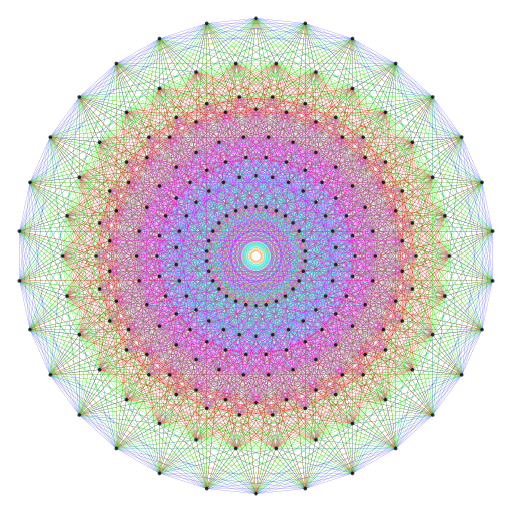
Autoethnography

The essence of me, the Essence of We;

Connectedness and Change

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Abstract: The autoethnography following is a brief description of my current framework of knowledge as related to my developmental understanding of my educational philosophy.

“Connectedness, includer, learner, input, achiever,” these are the descriptors that resulted from a Gallup Strengthsfinder poll I completed in recent history. After receiving this data, I don’t know that I had a strong understanding of the meaning behind it. These words have sat upon my desk, at times jokingly referred to, but remained as just a few words that described me. I don’t think that it was until now, two years after receiving the information that I have been able to make deeper inroads to understanding what they mean. As I reflect upon information gathered throughout the semester, and through writing this instrument, I find that I am coming to a better understanding than before, and also find that with each nuance, each experience, each person and friend I encounter, these words alter, reconfigure, realign, and reconnect. Ever transforming and changing,

Physical self  
 My physical self is something I have come to grapple with, with some days being better than others. The biggest item that has been a concern for me has been my weight. When I was eleven I was told by a close family member that I would die before I was twenty-one. At twenty-seven I was diagnosed with Type II Diabetes, and through daily injections and monitoring, I remain ever-aware of my weight. I remember during grade school being especially sensitive to it, I spent my entire freshman year wearing a blue windbreaker. It covered me both physically and psychologically. This discomfort with my physical

self led me to seek acceptance and approval in an area I seemed to do well at, academics.

In addition to focusing me on academics, my consciousness of my weight also caused me to be more aware of the way people treated others, including students and teachers. I often felt (and at times continue to feel) that I am not part of the group, often on the periphery, “marginalized” (Gameson, 2000, 347) because of my weight. As an education professional, the presence of my body issues impact me daily. As a teacher and administrator, I often look for signs of bullying or teasing that will drive students away from achieving their potential on every level, and attempt to deter them before they happen. As a support for teachers and staff, I find myself using my body issues as a form of joking to build rapport.

In the future, I am uncertain of how it will develop. As I change roles within the education system, and as I seek my goal of obtaining a doctorate, I find myself becoming more sedentary and not eating appropriately. I feel like my own discomfort with my weight contributes greatly to a lowered self-esteem, and if unchecked, it will undermine changes I can affect within education.

Cultural Self

At this time I know that my cultural identity is incomplete, as I continue to learn and grow with new experiences and new learning, I imagine that my cultural identity will continue to grow and develop. When asking my family how I would be identified culturally, they responded initially with the following adjectives: American, white, Christian, female, liberal. My sister said, “Not just politically liberal, you are liberal in how you live your life, you don’t cater to every dictate of our society. My stepmother echoed my sister’s sentiment saying “you are definitely not traditional.” My sister continued to add, for example you are going to school to get your doctorate, not something that every woman does. You are strong, and motivated, and caring, and considerate.”

I could see how most of these things might be included in a discussion about me, and was flattered by a few things that were said, however I was a bit surprised by the term “Christian.” Although I have attended many services of various Christian-based faiths with my family as well as celebrating common Christian holidays together, I don’t know that I would identify myself fully as Christian. While I believe in many of the tenets of Christianity, I find them echoed in other religious beliefs, and find myself challenged with some of the practices of organized religion and the fundamental Christian belief that non-followers are wrong and will suffer because of it. For the majority of my adult life, I have continued to seek enlightenment as related to not only religion, but philosophy. I read and referenced multitudes of books on philosophy and religion at the same time learning about my subject area of study, science. Perhaps it was the recent scientific introduction of the Theory of Everything by physicist, surfer Garrett Lisi (Lisi, 2007), or perhaps it was my desire to learn more about string theory, somehow the learner/input part of me coupled with the connectedness part of me has attempted to put understand how these things are all interconnected, spirituality, religion, and philosophy that have merged to create my now.

