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Change in Everyday Life and in the Communication World: A Co-Constructed Performance Autoethnography

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Abstract

In this paper, we use a co-constructed performance autoethnography to explore change in everyday life and in the communication world.

Keywords

Autoethnography, Performance Autoethnography, Communication, Change, Everyday Life

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Change in Everyday Life and in the Communication World: A Co-Constructed Performance Autoethnography

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In this paper, we use a co-constructed performance autoethnography to explore change in everyday life and in the communication world. Keywords: Autoethnography, Performance Autoethnography, Communication, Change, Everyday Life

Performance autoethnography is well positioned to examine the central role of change in the human experience. As communication scholar Tami Spry (2001) has written: “Performing autoethnography has encouraged me to dialogically look back upon myself as other, generating critical agency in the stories of my life, as the polyglot facets of self and other engage, interrogate, and embrace” (p. 708). By examining these patterns of change in personal stories, one is able to access the more intimate and personal self of change. As Spry notes: “Performing autoethnography has allowed me to position myself as active agent with narrative authority over many hegemonizing dominant cultural myths that restricted my social freedom and personal development” (p. 711). Following Spry, we assert in this paper that examining the landscape of the past makes possible the journey to our present selves.

Specifically, we present two autoethnographic sketches (Rambo, 2007) focused on changing self-perceptions as lived through early experiences with music. The first sketch was composed by an assistant professor of communication while the second sketch was composed by a recent college graduate. We choose to elevate these everyday experiences because they feel to us to be indicative of broader self-transformation. We assert that our decision(s) to be selective in this way reflect and reinforce the emancipatory power of performance autoethnography as a tool for analyzing lived experience. In each of these autoethnographic sketches, we were—and are—performing our younger selves.

1.

In her poem, “Why I Wake Early,” Mary Oliver (2004, p. 3) opens:

“Hello, sun in my face.
Hello, you who make the morning
and spread it over the fields”

Oliver’s words invite a memory of how the floor shook, more like vibrated, when I played music on the stereo in my room. I was a teenager and welcomed the beautiful chasm; how it felt like an earthquake yet barely moved the world. Which songs didn’t much matter: how each voice was a kind of affirmation of liberation, in the way youth carries across its time an opportunity for embracing all.

*

In eighth-grade honors choir, I sang a solo in “Seasons of Love” from the musical RENT. I remember being worried that I might forget the words in the midst of my big moment, but thankfully, I did just fine. Music has been all around me ever since. I can still

remember the lyrics: “in truths that she learned, or in times that he cried, in bridges he burned, or the way that she died.” I might have the gender pronouns wrong, but that’s the gist of it. I hope. Funny how certain words stick to my tongue years later. I feel a need to apologize, in the event I might have the lyric wrong, but I am fighting that urge as I write these words. I am learning the value of feeling my way through experiences, weaving emotions into and out of memories. Patching up a certain kind of quilt.

*

“Focus on what you know.” This is the best advice I’ve ever received. And also: “show up and be nice.” Remember two things. I grew up as a Dave Matthews Band fan, and I know they have a song (and/or perhaps an album) called “Remember Two Things,” but the details escape me on a Saturday morning. The best thing I can say about the band is that they made the floor shake (not just vibrate), when I played their albums with enough bass on the stereo in my room. In this autoethnographic sketch (Rambo, 2007) about growing up in Southeastern Minnesota, USA, I explore the relationship between memory and media on an autoethnographic journey (Holman Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013). Forging a link between media and memory and autoethnography is personally meaningful to me, because I am both a media and memory researcher and also an autoethnographer. Searching, mining the past, reveals new and novel ways of and for exploring in the future. Across media and memory and autoethnography, I am learning to embrace the notion that I am always the explorer. This realization propels me toward, in the words of poet Stephen Dobyns (1994), “what comes next and how to like it” (p. 187). There is media in this autoethnographic sketch: music, books, and there is memory: the scenes from my youth. I carry these links forward on my journey. I invite the reader to experience them along with me (Rambo, 2007). While I have written about my affinity for Dobyns’ poem “How to Like It,” in earlier work (Glociczki, 2015), the process of exploring autoethnographically helps me more fully understand my affinity for Dobyns’ poem in general and for its concluding sentiment in particular. Exploration is the catalyst that carries me into the future; exploration is how I embrace what comes next.

