

# Writing to Transform Relations

## Escribiendo para Transformar Relaciones

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### *Abstract*

In reunion stories, letters exchanged between adopted children and birthparents are mediating artifacts. Self-transformation occurs during embodied lifestorying, initiating healing conversations. This reflexive process has the potential of enkindling social action. Awe and epiphany elicit engaged authorship, where narrative performance inspires relational responsibility. What we receive and what we pass on make-up intertwined patterns of a never-ending storyline, giving rise to story as legacy.

Self-transformation, adoption, reunion, synchronicity, legacy

### *Resumen*

En relatos de reuniones, las cartas intercambiadas entre niños adoptados y sus padres naturales son artefactos de la mediación. La auto transformación ocurre durante el relato en persona, iniciando conversaciones sanadoras. Este proceso reflexivo tiene el potencial de mejorar la calidad de la acción social. La sublimidad y revelación conllevan a una autoría involucrada, mientras que la performance narrativa inspira responsabilidad en la relación. Lo que recibimos y lo que pasamos a los demás adorna patrones entrelazados de una historia sin fin, dando lugar a el relato como legado.

Auto transformación, adopción, reunión, sincronidad, legado.

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### *“Transmission: Passing On The Golden Pocket Watch”*

“Lives are experiences, the telling and the told, are represented in stories which are performances. Stories are like pictures that have been painted over, and, when paint is scrapped off an old picture, something new becomes visible” (Denzin, 2014, p. 1).

Lifestorying is indeed a transformational process. The writing process forces the writer to find words to describe life experience. As an author beginning my experiential journey in front of my computer, the first step was visioning the images in my mind’s eye where scenes appeared in the forefront, tainted with the scent of emotions like a perfumed love letter and playing to the songs on the radio associated with a moment in time. As I was finding my words to tell my story, theories also came to mind bridging my experience with conceptual templates that served to buttress my *oeuvre*. “Yes, and a language of interdependency would explain how autoethnography *needs* realist ethnography, how stories *call out* for theory, how theories *require* specific cases” (Ellington & Ellis, 2008, p. 462). After engaging in the storying process, my *story called* out for theory, demonstrating how transformation is enkindled once the penman begins. In the beginning, I tried to understand my reunion case study but as the writing process continued, I sought to better comprehend the autoethnographic theory and experience. I reflected upon my journey performing writing that “simultaneously embodies and makes theory and experience visible” (Denzin, 2014 p. 10).

I began transcribing my memories, illustrating with words, sentences, and paragraphs. Then I structured my work through chapter headings and book parts. Re-membering painted on the page came into narrative form. At this stage, the narrated self is on its way to becoming “a linguistic dialogical self” (Anderson, 1997 p. 224). The written image and written page blend together. It is within the process of telling the story that the opportunity of change is found (Anderson, 1997, p. 223). Self-narratives take on a kind of conversation with other self-reinforcing narratives in a polyphonic novel, giving birth to the authored self in relation to other characters that come to play on the written page (Anderson, 1997, p. 225).

Self-transformation occurs as the autoethnographer finds voice to speak out and tell the story. Maybe the term “memoire” is closer to the act itself, as it carries the meaning of memory, suggesting the re-membering process. One book title, “Who Would You Be Without Your Story”, suggests that we exist through our stories (Byron & Williams, 2008). We can also learn to appreciate our stories and use them as a teaching tool. My own life story became extraordinary when I reunited with my birth parents and shortly later, reunited with my birth sister who had also been adopted. Not only was that life event confirming, it was transforming, as it allowed me to experience a moment of epiphany. Therefore, my embodied experience encompasses two levels of self-

transformation, the first being the extraordinary life event and the second, the process of writing about it.

### *Awe, A Bookmarker Ennobling Life Experience*

I was infused with an overwhelming sense of awe when I found my birth family. That experience in itself became a page marker in my book. “The experience of awe is about finding your place in the larger scheme of things. It is about feeling reverential toward participating in some expansive process that unites us all and that ennoble our life’s endeavors” (Keltner, 2009, p. 268). My life felt ennobled upon receiving my first letter from my birthparents with an enclosed picture of our/their family. It was as if my grandmother from my birth family had called a circle that was so powerful, that we heard her voice calling from far away, promptly showing up on my birthparent’s doorstep (Baldwin, 1998, p. 6). My search and my sister Cathy’s search dovetailed, bringing us both back into the family circle in the summer of 1996, just in time to meet our mother’s mother, who was dying of cancer. I was reunited with my birth parents on July 5, 1996 on my 33<sup>rd</sup> birthday, under the auspices of a Blue Moon.

When I decided to write about the series of serendipitous happening revolving around our reunion, I entered into the process of flow. It was the pouring out onto paper that gave new form to my lived experience. The story naturally flowed in to an authored form, transposed from memory to narrative.

