Autobiographical Writing as a Learning Process: Discovering the Inner Voice

Introduction

Linda Armacost
Northern Illinois University

This issue of *Thresholds* examines personal transformation through the use of autobiographical writing. The authors are current and former graduate students in Adult and Higher Education who explored autobiographical writing during classes taught by Professor Glenn Smith at Northern Illinois University. Autobiographical writing is a method that encourages learners to explore their own beliefs and assumptions by recounting their reactions to specific events or ideas. Sharing their personal experiences with others can be empowering for adult learners. As learners come to understand their own personal belief system, they are better equipped to engage in critical thinking because they have identified a real reference point for reaction. Adult learners who understand their philosophical paradigm (See *Thresholds* Volume XXV, No. 2 & 3 May/August 1999) possess a contextual framework for making sense of their world.

Adult learners who understand their philosophical paradigm possess a contextual framework for making sense of their world.

Autobiographical writing is successful when learners realize they are working within a safe and supportive environment that is non-judgmental. Those who want to experiment with this method must understand the demands it places on the teacher/facilitator. Adult learners typically have been inculcated by educational systems that rely on what Paulo Freire (1998 [1970], p. 53) termed the 'banking' concept—where knowledge is 'deposited' into learners by those who possess knowledge (teacher) to be withdrawn sometime in the future. For autobiographical writing to succeed, teachers and students must be treated as equal co-learners. Teachers who are secure enough to bare their fears, doubts, and hopes with learners engender an empowering force for assisting learners in their personal explorations. The following five students are sharing their perspectives on personal transformation:

Siew Sim Chin reflects upon her participation in a class on the Metaphysics of Transformation. Sim's inward journeys via autobiographical writing revealed her deep connection to spirituality and its seeming absence in Adult Continuing Education. "Spirituality in Adult Education as Teaching to Connect Hearts" explains how the class experience guided her personal quest to "locate and articulate the issue of spirituality in adult education."

Rebecca Johnson shares how her experience with autobiographical writing opened a doorway to personal awareness and influenced her teaching practices. Her poetry and personal reflections appeared initially in a master's thesis written at Northern Illinois University.

"Presence," by Jeanette Rossetti, discusses the importance of understanding oneself for teachers seeking to foster transformative learning in the classroom. Jeanette's explorations with autobiographical writing helped her articulate her beliefs and led to a greater understanding of herself as an individual and teacher.

Christopher Adamsick's, "More Questions than Answers: Spirituality, Psychotherapy, and Awakening," focuses on the psychology of centering prayer and its relationship to personal awareness—awakening.

"Bending," by Linda Armacost, describes her experiences with personal transformation when a disorienting event led her to seek an old, familiar hobby, horse-back riding, that presented her with unexpected challenges.

My experiences with autobiographical writing have been profoundly enlightening. I admit the notion of sharing my personal feelings or experiences with perfect strangers in class felt uncomfortable and somewhat intrusive at first. Glenn Smith was able to create a safe and supportive environment that freed us to explore our own consciousness, deepest fears, and ardent desires. I had the opportunity to interview Glenn and to ask him how and why he began to incorporate autobiographical writing with his students.

Interview with Glenn Smith **(GS)**
1/7/2003

Linda Armacost (LA): **In recent years you've been known for having students in most of your classes write autobiographical essays. When did you decide to incorporate autobiographical writing into your teaching experiences?**

GS: Overtly, it started in 1996 when I left university administration and returned to full-time teaching. But there was background leading up to that decision—really not so much a *decision* as the realization of a long drift.

LA: **What happened in 1996? Why then?**

GS: In January 1996, I left department chairing and returned to the faculty. My first teaching assignment was a required course called "The Nature of Adult Continuing Education." I didn't know what the nature of adult education was—my background was the history and philosophy of P-12 and higher education—but the Adult Education faculty had generously offered me rank, and I had accepted. To break me in, they assigned a section of the course an hour and a half away in Chicago with only seven students . I don't know if they were being merciful to me or limiting the damage to a small number of people as far away from home base as possible. Maybe it was a little of both.

I was grateful for the small numbers but intimidated by the course's general reputation as lightweight and boring and even more intimidated by my naiveté about adult education. Everyone who enrolled was there by requirement, not choice. Most adult education faculty members preferred not to teach it. On campus the class enrolled 30 or more students every semester—about a third being seniors, a third 25- to 45-year-old master's aspirants, and a third 30- to 55-year-old doctoral students. The undergraduates were health majors who saw this as one more hurdle before they got licensed to earn a salary. For the master's students it is a necessary hurdle to the career changes most of them wanted. And the doctoral students were coming to the adult education program with degrees in fields other than adult education. They had to take it as a "deficiency"—for a grade, so it could hurt their GPAs; yet it didn't count on their programs of study. You can imagine the uneasy energy of a classroom populated by such a group.

LA: **Doesn't sound conducive to writing and sharing autobiographical material.**

GS: No, and as I developed the syllabus for my section of the course, I wasn't thinking of autobiography.

LA: **What made you decide to try it?**

GS: I didn't really decide directly. What happened was that a friend, Keith Armstrong, asked if he could help me teach the course. Keith had an undergraduate degree in social work, a humanities master's from Harvard with an emphasis in photography, and was working on his doctorate in adult education. He had left a successful institute for adult males in life crises that he had founded. He had recently begun teaching an undergraduate general education course called "Education as an Agent for Change." He wanted to expand his higher education teaching experience, hoping to eventually become a faculty member—which he did after graduation at DePaul University's School for New Learning.

I knew Keith's excellent reputation in the "Change" course. He had told me that the heart of his technique was in autobiographical material he had students write and share with each other. So we decided that each week he would work with students using autobiography and I would do Adult Ed topics based on a textbook that most other instructors of the course used.

***LA*: How did it work out?**

GS: Really well. Every Monday evening from 6:00 to 9:00 we would spend maybe 30 minutes discussing material in the text; the remaining 150 minutes were taken up by two or three students reading brief autobiographical musings followed by Keith pointing out to each one what she or he had said and what their writing indicated about their life issues. I was amazed by what I saw. He didn't soft pedal, but no one objected. He was so accurate and non-judging that everyone drank down all he gave them. We didn't plan for Adult Ed topics taking a back seat to people's autobiographical readings, it just happened that way and everyone was happy about it—especially me, because I got to watch Keith work. I asked him lots of questions at dinner following class and during the three-hour-roundtrip commute each week. My biggest question was "Does one have to be born with the gift of how to do this, or can it be taught and learned?

***LA*: So Keith Armstrong got you started. Did you copy his style?**

GS: I tried to, but a couple of circumstances made that difficult. One was that the next semester when I taught solo, my section of the "Nature of Adult Ed" course was on campus and the typical people showed up. Keith had often spent all the class time on 2 or 3 people, saving the other autobiographies 'til the following week. That worked okay with only 7 class members. But, with more people it was obvious that the amount of time spent on each would have to be brief. Along with that was my nervousness, bred by years of academic curriculum committee meetings, of having the course look too "touchy-feely"—too much like therapy instead of cognitively academic. So I keyed the autobiographical writing stems to the course readings. For example, if the week's reading was Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*, the writing stem would be something like "Violence and Me . . ." And, I ramped up the reading requirements from one book for the semester to a book each week. That caused shockwaves, mainly among some of the doctoral students and could have led to rebellion. However, other sections of the course, taught in time-honored fashion, were always available, so anyone who objected to either the load, the cost of the books, or the autobiographical component could satisfy their need for the course in one of the other sections. I heard that some faculty colleagues complained privately that my section of the course was, I believe the phrase was, "too academic." They didn't comment about the autobiographical part, so I guess the academic workload distracted them—as I hoped it would.

***LA*: Sounds like the "Nature of Adult Ed" course was your laboratory.**

GS: That turned out to be the case, though I didn't think of it that way. I was just doing my job as well as I could. Following the semester that Keith and I taught together, I was assigned sections of the course in each of the next five semesters, not counting summers. By the next to the last time I taught it, the pattern was set. The academic work had expanded to fourteen books and at least that many articles or chapters. An average of 25 percent of enrollees dropped after the first meeting each semester. Even then, I was a bit unsure about the autobiographical portion, and from time to time I thought of eliminating, or at least backing off from that part. For example, if we ran short of time, I omitted sharing autobiographies for that night. Each time that happened, there were many protests—with no one expressing an opposite sentiment. So autobiography stayed in, but I had long since stopped making any remark other than "thank you" after each person read. Originally this was just to save time, but I gradually realized that reading without comment seemed not to diminish the power of the experience, though I hadn't stopped to think why. Partly because I hadn't needed to defend it to anyone.

***LA*: When did you begin to analyze it?**

GS: During the next to last semester that I taught the "Nature of Adult Ed" course, one of the students in that class, Rebecca Johnson, had an even stronger impact on me than Keith had had. She was fascinated by the whole process, both because of her personal experience with the course and because she had used autobiographical assignments in her own teaching as a college English instructor. She kept asking me gently-phrased questions. Things like why I didn't comment after each reading, why exactly one page, why every week, and how explicitly did the autobiographies need to be tied to course content. Mostly, I had to admit that things had simply evolved, that I didn't have good

explanations. At my request, she agreed to join me in teaching what turned out to be the last "Nature of Adult Ed" class I would be assigned. Then she and I designed and shared the teaching of a graduate seminar in which autobiography was a major element. Out of those experiences, her reading, and a survey of other instructors that she distributed and analyzed, she developed a model for and wrote a thesis about the use of autobiography in teaching. Those interactions with Becky provided for me a powerful learning stimulus about autobiography and many other subjects connected with it. I learned a great deal from her, and she led me to learn more from myself. I still don't know all the answers, but feel a bit farther down the road.

***LA*: You've said students felt some sort of benefit from autobiographical sharing, even urged you to keep it. Did you or Becky figure out in what ways students benefit?**

GS: Becky named several in her thesis, which anyone who's interested should read, but I'll stick to giving my own version of an answer. In my experience, the most basic benefit of doing autobiography is that we get more in touch with what I'll call the *core self* when we try to explain why we have the feelings we have about the past. This is what autobiography does. It's not primarily objective verification of exactly what happened. It's much more about why only a few of the millions of things that we all experience remain in memory, persistently nudging us for retelling—as we search for satisfying explanations to ourselves. Someone has said that the difference between people whom we officially judge to be crazy and those still walking the streets is that crazy people don't have explanations for their pasts. This doesn't mean that the explanations of technically-sane people are correct—but they *have* explanations. Each of us is looking for an explanation of who we are by trying to remember where we've been and what being there meant.

***LA*: That sounds psychological. Isn't that what psychotherapy is for? How does that fit with an academic setting and doesn't it potentially infringe on student rights?**

GS: There are several issues in your questions. Yes, it's what psychotherapy is about, and in that sense it's partly right to think of it as psychological; and yes student rights *can* be infringed upon. Student rights, in my view, are always infringed upon when professors do *not* engage in some form of what autobiography allows.

***LA*: Well, that needs more explaining! Care to expand?**

GS: Let's start with the psychotherapy part. We typically assume that psychotherapists and college teachers have basically different kinds of roles in society. But both are really engaged in the same basic enterprise. And that is to give their clients a different understanding of reality than the one they initially bring to the table. We assume a difference because we've been taught a mistaken notion of learning and how it happens. Since Rene Descartes and John Locke, we've believed that emotions and learning are separable from each other—hence the psychoanalyst deals with emotions and the professor with learning—and we've decided that learning is a conscious activity, controlled by our will to know. But researchers who study brain science tell us that *all* learning is emotionally connected, that learning doesn't happen in the absence of emotion. [Ed. Note: Becky Johnson writes about this topic in this issue of *Thresholds*]. It's the emotional part that makes both talk-based therapy and a college education take so many years—and often be only marginally effective.

