. This is the type of neighbourhood I imagined as a child when we lived in the North on the permafrost in squat homes. What we had up north rather than picturesque neighbourhoods was the big wide world. Pine trees, muskeg, cattails, frogs, and beavers. When I was eight, about the age my son is now, I was allowed to play as far away as my legs could carry me and have me home for supper at six. I could be gone all day. Once he turned eight, I let my son cross the street and play at the park along with his friend from down the block, hoping that this fictional freedom (I can see him from my window) will somehow give him what my long hours did for me all those years ago in the woods.

I remember snow forts that took entire days to dig. I remember a three-story tree fort that I built with remnants of timber and scrounged nails. The top of that house was probably 30 feet in the air. There was only room for one at that level. Up there the winds would rock me. Waving above it all in solitude among the trees and above the houses were peace and freedom. So the day that Duncan came home in tears because they'd cut the branches off the tree he'd been climbing, I nearly cried too. "But why would they *do* that?" he pleaded. I know why. I who at the age of three climbed my first tree 20 feet up a pine; my parents coaxed me down and trimmed 6 feet up. As the parent now, I have held my tongue as he climbed that tree. It is a tough climb and hovers above a rocky patch. I kept my mouth shut, swallowed my fear. I've always told him, "If you can get there, you can go there." I who at six climbed on a roof of an old garage whose shingles gave way. I got six stitches over my lip that day. This day I bit that lip and cheered my climber on. Up and up and up he will go. Beyond my reach, beyond my protection. This is as it should be.

So why a tree house? Why always a tree house? I'm not sure. Is it my penchant for birds? I feed them; I love them. Is it emblematic of the way that I feel separate somehow, but still want to be connected, to see without being seen? Is it about perspective? A broad view? A long view? Is it about safety? Is it primal?

Because it seems I've been climbing trees forever and making forts. Little spaces of my own carved out or hammered up against the perils of cold, infirmity, and wind.

## CHAPTER 9: TIME AND SPACE

I consider a simple commute. What is there to learn here?

### Moving through Time

Have you ever done this? Driven sometimes miles, and suddenly you come to consciousness and realize you were completely unconscious of the distance you've traveled?

Lost in thought—a loss of time.

I did this the other morning. I drove from Alma to Blanca up 10<sup>th</sup> Ave. And I lost myself along the way.

Where was I? Elsewhere either reflecting or projecting, which we do often, but it is at its most alarming when done behind the wheel of a 3,000-pound potential hazard.

Perhaps this is a good metaphor for the danger of failing to attend, to *live in the now*. Who knows to what we are laying waste as we go along mindlessly?

As teachers, we are constantly in three time frames—assessing prior knowledge, teaching now for future benefit, and let's not forget assessment!

We juggle all this while on the tightrope of self versus other and the system—a high-wire circus act with no net.

We shape our year according to the school calendar; I still think of the new year as September rather than January. My ‘fresh starts’ occur at this time.

Fresh start, second chance, do-overs. The hope that in time, in our story, there will be an opportunity to go back to redeem oneself.

Like new school supplies (I love them), clear pages yawning wide, inviting creativity—possibility.

But you can never go back. Hindsight is 20/20.

I must say, of late, I find myself astonished to find I’ll never be 25 again. Understand, I have no problem with being over 40, but the notion that time seems to move in one direction is not something that had particularly impressed me before now.

Such a restriction.

I do not view 25 through a nostalgic filter; indeed, I’d not want to go back exactly, but the constraint of a timeline and perhaps what goes along with that stymies me.

So being in the moment or called to attend to the moment. What will do that for me? Well, right now I’m in an empty classroom with the sun falling across my lap and across my page. The weight of the sun brings me to a sensorial experience, and I am in my body even as I am in my head.

For me, *embodied* moments allow this sort of attention: yoga, swimming, making love.

Gardening, putting my hands in soil, commands my full attentiveness. I can't *race* when I garden.

And race I do—we do—a lot! The mind races, the heart beats, the belly boils, the groin yearns, the legs propel the body in the race we have created, the human race.

*In some philosophical traditions—Chinese, Hindu and Buddhist, to name three, time is cyclical. On Canada's Baffin Island, the Inuit use the same word—uvatiarru—to mean both “in the distant past” and “in the distant future.” Time, in such cultures, is always coming as well as going. It is constantly around us, renewing itself like the air we breathe. In the Western tradition, time is linear, an arrow flying remorselessly from A to B. It is a finite, and therefore precious, resource. (Honoré, 2004, p. 29)*

## Poetry Is Not a Race

Poetry is not a race!  
Poetry is not a race!  
Poetry is not a race!

