The Ethnographic, the Reflective, and the Uncanny
Three "Tellings" of Autobiography

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Adult learners who write their life story embark on a process of personal self-reflection and meaning making. Some of their narratives center and remain on the detailing of life events. Other writing goes further, associating feelings and emotions that lead to additional exploration and reflection. Other writing goes still further, uncovering experiences and emotional states, previously unspoken, perhaps even incomprehensible. Each has its benefit for the writer and for the reader, but it appears that when writers move into the reflective mode, and even further into exploring the "uncanny" aspects of their life, the major benefits of autobiographical writing surface as a profound, even transformative, learning experience. In this article, the author examines selected autobiographies written by adult learners in adult and higher education studies and considers the significance of each of these "tellings" in promoting student growth and development.

Keywords: *adult learning; adult development; autobiography; narrative; transformative learning*

> When we tell stories about our lives, the point is to make our lives not only more intelligible, but also more bearable.
>
> —H. B. Nielsen (1999, p. 50)

Adult learners who write their life stories embark on a process of personal self-reflection, self-definition, and meaning making that can transform their view of self and the world (Dominicé, 2000; Gornick, 2001). Some of their narratives center and remain on the ethnographic detailing of life situations and events. Other writing goes further, surfacing associated feelings that lead to additional exploration and reflection. Other writing goes still further, uncovering experiences and emotions previously unspoken, inaccessible, incomprehensible, even "uncanny." From the perspective of learning, each has its benefit for the writer and for the reader; but it appears that in the latter two efforts—the reflective and

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the uncanny—lie the major benefits of autobiographical writing as profound learning experiences, possibly even the transformation of one's perspective of self and the world.

For the past 7 years, I have included for my graduate students in adult learning and development courses the option of writing their life story as their final (elective) assignment. What began as an innocent experiment quickly emerged as a powerful learning tool. The assignment was fairly straightforward. "Imagine that a publisher has asked you to write five chapters of your life story. Complete two to three pages for each chapter and write a title for each." (See the appendix for the guidelines.) I was surprised and delighted by their humor, sensitivity, emotion, and wit, elements so notably absent from their more formal writing assignments. I was amazed by the challenges, hardships, and tragic events that students shared but that rarely surfaced during normal class activities.

As I read through their narratives at the end of each course, I had a greater appreciation of both the students and their course-related work. Still, I wondered how this assignment might have affected them. What might they have gained by writing their stories? And having become known to me, had they also become known to themselves? What guidelines and structures could I provide to encourage a deeper exploration that might yield additional insights? And finally, within an educational context, how could I characterize their autobiographical writing as an incident of personal learning?

In a recent volume by psychoanalytic theorist and educator Deborah Britzman (1998), I detected a framework through which to address these concerns. Britzman examined autobiographical writing as a method for the advancement of self-knowledge. She suggested three ways of telling one's story, in three "dimensions of time"—the ethnographic (where the focus is on detail), the reflective (where the focus is on the tension or anxiety), and the uncanny (described by Britzman as "the force of secret"). Each way of "telling" reveals progressively something more. Hence, the uncanny, or deepest level of telling, she asserted, is the source of greatest change. To excavate the uncanny, that which has been buried and lost, is to learn and to heal. Britzman's work led me back to the narratives I had collected over the years and to the follow-up personal interviews I had conducted with one group of writers. I then analyzed these through the framework of the three tellings to understand the extent to which personal learning arises from autobiographical writing. In this article, I examine a range of autobiographies written by adult learners in higher education studies and the significance of these respective "tellings" in promoting student growth and development.

Theoretical Propositions

AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND ADULT LEARNING

The first recorded autobiography is said to be St. Augustine's fifth century memoir, *Confessions*, which described his conversion to Christianity. Predating

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fiction, the memoir was also used by women throughout the Medieval period to record personal relationships with others and with God (Conroy, 1999). It later developed among writers into a self-analysis, now related less to sin and transgression and more to intimacy, emotion, and self-understanding (Felski, 1998). Since then, literary figures and famous people have used the autobiography to record their lives, oftentimes to justify their decisions, choices, and behavior.

Since the 1950s, scholarly interest in autobiography has grown within the field of literary theory as well as in other disciplines (Gullestad, 1996). Among the literary theorists, Olney (1980) and Randall (1995) examined autobiography from the perspective of psychological development. Smith and Watson (1996, 1998) have compiled edited collections of feminist literary analysis. Josselson and Lieblich (1999) have advanced autobiography as a source for narrative research. In education, Dominicé (2000) has employed educational biography in adult education, and Witherell and Noddings (1991) have examined story and narrative as primary tools in the work of both teachers and counselors. In an insightful article written 20 years ago, Catherine Warren (1982) noted the important and emerging role of life history in adult education and commented on its potential for enlarging our understanding of the lives of adults. More recently, Marsha Rossiter (1999) explored self-narrative in relation to adult development and demonstrated how writing our story can lead adults not only to reflect on and interpret their life but also to change it.

