

EIGHT EVENTS FOR ENTERING A PHD

Eight events for entering a PhD: A poetic inquiry into happiness, humility, and self-care

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Abstract:

The following pair of poetry clusters (Butler-Kisber & Stewart, 2009) offer (1) reflective, ‘past’ event poetry and (2) hopeful ‘humbling’ event pieces for future use. They are threaded with self-care advice for particularly, first year PhD students. I am inspired by scholarship examining the emotional difficulties commonly experienced by novice academics (Baptista, 2013; Brown, 2013; Brus, 2006; Casanave, 2015; Polson, 2003; Stanley, 2015), as well as literature on finding success and happiness in graduate school (Furstenberg, 2013; Kearns, Gardiner & Marshall, 2008). First, I mined my own experiences for poetry that honours significant moments, which helped me to exercise self-care. Next, I turned the hopeful future, extending an invitation for contemplation and action with the second cluster. Each piece outlines a potential poetic path to accessing humility, as staying humble is important in graduate school (Gritzso, 2014), particularly while writing (Leggo, 2016); indeed, humility is perhaps an ideal avenue for finding happiness and exercising self-care (Chancellor & Lyubomirsky, 2013). Ultimately, the clusters combine into a micro-collection of eight event poems representing past experiences and future potential.

Keywords: higher education, novice academics, poetic inquiry, self-care, humility, happiness

Looking back, moving forward: Introduction to two poetry clusters

This poetic inquiry explores potential self-care practices for early academics inspired by my first year as a PhD student in language and literacy education. This period of time was fraught with competing emotions including nervous anticipation, excitement, fear, guilt, self-doubt, and hope. Because emotional difficulties are common among novice academics (Baptista, 2013; Brown, 2013; Brus, 2006; Casanave, 2015; Polson, 2003; Stanley, 2015), it is crucial for novice academics to take time for self-care throughout their careers (Furstenberg, 2013; Kearns, Gardiner & Marshall, 2008), particularly from the beginning, in order to develop habits for wellness. As such, the first poetry cluster (Butler-Kisber & Stewart, 2009), using the (past) event poetry form, chronicles significant moments of self-care exercised as an emerging academic, providing guidance through example. In mining my experiences, a search conducted through re-reading my journal, personal calendar/planner, texting and email exchanges, and social media activity for useful instances where I engaged in self-care, I discovered a handful of moments that reveal potentially helpful and consistently quirky self-care strategies that I engaged with.

Next, in the second cluster, I aim to offer possibilities with my poetic inquiry into searching for potential paths to access humility, which might be an avenue for happiness and self-care. In fact, Chancellor and Lyubomirsky (2013) posit that humility might be “the most overlooked and underappreciated value,” and cite poet Tennyson as deeming this quality “the highest virtue, the mother of them all” (p. 819). Remaining humble is important when beginning PhD life; as Gritzo (2014) argues, “you should be proud of having achieved the highest level of formal education, but don’t let arrogance get in the way of your success” (p. 11). There are many ways in which graduate school offers opportunities for remaining humble, everything from rejection of papers by prestigious journals, to even citation

management; as poet inquiry legend Carl Leggo (2016) stated in one of my graduate courses, “APA is keeping us humble; it is always changing- this is the spell of language” (Dr. C. Leggo, personal communication, September 6, 2016). Later, he shares that his “favorite words” are “courage” and “humility” and asks a very humbling, important question for us emerging scholars to consider: “Don’t ask if a poem is good, but how or who it is good for” (Dr. C. Leggo, personal communication, September 14, 2016). As such, the pieces in this cluster are peeking out from behind the curtain, looking at you, the audience, wondering how or if they will be “good for you.” I hope that these event poems might lead to humble, happy moments.

Cluster 1: Reflective, ‘past’ event poetry

A quitting your job event:

1. Stand in the hallway. Hug students goodbye, wish them a happy summer. It’s okay to embrace them now- you’re not a teacher anymore.
2. Sigh a ragged sigh. Return to classroom, clean out desk. Talk yourself out of stealing the stapler and those extra packages of paper you’ve hidden. Return abandoned textbooks to the library so the kids don’t get fined, even the ones who doodled all over the pages. Think about how you’ll likely never see another penis drawn in a margin of a textbook unless you put it there yourself.
3. Shred all homework the kids never picked up, filled with thoughtful, sometimes terse, comments written in your handwriting that looks like your mom’s.
4. Remember that no one is going to call you ‘Ms. M’ for a while. Savour the last few times this happens as you schlep your boxes to your Pontiac, wiggling your fingers from under the cardboard in a pathetic wave to the last few stragglers in the parking lot. They’re stalling- why aren’t you?
5. Don’t cry when one of those kids makes a heart shape with their hands and smiles at you from the bleachers while you search for your keys. Remember the reasons why you deserve this shot at a PhD before driving away.
6. Put your Dad on speakerphone and hiccup-sob all the way home. Ask questions like, “What have I done?” Say “I miss them already.” Listen to him when he tells you it will all be okay.
7. At home, pour a glass of wine. Go online. Image-search “University of British Columbia.” Remember they have a rose garden. It’s on the ocean. Think about how you can drink coffee all day, and read, and write your own damn homework again.
8. Cry some more until your partner gets home.
9. Accept a bear hug, a second glass of wine, and another speech about how you’re doing the right thing.

