

# PIONEERS PAST AND PRESENT: CURRICULUM INSIGHTS FROM STORIES THAT LINK THROUGH GENERATIONS

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**ABSTRACT.** Stories that were written by my grandfather at the turn of the 20th century spiraled into my daily life as a nurse-teacher at the turn of the 21st century. In this paper, I explore a common plotline of my Afi (Islandic for grandfather) and me as pioneers by linking his life stories to the tensions I experience in my contemporary professional worklife. Our narratives intersect, crossing generations with stories that illuminate for me ways to understand these tensions as a faculty member and curriculum-maker.

**LES PIONNIERS DE PASSÉ ET DU PRÉSENT : PERTINENCE POUR LES PROGRAMMES D'ÉTUDES DES HISTOIRES TRAVERSANT LES GÉNÉRATIONS**

**RÉSUMÉ.** Des récits rédigés par mon grand-père au tournant du XXe siècle refont surface dans mon quotidien d'infirmière-enseignante au tournant du XXIe siècle. Dans ce document, j'explore une intrigue commune mettant en scène mon Afi (grand-père en islandais) et moi-même comme pionniers en établissant un lien entre les récits de la vie de mon grand-père et les tensions que je ressens dans ma vie professionnelle contemporaine. Nos récits s'entrecroisent et franchissent les générations en me révélant des moyens de comprendre ces tensions à titre de professeure et de conceptrice de programmes.

In this article, I explore my work at an urban Ontario university as a nurse-teacher in the twenty-first century, through connections to my Afi's (grandfather's) stories of being an early 20th century pioneer in rural Manitoba. My grandfather wrote his autobiography in 1997-1998 in his 89th and 90th years at the same time that I was writing my doctoral thesis. He mailed eight school scribblers to me, noting in the flyleaf of one that he often wrote his stories when Amma (my grandmother) was away with friends playing cards. In the midst of planning a fall visit to my grandparents, after my own writing on healthcare reform for registered nurses (Lindsay, 2001) was completed, I turned my attention to transcribing Afi's scribblers into a book-form. Yet, as I wrote, an unanticipated response arose within me; I knew that Afi's stories and my relationship to them were not finished.

In September 2002, my father, my siblings, and I visited Afi in Arborg, the farming town of his birth, where he had moved when Amma was admitted to hospital in the city. At my first glance of him, I was surprised. His body was much smaller than I remembered, his skin paper-thin, and his face encircled with a bandage from ear surgery. He looked like an Icelandic elf, a *huldafolk*. I gave him his book while reminding him of stories he had written. In one story about his childhood when skiing on a barrel stave, he landed face first in a snow bank. In a later story involving his friend John, he stood at the end of a sidewalk plank and stepped off when John stepped on the other end. Afi laughed out loud with delight, and leafed through the pages of his book.

One evening in January of 2003, after spending a day with my cousin Brant and his wife Cathy, Afi peacefully slept into death. Once more, my thoughts turned toward his scribblers and stories. The deep resonance I had felt when I first typed Afi's stories returned anew. As I combed through his stories, retold in different places with new details added each time, Afi's memoirs came together. Working with his words and my memories intact, I shaped his stories into narratives with beginnings, middles and ends, thereby extending our connection and bringing his life forward into mine.

I paid attention to the parallels between Afi's experiences and my own. Though generations apart and from very different lives, one of everyday survival in a rural setting and the other of academic survival in an urban university, I found Afi's stories instructive in dealing with and talking about the tensions occurring in my professional life now. As a nurse-teacher, I approached my work narratively (Lindsay & Smith, 2003). I wrote about my experiences to make sense of them, to see ways to live through these increasingly painful events. In this paper, I examine exemplars from these work tensions, the faculty relationships and the program curriculum that gave rise to them. I show how these exemplars and my Afi's stories are interwoven. Exploring experience in this way reveals for me the layers of curriculum at work in nursing education.

I approach this inquiry with awareness of "relational responsibility" (Clan-dinin & Connnelly, 2000, p. 177). While reconstructing what happened in my faculty peer group and what my part in it was, I recognize that this inquiry represents my interpretation of these events and, therefore, is a partial understanding of the situation. Other organizational layers underpin these events, but will not be told in this paper. My focus is primarily on the relevant nurse-teacher relationships, and our curriculum building process.

As I reread Afi's stories after he died, my grief for what was happening in my workplace and for my grandfather intersected. Afi loved that I was a teacher. He called me "professor" and encouraged my continuing edu-

tion. His own story of schooling partially illustrates where his values and attitudes originated.