In autobiography, life is transformed into a story. As Gusdorf (1980) explained, "The author of an autobiography gives himself the job of narrating his own history; what he sets out to do is to reassemble the scattered elements of his individual life and to regroup them in a comprehensive sketch" (p. 35). Autobiographical writing requires distancing oneself to draw meaning from one's life (Gusdorf, 1980), reconstructing "the unity of a life across time" (Gusdorf, 1980, p. 37), and finding the "larger story" that distinguishes one's life from another (Houston, 1987). Olney (1980) noted that when we write about our life, through the course of examining its metaphors and historical threads and in connecting events historically, we find patterns and meaning in our life. Having stepped back and reflected, we know something now that we did not know before.

ADULT AND TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

Recent adult learning theory has focused on adults' capacity for transformative learning with respect to how they change and how they adapt to or challenge their circumstances. This learning permits a more inclusive, differentiated, and integrated view of oneself and the world (Mezirow, 1991; Tennant & Pogson, 1995). A central feature of transformative learning is critical self-reflection, a process whereby adults examine cultural and individual assumptions and meanings that underlie and shape their view of life (Brookfield, 1986; Mezirow, 1991). Whereas critical reflection calls largely on the learner's rational processes (Mezirow, 1991), it also includes both intuitive and emotional dimensions (Dewey, 1964; Schon, 1983). Dewey (1964) powerfully illuminated the qualities

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that constitute a transformative experience. These include the individual's "falling out of step," the presence of discord and emotion, the effort to bring form and meaning to the experience, and, finally, the fulfillment and integration of the experience into the individual's life.

All education presupposes some sort of change, progress, betterment, or advancement (Britzman, 1998). Writing in the psychoanalytic tradition, Britzman (1998) suggested that "the work of learning is not so much an accumulation of knowledge but a means for the human to use knowledge, to craft and alter itself" (p. 4). Borrowing from Sigmund Freud, Britzman made a distinction between two kinds of learning: learning *that* and learning *from*. Learning *that*, in relation to an event or experience, focuses on the acquisition of qualities, attributes, and facts, and it presupposes some distance or detachment between the learner and what is to be learned. In contrast, learning *from* an event or experience by its nature demands the emotional engagement and attachment of the learner to the knowledge. It leads to insight.

Britzman (1998) would seem to suggest that within an educational context, autobiographical writing can further the individual's growth and development by learning "of the self's relation to its own otherness and the self's relation to the other's otherness" (p. 134). It could also be argued that life writing constitutes learning *from* an event or experience, and in this case the event or experience is the writer's own life. But what happens in autobiography when the subject of knowledge, the writer, meets the object of knowledge, the writer's own life history? Through this encounter, what insights emerge, what shifts occur? And finally, how and to what extent can learners use autobiography—the knowledge of self—to craft and alter themselves?

HUMAN CONSCIOUSNESS

A further line of relevant theory and inquiry resides in neuroscience and cognitive psychology and, in particular, the work of Antonio Damasio (1999). Based on years of controlled experiments with patients, Damasio provided insights into the growth of consciousness, which he defines as the awareness of the organism of its own self and surroundings and, more significantly, as the capacity to know joy, grief, suffering, pleasure, and pride. Through consciousness, "we become known to ourselves" (p. 315).

Damasio (1999) distinguished between two kinds of consciousness: core consciousness and extended consciousness. Core consciousness provides the organism with a sense of the here and now, the sights, sounds, and feelings of the moment. But it is the latter, extended consciousness, built on the foundation of core consciousness, that provides the more elaborate, complex sense of identity, both past, present, and anticipated future, as well as this identity in relation to others over the entire life of an individual. According to Damasio, consciousness develops when the individual constructs knowledge about two facts: that the individual is having an experience in relation to an object and that this experience is changing the individual in some way.

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Damasio's (1999) work has particular significance to autobiography. The autobiographical self is the "organized record" of our life: our place of birth, our needs and desires, our typical way of coping. Damasio explained,

> When we talk about the self in order to refer to the unique dignity of a human being, . . . to refer to the places and people that shaped our lives and that we describe as belonging to us and as living in us, we are talking, of course, about the autobiographical self. (p. 229)

Through its reactivation and display of the systemized memories of situations and events of that life, the autobiographical self serves extended consciousness as it evolves over the lifetime. It would follow that writing the life story—bringing events and experiences to awareness and composing them as a narrative—would serve both the autobiographical self and consciousness.