I believe that as an education professional, I have seen the role of religion come to play in school systems through the discussion of evolution, and through the lack of consideration for other non-Christian based faiths. It never ceases to amaze me at how often in the education system and in the world in general we are so ready to separate ourselves based upon perceived differences. When thinking about the Theory of Everything, religion, string theory, quantum mechanics, DNA, energy transformations, we are all so intrinsically connected on such an infinitesimally small level, that to take something so inconsequential as religion, skin color, or physical attributes to force perceived differences that I am challenged to understand the mindset that establishes these constructs, this forced binarism (Appignanesi and Garret, 2008 p. 60; St Pierre, 2001) which is undermined at the deepest level of being we as humans are aware of, the quantum level.

Political Self

It is easy to trace the development of my political self. When I was very young, I remember great family debates on my mother’s side of the family. My grandparents worked in schools as an RN and as a custodian, my mother and aunt were also educators, so there was often talk of the importance of education for everyone, the oppression of the masses, and the importance of social equity. These values have always been a part of my political prevue.

Other than mock voting is social studies, and being class secretary for my sophomore class, my first real political act was in Forsyth County, Georgia. On January 24, 1987, my friends and I drove to Cumming, Georgia from our home in Atlanta and joined the civil rights march down through Cumming. My friend David heard about what happened a week earlier with the Nationalist Movement, and asked several of us to join him. I remember that I was really excited on the way, we generally talked about school and other things, and when we started walking it seemed alright, and although there was a lot of crowd control, and we were on the far side of the street, I remember hearing things yelled with such vehement hatred from the other side of the street by the Ku Klux Klan members that were lined up and held back by the national guard. I remember trying really hard to wrap my brain around how people could feel such hatred, and still to this day being unable to achieve the understanding, let alone forgiveness that others have for this type of behavior.

As I grew up and continued into my career, I realized that being “white” afforded me privileges and advantages that others did not have. While I disagree fully with this, and often argue for and seek ways to support others and to remove the identifiers.

As a white person, I have been privileged to some political advantage, but as a woman I am at a political disadvantage. Even in the world of education that has evolved from being male dominated at the teacher level (Blount, 2000 p. 85-88) I find that at the administrative level I am seeing challenges because I am a woman. I have experienced choices for building campus administrative cabinets built solely upon the gender, once early in my career as a member of the interview committee hearing a principal state, “we have too many females as administrators, so unless there is something extraordinary, focus your attention on the male candidates.” I came to find out that in this day and age, this sentiment wasn’t as uncommon as I expected it to be.

Historical Self

As a teacher, experiences similar to the experience of the interview committee, coupled with my continued disagreement with the consistent marginalization of students by fellow teachers, the testing system, and the school district that made me wish to move further along in my own education. Upon getting ready to graduate with my bachelor’s degree, I remember searching for a quote that expressed my feelings about my continued goals as I moved forward in life. I found a quote from Mahatma Ghandi that resonated with me, and has become a part of my mantra as I continue to grow and change, “You must be the change that you wish to see in the world.” I find that my continued desire to seek understanding, to give back to others, and to be a part of the change I wish to see, change that will remove identifiers and marginalization, that will shift power dynamics away from oppression, currently manifests itself in seeking my doctorate. Not only to continue to develop my own learning, but to be the change agent I strive to be, creating change from within the system.

I chose to save historical self for my last segment because I believe it is all of the experiences mentioned in earlier sections in conjunction with so many others that have led me to this place, and they will lead me in different, unexpected directions in the future. One of the most significant events that had great influence on me not previously mentioned is the seemingly sudden death of my mother. Nearly ten years ago, my mother was diagnosed with and passed away from pancreatic cancer. This was and remains the most devastating event of my entire life. My greatest influence came from my mother, she was a fearless, John Lennon loving, peace supporting, love everyone as they are person. I grew up coloring in stamps I found on the desk that said “war is not healthy for children and other living things,” wearing dresses with peace signs on them, learning about the history of so many different types of people, listening to everything from the Beatles to Janice Joplin, and watching her act out the poem “The Raven” on the stairs of the sunken bedroom. After her divorce from my father, she worked her way through school as a custodian to become a teacher, and was one of the most well respected and loved teachers at her school (as evidenced by repeated “teacher of the year awards). The only time I remember being unhappy with my mother was when she challenged me to push myself further and to “not worry about what other people think.” She introduced my older sister and myself to many of the people I consider to be influences in my life on the world stage such as John Lennon, Ghandi, Mother Teresa, and Nelson Mandela. She encouraged me to grow, learn, and explore the world as well as to have the highest respect for the things in it, and will always be the key individual that influenced me.

Methods

During this study, that I mostly targeted the use of quantitative data. Anecdotal data from stories and discussion with family and friends, old scrapbooks and journals from grade school, my own memories of the things that have been a part of my life, previous papers regarding educational philosophy, and collections of books that I have read. I also incorporated a small piece of quantitative data in the form of the Strengthsfinder survey taken two years ago.

