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## Imagining and critical reflection in autobiography: An odd couple in adult transformative learning.

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## **Imagining and critical reflection in autobiography: An odd couple in adult transformative learning.**

Alex Nelson

**Abstract:** Adult education approaches to transformative learning generally emphasise the interpretive role of critical reflection and critical thinking. This explanatory understanding of transformative learning as autobiography claims that the learner composes their life, by using imagination and critical reflection to interpret their life story within the social context.

### **THE PHENOMENON OF REMARKABLE CHANGE**

The remarkable change under consideration here indicates adult transformative learning that has both personal and social dimensions. The change is not an expectable outcome of adult development. From the viewpoint of the person who makes a remarkable change, the decision to enact this alternative behaviour constitutes a deliberate and conscientious shift away from a previously valued important personal commitment. Secondly, the behavioural expression of a remarkable change in life choice contravenes publicly some institutional or cultural norm. Many accounts of these changes in life choice portray their authors as expressing a new sense of joy, peace and freedom. As well, people who make such a remarkable change often claim to live now with a greater sense of integrity as a result of their choice.

From a sociological viewpoint, the transformative learning of the co-researchers in this inquiry participates in a contemporary worldwide social movement among Catholic priests, sometimes described as an "exodus" (Powers, 1992). Since the 1960's, Catholic priests have been reconsidering the meaning of authority and sexuality in their lives. Of these, some 100,000 have withdrawn from active ministry. The origins, outcomes and impact of this worldwide cultural phenomenon of critical review and withdrawal reflect the alternating and sometimes conflictful culture of the Roman Catholic church during this era. Questioning of tradition, and institutional resistance to change in the policy of mandatory celibacy have both been part of the social context in which the authors of the six life stories have lived. In response to the enabling constraints of their changing social situation, each individual perceives, defines and imaginatively composes their life. The narratives of transformation told in this inquiry illustrate well how the authors' historical and proximate social contexts have influenced them. They show also the interaction between personal authorship and social construction in adult transformative learning.

### **A CO-OPERATIVE INQUIRY INTO REMARKABLE CHANGE**

I began this inquiry intending to discover the learning processes of remarkable change and the place of imagining among them. I proposed a co-operative inquiry (Heron, 1996) to the participants as a research paradigm appropriate to narrative and reflection, because it valued expression as well as explanation. Later, I renamed my research area as that of autobiographical learning, as the accounts of transformative and emancipatory learning emerged as life stories. To explore the process of "autobiographing", the research group employed several forms of life storytelling. In addition to interviews and hermeneutic conversation, we included artwork, metaphor analysis, and parable.

## **AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL LEARNING**

During the research process, as an outcome of my close attention to the actual autobiographies of the co-researchers, I became convinced that the metaphor of autobiography aptly signifies the processes of transformative learning that occur in the contexts of everyday lives. The construction of the life story interacts with the author's transformative learning.

Autobiographical learning is discernible through significant changes in the learner's self-understanding, worldviews, and ways of being in the world. Remarkable changes have social consequences, and those whose lives are affected by another's remarkable change expect the learner to give them some account of the transformation. Our best attempts to give a coherent explanation for both continuity and change in our lives lead to a story about improvisation and composition. Autobiographical learning, a form of learning from experience, sustains the ongoing formation and reinvention of life (and its narrative), but only in so far as learners attend with both imagination and critical reflection to the contexts and circumstances in their lives. Consideration of the narratives of remarkable change as life stories led to my understanding the work and play of autobiographical learning in the following terms.