On the basis of these theoretical propositions, a connection between autobiography, learning, and consciousness can be made. Through the course of writing our life, we translate our memory into the form of narrative. We become aware of the relationship between ourselves and others, among events past and present, and thus compose the autobiographical self. This sort of knowledge is a learning *from* life events, relationships, and experiences, which leads to self-awareness and insight. It is significant that both Damasio (1999), a neuroscientist referring to consciousness, and Ellerby (2001), a literary theorist referring to autobiography, describe each, respectively, as the process of "stepping into the light." And by this metaphor, they affirm the connection of writing our story to that of becoming conscious.

Methodology

I have been collecting student autobiographies, written during my classes, for 7 years. After the courses are completed, and working in accordance with the guidelines of the University institutional review board, I have invited students in my class on adult learning and development to participate in my autobiography research. If willing, they are asked to resubmit their papers for this purpose. For one particular group of writers, I invited them, in addition, to participate in a personal interview 6 months after they had written their narratives. Of the original 20 students, 15 were available and willing to be interviewed. Through taped interviews, I explored the process and effects of their autobiographical writing. Among the questions asked were the following: For whom was your autobiography written? What were the most enjoyable and what were the most difficult parts of the process? What, if anything, did you learn from the autobiography? On the basis of the narratives and interview data, major themes concerning both the experience of writing and uses of the writing were analyzed and described. They are reported in two earlier articles (Karpiak, 2000a, 2000b).

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For this article, I draw my data from these same two sources of material—the narratives I have been collecting and the interviews with one group of writers. However, for the purposes of my analysis, I apply Britzman's (1998) theoretical framework as a template through which I examine one life story at the time, as an extended case. The particular writings were selected on the basis of their illustrating the varieties of style in the various tellings of autobiography. On the basis of Britzman's view that each progressive telling of one's autobiography takes one deeper into the memories, deeper into the emotion, conflict, and anxiety, I explore the learning and growth of consciousness that can arise through each respective telling—ethnographic, reflective, and uncanny.

Findings: The Three Tellings

THE ETHNOGRAPHIC TELLING

The ethnographic telling centers on the detail, on the apparent, of events—the individual enters school, the family moves to a new location. In this telling, according to Britzman (1998), the events are told in sequence and described. She adds that in this telling, the writer is aware of the danger of going too deep, of exploring too much of the detail. Turning to the students' autobiographies, it was the ethnographic, the place of detail, that held the richness of their stories, opening their narrative and setting the stage for what was to come. Their stories abounded with such detail—the first house, the first day in school, the first love. This profusion of detail alerted me to the contrast between this kind of writing and the students' more formal assignments. As an instance of this richness and creativity, one writer opens her narrative, "A Life Well Pieced," with this commentary on the threads and pieces that both contained and centered her family.

> A strange conglomeration of patterns, stitches and hues pieced together to provide comfort, warmth and security. Such were the quilts produced by my ancestors and passed on to each generation. The quilts were used to teach practical skills in the needle arts as Grandma quietly repeated lessons learned during her lifetime, family history and wisdom of a life well lived. These quilts, these pieces of art, pieces of lives, were used to instill a sense of community in the Quilting Bees held throughout the year. At 50, as I review my life (lessons learned, achievements, disappointments and regrets) I think in terms of these patchwork pieces amassed to represent my life.

The ethnographic revealed itself through the humor, the evocative metaphors, and the recounting of their lives that now permitted me a glimpse into the storehouse of material concerning adult learners—the highs, the lows, and the episodes of learning and of not learning. It revealed itself in other ways, too: through the spirited language of introducing and describing self and others; in their naming of their chapters, thereby giving shape to their life stories; and in their summing up of their present perspective on their life and identity through

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their choice of overall autobiography title, among these being, "Through My Goggles," "A Voice of One Calling in the Desert!" and "Spanish Blood, American Life."

At times, their humor presented itself with the very first sentence. One writer opened his life with these words:

> It was a very close race. In fact, we were neck and neck for several months, but in the end, my twin sister was born into this world before me. With a mere six minutes between us, I was forever labeled the last of six children.

Another writer, who grew up in Puerto Rico, instructed the reader on a critical life skill learned from his beloved grandmother: "First, you have to pick out the chicken you want, then get a long string and tie it into a lasso." One woman recalled being born prematurely and summarily "popped" into the incubator, and another, having moved out of her parents' home, bemoaned the absence of the "magic laundry basket" that seemingly emptied itself.