“The narrative mode locates a person as a protagonist or participant in his/her world. This is a world of interpretive acts, a world in which every retelling of a story is a new telling, a world in which persons participate with others in the “re-authoring”, and thus in the shaping, of their lives and relationships” (White & Epston, 1990, p. 82).

I was transported by my memories and emotions down a flowing river to a place of catharsis.

“By katharisis I am referring to what I understand to be a central classical understanding of this concept—katharisis as a phenomenon that one experiences in response to witnessing powerful expression of life’s dramas, a phenomenon particularly associated with one’s response to the performance of Greek tragedy. According to this classical definition, an experience is kathartic if one is moved by it—moved not just in terms of having an emotional experience, but in terms of being transported to another place...” (White, 2007, p. 195).

### *The Introductory Letters*

When Becky Crofoot, the social worker at the Nebraska Children’s Home explained the search process to me, she asked that I write a letter to my birthmother that she would then send on once

she was able to make contact with her. That original letter was my first attempt at writing my life. The letter I wrote on a soft pink, letter paper contained biographical information but was also filled with the hope that my birthmother would someday read my letter and respond. The letter was a mediating object allowing us to reconnect. The envelope sent from Switzerland to Becky's office at the Nebraska Children's Home traveled across continents with a mission. Becky's intention was to use the letter to connect us. When it finally reached my birthmother's hands, she was faced with an important decision: how should she respond?

Little did I know that there was yet another sister, who would engage in a search of her own, only months later. After our grandiose family reunion, my sister Cathy entered into the family circle with her own letter of introduction. The synchronicity of our searching processes intensified the relational reunion within our family that seemed to correspond with the imminent death of our maternal, birth grandmother. Emanating from this letter writing process, a synchronistic and serendipitous resonance was intensified, accelerating the reunions that soon followed along with the promise of reconciliation at the end of the long tunnel of soul searching that all family members were somehow forced to embrace.

Our letters were like detonators; they were explosive bombs that arrived in a family that had swept our existence under the covers of career success and community belonging. Our births corresponded with a time of tumult bringing up memories that had been stored away in a place in the mind resembling an attic trunk marked with "fragile, open with care". Our parents had buried the past to be able to survive in the present. When we sent our letters with the appropriate address and the correct stamps, we were in fact unearthing hidden relations that had been hushed by the family and the community surrounding our parents.

However, our letters would eventually erase all those boundaries, allowing us to reunite in a space where the emotional and legal configurations of the past could be transformed. The legal constraint that had separated us and protected our adopted families that adopted us under laws that did not allow birth parents to find their children given up for adoption, gave way to our adult right to have access to our files.

Cathy and I were free to search, but were vulnerable to the possibility of a second rejection and also the revelation of a family story that would be a burden to consciously carry. Still, the promise of reunion and a new relationship offering intergenerational reconciliation was a driving force, something like the "Eureka!" cry that inspired the frontier men and women who took part in the gold rush, braving the frontier for the promise of wealth to be found in golden nuggets. Our letters reached out to our birthmother and ultimately our entire birth family. They were like peace pipes

that circulated within the family circle, allowing family members to reposition themselves, freeing a place in the tribal circle so that we could fit in.

*Narrative Performance: My Love Letter To My Birthmother*

My letter bares a rare form of exposed interpretive autoethnography, written in hopes of finding my mother. I opened a portal offering the family group the chance to transform our collective life-course by integrating my story in a reunion performance: a kind of modern family ritual of redemption, bringing peace to our dear maternal grandmother's soul before her passing. This letter sailed across the ocean connecting us in kinship. Following our reunion, I found myself in a new place, having achieved a transfigured perspective of my heritage, life, and identity. Years after our reunion, in 2012, I began writing my life. I connected with my life purpose on yet another level, by making meaning of my life experience, not just in verbal explanations as in conversation, but within an added dialogical layer: growing pages in authored self form. The meaning-making process generated self-transformation as I associated memories and tied stories together like the Winnebago Indians tie tobacco in prayer when they go into the sweat lodges. This custom is much like the Catholic practice, when fingers count the rosary beads while repeating Hail Mary and imagining Christ's Passion. In a similar way, I worked on my story Mandala, illustrating holograms of meaning, while alluding to fundamental principles of life that I had espied. I tried to show the synchronicities that had occurred, giving explanations to the connections I saw in serendipitous events. I tried to coax out the mystery of my own life's passion, bearing witness to the awe.

