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## Into the Depths of Reflexivity and Back Again—When Research Mirrors Personal Experience: A Personal Journey into the Spaces of Liminality

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## Into the Depths of Reflexivity and Back Again—When Research Mirrors Personal Experience: A Personal Journey into the Spaces of Liminality

### Abstract

The context of this paper surrounds my Master's thesis which was written in 2010 related to recovering crack cocaine addicted mothers who had lost custody of their children. Every qualitative thesis has a story attached to it—an impetus for engaging in the research. When the research combines sensitive topics and the research mirrors the experience of the researcher, decisions must be made considering the research processes and methods. This paper explores the reflexive processes that were employed in the 10 months preceding taking my first thesis course. Using the preface of my reflexive journal as data, three themes arose from subsequent coding with qualitative data analysis software: liminality, the wrestle, and the third space. The resultant discussion of the three themes highlights my journey into the depths of reflexivity and back again as I journeyed into and through the spaces of liminality.

### Keywords

Reflexivity, Liminality, Child Custody Loss, Qualitative Research

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# Into the Depths of Reflexivity and Back Again—When Research Mirrors Personal Experience: A Personal Journey into the Spaces of Liminality

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*The context of this paper surrounds my Master's thesis which was written in 2010 related to recovering crack cocaine addicted mothers who had lost custody of their children. Every qualitative thesis has a story attached to it—an impetus for engaging in the research. When the research combines sensitive topics and the research mirrors the experience of the researcher, decisions must be made considering the research processes and methods. This paper explores the reflexive processes that were employed in the 10 months preceding taking my first thesis course. Using the preface of my reflexive journal as data, three themes arose from subsequent coding with qualitative data analysis software: liminality, the wrestle, and the third space. The resultant discussion of the three themes highlights my journey into the depths of reflexivity and back again as I journeyed into and through the spaces of liminality. Keywords: Reflexivity, Liminality, Child Custody Loss, Qualitative Research*

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Behind every qualitative thesis there is a story—an impetus for engaging in the research. It may be an interest in a particular topic but most likely involves a passion for what is to be researched. Writing a thesis is not for the faint of heart. For the developing researcher, a thesis takes all one has and then some more. In the moments of discouragement or even despair when we as researchers, cannot find the words or the ideas elude, it is the passion that sustains us. Such was the case for my Master's Thesis entitled, "*And Then There Were None: The Lived Experience of Recovering Mothers Who Lose Custody of Their Children*" (Janzen, 2010). The thesis explored four crack cocaine addicted women's experiences of losing custody of their children.

The purpose of this paper is to reflexively explore my experiences leading up to commencing work on my thesis. A reflexive journal was written over a period of 10 months immediately preceding my first thesis course. A background related to my reasons of pursuing a thesis of this nature is presented. A literature review examines reflexivity, sensitive topic research, and bracketing. Methods are delineated. Three themes: *liminality*, *the wrestle*, and *the third space* are explored. The conclusion of the paper involves a discussion of the three themes and closing remarks.

## **Background: The Story Behind the Research**

In 2001-2002, I spent three months in the psychiatric unit of a hospital suffering from major depression. At the end of the first month of hospitalization, I lost custody of my five children to my estranged husband. The moment of losing custody was both traumatic and painful.

After being discharged from the hospital, I lived in a long term residential treatment centre whose mandate was to assist women who had suffered from abuse, mental health issues, and/or addictions. While I had no addiction, I lived with women who on a daily basis struggled with the chains of addiction—most of who had lost custody of their children (some

of them permanently). In the three years I lived in the treatment center I was the only woman to regain custody of her children. Seeing and hearing firsthand the distress and suffering of the women who did not regain custody, I determined in my heart that if I were to ever return to university to get my Master's degree, the lived experience of addicted mothers who lost child custody would be the focus of my research.

In 2010 I completed my Master's thesis and subsequently fulfilled my promise: my thesis supervisor and I published the results of my research in a special issue of the journal *Janus Head* (Janzen & Melrose, 2013). Where a societal posture of disenfranchised grief had silenced the four recovering, addicted mothers I interviewed (and many mothers before them), these mothers were at last given a voice. These women stood and still stand as a testament to the resiliency of the human soul.

## Literature Review

### Reflexivity

The processes of reflexivity could be considered as old as recorded history as great thinkers pondered upon and wrote about their experiences in and of the world. While the origins of reflexivity in the "sociological canon" are attributed to Alvin Gouldner in 1970 (Armstrong, 2009, p. 3), epistemic and ontological reflexivity are traced to the writings of Kant in 1781 (Johnson & Duberly, 2003). Reflexivity in qualitative research has been explored since the 1970's (Findlay, 2002). Reflexivity is a mainstay of qualitative research in that it strengthens the validity of the research (Green, 2015) and is considered to be a "major strategy for quality control" (Berger, 2013, p. 1).