***LA*: So how should we understand the relationship between learning and emotion, and what practical difference does autobiography make?**

GS: The answer requires a different conception of *mind* than most of us have been conditioned to believe in. First of all, the *mind* is not a physical organ; it's not a synonym for brain. John Dewey's definition of *mind* was that it's a function in service of the organism. But universities operate as if our minds are infinitely expandable houses. By this way of seeing things, we start with small minds in kindergarten and as we add more and more furniture up through graduate or professional school—or even beyond—we just keep making bigger rooms and adding on—"a four car garage and still build'n on," as Waylon and Willie sang in *Lukenbach Texas*. The well furnished mind has a lot of rooms filled with scads of beautiful stuff. It would be more accurate to think that, by somewhere

around age 4 or 5, we pretty much have the mind "house" we will occupy for the rest of a lifetime. This doesn't mean that no change happens, that it is completely furnished and decorated, or even that rooms aren't added or expanded. But it does mean that anytime something new is to be added, it must somehow fit in with what's already there—a "space" has to be found for the new items—and this means the owner of the house has to rearrange existing furnishings and maybe discard some things.

***LA*: Is autobiography, then, our stories of how we've rearranged our mind houses across a lifetime?**

GS: In a sense, yes. And there's one more element that will help make sense of all this. The architectural blueprint of our mind houses gets put in place from conception to age 4 from the ways we interpret experiences. This has been confirmed repeatedly by therapists who age-regress people with terminal illnesses in search of "initial sensitizing events" trying to reprogram what led to, say, cancer. At the youngest stage, well before language develops, the mind takes in directly whatever meanings its earliest experiences support. For example, if the mother (or father or both) is distraught over the pregnancy, the initial sensitizing event may be a message that the child is making life difficult for the mother (or father or both). One overheard conversation is enough to send a message. As few as three or four reinforcing incidents may be enough to put a program firmly in place, a script already headed to the subconscious part of the mind that leaves the child knowing that her crime against the mother (or father or both) should be punished.

The subconscious mind takes in whatever comes to it without judgment. By around age 4, the mind house is built, and different rooms are furnished with whatever scripts the subconscious mind has acquired by then. At this point a security service appears to protect the new mind house and its contents. This is the additional element. For ease of reference, let's call this the Guardian. This is no sleepy grandpa rocking on the front porch as a gentle "no trespass" signal. Across time, but not a lot of time, the Guardian becomes Rambo on 24-hour alert, equipped with guardhouse and advanced weaponry and information sensors.

***LA*: We're still headed to autobiography, right?**

GS: Yes, we're almost there. The Guardian protects the mind house *as it is* without evaluation, just as any good security service would do. Whatever scripts are already running get absolute protection. But soon there are people at the front door wanting to sell or give away additional furnishings. The Guardian must decide who's turned away and who gets in. Not that the Guardian makes the final decision, but the Guardian quickly starts protecting not only the house's but the house master's best interests. To do this, the Guardian has to start judging what belongs in the house and what doesn't—and has to be able to *predict* what the master, in any specific case, will want if asked. One thing the Guardian knows for sure, the master does *not* want to be troubled by every caller at the front gate. And in the absence of specific instructions to the contrary, the Guardian always assumes the more things look like whatever is already in the house, the more likely the master would be to favor them.

So, now apply this to psychotherapists and college professors, and you'll see why their goals are identical. Both are at the front gate with furniture or accessories they want the master of the mind house to consider. But they can't get access to the master without clearing security first. And the Guardian, necessarily by job description, is cautious—of anything that looks different from what's already in the house—especially of any proposed new script that runs counter to the original ones.

How to respond? Both the professor and the "shrink" are disadvantaged because in most cases they know little of what's already in the house or of what the master's tastes or interests might be. But they must somehow convince the Guardian, who does know these things, that the master's (and hence the Guardian's) interests would be well-served if they could be granted an audience with the master. The psychotherapist has three advantages over the professor. First, everyone expects analysis to take years, so this gives the analyst time to get to know the Guardian before trying to get access to the master; professors usually have months instead of years. Second, most psychotherapists have had extensive training in how to deal with Guardians;

professors have no training—indeed, most don't know there is any difference between the mind master and its guardian. And third, the analyst usually interacts with Guardians individually or in small groups. Most professors have 20 to 500 Guardians in a room at once, and they usually have insufficient time to show the master all they are selling, even if they had immediate direct access, so they have no time for placating Guardians—which they don't know how to do anyway.

This brings us to a typical 21st century university classroom. Assembled in uncomfortable chairs all facing the professor are 20 to 500 Guardians who don't know each other. The professor displays the mind house furniture he's offering. His attitude is, "my job is to show it to you. Take it or leave it." Guardians make decisions about whether to engage their masters. Some think their masters might want what's offered, so they suggest engagement. Most don't want their masters anywhere near what's offered because they are there to protect what's already in the house. They either convince their masters to drop the class or pretend on behalf of the master to take what's offered. They do this because the prof is grading on who takes how much and they know their masters need passing grades. They trash what they take as soon as they get clear of the course, so nothing new gets into the house. The prof is happy enough, however, because he doesn't know this.

LA: **Autobiography?**

GS: Yes, we're finally ready. As with any security force, Guardians know if in doubt it's better to shoot first and analyze later. Safer to turn away some great new furniture than let a thief (or worse) sneak into the house in disguise. Besides, the Guardian came into being in the first place to guard what's already in the house. If some or all of that's to be thrown out, the Guardian's reason for being feels threatened. Add to this the fact that masters of mind houses in our culture lead busy, scattered lives. They are racing from one distraction to another. This means that most of us have Guardians, they age and retreat from life's scrapes and bruises, get delegated more and more and, on their own, begin to usurp more and more. The default decision is: Better to let the Guardian deal with whatever comes up, even if some good stuff gets missed in the process. And it certainly looks safer to Guardians to screen out anything that could possibly mean change. So they do.

LA: **Let me see if I'm following you. Are you saying that people get less flexible and harder to teach as they age?**

GS: Not in every individual case but as a rule, yes. This is where autobiography comes in. It's a device for bypassing the Guardian and making direct contact with the master of the mind house. If a serious autobiographical essay is asked for, the Guardian isn't really up to the job. Only the master of the mind house knows the first-hand story of the house's real life. If the autobiographical account is read in public, people will catch on if the Guardian wrote it. So by the second class, every Guardian knows: either bail out and run, or the master of the mind house will have to attend class. It won't work to allow the Guardian to go instead. The Guardian will come too, but has to take a back seat when the master is present.

LA: **All this talk of Guardians and masters of mind houses is interesting, but can you say in plain English what happens when you have people write and read autobiographical material in class?**

GS: I'll try. The point is this. Learning anything isn't simply a cognitive task; it engages the emotions. Part of each complex organism called a human being needs to discover new paths, walk toward the light. Part of each organism has the assigned task of protecting all that is. This internal "spam killing" program usually winnows out not only the really negative stuff but also much that would help the organism get closer to its own inner truth. The task of an educator (or psychotherapist) is to either placate or bypass the protective energy enough to allow actual learning of something new. Autobiography used skillfully and responsibly in an instructional setting can do this. In addition, it can remind the core self to update the organism's security forces so they don't automatically screen out really useful new learning.

LA: **Are there dangers in using autobiography in teaching? Might someone go off the deep end and hurt themselves or others? Are there precautions?**

GS: This is always possible, with or without autobiography. All the normal precautions still operate. Additionally, although I do make the autobiographical work a requirement, I don't grade how it's done—just whether it's done. And having every person aware that they will read aloud lets each one set his or her own limits of what to reveal and what to keep back.

***LA*: What if someone refuses to read?**

GS: I ask if they would prefer that someone else read it for them. If they still refuse, I accept the refusal. It's important to honor people's real feelings. I don't make it easy for people to refuse, but I always provide safety valves in my own mind. I don't punish refusal. We simply go on around the circle. So far I haven't had anyone refuse more than one time in a semester. Hearing everyone else's stories seems to ease most people's anxiety over what they want to reveal but feel reticent about.

***LA*: Can anyone do this? What if a facilitator or instructor doesn't have counseling skills?**

GS: The most basic counseling skill is hearing clearly what someone is saying without judging the feelings or behaviors they describe. Anyone who teaches in any setting needs this skill, and it can be developed; however, universities don't encourage professors to cultivate it. Those who can't listen fully, simply be present with someone without passing judgment, probably should not use autobiography in teaching. Actually, they should find another line of work, but that's another conversation.

Reference

Friere, P. (1998 (1970)). Pedagogy of the oppressed. New York: Herder and Herder.

Linda Armacost is a doctoral student in Adult Education at Northern Illinois University. Prior to returning to school, Linda was a manager of Governmental Affairs for a national healthcare association. Part of her managerial responsibilities entailed traveling across the country presenting legislative and grass roots organizing workshops to association members. In addition to learning the art of dressage, Linda is a Master Gardener recently smitten with the beauty and challenges of growing orchids.

Glenn Smith is Professor Emeritus of Adult Education, Northern Illinois University. He is past president of the International Society for Educational Biography, also of the Council of Learned Societies in Education. He has been editor of Educational Studies *and* Vitae Scholasticae *and has served on the executive council of NCATE. A contributor to* World Book Encyclopedia *and numerous educational journals, he has presented papers in a dozen countries and authored or coauthored books for Allyn & Bacon, St. Martin's Press, and Lawrence Erlbaum. He is a certified hypnotherapist, photographic artist, and poet.*

Spirituality in Adult Education as Teaching to Connect Hearts

Siew Sim Chin
Northern Illinois University

In my introductory courses on adult education, I encountered the inspirational work and life of Myles Horton and Paulo Freire and saw the clear expression of spirituality in their work. Further into the program, I encounterd Jane Vella (2000) and saw in her work, too, the expression of spirituality in action. In co-learning with faculty members in the Northern Illinois University adult and continuing education program, I sensed their wonderful and warm energy in teaching. What and how they taught had a definite connectedness to the mind and heart. I felt it, but was not sure how to articulate and locate the issue of spirituality in adult education. It was a course with Dr. Glenn Smith on "The Metaphysics of Transformation in Adult Education" that formally opened the spiritual space that I was seeking in the academe. I can now comfortably connect to and nourish a covenant I made with myself in coming back to the academic environment—that my engagement in learning about the knowledge of the world must be accompanied by a simultaneous deepening of my spirituality.

There were no 'oughts' in these writings; rather, they were about what matters, what counts most in our inner lives. In sharing my autobiographies, I learned to trust and speak from my heart in a formal learning environment.

This article is a personal reflection and synthesis of my participation in this course. In the first section, I share some reflections on what I regard as the practice of spirituality in this class that has helped me connect to my inner spirit in an academic environment. Secondly, I explore several dimensions of spirituality as the practice of teaching to connect hearts.

Reflections on Use of Autobiography in Connecting to the Inner Spirit

The use of autobiography in this class was a new learning experience for me. In this course we collectively chose a weekly writing stem and had the option to read (or not read) it aloud in class. For a couple of reasons, I found myself resisting this assignment initially. Firstly, I could not find the quiet time and space to engage in this weekly reflective assignment. There was constantly something to be done or seen to: work, studies, groceries, dinners, children's schoolwork and activities, laundry, family, community, and so forth. My initial reflections were more of attempts to "squeeze" each piece into the week rather than meeting the goal of engaging in critical self-reflections. Gradually, instead of squeezing each piece into the week, I began to realize that I had started to create the space for this weekly exercise. Secondly, my initial uneasiness with the use of autobiography stemmed from an awkward feeling of it being almost like confession. However, as the class progressed, my predispositions gave way to new, receptive learning experiences. We were given the freedom to explore the various writing stems in ways that best fit our individuality and concerns. There were no "oughts" in these writings; rather, they were about what matters, what counts most in our inner lives. In sharing my autobiographies, I learned to trust and speak from my heart in a formal learning environment.

