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A Critical Autobiography of Moral Learning across Four Generations of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union: A Feminist Genealogy

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Abstract: *This qualitative evaluation of the intergenerational moral learning related to the activist work of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) constitutes a critical re-membering of growing up in a WCTU home and community. I trace the public and private continuities and discontinuities of moral learning across four generations of Ontario WCTU families in the 20th century.*

Starting with My Self

In a graduate course in adult education that I co-facilitate, the work of The Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) makes a fleeting appearance as a bibliographic footnote in the foundational text on adult education in Canada (Butterwick, 1998). When I first encountered this, the ceremony of my mother tying a white ribbon around my baby-fat wrist flashed before me. My mother's signature on my Little White Ribboner's pledge card is a promise that she would not "give or allow [me] to take any Intoxicating Drinks" (August 6, 1947). The next reflex happened in quick succession: I was struck for the first time that the temperance work of Mum and Grandma Lander and my aunts *was* adult education, *was* feminist activism. I deliberately use Cunliffe's (1999) language of "reflex" and "being struck" with which she defines critically reflexive dialogue:

this moment of being struck may cause us to question our ways of acting and responding and open us to possibilities and new ways of talking and acting . . . We may be making new connections between tacit knowing and explicit knowledge and constructing our sense of situations in ways not visible to us previously. (p. 9)

The Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) was founded in 1874 in New York; the Canadian WCTU established later in 1888 was active in Ontario well into the 20th century. Cook (1995a) elaborates on the Ontario WCTU's evangelical feminists whose central task of reforming society was aimed at "home protection," a reconstituted family committed to Christian values, and to women's collective action against male vices.

Artifacts, auto/biographies, and collective memory-work of four generations combine with my lived experience in a WCTU home and community in the 1950s and 1960s to make moral meaning and to evaluate moral learning.

Brookfield (1998) challenges linear, developmental learning processes of adult moral learning and outlines a schema of critical reflection that: "entails judging the 'fit' between the moral rules of life transmitted, assimilated and evolved in childhood, and the realities of adulthood" (p. 291). Does what I/we learned in childhood about substance abuse and home protection through the WCTU educational programs have any relevance to the way I/we construct our moral selves as adults? Or the way our children do?

Methodology Made Moral

Feminist activists and adult educators often support their use of critical autobiography by referencing C. Wright Mills' (1959) *The Sociological Imagination* (e.g., Church, 1995; Miller, 1993); I suggest that his words also animate the "moral imagination" of critical autobiography:

The most admirable thinkers within the scholarly community . . . do not split their work from their lives . . . They want to use each for the enrichment of the other. . . . What this means is that you must learn to use your life experience in your intellectual work. (Mills, pp. 195, 196)

My critical autobiography narratively disrupts the traditional evaluative categories of adult learning, especially transfer of learning characterized as "the effective application by program participants of what they learned as a result of attending an edu-

ational program” (Caffarella, 1994, p. 108). Instead I trace the moral parameters of good talk (Ayim, 1997) in my intergenerational inquiry into the Canadian WCTU’s purposeful rhetoric.

Research Design: Starting with Our Selves

I conducted my research in August 1999 by assembling 37 people (spanning three generations of my friends, neighbours and family) in the farming community in southern Ontario where I grew up and where my 89-year-old mother still lives. My sister June, my two brothers Howard and David, and myself (all in our 50’s) have not lived in this community for over 30 years but almost everyone else in the group continues to live in the area. I facilitated two sessions of dialogical narrative inquiry organized by generation. Group one included eight WCTU mothers (including my mother) and two spouses. The second group of 24 from my generation consisted of my sister and brothers, many cousins, classmates from elementary school onwards, along with three of the next generation, including my niece Marjorie.

At my invitation, people brought their WCTU artifacts: minutes of 1960s meetings, pledge cards, and elocution medals unlocked stories. According to Zussman (1996), “Memory is . . . not only located in the recesses of our minds but also generated by ‘retrieval cues’ that are themselves lodged in other people, in places, and in memorabilia” (p. 147). A dairy farmer from my generation told me that he had been musing about the temperance elocution medal contests, while ploughing, the week *before* I invited him to this WCTU reunion. He recited the temperance poem that he had orated some 35 years earlier, a tragic saga about drinking and driving. The vividness of small details and the forgetting of the larger history was a recurring pattern in this shared inquiry. The dairy farmer clearly remembered his WCTU mother’s work in helping him prepare for his recitation: “Mother being inventive as she was, she got a Spic and Span can and we put a set of Meccano wheels on it . . . And I can remember holding up this thing, it was to represent a car, it was an old tin can.”

The Critical is the Moral in Critical Autobiography

The narrative form of autobiography situates me as a critically reflective moral agent. In retelling the stories of my family and friends, moral agency intersects my public researcher self and my private

selves as sister, daughter, niece, cousin, aunt, friend, and neighbour. Autobiography becomes critically reflexive by virtue of attending to multiple selves. I am attracted to Michele Fine’s idea of *working the hyphen* by which she means “creating occasions for researchers and informants to discuss what is, and is not, ‘happening between,’ within the negotiated relations of whose story is being told . . . and whose story is being shadowed” (p. 135).