- Autobiographical learning, which encompasses reflection on experience, critical thinking, and imagining leads to a transformation of perspectives and lifestyle. It also brings a change to the life story learners tell to themselves and to others.
- From time to time, some events disrupt our usual ways of understanding ourselves and the various contexts of our lives. Critical reflection on the relationship of these events of inner and outer experience to our traditional ways of interpreting our lives can lead us to see how our values, feelings, ideas, imagining, and choices have shaped and sometimes distorted our life (Mezirow, 1991). We are likely to grasp for an adequate self-understanding, imagining an alternative personal narrative in the light of the new critical awareness.
- As we discover and rediscover our capacity to imagine constructively our life as other than it is, we gain a sense of becoming the author of a life story that we are able to invent and re-invent. As an outcome of moments of autobiographical learning, our sense of personal autonomy and authority in our life increases.
- The quality of our authorship, and the degree of authority to shape our lives are related to the strengths and limits of our personal capacities, the enabling constraints of culture, our significant personal relationships, the physical environment, and the vagaries of circumstance.

- Autobiographical learning may be facilitated by life storytelling in diverse explicit and implicit ways. Imagining, critical reflection, and artistic expression call into awareness tacit and symbolic dimensions of our knowing. Telling and retelling life stories helps us to understand ourselves and explain our life to others.

Autobiographical learning includes all the processes by which we come to compose and construct our life story of continuity and change. Learners generate narratives of self-understanding, and find explanations of change in a variety of ways; sometimes suddenly, at other times as a result of a lengthy period of learning. Through all of the processes of transformative learning from experience runs the common thread of interpretation and self-composition. The journey of transformative learning appears to be arduous. Its completion may require exacting processes of self-reflection and sometimes costly choices. Difficulties are encountered in enacting a new life in a social context where the remarkable change in one's life story is not welcome. Emphasis has been placed on critical reflectivity (Mezirow, 1991) and critical thinking (Brookfield, 1987) as the primary tools for effecting transformative learning. These approaches appear to suggest that learners are able to extract themselves from stagnation and repetitive living through conscious critical awareness. This inquiry's stories of transformation portray the neglected yet crucial factor of imagining in the learners' transitions and transformations.

## IMAGINING

In autobiographical learning, the influence of imagining to reach a new self-understanding in changing circumstances may involve a sequence of events similar to physicist David Bohm's description of accounts of several scientific discoveries. Bohm detected in them pattern, in which insight and imagination played a part. The accounts regularly depicted a researcher who has been engaged in intense work for a long period without apparent result. Then, in a moment of relaxation, an image or insight would appear within the researcher's consciousness, unbidden and unexpected. Following this insight, there came a time of further diligent work to fathom the meaning of the insight. The discovery which eventuated is, therefore, the outcome of an elaborate process of knowing.

"The function of insight is twofold: to remove blocks in our customary and fixed conceptions of things, and to gain new perceptions. When we fail to attend to the central role in knowing of this deep imagination, or insight, we become trapped in the already given" (Sloan, 1983: 141).

Likewise, the interpretive knowing of autobiographical learning is accomplished through the joint activity of critical reflection and imagining. Although imagining deserves thorough exposition and discussion, let it suffice here to summarise some observations drawn from Casey's (1976) phenomenological study of imagining.

- Imagining and insight may be seen as synonymous; however, imagining differs from fantasy.
- Imagining may be understood as a form of mental activity which is related to, but independent of other forms, such as critical thinking. Imagining-that and imagining-how are two aspects of this activity.
- Imagining emerges spontaneously into consciousness. These images or epiphanies may then be elaborated through controlled imagining.
- Imagining questions and is questioned by the tradition through which we usually interpret our experience; imagining proposes possibilities for change.
- Imagining collaborates with critical thinking to discern distortions in the life story, construct an alternative self-interpretation, and enable the learner to compose their autobiography.

## **LIFE AND LIFE STORY ARE FORMED THROUGH INTERPRETATION**

Retelling the life story is neither mere reiteration, nor even paraphrase. It is the serial reconstruction of the life story that takes form within and through the process of the author's ongoing self-interpretation. Each new telling of the life story reveals the emerging self-understanding of the author. Reimagined and reinvented forms of life stories disclose the outcome of transformative learning, and communicate an explanation of the transformation. A constituent common to autobiographical learning and the composition of the life story is the work and play of interpretation.