And life is poetry in motion.  
Now don't get me wrong  
I fill my space; I step in time with that 'Marching Song'  
I do my best to keep the pace  
as I smile and wave at the expectant throng.

Poetry is not a race!  
Poetry is not a race!  
Poetry is not a race!

And life is poetry in motion.

Poetry  
is an ocean, an ocean lapping  
lapping at our shores.  
It takes us in its immense embrace  
lifting lolling, languishing grace.  
It dives us down and down  
and down  
and I wash up on your shores  
lay my head upon long stretches of sandy white  
then dive again for the pearls found in the depths.  
Because  
Poetry is not a race,  
Poetry is not a race,  
Poetry is not a race.  
And this is poetry in motion.

*The spirit, by its very nature, is Slow. No matter how hard you try you cannot accelerate enlightenment. Every religion teaches the need to slow down in order to connect with the self, with others and with a higher force. (Honoré, 2004, p. 47)*

### **A Date with Myself**

Time and slow deep breaths.

No one who requires anything from me.

Not 'needed' right now.

Time grows elastic; pulls thick and sweet like honey.

Elongates.

When I race, time races; when I do not, time slows to join me.

So here I sit on my own.

Home eked out in the corner of my class, warm rug at my feet, flowers sit cheerily on my desk and a smiling thumbs up from my kid sits framed encouragingly. As if to say, "You're doing a fine job, Mom! Keep up the good work." I need this.

Windows open, and I listen to the rainfall between the purple leaves of the plum trees here.

A gentle sound that seems to say, "It won't stay long."

The kind of rain that lets you walk to your car rather than clutch your collar and run.

A date with myself mining the mind/heart for pearls, diamonds, and gold.

The biggest and brightest full moon of 2009 . . . occurs . . . on January 10; the moon reaches full at 10:27 pm EST. On this date the moon is also at perigee and 222,138 miles from Earth at 6 am EST. This bright, close full moon is the third brightest of the 25 year period from 1993 to 2017. (Whitt, 2008, p. 1)

### **A Moon Bath**

Fill the bucket slowly, John.

Hush, hush, hush.

Plunge the bucket quietly, John.

Hush, hush, hush.

The fish are lolling now below;

the birds anest above.

So gather we our moon bath, John

all hush, and hush, and hush.

Gather my hair between your hands, John.

Hush, hush, hush.

Wash my hair with starlight, John.

Hush, hush, hush.

The trumpets will blow at morning's light;

the fields will call you back.

So gather we our moon bath, John

all hush, and hush, and hush.



Unaware of the reported celestial phenomenon other than the brilliance that I was witnessing as I sat at my dining table January 2009. The preceding piece came to/through me fully formed. I had only to put pen to paper. Afterward, I noted it seemed to live in multiple time frames: a distant agricultural one, a current one. It seemed to be the voice of a couple sharing a moment in the face of war. At this time my heart had been very much with those engaged in battles in Iraq and Afghanistan.

*“We need re-membering of our love of the Earth signed in the breath and beating in the blood whether we know it or not”* (Jardine, 1993, p. 25). So much of the best of my youth was the reminder that sustenance and creativity stem from time apart. Time needed to listen to one’s own pulse and to what the earth seemed to be saying. What wisdom is on the wind?

## Walk Out with Me

April 20<sup>th</sup>. I must remember the date.

This time is the time

when the cherry blossoms weigh so heavy on the heads  
of the trees outside my house, that they cannot help but shake them  
shake them free at each sigh of wind.

Rose-colored rivers running down the lane

my son and I wade wander wonder at such beauty.

Early evening, the sun slanting rays sidelong

we scoop pink piles in our palms and heave them aloft,  
watching slow motion as they flutter through the shafts of light,  
passing so slow so slow so delicately delicately.

We ache for the beauty this paradigm of spring.

We ache so we do it again and again and again never tiring

all through the evening we wander and later witness  
others reaching and tossing and gazing and lingering.

Yes lingering.

This is what these rose rivers do.

They invite us to linger to pause.

