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A Need to Continue Healing: Report of Findings From an Autoethnographic Study

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Abstract

This article reviews the design and findings of an autoethnographic study on identity development over time. The researcher wanted to know how an adult can make meaning from and develop through experiences of mental illness, spiritual awareness, and death. The purpose of this autoethnographic bildungsroman was to explore how a male in the general population describes how life events have influenced his identity development over a period of 23 years, spanning three decades. The author, as the researcher-participant, asked two primary questions: (a) How does the individual describe his adult development in terms of life events or “individual and cultural episodes” (Smith & Taylor, 2010, p. 52) related to mental illness, spiritual awareness, and death over time? and (b) How does the individual describe his possible selves in constructing a new sense of identity? The author explored the spaces between academic analysis and his personal narrative experiences by alternating between third and first-person perspectives. Addressing the research questions in this manner contributed to the literature of adult and continuing education by providing a glimpse into stories of lived experiences over time in the light of adult development. Synopsizing these findings makes them more accessible to general readers interested in adult development over a life span, to those challenged by mental illness, and to spiritual pilgrims.

Keywords

Autoethnography, Personal Narratives, Qualitative Inquiry, Adult Education, Adult Development, Life Events, Reflections

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A Need to Continue Healing: Report of Findings from an Autoethnographic Study

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This article reviews the design and findings of an autoethnographic study on identity development over time. The researcher wanted to know how an adult can make meaning from and develop through experiences of mental illness, spiritual awareness, and death. The purpose of this autoethnographic bildungsroman was to explore how a male in the general population describes how life events have influenced his identity development over a period of 23 years, spanning three decades. The author, as the researcher-participant, asked two primary questions: (a) How does the individual describe his adult development in terms of life events or “individual and cultural episodes” (Smith & Taylor, 2010, p. 52) related to mental illness, spiritual awareness, and death over time? and (b) How does the individual describe his possible selves in constructing a new sense of identity? The author explored the spaces between academic analysis and his personal narrative experiences by alternating between third and first-person perspectives. Addressing the research questions in this manner contributed to the literature of adult and continuing education by providing a glimpse into stories of lived experiences over time in the light of adult development. Synopsizing these findings makes them more accessible to general readers interested in adult development over a life span, to those challenged by mental illness, and to spiritual pilgrims. Keywords: Autoethnography, Personal Narratives, Qualitative Inquiry, Adult Education, Adult Development, Life Events, Reflections

Prologue

Research Purpose and Questions

How can an adult make meaning from and develop through lived experiences of mental illness, spiritual awareness, and death? The purpose of this autoethnographic study was to explore how a male in the general population describes how life events have influenced his identity development over a period of 23 years, spanning three decades. The researcher-participant asks two primary research questions: (a) How does the individual describe his adult development in terms of life events or “individual and cultural episodes” (Smith & Taylor, 2010, p. 52) related to mental illness, spiritual awareness, and death over time? and (b) How does the individual describe his possible selves in constructing a new sense of identity?¹ Addressing these questions contributes to the literature of adult and continuing education by providing a glimpse into stories of lived experiences over time in the light of adult development. In short, this research helps fill in a gap of adult education literature at the nexus of these three cultures. The multi-layered personal narrative responds to these research questions in a visceral and intimate manner, thereby inviting the reader to examine the

¹ Throughout this paper, I use the first person to share personal narratives and the third person to provide academic analysis of those experiences.

fragmented nature of the researcher-participant's identity development and perhaps reflect upon her own.

Organizational Rationale

This research project is organized in a narrative format to facilitate its primary methodology (autoethnographic narrative inquiry), promote a deeper understanding of my personal experiences within the context of three particular cultural contexts (mental illness, spiritual development, and grief), and examine these experiences as part of a continuum of life events over time. In this section, I describe the proposed structure of the study section-by-section and based upon a foundation of narrative inquiry which naturally examines human experience over time (Ellis, 2004; Poulos, 2012).

Additionally, this research interweaves adult development theory with personal experience. Because these topics normally consist of different tones and persons of linguistic structure, they will frequently be set in different sections separated by either headings or asterisked lines. For instance, autoethnographic sections concerning the analysis and representation of life events in personal narratives are in separate sections in the first person using a prosaic or poetic format. Contrarily, theoretical and some methodological interludes are in the third person using academic prose. By presenting the material in this interwoven manner, I justify this organization as illustrative of autoethnographic epistemology and as optimal for addressing the research purpose and questions.

The **Error! Reference source not found.** introduces the research questions, narrative structure, operational definitions, and organizational rationale. I describe a show-tell format which iteratively illustrates how my personal stories connect to adult identity development theory.

My Fragmented Narrative examines the context of the personal stories in terms of the research design and the theoretical and methodological frameworks. While this section *tells* the outline of the framework, it concludes with (i.e., *shows*) a shadowed illustration of how life events have shaped my identity development.

Summary and **Conclusion** includes a summary of how the research addresses the research questions and provides some implications of this project for the academic field of Adult and Continuing Education. In particular, descriptions of an evolved self-concept in terms of the cultures of mental illness, spiritual development, and death and grief are presented.

The Epilogue represents data through an intersectional dialogue and concludes with a way ahead for future research pertaining to shadowed meaning in adult education.

Writing to Understand

Over the past three decades, I have journaled to help make sense of some challenges and transitions I have faced—especially in terms of mental illness, spiritual development, and grief. These transitional life events have occurred over time, and understanding how they—even expected or desired transitions—can alter “one’s roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions” (Schlossberg, 2011, p. 159; see also Smith & Taylor, 2010) can help one cope with the stress that accompanies them. This autoethnographic research examines the process of my adult development within three cultural domains: living with mental illness, striving for spiritual growth, and coping with death/grieving. Autoethnography can provide the socially dispossessed and those wounded by invisible disabilities a means to better understand and renegotiate their social-cultural positions “within educational structures and institutions” (Congdon, 2014, p. 1). Congdon (2014) particularly includes Digging Deeper sections at the

end of his personal stories to link the experiences described to theory. These introspective interludes provide useful insights for lay readers as well those in the academy because they help connect my lived experiences to adult and, in particular, identity development theory.

Writing autoethnography uniquely provides a researcher the space to analyze transcendental data and construct meaningful knowledge from lived experiences (Ellis, 2004; Polanco, 2013). In this research, I examined my experiences of identity development while coping with a mental disorder through an autoethnographic inquiry using personal narratives of transition and challenge from my journals and other family primary sources. The refractive lens I used is that of an over-40-year-old person looking at journals I wrote when I was as young as 20. The purpose of my personal narratives is to position my subjective self as a narrative researcher-participant in the dynamic social-cultural context of this study throughout, starting from the beginning (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The chunking of life events into personal stories by transitions facilitates an ongoing performance in which I can witness the development of my identity and social context over time and to make sense of the “hidden, unknown connections between lived experiences and theory” (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 5; see also Bhattacharya & Payne, 2016; Riessman, 2002). Furthermore, the interweaving of personal narrative and theoretical reflection promises significant opportunities for adult learning and teaching (Brookfield, 2013). As a result, by narrating my possible selves through the disparate voices of archetypal characters representing aspects of my personality who experience particular life events significant to me, I can effectively construct meaning while concurrently analyzing and representing the data. This autoethnographic approach lends itself to a bildungsroman organization of story, naturally linking my examination of identity development and possible selves over time to adult development and learning theories.

A bildungsroman is a coming-of-age novel in which a character normally learns, through a journey of adversity against the odds, to become a contributing member of society; it has become a methodological approach to adult education research (Michelson, 2013; Sameshima, 2007; see also Lander, 2000). Over the past three decades I, as the researcher-participant, have documented several life events consisting of invisible wounds (e.g., coping with mental illness, toxic leadership, social stigma) and masks (e.g., wearing uniforms, discreetly seeking counseling, and exuding social conformity). These events have not only informed my journaling but have become the raw data for personal stories that represent periods of transition and challenge in my life course. I have become the subject—both protagonist and sometimes an antagonist—in this narrative, and the personal stories of transition and challenge have become the plot tracing my identity development for the audiences.

There were four primary audiences for this research. First, my committee presented the most immediate audience because it had to approve the process and final product. They were a subset of the larger academy, but the members contributed invaluable insights from their own fields (history, psychology, qualitative inquiry, and adult education) to the literature of adult and continuing education. Second, adult education professionals (i.e., as educators, administrators, curriculum developers, policy makers, and author-researchers) had a stake in this research because they can better understand the agony and hidden costs paid by many of their students who are increasingly diverse. Consider the many adult learners who must confront the grave barriers of mental illness: not seeking treatment due to denial and/or social stigma, relationships broken from emotional abuse, or the psychological prisons levied by such disorders. In this context, this project served to help adult educators learn about some precise challenges their students confront daily and how autoethnographic research methods can augment learning and development over time. Third, a closely related audience were fellow adult learners who suffer from anxiety disorders. This group includes their under-appreciated care givers. Anyone can relate to grief from death or sickness of loved ones, but only those

who experience the pervasive, insidious fragility and insecurity that my anxiety disorder imposes can understand this disorder and its impact on identity development. Reading the experiences of an adult learner who has overcome similar adversity may remind them they are not alone. Finally, my family and I were inherently an audience because we have co-created this research. Any story about me invariably reveals some illuminating moment, crack in the concrete, or an embarrassing factoid about family members or friends who are committed to our collective legacy. These four audiences helped provide parameters for the research questions and epistemic alignment.

In summary, this research used autoethnography to understand in depth (the *why*) personally experienced social-cultural phenomena associated with identity development (the *what*) over a life course (the *when*). The *who* consists of four multivariate audiences, including my intimate family members and friends. Autoethnographic inquiry (the *how*) provides a narrative methodology to answer the research questions situated within the field of adult development and life events/transitions in particular.

The Narrative Begins

I'm an adult educator and I have a story to tell. When I tell the story, it seems that time is of no importance, because in one instant I may be teaching graduate students about qualitative inquiry or in the next reflecting how past toxic bosses still influence my behavior and thinking. Over the span of decades, I could feel that I was the same person on the outside like the stoic façade of a matryoshka doll, but I somehow was changing intrinsically—intellectually, spiritually, and psychologically—in an evolutionary way. Sure, time has been a factor, but the reflections of my experiences with other people have mattered most. These relationships included those with God, others, and myself.