Whereas some writers described events and experiences, difficult choices, and taking action, other writers recounted life events, people, and places in a decidedly factual, chronological manner, maintaining a distance from any associated emotions. The following case study of Gail illustrates the ethnographic telling that, consistent with Britzman's (1998) observation, appears to evade the tension and emotion that would be associated with "learning *from*" her own story.

Gail's Story

The theme of Gail's narrative centers on the metaphor of "Painting the Adult Canvas." Throughout her five chapters, she highlights the brushstrokes that represent signal events and life transitions—from the time she is 13 during the breakup of her parents' marriage, to the birth of her son when she was still unmarried and barely 16, to the present time when she is remarried, happily settled into a career, pursuing higher education, and experiencing a sense of her own integration and peace. Gail's narrative telling illustrates the ethnographic in its focus on objectivity and corresponding avoidance of emotion. In the course of her narrative, she connects her experiences at each age and transition to the various stages of development discussed in the class, revealing events in a factual manner, sidestepping any threat, pain, and anxiety.

Gail's narrative appears to reflect two kinds of learning: the technical and the rational. In her follow-up interview, she maintains her focus on the technical aspects of the writing—how she worked to find the required theme and to have the words come out right. The rational is expressed in her new and deepened understanding of adult development theories and concepts. Through the lens of her own experience, the various developmental concepts become more real to her, in her words, "sharper." To the question of what she learned from the project, she responded that although she found certain concepts to be reinforced, "If there was something new to learn from it, I missed it." Hence, the personal dimension of learning, the "learning *from*" her experience that Britzman (1998) identified, is

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not as evident as the "learning *that*." Gail's narrative appears to illustrate the distinction that Gornick (2001) made between the "situation" and the "story," wherein the former is the context and the plot, and the latter "is the emotional experience that preoccupies the writer: the insight, the wisdom, the thing one has come to say" (p. 13).

Nonetheless, there are indicators of insight. Gail ends her narrative with the following paragraph, in which she considers her portrait in light of elements within her present life phase (a new marriage, satisfying work, and spiritual peace):

> When I evaluate the portrait I do not see it as something finished and ready to be put away. The canvas may have all of the colors there to define the picture, but it is also the beginning of many more portraits. This particular canvas is the one to return to in order to find the brushstroke that helped begin an outline.

As Britzman (1998) pointed out, the ethnographic detail promotes the reflective telling. This feature emerges in Gail's last paragraph. This would support Britzman's claim that even when focused primarily on the detail, the act of writing one's autobiography promotes reflection.

THE REFLECTIVE TELLING

> Memory is made as a quilt is made. From the whole cloth of time, frayed scraps of sensation are pulled apart and pieced together in a pattern that has a name.
>
> —Kim Stafford (1991, p. 15)

The second "reflective" telling takes the narrative process further to include a retrospective observation of the ethnographic detail and to touch on the significance of tension and anxiety. Will I succeed? Will my mother recognize me? The reflective telling "interferes" with the ethnographic telling; it implies a return to a site left behind; it surfaces the older story, "buried and preserved in the ethnographic present" (Britzman, 1998, p. 13). In reflective telling, detail and contemplation occur concurrently throughout. Feelings are expressed of joy, sadness, pride, fear, guilt, and awe. As illustrated in the case study of Gail, not all writers move deliberately into the reflective mode; some stay more soundly in the ethnographic, detailing events of their life through the various eras. However, most do move into the reflective and, correspondingly, bring out the challenges, even harshness, of periods of change and loss.

Dave's Story

Dave illustrates first the ethnographic and then the reflective tellings, as he recalls his boyhood in the South.

> I grew up like Tom Sawyer. The river was not the Mississippi, but the Tennessee. . . . There were horses, cattle, endless rides, forested hikes, and lazy days on the

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> river. There are no better smells than freshly tilled earth and the lather of a horse mingled with the smell of saddle leather. I try not to be guilty of a "Disneyfication" of my past. Growing up on a farm is not completely carefree. I had chores to do everyday along with homework and there was a ragged side of rural southern life. I would see this side of life at school and as I went for rides along the miles of dirt roads that spiderwebbed my community. The south of my youth was genteel. . . . My saddle and tack was a month's wages to many along that road. I knew that I was lucky and that I had better life than many in my community. I was grateful, but this knowledge was a burden, one that I carry with me to this day.