10. Believe him.

A moving event:

1. Pack books in yearbook boxes.
2. Modestly highlight said boxes; regular-sized boxes are heavier to heave down three flights of stairs in July.
3. Exercise reciprocity. Listen to the mover brag about his son, Joaquin. He's doing better since his mom left and seems content to work alongside his Dad all summer. Give them orange Gatorade.
4. Hardly drive any of the way from Calgary to Vancouver. Stick feet out the passenger side window instead. Read Haruki Murakami to your partner. Fuel him with beer nuts and cherries. DJ. Save *Courage* for crossing the provincial line.
5. When you get close, smell the ocean through the trees.
6. Marvel at all your crap despite the purge. You have built a mini-city of cardboard.
7. Regret scoffing at that zen and the art of decluttering book.
8. Eat tacos. Only unpack the bed for the first night.
9. Sleep in. Go to the market. Buy muffins and a family-size box of blueberries even though it's just the two of you.
10. Eat blueberries at all three meals, but take the last few handfuls to eat on the roof for sunset viewing. Notice there are different colours in the sky here.

A first online course posting event:

1. Read assigned articles in your pajamas. Ignore dangerous precedent setting.
2. Don't worry that your screen name is IN ALL CAPS.
3. Do post first. Dive in.
4. Actually, wait. Post second. Let someone else break the surface.
5. Take a bath. Use a bath bomb called "Metamorphosis" for a "warm, spicy soak."

A first hometown visit as a PhD event:

1. Do NOT use the following words:
 - a. Discourse
 - b. Hegemony
 - c. Subjectivity
 - d. Problematic
 - e. "Post"- anything
2. Expect furrowed brows when discussing your research.
3. "Oh! You have so much time to work out now!" Smile tightly. At least that's tight.
4. Remind: no, it's not teachers college. That was eight years ago, remember?
5. Assure that you're not going to be a stay at home mom now. You're not even pregnant.
6. Go to the basement. Wear thick socks. Look through old journals. Remember everything you always wanted for yourself. This is part of that.
7. Doze. Read. Try *The girl who was Saturday night* (2014).

8. Feed the dog too many treats. Walk her in the woods around 4pm; right when the light giving you a sideways glance through the pines.
9. Let yourself be driven through your hometown like you're 14 again. Let the adults talk. Lean against the cold window. Listen to the radio. Pretend to be in the music video.
10. On the plane ride home, open the meditation app you downloaded while waiting in the Zone 4 line. Listen to "Silk Waves" for "reduced anxiety." Quickly switch to Robert Johnson.

Cluster 2: Hopeful event poems, potential paths to humility

A set of feel-small-again events:

1. Sit on a tall stool so your feet dangle. You may need to go to a bar. If possible, find a leather seat; it adds an extra dimension.
2. Open a closet that's not your own. Slip on shoes that are too big. Scuffle back and forth on carpet. Run down a hallway. Allow yourself to fall if need be. Scrape your knee.
3. On a rainy day, find Concession 7 in Southern Ontario. Jump in all the pothole puddles. Wave to the grazing Black Angus. Make a grass whistle. Move out of the way of cars.
4. Go to Crossfit.
5. Write a letter to someone older than you. Handwrite it. Mail it with soft licorice.
6. Re-read your favorite book. Underline/highlight/star the best lines.
7. Visit The Broad in downtown LA. View *Under the Table* by Robert Therrien (1994).
8. Sit cross-legged in the middle of your bed. Take the hamper of clean, warm laundry and dump it on your head. Lay back.
9. Admit when you're wrong.
10. At night, find a rooftop garden. Lay down a blanket. Drink a strawberry milkshake instead of wine. No almond milk allowed. Count the stars.

An anchoring event:

1. Go to the woods.
2. Take off ring(s). Press hands against a thick tree. Slip fingers between lines of bark. Release only when additional lines have been imprinted on palms.
3. Spread legs wide. Bow face to hover above the ground. If possible, let a fern tickle your nose. Inhale.
4. Find water- a river, brook, or spring. No puddles. Watch the movement. Pick up a wet stone and warm it in hands. You have permission to slip it in your pocket.
5. Run for a few minutes, or longer if you like. Think about Jodi Foster in *Nell* (1994), if possible. Try to feel at home.

An accepting of peer review event:

1. Make tea before opening email.
2. Forget the tea. Break out the Drambuie.
3. Sit cross-legged; wrap yourself in a faux fur blanket.

4. Read message once. Sip, sip, sip. Read message again. *Siiiiiiiiiiip*.
5. Send reviewers 1 and 2 happy thoughts.
6. Don't wish death on the third. Maybe a harmless trip up the stairs or cold Starbucks. Under extreme circumstances, a parking ticket. Okay, a towing if you must.
7. Begin revisions tomorrow.
8. Once finished the next draft, write a response letter. Before replying, ask no fewer than two people you trust to read it as well.
9. Listen to comrades who highlight passive-aggressive passages. Delete.
10. Thank all (yes, all) reviewers for their time.

A gratitude event:

1. Thank:
 - a. Supervisor(s). First. Without question. What are you, a rebel?
 - b. Bus drivers. Every day. Don't be afraid to holler from those doors at the back.
 - c. Family. Blood, chosen, or both. Remember they taught you what actually matters.
 - d. Memes. SNL. Dad for dad jokes. Whatever makes you laugh.
 - e. The makeup industry for under eye concealer.
 - f. Monks for getting the wine thing going. Did they? Thank grapes.
 - g. Every teacher/professor/TA you ever had.
 - h. Thank that last reviewer re. the previous poem- we all know you didn't.

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