Logotherapy stresses the importance of making meaning of life events in an attempt to heal (Frankl, 1984, p. 116). Writing down my story was a new experience of self-transformation, allowing me to integrate a higher level of knowledgeability, achieved through the storying process. The reflexive process that I had undertaken over the years was intensified by my search for meaning in a step beyond conversation that was even more engaged, as it required a kind of determination not only to begin a written project, but also to finish it, accompanying it until it could be brought into the world. Birthing my authored self was a creative process. Storying seemed to reinforce my performance on the stage of life. My narrative performance allowed me to analyze personal experience and connect it to cultural experience. Writing was a generative process, allowing me to gain higher levels of coherence about the social construction of my identity. My narrative eventually evolved into a dialogue co-sung with a professional singer and guitar soloist in a performance entitled, "From Synchronicity to Serendipity, the Sacred Art of Co-creation and the Quest for Self", where I presented Jung's Red Book. Our joint performance, interwove dialogue and song, as I found my voice in yet another way during the Fall and Winter of 2013-2014.

As I wrote, I remembered the dresses I was wearing, the songs I had associated with each precise happening, and the social conventions that were influencing the event, highlighting the social scripts that were determining my life-play. In my mind's eye, I was playing the lead role, wearing costumes and acting out a script on the stage of life. Continually deconstructing and analyzing the events that took place, I kept returning to the reflexive meeting I had made with myself to write. As I tried to tell my story, it became clear that I needed to paint a landscape of meaning that would underscore my more personal descriptions, a kind of backdrop for the stage. Though our family reunion was a joyous event, as our story unfolded, the suffering of separation was slowly unpacked. It was in this paradoxical place that I found myself trying to rise above the “double bind” of my reunion; writing was both a form of meta-communication and family therapy at the same time.

### *Using Epiphany to Harness Agency*

At times, my interpretations were filled with emotions resonating with unfairness experienced on the individual level that seemed linked to larger forms of social injustice. As I interpreted my joy in moments of expansive grace while simultaneously digging into my deepest wounds where rejection had seeded a form of chronic internal inflammation, I revealed parts of my paradoxical self. The grace filled me with a brave heart able to look at the rolls of film portraying painful episodes. I exposed my self, broken open by the power of reflexivity. I held my own in the reflexive space that narrative inquiry provides, not giving in to the heavy weight of awareness. I had initiated a process leading to a higher level of coherency and consciousness. Beyond the shadow self was the promise of contentment; faith in relational transfiguration. It is as if there is a protective shell that encloses the heart, when it is broken open, there is a treasure to be found. Still, it is accompanied with a risk inherent in such intimate disclosure. “Will I be rejected again?” asks the adopted child. “Will I be broken-hearted?”

To brave the storm, personal work is required.

“Everything can change in a moment; we have little control over the outer weather patterns as we make our way through the landscape of a life. But we can become masters of the inner landscape. We can use what happens on the outside to change the way we function on the inside. This is the moral of the great teaching myths” (Lesser, 2004, p. 277). I had to come to terms with this state of exposedness to grow.

Agency is harnessed through the process of transforming inner landscapes of meaning. Narrative is a tool in our personalized tool kit. We can't change what happens to us, but we can transform how we welcome and interpret the experience. Letting the story teach, calling out its hidden potential to guide, is a pathway to transcendence.

These re-memberings were re-collected in the chapters of my manuscript, a work in progress to someday be published. However, I wasn't just writing to change my life, I was writing to change the world. "Our work is about something much bigger and more important than we are" (Pipher, 2006, p. 152). I was nudged forward by a strong belief that my story illustrated something about life that was much bigger than me. It seemed that our synchronous reunion was proof of a connected field of human consciousness.

"With personal essays, we invite the world to join us in our epiphany. We share real details and experiences, yet we weave our very souls into our stories. We enable a finite moment to transcend itself, opening up our readers and ourselves to a whole new understanding" (Pipher, 2006, p. 192).

Renewed perception is the gift of authorship. The process reveals new ways of interpreting events, offering previously unforeseen channels of becomingness to the writer and the reader. I was writing to transform relations.

Julian of Norwich is the first writer in English, to be identified as a woman in the period of 1342-1416. Her book entitled "Revelations of Divine Love", relates her visions in a feminine way where, "Experience, memory and meaning could never be fully separable" (Julian of Norwich, 1998, p. xii). After writing about her revelations, she continued to analyze the deeper meaning that was revealed to her stating, "[W]e need to have three kinds of knowledge: the first is to know our Lord God; the second is to know ourselves, what we are through him in nature and grace; the third is to know humbly what we ourselves are where our sin and weakness are concerned" (Julian of Norwich, 1998, p. 160). This search for knowing underlies her text that moves from visions to one of the first examples of feminine theology. She used symbolic narrative to convey her teaching parables, learning from the parts of the shadow self she considered to be of sin. Her experiences of epiphany through her visions as well as her understanding of her weaknesses were the focus of her contemplations.

Embodied epiphany therefore can be seen as a catalyst for narrative expression. The awe that I experienced when I received my first letter from my birthparents was the impetus for writing my autoethnographic text. I was compelled to share the synchronicities that had convinced me of an overarching form of connectivity. However, once I entered the process, my search for knowing brought me closer to my soul, my human weaknesses, and my humility; accepting the grace of reunion and recognizing that it was a gift and nothing that I could have orchestrated by simply beginning the search.