Analysis and Discussion

When compiled and analyzed, all of this information revealed to me a deeper sense of self in a myriad of ways. I began gain more than a surface level understanding for my motivation to be an educator and person of service to others, and as a student. In addition I realized to that there are parts of me aligning with several of the philosophies we have studied over the semester.

As an adult learner, education professional, and as a doctoral student, I see patterns throughout my life that are part of who I am now. I have always sought to move to a different level of understanding rather than settle in to my current state, and when unhappy with the status quo or the accepted norm, I have been a motivated self-learner fueled by my desire to understand connections and truths in addition to being motivated to seek higher levels of systems knowledge to support my understanding. I find that I enjoy learning about things I am interested in, and when I have down-time I seek to increase my knowledge through reading and discussion with others. As a learner I find myself challenged with developing and communicating my own understandings in a clear, concise manner.

As a PhD student, I find that my desire to learn and have discussions with others is supported by the framework of being in the program. With each new level and experience I encounter things that cause me to stop and redirect my thinking.

When reflecting upon all of my “selves” I see them continuing to grow and morph, being reborn with each new person I encounter. What I see, the thing that is intrinsic in my soul, and in my philosophy, is the removal of oppression and marginalization, the move toward everyone being able to be and explore themselves unhindered by labels and identifiers. Further, my educational philosophy targets the provision of opportunities for social equity and social justice, including opening doors and removing obstacles for others to expand their own learning.

Recently, during my presentation, one of my colleagues noted that my philosophical viewpoint seemed to clash with the education system, and asked how I can mesh the two. I find that as I go along, I disagree with the state of many things, but often fall back upon my adopted mantra of being the change I wish to see in the world. At this time, I believe that I am in a position to move toward incremental change from within. As an education professional working directly in a school system, I have the opportunity to interface with people on a variety of levels. It is through these opportunities that I strive to identify and move toward a common understanding related to social equity.

I believe I have chosen to be a part of the PhD program because it is a manifestation of my desire to move outside of the status quo, to seek other ways to help not only myself, but others make sense of the connectedness and social responsibility we all have to one another. Initially, I had several key targets that I wanted to focus on in my studies that included detail oriented support for school systems, now I am finding that my truth may lie in another, unanticipated direction relating more to social justice, equity and responsibility. “The solution is not to ‘integrate’ them (the oppressed) into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they can become ‘beings for themselves’” (Blackwell, 2008 p. 69). It is in this statement that I seek to work now as an educational professional and PhD student, and in the future as I continue to support movement away from oppression.

Philosophy

Having reflected upon my current knowledge of the various philosophies studied, I have found that I generally find pieces of each philosophy studied that I embrace, and pieces I reject. After analysis of the data, and developing a very brief understanding of the philosophies studied, I find that currently I most align myself with pieces of each philosophy informing my own educational philosophy. Progressivism with the belief that education is for all and is experiential (2006, p.47-54), and Existentialism with the development of the importance of community (Greene, 1995 p. 37-40) are tenets I find echoed in my own philosophy. I find that I am most aligned with critical theory and postmodernism, absorbing pieces of poststructuralism, queer theory, and feminism within my philosophy. My aforementioned experiences as described in discussion of “selves” have led me to this understanding. From a young age, I have seen oppression and marginalization (hooks, 2000 p. 4-7; 1998 p. 56; 2000 p. 347) of myself and others based upon falsely constructed meanings (2000 p. 348), language set by power-makers (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery and Taubman, 1995 p. 456-461), and victimization (Blake, Smeyers, Smith, & Standish, 2003 p. 38). I have chosen to reject traditional ways (1995 p. 452) and attempted to seek my own path (Freire, 1998 p.58 )

As an education professional, I see my work continuing to be informed by all of the aspects of philosophical study I have absorbed, and continuing to find connections that are not currently evident. “Our awareness of our unfinishedness makes us responsible as beings, hence the notion of our presence in the world as ethical” (1998 p.56).

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Addendum

Presentation of selected excerpts from

Autoethnography

Narrative: The essence of me, The Essence of We

For my entire life I have had a chasm in one particular component of what could be called the well-rounded triumverate (inclusive of physical, mental, spiritual). While I am not the pinnacle of physical specimen, I have been able to grapple and understand my physical self and work with or without the parameters it entails (some days are better than others). I have always worked on my intellectual self, including continuation of learning on a variety of levels (thank goodness for the computer, I have even continued this learning to the new technology of prezi) and I do not foresee a time when this will not occur due to lack of desire. In regard to political self, it is and has been relatively constant, social justice and social equity for all (in my family I am known as the soft-hearted liberal).

This brings me to my chasm, my spiritual/philosophical self, as I am currently in the understanding that for me, these two things are intertwined. I find this area a challenge for me because I am void of the “knowing,” the “faith,” or the enlightenment that some people seem to so readily profess.