When I started school, it was a one room schoolhouse that later became a four room schoolhouse, which I worked on when I was 14. We mixed the mortar for Brinki Bjornson, the plasterer, and I finished my grade X with honours that season. Then the following year the school board dropped grade XI so there was no more education. My parents were too poor to send me to Teulon each day for my grade eleven as the fare for both ways was 35 cents per day. Since I would have to leave at 7 in the a.m. and be home at 7 p.m. in the evening, maybe it was too much time away from home. That was the end of my education.

Oh, how I wished I could have had an education. When talking to the people we associate with, it's somehow hard to understand at times as they are so educated and can converse about so many things. It makes one feel as if you do not belong, so we just keep our place and be polite to one and all. We are not as well educated as the others, schoolteachers, nurses and retired government workers. I feel a little out of their class, so we just keep silent most of the time, and feel proud to be able to say, "I did it my way". Now it's time to close the chapter on the past, and live with the future, which is ahead, how long is not for me to say.

In July 1999, I joined a newly developed Collaborative Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BScN) program. Moving beyond part-time management and part-time teaching positions, I felt that I was entering the most satisfying time in my nursing career. Yet, as is expected with new programs, the change brought an endless learning curve and increasing demands for creativity in developing new courses, immediately beginning them with students, and concurrently developing other courses for the next semesters. It was also a busy time for me in other ways. A small group of us on faculty designed and led an international conference, *Creating Healing Spaces* (2000). We believed in this concept and felt it was congruent with our philosophy as nurse educators of valuing "lived experience." Also, by the time I completed my second year in this collaborative undergraduate nursing program, I had successfully defended my doctoral dissertation on nurses' experience in healthcare reform. As a member of our Collaborative BScN faculty, I felt like a pioneer. I had helped shape the new nursing curriculum and had participated in policy development for this program delivered at our university and college partner sites. While some of these activities came to a close along the way, the work of designing my own approaches to teaching-learning and research, ones that complimented our phenomenological philosophy had been ongoing.

Each year since 1999 we increased our faculty complement and student numbers. Each year I felt the shift from being involved in everything with a few other colleagues, to sharing the load with many. By the summer of my 3rd year, I was digging deeper and deeper into my "root cellar" in search of nourishment that would allow me to continue. I moved from imagining

that when we had achieved a steady compliment of student and faculty numbers things would be different, to cautiously wondering if I could live through each new day with whatever it brought. I shifted from short-term crisis mode to thinking about my stamina and about maintaining my energy for the long haul.

A small group of colleagues and I worked long hours every day, and despite some conflicts, I felt closest to heaven on earth during this time in my professional life. In reflecting on Afi's memoirs, I recalled that my grandfather had written a similar story.

After managing the Leland Hotel, I was Office Manager for the Associated Anaesthetists of Winnipeg and I just could not believe how nice it is to work from 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. I was so fortunate to have the farm near Riverton where I visited when I was a boy. I could not get home soon enough to spend the weekend in the country, to repair, fix up the sheds and clean up the grounds of limbs and branches. I was in my glory doing that, and after dark I would light the pile of shrubs and watch them till the embers were turning to ashes, the full moon shining above and everything was so still and quiet. It was heaven on earth.

A few years ago, one spring morning, the sun was on the horizon and I decided to drive to the sandy shore. The weather was mild and the snow and ice had melted for about twenty feet out to where ice met the water, and while standing there, I heard this sound like chimes in the distance. I thought I had left my radio on in the car so I investigated and the radio was not on. So back I went and I could still hear the sound of chimes. Wondering what's making that sound and looking to where it's coming from, I saw that the water was only three or four inches deep at the shore. The ice had shifted towards land and the porous ice had formed icicles and they were crystal clear, close to the ice where it had stranded. There was a slight breeze and the ripple on the water made the icicles bump against one another and this was where the chimes were coming from. Nature was playing them for me to hear and this was the only time I ever heard them.

In the fall of my third year in the new collaborative BScN program, and while pondering how to construct my life as a nursing scholar in the face of relentless daily demands, two major projects that faculty had undertaken were brought to school meetings. The first embodied our dreams of developing a masters program and the second focused on obtaining funding for a research center. At this meeting a maelstrom of issues, emotions, and conflicts arose as these two issues magnetized, collected, and exposed intense feelings, perceptions, and events that had obviously been silently unfolding. These heightened reactions continued, and threatened to explode all over us. They called into question the core of all that we had worked for: our philosophy of valuing lived experience and multiple perspectives, our belief in creating healing spaces, and the development of our practical foundations. Sub-groups polarized around projects, and debates surfaced about faculty membership

and their modes of inquiry. While I felt my own sorrow and anger rise in response to this situation, suffering seemed evident on all sides. Though my fuse was short, when one of my peers gave advice on how to structure my winter course, I did not express the resentment I felt, nor did I ask questions that would clarify comments offered. Rather, I went silent, similar to my Afi's earlier story of education.