Awe comes to us by way of a feeling and embodied recognition. When I first started telling my story of reunion, listeners would rub their upper arms saying, "I'm getting goose bumps". Epiphany

is experienced more as perception: seeing and understanding in a new way. It feels like being brushed by divine presence.

“The darkness that dominates this story has nothing to do with what time of day it is. It has nothing to do with the position of the planets in the sky or the rods and cones in people’s eyes. It is an entirely unnatural darkness—both dangerous and divine—that contains the presence of the God before whom there are no others.” (Taylor, 2014, p. 47). In moments of epiphany there is an outline of the divine that can just be made out in the distance through shades of blackness.

The stories of other adopted children that found their birthparents seem to dovetail with my own experience. Many spoke of awe and found relational and metaphysical exegeses in their reunion stories.

“For those who have discovered it, synchronicity takes the darkly awful puzzle of love, abandonment, and grief and sparks a hint of the awesome. Following are the types of meaning attributed by some of the persons who lived the stories told in the preceding chapters. Some caught glimpses of eternity through time. Many did not attempt an explanation beyond their feelings of awe. The more reflective comments fall generally into two major divisions: human relationships and metaphysical explanations” (Stiffler, 1992, p. 152).

Narrative inquiry captured these reunion story interpretations, showing the mystery associated with their connections. Synchronicity seems to best describe the adopted child’s perception of symbolic happenings that guide the reunion process.

### *Relational Responsibility*

When I initiated my search for my birthmother it wasn’t to know about my genetic make-up. I wanted to reach out to her and offer both of us reconciliation and peace. I wanted to find healing and offer an opportunity for her to heal. I wanted to forgive and offer forgiveness. It was my way of taking relational responsibility, “[C]learly, it is not the words alone that will succeed in replacing isolation with engagement” (McNamee & Gergen, 1999, p. 217). My search was my own way of performing relational responsibility, using my right to delve into the records and find my birthmother. I knew that the law did not allow her to look for me.

Bearing witness to my heartfelt awe and my experience of epiphany through writing was also a way for me to show my gratefulness for the grace I had received through reunion. When I began writing, I was challenged to explain my deepest motivations. That too was part of the process: clarifying my intentions and embodying the story. There was a creative tension like a full sky before a hailstorm. I didn’t want the hail to ruin the crops in the fields of my life with one great, powerful release. I didn’t want raindrops to freeze into hail, wrecking my relationships. Yet, I wanted to

speak out. I wanted to tell my story. I wanted to write my book, unleashing expression that could no longer be contained. I want to find a publisher and do a “book release” that will resemble a soft rain on prairie grasses in spring, allowing the wild flowers to bloom, covering the fields.

I had taken a risk, sending a letter addressed to my birthmother, through the channel of the Nebraska Children’s Home. Telling my story was yet another risk. As I engaged in a conversation that had the potential of generating a higher level of coherency for our family, I was also eliciting a response from all those in my larger family circle. I was writing for them to read me. This *relational responsivity* (McNamee & Gergen, p. 210) was part of a dialogical process that was moving toward a living demonstration of how narrative can generate transformation of self, rippling out to larger circles of relations.

I felt responsible for all of my relations. There were several generations alive at the time of my search. I got unconditional support from my adopted grandparents and parents to investigate and search for my birth family. After finding my birth family, an entire generation was laid to rest, as if reconciliation allowed them to leave in peace. My maternal birth-grandmother passed away several months after our whole family was reunited. Though I wasn’t responsible for the circumstances leading to my adoption, I was however responsible for our reunion. The start of my autoethnography began when I wrote that first letter, in my first attempt to tell about who I was. My letter was a way of calling the circle and inviting my family in. I had heard my grandmother’s wish to meet me, as if whispered in my ear during a deep night’s sleep. I heard her call from the hospital bed, asking for me to act before it was too late. Not only did I find her on time, but my sister Cathy found us too!

“Our experience of energy changes how we see the world; as a result of changing our point of view, we change our actions; as a result of changing our actions, the world is changed.” (Baldwin, 1998, p.195).

Sending off that letter intended for my birthmother put in motion a process that reconnected us. Its stamp had wings. Its words resonated through the barriers that had separated us, breaking them down and opening a portal of communication. That letter was the acorn of my telling process.

Still, the more official beginning was when I began writing in 2012. I sent off the first version of my manuscript to an old friend from high school, a writer who generously helped me to structure my flowing consciousness style. After getting my first draft down on paper, an unfortunate ski accident kept me inside during the entire ski season, ultimately allowing me to probe even more deeply into the artifacts of my past, digging out letters from my great-grandmother’s wooden chest at the foot of my bed, unearthing buried thoughts and expressions, and adding them to the text in

an attempt to bring more voices into the storying process. In multiple ways, loving friends and family, even my accident, escorted me to the altar of self-transformation.