As a child I attended churches of many different faiths, we celebrated easter and Christmas, I attended CCD (not fun when everyone knows what is going on but you), bible camp, and read bible stories. I watched and felt hypocritical goings on as people of “faith” snickered and jeered at my ill-fitting clothes, the clothes of others, or at the misfortune of others (such as an entire service dedicated to the young music director being found kissing his FIANCE’ in the church parking lot…blasphemy I say. (Audience snickers and jeers)

So, with this strong foundation, and terrific role-modeling, I decided to seek this elusive “faith” and understanding of my place in the universe on my own. At this time, I was much younger and targeted my understanding of my own needs, of the microcosm. I read everything I could (Audience- book flapping), and attended services for multiple religious and faith belief systems. I even ate a tiny rubber cow that was buried in a cookie at the festival of little and big during a ceremony for a “non-traditional” faith. Who knew the cow was supposed to be discovered by someone? I kept silent, the cow was never to be seen again.

During this time, I began to branch out my questions to think about the people around me, to connect with this “faith, knowing, and understanding” to seek my own understanding and Two examples come to mind..

During a play about Harriet Tubman that the entire school attended at a local church, one of the students I was with (a 5th grader) asked me…Miss Rang, what is this about…we don’t do this religion in my house). He is one of my traveling companions…one that I think about when trying to make and support work choices (including discussions about evolution)

Another example is a bit more personal, and perhaps shows the devilish nature I can hide (I’m sure many of you that have worked with me are quite aware)

SO…

One day, I questioned my sister-in-law, a Lutheran Youth minister, asking “Do you expose your students equally to other faiths? She replied, “no” Being the person I am, I pushed further, “if you don’t expose them to other faiths or religious ideas, then how do you know that when the choose Lutheranism it is a true, informed choice, rather than one that is slanted and biased?” Thank goodness it was time for the birthday cake, because we would have had to push further. I’m not sure how many families also use birthday cake as tension avoidance, I love my family…we would give anyone a run for the money with the “food avoidance” technique.

My spiritual/philosophical quest continued…with some valleys and some hills (probably more valleys, or more hills depending upon your perspective of challenges and highs and lows, I’ll let you decide).

Then my earth shattered, my mother, best friend, and hero passed away within six months of a diagnosis of pancreatic cancer. For months after her diagnosis, she seemed to seek her own understanding, and worked to solidify her faith. She chose the faith of her childhood, Christianity to help support her through this time. I was not so swayed, but supported her choices.

After she passed away, I was tormented with my own lack of faith and of connectedness with the universe, I had not yet had enough time to wrestle my understanding, to know that I would see her again as others seem to know or profess knowing. I was woken with terror that perhaps she felt the burning of the crematorium, I questioned both science and religion and finally came to grips with continuing my own spiritual quest.

I continued to refine my understanding of the relationships between faith, science, religion, and philosophy, trying to make sense of it all in order to move toward my own foundation, as well as to support others.

Recently, I have begun thinking about energy transformations and the connections between all beings. I think this started with the Celestine Prophecy. Energy comes in and goes out..causing me to what percentage of us is the same as before….for example, we take in energy as food (approximately 1-200 watts per day) and we release energy through heat and through chemical processes….(40 watts for heat). (Audience-Marshmallow activity) so, if we are really the same as we were before, how would we know….mind boggling

Of course I couldn’t leave well enough alone, one day my bubble shifted (since I am usually half a bubble off a level, this is not an unusual thing)… I happened upon string theory ( a concept that is firewall protected in some districts by the way…really?? I digress..…(Audience tosses string across the room***).*** To me this was reminiscent of the cytoskeleton in a cell… and I began thinking, what if we are part of a greater cell….from this even more wonderings abounded…I began to think of the energy dynamics, the conceptual understandings of the universe, energy connections with stars, our exchanges with one another and the entire energy of the universe…just a few things….

Now I wonder about meta-narratives, binarys and power struggles, marginalization and the relationships between religion and philosophy…how do they compliment one another…how do they compete…how will it help me, mold me..assist me with defining my understanding and supporting my understanding of the collective “we”

Well, enough ramblings and wonderings…I could go on for days with this… and will do so if left to my own devices...

The quest has been ongoing, with greater and lesser focus…today, I am at a current understanding that marries my knowledge of science, philosophy, and a touch of faith continues to grow and morph…I have put together a brief poem to share this with you….

Incredibly large me

Incredibly small me

Stars collide

Energy Transforms

Cells grow

Are we all me?

It is truth I seek,

Not historical or physical truth,

But the truth of me

The inner me, the outer me, the connected me,

Just a peek

Just a peek to see

What is me

In relation, conjunction, connection, cohesion, with thee

How will it unfold?

is becoming…