The participation of Dr. Smith in sharing his autobiographical reflections was crucial in fostering a full-learning circle in class. When a learning situation starts and ends with the authority of the teacher, I consider the situation to be an inauthentic and broken circle of learners. In a full-learning circle, the teacher and students merge so there is no "starting" and "finishing" point. In this class, the instructor did not separate himself from us; he was among us.

In sharing our thoughts, I recognized various

dimensions of spirituality expressed in class—through poetry, meditations, reflections on what matters, on the search for meaning-making in life, of open honest discussions, and of a sense of connection to something greater than the individual. This feeling of learning in a safe space and connectedness to one another, in turn, nourished in me the courage to write and speak more freely. I began to feel comfortable and confident as an adult educator in articulating spirituality in an academic environment. As a minority student (from the standpoint of ethnicity and religion), this act of reading aloud my personal belief was very empowering. I feel that the crucial task of creating a connection of hearts among students and a safe space for the articulation of personal beliefs in class (this is even more so in the light of the September 11 tragedy) must be given as much focus as we give to intellectual content.

Setting the Reflective Learning Climate

Climate setting in adult learning situations has been well explored in much of the literature on facilitating adult learning (Knowles, 1980; Priest, Gass & Gillis, 2000; Kiser, 1998). However, little has been given to affective climate setting—of fostering the collective connecting energy that can greatly enhance the learning experience.

Our classes always started with what Dr Smith called a "focus" exercise. These exercises were usually short relaxation and meditative moments to wind down and refocus our thoughts in preparation for the class ahead. Personally, I appreciated these reflective moments for the change of pace that it induced in me as well as creating a sense of connection with the class. While not everyone was comfortable in participating in such exercises, the issue was not the meditation or relaxation exercise itself. It was more of the act of cultivating a connection of hearts and minds as a mental and attitudinal preparation in entering and enhancing the learning situation. This is especially helpful with challenging courses on racism, sexism, ageism, and other "isms." These are not one-dimensional social issues; they are affective issues as well, if not more importantly. Without the heart/spirit being affected by the impacts of these long-held oppressive practices, I feel that it difficult to move beyond rhetorical discussions. Rhetorical talk will not move people into action; when one feels a connection to the issues, there exits a greater potential to engage in varying degrees of action. I feel that a few moments of quiet reflection is conducive to building a connection among individuals and lifting the learning environment to a higher level of consciousness.

Without the heart/spirit being affected by the impacts of these long-held oppressive practices, I feel that it difficult to move beyond rhetorical discussions.

Articulating Spirituality in Adult Education

The last question asked of me at my admission interview to the graduate program of the adult and continuing education department in the Fall of 2000 was: "What will you bring to the field of adult education?" I froze for a few seconds wondering if this question meant what *professional* experiences do I have? I had stayed home to raise two young children for the past ten years. The domains of motherwork and faith-based community involvement defined my lifeworld. Those were also years of continuous changing roles—of marriage, motherhood and migration. These changes and renegotiations of self-identity brought with them a different understanding of the words "professional" and "learning." There, in a room of professors, I nervously responded with my values and international perspective. Having been in the adult education program for a year now, and having acquired the language and ability to name my experiences, I have come to understand that the values I spoke about referred to my set of spiritual beliefs that informs my life and work. By the international perspective, I was referring to the need to place one's practice of adult education within a global consciousness. When I nervously articulated how I perceived adult education to be, I was speaking of it as a practice grounded in spirituality within a social context.

I feel that, as adult educators, we are challenged with the tasks of exploring our own spirituality and how it informs our work. Spirituality in adult education is not about religion but about the expression of that spirituality into adult education work (Tisdell, 2000). A sense of spirituality provides the elements of vision and hope in the struggle for change. It is at the societal

level that the spirituality of adult education is challenged with the task of taking it beyond the personal to the collective arena for social transformation. Therefore, the social context of spirituality in adult education is concerned with expressing one's set of core, inner beliefs into actions and engaging in a lifelong ontological struggle of "becoming" (Freire, 1970). The visions, convictions, and struggles for social justice of adult educators such as Alain Locke, Martin Luther King, Paolo Freire, Myles Horton, Mother Teresa, M. Ghandhi, and Malcolm X were clearly grounded in their spirituality.

"Up There on High, Everything is One"

For me, the starting point of social transformation lies in the recognition of an inter-connected consciousness among all of us. It is the recognition of a connectedness on a higher level. Leading Buddhist philosopher and peace activist, Thich Nhat Hanh, offers an insight into the interconnectedness of reality and the interweaving of our existence across the different levels of consciousness. In *Being Peace* (cited in Rutstein, 1995, p.16) he wrote:

> Just as a piece of paper is the fruit, the combination of many elements that can be called non-paper elements, the individual is made of non-individual elements. If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud there will be no water; without water, trees cannot grow; and without trees, you cannot make paper. So the cloud is in here... Sunshine is very important because the forest cannot grow without sunshine. So the logger needs sunshine in order to cut the tree, and the tree needs the sunshine in order to be a tree... And if you look more deeply... with the eyes of those who are awake, you see not only the cloud and sunshine in it, but that everything is in here...

Similarly, Pierre Teillard de Chardin (in Rutstein, 1995, p.23) writes of the interconnectedness of existence: "Nothing is precious except that part of you which is in other people and that part of others which is in you. Up there on high, everything is one." Fundamentally, it is this recognition of the connection with one another—a connection of hearts and a respect of the sacredness of each heart that can help to lubricate the dialectical process of social transformation.

Engagement in "Spiritual Praxis"

"Spirited epistemology" (Vella, 2000), "learning from the heart (Apps, 1996), engaging in vision-logic (Lauzon, 1998), and the cultivation of the "Learning Spirit" (Gobeldale, 1991) offer ways of connecting to and drawing out the spiritual self in learning situations. In line with these spirited ways of learning, I am exploring the notion of the spirituality of adult education as "spiritual praxis."

Spiritual praxis is based on the premise that we are interconnected beings. It is the critical process of reflection and action informed by one's spirituality. In other words, it is the constant renegotiation and meaning-making of one's spirituality as it relates to her/his social location and roles. Such a process inevitably involves clashes within and without the self, but it is also this conflict and renegotiation that brings forth the spark of connection with others. In this sense, spiritual praxis is a dynamic and dialectical reflexive process in the transformation of the evolving spiritual being and society.

My idea of engaging in spiritual praxis is to locate one's actions within a social context where the individual and collective struggles are aimed at fostering a spiritually-based society conducive to advancing an environment that values people over material progress. Instead of defining the growth of society thorough quantitative measures, it is concerned with the extent and prevalence of qualitative progress. In this paradigm, *development* indicators are not economically based. Rather, it is concerned with the *abundance* of social justice, such as the degree to which racial and gender discrimination are addressed and tackled, the elevation of work to be ways of creative and spirited expressions, the guarding of an ecologically sound environment, the preservation and respect for indigenous cultures, and so forth. A similar framework of this spiritually-based society lies in Milani's (2000) call for a new "ecology of the mind"—of re-examining what matters, and making the conscious efforts and changes in creating a new state of mind.

The engagement in spiritual praxis is at once an affective, critical, and a rational process. The affective component concerns itself with connecting to the inner spirit and hearts. Without such an affective component in praxis, I do not see the possibility of moving beyond words in the discourse. However, without a critical and rational discourse in examining a spiritually-based learning, it can become an oppressive master narrative

in teaching what "ought." It is here that I find Habermas' (Welton, 1995) idea of communicative action to be a useful tool to link the spiritual to the rational, critical mind.

A rational discourse allows the spirituality of adult education to be subjected to critical questioning, offering checks against the articulation of spirituality in adult learning from becoming a transcendental discourse detached from everyday living and concerns. At the same time, the practice of a discourse of ethics calls for universal participation—hearing and giving voice to all. It is a consultative process and the engagement of the discourse in a language of respect and honor which prevents rationality from taking over the lifeworld where the spirituality in adult learning is located. In other words, communicative action reconciles a mind-spirit dichotomous learning. The question one may ask is how is this possible in the face of the different levels of power and viewpoints that each brings to the table. Habermas' communicative action is operational and realistic if the underlying foundation and process is infused with the recognition of a larger consciousness and connectedness among people. When hearts are connected, all possibilities become bigger and doable.

Spiritual praxis calls for not only a new ecology of the mind but of an equally important engagement in a new language of the heart where it infuses and charges the discourse to think and act with justice, love, faith, respect, connection, peace, courage, equity, compassion, humility, and kindness. Such an audacious discourse has great impacts on shaping and bringing forth a kindred connection in honoring the sacredness of the human heart.

Conclusion

In this article, I have attempted to share some thoughts on my perception of spirituality that was expressed in a class on Transformative Adult Education. I have also tried to articulate my notion of a spirited discourse through spiritual praxis. Spirituality in adult education as the practice of connectedness is an important arena with great potential for fostering authentic and liberating learning experiences. Adult educators must not shy away from examining dimensions of spirituality in their teaching; if hidden and veiled, valuable learning opportunities and connections can be lost.

References

Apps, J. W. (1996). *Teaching from the heart.* Malabar, FL: Krieger Publishing.

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed.* New York: Herder and Herder.

Gobeldale, A. (1991). *The learning spirit: The spirituality of adult education.* Northern Illinois University, Dept. of Leadership and Educational Policy Studies. Doctoral thesis.

Kiser, A. G. (1998). *Masterful facilitation: Becoming a catalyst for meaningful change.* New York: American Management Association.

Knowles, M. (1980). *The modern practice of adult education: From pedagogy to andragogy.* (Rev. ed.). Chicago: Associated Press.

Lauzon, A. (1998). In search of a future: Adult education and the psychology of the soul. *International Journal of Lifelong Learning, 17* (5), 318-327.

Milani, B. (2000). *Designing the green economy: The postindustrial alternative to corporate globalization.* Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield.

Priest, S., Gass, M., & Gills, L. (2000). *The essential elements of facilitation.* Dubuque, IA: Experiential Publication.

