

Transformative Wonder

An Ex-Con Talking about Heidegger to a Class of Graduate Students

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Abstract

This paper is part of an on-going project where we bring formerly incarcerated adults into the classroom to share their experiences of incarceration and illness with graduate nursing and public health students. We present the experience of one formerly incarcerated adult, Earthy, as we consider his transformative process from participant to teacher of Heideggerian concepts of a person. Via a restructuring into poetic lines and stanzas, we creatively present Earthy's narrative from post class focus groups conducted over sequential semesters. The co-creation of this innovative and evolving class afforded Earthy the safe space to push into the unknown re-

sulting in an ontological journey of practical wisdom and a deeper self understanding that drew him back to a sense of what felt right – the wonder of shared dialogical interaction with others. We view this as a creativity of personhood born from a dialectical and dialogical practice within a ‘community of wonder.’

Keywords previously incarcerated, classroom, phronesis, dialectic, wonder, transformative learning

Introduction

Hansen (2009) speaks of a ‘community of wonder’ in higher education as a foundation for deeper and self-transforming learning. He also emphasizes that *to be* in a wonder is beyond the control of a facilitator; it cannot be manipulated nor forced to emerge (Hansen, 2009). However, what can be done “is to bring the visitor(s) to the doorstep of the state of wonder” (Hansen 2009, p. 309). The following story is about a visitor to the community of a university classroom, and how an open door of creative dialogue, reflection, and interconnectedness afforded him the creation of authentic personhood and ontological transcendence through, and in, wonder.

For multiple semesters, we have organized a single class within either a health promotion course for graduate nursing students or a health behavior theory course for masters in public health students where formerly incarcerated adults come into the class to share their experiences of incarceration, illness, and health. Previously, we have reported how this class, conducted in an open and dialectic manner, has evinced opportunities for phronetic experience for both the students and the parolees (Marlow, et.al, 2014). In this paper, we focus on the creative and transformative process of one parolee, Earthy as he journeyed from guest participant to lecturer of Heideggerian concepts and then to co-creator of the class. We aim to answer the questions: How did involvement in the class contribute to his creation of personhood? How has he been ‘in wonder’ and how does that interrelate to his phronetic knowing¹ and sense of Being? We also consider how can we as faculty, step aside, and allow creative wonder to occur in a classroom? How can this ‘allowing’ create the space for *all involved* to create authentic selves, dialectical intentions, and ethical knowhow? Finally, we invite the reader to gain a more ‘felt sense’ or ‘emotional understanding’ of the narrator through the inclusion of

verbatim excerpts creatively retranscribed into poetic structures (Todres & Gavin, 2008).

Presenting the narrative as poetry is an aesthetic approach for the researchers and readers alike to 'dwell with' the words and experiences of the narrator. Poetic restructuring of text creatively captures the manner in which a narrator tells a story, including the iterations, intonation, pauses, and fluctuations in volume and rate of speech, that exert meaning and become part of the narrative itself (Riessman, 1993). Gadamer (2007), on aesthetics and hermeneutics, wrote that a work of art "possesses a mysterious intimacy that grips our entire being," and it is this bridging between self and other that we aimed to achieve with retranscribing text into poetic structures (p. 124). Hansen (2012) speaks of an ontological understanding of the investigated phenomenon in which the researcher is taken up by the phenomenon in such a way that it becomes real to her. She "sees and hears" the phenomenon experientially rather than analytically (Hansen, 2012, p.5). This experiential involvement allows the researcher to connect more profoundly with the phenomenon and know something about its existential being that was previously unseen. Our narrator did not write or speak poetry per se; however, we argue that his words and experience retranscribed as poetry reflect a more ontological approach to phenomenological research and affords a 'felt' understanding of the phenomenon. Through the evocative and creative poetic lines and stanzas, researcher and reader have an opportunity to more fully participate in the narrator's reality, and therein, gain a deeper understanding of his lived experience.

The Project

Previously incarcerated persons (or Street Scholars as they now refer to themselves) who are part of a community based reintegration program (See The Gamble Institute [TGI]) co-founded by two of the authors are invited to come to the classroom situated in a northern California Catholic university and engage with the students in various formats. Over time, changes in how the class was conducted were made based on the readjustment of objectives, student and Street Scholar feedback, and, more important to this paper, Earthy's input. How some of these changes occurred will be revealed in Earthy's narrative below.

Narratives presented below were gathered from Earthy's participation in digitally audio recorded pre and post class focus groups and one video recording of an actual class. All recordings had been transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriptionist. University IRB approval and informed written consent had been obtained prior to participation. To guide our analysis and discussion, we draw on the works of Gadamer, Arendt, Heidegger, Wieman, and Hansen.