Reflexivity, although defined in various ways, can be viewed as a combination of the processes of decision making and the critical thought and emotive processes that accompany it (Munkejord, 2009). Four types of reflexivity are identified in the literature: personal reflexivity (critical consciousness of the researcher throughout the research process), emotional reflexivity (emotional engagement with research), methodological reflexivity (concerned with research design and method) and analytic reflexivity (processes of choice related to how data is collected and analyzed) (Jackson, Brackett-Millburn, & Newall, 2013; Probst & Berenson, 2014). Reflexivity is both a "state of mind and a set of actions" (Probst & Berenson, 2014, p. 814).

Reflexivity can be transitional or situational in nature (Sankowska & Söderlund, 2015). Both reflect Shoen's (1987) notion of *reflection-in-action*. Reflexivity can follow three timeframes: prospective, concurrent, or retrospective, or a combination of the three (Probst & Berenson, 2014; Sankowska & Söderlund, 2015). For the purposes of this paper reflexivity is defined as "the introspective reflection and internal conversation [that] mediate[s] between the researcher's personal and professional worlds or contribute[s] to the generation of knowledge" (p. 813).

Only one account to date investigates reflexivity when interviewing women with former addictions (Grant, 2014). Grant cites that no other accounts could be found in the process of researching her article. I could find no literature that involves researcher reflexivity when the research mirrors personal experience with mothers who experience child custody loss and/or who have addictions and lose custody.

### Sensitive Topic Research

The word "sensitive" is defined as word that is "used to describe something that may be considered secret, confidential, fragile or delicate" (Crowther & Lloyd Williams, 2012, p.

206). Lee and Rensetti's (1990) seminal definition of sensitive topic research still can be considered as relevant today in 2015 as it was in 1990 (Fahie, 2014). Sensitive topic research involves research where there the research itself "potentially poses for those involved a substantial threat, the emergence of which renders problematic for the researcher and/or the researched the collection, holding and/or the dissemination of research data" (Lee & Rensetti, 1990, p. 512).

The vulnerability and emotional response that can arise from sensitive topic research may be experienced either by the participants, the researcher, and/or both (Crowther & Lloyd Williams, 2012; Dickson-Swift, James, Kipper, & Liamputtong, 2009; Woodby, Rosa William, Wittich, & Burgio, 2011). For the researcher this can result in what is termed "researcher distress" which is thought to be connected to the distress of the participant (Woodby et al., 2011, p. 830). While measures are normally put in place in disciplines such as nursing or psychology within the ethics review process to safeguard and assist participants and researchers alike, this is not always the case in other disciplines (Moncur, 2013).

The literature is of mixed opinions pertaining whether to "guard" oneself from the display of either discomfort or emotion while in the presence of participants (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009; Woodby et al., 2011, p. 833) or to freely display emotion (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009; Farnsworth, 1997). There exist "rules [many of which are largely unspoken within the qualitative research milieu as to] "how we, as researchers are supposed to feel and act in the process of undertaking research, many of which are connected with the rules of how we are to behave" (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009, p. 65; Jackson et al., 2013). It is evident in sensitive topic research, that researcher distress can and does occur (Fahie, 2014; Woodby et al., 2011). Debriefing and dialogue and a personal connection with someone such as a thesis supervisor can assist with the emotions that arise (Moncur, 2013; Nelson, Onwuebuze, Wines, & Frels, 2013).

## **Bracketing**

Bracketing or epoché is the process of "holding at abeyance" all presuppositions while engaging in the research process (Bendassolli, 2014, p. 164). There are three largely accepted schools of bracketing in phenomenology: those of Husserl (1913/1962), Heidegger (1962) and van Manen (1997). Bendassolli (2014) suggests a fourth method, theoretical naïveté.

Husserl (1962) advocated total bracketing within phenomenology. Heidegger (1927/1962) approached bracketing with a belief that it was impossible to bracket one's life experiences but still required the researcher to put them at bay (Bendassolli, 2014; Findlay, 2009). It was van Manen (1997) who embraced this impossibility.

Instead of seeing bracketing as either/or van Manen (1997) created a method of researching lived experience which he called "human science" (p. 1). The presuppositions of the researcher are espoused and incorporated into the research process. The eidetic reduction or edios involves "bracketing all incidental meaning and [asking] what are some of the possible invariate aspects of this experience? (van Manen, 2011, para. 1).

Theoretical naïveté recognizes the phenomenon of subjectivity and at the same time maintains that "it has a close relationship with the theory" (p. 170). This method is known as "naïve inductionism" (p. 163). Naïve inductionism's primary principle is that the "world or reality imposes its own organizational structure upon us" (p. 176) instead of the researcher imposing his/her own influences upon the research.

Bracketing is felt to "protect the researcher from the cumulative effects of examining what may be emotionally charged material" (Tufford & Newman, 2010, p. 81). Tufford and Newman cite that bracketing assists in strengthening the rigor of the research. Preconceptions

are put at bay which may “taint the research process” (p. 81). Further, bracketing assists in entering into spaces of profound reflection, enhances the acuity of the research, analysis and results (p. 81), and stretches “beyond the constraints of egocentrism and ethnocentrism to facilitate innovation and renewed insights” (pp. 93-94).

