

Writing a New Story

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Love Letters

Autoethnography can be understood as an emancipatory process. In my autoethnographic work I include my letter to my birthmother and her response that followed. Our letters bear testimony to our shared vulnerabilities stemming from our separation at my birth. Our penned exchanges opened up the possibility for reunion. Our letters were portals for transformation.

Andrew Solomon addresses the question of children that are different from their parents in “Far From The Tree” (Solomon, 2012). He tells stories of adopted children, handicapped children, and homosexual children. He writes, “Children whose defining quality annihilates that fantasy of immortality are a particular insult; we must love them for themselves, and not for the best of ourselves in them, and that is a great deal harder to do. Loving our children is an exercise for the imagination” (Solomon, 2012: 1). As an adopted child, I myself fell far from the tree. I was not like my adopted parents who learned to love me in spite of the fact that I would not carry their genetic heritage forward. Nor was I like my birth family. After our reunion, we all had to face the unlikeness that my upbringing had nurtured. But by truly listening to each other’s stories with heartfelt compassion, we transcended the differences that challenged us. Love does triumph.

In that first letter to my birthmother, I presented myself and asked to connect. I expressed my love and desire to meet her. My letter opened a pathway of communication and eventually reunion. Through that letter, I allowed myself to be exposed and possibly rejected. I re-connected with my birth parents through a ‘love letter’ written on paper ingrained with the hope that we would somehow reunite. That first autoethnographic artifact painted a portrait of my identity. The letter was a mediating artifact that eventually gave rise to a new relational world for my families and me. Our letter exchanges were a kind of liminal space: a sacred space where our vulnerability took us to the threshold of relational transformation. Our family letters were emancipatory narrative expressions that like the magic closet door in Narnia, revealed a gateway to new relational worlds.

Caroline Short, a young multiple handicapped adult, has recently used facilitated communication working with her mother to recount her own life story (Short, 2012). Her

story is co-written with her mother and other facilitators. Their joint venture is an example of heartfelt expression. Caroline and her mother use a tool to tell their story. Caroline refers to herself as in-valid and those without handicaps as valid. She describes the painful regard of those who see her handicap compared to the loving regard of her parents. She also explains her perceptions of others as forms and colors. She sees facilitated communication as a space offering her the possibility to share and co-create.

I ask you to visualize yet another kind of love letter; that of a homosexual son writing to ask for his father's acceptance of this newly revealed facet of his identity. In the liminal space where his vulnerability is exposed, the son transforms the family relationships, breaking down the normalizing barriers between gays and heterosexuals. This way of the heart elicits a different kind of response: a healing conversation. Solomon writes, "All people are both the objects and perpetrators of prejudice. Our understanding of the prejudice directed against us informs our response to others" (Solomon, 2012: 18).

The Encyclical Letter *Laudato SI'* of the Holy Father Francis On Care For Our Common Home (Francis: 2015) articulates his love for all forms of life. Pope Francis has written a new narrative, challenging our philosophical positions that have objectified our mother earth, allowing us to pollute, consume, and destroy life at a rapid rate. Pope Francis has reached out to the universal community through his letter, proposing a new narrative and 'A Culture of Care'.

Liminal Space: Between the Old Story and the New Story

Referring to Thomas Berry's book "The Dream of the Earth", I would like to explore how his chapter entitled, "The New Story", and my narrative work to be published in 2017, "Transmission: Passing on the Golden Pocket Watch", dovetail, creating a liminal space for both self transformation and 'earthship'. As humanity integrates the fact that we are in the 6th phase of extinction, we are becoming aware of the vulnerability of many species. Dreaming, imagining and visioning are part of the integral transformative process, taking the mind's eye to new places where new worlds can come into being. Will a new story allow us to survive? Thomas Berry writes, "It's all a question of story. We are in trouble just now because we do not have a good story. We are in between stories, The old story, the account of how the world came to be and how we fit into it, is no longer effective. Yet we have not learned the new story" (Berry, 2015: 123).

Autoethnography is a self-transforming process that allows the penman to write into life an authored self. This authored self takes form on paper, in an encounter that is a kind of daily or weekly meeting point of self-discovery. When we write we are grounded in our cultural roots and languages. I dared to tell my story and face exposedness, taking the risk of being either rejected or embraced. My life is the poem that I am endeavoring to write. John Shotter speaks of social poetics, describing how language and storytelling create ‘shared understandings’. My own narrative account about finding my birth parents has a chapter entitled ‘Liminal Space’:

“The space we make in our heart to receive and care for the other transforms our mind-body and our family circle’s configuration, as we expand our circle of caring. Adopted children often arrive at that crossing between the infertility of their adopted family and the responsibility that their birth family cannot assume. It is a place that is in-between. In anthropology, the term liminality might best describe that place in between families that the adopted child occupies: born and waiting to be adopted. The adopted child stands in the threshold before he or she passes by the adoption ritual into a new family. During this liminal period, the family, social hierarchy is dissolved and the continuity of biological kinship becomes uncertain. The future outcome of a child in this position is unclear, as is their lineage continuity. The social outcomes that may have been taken for granted and attributed by the child’s birth parent’s status are also uncertain and the child’s future is momentarily thrown into doubt.