In this critical autobiography, I reference members of my family by actual names and designate other community members by their occupation, gender and age. This is a moral and practical consideration; I can negotiate matters of confidentiality and accurate re-presentation with my immediate family but less readily with other participants. For the same reason, I also name Brenda, my lifelong friend, who with her husband Neil hosted the gathering in their home. In our girlhood, Brenda lived two fields away on the next farm. Brenda did not grow up in a WCTU family although she and her brothers and sisters all participated in the medal contests. I remember living in fear as a teenager that my mother and father would find out that I had partaken communion wine when I attended the Anglican church with Brenda’s family; my family attended the United Church, which used grape juice for communion.

The complexity of working the hyphens and sustaining an impression of morality (Goffman, 1959) mounts in a group that has known each other long and intimately (See Aguilar, 1981, p. 20). Our selective self-disclosure had to take into account what we knew each other knew about our private histories related to alcohol. I was conscious of who knew that alcohol abuse was implicated in the break-up of my first marriage some 20 years earlier.

Evaluating Intergenerational Moral Learning

Traditional evaluation of program planning for adult learning spans three categories: learning skills, knowledge and attitudes (SKAs); transfer of learning; and impact (Vella, Berardinelli, & Burrow, 1998). Assuming that the program objectives of the WCTU tied moral learning to prohibition and to Little White Ribboners continuing the pledge of abstaining from Intoxicating Drinks, WCTU activism would be pronounced a dismal educational failure on all three counts. Vella et al. (1998) distinguish learning, transfer and impact in terms of time scale. Learning of skills, knowledge and atti-

tudes is immediate and specific (within the course or program). Transfer is the intermediate and applied level of results, “the effective use of skills, knowledge, and attitudes beyond the program” (p. 21). Impact is “the broad and long-term results of the education program” (p. 27). If there was transfer of learning and impact across generations, it did not attach to the program’s stated objectives. For example, my first cousin (age 51, Marketing and Sales Manager, radio station equipment) talked about how he had made it a practice to have wine with meals when his two sons were growing up, and he connected this to his sons’ current stance of “aggressively anti-substance abuse.”

My sister June participated in both groups and I appreciated her comments early on in the second group. She somewhat diffused an undercurrent of resignation to the “social acceptance” of alcohol in my mother’s group: “I didn’t hear too many of them say that the younger generation had completely gone to pot anyway, had they? [Group laughter]” Here critical autobiography comes into play as an alternative way of assessing moral learning across generations. Instead of evaluating adult moral learning in terms of program planning evaluative categories, I extend Ayim’s (1997) feminist analysis of the moral parameters of good talk to our 1999 dialogue about the WCTU as a form of critical reflection and critical reflexivity. I hold with Ayim that her moral criteria of language (caring; cooperative; democratic; and honest) resemble the criteria for interactions in moral community (p. 98). I adapt Ayim’s moral categories of good talk to a conversation initiated by my brother David:

David (age 54, United Church minister): *I guess I think that even apart from the alcohol thing, I think the WCTU was encouraging civility [June: Hmmm Hmm.] It wasn’t just alcohol, it was morals, civility, I guess, being a sensible person, contributing to society because that’s why they started up in the first place. There was a bunch of people that were not a contribution to society or to their families and these particular women were very concerned about that.*

School Bus Driver (age 54): *I think you’ve really hit on something there, David. I think that there’s probably more influence on our lives than we would maybe realize, definitely didn’t realize at the time. Maybe more influ-*

ence on our lives now and we wouldn’t have thought about it until Dorothy got us thinking about it.

David’s critical reflection uses *caring* and *honest* language to redirect the conversation away from alcohol. The demonstration of *caring* language is registered in a readiness to listen to the other speakers. June’s affirming utterance is both *caring* and *cooperative*. The School Bus Driver, who was my classmate throughout Sunday School and grade school, affirmed both my brother and me. He also exemplifies cooperative talk by engaging with David’s position and building on my questions about intergenerational learning.

Listen to my sister June’s *honest* and *critically reflexive* remembrance of how “they” managed to get her first teacher sent away. June creates her moral self in public when she says: “I remember my first teacher was Mrs. A. and I remember E___ [her older girl cousin and neighbour with whom she walked the 2 miles to school] telling me that Mrs. A. had a drinking problem. And Mrs. A taught me to read, she was my hero, and I told that to Mum, that couldn’t be true, besides she was even related to Mum. [Group laughter]. But she said, ‘I’m afraid she did.’” June’s impassioned memory followed on a *critically reflective* discussion about how the WCTU’s home-protection philosophy tended to blame only the alcoholic men, for example, the “drunken sot” in the dairy farmer’s recitation.