### *Healing Conversations*

When I thought that I finally had a manuscript that was complete enough to send out, I e-mailed it to my two families and dearest friends. It was the beginning of a phase of healing conversations. My manuscript initiated an opportunity to talk about what had happened and to find peace. I must admit it took a rare form of courage to send my work to my adopted mother and birth parents. How would they receive my manuscript? I asked them to comment and explained that I would gladly change any words, and reframe any part of the story that they felt needed to be revised. After having found my birth parents, I didn't want to lose them. As for my adopted family, husband, and children, I didn't want my vantage point to create any tension either. My intention was to use my words to initiate a healing process. The rich conversations that were elicited by my narrative enhanced the transformative process, allowing it to ripple through my many relations. I was convinced that the process we were engaged in would lead us all to a better place. I applied my method, allowing it to transport us, transposing memory into authored self.

My closest friends shed tears remembering our childhoods, reading their lives on written page. I was asked to add a few stories that I had left out, in a co-construction of our storied past. It was a phase of deep sharing and recognition for the profoundness of our lives bonded in friendship since childhood and now in narrative, a story we could pass on together.

As I wrote, I realized that I had several families. There were of course my adopted family and my birth family. There was also my close circle of mother-daughter friends that were like aunts and cousins. But as wrote, I discovered the importance of my academic family and the place that my academic mentors held in my heart-mind.

“A biological understanding also informs us that there are no self-contained individuals; all bodies carry the imprint of preceding relationships. By extension, the procreative relationship carries the immediate imprint of four other beings, and they the ingredients of all those before them. To view our bodies as bounded singularities is illusory; they contain multitudes” (Gergen, 2009, p. 375).

In light of this social constructionist view, an adopted child contains multiplied multitudes, adding to the ingredients the adopted parent's imprints. Lines of inheritance can equally be thought to include our academic fellowships, increasing our possibilities of enriching relations by sowing seeds of cultural heritage throughout our lifetime, another form of the procreative act. In these open waters kin-ship and scholar-ship sail side by side.

My adopted mother Jan, read and corrected my manuscript, supporting me in my authoring process. My birthmother Ruth-Ann, equally took time to read the manuscript, asking for only a couple of slight revisions to the text. Mary Gergen, one of the TAOS Institute founders, where I did my PhD., read my manuscript as a social constructionist expert. Her encouraging feed-back about the quality of my work, gave me hope that I would someday find a way to bring my story to the world. The importance of her opinion reinforced my conviction that our cultural and academic heritage is fundamental as we move into adulthood and choose our intellectual communities. Mary, too, was a mother to me, who had passed on a social constructionist heritage: a line of inheritance dear to me, a growing strand in my braided life rope.

As I continued to integrate important relations into the sharing process, I reached out to Becky Crowfoot the social worker who had reunited me with my family. She offered an important “message in a bottle”, that came to me across time, from my adopted father. Though he had passed away, Becky recounted how he had called her, affirming his love for me and supporting my search process when I asked the Nebraska Children’s Home to assist me in finding my birthparents. My father had called Becky and spoken with her in a telephone conversation unbeknownst to me. Becky had reunited me through the file that was safely kept at the Nebraska Children’s Home and is accessible to this day. I was amazed to discover that I had a file, and integrated that dimension of my identity into the storyline.

*Lines of Inheritance: What We Keep and What We Pass On*

Adopted children are different from their adopted parents, requiring a kind of love that can overcome those differences. “Children whose defining quality annihilates that fantasy of immortality are a particular insult; we must love them for themselves, and not for the best of ourselves in them, and that is a great deal harder to do” (Salomon, 2012, p. 1). Having experimented with flow, letting it all out on paper, my words were able to mirror back issues in relation to my adopted family that held a strong emotional charge. I realized that having had the perception of losing my place in my adopted family, following my search for my birth family, was yet another emotional issue to contend with, especially sensitive because I had interpreted a kind of favoritism that touched on the place my children held in relation to my adopted father’s recognition of my own sons. This was metaphorically expressed in the way my father passed on my grandfather’s Golden Pocket Watches. I started my first chapter by explaining how I got the Golden Pocket Watch in the mail, referring to yet another serendipitous happening that was yet another moment of epiphany when recognition was bestowed upon me by my grandfather’s mentored son.

Recapturing my place within my adopted family was an important conquest. In an amazing turn of events, I received my grandfather's Golden Pocket Watch from his mentored son, a successful businessman in New York City that had been best man in my parent's wedding. His generous gesture brought me a form of recognition that allowed me to reconcile with my father's gifting the watch to his only biological grandson. Developing this important turn of events on written page added to the meaning-making process. The words that came out were a kind of emotional salve. Each newfound wording wrapped layers of protective cloth on past wounds to heal. Symbolic transitional objects like the Golden Pocket Watch, take on a life of their own in story. I made it into a central transitional object, which in turn offered me a stepping-stone to transcendence. I let the Golden Pocket Watch transform me, as I played with it on paper, interpreting it in many different ways. It was my golden prize.