## **Methods: The Research and the Researcher**

### **The Research: My Thesis**

My thesis was guided by an interpretive foundation utilizing a phenomenological hermeneutic approach and van Manen’s (1997) method. Phenomenology in the eyes of van Manen is a retrospective “study of the lifeworld” (p. 9) and provides a progressively deeper layering and reflection from texts (Ajjawai & Higgs, 2007). This method is devoid of theoretical abstract detachment (Barnacle, 2001). Utilizing human science creates a space, where I believed “as Heidegger (1962), that it [was] impossible to bracket my own life experiences, values and assumptions—a conviction that my own lifeworld [could] enhance the study as the research process [unfolded]—a precept held in high regard within the hermeneutic approach” (Janzen, 2010, p. 20).

Four recovering mothers who had lost custody of their children and who were in a long term residential treatment facility represented a purposive sample. Data was collected over a period of four months. Subsequently, the data was coded for themes using Nivo8 (QRS International, 2010). Three themes emerged from the data: betrayal, soul ache, and reclamation.

### **The Researcher: My Reflexive Journal**

My reflexive journal spanned a time period of just over two years and encompassed 210 pages of typed text. The preface to my reflexive journal (17 pages of typed text) was written during a period of just over a year before I started my thesis. I began writing the preface just before my inception in an advanced qualitative research methods course.

Originally my reflexive journal was hand-written, but was transcribed verbatim bi-weekly when I started my thesis work in order to share it with my thesis supervisor. Prior to sending my completed thesis to my supervisory committee, I coded the entire journal using NiVivo8 (QRS International, 2009). Three themes arose from that coding: decisions and decision-making processes, personal reflections, and methodological reflections.

In preparation for writing this article I engaged in re-coding the preface of the reflexive journal with NVivo10 (QRS International, 2015). Three themes arise out of this coding: lininality, the wrestle, and the third space. Through the exploration of these three themes it is hoped that the reader will gain a sense my personal reflexive journey as I prepared for my thesis work.

### **The Research and the Researcher: Moustakas’ Heuristic Method**

Moustakas’ heuristic method, which encompasses six phases (Djuraskovic & Arthur, 2010), complemented my search for a method to guide me through my reflexive journey. These phases include: initial engagement, immersion, incubation, illumination, explication and creative synthesis (pp. 1577-1579) and spanned a ten year time frame as I moved from one phase to another in a linear manner. Initial engagement was reflected in the passion I had for the work ahead. This passion and initial engagement were echoed within my reflexive journal that I began to write in 10 months before my thesis began.

Immersion was evident as I became “one with the topic and question” and engaged in considerable soul searching (Djuraskovic & Arthur, 2010, p. 1577). In the words of Djuraskovic and Arthur, “the researcher must live the question” (p. 1577). The next phase, incubation, is reflected in taking a step back and is characterized by detachment (p. 1578). For me, the incubation phase encompassed a period of five years after my thesis was written. My thesis supervisor was emphatic but gentle in her urgings that when the time was right, there was a special paper waiting to be written from my perspective.

In illumination, a researcher becomes aware and receptive to the rising of themes from within (Djuraskovic & Arthur, 2010, p. 1578). As the time neared for the mandated destruction of the data from my thesis, urgings began to rise from within for this paper to be written. I could feel these urgings begin to swell within me and grow as I contemplated this paper.

Explication involves focus, a dwelling within oneself, exploration and disclosure on a personal level which allows the recognition of not only the uniqueness of the experience, but the formation and emergence of a complete picture of the phenomenon” as well (Djuraskovic & Arthur, 2010, p. 1587). Disclosure, for me, was embodied within the formidable anxieties and a tentative waxing and waning of courage. These strong emotions were as the ebb and tide of the ocean, where waves of fear came crashing in on the shoreline and the soothing of the sand with the withdrawal of the water.

The final phase, creative synthesis, is found in the writing and subsequent dissemination in a holistic and creative manner (Djuraskovic & Arthur, 2010). For me this involved using other’s poetry and quotes, as well as my own narrative to lend another layer to my journey. The path which I have traversed, while full of potholes and fissures, has culminated in this paper.

Douglass and Moustakas (1985) cite Moustakas’ seven sequential and experiential steps in “tracing the path” that one has travelled (p. 46). This suggests that a heuristic journey is taken from a point of time in the past to a point in time in the present and even perhaps a point of time in the future. Tracing the path involves a road map, as it were, to trace experientially where we have been and where we are now with an ultimate aim of explicating this journey for others. In essence, Moustakas suggests the creation of a figurative timeline that the heuristic researcher travels. First, a crisis creates a query or quandary. For me, the crisis at hand was losing custody of my children.

Second, from “a search of self in solitude,” emerges significance (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985, p. 64). This significance is expressed as a “creative urging” and simultaneously as a traumatic experience (p. 64). For myself, seeing the pain of others urged me towards sharing their lived experience while living my own experience. Within my very soul there had to be a place where the anguish and ache I saw in both others and myself I could be soothed.

Third, “an expanding awareness” of others occurs (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985, p. 64). This was enacted in two phases. First, when I entered residential treatment and “watch[ed], listen[ed], participate[d], observe[d], converse[d], dialogue[d] and discuss[ed]” (p. 64) and *lived* custody loss with the other mothers in the treatment center (p. 64) and second, when I engaged in data collection for my thesis. In this way *self-living* the experience became melded with *other-living* of custody loss. This can be likened unto not really understanding a crisis until you have experienced it yourself, and then opening your mind to others’ lived experiences who have similar crises.