In addition to these many painful events, a number of other stressful activities loomed on an already bleak horizon: the annual arrival of fall semester students in large numbers, the moving ahead of our masters program proposal, the detailed preparation for a national and professional program accreditation process, and the integration of yet another new group of full-time faculty. While each responsibility affected me personally, each also led me to wonder about us as a faculty, and as a collective. What impact would all these tensions would have on our working relationships, I asked myself. Mirrored in Afi's experiences were lessons that offered new ways for me to understand my feelings.

There was that day in the duck marsh near the farmhouse – it was a perfect fall day, calm and bright, when I sat in my duck boat, a Newfoundland canvas covered dingy, with reeds all around me. I noticed this Green-winged Teal come flying by, and suddenly a streak of blue-black seemed to come from above, and I heard the thud when the Peregrine Falcon hit it in the air and flew away with it in its claws. It was an amazing sight as a few feathers drifted in the air.

From Afi's story, I realized that we are all inter-related, and I understood that what happens to one has consequences for all. In these accounts, Afi taught me that there were no good guys and no right positions. In an attempt to protect myself in my situation, however, I wanted to identify with the Teal, but in doing so I was ignoring my own defensiveness in the face of change and my history of smoothing over tensions and of withdrawing in the face of conflict, a topic I had written about elsewhere (Lindsay, in press). My “good person” story of myself led me to assure myself that I would not act like the aggressor. Yet, I had to admit that when threatened, I could readily be the falcon on the hunt. In his time, Afi was likely out in his boat to shoot ducks, an action that implicates him with the Falcon just as I am implicated in faculty dynamics that I do not like. Afi's actions in shooting ducks for food arose from family history of hunting in the early 1900s. Hunting birds and animals in that time might be considered akin to grocery shopping today. Indeed, seeing my grandfather's stories as meaningful in his time and context lead me to wonder if my colleagues' words and actions, along with my own, arose from our individual narrative histories in our time and context.

Now, in late winter of 2004, I find that in my work as a nurse-teacher, I am living in-between. As a newly tenured faculty member, I am on the cusp of

my first sabbatical and an open future. Reflections on the past five years lead me to understand that being part of a new university program, developing courses, policies and practices in a small group of peers, sharing the terror and the accomplishments, is coming to completion as our program has recently (June 2003) been granted a 7-year accreditation by a national nursing education professional association. For those of us who felt instrumental in designing this baccalaureate program, this award pleased us immensely; our efforts were validated. Yet, as we celebrated, it seemed, from my perspective, to outrage those who felt things needed to be done differently and who perhaps had hoped that this external review would name or expose shortcomings. The continued jostling at meetings and over e-mail essentially deconstructs what has been achieved and established. Each of us brings our own unique narratives of experience to bear on what matters and on what should be done. We are apart still; a new story has not yet been shaped.

Language becomes a code for polarized positions, alignments and judgments on our history. Terms, such as "human science" that once held a neutral philosophical nursing history, have become loaded with personal meanings that raise comments about a specific nursing theory, a theorist, and those who espouse this particular worldview. Our conflicting assumptions about what the term includes or excludes only serve to build walls further between us. As such loaded terms emerge in faculty discussions, I see that words have lost their meanings and now fail to foster understanding. My feelings of anger, belatedly named, rise in my body, as my neck and shoulders ache and lock in tension. Words of criticism surge inside, and I wish to isolate myself from the whole situation to figure out what is going on and how I can be a person in this painful environment. A labour of love is being undone, and my grief takes me back to Af's words when he faced an irreversible personal loss.

I think I never mentioned what I am about to write, and that is when I was twelve years old and stood beside the bed and watched my eight-year old brother Marno die. We did things together, like get a partridge with a slingshot for dinner because we were poor, and very often we had a bird or even a rabbit for supper. Mother knew how to cook them so that they were very tasty. It was April and the weather was changeable. My brother got pneumonia and after two weeks the doctor could do no more. I remember having a dream of a big pure white horse coming down from the sky and he stopped in front of my brother and me, and he took Marno on his back and off into the sky. It looked and felt so real and a day or two later, the white horse arrived. I stood beside his bed as he passed away. And then I pulled the sheet over him.