There were lines that I wrote that I could not read without having tears well up. I read some parts over and over, modifying my descriptions until they felt just right. I connected with my heart, writing till I found a sense of peace, much like a small child that is finally rocked to sleep with a favorite lullaby.

*Multi-voice: Opening Up Dialogical Space*

The autoethnography method, allowed me to construct a reflexive space, penetrating into the recesses of my narrative inquiry, while inviting close relations into the conversation in a kind of polyphony and multi-voice, enhanced by letters and other written exchanges that added to the orchestrated performance of my search for Susie or supersymmetry (SUSY). Not only did I add letters, but also time offered me the possibility to bring in important literary references during my ski accident recovery period. Many authors, holding prominent places on my bookshelves in my private library, followed the lead from the lyrics in "Brothers is Arms" from Dire Straits, helping me to transform the landscapes of my life and make new worlds like the song's lyrics imply. Bringing academic fellows and their theoretical and philosophical worlds into my story became a space like a national park reserve, where I could vacation and take in beauty. It was a virtual territory that was preserved to contemplate the nature of things. It was a "fellow-ship".

That virtual space provided an academic lifeline where I was able to escape to a place of reflection, buttressing my individual possibilities of understanding with the wisdom and knowledge of the academic community. It was a place where I crafted a lifeboat and hid a life preserver for my integrity to keep afloat. I needed high ideals to keep me above water when I confronted the whirlpools of emotion that had the potential of pulling me in and down.

We navigate our lives through the sacred symbolic stories that are being played out by way of intuit. It can be helpful to question the storyline, offering a chance to transform the way events are perceived, by adding new interpretations. “For there is always the risk that the master narrative will eclipse its sacred story and set itself up as the be-all for reading our lives” (Randall & McKim, 2008, p. 264). As I engaged in the narrative process, I allowed for new horizons to open up, offering me new vistas to explore. Landscapes of meaning were transformed and new worlds were created as I spun tall tales; fabricating my own cloth of reconciliation: my liberty flag. I discovered a space of freedom wedged in between the lines, offering some wiggle room for becomingness.

Living in a household where my murmurings have often been stifled for various reasons ranging from grammatical corrections when speaking my second language, to a cultural shunning of any idea questioning the dominant male, Swiss system in place, I took refuge in my writing. It is a creative space where I cannot be corrected for my linguistic and cultural differences or for my feminist voice when I speak my truth. My dialogical space became my kingdom. My writing was my liberation from this prison of stifled conversation. I was living in the straightjacket of a constrained narrative written in the language of my husband’s heritage. I needed to reconnect with the words and expressions of my own cultural and linguistic heritage to attain a fuller expression of myself. I moved forward reclaiming lost territories of Self. In English, I was “adopted”. However in French, I was “abandoned”. It is interesting to contemplate how linguistic form and the choice of words can define our lived experiences, offering completely different interpretations and therefore different life scenarios to choose from (Sykes, 2015).

### *The Social Construction of Identity*

“The practice of autoethnography presumes that reality is socially constructed and that meaning is constructed through symbolic language.” (Ellingston & Ellis, p. 449). This view reinforces the importance of autoethnography as a method in the social sciences. The researcher becomes a participant through autoethnography, unearthing emotions and meanings as data exploration. In this field, “the self only exists in relation to others” (Ellingston & Ellis, 2008, p. 454). The reflexive narrative space also offers a possibility to confront silence, “[G]iving voice to those hushed impulses becomes a political act because language is indeterminate and imbued with power relations” (Ellingston & Ellis, 2008, p. 455).

When I decided to search for my birth family, I was met with an unimagined response in my circle of friends that saw my actions as disrespectful of the family that had adopted me. My husband especially found it difficult watching me reach out to parents he believed had abandoned me. He

was also worried about what I would find out about my birth family without any control over who I might then become.

For some people in my entourage I was perceived as having been disloyal to those who had taken me in. My search and reunion especially frightened family friends that had adopted children of their own, or who had been adopted. My own political act was to exercise my right to search for my birthparents when the laws changed, allowing me to have access to my file. I believed it was my right to know. My personal search resonated with the stories of other adopted children in “Synchronicity & Reunion, The Genetic Connection of Adoptees & Birthparents” (Stiffler, 1992). It wasn’t an act against anyone. Nor did I in anyway intend to be disrespectful or ungrateful. I was advocating for my right to know more fully about my origins. I was convinced that anyone who truly loved me would support my empowering process of self-discovery.