Fourth, one steps themselves “in the deeper regions” of the crisis so that the *other-living* becomes the center of one’s world (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985, p. 64). I found myself compelled in a world and work that exemplified this compulsion in body, mind and spirit to better understand the mother’s worlds of custody loss and their lived experience. I

felt driven to do a thesis and this *driven-ness* overcame my life. Everything I saw, heard, or read began to be seen within the lens of hermeneutic phenomenology and custody loss. This compulsion would follow me in my dreams at night and it was not uncommon to awake several times in the middle of the night to epiphanies, new understandings, or ways of explicating custody loss. Within these dreams I both sought and found answers to my questions.

Fifth, an “integrated vision and awareness” emerges through the “grasping of patterns” (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985, p. 64). This can be likened to the thematic understanding and the development of themes within the research process. For me, this place on the path took considerable time and effort as I worked through my thesis and subsequently coded and then re-coded my reflexive journal.

Sixth, one seeks “further clarification” through other mediums (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985, p. 64). For me, these other mediums were embodied through the literature. While there was no known literature to date from the mother’s perspective on child custody loss (Janzen, 2010), there was a considerable amount of literature regarding child custody loss itself. From the available associated literature further clarification was achieved. Further, in my reflexive entries, I used literature and poetry as a springboard to greater understanding.

Seventh, a manuscript is produced that expounds on various themes, representing both creativity and anxiety as well as specific strategies that have been utilized in attempting to “overcome and escape” the crisis that originally occurred (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985, p. 47). In my *self-living* and breathing within and through the experience of child custody loss for ten years before a manuscript was produced, this manuscript represents both creativity and anxiety as dichotomies on a continuum. This paper was an act of courage on my part. In writing this paper, the goal was to sooth my soul in a very real and tangible way.

## Results and Reflections

### Liminality: The Anguish and Shame of Losing Custody of My Children

Cold hearted orb that rules the night,  
Removes the colors from our sight.  
Red is grey and yellow white,  
But we decide which is right.  
And which is an illusion?

--Graeme Edge (1967)

Liminality is considered to be an in-between space—a “state of in-between-ness and ambiguity” (Beech, 2011, p. 285). Beech defines it as a place of significant disruption of an individual’s sense of self or place within the social system. Within the seminal work of Turner (1979/1987) liminality is characterized as state of “being” which is difficult. Within this space, doubt and anxiety prevail (Hawkins & Edward, 2015). There exists an almost inexpressible experience of anguish. While it is considered to be a space of transition (Beech, 2011), “the process is inevitably painful and frightening. It is a space of absurd confusion and fear” (Maksimović, 2015, pp. 4-5). On the day I lost custody of my children, the space I found myself trapped within all these descriptions of liminality. I recorded this vignette in my reflexive journal and subsequently in my thesis (Janzen, 2010, pp. 51-52).

*It was another usual morning on the psychiatric ward. Tired voices  
and muffled sighs filled the air alongside the noises of clinking*

cutlery  
 as breakfast trays were dutifully distributed and sleepily eaten. It  
 had  
 snowed the previous night which left the hospital grounds in a  
 perfect,  
 undisturbed carpet of white. There was never much excitement  
 on the ward—each day proceeded in much the same fashion with  
 little variation. The slowness of the passage of time was always  
 problematic, but somehow the clock continued its march. Eventually  
 the day would be over once more and sleep as an old welcomed  
 friend  
 would come to call. For a few precious hours sleep allowed  
 the escape of a tortured mind into a world that was not filled with  
 despair or despondency—a world which was somehow more  
 magical than anything reality had to offer. The day marked the one  
 month anniversary of my arrival. It was unknown how long I would  
 tarry within the confines of the locked unit. One thing was clear:  
 there  
 was not much progress being made.

Trapped in an abusive marriage for a quarter of a century had day  
 by  
 day; month by month taken its toll as the soul that once breathed  
 deeply and thanked God for life slowly died. The goal of  
 hospitalization was to resurrect this soul who no longer felt the need  
 to cling to life. Where there was once a fire that burned brightly,  
 now only charcoaled embers lay smouldering. It was only  
 thoughts  
 of my children that kept a minute spark from dying completely.  
 I sat deep in thought quite oblivious to my surroundings. My  
 thinking  
 was interrupted by my nurse telling me that my husband had come to  
 see me. I was ushered into a conference room where my nurse sat  
 on the far end of the table and my husband across from me. My  
 husband offered me stapled papers to read. I read them slowly  
 trying  
 to comprehend what they entailed. The words seemed to melt into each other  
 and I looked up at my husband, my eyes begging for some kind of direction.  
 He announced that he had applied for sole custody  
 of our children and the court had granted it.

For a few moments time was suspended in unbelief when a rush of  
 anger overcame me. Never had I felt anger that intense. It was pure  
 hatred and I experienced murderous thoughts. I found myself  
 lunging across the table and heard the sharp voice of the nurse  
 interrupting the motion of my body as I was ordered to sit down. The  
 meeting was deemed over. My husband was ushered out of the room.