I was in foster care for four months until it was certain that I didn’t have any physical defects. I learned only recently in a healing conversation with my adopted mother that she and my father were very clear during the interviewing process that they only wanted a “perfect child”. A part of me seemed to somehow know that. I become more distraught when I am not “perfect”. When I am injured I worry about the consequences of not being physically strong, and the rejection that can ensue. As a foster baby, I lived in a liminal space emerging as the “perfect baby”, ready to be adopted. This aspect is possibly at the root of my psychic scar. The adopted child is less of a subject than a child that is born into a family. The adopted child becomes objectified through the adoption process. In some cases, there is even an exchange of money in order to receive a child.

I have had to learn to fit into my different families. I fear rejection of my imperfections, my broken parts, and any dis-ease I may have. I long for unconditional acceptance. I know that children need a strong family to protect them. Nancy Verrier speaks of the “primal wound” to describe the pain of adopted children who are separated at birth from their birth mother.

Within liminal space is wiggle room to time-shape. There is an opening action in the telling of our life stories. In this open space of story-telling, new backgrounds can be configured with wordings that transform relations, shift shaping the future. The kaleidoscope rearranges the forms and colors, creating new designs. Being in-between allows for new unfolding landscapes to arise. Kinship and liminal space are key anthropological concepts. While kinship contains our belongings, liminal space can be used as a portal of transformation. In this way, my grandfather’s Goldent Pocket Watch represents transformed shared belonging: transmitting time-shape ‘a holistic getting later of everything together’ (Shotter: 1995). In French, the expression ‘entre nous’ is a grammatical metaphor describing that, which is shared between us. This relational space provides new ways of being in the world, opening wiggle room where new relational worlds can be engendered”.

Manumitting: Using Narrative as a Tool for Emancipation

The emancipatory power of narrative transfigures identity, revising the stories we live by. My letter to my birthmother, Carole Short’s facilitated communication, the anonymous letter of a homosexual son, and Laudato SI’ are examples of emancipatory narrative expressions, engendering personal agency and relational transformation in a liminal space where the individual and collective are entangled.

Intertwined time-scales can be analyzed in relation to life-long learning and life narratives.

“Epigenetic processes are the only ones accessible to our conscious experience. Evolutionary changes proceed at another-and usually much slower-rate (Alhadeff-Jones, 2017: 24).

The emancipatory processes linking self and society engender transformation that is experienced in different relational understandings. “Emancipation is conceived through the fluidity that defines both its aim (between autonomy and independence) and the nature of the changes it may carry (between ongoing process and steady state) (Alhadeff-Jones, 2017: 9).

Even our scientific concepts can be understood as scientific narratives that influence the unfolding human story by situating us physically and morally. Epigenetics has changed the

nature/nurture debate by bringing forward a new scientific paradigm. The terminologies used open up portals of shared understanding that influence how we are in the world. ‘Biosocial becomings’ is a new concept developed by Ingold and Palsson in 2013. It is a metaphor referring to comingled biological and social signatures. Our entangled selves include our malleable epigenome. “In this era of the Anthropocene, we are destroying local mileux beyond recognition, very often in the pecuniary interest of the few, while millions of individuals are left to survive in environments in which all semblance of a sustainable nature has been destroyed” (Locke and Palsson, 2017: 157-158). The shape-shifting nature of our epigenetic self, passing on the epigenome to future generations, transforms how we understand our shared becomingness. This transformed perception is fundamental in our individual and communal ‘entre-nous’. As an adopted child that has gone through the process of re-connecting with my birth parents, the nature/nurture debate and the epigenetic paradigm have been central in my questing for understanding and to ‘know myself’. Transmission has become a major theme in my autoethnographic writing.