Pausing is what I/we find so difficult. There are so many reasons to be disconnected from oneself and from the natural world. But what it affords in peace of mind, in creative spirit, and perhaps in health is rich. I must remember to pause.

## The Thaw

Deep in the heart of the Kootenay Mountains,  
where ridges slide into the Arrow Lakes, there, on  
the shore in the post-winter light, wood-nymphs  
gambol and play.

Three flaxen haired lovelies—wild and flushed, are  
contrasted by one head of deep brown. In gum boots  
and skirts the three do turns ‘round denuded  
Thimble Berry bushes.

While the dark one weaves in and out, adding  
counterpoint, providing punctuation. At times an  
exclamation, when standing on his head, at others a  
comma, as he considers how deep his gumboots  
will safely take him. And even, still mindful of the  
careful world beyond these woods, a full stop.

Now, as the sun’s rays beat in time with the wood  
nymphs’ chants, just below the last snow’s surface,  
the snowdrops keen and fight to raise their heads, to  
rise up and join the dance, the wild rumpus, this  
romp.

All around are signs of winter’s work, broken  
bracken, bear prints, bald branches.  
Evidence of all who have been here eking out a life  
while the world slept.  
But no thoughts of sleep today.  
The ring of wild children spins and chants and  
chants and spins. Meanwhile within the wood,  
mindless of their chant, is the creek bed filling.

Just behind them it swashes its primordial song of  
seasons measured through generations through joys  
and pains. It will continue to sing even when these  
merry makers grow up and move on.

But today. Three flaxen haired lovelies prance  
‘round the poplars punctuated by a mop of bright  
brown, all four singing spring’s raw and ready tune.

*We need loud wails and drums beaten and quiet halts in the midst of things and prayers  
shouted out into the exhaustible air blue arch. (Jardine, 1993, p. 25)*

## CHAPTER 10: RIPPLES AND ECHOES

*To write of family can be an act of homage and of trespass. (6) . . . [It is] not a fairy tale, but a story, made as all true stories are, out of the fallible flesh and blood of perfectly ordinary, perfectly remarkable people. (Kulyk Keefer, 1998, p.8)*

### Driving With Dad

I remember your hands, Dad.  
Small, but strong and expressive.  
When with you for fun I'd ride out on some errand,  
you'd reach across, clutch an inch of cheek flesh  
between the back of your two fingers as though smoking a cigar.  
You'd say, between clenched teeth, "Such punum! What feminine pulchritude!"  
Was it a word?

You told me you loved me when few fathers would have.  
You'd take my left hand in your right, your index finger holding my last three,  
and you'd gently hang on while shifting gears.  
On we'd ride, not having to part.

Your hands gesturing when upon ideas you'd expound have become to me now like  
a remembered ballet.

Today, similar gestures in others give me pause,  
send my head into my stomach.  
I sometimes see men ahead in their cars,  
window down, arm out resting gently on the rearview mirror.  
The summer breeze caressing arms that remember youth  
and they go all willowy.  
Fingers absently kiss casements or even catch a breeze,  
palms aloft momentarily flying alongside the car.

These tender moments, these times when otherwise contained adult men  
lose themselves on the breeze.  
Touch me.  
Tug at my chest.  
Lost summers, strong tenderness, and riding in the car with you, Dad.

## Phenomenology

Why, Dad, did your laughter ring in my ears robust, raucous—a riot of delight?

When it fell on others' as caustic sharp and stinging?

Your clever banter, your sharp intellect, your gruff voice were to me an invitation to play,  
a gauntlet thrown down in a merry battle of wits.

Like lions with cubs, you taught lessons with a heavy paw, but never with claws out.

Not to maim.

I came away readied, practiced, poised in self-defence.

But not so others.

Such battle games felt all too real to others.

The giant padded paws landed heavily on some heads  
and sent my siblings reeling, dazed and latterly, angry.

How?

How can we all have been there together and the stories be so disparate?

## Potency

One day the thin thread river inside me rose up, swelled,  
broke the banks of my life,  
and washed over and through the tidy shores I'd known.

Ran up and out toward its Ocean Self; wanting Fullness, Power, to surge.

Keening for the moon, this Constant Stream that had wound the path as carved  
'til then.

Now she thwarted sand bags and sadness.

Seeking she knew not what—

the flow that would make each ebb meaningful.

## Tiny White Tea Cups

We used to measure life out

in tiny white teacups.

