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Qualitative Inquiry 2005; 11; 933

DOI: 10.1177/1077800405276771

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Neuroticism: End of a Doctoral Dissertation

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This autobiographical account of the author, a graduate student, reflects the end of her doctoral studies. She writes to the point of obsession. The author inscribes into the curriculum her process of becoming. More central, she desires to create a pedagogical context for others to identify the epistemological assumptions that underlie the phenomenon of writing as reflective practice. Autobiography was discovered as a way to make sense and transform the aesthetic and intellectual understandings of her inner life. Her journey for self-knowledge symbolizes the epistemological forms she contravenes. Autobiographical understanding lies in the porous boundaries between the self and knowledge and the power of self-reflexivity that intensifies the educative process.

Keywords: *doctoral dissertation; autobiographical; story writing; self-reflection; writing as way of knowing*

Last Friday I struggled to write, but my neck was too twisted. My lower lip quivered and my right hand trembled. There was numbness. My arm was separate from my body. Briefly, I wondered if I had suffered clinical death. I had to bear my decision to write for twelve hours a day, the last four days. A huge price for a few hundred words. A cascade of thoughts. I had erupted with lava. It wore me down. I lay on my heating pad and checked the time. Continue to write. I was in a groove. More beginnings about the end. A dissertation to finish. I gripped the heating pad but was not in charge. I felt nauseous. An uncomfortable void in my stomach. I dragged myself to the kitchen and boiled water for instant noodles. Noodles have a way of calming me down. An Asian addiction I have had for years. Sometimes, I add an egg for flavor. When the water boiled, I ate immediately. Systematically, and rather absently, I finished my noodles. But my stomach rose, and vomit spewed onto the table and floor. I could not breathe. I ran to the bathroom and threw up more.

It was not the noodles that made me sick. During the extraordinary events of the past four days, my body had reached a point of complete saturation. New morsels were poison. I gripped the sink and closed my eyes. Lying back

Qualitative Inquiry, Volume 11 Number 6, 2005 933-938
DOI: 10.1177/1077800405276771
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down, I thought of the remains in the sink. They looked disgusting but I could not clean. I was too exhausted.

When I visited my massage therapist two hours later, she asked if I was OK. No. She said when we hurt, we long for spiritual awareness. I saw a childhood image. I prayed for repair. Knots tightened. My head began to pound. All I wanted was to feel alive and float with an artist's release. I told her, "Fix me in a hurry. Work your magic, please." Still so much to write. I could not allow myself the luxury of being paralyzed by emotions and physical agony. Eyes shut, I imagined the ocean. There was the sun, sky, and water. It was truth and I was free.

No choice but to write during the day. Inspiration from isolation. It is tricky business to write. Much of this dissertation I write in solitary confinement. My mate returns from work and mentions current events. A lump in my throat, I shake. I hear nothing. I overlook the world with a table, chairs, and books. Immobile. My hideaway. No one to disturb me. I get cranky but desperation triggers me. Prewriting rituals commence. To crank energy, I clean the kitchen, bathroom, and bedroom. A load of laundry arouses my muse. If in doubt, I stroll the dyke and drift with the clouds. I buy more books, my supply of words. I will not say how many books I have collected. Then I run. So much scenery to ingest. Miles and miles. No choice but to write during the day.

I work the writer's graveyard shift, sunsets and dawns. Three a.m., I wake up to write. My mind buzzes with thought. Before I sleep, I position my laptop on the table. It is in a wide, carpeted, simply furnished room. My imagination awakens in the dark. In an uncluttered room I hibernate, then hallucinate. Moonlight. On the end table sits my wine glass. I leave one there every night. Once, I was stuck in a sentence and wandered the room seeking distraction. I thought the glass moved and jumped back to my laptop. Passages came easily and dug near the bones. Empty the words. My writer's cell. A sequel to tell when moonlight hovers. I work the graveyard shift, sunsets and dawns.

Aubade: Farewell At Dawn
Daylight arrives
I bid farewell
tiptoe away
abandon my world
Daylight arrives

The urge to write devours. A slight movement from inside brings a feeling of fullness. I return to the keyboard. The second time tonight. My eyes roam as the ghost of light reappears. A phantom beside the monitor, I gaze at the flame that dances at my fingers. Tresses of hair fall on the keys. I return to bed and stare at the hazy streetlights. My breath rises at the edge of darkness. My words a sea of mud with floating logs. Writer's block.