Incorporating the Epigenetic Paradigm

Epigenetics theory purports that our environment and our perceptions transform our DNA, telling a new story that can in-form humanity. Returning to the transformational process inherent in autoethnography, where words express perceptions, the storying process grounds the authored self. When we individually and collectively tell our stories, we envision a path forward, the words of our creative writing are the foundations for the journey we prepare ourselves for, imagining flourishing futures. “We create a love story when we write. For many of us writing is a way of life, as important as breathing. We need to write in order to exist, to live expansively, and to be our most creative and fulfilled selves... We move through all that has come before and toward that which is yet to come: We go toward what we focus on, as our teachers remind us” (Adkins and Breed, 2013: 128). When we invest in our stories, as a way of life and a calling, we generate creative energy that can be used for relational transformation. The daily process of writing engenders a transfigured self by finding new expressions in the landscape of our imaginations. Adkins and Breed’s work shares their experience in writing communities (Adkins and Breed, 2013). They speak of the importance of knowing oneself and encourage writers to form community groups to enhance the writing process.

I wrote about my own transformative experience, sharing my writing with my families, in healing conversations that brought about relational transformation in my life. I asked them to participate in the narration process by adding their insights:

“In reunion stories, letters exchanged between children and parents are mediating artifacts. Self-transformation occurs during embodied lifestorying. Agency inherent within the process transforms relationships, initiating healing conversations. The reflexive and dialogical space narrative inquiry creates enkindles social action. Awe and epiphany elicit a form of engaged authorship, where narrative performance inspires relational responsibility. What we receive and what we pass on make-up intertwined patterns of a never-ending storyline, giving rise to story as legacy”.

In another section of my manuscript I describe the path under my feet:

“My story speaks of relational maps, following guidance, blazing trails, and building bridges. This cartography process, pinpointing the landmarks of my life, allowed me to find my way. My map has expanded, becoming a round globe. The relational terrain of my friendships and family ties has been a wonderful playground of adventure. The motivation to live and to love has incessantly fueled my personal quest. At times, I have felt called by a voice I could barely hear, yet a voice that was able to direct my feet along the path. I love to run and I often run on a mountain path that is like an old friend that I look forward to meeting. My feet know the terrain and I enjoy the turns in the path that offer new views of the mountains and smells from the changing flowers and trees that border the narrow trail cut out on the mountainside with an ancient irrigation system bringing water to the alpine pastures in my region. Running gives me balance. It is a form of meditation for me. As I run, I integrate the thoughts racing through my head. I get inspiration for my writing and clarity about the issues facing me”.

Aspiring to a Culture of Care

Love letters have a form that transcends other forms. It is this vulnerable space that normative barriers can fall, revealing the beauty of self-expression. When we write, we are often calling for someone to read us. For example, a love letter elicits a heartfelt response from a loved one. When I wrote my letter to my birthmother, I was reaching out to her and asking her to respond. I was inviting her to be in relationship with me. When Pope Francis writes to us in his letter *On Care for The Commons*, he is inviting us to transform our relationship in a new form of fellowship englobing earthship. His call to embrace a culture of care is joined by others in the academic world. Arthur Kleinman has a vision of a new social social science

with a transformed aspiration to be a caregiving and world changing activity (Wilkinson and Kleinman, 2016). Kleinman's first work introduced the notion of illness narratives using questions to elicit patient perceptions in relation to their illnesses. His work over the years has documented human suffering, leading him to take a position on the lived experience of care. Can the social sciences share their hope for humanity through knowledge leading to careful action? This new pursuit to transform social suffering, moves the focus from analysis to caretaking.

"Journey of the Universe: The Unfolding of Life" by Mary Evelyn Tucker and Brian Thomas Swimme (2011) is both a book and a movie tell the story of the universe while exposing the ecological and social challenges that humanity is currently facing. Their work and teachings invite us to envision a future of flourishing world communities. They inspire hope for a way for earth and humans to go forward together. They have joined in the process of writing a new story. Their transformational process builds upon Thomas Berry's work, using his writings as a foundation. They propose a book and film that documents the unfolding of life in a narrative that invites others to enter into a new relationship, or new story-where worldlings are invited to enter into earthship.

Transmission: The Gifting Process

As my own narrative unfolded, it became clear that it was less and less about me and more and more about my children and future generations: "The Golden Pocket Watch signifies the gift that I received from my adopted family and the link between generations. Its signification is more than the gift that was bequeathed, it encompasses the debt that I have to those who came before me, and therefore my loyalty to them. The Golden Pocket Watch links me not only to my ancestors, but also to my descendants, symbolizing the responsibility that I have to future generations. The transmission of the Golden Pocket Watch binds generations through the gifting process while at the same time offering recognition to its beholder. It is a time-keeper.