Sipping carefully through pursed lips, pinkies in the air

as if silently hailing

passing lifeboats,

the ships that sailed as ours listed.

Daily, the dogged sun shone through the fading glass,

while we tried to balance elaborate cakes atop our heads.

Even as we denied

the water

that seeped

through the cracks

in the floorboards

and swirled

around our ankles.

Behind us

on shelves

chimps chuckled and rattled

the bars on their cages.

They knew.

Rattle rattle.

Chuckle chuckle.

Precariously perched on the top of the table

My pallet of paints would shift  
and I'd battle white knuckled with my colours.

They'd roll.

I'd clutch.

Roll.

Clutch.

Roll.

Clutch.

Smile. Sip. Balance.

All the while trying

to capture this

refined chaos on my pallet.

While waters rose threatening

to wash my work away.

To bleed colours out

to swallow my tiny teacup

to crumble my elaborate cake.

And worse,

to drown the little chimps

caught in their

tight

tiny

cages.



## The Air All Around

Suppertime in my childhood, it was a sacred family hour.

We were satellites otherwise, but at six o'clock each evening  
we'd form a constellation, our own small universe.

Here was where I learned humour and argument.

Here I cut my teeth on words that would become my work.

A raucous loud and crowded space, we'd climb the volume ladder to be heard.

There was banter, laughter, and complaint.

But now . . .

There is D and me.

We sit down at the same table one hundred years old with stories to tell.

But now we hear the scratch of knife on plate, the gentle intake of breath.

The birds in the trees trill our evening song.

The laughter remains, but it cuts holes in the blank expanse of the air all around.

*“The best thing for being sad,” replied Merlyn, . . . “is to learn something. That is the only thing that never fails. You may grow old and trembling in your anatomies, you may lie awake at night listening to the disorder of your veins, . . . you may see the world around you devastated by evil lunatics, or know your honour trampled in the sewers of baser minds. There is only one thing for it then—to learn.” (T. H. White; as cited in Palmer, 1998, p.145)*

## Disconsolation

I used to be carefree,  
now I am care-full.

I used to be open-hearted,  
now my craggy heart is clamped shut.

I used to be wakeful at night in anticipation,  
now I lay awake with anxiety.

I used to be sure that anything was possible,  
now I despair.

I used to be the Sea, laughing and full,  
but now I am the shore, stagnant, eroded.

My garden is fallow.  
My cupboards are bare.  
When I call for solace there's nobody there.

These are the lean times,  
the mean times,  
the awful in-between times.

I'd hope, but I'm just too weary.

*You see, we cannot draw lines and compartments and refuse to budge beyond them. Sometimes you have to use your failures as stepping-stones to success. You have to maintain a fine balance between hope and despair. . . . In the end, it's all a question of balance. (Rohinton Mistry; as cited in Goodreads Inc., 2011b, quotation 4)*

Sometimes one can become lost in one's own sorrow, in one's own old ways of seeing. This is where I found myself periodically through the process of writing this thesis. At times I've been so lost in the intricacies of my own feelings, history, and happenings that I feared I'd never find my way. But as has often happened in my life, I was 'saved' by a book, by voices calling me out of the maze in which I'd found myself. Writers voicing their own stories reached and connected when I really needed them.

### **What Washed Up on the Beach**

All afternoon I've sat reading  
and crying  
on the beach.  
Reading as communion.  
Reading words that reach out  
a loving hand  
proffered  
lifting me both out of  
and into  
myself.

Crying tears  
consecrating years  
of pain and passion,  
misery and majesty.

"You can do this," the wind whispers across the waves.  
"We have some flax golden tales to tell." I hear in the Shel at my feet.  
Our simple stories balm to others, my songs, our songs blending rising.

I've spent the afternoon brushing sand and sadness from my shoulders.  
Searching for strands to hold onto to weave with, to tether me to this earth,  
to the past and to the future.

I've been reading and crying beneath the sun that continues to shine  
through all my summers,  
"Shine on," she says,  
"Shine on."

I'm learning again and again that judgments of merit ought not extend to one's own worth. We must remember in looking back at ripples and echoes of errors or failures, at losses great and small, that these too are the fruits of a life led with fullness and heart.