I was left alone in the conference room. All I had ever hoped and  
 dreamed for in my life had been taken away in the course of a few

*short minutes. Tears began to fall as I cried out in agony of body and soul. It was if the tears were laying the smouldering embers to rest. There was no future. There was no hope. It would be two more months that I would call the hospital “home.”*

The experience changed me and the course of my life forever. What, in the moment previously was an existence where I *no longer felt the need to cling to life*, I now was plunged into total “darkness” and into an abyss of the soul. My close friend and confidante during that time called it mere existence in a “void of nothingness” (W. Hall, personal communication, January, 2002).

Getting a lawyer and even pushing myself to gain even the tiniest grain of faith to propel me forward into the process of trying to get custody back, took all I had within me. I was merely going through the motions at first. If it wasn’t for the encouragement and insistence of the nurses on the psychiatric unit I would have curled up into a fetal position and prepared to die.

It would be two more months that I would remain a patient on the psychiatric unit. During that time I went from every day being a “bad” day to having a few “good” days interspersed in between. Even after I entered a long term residential treatment center for women who had mental health, abuse and/or addiction issues, it was the shame, like fetters, that bound me. I was, however, able to accept the women I met in the treatment center with ease. I expressed this in my reflexive journal:

*Some people may see women with addictions who lose their children As deficient—as deserving—who brought it on themselves. Being in recovery, I saw a totally different picture than the stereotypical addicted woman. I saw women who were marginalized by prior abuse and mental health issues—women who were desperately seeking change in their lives. Most came into recovery with little or no hope that their futures held promise of any kind. These women were real people who cried and laughed—who had a conscience. Most of them were destroyed not because of their addiction, but because of life experiences. These women were used to the brutalities of life—some of them had experienced horrors that no one should ever experience. I came to understand that where they were in their lives was a complexity of different life experiences—a culmination of sorts of everything that had happened to them. So, in honour of these women—I don’t see them as drug addicts or alcoholics—I see them as women and a person first. These women are not the disease they are experiencing. They are human beings that happen to have an addiction.*

Despite this acceptance of the other women, I felt I was incredibly deficient. The guilt and shame I carried with me was like the ebb and tide of the ocean—never fully gone—always to return in waves of anguish and grief crashing upon me when least expected. I spent three years in the treatment center before I healed enough to venture into the world. I rented a townhouse and began my life of living alone. On the outside I was happy but the shame and concurrent pain of losing custody of my children lived on. Although I eventually regained joint custody after fighting for two years in the court system, my ex-husband retained guardianship.

I was the only mother in the three years that I lived in the treatment center that regained custody of her children. The women I worked with, cried with and laughed with, experienced many of the same emotions that I was experiencing at the time. I promised in my

heart if I was ever to return to graduate school, I would honour the experiences of the mothers I met in treatment. I became determined to research the lived experience of mothers in recovery who had lost custody of their children. For *I had “lived the experience” and it forever altered my life and my world.* What was that experience like for those who would never regain custody of their children?

I graduated from the long term residential treatment center in 2005. The following five years were spent preparing for a thesis—one which I was not entirely sure would come to pass. I learned all I could about addictions and was awarded a university certificate in addiction studies. I collected over 100 articles pertaining to mothers with addictions and set up a database so the articles could be easily retrieved. I found no accounts from the perspective of addicted mothers who had lost custody of their children. I entered graduate school in 2007 and started my thesis in the fall of 2009.

As time passed the shame I felt related remained and even though I never spoke of it aloud, it remained a “monster” in the closet (Hawkins & Edward, 2015, p. 24). As I grew ever closer to starting my thesis, I enrolled in an advanced qualitative research methods course (the course prior to my thesis work), I experienced periods of intense anxiety. I would have to come to terms with whether or not to divulge the reasons behind wanting to do a thesis of this nature. The result was an intense wrestle within my being.

### **The Wrestle: The Monster in the Closet**

Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?” “That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the Cat. “I don't much care where,” said Alice. ‘Then it doesn't matter which way you go,’ said the Cat.”- “So long as I get SOMEWHERE,” Alice added as an explanation. “Oh, you're sure to do that,” said the Cat, “if you only walk long enough.”

--Lewis Carroll, (1865/1986)

As children, monsters lurk and can live almost anywhere, but mostly under beds or in closets. Monsters come out at night when it is dark and quiet and only the moon lights the bedroom, howbeit dimly. Adults cannot see the monsters, for under the bed exist just dust bunnies or scattered toys which have been carelessly left by inattentive children playing. As children grow up they learn to distinguish reality from imagination. The monsters only rear their heads intermittently.

I started writing my reflexive journal in December 2008—a full 10 months before I would begin my thesis. The monster in the closet was still alive and well—fed by fear. I wrote in my reflexive journal: *I fear that making that information explicit I will open myself up to the scrutiny of others—I fear being judged and of prejudice. That's what holds me back.* Somehow I forged onward—still determined to honor the mothers I had met who had so profoundly affected my life.