To document these transitions and challenges over three decades, I have journaled. These personal documents have served as a means of autoethnographic narrative inquiry into the meaning I have derived from my own adult developmental experiences and life events. I hope to scaffold an understanding of the qualitative research process by modeling how I have approached this research with an attempt to humbly reveal vulnerability. While journaling is inherently introspective, it expands beyond navel gazing because it, through autoethnographic inquiry, shares personal stories with readers who may decide the lived events are not so different from their own (Pelias, 2013). They may find they are not alone.

Operational Definitions

The following terms help clarify the scope and purpose of this study. These terms relate to the concept of adult development in that they describe a fundamental aspect of individual cognitive, behavioral, psychological, and spiritual growth over a lifespan (English, 2005; Smith & Taylor, 2010; Tisdell, 2003). In this sense, they serve as building blocks for the story of the researcher-participant's adult development over his life course.

Active Page. Describes any page not blank or torn out of a primary source in this study. Thus, any human-made symbol, doodle, or mark on an otherwise blank page would make it “active” and thus count toward the page count tracked in Table 1. The page size varies according to the size of the source document.

Autoethnography. Autoethnography as a term evolved from anthropology and originally referred to how researchers could get people to describe their own experiences (Heider, 1975). The contemporary term describes the personal experiences (personal stories)

and the cultural phenomenon to be studied, linked to the research questions—e.g., analyzing life events on the journey of identity development (Kim, 2016; Schwandt, 2015). Writing in and reflecting upon personal journals constitutes autoethnographic practice.

Bildungsroman. A bildungsroman narrative of the researcher-participant's developmental journey concerns figuring out one's self-concept: who one is and whom one wants to become.²

Death. This is a culture of death as it impacts the researcher-participant and possibly the reader. It also refers to grieving for the loss of loved ones as well as for one's mortality.

Identity Development. This term refers to both identity development and self-concept. Studying identity development is of value to higher education in terms of designing creative and "inclusive learning environments" (Jones, Kim, & Skendall, 2012, p. 699) that embrace diverse perspectives (see also Dey & Associates, 2010). In other words, identity is a social construct, but it is often not yet described in terms of cultures of invisibility or silence.

Invisible Wound/Disability. This term refers to a culture that disregards others impairments due to ignorance or a lack of concern. There is an often unspoken stigma attached to such wounds, making them similar in effect to the culture of silence. See also Masks.

Journaling. A narrative method that facilitates reflection. The research journal used in this study exemplifies this technique.

Life Events Perspective. This is a perspective of adult development which connotes change over time and has significant implications for the roles of adult educators (Hansman & Mott, 2010; Smith & Taylor, 2010). For example, a wife may grieve (life task) at her husband's funeral (life event) which will influence the rest of her life course. A related concept is that of life course, "the engagement of self with world" (Levinson, 1986, p. 3; see also Erikson, 1959/1980) over time. Underlying the life course is another idea of life cycle that a singular rhythm of seasonal change occurs throughout any life course (Levinson, 1986). Over time, a pattern in life tasks may also indicate perceptions of possible selves (Cantor, Markus, Niedenthal, & Nurius, 1986).

Masks. Metaphorical, and sometimes literal, devices to avoid facing personal shadows. Poulos (2012) uses a mask as an autoethnographic means for participants to hide shadows from others and perhaps themselves. Masks also foster alternative self-concepts. The dynamic nature of possible selves, enabling adults to change them like masks as they accomplish goals or experience certain life events, fosters self-directed learning and development over a life course. See also Possible Selves, Shadows, and Invisible Wound/Disability.

Mental Illness. This factor is attributable to any culture of any medically diagnosed mental illness and the impact on those afflicted, their care givers, and researchers (American Psychological Association, 2017). As a result of societal ignorance and misperceptions, diagnosed survivors often experience the burden of stigma and invisibility. This inner struggle

² A bildungsroman is a novel of identity development that provides a narrative structure (e.g., characters, voice, plot, scenes) related to a person's experiential learning through adversity. Because it normally consists of an individual writing his/her "way into self-authorship" (Michelson, 2013, p. 203) in a multilayered manner using rich text to create meaning, this structure complements the life events perspective coupled with informal learning throughout the life course (Sameshima, 2007).

for sanity marks a person and can proffer a good background for personal stories of development through adversity.

Narrative. A narrative is a story or tale, but in this research, it also connotes an integration of personal experiences over time in a cultural context. In the literature, narratives and stories are often used interchangeably (McAdams, 2012). That said, *narrative* is often a broader term referring to how a *story* that describes a series of life events is told (Walsh, 2011). In this context, a narrative is a personal story with social and cultural implications (McAdams, 2012). For this reason, autoethnography is a narrative practice—rather than just storytelling. Narratives can facilitate adult development through a reflective interpretation of lived experience over a life course (Rossiter, 1999a, 1999b; Rossiter & Clark, 2007). Put another way, to narrate is a way of inquiry that adult learners can use to learn and better understand themselves and their cultures.

Possible Selves. Possible selves indicate differentiated, personal goals set by open-minded adults to develop potential identities over time depending upon social and/or historical contexts (Cantor et al., 1986; Dey & Associates, 2010; Jones et al., 2012).

Reflective Learning. Reflection links individual constructive learning to personal or social experiences. In this sense, reflection entails “the process of critical self-reflection on one’s biases, theoretical predispositions, preferences...” (Schwandt, 2007, p. 260). This type of learning often employs autobiographical tools such as journals to record and thereby create deeper levels of meaning.

Shadows. Adults have shadows or dark facets of their personalities that they would rather not address. The persistent shadows of challenge and transitional stress resonate with the autoethnographic work of Poulos (2012) who examines the often unspoken, toxic cultures in family life.

Silence. This refers to a culture of silenced voices that yearn for emancipation. This concept is related to invisible wound/disability.

Spirituality. This is a culture of spiritual awareness. English (2005) provides an operational definition of spirituality pertaining to adult education that emphasizes its secular aspects over institutionalized religion (Tisdell, 2003). Newman (2012) questions the existence of transformative learning as an independent phenomenon, but he does not explicitly argue against the premise that spirituality in the context of adult education is linked to meaning construction and identity development (English & Tisdell, 2010; Newman, 2012).

Story. See also narrative. I used a particular type of story (i.e., a parable or tale which metaphorically expresses experiences and relates them to meaning) to analyze and represent the data. Storytelling is not only an action but a developmental process of meaning construction that can take many forms.³ Storytelling is also a form of narrative pedagogy that contributes to adult learning and development (Artistico et al., 2011).

Voice. This concept represents a goal of adult education: to empower learners, particularly those on social peripheries. Narrative inquiry facilitates this emancipatory process

³ Visual storytelling is another mode of narrativizing lived experience. Visual storytelling is already used in pre-teacher education as a pedagogical tool to encourage critical development (Rifa-Valls, 2011).

through the personal reflection upon and expression of lived experiences (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). In this research, the term refers to the inner voice that expresses the researcher-participant's heart-felt thoughts, emotions, reflections, and beliefs as a result of learning from life events at particular places and times (Barber, King, & Baxter Magolda, 2013).

My Fragmented Narrative

Do you really want to know why we're here to listen to my story? Let me tell you a story to explain why. This damn book [holding up my grandfather's autobiography] started it all. Damn! Sorry, I shouldn't have said that. [Circling arms...] Now, I'll have to say the Hail Mary three times and the Our Father once with the correct pauses. Blaming the book instead of myself.... Ugghh!!! Click, click, whirrrr, whirrrr. Is this God's way? What if this is all there is?

You see, what I'm telling you is all true. It really is. This book, my grandfather's autobiography, has magic powers. It has sent me out on this quest of identity development. Like all of us, I guess, I have wanted to make sense of things from past hurts, perceived wounds, doubts, and fears. One of those invisible wounds was the fact that my mother—as I perceived it—withheld Pop-pop's autobiography from me since his death in 1979. Sure, I had read it and had looked at the fancy, old photographs of my aunt and grandparents. But there was something more to this book. For me, it symbolized a portal into my ancestry—a glimpse into the storied past in which my brooding mother often resided but rarely mentioned. I even hinted to Mom over the years that I wanted the book, but she would only reply with non-committal phrases such as, "That's nice." On her death bed in September 2012, I hesitantly suggested to her that I would preserve the book using my archival skills. When both of my parents died within 8 months of each other by May 2013, I knew I had arrived at the opportunity to possess this magical book. The next question was, what do I do with the memoir to harness its magic?

By January 2013, I'd finally received Mom's personal effects, and my father was dying. I decided that inheriting this autobiography was finally my chance to illuminate the shadows in my life. Figure 1 illustrates, that my life events are situated within a broader landscape in which my personal narratives connect with identity development over time amidst shadows (Ellis, 2002; Merriam & Brockett, 2007; Poulos, 2012; Smith & Taylor, 2010). You see, on the one hand I had the key to what I perceived was understanding my past, and in the other, was the knowledge that my legacy was dying. My brother and I were becoming orphans as our father faded faster and faster from his cancer-ridden misery. When Dad passed on May 1, 2013, I remember feeling at the time like I was hiking up a hill with bulky balloons of mental distress, crippling grief, and spiritual befuddlement. Rather than uplift me, the balloons cast insidious shadows over my efforts to serve as his personal representative. My grieving was stalled.

Figure 1. Cultural Spaces and Shadows

During this time, my brother and I did become closer because we had to depend upon one another again. Ours is a low-key relationship, but every once in a while, we'd share stories about our parents. We often joked about inheriting the crazy gene from Mom's side, knowing schizophrenia runs in the family. Well, it looks like I won the lottery, because I was diagnosed with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) about 15 years prior. I had told my brother but, gratefully, not my mother who suffered from guilt from having smoked during my pregnancy.

One episode in my fragmented narrative had my teenage self yelling at a blue jay:

BLUE JAY: Caaaawwwwwww!!!!