Brenda is a primary school teacher and her *caring* and *empathetic* “Oooh” in response to June’s story was clear to me later when she told me of her own experience of children becoming attached to her as their first teacher. According to Johnson (1993), empathy “is the chief activity by which we are able to inhabit a more or less common world—a world of shared gestures, actions, perceptions, experiences, meanings, symbols, and narratives” (p. 201). The *cooperative* responses from others who had Mrs. A as a teacher also employed moral imagination. The very cousin and neighbour (age 63, Retired Military Wife) who June referenced was visibly startled by June’s memory but then went on to create her moral memory of how Mrs. A. got sent away: “My Dad was on the school board. [June: I see]. And I mean she came in drunk every Monday morning.” The *cooperative* responses built with a Retired School Custodian (age 66, male) then saying, “She got me through grade school.” His sister,

the retired military wife nodded: “She was the best teacher we ever had. Oh yes, she was one terrific teacher.” A Kindergarten Teacher [age 52] then related *cooperatively* and *empathetically* her “class from hell,” eight of whom had fetal alcohol syndrome. June re-storied the kindergarten teacher’s tale in terms of the practical and performative morality of the WCTU’s rhetoric: “Well, a long time ago, I think the WCTU prevented some of that. They made it sound, it was not nice for women to drink and men shouldn’t either because they’re supposed to be supporting these women and families but as long as the women don’t drink, something will go right. [Group laughter]” All of the conversations exemplified civility and *democratic* talk, that is, no one dominated and no one was excluded from participating.

Re-Membering White Ribbon Rhetoric

The verb “remember” features over and over. Remembering our autobiographies of the WCTU experience is a moral negotiation of a shared past (Engel, 1998, p. 39). The paradox of our remembering is that we not only supported each other’s protective self presentation and Goffman’s generative ideas of impression management but we also “used the past to shake up one another’s self presentations” (Engel, p. 39). Re-membering involves the moral imagination of both critical reflection and critical reflexivity. I take the position that the selves created through memories are constantly interacting with the selves one’s memory creates—a dynamic public process of co-authoring moral selves. As Rockhill (1993) puts it, collective memory work holds a key for politicizing the personal (p. 360).

The negotiation of our shared past continued beyond the shared inquiry. When I told Mum about June’s story of her first teacher and that part of June’s dismay was that “she was even related to Mum,” she laughed nervously about this public disclosure. But then Mum re-membered a connection to the first generation of the 20th century. This teacher’s father (Mum’s uncle) was an alcoholic and her aunt and cousins (including Mrs. A.) had a “pretty hard life . . . not enough for clothing.” He would come to Grandpa [referring to her own father, a Baptist and teetotaler] asking for money for seed corn and Grandpa was always generous. He could not say “No” to his own brother-in-law and a

fellow farmer, even though he knew it would go for drink.

My critical autobiography uncovers and confirms O’Malley’s (1996) claim that the harm reduction and risk management emphasis in contemporary alcohol education programs and addiction services constitutes “strategic re-moralization.” My first cousin’s tale of serving wine with meals to introduce his sons to responsible drinking also supports O’Malley’s critique: “We do not see [or pass judgement on] any ‘irresponsible’ users” (p. 30). My niece Marjorie [age 29, neurology nurse, June’s daughter] was the only vocal participant of her generation, and cannot represent the moral positioning of a whole generation. However, I sensed that she was skipping her mother’s generation and judging drunkenness as irresponsible, although not nuanced in the Christian terms of the WCTU in which drunkenness was a sin. Marjorie attributes many spinal injuries that she observes on a daily basis to irresponsible drinking.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) highlight the entailments of metaphors for “mak[ing] coherent certain aspects of our experience . . . creat[ing] realities, especially social realities . . . [as] a guide for future action . . . [as] self-fulfilling prophecies” (p. 156). The original entailments of the white ribbon were very much linked to prohibition. Cook (1995b) does not elaborate on the 1990’s “appropriation” by men of the white ribbon “as a public symbol condemning male violence against women” (p. 207). It strikes me (my critical reflexivity) that the partial appropriation of the violence entailment effectively erases the entailment of the relationship of drinking to violence. The connection between drinking and violence, especially physical violence did not emerge in the public re-membering that I facilitated and it has a carefully circumscribed presence in the literature on family violence.

I re-present and reconstitute the research findings and conclusions as a moral framework for social and educational policy and for adult education programming. This framework re-stories the WCTU’s “home protection” and once again takes into account *irresponsible* choices and the connection of substance abuse to family violence. Critical reflection and critical reflexivity augment the moral criteria of caring, cooperative, democratic, and honest language in order to responsibly build and sustain moral community.

The research methodologies of critical autobiography and feminist analysis of rhetoric constitute a feminist genealogy, a “history of the present” (Dean, 1994). They begin the work of re-storying and validating an early social movement of women and mothers as activists so as to inform contemporary theory and practice of moral learning and moral policy-making. Re-membering spins the critical web of feminist genealogy, reflection, reflexivity, and autobiography. Rockhill draws on “Arlene Schenke’s (1991) ‘genealogy of memory-work [that] should offer strategies of commitment that are relational, provisional, deliberately ambivalent and continuously in process’ (p. 13). It should be an opening, ideally, to continuing reflection and critique, a story that never stops beginning or ending” (p. 362). By extension, the imbricated research methodologies of critical autobiography, feminist rhetorical analysis, and feminist genealogy rely on re-storying that never stops beginning or ending.

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