I turn to the words of Barbara Kingsolver (as cited in Kornfield, 2008):

*Every one of us is called upon, probably many times, to start a new life. A frightening diagnosis, a marriage, move, loss of a job or a limb or a loved one, a graduation, bringing a new baby home: it's impossible to think at first how all will be possible. Eventually, what moves it all forward is the subterranean ebb and flow of being alive among the living. In my own worst seasons I've come back from the colorless world of despair by forcing myself to look hard, for a long time, at a single glorious thing: a flame of red geranium outside my bedroom window. And then another: my daughter in a yellow dress. And another: the perfect outline of a full, dark sphere behind the crescent moon. Until I learned to be in love with my life again. Like a stroke victim retraining new parts of the brain to grasp lost skills, I have taught myself joy, over and over again. (p. 305)*

## CHAPTER 11: JOY IN THE CLASSROOM

Jane Tompkins (1990) writes, “I’ve come to realize that the classroom is a microcosm of the world; it is the chance we have to practice whatever ideals we may cherish. The kind of classroom situation one creates is the acid test of what it is one really stands for” (p. 656). Rather than wishing to fly a flag or a standard outside my class, I long to live, learn, and teach with authenticity, connectedness, and depth of meaning.

Upon reflection, it seems to me that when I am ‘in a flow’ at school or in the rest of life, there comes a solemnity, a reverence. Something *other* is present.

## Heartography

Shhh.

Listen.

Listen with Care.

For those who care to listen, you'll hear the Hearts beating here.

The blood that courses hopefully through our veins.

Roadways, river ways, charting courses along our bodies.

Inviolable,

At least on the inside.

Listen!

Take that road less taken.

Follow the path of life's blood.

Go along for this ride,

Even as you are aware that all around you other countries heave and pulse.

Sovereignty.

That is what is on offer.

To oversee and care for this small acre

Of land, of heart—of Heart Land.

Aching to be still and heard.

Shhh . . .

*[When] a group of people assemble for a creative purpose, their energy and desire welding them—if only temporarily—into a unity a certain atmosphere of ceremony prevails. (Cowen; as cited in Slattery & Selig, 2009, p. xiv)*

### **On Girls Writing**

Six silent scribblers

scratching away

seizing an hour

at the end of the day

writing in colours a rainbow's hue

dreams enough

to fill reams and reams.

Silence billowing

covering us all

their cloak of words sings

weirdness and pain

and the taste of sweet bitter things.

*I want to communicate my love-not exactly of my students, though not exactly not of my students-but more explicitly my love of the books, those writers; I want to encourage my students to find what might move them in the same way-and come to love looking for it. . . . I want to encourage them to love. (Downing; as cited in Slattery & Selig, 2009, p. 153)*

Sometimes one questions curriculum, wonders if the traditions of the classroom meet with modern ends.

### **Begging the Bard**

How can I rationalize the study of Middle English plots and language 400+ years old to a crowd so modern and so diverse? Should I tell them that, like bran, it is good for them—though at times difficult to swallow to digest? Do we study Shakespeare because *I* love him? Like Cordelia, “I cannot heave my heart into my mouth.”

I think back to when I first grew to admire Shakespeare. What was it? What compelled my 14-year-old heart to open? My schooling was rural and poor; very little occurred there to create in me the passion I have always felt for literature. I came to Shakespeare more or less on my own. I spent long solitary hours in my bedroom swooning to my recording of Zefferelli’s version of *Romeo and Juliet*. “Did my heart love ‘til now?” I lay on my belly turning the delicate pages of an ancient book, trying to solve the riddles of his sonnets. There was summer stock theatre in the park. What clues here for my students?

I look out at their faces again. I see them there. Really *see them*. Tyler, late to class, fresh from his bed at the back of a local church where he has lately taken refuge. This slouching, reed-like boy, Mohawked hair, piercings, clothing ripped and repaired with safety pins. What has the Bard to offer Tyler?

There are more. Wendy, whose parents believe that 90% just isn’t good enough. So she has to work hard, and harder. But she doesn’t have to eat; no one can *make* you eat.



Over in the corner there is the trio of divided loyalties. Can there ever be peace between friends when they love the same person?

Counterpoint to all this angst is the witty repartee between Jason and Kuljit. A love dance between them that cannot end with romance. Her parents have already chosen her a husband. She'll join him in India after graduation.