Dave continues with the ethnographic detail, the rich description of his life in rural Tennessee. And then, in the last sentence of the paragraph, he takes a turn into the reflective, into the feelings of loss that remain with him even today and the sense that what has been lost can never be regained.

> People speak ill of the south. The cultural isolation and insulation are infamous. "When a girl turns 14 in the south she washes her hair, gets shoes and a husband!" Some of my schoolmates almost fit that description. I try not to be too critical. They remain married, have families and seem to be happy, while I am divorced, lost my family and am wondering if I want to try again.

Dave's telling represents the approach most frequently taken as writers recount the significant events and experiences of their life. An awareness of patterns is noted in most of their narratives, these often expressed through metaphors, such as, "the colors of my life," or "fragmentary order," or "icons of transformation." Writers also recognize behavior patterns or attitudes that created problems. One summed up, "In retrospect, I played the role of the innocent. I believed tomorrow would always be there." Often, the quality of care by parents and their influences are highlighted, as are the defining features of teachers and the events that shaped their school attitude.

In subsequent interviews, students acknowledged the value of going back and dissecting their lives, and in so doing, discovering more about themselves. One student described the writing as, "A process of unraveling, pulling [my life] in a bunch of pieces and then putting it back together." For some, it offered the possibility of validation and self-acceptance, an opportunity to put things in perspective, to balance their positive and negative experiences. For still others, focusing on their accomplishments became a confidence-building experience. Several students even resolved to move forward and get started on their educational and career goals. For many of these students, writing prompted a look at life through a rearview mirror. One student recalled, "For me it was enriching because I was at a point in my life [when] I needed to take a step back; I needed to look at my life in order to move forward."

Writers become more aware of their personality and the part it played in their life choices, and they generally could accept responsibility for their lives. Others, like Angela, described past trials and how these shaped their values and identity.

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Angela's Story

Angela, a student and a soldier in the military stationed overseas, titles this chapter, "In the Army Now." She describes entry into the military, the shock of failure in Air Assault School, and shift in identity from civilian to soldier.

> The greatest test was Air Assault School especially given my fear of height. My first time at school I did not make it through the course. I was shocked because I had never failed at anything before. . . . My heart felt like it had broken into pieces. . . . My friend Greg had to literally build me back up. He made me see that I was only a failure if I did not try again. I finally began to understand and the next time I went to Air Assault School I will admit I did not feel so confident but I made it through successful [*sic*]. I will admit these were [the] longest ten days of my life and the first time on the thirty-foot tower ready to jump I felt my heart would rip right out of my chest because it was pounding so fast. I jumped though and I've never felt so proud of myself. After that first jump it became a little easier.

With this success on the 30-foot tower jump, Angela begins her transition to a soldier. In this next section, she reflects on her learning and perspective transformation.

> Thinking back Air Assault School taught me a lot about myself. I gained confidence in my ability to conquer any obstacles standing in my way. Developing that train of thought made life easier for me at [the Fort]. . . . As I started to warm up to the place things started to work out. . . . Yes I hated running five days a week but looking on the bright side it kept me in great physical condition. I hated taking orders but the more accepting and less challenging I became military life just got better. I began seeing myself more like a soldier and less as a civilian.

As Angela closes her autobiography, she contemplates the oncoming birth of her baby and the kind of mother she wants to become. Her "learning *from*" her life experience is conveyed, as she hearkens back to her earlier failure in Air Assault and the lesson she learned about the importance of not recoiling from failure. This is a lesson she will now pass on.

Carolyn's Story

Carolyn titles her story, "Welcome to Adulthood; The Lessons of my 20's." Chapter by chapter, she pieces together her own process of development, in each one separating and identifying specific issues and concerns: letting go of control, defining boundaries, gaining perspective, striving for authenticity, and, finally, critically examining beliefs and assumptions.

> Chapter 1 "Carolyn Makes a Plan—God Laughs"

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> Lesson—Life is unpredictable and often uncontrollable . . . events happen that are out of our control and that just because we can control something doesn't mean we should.
>
> Chapter 3 "The Silver Lining"
>
> Lesson—There can be good even in a bad situation. Humor, putting things into perspective, looking at life from a different angle are all abilities that . . . help me take steps closer to the person I am striving to be.

Carolyn's opportunity to reflect is not wasted, as she makes each chapter a "lesson" learned. Her chapters support Olney's (1980) observation that when we write our story, our knowledge is extended; we know more about ourselves than we did before; moreover, having written, *we know that we know*. Furthermore, the chapters reveal her process of critical thinking, an essential part of transformative learning (Brookfield, 1986; Mezirow, 1991). To the extent that Carolyn and other students have taken a step outside of themselves, observed themselves, and defined and affirmed their own growth, they have learned, and according to Damasio (1999), they have furthered their extended consciousness.