15-YEAR-OLD ME: Shuuut up! I'm trying to retype this biology paper on my IBM Selectric! Give me a break!!!! [Circling arms....] Just one more correction so I can make it perfect and not give Mr. Biology a reason to give me anything other than an A because I need to know how well I can do this.... Click. Click. Whirrrrrr.

BLUE JAY: CAAAAAAAWWWWWWW!! [I don't care!]

A week later, my Mom gave me a porcelain blue jay, with a smirk.

I guess I always knew I was a little off. When Mom and Dad argued, I would neatly pack my one bag, put on my best clothes, and walk out the door. Most 6-year-olds don't do that. When I cried in despair at my first big homework load in 3rd grade, I knew I was freaking

out. It was like I could see myself from the outside and observe, “Boy, he’s really freaking out over such a small thing.” What could I do?

There was something I knew I couldn’t do. I couldn’t go it alone. I needed help. The parents were fighting through a divorce; my brother was older and in another school. So, I went to the best place for the guilty, church. Is this God’s way? What if this is all there is?

Yep, that was me, the poster child somewhere on the Autism spectrum from white suburbia with repressed hopes. As I grew through adolescence, my need to cope with transitions and challenges became more acute. I sought peace of heart and especially of mind.

Project Description

❧ Purpose:

- ❖ Explore identity development over time
- ❖ Apply Life Events Perspective

❧ Research questions:

- 1) Life events in particularly vulnerable cultural contexts
- 2) Possible selves in re-storying a sense of identity

Figure 2. Research Purpose and Questions

So, I wrote and then I drew to explore my identity development. Since 1989, I have been recording my observations, humiliations, doubts, and fears—plenty of them!—on over 2,000 pages of journals and personal correspondence. Who writes letters anymore?! (See Figure 2.) To make sense of this mound of material in 2013 when I started this project, I considered two key aspects of identity development within the context of the Life Events Perspective: life events and possible selves. These life events are mental snap shots of lived experiences (Smith & Taylor, 2010) and address my first research question. Autoethnographic practice for contemporary adult learners has promoted my identity development over three decades within the literary framework of a bildungsroman. I chose the bildungsroman model because it represents coming-of-age experiences from a retrospective and introspective stance. So, the literary tool links my autoethnographic research approach to my personal experiences.

Table 1. Data Inventory

<i>Data Inventory from Study</i>		
Source of data	Estimated number of pages	Page count total
Grandfather's inherited autobiography	341 active* pages	1 x 341 = 341 active pages
15 Personal journals and separate pads/pages	Varies per item. See active page counts in Appendix A.	1595 active pages
Personal letters and cards and <i>Journal 16</i>	1-2 pages per letter (2 total)	142 active pages
Research journal reflections logged in WIKI	1-2 pages est. per week 15 weeks	1 x 15 = 15, 2 x 15 = 30 15-30 pages
Virtual communication (e-mail, informal conversation online or via phone)	~ 5-10 pages per researcher	5 x 1 = 5, 10 x 1 = 10 5-10 pages
Peer debriefs and member checks	~ 1-2 pages per session ~ 1-2 meetings	1 x 1 = 1, 2 x 2 = 4 1-4 pages
Total Pages		2099-2122 pages
<i>Note.</i> See operational definition for Active Page in Chapter 1.		
* <i>Active page</i> describes any page not blank/torn out of a primary source in this study (Operational Definitions).		

Looking at this mass of material (Table 1), I needed help just to not get overwhelmed sorting through it all. The table gives an idea of what sources I've been looking at. The broad spectrum of primary materials coupled with peer reviews enhances the rigor of the research methodology. This table outlines the estimated page counts for each data source, with a total exceeding 2000 active pages. I followed a 39-week program of research which allowed me time to design the study, collect data, and then represent analyzed data. Sorting took some effort, and I soon realized how complex identity development can be. Is this God's way? What if this is all there is?

Table 2. Archetypal Narrators of Personal Stories

Name	Description	Personal Story / Life Event
Deidre	Celtic noble woman	Airborne School
Aron	Ashkenazi merchant of the Silk Road	Marrying my Best Friend
Vince	Introspective scholar/monk from northern Italy	Adjusting to a New Job and Role
(H)erb	Notorious narcissist	A Professional with Mental Illness
Colleen	Strong, young widow	Losing my Parents
Unger	Young man from Sweden	Major Happy
Laura	Peasant from Odessa	Toxic Climate—The Presentation Hijacker
Kevin	Celtic noble man; Deidre's brother	Pop-pop's Memoir
Ingrid	Middle-aged, German nurse	A Journey Toward Carmel
Nara	Young librarian from Persia	Journey as an Artist

That's where my archetype wonder team comes in (Table 2). They represent my possible selves (second research question) and how I have responded to particular transitions and challenges over time. They represent aspects of my personality and are linked to my personal stories. So, the strong women archetypes symbolize the strong female influences in my life, from my mother to Saint Edith Stein, to our family friend who lost her husband to suicide.

- **Discover themes in personality**
- **Negative thinking patterns**
- **Hypersensitivity**

Culkin, Entry, *Journal 2*, August 2, 2003

Figure 3. Sample Journal Entry—First Level of Data Sorting

And, yes, I've had woman problems. It surprised me that a woman would even pay attention to me, but I married my soul mate in 1995 when I was 26. During this time of transition, I would record mostly life events that gave me angst (see Figure 3). Over the years, my uncommanded thoughts only escalated with hypersensitivity. This figure is at the first level of sorting data. I discovered certain themes in my personality to include negative thinking patterns and hypersensitivity to emotional responses.

I should have gotten the hint when, at a counseling session for my wife around 1996, the psychiatrist offered **me** a brochure about Zoloft. But I couldn't consider psychological treatment as an option: my military career in aviation was just starting, and I feared that my flight status and security clearance would not stand. In the early part of our marriage, my mind would often snowball toward oblivion, cycling when basic fears coagulated on primal doubts:

I saw a pretty woman.
Cannot process. Why am I looking?
I must be bad.

I watched a horror movie.
The man killed his wife.
I could physically do the same.
Good marriages are based on trust.

Am I trustworthy?
 I would never lie to my wife.
 I will tell her to maintain that trust.
 If I do not, trust will be lost—
 the marriage gone. Click.
 click, click, whirrrr.
 I just have to tell her;
 then I'll be relieved—
 until it happens again.
 I hope it doesn't....

Plunge the knife, wield the
 hatchet.
 Would I? Could I?
 Of course I shouldn't, but
 why these thoughts?
 I must be bad...unworthy.
 She doesn't deserve....
 I'm broken; "He's broken!"
 What can we do? Click, whirrrrr.
 You worry about doing something
 you'll never do; psychopaths
 never think about what they've done.

Is this God's way? What is this is all there is?

Figure 4. Sorting to Link Life Events to Personal Stories

Excerpts in Figure 4 are from personal narratives that build upon the journal entries and highlight particular life events within the cultures of mental illness, spiritual awareness/development, and then death/grieving. In a way, the entire journey has been spiritual, with shadowed obstacles of mental illness and grief scattered throughout my life course—seemingly with a purpose of aiding my development over time.

My wife and I now joke that she got a no-return policy on me. But we can only say that by having gone through the visceral, yet invisible, pain of living with mental illness together. We have both grown stronger as individuals and as a family because of this shared journey of suffering, fear, and perseverance. And because we sought help. Our low point was illustrated

by my wife escaping my cycling one night in 2000 to decide if the relationship was worth fighting for. Sure, I was hypersensitive and had a hard time reading people, but how could I become whole when I never was?

So, I kept writing and hoping I'd somehow grasp that magic book. Over the years, the idea of the book became more potent as my disorder became worse. I yearned for its healing powers that I intellectually knew did not exist. Poetry and drawing were some comfort, but we eventually realized we had to seek professional help, despite the social-cultural stigma of seeking psychological help for military officers. But I couldn't lose my soulmate. (See Figure 5.)

Figure 5. Epistemic Research Space for Narrative Inquiry by Levels of Data Sorting

Narrative inquiry has a particular space in which the researcher can analyze raw data and ultimately represent unique insights through a rigorous process. Figure 5 defines the research space in which data collection and analysis often overlap. Using Dewey's ontology of experience as a foundation, narrative research can define its space among three dimensions: social interaction, temporal continuity, and situational context (Clandinin & Murphy, 2009). This figure illustrates how the process of narrative inquiry fits within the epistemic construct of this multidimensional research space.

During therapy sessions and in my journal entries, I relied on my gut to identify life events of transition and challenge that mattered to me—I could not write down everything, but everything mattered. So, while I eventually used Mattsson's (2014) three-step intersectional analysis to gather materials, discern life events, and re-story my experiences, I also relied upon my instincts. This iterative process allowed me to redefine what Dewey (2008) described as a continuity of experience—across time and space. Additionally, the typology helped me extract those life event stories of sufficient depth and transcendent breadth that I would study (Cranton, 1994/2006; Hoggan, 2015).

I believe many OCD sufferers can make excellent psychological patients. We're perfect at following through on tedious tasks because the perceived consequences can be quite dire. I was convinced that if I didn't submit to the regimen of cognitive-behavior therapy and

medications, I would lose my wife. My life. That perceived reality became suspended when I was diagnosed.

Now, you might think being diagnosed with an incurable disorder that already wreaks havoc on all aspects of your life would be terrible, but it's actually a great relief. I finally knew that I was not born a bad person, that a biochemical imbalance in my noggin enabled the cycling of thoughts that most people can readily dispose. My wife and I could now begin to re-build our lives. Build...building...bildung...bildungsroman. Bildungsroman—coming of age, coming to life, gaining an identity from a new beginning.

“You’re so introspective; it’s unusual for patients to be able to articulate what they’re thinking when they cycle between obsessions and compulsions,” our therapist would say. None of us knew what we could do with that reflective talent, but I kept writing anyway. Is this God’s way? What if this is all there is?

Figure 6. Research Design

When I finally learned about autoethnographic research methods in 2014, it clicked. Click whirrrr. I could now take over 2,000 pages of field notes collected over a quarter century, describe key life events from that period, and start putting the puzzle pieces together to construct a new, more cogent story. I could design a study (Figure 6)—not intending it to be my dissertation at first—that explored my identity quest in a way that could help others. Figure 6 outlines the research design including the data collection, analysis, and representation in response to the research purpose and questions. The hour-glass shape indicates the research draws upon the larger body of literature in adult development and applies autoethnographic methodology to inductively create broad implications depicted on the bottom (see Bhattacharya, 2017).