The differing approaches to interpretation, which Gadamer (1975), Habermas (1972, 1977), and Ricoeur (1976, 1980) propose, all contribute to this understanding of autobiography and transformative learning. These three philosophers place emphasis on diverse and alternative dimensions of interpretive knowing, yet they hold in common that interpretation aims for an explanatory understanding of texts and human actions. In many instances, interpretation is directed towards someone else's actions, and another writer's texts. In autobiographical learning and autobiography, the author's own life and life story are the matter for interpretation. The principal emphasis in the following discussion of interpretation is taken from Paul Ricoeur's critical hermeneutics. The primary aim here is to consider the interpreting which learners do to understand themselves and events in their lived experience. The learner's interpretation of experience leads to self-formation ( or deformation) and the construction of their autobiography.

Each life story, in whatever literary form it is considered, is an account of meaningful and intentional human action, and may be considered as a text suitable for interpretation, just as any written text is (Ricoeur, 1971). In this co-operative inquiry, interpretation played a part in two related phases. Remotely, it was through interpretation that the authors had already reinvented their lives through remarkable change, and composed stories of transformative learning. Proximally, in the research group's hermeneutical conversation, the co-researchers interpreted their life stories to gain further understanding of their autobiographical learning. Authoring and autobiographical learning continued within the research process, and because of it. The co-

researchers responded to the invitations to tell their accounts of transformation in various forms through artistic media. They interpreted their narrative once again in each telling.

Besides having a *cognitive* function of explanation and understanding, interpretation of the life story also exercises a *normative* function. The interpreter expects to reach a self-understanding which measures up to his or her received tradition. Therefore, the life story of the author's experience appears to be formed through a process of ongoing normative interpretation which structures and maintains it. The co-researchers discovered that change had taken place in what each author had understood initially to be the relation between tradition and experience. On those occasions, when an author's self-interpretation leads to a critique and revision of their tradition, the reinvention of the life story is likely to occur (Bateson, 1990).

Gadamer insisted that hermeneutic consciousness does not set out to "grasp the concrete phenomenon as an instance of a general rule" (1975: 6). Although the co-researchers' initial intention was to discover in each life story its own explanatory understanding of remarkable change, they found in the co-operative inquiry an understanding of autobiographical learning as a phenomenon common to each.

Meaningful actions and their accounts constitute the "texts" for interpretation in this study. These include all those events and processes of autobiographical learning which led to the authors' choice to exit from the priesthood and to enter into marriage. Both written texts and meaningful actions leave their mark on the social context, have unforeseen consequences, disclose a world before them, and are always open to reinterpretation. They have an autonomy which evades the control even of the author's intention (Ricoeur, 1971, 1980). Consequently, the life stories in this inquiry were and are open to interpretation in ways other than those which their authors intended.

The co-researchers in this inquiry had for a long time experienced the contradictions in their life as disruptive, and insistent towards some resolution. Despite their active efforts to reach some conclusion to the personal chaos, they found that their ongoing self-examination in the light of their tradition was repetitive and had brought only stagnation. However, due to their persistent questioning and an illuminating insight, their changing narratives began to disclose to them a world that went beyond their current understanding of their immediate social context and ecclesiastical tradition. Ricoeur has observed; "A work does not only mirror its time, but it opens up a world which it bears within itself" (1971: 544). Thus, the ongoing interpretation of their experience revealed to them a world which was *imaginatively* possible. Imagining, within interpretive knowing, held out to them possibilities for recomposing their lives and life stories. For these priests, such a possibility was to leave the priesthood and to marry. Critical thinking enabled them to test the feasibility of such a re-invention.

For Ricoeur (1971), comprehension of a text or action consists in apprehending what lies *before* it, rather than the original situation, context, or author's intention.

"It is because it 'opens up' new references and receives fresh relevance from them, that human deeds are also waiting for fresh interpretations which decide their meaning" (Ricoeur, 1971: 544).

"To understand a text is to follow its movement from sense to reference, from what it says to what it talks about" (Ricoeur, 1971: 555).