THE UNCANNY TELLING

> All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story.
>
> —Isak Dinesen (in Ellerby, 2001, p. 3)

The third "uncanny" contains the force of secrets, the unsayable, the haunting, and the untold. According to Britzman (1998), to write about the uncanny is to uncover secrets and explore lost life themes. She asked, "Why speak of what's uncomfortable to speak of?" (p. 14). What damage might this telling do? Why not let the secret remain private? Because the uncanny is also the site of learning; its purpose is to locate "the where" of the discomfort and to engage and integrate the uncanny with current life and thereby enhance the capacity for love, learning, and work.

This third telling, written so personally in student autobiographies, so eloquently, and so starkly, oftentimes revealed backgrounds of profound abuse and abandonment. Frequently, I asked myself, why would they write this, why would they write something so personal? It seemed incomprehensible, beyond reason, that they would write what could risk others' judgment or what could come back to haunt them. Their autobiographies describe the child who is betrayed by and unprotected by her parents, the daughter who is abandoned by her mother, the mother whose infant dies on his first morning in day care. Through their narratives, the writers confront their past and relive and reveal the uncanny in their lives. Those involved in subsequent interviews describe their own process of confronting the pain and moving beyond. And most significantly, they demonstrate that through the course of writing their stories, they are able not only to move to a place of greater reconciliation but also *to know* that they have arrived at this rec-

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onciliation. In the following sections, both Susan and Lori illustrate the uncanny and its role in transformation.

Susan's Story

Susan's autobiography opens with the following comment:

> It's very hard to remember my childhood until when I left home. In fact, it's quite painful to remember and write about it. But in my adulthood I've learned that remembering is healing and it's only until we understand who we were that we know who we are.

Susan's comments echo Britzman's (1998) observation of the role of autobiography in healing and integrating painful remembering with present identity. Susan organizes her autobiography through the metaphor of "knots." She begins, "The rope of my protectors, my parents, was a somewhat cruel one; it tied itself around me and my heart, violating the trust a child automatically gives to their parents." In the opening chapter, Susan reveals the childhood sexual abuse by her father and the lack of protection by her mother. True to the language of the unsayable, Susan never elaborates on what happened, but brings it out and studies its significance in her life. "I taught my eyes to glaze and see nothing," she recalls. "It seems my stomach was in a knot so often it became quite a normal feeling; the knots tied by my dysfunctional parents sort of got inside of me." In later chapters, she details the stages of breaking free of the knots, exploring their nature, later undoing them, and finally, in the last chapter, transforming and refashioning them. She begins her closing chapter, "I am taking those knots, which have been undone and making my new bowtie. My sense of who I am in the world is expanding."

In the subsequent interview, Susan recalls the painful process of this writing and her strong efforts to avoid writing about the abuse and then deleting as much as she could. She also speaks of what she has gained. Initially, her husband counseled her to just talk about the university years. But she knew what was important. She recalls, "I cut to significant events that I felt shaped me or impacted me to a large degree." She details the writing process as painful and emotional, yet necessary, "to help give me some kind of closure to a stage in my life, and to look back in order to look ahead." Writing her story reconciled looking backward with looking forward, integrating her past life with her future. Her experience echoes that of Janet Mason Ellerby (2001), who in a recent book revealed the pain of "bearing Sorrow," her daughter, whom she was forced to relinquish, as a young girl, some 30 years ago. Ellerby wrote, "My hope is that by finally telling the secret, renarrating the story, I can reinterpret the characters and in so doing reexamine myself and my fellow players on that faraway stage" (p. 22). Ellerby decided she needed to write her story to free herself. And, amazingly, from that act came the reunification with her long-lost daughter and, in a sense, with it her own re-

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demption. It would seem that writing one's story frees one from it and frees one to move beyond.

In the case of Susan, she observes how importantly her life experience and her story have shaped her in ways that serve her today. And whereas she recognizes, "I don't come from a naive point of view at all. I come from a real ugly point of view," she also knows that her present perspective is the richer for it. Most significant, now an educator, Susan describes the changes that have occurred in her own approach to teaching since she wrote her story. Realizing now that students, too, have a story, she is more open to their experiences and more accepting of what they have to say, as she describes below:

> I try and relate to people now more as people than what I used to, probably because of writing my story, of going through that process. You are almost more effective, more acknowledging, affirming of what other people have had, because everyone, when they interact with you, they are giving you little bits of their story.