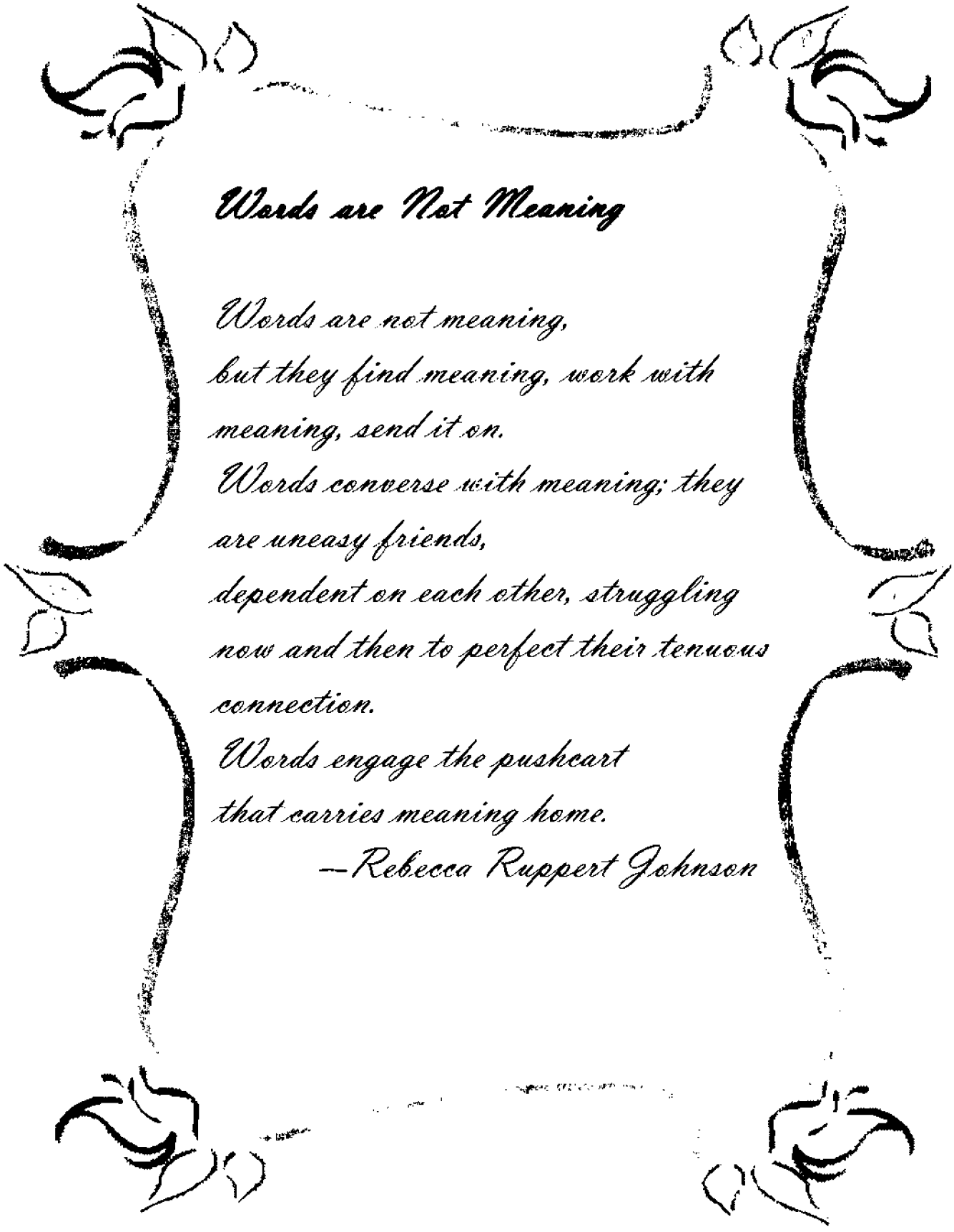
Rutstein, N. (1995). *A way out of the trap.* Springfield, MA: Whitcomb Publishing.

Tisdell, E. (2000). Spirituality and emancipatory adult education in women adult educators for social change. *Adult Education Quarterly, 50* (4), 308-336.

Vella, J. (2000). A spirited epistemology: Honoring the adult learner as subject. In L. M. English & M. A. Gillen (Eds.), *Addressing the spiritual dimensions of adult learning: What educators can do.* (pp 7-17). San Francisco: Jossey Bass Publishers.

Welton, M. (Ed.). (1995). *In defense of the lifeworld: Critical perspectives on adult learning.* Albany: SUNY Press.

Siew Sim Chin is currently a doctoral student in the Department of Continuing Adult and Higher Education at Northern Illinois University. She has lived in Malaysia, Thailand, Canada, and the United States. Her experiences of place and meaning-making across cultures have greatly affirmed for her "up there on high, everything is one" and that the spiritual path of transformation must be walked with practical feet.



Words are Not Meaning

Words are not meaning,
but they find meaning, work with
meaning, send it on.
Words converse with meaning; they
are uneasy friends,
dependent on each other, struggling
now and then to perfect their tenuous
connection.
Words engage the pushcart
that carries meaning home.

—Rebecca Ruppert Johnson

Autobiography as a Teaching Tool: The Literature

Rebecca Ruppert Johnson
Northern Illinois University

Autobiography has its roots in the *Confessions* of St. Augustine in the 5th century. By the 12th century, with Peter Abelard's autobiography, this confessional form of writing had become less about admitting sin and more about self-reflection. Today, autobiography is often sensationalized through high-profile stories of celebrities and the near-famous. In academia, autobiographical writing is generally reserved for beginning composition students. English instructors hook students by allowing them to write about themselves and gradually reel them into believing that writing can be fun because it's about them. But the fun doesn't last long. Students are soon expected to put away their childish, immature narratives and begin writing about the ideas and opinions of experts. In short order, students' lives take a back seat to more respected modes of discourse. This is often the practice that contradicts the theory. Current literature about autobiographical writing proclaims profound benefits to writing and examining self in the academic context. Reviewing some of this literature and investigating practice will begin to address this divergent thinking and perhaps uncover stumbling blocks that force the two apart.

Autobiographical writing can help students objectively see problem-solving abilities and other personal-coping skills that helped* them *guide* themselves *through life.

Self-Reflection and Probing

Writing about self is much more than just recounting dates and places. Re-connecting with one's past through writing allows the writer to examine individual events as part of the larger patchwork of life. Painful events can be re-visited from a safer distance and put in perspective (Birren & Deutchman, 1991; Karpiak, 2000; Nelson, 1997). Glenn Smith, Professor Emeritus of Adult and Continuing Education at Northern Illinois University, finds when assigning autobiographical assignments to graduate students, "...that, while each particular assignment does shape the resulting autobiographical statement, people tend over a few weeks to write about their most pressing issues "no matter what" the overt subject suggested by the assignment" (personal communication, June 22, 2001). Students can allow themselves to become fixated on themselves to uncover meaning. "Sometimes it is only by bludgeoning experience—for example, through being obsessed with something—that we can make experience give up secrets that we don't get by innocent observation" (Elbow, 2000, p. 65). "Bludgeoning experience," as Peter Elbow suggests, is not an undertaking for those not looking. Seeking knowledge about themselves won't come unless students probe. The probing becomes an emotional undertaking destined to make them feel uncomfortable as the secrets are forced from safe hiding places. "It's not about fixing anything. It's just about being present with whatever it is. There will be joy, pain, disappointment, recognition. I've found that being present is all I need to do" (G. Smith, personal communication, June 22, 2001). The uneasiness need not make students feel victimized by their own hand or that of their instructors.

Tempering Life's Review

Survivorship can be celebrated and feelings of victimization can be tempered through the process of writing and the review of life. After all, some degree of perseverance and fortitude helped the student survive life's traumas and brought them to this current place. In fact, autobiographical writing can help students objectively see problem-solving abilities and other personal-coping skills that helped *them* guide *themselves* through life. Strengths can be inventoried

and honed, weaknesses can be acknowledged, accepted, and put in perspective. As autobiographies change over time, students incorporate new insights, previously unanticipated events, and changed perspectives about their life (Rossiter, 1999). Autobiographies become themselves living and evolving works.

Self-Identification

Writing about self allows adult student to construct an identity of self—one that can be examined at length. Students bring to the classroom a number of versions of themselves. One version—a real self—can be their interpretation of who they think they really are; another version—an ideal self—is the self they think they ought to be, the one they struggle with from time to time; and a third version—a social self—offers them a view of how others might see them (Birren & Deutchman, 1991). Conflict between these selves produces disharmony in adults' lives. Working through these divergent selves in writing can provide adults the clarification necessary to reduce the differences between the ideal and actual selves. The classroom environment provides a rich stage for students to acknowledge their social-image self. As they integrate new information into their existing bank of knowledge, students automatically become conscious of what they know, what they don't know, and what others might think they know. If students have been away from school for awhile, they can feel uneasy about returning to a learning environment. Such an upheaval in their life can temporarily widen the gap between the actual, the ideal, and the social self. Autobiography can help students use this transformative event to grow.

> "Autobiography, if it is to be of a transformative nature, entails an event of falling out of step, out of a state of integration, then follows the process of reconstructing that experience, and finally, the recovery of union of integration" (Karpiak, 2001).

Writers begin to see not only the unique events that paint their life special, but also common events and emotions that define the human experience.

Understanding the gap between the mask presented to others and the naked self can bring into focus a conflict that needs attention. "Whether good or bad, anticipated or unanticipated, transitions provide an individual with the opportunity to 'take stock' and 'take charge' of life" (Reeves, 1999). Narrowing the gaps between the three selves brings adults closer to self-integration and a more harmonious and fulfilling life. This will happen over and over again as life experiences continue to unfold.

Autobiography as Therapy

While autobiography is not formal therapy, it can have wonderful therapeutic effects such as: "1) increasing self-acceptance and personal integration, 2) reducing anxiety and tension, 3) increasing feelings of energy and vigor, and 4) increasing social connectedness and the capacity for rewarding interpersonal relationships" (Birren & Deutchman, 1991, p. 14). Sharing autobiographical pieces in a group setting builds group cohesion by illustrating patterns and rhythms that are experienced universally (Birren and Deutchman; 1991; Brookfield; 1995). Writers begin to see not only the unique events that paint their life special, but also common events and emotions that define the human experience. Seeing oneself in this way promotes self-healing, self-acceptance and self-knowing. "Experience is the adult learner's living textbook" (Lindeman, 1961, p.7). It precedes any other form of text.

In the classroom setting, writing and sharing about self engages students in interactive activities helping the classroom environment come alive, turning it from a passive lecture-hall to an active and breathing laboratory. Stories of depression and sadness can bring tears to both reader and listener. The display of tears is okay in autobiographical sharing. They are cleansing and can act as an effective catalyst to further bonding.

> By creating an atmosphere where the trials and hardships of life can be shared, the group can affirm the person's ability to proceed beyond a troubling event and aid in the development of greater confidence and self-worth. (Birren & Deutchman, 1991, p. 49)

Getting beyond a "troubling event" releases it from the death grip is has on the student, making room for greater growth and development.

As a welcome by-product, instructors can count on some autobiographies to bring lightness and humor into

the classroom as well, "which helps to ease tension, alleviate boredom, and pull those with fading attention spans back into the reality of the classroom" (King, 1987). Through humor *and* tears, students connect with each other, building bonds that build friendships and facilitate a co-learner atmosphere where students help students learn. Students become active listeners *and* active participators, fully engaged in the present.

This intellectual inquiry of self through autobiographical writing can help facilitate the same intellectual inquiry of subject matter.

Transformative Learning

But does autobiographical writing and sharing simply help create a warm and friendly classroom atmosphere? Or is there a deeper and more profound link between learning about self, learning about others, and learning about academic subjects? Irene Karpiak, Assistant Professor of Adult & Higher Learning at the University of Oklahoma, uses autobiography with graduate students in her adult education program. She explains, "[B]ecause autobiography involves not only recounting memories and expressions but also finding their larger meaning, and to the extent that the activity expands the individual's knowledge of self and the world, it constitutes learning" (2000, p. 34). Not only is learning about self transformative for the learner, but so is learning in general. When students give themselves permission to learn, they learn with their whole being. This being-ness or human-ness is comprised of rational and emotional components operating together, not separate.

> Individual experience and feelings are inserted into the educational processes and become the means by which rationality, skills, and attitudes are developed. Thus, it is the whole 'person' rather than simply the 'head' and/or 'hands' which engages in and is affected by the educational process. (Usher & Edwards, 1995, p. 10)

Intellectual Inquiry

Learning what it is to be fully human in the larger world context is as important as acquiring subject expertise that must also be learned in the same context (Birren & Deutchman, 1991; Karpiak, 2000; University of San Francisco, 2001). Developing this idea further, one must come to understand the link between subject and self, examining each under the same critical microscope, wary of bias, skeptical of purpose and relevance, curious about application and promise in the historical-cultural world around us. This intellectual inquiry of self through autobiographical writing can help facilitate the same intellectual inquiry of subject matter. Through this inquiry, students can begin to ascertain not only the influence of a particular discipline on them, but also how they might be influencing that discipline, and in turn influencing the larger world machine.