*I listen in the dark
 immersed in an endless sea of joy
 I wander to my words
 an unknown visitor to the keys
 I shiver at my trembling shadow
 shaken by the heat of harmony*

At Dim Sum, hors d'oeuvres are selected from Asian ladies pushing carts of food. There are pork and shrimp dumplings, noodles, rice dishes, and the exotic array of cow's tongue, eggplant, red bean pastries, barbecue pork, curried squid, and chicken's feet. Chimeric characters create scenes in my head. There are stories in the snake soup. As I savor squid, compelling characters whisper to me.

I switch hats all the time. The unsettling effect is a challenge. I visit the hat store. The owner says people wore hats in the Middle Ages because drafty castles had no heat. The peaceful, powerful sense of a hat unfolds who I want to be. A time for critical reflection. Each hat grants space to feel hurt, hate, love, faith, hope, and pain. I struggle. Heal. Express. There are dress hats—Bretons, sailor styles, velour, and lampshades for formal wear. An array of casual hats—cloche, cashmere, Basque beret, narrow-medium-wide brimmed, and soft crushable hats. If you want to be funky, try a gator hat, the cat and the hat, or a crocheted strawberry, bumblebee, or ladybug hat. Yesterday, brash and sassy. Today, quiet and mysterious. Tomorrow, bold and alluring. I play with the hats of my life.

My writer's hat is a safe place. I write academically, polemically, and playfully. I have written secret diaries, but with the understanding they are not to share. Writing is symbolically a gesture of longing compelled to give voice. Writing is like crockery cooking. I think of my crock-pot, with its wonderful odor of food, and precious mixture of vegetables, spiced, mixed, and tasted. Wild mind. There are several women writers to whom I pay homage: Nancy Lee, Evelyn Lau, Grace Paley, and Madeleine Thien. I have always wanted to create a writing world.

I develop neurotic behaviors. Solipsism prevails as I desperately wrestle the world. A phobia provides a palisade to pontificate. The last few years have been like this. When I drive to work, it is strange. Traffic lights and people uptight. My students ask why my eyes are glossy and red. I tell them it's my big day out of the house. When the addiction becomes all-consuming, I feel fury, remorse, and paranoia. At times, manic bursts of creativity and dazzling results. Intoxicated to create. I feel great when manic, worthless when depressed. I question whether my writing is riveting without mood swings. It is not unusual to disappear for hours and write at a fevered pitch.

Friends seem strange. They cannot see I am completing a horse race. Some days, writing is hell. I had touched fire and fire had touched me. There is an inherent disbelief that writing is work and should be indulged in after

business hours. If one does not make money from writing, why bother? I announced to my mother that my supervisor and I had an article accepted for publication. Her response was, "Will you get paid more?" Nothing is more vexing for a writer than, "I have not seen your books in stores." When I give someone my manuscript, it is like giving my heart away.

I am joined to my laptop. I lug it to strange events. I must not risk stopping. There is a band rehearsal. The music gets my blood going and it feels really good. Surprisingly, in walks a research participant. Followed by a school advisor. What an odd combination, but I am alive. Why would anyone write instead of listening to music? Because writing takes me to the same place that musicians go.

My deepest instinct urges me to act. I place my right hand on the lid. A voice whispers my name. I hesitate but lift the lid and inhale. I am uneasy. I am lured into the screen. There is a shiver. My left hand slides onto my right, the grip like a kiss. A voice bellows to type, but my fingers are paralyzed. The chair sways. A fire burns by my side. I am heightened. I gasp. My head bends and my forehead nears the keyboard. Innocent movement of hands, up and down. Count Basie echoes in the room. The keys lift and fall, one by one, as I recall my thoughts. The chair draws me closer. There is a churn of water. I push toward the waves. The keys envelop me while I scream inside. The lap of my tongue presses in my mouth. My wrists tremble and my fingers stop. I inhale deeply. Pulsating spasms shiver through my arms. Rhythms twitch in my neck. I drown in a rush of sensation. I haul myself off the chair. Closing the lid of the keyboard, I smile. A brief moment of pleasure.