From Ricoeur's perspective, the meaning of "the world in front of" the social movement of exiting priests has not yet been exhausted (Powers; 1992). Texts of autobiographical learning, carry both personal and social dimensions. The development of new styles of lay ministry, the emergence of house churches, and small communities of faith within the Roman Catholic church may be examples of such unforeseen social consequences of the phenomenon of priests leaving active ministry during the last thirty years. The actions and narratives of this remarkable change may continue to be read and interpreted in new and different ways. It is likely that the authors themselves may reach further interpretations of their own life stories.

To understand the meaning of actions in the life story, the author-interpreter must become aware of what these actions point toward in disclosing a possible world, and how he or she might stand in it. Interpretation positions autobiographical learners to imagine *what* might take place in their life, and *how* to enact their new account of self (Casey, 1976). The narratives in this inquiry show that ongoing interpretation of experience and tradition leads on some occasions to a patently different self-understanding, and to the enactment of remarkable change. This autobiographical learning entails a change from living on the basis of a once self-evident worldview to living from an alternative and possible perspective. The process of interpretation draws upon both spontaneous epiphany and controlled imagining (Casey, 1976).

## **UNDERSTANDING OR MISUNDERSTANDING?**

Does interpretation, which brings a new perspective and practice, actually constitute an understanding rather than a misunderstanding of one's meaningful action? The estimation of interpretation's validity does not rest on the criterion of its consistency with the learner's current worldview, since transformative learning implies change in perspective and practice. Moreover, this question about validity goes beyond concern about whether the interpretation accurately represents what authors say in the life stories. Nor is the question answered by a diligent retrieval of the circumstances of the act, or by uncovering authors' hidden intentions. According to Ricoeur, the question about validity asks whether a particular interpretation expresses the truth claims of the account of transformation.

The question about what constitutes genuine understanding or a valid interpretation of the ongoing life story is a crucial one for people who are making choices for remarkable change. Obviously, not all interpretations of experience and tradition are equally valid. The practice of valid interpretation of texts relies on good guesses, because each text or action is plurivocal, and "open to several readings and reconstructions" (Ricoeur, 1971: 544). The guess, which enables the process of interpretation to begin, is a necessary step in judging what is important for understanding the text and the life. In turn, there is a question about how to authenticate guesses.

Since the certitude of one's interpretation of human actions cannot be demonstrated, an interpretation which purports to understand authentically the text of a life needs to be more probable than any other. The decision to accept one rather than another is based on judicial consideration of alternative and opposing interpretations. Schneiders (1991), sympathetic to Ricoeur's approach, proposed some criteria for validity, drawn from her expertise in biblical interpretation. Some criteria have a global quality, others are specific. For example, she asked whether the interpretation comprehensively takes into account all the dimensions of the story that are likely to have a bearing on its interpretation, such as the social context in which the story is composed. The criterion of fruitfulness refers to a particular interpretation's capacity to open up the potential of the text to explain the actions it portrays. The ongoing recomposition of autobiography is sustained by a fruitful understanding of the interplay of experience and tradition in the author's social context. Referring to the interpretation of written texts, Schneiders (1991) proposed that a valid understanding takes an account as it stands, unless there is good reason for reshaping it. Valid understanding brings an internal coherence that is not achieved at the price of violating the whole of the story, or the story as a whole. It also offers a plausible account of what appears to be anomalous in the story, and it is compatible with what else is known about the situation from other sources. Even though, after due consideration, one particular interpretation is judged to be the most genuine, it is "a verdict to which it is possible to make an appeal" (Ricoeur, 1971: 555).

When autobiographical learning is taking place, the author's reflection on disorienting events in their experience leads to their reinterpretation of the life story. The reinterpretations, which led to remarkable change in the co-researchers' lives and life stories, are examples of an appeal against the verdict of an interpretation based on longstanding tradition. Ongoing interpretation, which involves both imagining and critical reflection, understands both particular events and the whole life story, in such a way as to disclose new stances and practice. Ricoeur (1980) proposed that interpretation, such as occurs in autobiographical learning, belongs to the realm of the poetic. Referring to the broad domains of poetic discourse, he argued that the poetic or metaphorical dimension of language has a revelatory function.