> Another way of perceiving consciousness-raising is as a means of encouraging a reflexive understanding of the relationship between individual practice and social structure, not only relating selves to social collectivities, but also recognising the part that selves play in constructing structures as well as being mediated by them. (Stanley, 1993)

Social Structuring

Each person is implicated as a player in his or her own academic arena. This objective look at their participation in social structures helps students understand the workings of social structures, compromises made to participate in these structures, and the power students have (even if minimal) to instigate change in these structures (Larson & Brady, 2001; Reeves, 1999). As future practitioners in a given field, this knowledge is crucial. Their voice is important in helping them see their place within the field at any given time. It can only be captured if they are given the chance to discover it, document it, review it for themselves, and pass it on.

Parker Palmer sees the autobiographical connection to subject matter as vital even though much of what we tell is from our particular and colored point of view.

> Of course, everyone's story is, in part, parochial and biased. But when we deal with that fact by ignoring autobiography, we create educated monsters who know much about the

> world's external workings but little about their inner selves. The authentically educated person is one who can both embrace and transcend the particularity of his or her own story because it has been triangulated many times from the stand points of other stories, other disciplines—a process that enriches the disciplines as well. When autobiography and an academic discipline are brought into 'mutual irradiation' the result is a self illuminated in the shadows where ignorance hides and a discipline warmed and made fit for human habitation. (Palmer, 1999)

Autobiography brings together interior and exterior worlds in a manner that has the potential to inform both. Individual stories have meaning for individuals, but enough stories from enough individuals ensures that definitions of universal truths encompass meanings for everyone affected by them. Untold stories compromise universal truth to the detriment of all (Palmer, 1999).

Autobiography in the Classroom

Autobiography is an especially necessary vehicle for hearing student's voices and acknowledging the full scope of their learning. Most curriculum programs culminate with an evaluation tied to predetermined learning objectives but have no outlet for students to express or otherwise gauge accidental, insightful, or additional learning outside the predetermined program (Brookfield, 1986; 1994). Autobiographical writing allows students to explore their thoughts about self and learning, unhampered by testing or evaluation rituals and restrictions. For educators committed to enhancing practice, measuring incidental learning should be crucial to their evolving pedagogy.

It would be misleading to believe that all autobiographical writing is beneficial for all students and educators all the time.

So why don't some educators allow students to use autobiography as a tool in learning? A possibility may be that these educators don't use autobiography as a tool for their own learning. Brookfield believes that "when we're trying to uncover our most deeply embedded allegiances and motivations as teachers, a useful path of analysis is the study of our autobiographies as learners" (1995, p. 32). Educators not familiar with their own autobiographies may fail to see merit in such writing within their classrooms. In addition, Brookfield has studied critical reflection among educators and found that the culture of academia may not be welcoming. Educators with new ideas gathered from a period of critical reflection involving both personal and professional autobiographical writing are sometimes dismissed by peers. Some may view them as becoming pretentious and elitist and, at the very least, view them as troublemakers trying to make life uncomfortable for those around them. Few educators want to risk being so negatively portrayed in the eyes of their colleagues. Their fear is not unfounded, nor can it be ignored.

Current literature also examines fears educators have about allowing students to write extremely personal narratives in an academic setting. Painful experiences in the lives of students leave teachers feeling that they need to play the role of therapist—a role few feel qualified for, yet most do in some measure already as they counsel students. As long as students who have experienced traumatic events are treated as victims, they will need to consult experts outside the academic arena. However, if all students are treated as survivors of life's experiences, then student, teacher and fellow classmates can celebrate survivorship without dwelling on their victim status. The classroom becomes a community of friends who accept, celebrate, acknowledge, and rejoice in learning life lessons—just as most friendships in life do.

The academy is not accustomed to looking for friends, though. A well-established hierarchy of clearly defined knowers who clearly define the known is unlikely to give up power for friendship. Coaxing students to investigate their interior environment is to ask them to look in their own shadows. Asking them to investigate their exterior environment is to suggest that they look in mostly dark and highly protected areas typically closed for student inspection. Growth and new truth come from examining these dark and protected sites. Conflict is sure to result. "Paradoxically, the most important thing a teacher can do to encourage classroom conflict is to make the classroom a hospitable space" (Palmer, 1999). Creating a hospitable space begins by eliminating bi-polar views of right and

wrong, good and evil, winner and loser.

It would be misleading to believe that all autobiographical writing is beneficial for all students and educators all the time. Disconnects can happen. Students can sometimes feel like impostors. They may believe that their personal narratives don't seem academic enough, that their professors may see them merely as struggling and stumbling survivors of life's traumas, but not necessarily "college material" (Brookfield, 1994). Students can feel inadequate, emotionally weak, or intellectually fraudulent. Paradoxically, some students may feel the opposite. They may sense that their instructors place high value on transformative insights gained through traumatic personal revelations; students without these insights, or without dramatic personal pasts that lead to transformation, may feel inadequate. Brookfield also notes that "journals, portfolios, and logs also have the potential to become ritualistic and mandated confessionals—the educational equivalents of tabloid-like, sensationalistic outpourings of talk-show participants" (Brookfield, 1995, p. 13). Can writing about self become ritualistic? Does use of student autobiography smack more of St. Augustine's *Confessions* than a vehicle for personal growth and acceptance? I prefer to look at the ritualistic nature of autobiography and the confessional nature as separate animals.

Brain research, although complex and still very much mysterious, does indicate that intellect and emotion travel together.

Writer to Reader to Examiner

Autobiographical writing dredges up memories, details, thoughts, and emotions. Recounting episodes of one's life by writing about them brings out the events from their hiding places. Submerged recollections are teased forward, and the very act of writing is a journey of finding words to express that which has often been unexpressed (Kerka, 1996). It can be quite cathartic and therapeutic. If the autobiographical process stops there, though, this type of writing can become ritualistic. Portfolios, journals, and logs can fall into this trap. An insightful instructor will help students find within themselves tools to reflect on their writing from a critical stance. With life on paper, the writer now becomes reader. The subject, the student's life, can be examined in concrete and meaningful ways. This examination can happen throughout life and will be as changing and evolving as life itself. A particular event will garner meaning in one way as it's happening, more meaning ten years after the event, and perhaps still more meaning as it's reviewed near life's end. Reviewing life may become a ritual, but never ritualistic.

Discourse & Effect

In terms of Brookfield's look at autobiography as a mandated confessional, Usher and Edwards provide some insight. They consider the paradox between the Rogerian interpretation of self-discourse in a confessional sense as a form of empowerment for individuals, giving them an opportunity to bring feelings and individual experience together in the education process, *and* a Foucaultian interpretation that suggests such "discourses are not to be explained in terms of their causes, the intentions of their 'authors' or the interests they appear to serve. Discourses are the means by which power is disseminated, the means by which power is given effect" (Usher & Edwards, 1995, p. 10). Usher and Edwards prefer to look at self-discourse, what they call the confession, not in terms of its ability to bring about self-actualization for the student nor its potential to bring student and subject matter together as one. Rather, they prefer to examine the exchange of power such discourse brings to the academic arena and the larger socio-cultural context. Bringing forth student as subject allows that subject to be examined. As such, it becomes vulnerable to regulation. In other words, the very act of requesting students to write about themselves is to expect that they will examine their life through a judgmental filter. "Confession therefore functions as a regulation through self-regulation, discipline through self-discipline, a process which is pleasurable and even 'empowering', but only within a matrix of emancipation/oppression from which power is never absent" (1995, p. 14). This assertion assumes that in the process of reviewing their lives in writing, students make judgments about events and actions in their lives in terms of right and wrong. This right and wrong judgment comes from moral and ethical codes programmed into the student by a society intent on controlling and domesticating its citizenry. A predictable outcome of this evaluation will have students intent on working to minimize future wrongs

while making promises to themselves to try to do better, thus falling in line with the behavior most expected by society.

The argument between the Rogerian interpretation of autobiography as a means to self-actualization and the Foucaultian interpretation of autobiography as a means to social control is to acknowledge that autobiography is an individualized, psychological and/or spiritual process operating within a complex sociocultural context (Usher, 1989). The hegemonic control of society can be minimized simply by first understanding its existence. Deciding the extent to which this influence will be tolerated in the future is a question each student must ask him or herself. Autobiography opens the door for this realization, and meaningful sharings of this realization foster a critical examination of all influences on the student. Again, students step away from their role as victim and continue to move toward their role as survivor and empowered participator in the process of life.

The current literature in the use of autobiography in education chronicles a process of self-knowing through an academic fabric that begins with memory, journeys through discovery, leads to review, accepts and integrates new information, passes through a social context, and makes its way home to self-knowing and self-actualization. This process entails the workings of emotion and intellect operating in unison and requires not a little energy and willingness to travel such a journey. What stimulates all of this activity?

Recent brain research finds a close relationship between reason and emotion. Antonio Damasio, Professor of Neurology at University of Iowa School of Medicine, continues to study the integral relationship between all physiological functions of the brain as they translate into human behavior.

> The idea of human organism outlined in this book, and the relation between feelings and reason that emerges from the findings discussed here, do suggest, however, that the strengthening of rationality probably requires that greater consideration be given to the vulnerability of the world within. (Damasio, 1994, p. 247)

According to Demasio, brain activity functions to filter all new information and catalog it according to whether or not it upsets the basic regulatory mechanisms that protect us from harm (1994). All new information gets cataloged, even if it is not overtly good or bad. And, according to Stephen Parkhill, it gets tagged for admission or rejection depending on how well it fits with emotionally laden meanings already in place (1995).

Brain research, although complex and still very much mysterious, does indicate that intellect and emotion travel together. Educators know when something good happens, although they may not always understand the physiological or mind-based systems operating that cause it to work so well. What it says to educators is that students must not be separated from their emotions if learning is to take place. Some educators have known this all along. And among those are a few who have discovered that autobiography can enhance the process.

References

Birren, J. E., & Deutchman, D. E. (1991). *Guiding autobiography groups for older adults: Exploring the fabric of life*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Brookfield, S. (1986). *Understanding and facilitating adult learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Brookfield, S. (1994, May-June). Tales from the dark side: A phenomenography of adult critical reflection. *International Journal of Lifelong Education, 13* (3), 203-216.

Brookfield, S. (1995). *Becoming a critically reflective teacher*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Damasio, A. R. (1994. *Descartes' error: Emotion, reason and the human brain*. New York: Avon Books.

Elbow, P. (2000). *Everyone can write*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Karpiak, I. (2000, Spring). Writing our life: Adult learning and teaching through autobiography. *Canadian Journal of University Education, 26* (1), 31-50.

Karpiak, I. (2001). Deweyan 'Experience', autobiography, and adult development. [On-line]. Available: http://www.members.aol.com/jophe00/karpiak.htm.

Kerka, S. (1996). Journal writing and adult learning. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 399 413).

King. K. M. (1987). Using retrospective autobiographies as a teaching tool. *Teaching Sociology, 15*, 410-413.

Larson, D. & Brady, E. M. (2001). Learning stories of our own. Retrieved March 28, 2001 [On-Line]. Available: http://www.usm.maine.edu/~dlarson/ LarsonBrady99.htm.

Lindeman, E. (1961). The meaning of adult education. Canada: Harvest House.

Nelson, A. (1997). Imagining and critical reflection in autobiography: An odd couple in adult transformative learning. *1997 Adult Education Research Conference Proceedings.* Retrieved March 31, 2001 [On-Line]. Available at: http://www.edst.ubc.ca/aerc/1997/97nelson.htm.