Figure 7. Emergent Themes

Throughout this iterative process of data collection and analysis, several themes emerged (see Figure 7) that spelled the vernacular of my new life story. This word cloud illustrates patterns among the emergent themes that arose from re-storying the personal stories (Level 3 Sorting). These themes of development emerge from *all* 10 personal stories and are highlighted (with italics) in the culminating intersectional narrative.

As a result of this autoethnographic journey, I can be mindful and skip past the land mines of my disorder, so I can enjoy life with my family. I am responsible for my transgressions, ruminations, and perseverations, especially when they harm my intimate others (Ellis, 2007). But I now have a voice that, once muted by invisible pain, has an expressive outlet. My wife and I are stronger for seeking professional help through the daunting labyrinth of mental illness. You can be assured that our therapist will be one of the first to receive a copy of this dissertation. The fragmented narrative of these 10 disparate stories now has connective tissue, illuminating shadows and rendering an instinctive memory of my identity development over time.

Figure 8. Conclusions

In summary, this has been a lifelong journey of learning (see Figure 8). Over 26 years and counting. It started with a desire to explore the narrative fragments of my life experiences (research purpose, top circle). Choosing an autoethnographic methodological approach enabled me to inquire into key aspects viewed through the Life Events Perspective of adult development: shadows, life events, and possible selves (middle circle). As a result, I have been able to re-story my personal narrative by putting more pieces together, thereby constructing a more cogent narrative of my identity development over time (bottom circle).

Implications for primary audiences:

- Committee
- Adult Education Professionals
- Fellow Adult Learners / Sufferers
- My Family and I

Suggestions for future research:

- Adults with anxiety / depressive / traumatic disorders
- Adult educator accommodations in differentiated environments
- Overcoming social stigmata in educational institutions
- Applications for higher education institutional policy

Figure 9. A Way Ahead

So what?! What's the point of this research? See Figure 9. Writing this bildungsroman has allowed me to develop spiritually by reflecting upon my identity development over time. My developmental transformation has occurred gradually over several years, rather than during specific episodic experiences, and was marked by multiple life events documented in the field notes presented.⁴ This research implies for its audiences that (a) committee members can spread the word about autoethnography into new fields, (b) adult educators can gain a deeper understanding of learners with invisible wounds—that they are not a monolithic demographic and many are high-functioning performers—through the sharing of authentic personal stories in their own voices and spaces, (c) fellow adult learners can commit to seeking help through proactive introspection and trust, and (d) my family and I can further develop on the road of healing. The fragmented narratives that emerge will no doubt counter current stances of power inequalities experienced by invisibly wounded learners, promote deeper learning of identity development, and suggest further benefits of autoethnographic inquiry in socially responsible education. Future researchers in adult and continuing education may consider inquiries concerning how learners with anxiety disorders experience educational activities given social stigmata, differentiated accommodation of high-performing students with disorders, and the evolution of educational policy regarding the mentally ill. Everyone has a story worth telling.

Robert Stone (1985) reminded me about the importance of story in extracting meaning from life experiences:

We need stories. We can't identify ourselves without them. We're always telling ourselves stories about who we are: that's what history is, what the idea of a nation or an individual is. The purpose of fiction is to help us answer the question we must constantly be asking ourselves: Who do we think we are and what do we think we're doing?

We tell who and what we are. It is a continuous process of learning and development, feeding each other over the life course.

So, why are we really here today? Well, I'm here to tell you that it's not this darn book [holding autobiography] or these journals. Now, some of the key references I used include pioneers in adult development, autoethnography, identity development, life events perspective, narrative inquiry, and qualitative inquiry.

The magic is inside each of us and our audiences. This autoethnographic journey has taken me through conceptual linkages, the research concept and space, data inventory, research design, and a way ahead. We all need to heal, but healing isn't teleological. It isn't the end but the beginning of future efforts to improve our lives and those of others. We all want to be uniquely loved and to be part of something greater than ourselves. To seek help from mental anguish, we need to trust ourselves, our loved ones, colleagues, spiritual advisors, and health professionals so we can become stronger. Perhaps my magic power is introspection, and I hope it can help others to heal through this narrative. I invite you to enter into this narrative through its numerous cracks and layers—a narrative I've told to heal myself and one that I now have a responsibility to tell.

Limits and Possibilities of the Study

There were several limits of this research that helped define the long-term implications and acceptance of the research. The first limit was that the researcher-participant was new to

⁴ Christian mystics discovered long ago that spiritual development is a lifelong process of transformation, occurring gradually over our life spans and rarely in singular episodes (Chalmers, 2014).

qualitative research and was likely to make some mistakes in the application of certain research principles. A second limit contains an ethical dimension. The researcher had to maintain a degree of confidentiality as participant and of his family members and friends. This means he did not reveal private information that was unrelated to the study and its purpose or questions. He also had to represent enough analysis to demonstrate a deep understanding of identity development over time. To accommodate these particular ethical requirements regarding intimate others, the researcher-participant received an exemption from further institutional review board review from Kansas State University and also had immediate family members (brother and wife) conduct co-reviewer agreements (Culkin, 2016; Ellis, 2007). Since autoethnographic methodology incorporates personal materials as primary sources, it was difficult—but necessary—to realize this confidentiality-representation balance.

The possibilities of this research were expansive. First, the researcher-participant's open-minded approach to the journal materials offered a richer context for analysis. The researcher-participant created the field notes and inherited the autobiography before he decided to conduct autoethnographic research. As a result, the notes and experiences gleaned necessarily addressed a broad spectrum of personal experiences that extended beyond the scope of this study as delineated by the research questions. These rich and layered resources contributed to the rigor of the research design and to the depth of the analysis. Ultimately, the possible benefits of this study outweighed the limitations.

Summary and Conclusion

My personal story matters because it *is* personal. It is personal not just because it provides a deeper insight into my own life experiences; it also opens a window—a two-way mirror of sorts—for readers through which they can participate in creating their own meanings. This transferability of storied experiences to readers of diverse backgrounds implies a “narrative inheritance” (Boylorn, 2013, p. 116; see also Goodall, 2006). But this transfer of meaning also infers that my story, this autoethnography, is nested in the experiences of others. It is social.

The story of a young man struggling with OCD extends beyond my life course. My hope is that, as Boylorn (2013) notes, its message will strike a chord of recognition, stimulate reflection, and spawn learning in readers who can choose to apply it to their own lives. A tool to foster this interactive role is poetic inquiry. Poetry enables my inspection of interior spaces and shadows within my multi-layered identity in order to create meaning from lived experiences inductively (Bhattacharya, 2013; Boylorn, 2013; Cahnmann, 2003; Faulkner, 2016), similar to the inter-spaces inside a nesting doll. For this reason, I have inserted poems of reflection in many of the narrative episodes to represent not only the multiple layers of meaning but also the shadowed spaces between them.

In this social-cultural context of narrative inquiry, my re-storied life events become a theory to explain and interpret their meaning. Stories are themselves theories (Boylorn, 2013; Ellis & Bochner, 2006) because they outline causes and/or effects, derive subjectified meaning, and provide a setting in which the life events and meanings could resonate for audiences. Bochner (2013) reiterates that autoethnography is a narrative search for meaning in life experience. So, my personal story matters because it is personal and can mean something for others.

Summary

Over the past several decades, I have developed into a more self-authored person and continue to develop through an ongoing series of high points, low points, and turning points.

Reflective journaling—which has included poetry and sketching—has been a primary means whereby I have found a prayerful pathway to personal growth and identity development. Writing my story has enabled me to understand myself better and has helped me make better decisions for my future path.

Another way to represent the implications of this autoethnographic journey is through poetry. This poem, *The Castle*, summarizes the pilgrimage process that I have taken through journaling followed by autoethnographic analysis.

The Castle

My castle is a sanctum, standing unmolested on Mount Carmel's summit.
Everything is as I wish it: weathered stones anchor the foundation,
providing stability to structure and master; the deep moat protects me
from pesky neighbors, disease, and other fears.
But that drawbridge has its own thoughts....

Is this God's way?
What if this is all there is?

Shadowed figures rise along the horizon, crossing the meadows
toward my castle. How can they do that?! Why?!...
The drawbridge lowers without my bidding—I am exposed!
Uncertainty is slowly killing me.

Is this God's way?
What if this is all there is?

Herb, my nemesis but another me, mans the drawbridge.
He laughs at my anger. I am alone and under attack from
the inside...imprisoned in my own safe house!

Is this God's way?
What if this is all there is?

I retreat into the dungeon of my sub-conscience,
seeking answers to unknown questions. The strata
indicate years of rot-growth-misuse. Many memories
are long forgotten until I find them under the rubble,
waving back as if I should know them. I know only a
few, and partially at that. Archaeology was my first love.

Is this God's way?
What if this is all there is?

The shadows approach the impenetrable moat, but
they know my vulnerabilities—I cannot escape.
I must pray, with clasped hands, to make them
go away. It only works a little while;
they chant, "Are you a bad person for thinking
bad thoughts?...We'll return!"

*Is this God's way?
What if this is all there is?*

I take the prescription from the physician I agreed to see—
my marriage counts on it. But
I cannot tell my neighbors or colleagues—they could judge
and not understand. Besides, it's my castle!

*Is this God's way?
What if this is all there is?*

My parents' souls knock on my door every day—
I didn't think they knew my castle.
I miss them and want to say thank you, one last time.
Their shadows are welcome to stay here.

*Is this God's way?
What if this is all there is?*

Therese of Lisieux⁵ guides me to choose love over anger;
that informs my decisions. I mature and watch the
windswept fields and cloud-laden skies from the castle-
head at sunset. The shadows are out there; Herb still
lives here, and some shadows visit now and then.
That's OK—I have God at my side. My journey
is not complete but continues.... Learning is lifelong.⁶

*Is this God's way?
What if this is all there is?*

The night arrives, and I bide my time web surfing.
I will begin my journey in the morning as a
self-reliant pilgrim, continuing to learn
about my Spiritual Director.