I wonder what to do, now that this story I helped to create is ending? How do I conduct myself when "the sheet is being pulled over" important events and relationships? I worry about the impact on our curriculum by these faculty goings-on. Then, it comes to mind that these different worldviews are not new. All along, our narratives have been an invisible curriculum.

I wonder if bringing these differing perspectives more clearly into view would open conversations on how to work together. Like my Afi's dream of the white horse taking his brother away, my dream of creating healing spaces through a curriculum that values lived experience was also taken away. My sabbatical time awaits, promising me respite and peace from the sense of loss in relationships. As I hope for a more restorative time, I turn my energies to writing this paper as a way of navigating the shoals and the darkness of the grief I feel so deeply. And yet, I wonder, is the hope I feel toward my sabbatical an assumption, a way of "pulling a sheet" over my head too? While Afi's story lingers in my reflections, Annie Dillard's words also come to mind,

When you write, you lay out a line of words. The line of words is a miner's pick, a wood-carver's gouge, a surgeon's probe. You wield it, and it digs a path you follow. Soon you find yourself deep in new territory. Is it a dead end, or have you located the real subject? You will know tomorrow, or this time next year. . . . The writing has changed, in your hands, and in a twinkling, from an expression of your notions to an epistemological tool. The new place interests you because it is not clear. (1989, p. 3)

The plotline for me amidst all of these tensions is embedded in questions: how am I in relationship with my colleagues and with my work life; how are we, as colleagues and educators, in relationship with each other and with our social milieu (Lindsay, 2004)? Based on my insights from reflections on Afi's stories and my own, I imagine each of us in this work situation participating according to our own narratives and narrative histories. I expect that our autobiographies will come into play along with personal meanings from our individual past experiences. I envision that we have a choice, either to replicate and reify our protective interpretations and perpetuate the separations already in place, or we can reframe the situation so that new endings may be possible.

The value to thinking narratively reveals to me the knowledge that I can claim about the situation and my personal assumptions. However, this distinction about knowledge brings me up short – how much of what I "know" is simply a mirror of what I already believe to be true? If a story can be told from each person's perspective, what new information can be revealed? Can alternate plotlines be constructed, depending on how the "facts" are interpreted? In my colleagues' viewpoints, I detect a wish for the inclusion of what matters to them – clinical practice, a particular theory to guide the curriculum, accepting faculty with non-nursing degrees, and different research models. Experientially-based lenses can frame and colour interpretations of a situation and render a person credible, whether they are accepted or not. Personal and social narratives intersect in situations, giving the situation a complexity filled with multiple possibilities that can influence the ongoing community or grand narrative we faculty were subject to. If I believe that

my story offers the only lens to this situation, then much detail leading to understanding could be missed. My Afi's stories brought me the much needed wisdom to enlarge my perspective beyond my own interpretation of the events.

Canadian novelist Sharon Butala wrote in *Perfection of the morning* (1994) about a time when she lay on the Saskatchewan grassland, shutting off her internal chatter, and mingling her awareness with the prairie life,

You have to be still and quiet for these things to happen; you have to release your expectations; you have to stop thinking you already know things, or know how to categorize them, or that the world has already been explained and you know those explanations. You know nothing. You understand nothing. You have only what your own body tells you and only your own experience from which to make judgments. You may have misunderstood; you may be wrong. Teach me, is what you should say, and, I am listening. Approach the world as a child seeing it for the first time. Remember wonder. In a word: humility. Then things come to you as they did not when you thought you knew. (1994, p. 129)

A hope rises within me; I want to share these words with colleagues at work, let them know there is a message in here for them. Then, I pause, and wonder how this is a lesson for me. How would I be different in my situation if I approached relationships saying, 'Teach me; I am listening.' Each of us brings our autobiographies to every situation. Each autobiography brings plotlines that intersect. Suddenly, I realize that reflecting on the autobiographical context of this situation creates space, a new curriculum space perhaps, for me to understand how my narrative intersects with others'. The two curriculums—the formal and the invisible – finally meet as one. An email I sent to my practicum co-lead teachers in the spring of 2004 captures my awareness:

I just wanted to share a few morning thoughts... yesterday when you talked about the workload for next fall (three courses to teach, preparation for winter practicum, chairing Council) I was struck by how much work that is and how it sounds like too much!!! And then later, I realized that last fall I taught three courses, prepared for practicum and chaired Council. What hits me is how taken-for-granted this workload is. I am not valorizing myself – I am thinking about what is routinely expected and accomplished and largely invisible. It goes a long way to suggesting why getting to our research might be a tad difficult. Sigh! (E-mail, April 1, 2004)