Palmer, P. J. (1999). *Good Teaching: A matter of living the mystery.* Retrieved April 28, 2001 from Maricopa Center for Learning and Instruction [On-line]. Available: http://www.mcli.dist.maricopa.edu/fsd/afc99/articles/goodteaching.html.

Parkhill, S. C. (1995). *Answer cancer, answers for living: The healing of a nation.* DeLand, FL: Omni Hypnosis Center.

Reeves, P. M. (1999, Winter). Psychological development: Becoming a person. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, 84,* 19-27. Retrieved October 24, 2000 from ERIC online database (No. ED100003278).

Rossiter, M. (1999, Winter). Understanding adult development as narrative. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, 84,* 77-85. Retrieved October 24, 2000 from ERIC online database (No. ED100003303).

Stanley, L. (1993, February). On auto/biography in sociology. *The Journal of the British Sociological Association, 27* (1), 41-52.

University of San Francisco. (2001). Autobiographical literature across cultures: Curriculum guide. Retrieved March 31, 2001 [On-line]. Available: http://www.usfca.edu/faculty/cody/boxcodyj/00writing2000/writing pictures/autobioghdbk.htm.

Usher, R. (1989, Fall). Locating experience in language: Towards a poststructuralist theory of experience. *Adult Education Quarterly, 40* (1), 23-32.

Usher, R. & Edwards, R. (1995, April). Confessing all? A 'postmodern guide' to the guidance and counseling of adult learners. *Studies in the Education of Adults, 27* (1), 9-23.

Rebecca Johnson is an English instructor at Griffin Technical College in Griffin, Georgia. Her passion continues to be finding meaning through reflection and self-knowing within the parameters of vocation and skill-building. A student of poetry, Rebecca also attempts to find her own center through self-reflective writing and poetic meanderings.

Presence

Jeanette Rosetti
Northern Illinois University

It is important, as adult educators, to foster transformative adult learning by encouraging our students to become more reflective, participate in critical discourse, and thus acquire new meaning perspectives (Mezirow, 1991). This author believes being present with ourselves, as adult educators, and with our students would assist in the process of transformation in the learning environment. The concept of presence will be explored, and the importance of teachers being present with themselves and their students will be discussed.

Palmer (1998) shares that out of all the stories he has heard about good teaching, one characteristic is in common. This one characteristic is that the teachers have a strong sense of personal identity which infuses their work. Palmer's example of this was a student's remark, "Dr. A. is really *there* when she teaches" (p. 10). Being *there*, being *present*. Teachers who are fully present and open to the humanity of their students are gifts to the educational process.

Presence is considered to be a higher level of awareness allowing thoughts, feelings, and actions to be known, developed, and harmonized.

The presence of a teacher is central in our educational endeavors—as the primary role of a teacher is interaction with others. In order to be able to interact with others, one must be genuine to one's self. "The teacher needs to know herself as a person in order to know herself as a teacher. She needs to know herself as a person so as to have good and satisfying relationships with others in her teaching role" (Cranton, 2001, p. 14).

An important factor in holistic learning is for teachers to nurture their own deeper selves and develop an inner life. Activities such as gardening or meditation and using the technique of mindfulness can help with the process of nurturing the self (Miller, 1999). To further illustrate the importance of self awareness, Miller describes a teacher in one of his classes as writing:

> As a teacher, I have become more aware of my students and their feelings in class. Instead of rushing through the day's events, I take the time to enjoy our day's experiences and opportune moments. The students have commented that I seem happier. I do tend to laugh more, and I think it is because I am more aware, alert, and "present," instead of thinking about what I still need to do. (p. 48)

Miller speaks to the importance of making connections through holistic learning by balancing learning and assessment. He addresses this to include students of diverse race and abilities and to making connections that deeply integrate learning. All in all, the focus is on what is important in life and fostering the development of whole human beings.

The following illustration of being present is offered in an attempt to describe something that is rather difficult to put into words:

> Whenever I stand in the presence of a powerful, creative person I feel the impact of the deep spirit responsible for that person's life and personality, and I am aware that even this person may not know anything of this other presence. I may see it more clearly because I am touched and pressed by its palpability. It is this deep force of vitality, not intention and by all means not consciousness, that grants personality. In fact, a certain forgetfulness may be just the item that allows the soul to break through with forcefulness and creativity. (Moore, 2000, p. 89)

Moore believes that a passionate and inner presence makes us who we are. Moore gives words to presence.

In speaking of presence as a human attribute, Helminski (1992) describes presence as a quality of "consciously being here" (p. viii). Presence is considered to be a higher level of awareness allowing thoughts, feelings, and actions to be known, developed, and harmonized. It is the way we occupy space and determines the degree of our alertness, openness, and warmth. It can be difficult to pay attention since our capacity for voluntary attention is small. Presence allows us to be aware of when our attention is caught and how to free it by developing our attention. "We can sustain a sense of our physical presence through being aware of sense impressions: sound, touch, smell, and the sense of our own bodiliness, especially our breathing" (p. 37). Presence is the essence of a relationship and of communication, as we can simultaneously be aware of our own inner state, as well as the state of another. Presence involves the conscious recognition of self and the forces operating on self at any given moment for "presence is seeing, sustaining a conscious relationship to our experience" (p.116). This can, in fact, assist us in being more sensitive to others and being more aware of our own feelings.

Harper (1991) speaks to the difficulty of writing about presence. Harper calls presence elusive. Eloquently, he describes for the reader what he means by presence:

> When I am moved by a painting or by music, by clouds passing in a clear night sky, by the soughing of pines in early spring, I feel the distance between me and art and nature dissolve to some degree, and I feel at ease. I then feel that what I know makes me more myself than I knew before. (p. 6)

Coming from a background with a specialty in psychiatric nursing, this author was able to make a connection to the writings by Leifer (1996) who describes presence from a medical perspective. Leifer, a medical doctor, postulates that medical treatment of the chronically ill is "an art that involves much more than the skillful management of physical pathology and more than a charming bedside manner" (p. 752).

Presence is the essence of a relationship and of communication, as we can simultaneously be aware of our own inner state, as well as the state of another.

Leifer identified that the presence of the physician had a profound impact on the patient. He states that this presence is much more than just physical presence. This presence is a quality of being which involves the physician's inner qualities. Leifer states, for example, that if the physician is relaxed and present-centered, the patient will be drawn into that relaxed state. "If the physician is not paying attention to the patient, then he or she cannot make full contact with the patient in the present moment" (p. 757). Developing this therapeutic presence is not a simple task, it is one that can be acquired and developed with the proper motivation and effort. "To develop a presence involves consciously working with one's negative qualities while developing skills in relaxation and present-centeredness" (p. 758).

Helminski (1992) connects one with another in the presence of the Absolute Being. Presence is understood to be the reflection of the Absolute Being through the human being. "Presence is our connection to that greater Being to which we belong [and it is] the point of intersection between the world of the senses and the world of the spirit" (p. xi). Here, the individual spirit is in connection with the unified spirit of the whole. Helminski posits that education in the west ignores the human soul. In teaching and learning, one must have an eye toward awareness of self and the other.

A correlation is found in Helminski's notions of the importance of recognizing the human soul in education to Palmer's *The Courage to Teach* (1998). Palmer sees teaching emerging from the inwardness of the teacher. "As I teach, I project the condition of my soul onto my students, my subject, and our way of being together" (Palmer, 1998, p. 2). Being in touch and present with the self assists one in being present with

their students.

How may one deepen the understanding of the self and develop presence? Brown speaks to the teacher being aware of the inner happenings of the self and how faculty can develop a spirit in the classes they teach. Brown (1998/1999) spoke to the teacher as being a contemplative observer who learns to bring the fundamentals of Buddhist practice into the classroom. Observation, meditation, contemplation, and compassion are the elements that lead to one being a contemplative observer in the classroom. "In contemplative observation, we observe not only what is happening in the environment, but also what is simultaneously occurring within ourselves, the observer" (p. 70). Again, there is a reference to presence: "[I]n being fully present, we trust our responses, our ways of knowing that arise in the moment" (p. 73).

It was this writer's intention to explore the concept of presence so that one could note the importance of it in transformative adult learning. The ability to be truly present with a student can assist the learner in defining meanings and gaining new perspectives in the arena of adult education.

References

Brown, R. C. (1998/1999). The teacher as contemplative observer. *Educational Leadership, 56*(4), 70-73.

Cranton, P. (2001). *Becoming an authentic teacher in higher education.* Malabar: Krieger Publishing Company.

Harper, R. (1991). *On presence.* Philadelphia: Trinity Press International.

Helminski, K. E. (1992). *Living presence.* New York: Penguin Putnam.

Leifer, R. (1996). Psychological and spiritual factors in chronic illness. *American Behavioral Scientist, 39*(6), 752-756.

Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning.* San Francisco: Jossey- Bass.

Miller, J. P. (1999). Making connections through holistic learning. *Educational Leadership, 56*(4), 46-48.

Moore, T. (2000). *Original self living with paradox and originality.* New York: Harper Collins Publishers.

Palmer, P. J. (1998). *The courage to teach.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Jeanette Rossetti is an Assistant Professor at Northern Illinois University's School of Nursing in DeKalb, Illinois. Her area of focus is psychiatric nursing. She received a doctoral degree in Adult Education from Northern Illinois University in December, 2002. The title of her dissertation is Factors that make outstanding professors successful: A connection to inspiration. *She received a Masters degree in Nursing from St. Xavier University and a Bachelors degree in Nursing from Lewis University. She is a member of Sigma Theta Tau International and serves on the Guardianship and Advocacy Commission for the State of Illinois, North Suburban Region.*

More Questions than Answers: Spirituality, Psychotherapy, and Awakening

Christopher Adamsick
Northern Illinois University

An understanding of the spiritual as well as practical advantages of meditative practices has a long and tried history. In the Christian tradition, systematic meditative methods date back primarily to the 14th century classic of Christian mysticism, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, as well as the works of St. John of the Cross (Keating, 1994). Christian meditation itself dates back even further, to the early Christian church and the desert fathers. In the Eastern tradition, Buddhist meditation dates from the teachings of Buddha himself (Wellwood, 2000).

In a more recent development, both the Trappist monk, Father Thomas Keating, as well as the noted psychotherapist, John Wellwood, have popularized meditative practices—especially insofar as they relate to contemporary thought in psychotherapy. Both men, working independently of one another, portray meditation as a way to awakening, or more appropriately re-awakening ourselves to the fortunes of being human and all that accompanies that—just being human.

This brief essay will take a look at Thomas Keating's psychology of centering prayer and John Wellwood's psychology of awakening. It will take a look at the very real possibilities that both Christian and Buddhist meditation are present in personal and communal transformation. Although both practices originate out of rather different traditions (Christian versus Buddhist), they share many similarities just the same. I begin with an account of the emergence of the spiritual/psychotherapeutic tradition that both Keating and Wellwood have done such remarkable jobs at popularizing over the past thirty years. This account will be followed by an introduction to a few of the concepts that are associated with this tradition, and will conclude with a brief autobiographical sketch, my own account, of awakening.

Why do we need to be awakened in the first place, and precisely what is it from which we need to be awakened?

Origins of Awakening

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (1993) defines the word awaken as "to rouse from sleep" or "to rouse into activity; to stir up, excite; kindle." Awakening seems to be the word that both Keating and Wellwood prefer in describing the transformational affects of meditation. But doesn't their assertion (their choice of metaphor, if you will) suggest that for one reason or another, you and I are actually in need of transformation? Why do we need to be awakened in the first place, and precisely what is it from which we need to be awakened? There are probably no clear-cut answers to such questions—thus, more questions than answers. Nevertheless, in the 1960s and 70s both Keating and Wellwood found themselves in positions where they experienced, first hand, the phenomenon of awakening.