*God's way is my way.
That's all I need.*

I return to the original question: How can an adult make meaning from and develop through lived experiences of mental illness, spiritual awareness, and death? The purpose of this autoethnographic study was to explore how a male in the general population describes how life events have influenced his identity development over a period of 23 years, spanning three decades. The researcher-participant asked two primary questions: (a) How does the individual describe his adult development in terms of "individual and cultural episodes" (Smith & Taylor,

⁵ She was a Carmelite nun who lived in France and died in 1897. See also http://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=105. When I read her memoir *Story of a Soul* (1972/2005), her daily "little way" (p. x) of humility and contemplation convinced me to choose love over the anger that had motivated my youth. This was a transformative life event in my adult development described in the personal stories.

⁶ King, 2010.

2010, p. 52) related to mental illness, spiritual awareness, and death over time? and (b) How does the individual describe his possible selves in constructing a new sense of identity? Addressing these questions has contributed to the literature of adult and continuing education by providing a glimpse into stories of lived experiences over time in the light of adult development. More importantly, this research may provide further insight into numerous issues central to contemporary adult and continuing education: identity development over time to render an internal voice, particularly for marginalized students; counter-narratives to controversial topics such as mental health access, toxic leadership, spiritual awareness, and reflection to construct meaning in a fast-paced world; and narrative-informal methods of learning and inquiry. I have illustrated the value of autoethnographic practice for contemporary adult learners by demonstrating how it has promoted my informal learning and self-authorship over three decades.

Conclusion

Pilgrim steps forward—
Cracking masks; freeing shadows.
Heartfelt wounds now heal.

There are significant implications of autoethnographic activities for adult and continuing education. First and foremost, autoethnography, grounded in current theory and research, can foster the voice of individuals, particularly from marginalized populations in a contemporary society that is increasingly divided between haves and have nots. Transformative learning events can also inform adult development through extant frameworks such as cognitive development theory. Informal learning activities involving narratives and creative nonfiction, can augment identity development in numerous ways. Additionally, integrated narratives can offer counter-narratives to break tightly held stereotypes in long-stigmatized fields such as mental health, service industries, and identity development. Finally, autoethnographic methods serve as effective tools to link lived experience with meaning making (i.e., a narrative approach to informal learning).

Perhaps this journal entry says it best: “We, ourselves, give meaning to our experiences, not the other way around” (Culkin, *Journal 4*, November 14 & December 25, 1997 & January 14, 1998). The researcher-participant reviewed over 2,000 pages of primary materials covering 23 years of his lived experience. The resultant integrated story tied 18 causal connections over this period spanning three decades that describe how certain key experiences have transformed the way he thinks about his identity and the manner in which he expresses self-actualized ideas, beliefs, and values.

This study suggests that autoethnographic practice is an effective methodological approach to data collection, analysis, and representation in informal learning and adult development contexts. Furthermore, personal stories of life events, when narratively analyzed in social-cultural situations, can provide a coherent narrative of one’s identity development over time. For example, in journaling for over three decades, I have learned to take off his masks and reveal his invisible wounds in order to become more of his true, holy self—rather than become a slave to his shadows—gradually over time. The effort expends much energy, but it has also healed without curing, enabling me to refer to past experience to live a better present and future. In a world increasingly marked by decentralization, politicization, and division, autoethnographic practice can offer an effective means for any adult—particularly those marginalized—to express his/her voice and thereby learn and develop.

Epilogue

Whether this personal bildungsroman is an adult educator's dream, an archaeological memoir, a pilgrimage, or a retelling of a series of life events; the story ends as it began—a continued inquiry into the incomplete puzzle pieces of the researcher-participant's life experiences. This quest has taken divergent paths such as the invisible wounds of mental illness and the masks the stigmatized put on when facing a cynical society. But those pathways have forced the researcher-participant to confront those multifaceted varieties of his personality, self-concept, and choices that have shaped his self-concept over time. These possible selves represent a contemporary contemplative who seeks spiritual grounding while also struggling with the self-centered obsessions of a mental illness that seeks to disrupt the very roots of faith and certainty sought. Other possible selves have appeared as shadowed life events, including toxic leaders who forced him to question his own worth and competence. Yet other characters, epitomized by the poet or the passionate adult educator, have sought opportunities to learn from all of these life events—the wounds of the past, the transitions of the present, and even the uncertainties of the future.

Adults in contemporary society face these transcendent concerns that influence how they learn over the life course. Adult educators, as lifelong learners themselves, can reflect upon their own life events in a similar, narrative way using informal methods to refine their pedagogical philosophies. Learners on the tortuous path of identity development, can become aware of their possible selves and how they all, including the shadows, can help them create meaning from the puzzle pieces of their life events. Life is experience, but meaning must be actively and continuously discerned. The following intersectional narrative attempts to re-story the emergent themes identified during data sorting.

Haiku Pilgrim: An Intersectional Dialogue

In this autoethnographic bildungsroman, I have tried to examine my multi-faceted experiences within the cultures of mental illness, spiritual development, and grieving loss. In this section, I re-present my findings through a fictionalized conversation with my grandfather. In this sense, it is an autoethnography of adult development and of identity development in particular. More generally, it is an intersectional analysis that explores rich, layered social and psychological phenomena over the course of my life span (Huber, Caine, Huber, & Steeves, 2013). To show how the emergent findings informed this new personal story, I italicized the 18 themes throughout the following narrative. In the end, this is a story of a life lived and living, its relational legacies, and future opportunities grounded in the past and present.

Background

Roses grow in spring
from new buds born in winter—
all colors fading.

In the summer of 1991, I turned 22 and felt like I was about to really live. I was a recent West Point graduate and really wanted to make a contribution to the world. In many ways—ways in which I could not perceive then—I still do. I had learned a great deal while a cadet at West Point. As I noted in my cadet journal, the 4-year experience had opened my naïve eyes and allowed me to grow interpersonally: “dealing with others so that we may live with ourselves” (Culkin, February 13, 1989). In another entry, I noted that working with fellow cadets during the summer of 1990 had changed my life: “What a joy it is to be with and enjoy

other people. What greater a joy it is to know they feel likewise” (Culkin, August 26, 1990)! Ah, the exuberance of youth.... I was just as idealistic as the next hormone-ridden American youth, and I had a plan. I always had a plan.

My plan was to become an Army helicopter pilot, get a master’s degree in a few years, and then see where my career would take me. Not much of a plan, looking back. In retrospect, my plan was really to escape the parochial cocoon in which I had developed until then. I was a single kid—my older brother had left home years before to join the U.S. military—with a resilient single mother who struggled with her mental stability, emotional fragility, and addictive proclivities. In one sense, he may have possessed some guilt for leaving me behind with our temperamental parent, unable to protect me (Brother, personal telephone communication, April 7, 2016). Going to an all-boys Jesuit high school followed by the monastery on the Hudson River provided me a world-class education but not much exposure to the “real world,” whatever that was. My father was present during my adolescence, but he didn’t know how to communicate with people younger than 40. So, I was pretty much on my own during my young adulthood.

When I now look back on my lived experiences almost 24 years later, I can see certain high points, low points, and turning points. They help mark the milestones of change and how I learned from those experiences. The primary challenge I had to overcome was developing internal voice, a key element of self-authorship, as an introvert (Baxter Magolda, 2008). I have adapted and have grown into my own person while continuing to develop. Eighteen emergent themes found during the third level of sorting are italicized for easy reference and context. Interspersed throughout the story, they help tie together my new personal story in a unique manner, documenting the journey just trod. In a way, this journey shared with my grandfather is similar to a pilgrimage. I encounter high points on the first day, low points on the second, and decide to turn in specific directions by the third. For each day, I integrate a reflection to tie the experiences to meaning via autoethnographic practice.

Day 1—High Points

Figure 10. Illustration for Day 1. The banner signifies the use of parable to describe a three-day period as a literary framework for the integrated story. The first day covers high points, symbolized by the successful negotiation of dangerous boulders in the river. Illustration by author.

The summer morning sun was burning through the wispy clouds that embraced the Hudson Highlands. I could smell the mull brush in the air, cleansing my nostrils and caressing my lungs. My heart was a little lighter. I was looking forward to my adult life. Then I finally met him.

“Come on over here! Over here, Haiku Pilgrim!” exclaimed Pop-pop. I had just graduated from West Point and had travelled from Highland Falls, New York, to make this rafting trip my step toward independence before I reported to my first army assignment.

I wondered why he had called me, “Haiku Pilgrim.” Perhaps he knew something I did not. Nevertheless, I put it in the back of my mind because I had longed to talk to him since he had died in 1979 when he was 91 and I was 9.

We both settled in the raft and began to paddle. The glacial water froze when it splattered on our faces, but we drove on. Then I saw the boulders ahead.

“Stay the course!” Pop-pop shouted above the living cacophony of the approaching rapids.

We both dug in and paddled as hard as we could. At the last second, the bow shifted left to avoid the boulders that would surely have penetrated our rubber vessel. We were safe for now.

I felt safe with someone spiritually secure as Pop-pop. Sure, I had sought out other guides to discern spiritual peace. Thomas Merton had been my informal guide throughout high

school. I had read some of his stuff about his St. Augustine-like conversion which made me feel somewhat better about myself. I knew that, with my parent's divorce and Mom's depression, I couldn't make it through life by myself, but Pop-pop reminded me that I was not alone.

"Now, remember, I'll be there with you.... Listen to me at all times, and you'll be fine," Pop-pop proclaimed. His was a no-nonsense kind of personality. That sense of certainty and decisiveness somehow comforted me a little in an odd way, putting Herb into a quiet corner.

I needed the confidence boost. The rest of the day was filled with extraordinary vistas of woodlands, palisades, and reminders of times when life was a little slower paced. We found a camp site on the west side of the river and started a fire.

Night 1—Reflection

"So, Dave, what have you learned from today?" Pop-pop, my namesake, queried through his thin lips and slight smile. I closed my eyes and could feel the evening winds begin to kick up and embrace us.

"Well, now I know why I have to keep walking forward and not wait for my fears to take over."