I see them and wonder what it was in my early life that enabled me to embrace the works of Shakespeare. No one dissected him for me and offered him up like a biology experiment. "The *play* [was] the thing!" (adapted from eNotes.com, 2011b, *Hamlet*, Act 2, scene 2, l. 604). In both senses of this word! The plays stood on their own. There was no intermediary spoon-feeding me lest I miss something. His words. Told, read, and enacted wooed me. Remembering and reciting were the games I'd play; the linguistic acrobatics Shakespeare taught me to enjoy and to emulate were play.

The play is the thing! (adapted from eNotes.com, 2011, *Hamlet*, Act 2, scene 2, l. 604). That . . . and that "all the world's a stage" (eNotes.com, 2011a, *As You Like It*, Act 2, scene 7, l. 139).

Now as I look out at this group I do not see only students; I see 'star-crossed lovers.' I see the dispossessed Don John. I see recalcitrant Katherine. I see Prince Hal. And though I've never understood him and he scares me a little, I see Iago.

All the world is a stage. These are the players. My 'job,' is to join my students in this confusing, delightful, tragic, and often comedic process of being human.

This is what Shakespeare is excellent for. We are all here in his pages and on his stage. The human heart, the human experience, is rich and difficult to capture and put into just the right words. The poetry of Shakespeare and the otherness of Shakespeare somehow capture that

ephemeral essence in a way that has endured. Because his language is at once familiar and foreign it invites re-looking at our own themes.

So. The reasons that I'll teach him have to do with his ability to paint characters that connect with us, who bear looking and relooking at. The conflicts they face are, in many ways, our conflicts. But Shakespeare, unlike all others, is able to convey the sublime and the ridiculous with equal grace and eloquence we should teach him because he connects us to language and to humanity.

## CHAPTER 12: POEMS PLUCKED LIKE PLUMS

*Poems fall not from a tree, really, but from the richly pollinated boughs of an ordinary life, buzzing, as lives do, with clamor and glory. Poetry just is, whether we revere it or try to put it in prison. It is elementary grace, communicated from one soul to another.*  
(Barbara Kingsolver; as cited in [aislingmagazine.com](http://aislingmagazine.com), 1999, ¶ 8)

This research, a/r/tography, has confirmed for me the notion that there is much to be learned from attending to one's life, practice and art in such mindful and heartfelt ways. When we take the time to attend to the artistic, all else is enhanced. I am seeing my practice with greater clarity and joy. I am seeing how the invitation to *look* in these ways can render much in the way of artistic merit, but also in terms of sustaining engagement in the practice of teaching. For those of us called to it, the teacher's practice can be a long and at times lonely journey often traveled with doubt. There is much inspiration to be gleaned by attending to the poetic moments that fall, as Kingsolver put it, "not from a tree but from the richly pollinated boughs of an ordinary life."

### Beyond Cages

Cold entwines with gray cold  
barring entrance; preventing exit.  
Hard ice mesh, metallic to the tongue  
as I call for release from prison.

Yet, just beyond, wind blows feather free.  
Autumn's root-nut perfume reaches my nose and beckons,  
"Join us! Join us! Here, bask in the sun's dying days!  
Lay in the wet warm embrace of blazing red leaf strewn lawns!"  
No . . . another sound . . . awkward shifting.  
Silence.  
Oh, oh dear,  
I'm meant to be teaching.  
What to say now?  
What wisdom when the wind calls my name?

Cold entwines gray cold and I turn.  
Let us talk of rooty, moldy growing things.  
Of living and of dying things.  
Send our minds upon the leafy breeze.

## **I Remember Skyler**

I remember Skyler from my first year teaching.

Tall and bent like a young sapling weighed down by a heavy yolk of snow.

Mohawk hair-cut, tee shirt ripped and repaired by safety-pins,  
black jeans and kick-your-ass boots.

Multiple facial piercings, metal at his wrists and knuckles flashed a warning.

A talisman.

People left Tyler alone.

But above his curled lip, two of the most liquid blue eyes I've ever seen.

Emboldened one day, I dared to inquire quietly of him, "You have to work pretty hard to disguise those gentle eyes, don't you?"

I held my breath. And for a moment his face melted to join his liquid eyes,  
a smirk and an almost imperceptible nod.

Then he shored himself up again.

Sad image:

Skyler standing slouched disconsolate in just his tee shirt and the pouring rain his proud Mohawk deflated and dangling a homeless boy a defeated warrior.