Previously unseen connections between my experience and my colleague's concern for the future open me to the possibility of relationship. In this vein, I think back to Afi's story of the falcon as the hunter and it leads me to reflect on an email I sent to Jenny (pseudonym), a colleague. Jenny admitted being in information overload and not having responded to a curriculum planning document approved in January that she now sees as causing problems. Emily (pseudonym), another colleague, and I prepared

this document, so I respond by resending the materials emailed in December that invited faculty input and participation. Thus, my response to Jenny is defensive, with the intention of showing how Emily and I am not at fault, and I reject seeing the merits to Jenny's point about overload (see e-mail above!). In this example, I notice my embodied responses to people, places and events of daily life, and I conceptualize our narratives as touching and clashing. So, what do I make of all this reporting about e-mails? It shows a level of expectation of my colleagues and myself that we, as faculty, then transfer onto students, who also repeatedly tell us that they too are overloaded, and that too many assignments reduce their learning. Our teacher workload stories play out between us and are transferred to students. Do we then feel inadequate because we cannot keep up? Does a fear of being found lacking translate into defensive anger and withdrawal?

My body responds to these demands by expanding, tensing, sighing. How does this impact on my students? I return to Dewey's (1929) argument that the split between theory and practice, means and ends, is damaging to human life as it impedes social reconstruction. Dewey reminds us that

Full education comes only when there is a responsible share on the part of each person, in proportion to capacity, in shaping the aims and policies of the social groups to which he belongs (p. 209)...When the liberation of capacity no longer seems a menace to organization and established institutions...making a living economically speaking, will be at one with making a life that is worth living. (p. 211)

As I work to make a life worth living, I see that our stories of being nurse-teachers intersect with each other and with students' ongoing stories of becoming nurses. And, our stories play out in clinical situations with colleagues (Schwind, 2003) and also with those in our care. How can we then "liberate" ourselves from these narrative tensions to shape our situation as a healing space? Students in clinical practice settings often bring to their nursing narrative notes and conversations stories of their conflicts with staff nurses, healthcare team members, and with patients. Their experiences resonate with my stories of faculty life. Whether we realize it or not as educators, these encounters and our ways of working through them, are also a part of the living nursing curriculum. Indeed, as Connelly and Clandinin (1988) wrote, our relationships and life experience are the process and content of our curriculum, and for me, are the basis of our social significance.

Thus, what matters to curriculum discussions is more than the discipline content. The fullest development of the nurse-teacher "as a person who is aware of how she functions in a situation" directly informs, as Peplau (1952, p. xii) said, "the kind of person each nurse-teacher becomes, and in turn, makes a substantial difference to the curriculum that each student nurse will learn" as s/he is taught throughout her/his experience. Reflection on and reconstruction of my personal and social experience in connection

to my grandfather's stories underpins my curriculum. Afi's narratives help me over time to understand my work experiences, and suggest to me that disagreement and connection are both possible in problematic situations. Annie Dillard's observations also come to mind once more, "the world is as glorious as ever, and exalting, but for credibility's sake let's start with the bad news" (1999, p. 8). It is tempting to put a Hollywood ending on my story, to make it tidy or happy; or, to stay with the certain, expert, cover story (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995), but that would not reflect my learning about the dialectical power of narrative and autobiography. Afi's stories included the falcon, death, loss and grief as well as splendour and solace in nature. Yet, after more than 9 decades of life's bittersweet experiences, he still had hope for relationships:

When I leave I want to hear the breeze and the rustle of the leaves as I walk through them and commune with nature, geese ducks, crows, gulls and birds of various kinds. So if you come looking, that's where you'll find me – with a straw between my teeth. I'll be waiting for everyone. Who knows maybe the good Lord will let me put the kettle on and we'll have tea. God bless everyone. (Bjarnason, 1997-8)

I come to the end of my text knowing that how I interact with faculty colleagues underpins my daily life and impacts on our curriculum. Yet, what haunts my thinking is the possibility that we will, rather than become a faculty community through dialogue about each other's narratives, stay within our autobiographically plotlines, leaving no openings for learning and change. My commitment to thinking narratively, which is made transparent in my writing, is a practice as well as a theory. I fall back daily into the narrative-in-progress that is my life and remember this is also true for my colleagues and students.

My grandfather's stories live on and weave through my life and my work every day, guiding me through the many challenges I face as an eductor and as a human being. There are many more of his stories to learn from as I move on.

(John Wallace Duncan Bjarnason, June 3, 1909 – January 18, 2003).

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