Lori's Story

In Lori's case, her crisis, the death of her infant son, changed her life. Lori writes, "If I thought Brian's entry into the world was early, his exit was as premature as anything I could have ever imagined." She dedicates one chapter to Brian's death and the impact it has had. She describes his sudden death on his first morning in the care of a sitter, as Lori, herself, returned for her first day back at work after her parental leave. She details her subsequent efforts throughout the past 9 years to cope with and to recover from this tragic loss:

> Nothing I had ever learned, read or imagined could have prepared me for that day or for the following days, weeks, months and even years. It will be eight years this October and although I have made quantum strides in dealing with the loss, I will never be the same and I will never "get over it." I realize now that people don't get over the pain and grief of death, they "go through it." The pain is not as constant, nor as sharp, but it can sneak up on you unsuspecting and cut you like a knife.

In her subsequent interview, Lori several times mentions how hard it was to write her story and how much she invested emotionally in the writing. The most significant aspect of Lori's autobiography centers on how the writing brought her some closure. Up until the writing, Lori had commemorated both Brian's birth and death in a special way. Below, she reveals her newfound capacity to move beyond the need to carry on this yearly ritual:

> It will be nine years; and up until last year I had written something every year on the anniversary of his death, usually a poem or something. And this year, for the first year I didn't. I felt that I had reached a point where I didn't have to do that. And when I was writing this [autobiography], he was just a big part of it, and I

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> really felt that this was kind of for him. And in some crazy way it was my way of showing him that I was OK now, and that I had gotten through all of this.

Based on her written story and the subsequent interview, for Lori, writing her story brought an integration of the experience of her son's death. On that basis, given Dewey's (1964) criteria of the integration of experience, this experience was transformative. Moreover, Lori is aware of this transformation. Having looked back over her journals of that painful period, she notes, "When it happened I did keep a journal. And I'd go back and I'd read that journal, and [then] it was a different person writing. It was a person [then] that was struggling to survive."

From the above narratives and from others included in the analysis emerge the various uses and benefits of telling the uncanny. First, it can serve to reveal a secret, to release the secret, and to reduce or dilute the force of the secret. Second, this telling of the secret, the affirmation of this aspect of one's life, appears to promote the individual's sense of authenticity—of being true to one's identity and history. Third, it legitimizes what one had gone through and gives it a distinct quality or character. Finally, telling the uncanny can promote resolution, healing, and closure. The individual is able to acknowledge the positive that has come from this experience, awful as it was, and to contemplate a possible future action. The event has run its course and been incorporated into who the individual is now. Having also become part of the individual's extended consciousness, the incorporation of the event can help her cope with future incidents and events (Damasio, 1999). Susan's last chapter, in which she fashions her knot into a bowtie—from a rope into a ribbon—reveals the sort of shift that is possible.

Discussion

Each telling of autobiography represents one approach to autobiographical writing. Each reflects a motive—to complete an assignment, to describe one's life, to reflect, to heal, to come to terms, to integrate. Each has value for the writer in that it brings life situations and events to consciousness. The ethnographic, it would appear, is the most detailed, often the safest. It singles out those experiences worth writing about, those defining moments in one's life story, and binds them into chapters. Evading emotion, it focuses instead on the detail of various events, without betraying their significance.

The ethnographic might be seen as the first phase, when one begins the work of putting a life into text. Designating the five chapter titles is itself a significant step, directing what is to be included, what language will be selected. However, even in autobiographies where ethnographic telling predominates, there are aspects of the reflective, often in the last chapter. Ethnographic writing, in addition to revealing cultural factors and psychological dispositions, can reveal the "forks in the road" and the ways these choices carve out their life.

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The second, reflective telling portrays parents, teachers, and loved ones, not only in descriptive terms but also as influential figures shaping their lives. Successes and failures are explored in terms of cause and effect and consequences, and a sense of order emerges. The metaphors that describe the patterns of their life "from chaos to calmness" or "I was the innocent" are revealed and become strong indicators of the reflective mode.

And finally, the uncanny—the one holding the greatest mystery, the telling that is so often left untold. In this telling, I have found tangible evidence of healing, integration, and the beginnings of integrity as Erikson (1950) described it—the acceptance of one's life as the only one that could have been and, by definition, permitted no substitution. Only a few go there. Perhaps those who have a sense that the telling is connected to their growth, or perhaps only those who sense freedom and safety in the telling. In this case, their interviews and language echo that of the literature for its profound effect of freeing them from the burden of old secrets. The writing of the story bears witness to this process.