## Pink Blossoms

“A bubble-gummer,” my Dad used to call me.  
He meant it with love, a throwaway line.  
It meant young and uninitiated.  
Somehow lacking, I thought,  
in power and potency.

Cast forward twenty-eight years.  
Now a teacher, a woman of forty.  
I walk the hall as the workday wanes.  
My gaze follows the light.  
It pours honey down the walls, across the floor,  
and over the sneakered feet of a thirteen-year-old girl  
who is scampering toward me.  
Bathed in honey,  
she comes.

High-tops and tights and a ballooning candy pink skirt.  
Gym strip dangling absently from chubby mitts  
ponytail waving  
she comes.

The previously bustling hall  
seems suddenly denuded and quiet.  
Only we two here now  
as my eyes alight on her moon face.

I attempt to take it all in.  
Her balloon pink skirt flounces  
her pony tale bounces  
and on her moon face,  
a giant pink gum bubble blossoms.

The girl, unaware of me, canters off  
and I am left, ripples of liquid light  
a swirl around my ankles, a gentle smile on my face  
and the tightness in my chest that true beauty brings.

Youthful energy and the lovely symmetry between her moon face and the round bubble and its  
matching gum pink skirt give me pause.

“A bubble gummer!”

I think it with love, now aware of the Power and Potency owed the title.

## Pretty Girls

Pretty girls  
are jewelry for rooms.  
Pretty girls are loved and loathed,  
desired and dismissed.

Pretty girls  
get stuff for free,  
smiles, assistance, entrée.  
The only thing better than a pretty girl  
is a helpless pretty girl  
a girl in need of saving.  
Or perhaps two pretty girls.

Pretty girls  
are friends with other pretty girls.  
No 'snowy doves trouping with crows' here.  
No. Pretty product shines more brightly in packs.

Pretty girls  
Must win the party must command the room.  
They enter, scan and take their places  
secure in the knowledge that eyes will follow.  
And they do.

Pretty girls  
must work hard to show up lovely  
to be 'on' in case of attention.

Pretty girls  
find it hard to hide;  
find it hard to fade.

Pretty girls  
must not rest  
mustn't stop shining.  
Or  
doors will swing shut  
gazes wash over  
hands once extended will lay limp in laps.  
She'll look up one day  
to watch pretty girls enter  
command the room and cross  
secure that all eyes will follow  
and they do.

## **A Man for a Day**

If I were a man for a day, would I be, upon returning to myself, a more patient woman?

Would I experience a sense of power and entitlement?

The kind that allows me to walk down the street or hall,  
unconcerned about the space I take or the pace I go?

Would I expect to be taken seriously and respected

solely for what I can do and think without worry about how I look?

Would I focus more on facts and less on feelings?

If I were a man for a day, would I think about sex more?

Or just feel freer to talk about it?

Would I be able to argue with a friend, get over it, and play ball all before lunch?

Would my musical tastes broaden?

Would I eat without worry?

If I were a man for a day, would I think life felt more fun?

If I were a man and back, would I love more men more?

## Betty and Veronica

I was supposed to be like Betty or Veronica.  
(You know, the ones from the Archie comics?)  
Probably Veronica; she seemed more in control of what happened to her.  
Not like that sap Betty, so nice—a victim.  
Veronica seemed unfettered by guilt, worry, or wanting to please.

As a young girl I honestly imagined that at some magical stage of my development  
(probably sixteen—you know, sweet sixteen?)  
I'd blossom into a curvaceous, stylish, and desirable beauty.  
The hair, the clothes would all magically come together  
to make the woman I was meant, bound, required to become.

16 came and went and 17 and 18.  
I still struggled with hair that wouldn't behave,  
With clothes that seemed designed for someone taller,  
thinner and more long of leg.  
And, unlike acerbic Veronica, I very much cared what others thought.  
Felt guilt and worry over the results of my actions.

I was supposed to become Veronica.  
But, absent the body or the style,  
I'd grown into that sap Betty after all.



## Reflection

They dance their dance  
before my gaze  
over reflective waters.

Effortlessly coming together  
and moving apart.  
Two Damson flies teach me  
lessons of agility and iridescence.

They do not hover  
above the water's reflective glass  
in self-appraisal.  
They care not for the  
opinions of the cautious Coy below.

No. These graceful beings delightedly  
buzz their song of freedom.  
They dance their wind dance  
delicately adjusting to whatever  
blows them from this dance.  
Until, it is *part* of The Dance.