In the midst of the Second Vatican Council, for instance, Thomas Keating (by then he was Abbot, from 1961-1981, of St. Joseph's Abbey in Spencer, Massachusetts) witnessed the renewal of Roman Catholicism's religious life in the form of inter-religious dialogue, which correspondingly initiated new religious experiences (Keating, 1994). With the doctrines of the Second Vatican Council in place, along with a little help from the mystical writings of the Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, many American men and women renewed their interest in spiritual things. Although not surprised by this renewal, Keating was surprised as to "why [there] were thousands of young people going to India every summer to find some form of spirituality when contemplative monasteries of men and women were plentiful right here in this country?" (Keating, 1994, p. 14)

John Wellwood, searching for a meaningful life for himself in 1960s Paris, also echoed the sentiments of

the many young men Keating had witnessed. "Christianity, at least as it was taught me, did not provide an experiential practice that allowed me to access the living spirit" (Wellwood, 2000, p. xii). Already disillusioned by both materialism as well as existentialist writers such as Frederick Nietzsche, Wellwood's uncertainty led him to search for something more. It was within this disillusionment, and within his search, that Wellwood happened upon the teachings and practices of Zen Buddhism. Along with his deepening interest in graduate studies at the University of Chicago (under his mentor, the existentialist philosopher/psychotherapist, Eugene Gendlin), the seeds of Wellwood's practice emerged (Wellwood, 2000).

What reasons might lead one to make the conscious decision toward the awakening and transformational experiences found in meditation? What are people looking for in such experiences? Albeit a difficult question to answer, I think that the spiritual/psychotherapeutic teachings of Keating and Wellwood can provide some insight. What does it means to be awakened in this tradition?

The Meaning of Awakening: The False Self, Presence, and the Realization of the True Self

The "false self" seems to be one of the most important concepts running through the meditative teachings of Keating and Wellwood. Traditionally, the false self has been associated with the ego and its propensity for designing elaborate and sometimes self-destructive patterns or stories about the way we really are or the way reality actually is (Keating, 1994; Wellwood, 2000). Wellwood, for instance, refers to this propensity as our "dis-ease" in that "we continually judge, reject, and turn away from certain areas of our experience that cause us discomfort, pain, or anxiety" (1994, p. 137). Keating, too, refers to these stories as the elaborate energy centers of our false self—in which there is no escaping. Simply, a person "can go all over the world and still get this disease" (Keating, 2001).

Neither man makes the claim that there is anything inherently wrong with the devices of the ego—these stories certainly seem to serve the purpose of human survival. As children, our "feelings were often too overwhelming for our fledgling nervous systems to handle" (Wellwood, 2000, p. 138). Thus, the development of the false self is partially a "consequence of traumatic emotional experiences from earliest childhood" (Keating, 1986). But isn't protection a good thing?

How attached are we to such things as security, power, and esteem—even our self or communal identity? Keating says that it "does not mean not using them, but having no attachment to them. So if they are taken away, you are not blown away" (Keating, 2001). Likewise, what are the implications or consequences of over-identifying with such things (Keating, 2001)? How do we let our "elaborate web of rationalizations," which first arose out of our innocent need for protection, cut "us off from our larger being" (Wellwood, 2000, p. 139)? Are we "blown away," so to speak, or do we step into the fullness of being human and all that accompanies that—just being human? Where do we go from here?

It is precisely within the meditative practices that people (such as John Wellwood and Thomas Keating) believe we can actually find the seeds of awakening. The meditative practices, as taught by these two men, are grounded in the idea of the healing power of unconditional presence (Wellwood, 2000). As Thomas Keating says, "[E]verything has to be allowed to be what it is" (Keating, 2001). It is, in the words of John Wellwood, "being present with our experience as it is" (Wellwood, 2000, p. 141). If our experience during meditation is one of grief for, let's say, the unexpected loss of a loved one, let it be. If it is the feeling of anxiousness over the possibility of losing your career, your status in the community, or even your own self-identity, let it be. If it is the joy of your newborn child, let it be. "This is unconditional presence" (p. 141).

This letting-be during meditation does not mean that if a particular feeling is rather traumatic that you shouldn't do something positive to correct it—possibly even go out and seek help in therapy or counseling (Keating, 1994). To the contrary, if you unexpectedly lose a loved one, it does not mean not feeling the very real anguish of that loss—it just means that life will eventually go on (Wellwood, 2000; Keating, 2001). In the Christian tradition, even death is not seen as the end of the story (Keating, 2001). But again, to reiterate the words of Thomas Keating, in the first instance, "everything has to be allowed to be what it is."

But how does one do this? Unconditional presence seems to be a rather daunting task, for if it were so

easy, wouldn't people be doing it all the time? As one enters into a meditative practice such as centering prayer, it is often very difficult to:

> let ourselves feel our pain and disconnection. As soon as we start to look at it, a story comes up, a distracting belief, thought, or fantasy. As soon as we ask ourselves, 'What is this? Why am I feeling so bad?' our mind steps in and says, 'Oh, I know what it is. It's x or y. It's my hang-up with my mother. It's my inferiority complex. It's nothing serious, nothing worth giving any energy to. Everyone has problems like these, don't indulge them.' (p. 140)

The crux of this human story, our story, is that we are not these things. We are not our beliefs, our thoughts, or even our feelings. "Ultimately, [we are,] just plain you and I" (Keating, 2001).

There is also the possibility, as a person begins to tread the meditative path toward unconditional presence, to "co-opt" the spiritual practice through unconscious identities which only serve to reinforce unconscious defenses (Wellwood, 2000, p. 209). We may begin to believe that we have prematurely transcended some of the things (e.g. emotional suffering, a particularly unpleasant situation) that are part of being human (Wellwood, 2000). Simply, the false self often rejects the world (e.g. emotional suffering, a particularly unpleasant situation, etc.) under the guise of spirituality (Finley, 1988).

The systematic meditative practices popularized by Wellwood and Keating are indeed designed "to turn off the ordinary flow of thoughts that reinforces our habitual way of thinking of ourselves and of looking at the world" (Keating, 1986, p. 109). In actuality, it does not mean turning off our ordinary stream of thoughts that occur. That would be a nearly impossible task. What it does mean, however, is that we have no particular attachment to our thoughts [conceptual thinking] during the meditative session (Keating, 2001). Simply, we sit in silence, fully present, to the emptiness of just being human (Wellwood, 2000; Keating, 1994).

Finally, as we begin to practice meditation—for twenty minutes or an hour, or longer each day—what should we expect to find as the fruits of our labor? In other words, if meditation and unconditional presence are in fact a move toward our true self (and away from the false self), what does it look like? As much as we might like definitive answers, there probably aren't any. The Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, from his book *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, talks about the realization of our true self:

> Where there is carrion lying, meat-eating birds circle and descend. Life and death are two. The living attack the dead, to their own profit. The dead lose nothing by it. They gain too, by being disposed of. Or they seem to, if you must think in terms of gain and loss. Do you then approach the study of Zen with the idea that there is something to be gained by it?...Where there is a lot of fuss about 'spirituality,' 'enlightenment' or just 'turning on,' it is often because there are buzzards hovering around a corpse. The hovering, this circling, this descending, this celebration of victory is not what is meant by the study of Zen—even though they may be a highly useful exercise in other contexts. And they enrich the birds of appetite.
>
> Zen enriches no one. There is no body to be found. The birds may come and circle for a while in the place where it is thought to be. But they soon go elsewhere. When they are gone, the 'nothing,' the 'no-body' that was there, suddenly appears. That is Zen. It was there all the time, but the scavengers missed it, because it was not their kind of prey.
>
> The birds of appetite soar about aimlessly within us. (1968, p. 13-14)

An Autobiographical Sketch: What Does It Mean to Me to Be Awakened?

The meaning of Merton's words are left to the reader. What follows is an autobiographical sketch of what it means to me to realize the true self and, ultimately, what it means to be awakened?

Most of the time I feel as though I will never be healthy. I am often anxious that I will never be awakened to my true self, the true self that people sometimes talk about. I don't want to be a slave to life's pain, my pain, for the rest of my life--for however long my life lasts. I've always thought of my feelings as good, or as bad, or that I shouldn't have them, or that they don't matter. How can I get rid of them? I think now, that I judge my feelings because I don't know what else to do with them. I know, however, I can only run so far before they'll eventually overwhelm me. I must choose either the path of awakening or the path of just not being. Please someone help me! Why am I not happy?

I've tried so hard to stop the feelings, some of the awful feelings of a lifetime. My therapist calls my desperate attempts "white-knuckling." I feel the pain, and yet I don't. I try to understand the pain, and yet I don't. I try to work on the pain, and yet I don't. My realization is that life, my life, is unmanageable. Yet, I can't seem to benefit from this wonderful gift (the gift of knowing that life is complex and that all that matters, in the end, is the moment) because people will not let me just be me. Or is it the other way around? Is it that I can't see these fruits because I won't let me just be me? Please someone help me! Why am I not happy?

I am afraid to move toward awakening. My life is paradoxical because my true self is hidden in the emptiness of just my being. A reward is not promised to me, not to anyone, I think. I'm afraid of this paradox. It really doesn't follow conventional wisdom. How can it be, that in the end, my true self is just me and your true self is just you? I understand this paradox now, but it's difficult for me to just be me. I'm still not terribly happy?

References

(1993). *The Oxford English Dictionary*, AND Software.

Finley, J. (1988). *Merton's palace of nowhere: A search for God through awareness of the true self.* Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press.

Keating, T. (1986). *Open mind, open heart.* Amity, NY: Amity House.

Keating, T. (1994). *Intimacy with God.* New York: Crossroad.

Keating, T. (Speaker) (November 2001). *Contemplative outreach.* (Cassette Recording) Oak Park, IL: Contemplative Outreach Ltd.

Merton, T. (1968). *Zen and the birds of appetite.* New York: New Directions.

Wellwood, J. (2000). *Toward a psychology of awakening: Buddhism, psychotherapy, and the path of personal and spiritual transformation.* Boston & London: Shambhala.

Christopher T. Adamsick is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Educational Technology, Research and Assessment at Northern Illinois University. His dissertation entitled "The significance of technologies for learning: A phenomenological analysis of instructional media" *focuses on both the meaning and nature of product technologies. His other research interests include: role transcendence, student transformation, and "what's left unsaid in the classroom."*

Bending

Linda K. Armacost
Northern Illinois University

The concept of transformation is a foundational theory in Adult Continuing Education. Transformation in the context of adult learning was initially explicated by Jack Mezirow in his 1991 book, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning.* Mezirow asserts that there are discrete phases adults experience while undergoing transformation, and that these phases begin with a disorienting dilemma and conclude with the adoption of a new role and an acceptance of a new life perspective (1991, p. 169). Transformation disrupts the individual's life with experiences that are often painful and involve periods of discomfort and self-doubt. Individuals who successfully negotiate the periods of discomfort and integrate new knowledge find themselves forever changed—they are transformed.

Mezirow asserts that there are discrete phases adults experience while undergoing transformation, and that these phases begin with a disorienting dilemma.

As co-learners enrolled in Glenn Smith's class, "The Metaphysics of Transformation," we explored the nature of transformation by reading selected texts about transformation and through autobiographical writing. We seemed to agree that transformation begins with a disorienting event. The event could be positive (the birth of a child), or negative (death or accident), in either case, the event snapped the individual out of his or her normal or complacent routine. Transformation, we discovered, can touch us in many ways; intellectually, emotionally, physically, and spiritually. Each person's transformational experience is unique.