When it came time to prepare and send off my thesis application and summary I was again stricken with fear and shame. I sent the summary off anyway despite the sleepless nights and days filled with worry that I encountered afterwards. I recorded in my reflexive journal:

*I sent off my thesis summary. I fear that I was too personal in my disclosures. I have had no word yet that it was received. Perhaps I won't hear anything until after the date. I am such a private person that it is painful . . . to talk about my past experiences.*

When I received word that my thesis application had been accepted I both rejoiced and fretted. I pondered deeply about which phenomenological method I should employ in my thesis. I recorded the following:

*I am torn between the bracketing of Husserl and the disclosure and subjectivity of Heidegger. Given my experiences as a mother who lost custody of her children is both beneficial and problematic. It is beneficial in that I have had an insider's view to not only my own experience(s) but also to the experience(s) of other recovering mothers I have a profound compassion for women who lose custody of their children. Whereas I was fortunate after two years to regain custody, other women are not so fortunate. I have lived, slept alongside, and worked in recovery with women who were totally crushed and defeated with the loss of their children and I learned much from them. Going into the thesis with this knowledge both defies bracketing and increases my own subjectivity. The question I pose to myself is do I use that subjectivity to interpret the research analysis and results? I look at alternatives... but essentially it comes down to the basic choice which will ultimately guide the rest of the research process.*

I wrestled with sharing my experiences of living at the treatment center with the mothers I hoped to interview. I reflected often and deeply upon this:

*I realize on a great level that disclosure of my own experiences will allow or give permission in some sense for other women to tell their stories and know that the researcher (myself) will give voice to an up to now voiceless population. I can act as an advocate for improved policy and programming as I go forward with my research. Can I do this without disclosure? I suppose if I were a research participant and a researcher came to me to generate data about the phenomenon I would perhaps react in one of two ways. I might see them as not in any way understanding where I am coming from. Alternately, I might see them as not being approachable as I might feel that I might not have the empathy or openness to understand their experience. By offering myself as someone who has been through the experience—I might trust them more—this would or may enhance rapport. This may provide richer, thicker data—this is my hope. I want to be seen as “real,” authentic and genuine as a researcher—compassionate and understanding.*

The wrestle continued as I sought a third space that would quell my fears and soothe my soul.

### **The Third Space: Between Pain and Passion**

One idea can change the world.

--Alacoque Lorenzini Erdmann (personal communication, August, 2011)

Within every problem there are solutions just waiting to be found. Many of those solutions emerge as “either/or” types of decisions. At times we find neither palatable. If we ponder long enough and wrestle with ourselves, there often lies a third space in which a solution can be found and a decision made. A solution that arises like a phoenix from the ashes of liminality can change our lives in profound and meaningful ways. For me, the

dichotomy of pain versus passion needed a third space to lend a sense of peace within my being.

In my mind I knew there had to be an intermediary place to solve the dilemmas I found myself wrestling with. I continued to write in my reflexive journal as I attempted to find a space of resolution. Again, the spaces of liminality emerged. I reflected in my journal... *I find myself at times in a state of mind that feels I cannot possibly do a thesis of this nature and at other times the passion burns brightly and I feel compelled to carry onward.*

I found the liminal space to be one of great loneliness and longing. While later, I would share my reflexive journal (including the preface) with my thesis supervisor, at the time I wrote the preface there was no one in whom I felt I could talk about the monster of pain I faced—and the decisions I felt compelled to make prior to starting my thesis work.

*I find the process of preparing to engage in thesis work a very lonely one. I long for someone to share my thoughts—my dreams and my fears much like having a close friend or confidante—a mentor of sorts to share this, my journey. For the present I tread lightly on a path that has neither confidence nor sure footing.*

My advanced qualitative methods course instructor was very supportive during this time. We often exchanged emails at three o'clock in the morning as I worked permanent nights and would often be working on my course work in the middle of the night during breaks. As she was a self-declared night owl, she would respond to me, often within minutes of my initial email. It was a happier time for me in which the monster of pain often "hid" in the closet of my psyche.

While my instructor was immensely helpful in assisting me to make the decisions of the mind, it was the indecisions of the heart that plagued me. Somewhere—somehow there had to be a third space to this liminality—a third decision I could ultimately "live" with. As I considered my options I recorded:

*I take this whole process very seriously. It is as if I have been living in the anticipation of doing my thesis for 7 years now—with the ultimate aim of social change or action. I want there to be options that would help women who find themselves in these conditions—something that may make their journey easier—somehow not as painful as mine was.*

One day I was reading in one of my books related to phenomenology, and I realized that there were more options in phenomenological methods than just the bipolar methods of Heidegger (1992) and Husserl (1962). I noted in my reflexive journal: *I am drawn to the hermeneutics described by van Manen as his method gives much room for creativity and expression.* Was this the third space I had been searching for?