"Good point. You've learned to channel your energy from love rather than from fear and anger—a key lesson." I reflected that my high points have been mostly the norm: college graduation, completion of masters programs, and marrying my best friend. I have also, during the course of the run, completed a successful first career, am working on a doctorate, and developing a persistent spiritual awareness. These are the calm spots in the river. The challenges associated with these high points are the boulders that do not block the way but certainly force me to make a commitment. And none of them are the same in terms of intensity or consistency.

Later, I wrote the following passage in my journal.

A common thread that ties these high points together is a prayerful reflection interspersed with a sense of pilgrimage. Being a pilgrim adds a spiritual dimension to my life journey. My young narcissistic and idealist self insisted that I was destined for great personal achievement. I now realize that I am a normal schmo who likes to use Yiddish terms to vaguely describe my largely unremarkable accomplishments while attempting to reach back into my Jewish ancestry. But now I realize that *personal inquiry and spiritual awareness have permitted me to see beyond self-perception, begin to overcome past regrets, and to develop into a less self-centered person*. This awareness is also a turning point because it affects how I interpret my past and how I may choose to live in the present with a consideration of future implications. Along the way, I have realized that I cannot endure life's journey alone.

I have found solace and confidence in the teachings of God, and Catholic saints have shown me how I can better follow those precepts. *Mystics such as Thomas Merton, St. Teresa of Avila, and St. Edith Stein have pointed out a path of awareness, patience, humility, solace, and true development given my Judeo-Christian cultural context*. For me, this path has meant self-surrender and increased humility: perhaps two of the hardest tasks I have undertaken. In other words, *let go and let God; be patiently consistent*. Teresa of Avila, for instance, achieved spiritual union with God and, in her writings, encourages lay persons to work toward the same goal through prayer and patience.

Prayer is the integrated path to improving my relationship with God, my choices, and development as a good person. Through prayer, I remind myself that I'm not alone, and especially pray for my wife—my immediate family. This path to companionship is strewn with prayer and respect. A key lesson I have learned is that refusing to take loved ones for granted permits me to invest more in my valued relationships over time—if I choose.

After writing in my journal, I walked over to Pop-pop and sat down by the fire. I began with my heavy burden. “When you died, I found out about your autobiography. Since then, I had always wanted to possess it because it reminded me of the importance of family memory. Mom, of course, inherited the manuscript which taught me about the events of your 65-year career in construction. But I wanted to know more, deeper.... Your life epitomized the arduous and ingenious spirit of your generation that experienced first-hand both the industrial and nuclear ages. For years, I would sneak glances at the document, never finding an opportunity to delve into it. Mom would promise it to me numerous times; but her possessive nature and depression led to me inherit it only after she died in 2012. When I finally studied the memoir, a new world opened up for me. I saw a side of my ancestor only relayed through my mother until then. I loved your acute description of flying alongside Charles Lindbergh, building the Missouri state capitol, constructing the United Nations, and building the Julliard School. These images have added clarity to my mental painting of your legacy. It seemed you focused so much on your construction career, almost forgetting about how you overcame the premature deaths of your father, losing your pregnant first wife during the World War I influenza epidemic, the lack of formal education beyond primary school, and succeeding as a member of an ethnic minority (eastern European Jew) in society. In this way, you're a part of me.”

“Well, there you go,” stated Pop-pop. “It sounds like you're on to something there—that I, as your grandfather, have unwittingly served as a significant model for your identity, humor, creativity, and resilience developed through long-term autobiographical practice.”

“By the way,” I asked turning back to my habit-adorned friend, “why do you call me ‘Haiku Pilgrim’?”

His stoic face broke into a glimmering shadow of a smile. “You are a poet seeking stanzas on a spiritual journey,” he replied as if he had rehearsed it many times. Should I have known that?

Pop-pop continued: “Merton (1961) once noted that holiness ‘...means to be myself. Therefore the problem of sanctity and salvation is in fact the problem of finding out who I am and of discovering my true self’ (p. 31).⁷ Thus, developing a self-concept is, in itself, a spiritual journey—one with many twists and unexpected turns.”

Reflecting at that camp fire that first night, I realized that even some low points—such as not being able to read my grandfather's autobiography—later became high points—such as when I got to read the autobiography.

⁷ Merton (1961) also observed that every individual has a unique set of gifts that comprise his/her identity: “...each particular being, in its individuality,...with all its own characteristics and its private qualities and its own inviolable identity, gives glory to God by being precisely what He wants it to be here and now, in the circumstances ordained for it by His Love and His infinite Art” (p. 30). Put another way, every person has a responsibility to use his particular set of gifts in time and space to express his true self. This is love in human life.

Figure 11. Illustration for Day 2. During the second day of the trip, the participant experiences low points represented by falling in but then being saved. These low points have tremendous learning potential. Illustration by author.

The next morning, the smoke from the fire burning Pop-pop's breakfast of powdered eggs and bacon⁸ inflamed my nostrils. It wasn't a stinging feeling as if vinegar was being poured down my throat. It was more of a hot-pepper scent that sparked memories of summer campfires from my youth. Then I noticed the hot pepper sauce by his left hip as he wrote in his journal. "What do you have there, Pop-pop?"

"We all experience moments that indelibly mark us with the negative emotions of anger, jealousy, and humiliation that yield emptiness and soulful yearning."

I replied, "That's really good, and makes me think of my mental health issues." He smiled because he was aware of my situation. He was my mentor after all.

An insidious mental illness has pervaded almost every facet of my daily life and is the common thread that interweaves most of my low points. Even as a young man, an overarching fear of failure, regret, and uncertainty resulted in obsessive thoughts...thoughts that convinced me that I was a fundamentally bad person.

"My fears have primarily concerned failure, regret, loss of control (i.e., uncertainty), and falling short of others' expectations," I once had written in my journal. Whatever

⁸ Pop-pop would eat bacon but "abstained from all shellfish (which can never be kosher) his entire life" (Brother, personal e-mail, August 1, 2016).

compulsion I did in response—i.e., briefing my wife of my woes, or repetitively writing detailed accounts of my feelings—only resulted in temporary relief. I could not get past the undercurrent of worthlessness and self-doubt. In this way, self-centeredness and hypersensitivity to others' thoughts of me have retarded my development.

"So, Pop-pop, how do fears relate to the future?" I asked, curious. He put his bacon back down on the little paper plate that rested on his lap.

He then pondered and surmised, "As a young man, I couldn't see the hope of the future, only the tearful past. Life was a series of worrisome problems to be solved, not moments of joyful sharing and camaraderie. I was building a successful construction business, but I had lost my parents and my first wife. The last two had died in my arms (Aronberg, 1969). Looking back, I repressed the pain." He resumed bacon eating.

My belief in working hard before playing only reinforced the negative experiences. In this atmosphere of perpetual mental imprisonment, my fears have fed my mental illness. In the course of a few years, for example, my uncommanded and unfounded thoughts ranged from sexual orientation, to domestic violence, to religious scrupulosity. It was not until diagnosis that I came to believe these experiences to be indicators of a disease rather than of a serious character flaw.

Pop-pop continued his lesson, shifting the focus to the role of authority. "The hardest thing for many young people to accept is not the hard work but the obedience to superiors. It's kinda un-American if you think about it," he said, relishing the last remnants of the bacon delight.

For the next hour, the older self and I shared our low points, focusing on misled bosses and the deaths of loved ones. We didn't describe them as tragedies but as opportunities to learn. It seemed the only way not to go to some dark place quickly. At the same time, I felt a live connection with him, experiencing him as he really was and not through an intermediary like my mother.

External influences, such as troubled people in positions of authority, have also triggered low points described in my journals. For example, I experienced professional toxicity while working for two senior officers at a major military command. Their overwhelming need to control the actions of others to brighten their own self-image allowed them to project a unique image to others. On one occasion, one blamed me for going long on a presentation that he and his guest had hijacked! In such cases, my humiliation fed anger. It was some time before I chose to respond with love rather than anguish; however, that choice would become a turning point in my adult experience.

While my wrinkled yet jovial grandfather listened to my story, he would occasionally close his eyes and smile while releasing an "Ah" which seemed to release some type of spiritual pressure from his body, somehow adding to his resilience. Pop-pop also thoughtfully rolled his white, furry eyebrows to show his non-judgmental mental tags. It was like he was posting trail markers throughout my tale. I finally got to my most recent low point—the deaths of my parents.

I started, "Mom and Dad died within 8 months of each other. This loss changed the status of my brother and me forever. We were now orphans. With 8 months separating their deaths, it was difficult for my brother and me to grieve in our unique ways. I cried for my mother but did not for my dad in public, though I was closer to him. This experience also has become a turning point."

Some hikers were passing nearby. They had all the latest outdoor regalia: hiking poles, fancy sun glasses, and spandex. What an indelible image! Suddenly, I felt I was a stranger in the forest, alienated from anything familiar. My mind was jumbled.

When I tripped a few minutes later and fell into the river in my confused state, Pop-pop reached out to grab me. His grip was strong and reassuring.

“Come on,” he smiled to encourage me. “Let’s take on the next leg!” I couldn’t argue with him. He had plenty of credibility with me. Who was I to complain?

Night 2—Reflection

That night by the campfire, I journaled more.

There comes a time in one’s life when he must accept his strengths and weaknesses. Without such acceptance, one cannot grow. I needed to learn to accept constructive criticism and handle uncertainty. How can I learn not to worry about what others think of me, especially when I fail?

Hypersensitivity had bugged me for years. And, yet, there it was, between being singled out as an unworthy alien lacking basic skills expected of everyone and falling in necessitating someone else to risk his life for me, I was feeling low.

“Do you realize those were great tests today?” Pop-pop asked me with his knowing and comforting smile. His gaze made my heart feel warmer. He went on to explain that my distraction by unnecessary things caused me to fall. My faith and new-found turn toward love, represented by Pop-pop’s guidance and lifesaving grasp, in turn saved my life. “Of course, you will continue to fall, but your faith will always remind you that you are not alone.” My heart pattered at peace.

“How many times has my wife offered me that same hand?” I pondered in my journal. Have I not pushed my loved ones away at times when I needed them most? Was my body paralyzed by the fear of failure or doubt of past regrets? I then realized that I was not only with loved ones but that those tests made me stronger.