Rossiter (1999) has aptly pointed out that "the re-storying process tells the story of perspective transformation" (p. 84). Through the course of writing, these individuals engage in various processes associated with transformative learning (albeit to varying degrees). The feature of critical thinking, so central to perspective transformation, begins as the individual, the subject, becomes the object of the narrative and looks at self as if at another. The "disorienting dilemma" (Mezirow, 1991, 2000) or "interference" (Britzman, 1998) is especially evident in the reflective and uncanny telling, with its focus on the tension and anxiety associated with an experience. The qualities of emotion and affect dominate the narratives as the writer's life is pulled apart, unraveled, and then "pieced together." And finally, the closing chapter often summarizes what has been gained, what change in "habits of mind" has followed from the writing, especially concerning one's sense of self and one's circumstances, as one autobiography title, "From Puppet to Dancer," highlights. This connection between autobiography and transformative learning evidently bears further exploration and study.

Conclusion

> Education should bring people to the place from which they can go on alone and make up their own stories.
>
> —Jo Anne Pagano (1991, p. 202)

At the start of this article, I described how I set out to understand more about the possible benefits to my students of writing their life story. I had been grading their narrative papers rather generously, being grateful for their willingness to write about their life and, further, not having a basis on which to distinguish those narratives that were exemplary from those more commonplace. I knew that some compelled me, moved me, stunned me, but I did not know why. Then, in

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coming upon Britzman's (1998) psychoanalytic perspective and scheme of the three dimensions of time (the ethnographic, the reflective, and the uncanny), I recognized the clue—the notion that the various tellings could be related to the various depths of personal, even transformative learning. This schema gave me a means to evaluate their work for its depth of exploration. Having now gone through the process of analyzing the written life stories and the follow-up interviews that I conducted with one group of the writers, I believe that Britzman's schema offers a valuable framework through which to appreciate and analyze autobiography for its depth of personal, transformative learning.

In this article, I have highlighted how autobiography can contribute to students' fuller appreciation of themselves and their world through the various ways of telling their story. The ethnographic telling brings forth the events and the details and circumstances surrounding them. The reflective telling probes experience and meaning and offers fresh personal insights. As educators, we cannot ask more of our students than for them to have taken this further step, and most of the students do. And the uncanny telling moves writers deeper into reliving their painful stories, writing them down, and thereby moving closer to engaging their stories with their present identities. By addressing the uncanny in their lives, they permit its integration and thereby move closer to their own authenticity and integrity.

By becoming known to themselves through the course of these writings, my students have also become known to me in ways I could not have envisioned. Having read their stories, I can never forget them. They are characters, qualities, and images that I have encountered and now carry with me. Their stories have become part of my own internal dialogue, aspects of my new experiences and the background of my conversations with others. Gail, Jose, Susan, Lori, and Antonia are for me characters no less compelling than Anna Karenina or Willie Loman. Through them, I have been witness to the ravages of prejudice and racism, the isolation of parental neglect and abuse, and the despair that is a consequence of cultural and economic poverty. I have become aware of their histories, struggles, and their spirit in overcoming obstacles and facing their greatest fears. I have come to know them personally at a level deeper than what I could have in any other way. My students have thus emerged as capable of much more depth than is normally expected or encouraged in traditional education.

Through witnessing their grief, joy, fortitude, and love, I have experienced my own. I have learned *from* my students in ways that have changed me. These changes are reflected in my connection with students—individually and collectively in the classroom. They show up in the tone of my course syllabi and in my negotiations with students concerning projects, assignments, and deadlines. In my teaching, they are revealed in the way I attempt to draw my students out in the classroom and in my efforts to reduce their isolation. One important implication of autobiographical writing for other educators lies in the likelihood that they, too, will be changed. To read their stories is to change.

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APPENDIX
Guidelines for Practice Using Autobiography in Higher Education

- Have students imagine that a publisher has invited them to write their story in five chapters; what would be the titles of the chapters?
- To guide their work, ask students to prepare an outline with the titles for your review.
- Encourage them to seek out a metaphor or a central theme that runs throughout their story and that might then be reflected in the chapter titles.
- Encourage them to avoid a simple chronology of their life, such as, "The Teen Years," but rather to give these periods an identifying quality or character, such as "The Teen Years: Lost in a Wilderness."
- Offer examples of chapter outlines that others have written.
- Encourage them to choose a title for their story, such as Christopher Reeves's "Still Me."
- Trust that writers will go as deeply into the various options of telling as they are ready.
- Encourage individuals to use this opportunity to reflect on their life, to take something from this exercise—what was their story; what was this life about?

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