Teach *me* to fly  
with beauty, grace and patience.  
Above the Deep waters,  
teach me to fly and dance, with joy  
on the winds that sway me.  
Show me how to disregard  
the reflecting glass  
and the appraising eyes beyond.

So that I too might  
share an effortless dance,  
move with agility and iridescence,  
and sing my freedom song.

So that I may fly  
With beauty, grace, and patience.

## Gratitude

The radio breaks through my sighing sleep.

I hit the snooze button and pull myself deep under a shroud of comfort of comforter.

The bed is warm. The room is cool. The contrast is delicious.  
Outside my window birds are busy, they let me know  
there is much worthy of rising for.  
So I rise.

Pour a tub of morning magic.  
In an instant and through no effort of my own, water, warm and clear.  
I slide in.  
I feel grateful.

D is awake. He is curled up reading as he does each morning.  
Eyes only blinkingly open and he is immersed.  
“Can I read to you, Mom?”  
“Yes. My marvellous boy.”  
I feel grateful.

Later, I come through the woods.  
Leaves turning, boughs bending in the autumn breezes.  
Sun’s strong rays fall sidelong or rains fall sidelong.  
Whichever, each morning I pull rich fragrant air into my nose  
as I ascend the stairs to school.  
Luxuriate.  
I feel grateful.

Inside.  
Busy bodies.  
Salutations and smiles.  
Minds and hearts at the ready.  
I go to work.  
I feel grateful.

## “Happy Holidays”

It is tough, at times  
to spread my words  
as wide as I'd like to spread my arms.  
I want to celebrate  
one festival,  
a festival of lightness.  
To embrace universal aims of love  
peace and humanity  
in all its exquisite compelling complexity.  
Not to wash over our difference, but to abide within it.  
Like the bulbs upon the trees alight  
with remembrance of the human capacity to love  
beyond language  
beyond boundaries  
beyond titles  
beyond measure.

*Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,  
the world offers itself to your imagination,  
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting-  
over and over announcing your place in the family of things.  
(Mary Oliver; as cited in Palmer, 1998, p. 91)*

## Little Kites

This day is an historical day. So seldom can we realize we are living a moment that will become etched in memory, . . . know it will *stick*.

This day, my place was to be in the classroom at 8:50 a.m.

But the world is changing! How can we be expected to carry on like everything is the same when we sense that nothing can ever be precisely the same again?

So in honour of the kind of change that dares us to hope, to break rules, . . . we waft into the hall to a point of convergence where an old TV has been unceremoniously tugged, choking on 20 yards of cable to watch Barack Obama sworn in as President of the United States.

We sit on bottoms, haunches, or knees to make room shoulder to shoulder.

So many of us here. We are motley/diverse clustered and craning.

I hear strangely little from the group.

Solemnity punctuated with spontaneous applause.

I search the faces. Do they feel it? Our place here together?

Thrown/sewn together, our tapestry of cultures, languages, ages, faiths?

Do they see how our place here together is emblematic of the 'figuring it out' that is happening all over the world? How loudly and quietly we are learning who we are as beings on this blue ball planet?

So from my place on my knees I send up a silent salutation to my fellows in this hall, on this continent, around the world.

My little kite of hope flying on the ether,

joining others flying up all over the world tugging on the hearts that send them soaring.

Daring to place our wishes on the wind.

## CHAPTER 13: PARTING THOUGHTS

Creativity is at the core of a well-lived life. Creativity and voice are what is so desperately needed as we meet the palpable challenges of this time. Linear, lockstep thinking and behaviour will not sustain the revolution required to foster a healthy planet and a viable existence going forward. So yes, I believe that a/r/tography—creativity and inquiry, whether in solitude or in community—fosters those elements most needed now.

What are the possibilities for further study? I invite my fellows in the teaching profession, indeed, I encourage anyone, to engage in attending closely to their world and their experience. I suggest that each of us find our own way of making art and/or expressing our creativity. For teachers in particular, this form of a/r/tographic research may hold keys to becoming more conscious, creative, and connected.

What are the limits of this study? They are both temporal and personal. As I acknowledged at the outset, the space between lived experience and the narratives created out of that experience creates a tension. Still, I contend that attention to and the telling of our stories hold keys to living with sensitivity, compassion, and vision in a world that so very much needs all three.

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