These thoughts led me to reminisce about my dog, Schneider, whom my mother put to sleep on February 10, 1990 (Culkin, D.T., personal notes, February 9, 1990). My mother called me two days prior to inform that that she would have him put down. He had been suffering for quite some time, and I acknowledged that it was the humane thing to do. It was the first time that I felt deep loss and wrote a brief stanza of love and memorial:

Dear Schneider
 You gave more love,
 More lightheartedness,
 More selfless tenderness,
 Than is good for this earth.
 May you rest in peace. (Culkin, February 9, 1990)
 Pop-pop then leaned forward. His eyes and kindness eked out from the growing shadows.

“When face tests of faith with love, your anger and impatience become meaningless. Incompetence, failure, regret...those are meaningless when you have faith in yourself and God. Be like the vine that must be pruned so that you can bear quality grapes.⁹ This means that suffering is necessary for growth and, although cutting may hurt, it will never kill you.”

⁹ John 15:1-17 (New American Bible, Revised Edition). Hays (1981/2007) also describes vines as a metaphor to understand suffering, particularly grief and illness.

Figure 12. Illustration for Day 3. At the end of the trip on Day 3, the participant looks back and reflects on the high, low, and turning points. These help describe his identity development life events over time. Illustration by author.

The final morning of the trip, I woke up alone. I mean, no one was in the camp. Pop-pop, my guide and companion, had departed as quietly as he had re-entered my life. I felt alone, but I also knew that he was with me in spirit. In fact, he had left me a little prayer written on a gum wrapper:

Don't look back but forward.
 Live each day as one reborn.
 For you have enjoyed great triumphs,
 And have been reminded of your frailties.
 You have fallen in the muddy trails,
 But have gotten up to continue the journey.
 You have looked back to learn where you have been
 And where you may go. But
 As long as you have God, you need
 nothing else.¹⁰

As I trod down the trail on the final leg, I somehow knew this wasn't the end. The trees were in full color. The wind just a mild breeze, keeping the humidity comfortably low. The water calmly splashed the banks of the nearby river.

¹⁰ Saint Teresa of Avila said something similar in a prayer during the trials of suffering from a painful illness.

I saw some tall mountains to climb ahead, but I was prepared. Unlike the other day, I knew what to expect and—more importantly—I knew I could handle whatever was coming. It wasn't easy, as I had learned during this tortuous journey, but I had confidence in my skills and choices. I felt renewed.

The rest of the trip was uneventful and very peaceful. As I pulled into the trail head, I knew I was a different person than the one who had started the journey. In fact, I was different because of the journey.

Sitting on a boulder not far from the rest area, I could look back on the river below and recount the course. I had some hours to kill before my wife came by to pick me up the next morning, so I began to journal with some poetry:

As I look back on the river I have just conquered,
It seems beautiful—even peaceful—if not alive.
Walter pulsates against impregnable rocks,
Breaking them into pebbles and sand.

I realized then that I had experienced some turning points—or significant changes in perspective—that I could only see when looking back on the journey I had just taken. Some were low points, like falling down, and some were high points, like vanquishing the feared boulders and sharp turns. It wasn't that I was now an expert outdoorsman...far from it. But, I did have a better sense of myself by understanding what I had experienced and how I could now proceed.

Night 3—Closing Reflections (Integrated Poem)

That night, I was left alone with my thoughts and memories. The fire kept me warm as I thought about what Pop-pop taught me. What a lot to take in and write in my journal, a counter narrative. At these times, poetry helps me make sense of things...:

As I look back on the mountain I have just conquered,
It seems beautiful—even peaceful—if not alive.
Walter pulsates against impregnable rocks,
Breaking them into pebbles and sand.

Transformation has been at the high & low points, and in between.
The large boulders in the first leg were a turning point:
My decision to live a life fueled by love rather than anger.
Seeing possibilities rather than risk has saved my life.
Falling in the water is another turning point:
The point I realized that I was mentally ill and not a bad person.
People may not see the real me under water, but I can swim.
The dramatically poised boulder at the sharp turn is also a turning point:
My choice to wed my soul mate and life partner.
She has been always there for me, regardless of time.
Looking back, confidence in my skills and choices
Defines my sense of self-authorship.
I lean back and howl in joyful affirmation of
My strengths, fears, regrets, and weaknesses.
My internal voice is no longer silent.

As I look back on the river I have just conquered,
 It seems beautiful—even peaceful—if not alive.
 Walter pulsates against impregnable rocks,
 Breaking them into pebbles and sand.

* * * *

Reflection and journaling have served as the primary tools I have used to transform these lived experiences into turning points or best practices. Such prayerful reflection—and narrative practices such as journals and poetry in particular—on lived experiences has promoted my cognitive and spiritual development over my lifespan while fostering my confidence and capacity to adapt during transitions, to heal from past failures, to cope with adversity, to discern meaning, and to glean best practices for future benefit. Through this process, I have endeavored to make both high and low points a part of my spiritual journey. More specifically, finding my voice through drawing, praying, reflection, and writing has enabled me to find new wells of strength to cope with life's challenges. Art—e.g., poetry, drawing, creative writing—therapeutically facilitates resilience, awareness, and expression through self-dialogue. I call my internal voice Haiku Pilgrim because it epitomizes the journey of spiritual awareness while capturing the opportunities for self-expression provided by art—especially poetry and drawing.

Along the way, I have been painfully aware that I cannot endure life on my own. It is not that I need someone else; rather, I do not have the mental, spiritual, or physical stamina or weaponry to consistently confront the challenges, setbacks, and even triumphs of life. Indeed, I now realize that seeking help for mental illness is not only a good idea but also an obligation to myself and my loved ones. Through reflective journaling, I have discovered that humor, resourcefulness, and self-reliance enhance my resilience and my relationships. A balance is necessary for my development into a self-authored person.

Becoming self-authored for me means consistently living a balanced life—spiritually, physically, and intellectually—on my terms while not obsessing about others' opinions. I pray daily to build a relationship with God and to maintain an energy source for inner transformation. Spirituality is a metaphor for my relationship with God, how I interact with others, and my lifelong journey of awareness toward holiness. It is a pilgrimage. I regularly work out not to meet job requirements but to stay healthy and do God's will. I study, read, and reflect to develop my mind so that I can synthesize my efforts across all dimensions of lived experience.

Over time, my decisions have influenced the changes in the roles that I have assumed. For instance, I choose my response to the challenges of daily life. These choices define my self-dialogue, attitude, relationships, and spiritual awareness. In particular, my selection of love over anger as a daily motivator has been a significant decision in my development as a self-authored individual.¹¹ It is a significant turning point. Over time, deliberately choosing love over innate anger has lowered my stress, has brightened my outlook on my future, and has gradually helped develop my deleterious attitude into a more positive demeanor. This is tough for someone mentally ill.

¹¹ Baxter Magolda (2008) links self-authorship to adult learning and (identity) development: "Self-authorship, or the internal capacity to define one's beliefs, identity, and social relations, has emerged in the past 15 years as a developmental capacity that helps meet the challenges of adult life" (p. 269). Furthermore, she suggests that transformational learning fosters critical thinking through reflection and a development of self-authorship through the cultivation of internal voices (Baxter Magolda, 2008). For me, my decision to use love as a motivator was the first primary move down the path where I could be more aligned with my inner voice.

In my professional life, I have chosen to seek cognitive development in myself and others. Critical thinking has become more than a catch phrase; it is the currency of my intellectual life, continuously seeking the networked connections among the gossamer patchwork of knowledge and experience. As an adult educator, I seek this development for my students. To that end, I have tried to incorporate collaborate learning techniques, the avatar-centric narrative of Major Happy to invite mid-career students to their own learning goals, and guest speakers who apply doctrinal concepts in the real world. I believe that innovation in pedagogy leads to the development of creative and critical thinking in generations of students.

As I look back on the river I have just conquered,
It seems beautiful—even peaceful—if not alive.
Walter pulsates against impregnable rocks,
Breaking them into pebbles and sand.

As a result of re-storying my life events over the past three decades, implications for the four audiences of this research have emerged. For the committee, the process of narrative inquiry may represent a welcome change from more traditional qualitative dissertations that have set structures and content expectations.¹² However, the members of the committee and other adult educators may also find insights into their graduate students who struggle with the invisible wounds of mental illness and grief and who often cover these wounds with masks of pride, stoicism, or hypersensitivity. Conversely, adult learners with OCD and associated anxiety disorders, along with their care givers, may see cause to voice their challenges with their mentors. By actively discussing their interpretations of academic, personal, and professional situations with their instructors, adult learners may accrue more advanced knowledge and deeper meaning (Andrews et al., 2001). Additionally, they may narratively learn in informal situations through journaling over time. Voicing concerns that were once muted can empower such marginalized adult learners to break down barriers of stigma in accessing educational resources. In this sense, narrative learning of formerly marginalized learners can create counter narratives for future practices in adult education. Finally, my family members and I can gain a better understanding of how their husband/brother has coped with mental illness to promote healing. They may also learn more about my grandfather's life story and how it has influenced our family over time.

The Story Continues—The Nested Doll

As I think about the times I could have with my grandfather, given what I have experienced to this point in my life story, I imagine he would pass along some sage advice...some Kafkaesque witticism that captures a universal truth about anxiety and identity. After undergoing the process of narrative inquiry, I'm inclined to think—both as a grandson and as the researcher-participant—that he would tell me just one word: Live. At the same time, I imagine him still giving me advice his Russian Jewish mother could have given him through traditional stories. One story could describe how the identity development of possible selves over time replicates, in many respects, the crafting of nested matryoshka dolls. I would retrieve a weathered doll from my cognitive archaeological site and ask him about it....

My matryoshka doll is not like others, but it still illustrates my identity development over time. The outside shell is like other dolls because it looks like me as a fully functioning person in contemporary society. It is the public *I* whom I present to the world every day. It is

¹² Of course, the members may also find embarrassment at the quality of the analysis. Hopefully not!

also a mask (Poulos, 2012) that conceals any ongoing internal change, challenge, or transformation.