We receive life and numerous other gifts from our parents; however, we may regret what they were not able to give to us. As adults, we are called to fill the emptiness resulting from what we may have expected from our parents and what they were not able to offer us. Becoming whole involves weaving the strands of our origins into a strong rope that can bind generations, establishing filiations and parentage. Our family story is transformed as we take

responsibility for our relations and multiple belongings. We can open to a dialogue with life and the living with mutual recognition, co-constructing narrative identity that can endure changes and the test of time”.

Narrative transformation can be experienced through love letters, autoethnography, as well as larger universal stories. Even the words and expressions used to communicate our scientific concepts engender new forms of relating and understanding, affecting the expression of our DNA and the transmission of life forms through complex processes of transmission. The questing process involves looking into the discourses that we individually live by and relating them to our larger cultural narratives. Our collective emancipation depends upon our capacity to question who we are and our relationships, especially when faced with daunting scientific proof that our increased human presence on the planet has brought us to the 6th phase of extinction and a new geological phase known as Anthropocene, where human activity has been the dominant influence on climate and environment.

Heartfelt Belonging Through Time

In my autoethnographic work I conclude by saying, “When I willfully began the search I ignited a strong intention that resonated throughout the matrix of my relations. A pathway was forged, with a trail marked by synchronicity and serendipitous happenings. Finding my birth family reinforced my ability to quest. The bliss of reunion has enkindled a heartfelt desire to unite with kindred spirits and co-create, making kinship, doing research, and performing social innovation. I have been writing to transform my relations. I have embarked upon my journey as a re-researcher writing and sharing what I know. This autoethnographic quest, has allowed for self-transformation in an ongoing process to know myself and discover the ways of God, so that I can work in partnership with the divine, manifesting the miracle of reunion, and passing on the ‘Golden Pocket Watch’.”

We are all children of the earth. Our joint action to collectively imagine a culture of care, becoming caregivers and caretakers, is the hope of the future for our shared commons; our home. Pope Francis invites us to embrace an integral ecology through love, entering into the heart of what makes us human. His letter is an invitation. Our individual and collective response will determine what will be passed on to future generations.

Epigenetics, understandings of kinship and belonging, as well as our cultural narratives will all in-form the future, implicating us in a relational responsibility to act for our descendants. Writing to transform our relations allows us to participate in the storying process, transforming our own life stories as well as engendering collective emancipation. Dancing into the future, we live in rhymed lyrics and rhythmic discourses that move us through intertwined levels of expression. “The life narrative of a young adult is then interpreted to illustrate three rhythmic features of emancipation: the singular biographical movement through which one learns to relate to transgression; the periodicity of activities expressed, either as alienating or liberating; and the patterns of transgression and the strategies developed to accommodate the temporal constraints that rhythm one’s life” (Alhadeff-Jones, 2017: 10). The symbolic nature of the ‘Golden Pocket Watch,’ as a transitional object alluding to divine timing as well as the notion of being watched over, allows me to break through the constraints of time and space by using metaphor. My life story tells the tale of synchronicity and reunion, punctuating a happy ending. I followed a golden thread through the labyrinth that led me to my birth family, transforming the matrix of my relations. The golden thread of life passes through us like a tramway of decoded information that gives rise to new emerging forms of life and patterned networks (Dessalles et al., 2016). As the adopted child searching for her birth parents, I connected with humanity’s archetypal search for our shared origins. My experience reinforces the belief that in our questing to better understand where we come from, we enhance our capacity to navigate our future becomingness. From a mystical perspective Teilhard de Chardin wrote:

“Let us establish ourselves in the divine *milieu*. There we shall find ourselves where the soul is most deep and where matter is most dense. There we shall discover, where all its beauties flow together, the ultra-vital, the ultra-sensitive, the ultra-active point of the universe. And, at the same time, we shall feel the *plentitude* of our powers of action and adoration effortlessly ordered within our deepest selves” (De Chardin, 1960: 115).

Aging can be understood as a motivation for narrative elaboration. As we age our stories unfold in a changing body where biography and biology are intertwined. We ‘lifescape’ in more conscious ways when we understand the importance of epigenetics, more carefully cultivating well-being. As we learn to grow older, our capacity to reflect on our narratives guides our unfolding life course. “As the story of my life grows longer and thicker with time, so does the necessity of submitting it to a serious—aesthetic—reading” (Randall and McKim, 2008: 128). How we read our lives is indeed part of the emancipatory process. The social

poetics inherent in autoethnographic writing has the potential of reinforcing the ‘entre-nous’ through healing conversations. The penman creates a space, or *mileu*, manumitting our shared destinies. Our dialogical relationships may indeed shape our surroundings, giving form to our future. Writing a new story shapeshifts our embodied expressions through time, interlacing the personal and collective. In this sense, our ‘life-o-grams’ may possibly influence the face of the earth.

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