*

One of the first CDs that I bought with my own money was the soundtrack to “D2: The Mighty Ducks.” The movie came out in 1994, I was ten or eleven. I don’t remember what was on the CD, or even really remember the movie, but I am sure I bought the CD because the movie showcased Minneapolis, and I grew up in Minnesota. Buying the CD with my own money was a mark of independence--hollow though it was, fifteen bucks reflects little actual independence--and I remember feeling like I’d passed a milestone with that purchase. I bought something that was mine. Reflecting on the experience of this purchase, I recognize that I am sure I received the money as a gift, but I remember thinking of it, for the first time, as my own. The recognition of this reality affirms the fact that how something felt was not necessarily how it was. I embrace communication scholar Art Bochner’s (2012) notion “the truths of stories can never be stable truths” (p. 161). Bochner’s words underscore that truths, like individuals and their societies, can evolve. I no longer purchase CDs on a regular basis. I listen to as much music as ever, but my consumption has gone online. I often tell my students the study of mass communication is the study of change. This autoethnographic sketch uses one of my first experiences with music to further lend support to that claim.

2.

Perceptions change but feelings are absolute and eternal.

*

My fingers slid across the keys gently but proficiently. I could feel every note escape from my fingers, moving my soul just a little more. The piano was a place of comfort to me. It was where I escaped my problems. The required half an hour practice sessions weren't a chore, they were my escape from the real world...a world that is not always kind to the soul. I closed my eyes and let the memorized notes escape from my mind through my fingers, onto the keys. I let my body sway slightly and allow the music to overcome me. I sang in silence, afraid of judgment. Even though my voice was nowhere close to Adele's, I still sang at the top of my lungs, stopping only when I heard footsteps at the door to the music room. Mozart and Bach spoke to me, the astounding collaboration of notes bringing me to tears almost every time. I can still remember the way my heart skipped to the beat of "Marriage of Figaro"...one of my forever favorites...every note making my skin tingle as the song alternated between a hastened cadence and a slower, more peaceful phrase. Christian hymns were pastime, something that made my small town girl heart become warm and happy. The words of "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound" ringing true for the delightful chords that escape the piano. How sweet the sound...

*

This is all I played but this is what I loved, and ten years later, I still remember every song and every note...or so I hope. Music is a gateway into the soul, a glimpse into someone's perception of the world. Looking back now, I recognize my lack of musical variety. I stuck with the basics because that is all I knew. I had little concept of other varieties in my sheltered world of music. I was often teased for my love of classic music, "old people" music (1950s-1980s), and Christian hymns...children can be cruel. But these are a part of me, a part of my past and not something that I am now ashamed to know and appreciate. I realized that, with age, the mind changes with the body. It grows to understand social norms, and peer pressure to conform to those social norms overwhelms the teenage mind. But this is life. This is one of the reasons human life is so special...the challenge to grow and change.

*

Art Bochner (2012) describes this process in the following way, "Memory is active, dynamic, and ever changing. As we grow older, or face unexpected traumas or disasters, our relationship to the events and people of the past changes" (p. 161). I am finding this statement true as I grow older. My thoughts, memories, and way I process information changes. It's just a way of life. Even though I have been teased in my taste of music, I can still remember that feeling of being "cool" for knowing all the words to old songs. Perceptions change but the feelings are absolute and eternal. The feelings of a warm heart and bumps on my skin as I traced my fingers over those glorious chords.

*

But there is something special about music in this ever-changing world of social norms and perceptions. Music is a reflection on the current society, a reflection of the souls of

people. Just as my heart beat to the rhythm of the piano as a child, so does music beat to the rhythm of society. Music is the heartbeat, syncing to the patterns of the world around us. I'm not insinuating that one generation of music is greater than another generation. Quite the opposite, actually. Each generation of music is unique, a snapshot into the social issues of the time period. The perceptions change but the feelings are absolute and eternal.

*

Certainly, this paper touches on a number of topics: communication, first experiences, music, successes, failures and the peculiarities of the human condition. These autoethnographic sketches are comprised by an authorial team of professor and student. As an authorial team, we view the experience of authorship as a shared opportunity to reflect autoethnographically on the varied influences in our communication world(s). Foremost, our co-constructed autoethnographic journey (Averett & Soper, 2011; Ellis, 1999; Richardson, 1994) points to the power of narrative. As communication scholar Norman K. Denzin states (2000): "There is only narrative--that is, only different genre-defined ways of representing and writing about experiences and their multiple realities" (p. 899). Our narratives, separately and together, reveal change in everyday life and in the communication world.

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