*I have decided to frame my assignment around van Manen's hermeneutical method so I can gain an in-depth understanding of it in relation to my proposed research topic. I hope that this will give me the "grounding" that I lack. I have spent many hours searching for documents to assist with my learning. My searches have not been without frustration, but in the end have borne much fruit. Learning has become almost a compulsion for me. I am beginning to understand van Manen's (2006) reference "being driven by desire" (p. 721).*

At last I had found a method that would bring the monster out of the closet. Using van Manen's (1997) method could allow me to both honour mothers that had lost custody of their children while honouring my own life experiences with custody loss. I recorded the following thoughts and feelings on two separate occasions as I continued to seek for firm ground upon which to stand while doing my thesis.

*I think the reality of the researcher and the reality of the research participants merge into each other. Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. 167) speaks of synthesis—"a transactional synthesis" (p. 329). I think the end product of a research endeavor is indeed a synthesis—of minds and heart which have encountered each other in the space of temporality. Thus the passion of the researcher is in some way melded with the experiences of the research participants. Van Manen (1997) speaks of this process as "writing the story." Indeed our lives are stories—just waiting to be told. The sad part of life is that many stories go untold. The beauty of hermeneutical research is that the stories don't go untold. The silence is broken and the world is a better place for the telling of those stories. Some stories are simple—others profound but each deserve a telling in "an original singing of the world" (van Manen, 1990, p. 9). While some may not feel the significance of the stories that are waiting to be told—research provides a platform for a deepness and richness that may otherwise not be found.*

*I have hope that my thesis work will bring to light some form of truth—the truths of the women who share their lives and experiences with me. Heidegger (1962) said it well when he related that "Dasien hears because it understands" (p. 163). I hope I can do justice and honour to these women's experiences.*

While the pain and passion continued to exist as separate entities on a continuum, the space between them had become further apart. The pain began to recede and the passion grew in intensity. Never again would the monster of pain have such a great hold upon me. It was as if a figurative key was finally discovered that would open the shackles of shame that had bound me for so many years.

I knew that the journey would still be rocky at times as the monster still existed, but I now possessed the courage to press onward with renewed hope. In my reflexive journal I recorded: *I am struck by the enormity of the task ahead—but am reminded that one "eats" an elephant one piece at a time. Am I up to the task? The knees may be weak, but the heart and passion cry, "Yes!"*

I had come to a space where I believed that I could make a difference not only for the many addicted women I had met in recovery who had lost custody of their children, but also extend that difference for other women who might find themselves in these circumstances. Even though I was only one voice, all profound things start with one voice, one thought; one action. Toward the conclusion to the preface of my reflexive journal, I wrote:

*One could compare it to listening to a single flute and listening to an orchestra in all its magnificence. The multiple voices that are represented become the orchestra and the final research product a symphony. How I have hopes that my thesis will be that symphony—my masterpiece.*

## Discussion and Concluding Remarks

### Liminality

There can be many expectations which accompany a thesis undertaking. First the thesis student may have their own expectations of the thesis process and product. These processes can be mediated by the choice of thesis supervisor. Most academics can tell or have heard of stories of either triumph or tragedy in their relationships with their thesis supervisor. It seems that thesis supervisors can “make or break” the thesis experience for students. Equally, developing researchers, can come with their own agendas and ideas—full of passion for a topic they wish to research. Many of these topics can spring from personal experiences of the researcher—a wrong to right; a passion to fulfill (Moncur, 2013).

As human beings we all can come with what could be considered either “extra baggage” or alternately, richness in the form of lived experiences that affect the research processes and decisions. On the surface bracketing seems to be an obvious answer. But is it? How do we as researchers, negotiate the demands of a research when the proposed research mirrors personal experiences, and we are thrust into a space of liminality?

Academia could be considered be social system, just as being a “thesis student” pushes one into a unique social system all of its own. Turner (1967) relates the power of rituals just as Goffman (1959, 1974) speaks of front stage and back stage behaviors. I posit that both have relevance. The “doing” of the thesis itself could be considered to be a liminal ritual where one must find their way.

The front stage behaviors which exist may be quite different from those of the backstage. This can be seen “within conflicting ways of thinking, knowing, doing and being” (Hawkins & Edward, 2015, p. 39). On the front stage, the developing researcher may express a degree of fear and anxiety, but on the backstage these emotions may be much more profound and intense in nature. What results, may be a “dual-lensed critical consciousness: the awareness of oneself engaging in experiences, like an arrow pointed on both ends or an eye which sees itself while gazing outward at the world” (Probst & Bernenson, 2014, p. 815). The double pointed arrow can be considered to be an ever present reminder that monsters of emotion continue to exist.

### Monsters in the Closet of the Psyche

Reminiscent of the pains of adolescence, where monsters are put into closets to avoid the scrutiny of peers, most monsters, in time, dissipate as we grow into adulthood. The monsters are laid to rest in a perpetual dormant state. This dormancy allows us to function as adults.

For researchers that are wounded by past experience(s) and exist in liminal spaces, old monsters can be re-awoken and new monsters can arise from the ashes of tragedy. These monsters can continue to exist far past the experience that re-awakened them. If the monsters are of pain and anguish, they may never be laid to rest. Hawkins and Edward note “the monster of doubt, [fear, pain and anxiety] can be grappled with, or perhaps even be managed, but never overcome” (p. 35). Mitchell and Irvine (2008) concur in saying that resolution is not always possible.