Still, as I described family patterns and life events that had ruffled my sail, I wondered how my perceptions would be received. Again, if I stated my position and my opinions, would I lose important relationships? How would those close to me react to my authored self? I have often wondered after expressing myself in a form of intimate authorship, if I am strong enough to assume my own freedom of expression. Dare I jeopardize my belonging once again? Is silence safer than risking banishment? Ultimately, writing leads to narrative exposedness that entails a form of assumed authorship.

### *Narrative Inquiry and Social Transformation*

There are not only personal justifications for narrative inquiry. “Social justifications of narrative inquiries can be thought of in two ways: theoretical justifications, as well as social action, and policy justification” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 37). Narrative accounts hold the potential of transforming more than the Self. Narrative inquiry can ripple out to effect practice, social action, and even policy. Storying allows adoption policy to be considered through the lens of lived experience. Memoire can be useful because it relates personal experience, transforming the reader as they enter into the author’s process and discover their experience from the inside. By way of illustration, my account happened to prepare a good friend for an unexpected reunion with her sister that had been adopted unbeknownst to her and her sister that she had grown up with. My narrative aided her in understanding her own sister’s process, and the implications for the entire family, as they confronted their family’s past and contemplated how to go on together.

I had shared my manuscript with her before she even knew of the existence of her sister. It prepared her for what was to come, by opening her up to the possibilities reunion can have to heal family patterns and come to terms with “skeletons in the closet”. When her sister found her, she

called me and we discussed the situation. My story became a teaching story to help make sense of her life situation.

The healing of family patterns can possibly happen when silenced family stories are allowed to be discussed openly. When a family discovers hidden, hushed stories, they are faced with how they will go about living in the emerging story. My storying has allowed me to find a way to go forward, using words to accompany my solution searching process (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978, p. 26). My story has influenced my relations, informing and transforming them in the margins of my own existence.

My PhD. thesis was entitled “Conflict Narratives: Mediation Case Studies in an Intercultural Context”. It analyzed my practice and allowed me to investigate the narrative model in mediation. In this more recent and personal exploration of narrative, I have become engaged with autoethnography. It is a method of self-transformation with ethical implications. “In narrative inquiry it is the unfolding lives of participants, and of each of us as researchers, that matter. Narrative inquiry is about attending to lives, the living of those lives in process and in the making” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 141). Autoethnography mediates between the lived experience and the authored self, creating a transitional space where interpretations can be played with and relations and identities can be transformed. By honoring stories that bear witness to suffering and epiphany, researchers give voice to experiences that have previously been interpreted through the lens of the knowing social scientist. Autoethnography challenges the academic hierarchy by opening up space for narrative, inviting storied experience to participate in the ongoing conversations in medical anthropology and social constructionist circles. The Social Sciences actively participate in the inclusion of new perceptions when they give value to autoethnographic interpretations.

Performance studies embrace an ethic “predicated on a *pedagogy of hope*” (Denzin, 2014, p. 80). My story shares my perceptions of injustice as an adopted child and feminist revealing the power relations inherent in procreation. Yet, I attempted to orient the storyline toward “a communitarian dialogical *ethic of care* and responsibility” (Denzin, 2014, p. 80) honoring my own personal struggle while portraying hardship as a faithful companion that walked with me to a place of empowerment. Writing in the hopes that family and societal patterns can be transformed, my manuscript is a testimony.

### *Story as Legacy*

My writing is an important part of my legacy. It is filled with teaching stories that I want to pass on to my children and future generations. When I am gone, my loved ones can re-member with me, honoring our circle of relations. My book is a space where we can convene. I included poems read at funerals and prayers that I recite daily. Poems and prayers are worded parts of myself, often

difficult to share in other contexts. At the dinner table, other conversations unfold about the daily routines we live in the present moment. There is neither time nor space for my authored self to be introduced. My children may discover me someday as an authored persona. My hope is that my process of self-inquiry will free them too, inciting them also to “know thyself”. However, I hope that this manuscript may someday reach a larger audience and allow me to use my story to teach and mentor feminine forms of knowing within the social sciences. My life-story also addresses intercultural understanding, mediated by my marriage and double-nationality.

Writing is a reflexive method of serendipitous discovery (Catellin, 2014 p. 211). It leads one through process to sense-making (Adams, Holman & Ellis, 2015 p. 22) There is the pleasant experience of flow, the process of self transformation, and the artifact that can be held and read: the finished article and someday book. There is a continuum joining writing, reflection and authorship. Relating process allows others to replicate self-transformation through autoethnographic method, blazing an experiential trail for others to follow.