Iterative identity development occurs in the under layers. The deeper the layer, the earlier life events and longer-lasting changes are revealed. For example, the penultimate (i.e., most recently completed) layer in my life course is shaped like a soldier. The uniform and rank served as my mask of authority, position, and competence for over a 21-year career.

From a different perspective, the nested doll has three primary layers, all of which are informed by events experienced over my life course. These layers are physical, mental/intellectual, and spiritual; and they represent key elements of my self-concept (see also Maskulak, 2012). The physical nature of the external shell represents what I choose to present the world and others. I keep its patina glossy and strong through a prudent diet and regular exercise. The mental/intellectual facet informs the physical but also is its own phenomenon. I nurture it through reading, study, and writing. Similarly, the innermost spiritual layer informs the other two, but I care for it very differently—often through prayer and compassion. This inner layer could represent my truest, holiest self which is “always present (though often unacknowledged) in the learning environment” because spiritual development consists of “moving toward...a more authentic self” (Tisdell, 2003, p. xi) through other self-fabricated selves across the course of life (Chalmers, 2014; Day, 2011).¹³ Furthermore, each aspect of possible self—physical, mental/intellectual, or spiritual—may have more than one layer of growth. In this context, consider the doll as a living tree-like being, growing in layers over time at different rates. When I grow in holiness by learning new prayer methods or acts of charity, for instance, my spiritual layer may thicken or even form a newer, more interior level to signify this development. A strain or crack in an interior layer will often translate to an external layer, and a strain on the physical layer through illness or suffering can test the strength of the others. Thus, each possible self has a unique function but is interrelated with the others to varying degrees.

Put another way, my self-concept or identity has developed over time through a series of life events, particularly pertaining to transition and challenge. Adversity often comes with innate drama and dilemmas that demand at least partial resolution for growth and development to occur. This is why most of my personal stories highlight life events of shame, regret, and doubt. Adversity has stimulated identity development over my life course. No one single story represents my holistic identity, just as no one layer constitutes my whole nested-doll being. Each layer is informed by and informs the others in unique ways at different places, times, frequencies, and intensities. The fragmented personal narratives represent events in which those layers intersected to varying degrees, evoking growth and learning.

The goal is to synergize these three primary layers so that my actions, words, and thoughts intersect in all three dimensions of my identity. In this context, the layers, which have formed and thickened (or weakened) over time, continuously interact in a transcendental manner. Through reflection, grace, and guidance, my identity continues to develop through time and space in the three-dimensional doll of my self-concept. When I am compassionate to others, am humble in my thinking, and pray to develop a relationship with God, I know I am developing in a positive direction.

¹³ Chalmers (2014), a Carmelite priest, describes the representations of possible selves as the “false self” (p. 41) which individuals must confront and defeat before proceeding in spiritual development toward holiness. For me, these false selves emerge when my emotional responses to life events do not align with holy attitudes toward life. Recent examples of this dissonance include shaking my hand in rage at a driver who cut me off in traffic (i.e., I should be more patient), harboring self-righteous anger at new job obligations (i.e., I should be grateful to have a job), and falling asleep while praying (i.e., I should be alert when conversing with the God whom I behold as a sacred sovereign).

Furthermore, my voice plays a critical role in the expression of identity and self-concept. Archetypal narrators in my personal stories provide a mythical technique and conceptual basis for various voices that I have developed over time (Jung, 1957/1958; see also Dirkx, 2001). These voices fill the voids between the layers of the matryoshka doll, expressing both the positive affect of the masks and the depressing sorrows of the shadows (Bhattacharya & Payne, 2016). Poetry particularly fills the void of the interior spaces and shadows within my multi-layered identity represented by the doll (Bhattacharya, 2013; Boylorn, 2013; Cahnmann, 2003). In short, these voices help comprise an individual who must grow by facing the shadows and by choosing which masks to wear—or not. Perhaps I am ultimately called to scrape away all the built-up, varnished layers of falsities to expose my true, holy self to the world. In this sense, a person has an inner pilgrim, a contemplative, an artist, a storyteller, and/or a scholar at different times to varying degrees. The archetypal narrators in the personal stories represent some possible selves rooted in events I have experienced over my life course. These are key voices and layers in my doll. What are the key voices and layers in yours?

Nested Doll—A Person

Nested doll—a person in layers.
Physical, intellectual, spiritual;
enveloped within each other—
identity develops over time.
Matryoshka: public mask; physical *I*,
concealing invisible wounds and
weaknesses we choose to reveal.

Identity transforms internally;
deeper layers, earlier life events.
External masks are physical;
diet and exercise their patina.
Inside is mental, intellectual;
reading, study, writing fostered.
Closest to the heart is spirit;
prayer sets the bridge to God
over the river of life.

Each possible self is unique;
fate tied to neighbors
in either direction. Healing
exposes my true, holy self.

My doll grows over time and events.
Flourishes in adversity:
transition, challenge, doubt, grief.
Reflection, grace, guidance develop
compassion for others, humility;
prayer with God.

Archetypes voice poems between shells;
fragmented aspects of ever-changing
self-concepts. Possible selves whisper,

narrated over a life course,
 nested in a layered menagerie.

The old rabbi asks, “Is this God’s way?
 What if this is all there is?”
 I have fallen in the muddy trails,
 but have gotten up to continue the journey.
 I look back to learn where I have been
 and where I may go. But
 as long as I have God, I know I
 need nothing else.

As I look back on the river I have just conquered,
 it seems beautiful—even peaceful—if not alive.
 Walter pulsates against impregnable rocks,
 breaking them into pebbles and sand.
 Earthen aromas penetrate with hints of
 hope, anticipation, and fear.
 Shadows once muted by anxiety stand by,
 now soothing reminders of my limits.

The sun rises on the next chapter,
 illuminating the new layers of the doll
 as the crisp, dry air bathes my lungs....

Adult humans tend to spend so much energy on those events they convince themselves are causes of their victimization, stigmatization, and marginalization. Perhaps an emergent truth is that, rather than play to the resultant anxiety, they should embrace these disorders, griefs, and shadows by discarding their protective masks to live the lives we are all called to. I, as the researcher-participant, now realize I must embrace OCD, the deaths of my parents, the perceived affronts to my self-righteousness, and spiritual darkness as milestones on a sacred path of continued transformation.

A Way Ahead

When reviewed in context of this research project, the initial questions pertaining to my identity development seem somewhat parochial and short-sighted. While the analysis and representation have addressed the research questions pertaining to life events (Question #1) and possible selves (Question #2) throughout my life course, the complexity of each individual’s shadowed life begs further inquiry into the nature of adult learning and development.

Indeed, rather than merely consider implications for my own life in terms of coping with mental illness and grief, I ponder how this research can benefit other citizens or social groups for their life spans. What is the way ahead, given the transcendental nature of this journey of meaning, feedback from familial reactions, and my current epistemic situation? How do the voices expressed in this bildungsroman speak to adult learning and development? How can the audiences of this research apply those unmuted voices as senses of meaning to benefit others? The audiences and future researchers must answer these questions within their own situated contexts; but the following reflections respond to these inquiries by considering three elements of my fragmented bildungsroman: its nature, its message, and its call to action.

Crafting an autoethnographic study can seem like stitching together disparate puzzle pieces into a single mosaic. The researcher-participant at first has a myopic perception of the raw data, striving to see how they individually fit into a broader context. As he/she continues the process of iteratively interrogating and analyzing the data, the interwoven thread gradually is revealed: him/herself. This revelation can be a challenge for the researcher who must address the inner critique of navel gazing. As a result of this journey, the researcher-participant can represent the data in a cogent narrative that connects more dots, addresses some mysteries, and fulfills certain urges to learn and heal. More importantly, other audiences can now generate insights by entering into the once-fragmented, re-storied narrative, and construct their own meanings (Barone & Eisner, 2012).

The voices of the multiple possible selves expressed in this autoethnography speak to adult learning and development through the bildungsroman construct. As a narrative of a person's identity development over his life span, this bildungsroman not only has documented key life events in my development but has also attached a voice to their meanings. It has given me, as an adult learner with OCD, the courage to commit to continued development despite insidious doubts and anxiety. For example, discerning emergent themes from data sorting has enabled me to re-story related life events from episodic memories (i.e., 10 discrete personal stories listed in Table 2) into a continuous—albeit fragmented—narrative in which I have a better sense of my identity in relation to my wife, grandfather, parents, brother, colleagues, and even my mental disorder. The process has demanded patience and perseverance from me as a researcher and as a participant. Despite the invisibility of many of my shadows, the increased awareness of how they have affected me over time has facilitated my identity development. I am grateful for that gift of understanding.

Finale

This bildungsroman has provided me an opportunity to establish a way ahead, develop my unique voice, and insight into how to apply these lessons learned. The journey of autoethnographic inquiry has not been straight, and the winding paths have led me in unexpected directions but never to dead ends. There have been a few switch backs in which I have had to reconsider former life events from new perspectives. But I have realized that the developmental journey continues—it must continue. While some fragments of my narrative have congealed, others remain apart. That's OK. In this resulting aura of calm and fulfillment, I revisit the poetic introduction from the Prologue and refashion it as a broader spiritual reflection of social mindfulness in identity development. My italicized inner voice helps to illuminate some shadows:

My nested doll is layered, chipped, with dark spaces in between....

But I constructed it by my free will.

When I dream, I ponder uncertainty and wo/ander

how I can embrace it more.

What I should have told Mom & Dad before they died 8 months apart...

doesn't matter because I can still show them my love and thanks.

Why I have uncommanded thoughts that I must share with my wife...

I still control my attitude and choices.

Fear telling others about mental illness because of social stigma, so
So what? They don't have to live with the consequences of not seeking help.

I wear a mask of professional aloofness to fit in—then realize...
masks don't heal; be patient, for transformation is gradual.

My voice has been muted but I cannot cope alone.
So, I must speak out for others to listen.

Who can mentor me along the path to spiritual maturity & peace
God through a contemplative stance in daily life.

And fulfill God's will for me? What is that path, and
God will show me because He is part of my social reality.

How can I navigate through its shadows?
Shadows are tools for development.

My soul casts the darkest shadow.
If I let it. Light is needed to cast a shadow.

How do I know if I am on the right path?
*Who does? Look back and see how good the path
 has been all along.*

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