These monsters are rarely spoken of and their reality even less often shared with others. The monsters are kept locked in closets of the psyche. The monsters are far from quiet as they pound upon the doors and protest their imprisonment by regularly challenging the researcher’s psyche. This challenging of the psyche “significantly disrupts one’s internal sense of self or place within a social system” (Nobel & Walker, 1977, p. 31).

This can be especially evident in thesis work, when researchers are constantly being called upon to be reflexive. Memories may once again be re-awakened as we try our best to hide our painful thoughts and feelings. After all, we believe—somewhat erroneously—that our student peers and our instructors have long put their own monsters of liminality away forever. Emotional responses to doing thesis work which mirrors the researchers own experience may be at times traumatic for the researcher despite the passion that surrounds the work. Jackson and colleagues (2013) support this view by arguing that in research, emotions have long been neglected as an aspect of reflexivity. Emotional labor—the “control of the expression of emotion,” is carried out in attempts to conform to allowed or emotion ideologies around emotional responses” (p. 3).

Despite containment, the monsters of emotion sometimes still escape and the pain and anguish can repeatedly resurface. This may result in various degrees of multiple traumatization. The outputs of this traumatization include “anxiety, isolation, role conflict, and distress” (Moncur, 2013, p. 1884; Mitchell & Irvine, 2008). Beech (2011) warns of the “negative psychological consequences of extended liminality” (p. 287).

### **Third Spaces**

At times of traumatization, third spaces are needed, perhaps then more than ever, in order for the researcher to come to a place of peace with both the research, the research process, and him/herself. The thesis supervisor may become the key that opens the door of the third space by offering a safe place and space to express the emotions that surface and enhance reflexivity. In essence the thesis supervisor becomes a “host” or a “spirit guide” for the researcher to navigate not only the research itself, but also reflexive processes (Hawkins & Edward, 2015, p. 35). Debriefing is well documented in the literature as a means to manage and prevent feelings of being overwhelmed and flooded with emotion during sensitive topic research (Hawkins & Edwards, 2015; Moncur, 2013; Nelson et al., 2013; Woodby et al., 2011).

“Accepting the presence of emotion offers [researchers] ways of being comfortable with the existence of many perspectives [of the research] and with the multiplicity of . . . identities” of the researcher (Hawkins & Edward, 2015, p. 35). The identities of the researcher could be considered those which are both foreground and background in nature (Goffman, 1967).

Maksimović (2015) cites that “what is social liminality for Turner, for Jung is a transcendent function, which provides a number of transitional experiences that enables the transformation of attitudes and perspectives” (p. 4).

One’s experiences do not become lost or diminished over time. Rather, we come to see them in different light—with more wisdom and understanding. When research mirrors personal experience, the research may provide triggers—often very vivid triggers to memory. Emotion, howbeit painful at times, can become distilled within the mind, body and soul which provides reflexive mirrors to not only our own experiences but the experiences of others. We can use those experiences to transform ourselves and others or bury those experiences and risk losing “what could have been.”

With the telling of those stories that we hold close to our souls, we can offer an insider as well as an outsider perspective. No two experiences are exactly alike, but within the sharing of experiences, others may benefit. Berger (2013) suggests that by sharing experiences diminishes distance and enhances the ability of the researcher to “go places [she/he] otherwise would not” (p. 5). This allows the researcher to not only to “hear the unsaid, probe more efficiently and ferret out hints that others might otherwise miss,” but to also be more sensitive to others (p. 5).

Liminal spaces could be considered to be those of dichotomy: insider-outsider, black or white, good or bad; either-or. Rather than perpetuate this dichotomy where “either-or” exist, third spaces allow the existence of all of the aforementioned to live peaceably within in one’s being. The spaces of liminality could be considered to be grey spaces where sight and vision may be obscured. In the words of Graeme Edge (1967) the colors may be removed from our sight.

Reflexivity could be considered to be the mainstay of qualitative research—a mainstay which has great capacity to immerse us in both liminal and third spaces. In sensitive topic research, especially when the research mirrors the researcher’s experiences, the monsters of the psyche, can be called forth and subdued. The inherent problems of bracketing can be ameliorated through the use of deep and rich reflexive journeys as we find our way.

Using the metaphor of the brightest sunshine of day and the darkest of nights, the third space can be one of moonlight where the jagged edges of emotion can become soothed and passion can be allowed to exist—simultaneously. While both emotion and passion can denote pain, this pain when used in third spaces can indeed transform the world. Berger (2013) echoes the purpose of the sharing of my reflexive journey—that others “may use the lens of this experience in meaning-making” (p. 3) from the narratives that I have shared.

In closing, it has been said that knowledge is power. For addicted mothers who have lost custody of their children a voice has been provided previously in my thesis. The voice of myself, as researcher, lends another layer to my thesis. It is hoped that through the insights given in this paper, that the reader may consider that which was before unconsidered; that which was unseen and unheard--seen and heard. For we only “see through a glass darkly” (1 Corinthians 13:12 KJV) until the “lights in the firmament” (Genesis 1:14 KJV) start to illuminate the midnight skies of personal journeys into reflexivity.

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