Mine is a family memoir that has articulated emotional impressions, while weaving together a web of relations and possibly shared fate. I have attempted to reframe notions of family by looking at kinship through the lens of an adopted, bi-lingual, and double national, using my author-ity as a medical anthropologist and social psychologist; transforming me to we. My memoir touches on the liminal space of being in-between identities, presenting liminality as a creative territory of becomingness where the matrix is formatted for metamorphosis. It is a space where I have questioned conforming to conditioned ways of dialoging and relating within family, community, nations and even academic disciplines. How do we include and make a place for someone who is outside the circle of belonging? How do we treat what is unfamiliar? Are we open to difference? Can we embrace the nonconforming other, saying, “She is going her own sweet way” with detached benevolence or do we prefer cruci-fiction?

As we grow older, our story is still playing out!

“But even in later life, our lifestory is, technically, still unfolding. The End has not yet been written which means that we lack the benefit of parameters on what, in the interim, the meaning(s) of our story might be. What is more, how the ending gets written, depends in no small measure on us: on the decisions we take and the choices we make—of partner and residence, lifestyle and career. All of these serve to determine the genre of story that our life-course traces, at least in our own minds.” (Randall & McKim, 2008, p. 43).

Mari Sandoz (1963), a Nebraska author with Swiss origins wrote, “The Story Catcher”, a novel where an American Plains Indian tells the story of his people. Her title choice illustrates what

writers do. Books become “story catchers”, as they are filled with re-memberings and re-collections that steer author-ship through waters of reflection, mirroring back the changing face of the penman along the way. “There is a deep, inner self groping for meaning, and this self and its meaning are forever and always unfinished productions” (Denzin, 2014, p. 89). Author-ship sails forward on ethnographic waters becoming a form of scholar-ship; a container filled with engaged students and professors writing to change their relations and dedicated to bringing forth a better life for all through the introspective process. This crafted container holds a kind of knowledgeability moving with godspeed.

Art and science, find a blending in narrative inquiry where reflexive analysis, and poetics meet. Grass Dancers, one of my original poems, is an example of the transcendent level that poetry can offer, integrating the life story in art form. Having grown up spending my weekends on a farm surrounded by the Omaha Indian reservation between Decatur and Winnebago, I have been shaped by the land’s way of speaking to my feet as I walked sacred ground. This poem is an expression of my blending of worlds, shape-shifting, and affirming my path as a seeker. I am a questing scholar, a re-searcher, exploring transformations of Self. Mythology and folklore speak of shape-shifting, each culture has their own epic tales of metamorphosis. Now, I have my own that I share with you.

### **Grass Dancers**

*My grandfather told me a story  
About the Sundance Way of Life,  
He said, « Build your Thunder Bow ».*

*Meet me at the pow-wow,  
On our sacred land,  
Where our tribal cousins gather,  
Under dark sky and moonlight.*

*Meet me at dusk,  
When my shadow comes back,  
To dance with me,*

*There we will find the magic of perceiving,  
In the Medicine Wheel,  
Where each position changes the vision.*

*Bring your shadow with you,  
That part of your Self,  
You can only see when the lighting is right.*

*Meet me in the circle of light,  
The reflection of moon on earth,  
You'll find me there calling to father sky.*

*As the drums pound in your heart,  
Calling you home through the sacred dance,  
Feel your heart rising.*

*Meet me in the moon circle,  
Where our ancestors walked the sacred land,  
Feel their presence gathering.*

*Meet me in the sacred circle of the tribe,  
Connecting us between Earth and Sky,  
Dancing to the heartbeat of drums.*

*Medicine man, put on your mask,  
Shake off my pain with your snake rattle,  
Heal me! Heal my spirit, with your sacred words,*

*Tribal dance and costumes,  
Moccasins pounding on the ground,  
As spirit encircles the pow-wow,*

*Our offerings have called the Great White Spirit,  
And like the Ghost Dance before,  
We ask to save our people and renew Earth,*

*How can we change our ways?*

*Honoring our promise to the land,  
The Red man remembers the sacred pact,*

*Flooding, drought, and storms have come,  
Warning signs of our plight,  
Mother Earth is speaking.*

*We are keepers of the Earth,  
We are keepers of Life,  
We are keepers of the Human Seed.*

*Dance with me tribal cousin,  
Bring your shadow and your brave heart,  
Drum, heart, and foot are one here.*

*In the sacred circle we gather at the pow-wow,  
Offering our shadow and loneliness,  
To this sacred dance of life.*

*Through time and space the wind blows,  
As clouds open to the sky,  
Showing the direction forward.*

*Show me the four Great Powers of the Medicine Wheel,  
So I may perceive with the gift of whole vision,  
The "Breath of Wisdom" and "Total Understanding".*

*By Touching and Feeling we overcome our loneliness,  
Let me experience this living power in me and grow,  
Becoming a whole being through the path of peace and love.*

*Let me feel the harmony with every other thing,  
Teach me to Give-away to the other,  
In the Medicine Wheel of the Sun Dance Teaching.*

*Reveal me in the mirror of my personal shield,  
Through my vision quest I find my own medicine shield,  
I am the Seeker.*

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