"Here truth no longer means verification, but manifestation, i.e., letting what shows itself be. What shows itself is in each instance a proposed world; a world I may inhabit and wherein I can project my ownmost possibilities. It is in this sense of manifestation that language in its poetic function is a vehicle of revelation" (Ricoeur, 1980 :102).

To arrive at valid interpretation is to reach an explanation, and an understanding of the text's capacity to disclose its world of meaning. Thus, the interpreter has appropriated what the text or action contains. The world of meaning which is disclosed brings an understanding which goes beyond what even the actor or author of the text may have understood before. To gain this expanded horizon, the interpreter's reflection must involve a dialectic of distancing and participation. Ricoeur (1980) described reflection as emerging unexpectedly within ongoing experience. In a critical moment of distancing from the current account of itself that the ego gives, the knower becomes reflectively aware of the tradition in which their life stands. However, critical reflection alone cannot dismantle tradition's claim to be of sovereign



importance for interpreting. Ricoeur argued that poetic understanding receives the manifestation which the text itself bears within it.

"The power (of the text) to project this new world is the power of breaking through and of opening" (Ricoeur, 1980: 104).

"To understand oneself before the text is not to impose one's own finite capacity of understanding on it, but to expose oneself to receive from it a larger self which would be the proposed way of existing that most appropriately responds to the proposed world of the text" (Ricoeur, 1980: 108).

In autobiographical learning, a manifestation of meaning, which presents a possible reshaping of tradition, occurs through the author's poetic and critical interpretation of events in experience. Knowing involves both critical distance from the text and poetic participation in it. Whereas the author's submission to a literal understanding of the text of experience would close down the revelation of meaning, imagining responds receptively to the manifestation. In so far as the author embraces the new world of meaning and enacts it, he or she composes a new life story.

It is clear that for Ricoeur, interpretation in autobiographical learning is transformative. The narratives in this inquiry show that when imagining pointed the authors towards a possible change in their hermeneutical approach to the interaction of lived experience and tradition, they embarked on a transformative reordering of the story. Transformative interpretation appropriates the meaning of a text, and promotes the fusion of the knower's horizon with the world which the text projects (Schneiders, 1991). Interpretation that emerges from a fusion of horizons is the more compelling when it is based in the current praxis of the interpreter, as well as in his or her reflection. Such existential interpretation is critical as well as poetic, since it reaches not just for what the text of experience says but for the truth of it.

"It (interpretation) involves a radical personal engagement with what Gadamer calls the truth claims of the text. Truth claims are not merely dogmatic propositions, assertions of fact, or deliverances of information but the presentation of reality that offers itself to us as a way of being, as a possible increase or decrease of personal subjective reality... When one arrives at the stage of existential interpretation, one's engagement with the text's truth claims has ultimate personal significance, but the engagement remains a critical one" (Schneiders, 1991: 174-175).

Each person's retelling of their story of remarkable change in the co-operative inquiry provided them with an occasion for further possible interpretation. The narratives reveal that whatever transformation came, it was not only or primarily from conscious analysis, but also from a poetic or contemplative attending to their experience and their life narrative. In so far as "narration preserves the meaning behind us, so that we can have meaning before us" (Ricoeur, 1984: 22), the co-researchers' autobiographical learning generated a new composition of their life story.

"The task of hermeneutics is to charter the unexplored resources of the to-be-said on the basis of the already said. Imagination never resides in the unsaid" (Ricoeur, 1984: 25).

In the critical hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur, interpretation is the exploration of the "to-be-said" which promises a disclosure of what may yet be part of the meaning of an action or text.

## CONCLUSION

An odd couple, imagining and critical reflection, live in the house where lives and life stories are composed. Imagining skirts the thresholds of the unconscious underworld, bringing home unreliable shady friends such as dreams, questions, flashes of insight. Critical reflection's friends are eminently respectable, though a bit hard for imagining to bear. Sometimes they agree to throw a party, and to invite all their friends. There's great conversation, when all the participants get their say. What's more, you can't say in advance what might come of such a get together.

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