In Prince George, I walk on the edge. The room is quaint with a couch, chairs, tables, and a washroom. I close the curtains and plug in my laptop. It shakes like the waves outside the window. My skin bursts. It has been a week. The ripeness and waiting take over. I have seen you unused, bent while perched on the table in the shadow of a lamp. I wipe the dust and caress the alphabet. I moan as my thumbs covet the arc of the keys. The blue and white screen combines like ice cream and rum. Hairs stand on edge, as though an animal has clawed me. Even with some action, I want more. Quickly, I succumb. The keys are cold. I circle the palm of my hands over the keys. Desire builds and our forces collide. A blaze of energy, lost in touch. My fingers whisper as they float across the water. A current pushes me. Sweat drips. I touch, you respond. I move, you jitter. Wish I had a candle. Wax on my skin would melt with the moment. I want the taste of you, the pleasure of owning every word that gushes out. A tug of war and a buzz says this is dangerous. I steer my fingers and watch them shudder. I am silenced. Over and over, the tension builds. Up and down, the mountains sway. I know your ridges, valleys, and fortress. The thunder thought brings a storm. Wild winds deafen me. Hot and warm, I frantically type. To get there, to be there. I straighten my back and climb steadily, lifting my fingers in the dark. Just when I think I am at the edge, there is more to climb. I find a sore spot. My imagination and intellect bleed.

Bloodstains. Lines of words whirl past the wound. A wild path emerges as I probe. Symbols speed across the monitor. A sense of rhythm, pulse after pulse. And then it happens. I hold my breath and soar. Higher and higher. Full speed ahead.

A rapid, rumbling ruse. The world again. It ripples through my ears as the whistling wind blows garbage cans down the road. I wish to scream aloud. Plants need watering, a thick film of dust lines the windowsills, and there are overdue bills to pay. Right away. Collected phone messages. Soon, friends will cash in my rain checks for coffee and lunch. No recollection when I saw them last. Mailboxes of unopened e-mails I have compacted. Six years of artifacts. Traces of humanity draw me into another metaphysical realm.

Hard to come back. An adventure is an ontological division. Maybe I won't come back, cling to the mountain way up yonder. In the corner of my eyes, there is an image, growing larger, trying to assert itself. By the end of the week, the ocean will wash over me, and the world will be cleansed into a familiar Sunday night.

It has taken six years to understand what a dissertation can do. Others have seen me grow and change. For some, it has been overwhelming. There is fear on their faces watching my life unroll with intense periods of both joy and anguish. Broken images and shattered dreams. If there was a way to ensure that a doctoral dissertation would keep the world the same, research would not progress. My obsessive-compulsive disorder of a dissertation must make a difference. A tremendous amount of satisfaction came from being a writer. Truth is, I am saddened by the end.

The unspoken postulate of a doctoral program is that one will change both emotionally and intellectually. Life will be sliced differently after a magnum opus. It challenges and delights, but also brings agony and pain. In this society, writing gives me the pleasure of birds who build a nest and gloat. After floating for years, I embrace wounds and resolutions.

Being a writer is like being a musician. It takes you to a secret place of honor. I realize how tempestuous my life will be as a writer. But I want it this way. Dealing with musicians and teaching music in my research opens a door that brings me back to being an artist. Each time I enter a classroom, I feel closer to the part of myself that I have regained. I am an artist, cleaning, running, having fun, feeling good, eating noodles, dim sum, and blueberry pie with ice cream. I pass small words and keep treading. One word after another. Keystroke after keystroke. I find and lose myself endlessly. Daytime, nighttime, sheets of torrents to unknown places. Moments of writing convince me that there is nothing richer and more enlivening in the world. I am stimulated, nourished, and drained all at once. Deep in my heart, I know that if I create, freedom will stay. I am devoted to my craft. There is solace and wisdom, truth and pride. That is why I stay alive.

I am sad that I have come to the end. All is settled and done. Add the final touches and call it a night. I recall the first time I constructed knowledge.

There was a chorus of singers. I wondered what it meant. Rumors flew that this new knowledge could serve as an important philosophical and epistemological framework. My theories prove I can contribute to the academy. I am a scholar. A great deal of responsibility to disseminate what I had found. At first, it was overwhelming. Publish or perish. Writing a dissertation seemed unattainable, but now that I have completed it, I would do it again. To be lost and ponder words is pure heaven. Each time I write, I begin all over again. I have rehearsed for the performance. Hooks for phrases and lines with mazes. The End. Finis, be done with it, I say. I predict it will not last long. I return to the start. Reject and protect. That is what writing does to me. I will now end where I began six years ago. Today I will tell a story. It has a beginning, and a middle, and an end.

Karen V. Lee is a faculty advisor and cofounder of the Teaching Initiative for Music Educators (TIME) cohort at the Faculty of Education, University of British Columbia, Vancouver. Her research interests include issues of musician identity, teacher identity, music education, teacher education, and arts-based approaches to qualitative research. She is a musician, music educator, writer, and researcher. She completed her doctoral dissertation as a book of short stories, titled Riffs of Change: Musicians Becoming Music Educators (2004), which was about musicians becoming music educators in a classroom context.