The following story began in April of 2000. In my case, the disorienting event was the death of my father. I had been doing a great deal of autobiographical writing, and one day, after a particularly vibrant experience in my personal life, I was compelled to sit at the computer while a story literally poured out of my fingers. When I finally looked up from the computer, I had written a story about my experiences with horseback riding—and about transformation.

Bending

I had six semester hours to go to complete a Master's degree in Adult Continuing Education when my father died. Dad was ninety-three when he died. My mother died in 1979. As the only child, Dad's death reminded me that I would move to the head of the line, I was now the family elder. I wasn't at all ready to accept this new role; I believed I lacked the requisite wisdom. Time and the exquisite fragility of life come into bold relief when we experience death. My perception of life and my place in the world abruptly shifted.

I traveled to my old hometown to arrange Dad's funeral service. As the car zoomed past farms and fields, I seemed to be journeying back in time, to my youth, and the times I had shared with my dad. The funeral was a bittersweet experience. My husband Garry and I have three sons, Rick, Chris, and Matt, and they were there for their grandfather's funeral. Chris and Matt live in California and don't get back home often; we hadn't been together as a family for three years. Our joy at being together again felt out of place, given the situation. Dad outlived most of his friends leaving few folks to attend the funeral. Some of my old chums from grade and high school attended. When it was over, I returned home to finish spring semester and tackle Dad's bills, insurance, and taxes. I resolved to keep busy as a way to diminish the pain and loss I was feeling.

Several weeks later, I received an invitation to return to my hometown for a reunion with friends I hadn't seen in forty years. We had met as youngsters whose love of horses drew us together. We went our separate ways when we reached high school, and most had moved away from our hometown. Now, we met for dinner and attended a charity horse show the next day. My friends had contributed money to sponsor two

classes in my dad's name. I presented the trophies and ribbons to the winners. I hung over the show ring fence with the other "rail birds" and watched the earnest girls and boys showing their high-powered horses. Memories of my own horse show experiences came flooding over me. Riding had been by childhood passion. I began riding on my seventh

It was an old familiar skill, one that would bring me comfort at a time when I was in a state of disorientation.

birthday. Riding was the focus of my life until I married and could no longer afford it.

We walked through the barns after the show. The familiar, pungent scents of hay, horses, and leather nearly brought me to tears. I had missed this so much. My dad's death made me realize that putting off long held desires for "later" was no longer an option. That's how I returned to horseback riding.

I considered myself an accomplished rider. I had ridden thoroughbred jumpers, American saddle bred three- and five-gaited show horses, Arabians, Quarter horses, ponies, and had even ridden side-saddle in a horse show. I had ridden professionally, taught riding at a private college, and had scores of ribbons and trophies as empirical evidence of my skill. So it was with the attitude of an older athlete returning to the game that I chose to take up riding again. It was an old familiar skill, one that would bring me comfort at a time when I was in a state of disorientation.

I wanted to study dressage, recognized by many as the highest level of equestrian acumen. I located a nearby stable that specializes in dressage and eagerly plunked down my money.

I have this vision of dressage as an exquisite ballet of horse and rider, a *pax de deux*. I felt confident that I could learn to dance with a horse. Things didn't go as I expected though. The horses didn't respond to my cues. Initiating a canter was hopelessly futile. I blamed the school horses. They were old and had bad habits. The saddles weren't good, and there was certainly a problem with the horse's teeth. Now a student, I approached dressage as a thing to be learned. I bought the books recommended by my instructor, watched television programs, and read dressage magazines. Still, I wasn't improving: I was very frustrated.

My struggles continued for some time, but I wasn't going to give up! My instructor, Janet, had the patience of a saint. She listened quietly as I extolled my virtues as a rider and criticized the sad state of the school horses. One week I finally snapped. The lesson had just begun when I stopped the horse and said to Janet, "I'm so frustrated with my riding; I don't know what I'm doing." She smiled and said, "You are finally ready to learn. Now, we can get somewhere." Janet asked me to close my eyes while she led the horse around the arena, "Focus on the rhythm of his walk; feel how his hips rise and fall." It was a remarkable experience. I loosened my hips and let myself follow his rhythmic walk. I found I could increase or decrease his pace with only the tension in my hips. I was ecstatic. I had been resisting change because I didn't want to endure more discomfort. Dad's death was all the discomfort I could bear. Becoming aware of the horse's movement had been relatively easy. I believed I had escaped the rigors of change.

Life has a way of putting challenges in our path, whether we want them or not. My technical riding skills, though improving, were rudimentary. The goal was ballet, and I hadn't mastered the two-step. I had to unlearn everything I thought I knew about riding. Janet said I needed to "draw new maps." I changed my seat, the position of my legs, arms, and hands. It was all so new. I felt awkward and clumsy in the saddle. I could only imagine how horrible I must look.

Bending stretches the horse's long back muscles and allows his weight to be evenly distributed.

With Janet's extraordinary patience, I began to change, to draw new maps. I was learning the subtle cues of dressage. I had always used my legs to make a horse move forward and the reins to make him stop or turn. Now I was discovering that weight distribution, leg pressure, shoulder position, and muscle tension are as effective as steering with the reins and kicking with my

legs. I was feeling quite good about my ability to control a horse again.

Near the end of the fall semester, I was telling Janet about the paper I was writing in conjunction with my Master's program. It was about oppressed group behavior, a brutal phenomenon I had witnessed first hand. As I explained the focus of the paper (certainly thinking how very learned I was) Janet said, "Horses will always react as victims." In that instant I realized I was an oppressor. I was focused on 'controlling' the horse, dominating his will for my desires. How could I have been so clueless? I had written some fifty pages about oppressed behavior without understanding it at all.

I had returned to riding to find comfort and a safe haven from the changes life was throwing at me. I was searching for a smooth, straight road and found an untraveled path instead. I forged ahead, determined to improve my riding. The focus of the lessons now was coaxing the horses to bend. Bending stretches the horse's long back muscles and allows his weight to be evenly distributed. I was learning the mechanics of equine movement as the horse and I scribed twenty meter circles, again and again. Like people, horses favor either their left or their right. Bending is actually an exercise that trains a horse to become straight. I was discovering that bending was a lot harder than I thought. I watched as other, more accomplished riders moved their horses in circles. It looked easy and effortless. Why was it so difficult for me?

Bending is a multifaceted effort. It is much more than riding in circles. Proper bending requires *giving* by horse and rider. Horses running free in the pasture bend naturally. Having a rider on their back disturbs this natural balance. If the horse merely bends his neck, his hips will sway out, throwing him off balance. Horse and rider must work together to achieve bending. The rider exerts pressure at the girth with the 'inside' leg while placing more weight in the 'outside' leg, which is held behind the girth, guiding the horse's hips around the circle. The rider delicately squeezes the finders holding the 'inside' reins, and tilts the hips toward the 'outside' of the circle. If the horse is bending correctly, the 'inside' eye will be visible to the rider. The rider's challenge is to focus on the horse's shoulder and hip position while looking straight ahead. There were so many details to master and I longed to just 'run free' myself. Improving means learning to bend, and I continued to plug along. My riding was improving, and I felt more comfortable with the changes. There was the sense of something missing though. Would I ever have the ability to dance with a horse? Does my vision of horse ballet really exist?

The time of my weekly riding lesson was changed. When a well-known European dressage trainer was visiting the stable to give private lessons, the stable's owner encouraged me to arrive early to watch a lesson. As I entered the stable office, I could see through the window into the indoor arena. Something was going on. Folks were lined up along the rail watching. I pushed open the door and caught my breath—there was my vision, a beautiful horse ballet. A horse was prancing around the ring. I can only describe his motion as prancing. He seemed to have springs under his hooves. Horse and rider were forged as one being. Whatever organic, species differences existed were erased. They were so graceful. The trainer called for various exercises, "Shoulder-in, keep him straight, now half-pass, good, moderate trot." After some time, the pair stopped in front of the trainer for advice. He said, "Good, he looks good, his outline is fine, but he needs to raise his nose a little. He doesn't look happy to me." When the trainer said that, the horse whirled his head around and stared directly into his eyes. The assembled group sort of tittered and remarked that the horse seemed to be listening. Looking at us like simple children, the trainer said, "You know, it's funny but they understand every word we say to them." It was at this moment that I understood what was missing from my riding: It was my soul. Riding is about a relationship between living entities. I have to drop my assumptions about humans and horses. I must bring only my true self to the horse. I have to be open to the horse's self. All these thoughts raced through my mind as I watched in rapture at the beauty, strength, and grace of the ballet.

Looking at us like simple children, the trainer said, "You know, it's funny but they understand every word we say to them."

Half-pirouettes at the canter, lead changes in two beats—it was magnificent.

Learning to bend is hard work. Plumbing the depths of the soul is hard, scary work. I have so many doubts. For example, a friend asked about my riding: What was I trying to accomplish? Where would it lead? I tried to explain the joys and challenges of this new role I had assumed. She said, "Linda, you're way past fifty, don't you think you're a little old to be jumping into a young person's sport?" My clever rejoinder to her question was, "I'll be way past fifty whether I am riding or not." Nevertheless, her words haunted me. What was I doing at this advancing age? Am I completely foolish? Perhaps I ought to be settling down. Maybe I should act my age.

Before my next dressage lesson, the stable owner, Peggy, and I were talking about the horse ballet we witnessed the previous week. She said it was amazing how a 1500-pound animal could be so graceful. Then she told me the horse was twenty-two years old. In my experience, they retired or put most horses out to pasture at that age. The horse I saw had no white on his muzzle, his muscles were still firm and supple, and his coat was beautiful—hardly the image of an aging animal. Peggy went on to say that the owner had bought him for a dollar from someone who was going to 'put him down' (horse euphemism for killing). Apparently, the horse was very hard to ride and the previous owner had given up on him. The woman who bought him was able, in Peggy's words "to change his mind." Doubts about my age and the ability to change my mind evaporated.

I'm still riding. Bending is still difficult. My tendency has always been to attack straight ahead. I now realize that learning dressage is a life-long endeavor. I no longer dream of the time when I can relax, put my feet up, and be finished. Janet describes the discipline of dressage this way, "You reach the top of the hill thinking you've arrived at your destination. That's when you look out and see yet another hill to climb."

I think of myself as a rider—again. I'm more comfortable with my new role, and I seem to have been accepted by the other women riders I've met. I had to make up a missed class and found myself riding in a different group one Sunday morning. There were eight women in the class, and many were near my age. It didn't take a genius to figure out that I had been assigned the least challenging horse of the group. Competitive juices from my early horse show days emerged, and I managed to do a good job of riding a sweet but recalcitrant horse. I knew I had been accepted into the 'club' when I heard them call out, "All right, Linda, good job!" Their accolades thrilled me, and I thought to myself—"I *can* ride!"

Postscript

As I reflect on the changes and challenges that riding has presented, I realize that the experiences helped me to embrace my new role as the family elder. The changes I underwent while riding have extended to impact all facets of my life; I obtained a Master's degree and enrolled in the Doctoral program at NIU. I also became a Master Gardener. Yes, change is difficult, even painful sometimes. I now understand that without change I am unable to grow and move forward. I see the world, and my place in it very differently now and realize that I have been transformed.

Linda Armacost is a doctoral student in Adult Education at Northern Illinois University. Prior to returning to school, Linda was a manager of Governmental Affairs for a national healthcare association. Part of her managerial responsibilities entailed traveling across the country presenting legislative and grass roots organizing workshops to association members. In addition to learning the art of dressage, Linda is a Master Gardener recently smitten with the beauty and challenges of growing orchids.