Earthy's Story of Transformative and Creative Wonder

Earthy is a 52-year old African American who only 3 years ago was released from prison after spending 26 years behind walls for homicide. His fortunate discharge led him to the Gamble Institute (See TGI), where he has become a co-founder and an active core member, participating in community based research and a leader in peer mentoring (Marlow et al. 2012 ; Marlow et al., 2014). Earthy has also been one of the key players and guests participants for this ongoing classroom project for multiple semesters and is one of the authors of this paper. We present his story in four sections: I. Earthy: The Ex Con; II. Earthy: The Group Member; III. Earthy on Heidegger; and IV. Earthy as Earthy.

I. Earthy: The Ex-Con

This first excerpt is taken from an interview after one of Earthy's participation in an earlier class where he shared some of his life story, including his experiences in prison. He was asked, "What was it like during the class for you?"

I remember...
they was alert.
I thought maybe they might have been
in awe, like "wow!"

And I kept
wondering to myself,
"what is it exactly
that they're going to get from me?"

And I felt a sense of shame
come over me for a minute,

just playing my whole life over
in my head.
At the same time
I felt grateful to be in a position
to be where I'm at
and knowing that this is where
the changes start coming about.

We see Earthy working through some conflicting sentiments: he moves from shame to gratitude, but overall uncertainty – the dialectic in action, seeking some understanding or sense of purpose as he finds himself in this unfamiliar situation. There is a sense of 'practical knowing' that being there is the 'right' thing to do, to be able to help others. Phronetic awareness is generally developed in situations that are not necessarily consciously chosen, but rather while remaining open and listening to what the situation is telling us is the ethical action to take (Risser, 1997). Earthy continues:

I think I was wondering about that inside deeply.
And how would they take me?
And how much of my story
would I have to give to them
for them to really truly understand me?
And could they truly understand me?

Earthy's questioning of the unknown reveals a sincere and deep desire to be understood, and yet in lieu of fear or angst, he expressed it an open wondrous manner. He continued:

And afterwards we were sitting there
and then all of a sudden
I just got a whole crowd around me.
Then somebody broke the ice
and started asking me more questions.
And I just kept on smiling,
answered it the best way I could.

And I felt like it was a dialogue being shared.
I felt like I was a part of them now.

I walked in there feeling belittled
but actually I felt strong as the process went on
and I felt on their level.

A shift here moves us to see the exigent joy of connecting through dialogue demonstrated by the barrage of questions by students who care, in what Hansen (2009) would refer to as the 'community of wonder.' Earthy moves from feeling shame and 'less than' to feeling equal, an experience bursting with acceptance and human dignity.

II. Earthy: The Group Member

The next class was conducted differently to accommodate the structure and objectives of the course that semester. The director of the Gamble Institute, and co-author of this paper lectured on Heidegger's concept of a person as the philosophical foundation of their peer mentoring project. The parolees gave no life stories and together the students and parolees created and acted out vignettes. In the post class focus group, Earthy shared that this structure did not work for him. The following excerpts reveal his dissatisfaction as well as his suggestions for how he would like to participate in the next one.

[When]Dr. Marlow did a PowerPoint presentation
and we was kind of sitting on the side,
I didn't vibe it right.
It didn't touch me right.

It just made me feel belittled.
It just made me feel like
we was guinea pigs like
"Look. Here go the bad guys. Feed off him.
Get this information."

One of the things
that I actually missed overall [was]
being able to present myself
and give them a different oversight
of what I, consist of,
and what I'm about.

Earthy experienced something very different in this class than the one prior. Being on the sidelines left him feeling objectified. There was very little time for dialogue with the students, and this lack made him feel nonexistent, even animal like.

Earthy decided next time, he wanted to give the lecture on Heidegger, but not as Earthy, the ex con.

We go in there
and be introduced as doctors.
But at the end of the class
bring the reality of the dialogue
to what we truly are.

I'm sure there are lot of jaws
going to drop, like,
"Wow, I never knew."

Earthy's plan was to come in disguised and reveal who he really was later in the class. He also suggested to create vignettes that profile socially common held beliefs of black boys, men, and women, previously incarcerated or not. This was his idea for the vignette:

This individual [is dressed]
in his baggies, his Jordan's,
and just his 'get out,' right?

But he get hit by a car.

When they bring him in the hospital,
they like, "you look like a gangbanger,"
but he's not.

There is a thread between both of these suggestions and yet they differ. In the first, Earthy desires to give the lecture as a doctor and in the end reveal that he is actually the client that the students will be dealing with. In the second scenario, he wants to lead the students into thinking a patient who comes into an ER dressed up in his "get out" is a gang member but in reality he is just an innocent

youth. It is as if Earthy is like Socrates' 'gadfly' character who aims to awaken or arouse those who will, as Arendt states, "sleep on undisturbed..." (Arendt, 1971, p. 432). In a Gadamerian sense, he aims to uncover the students' prejudices to allow them to come to the foreground and through this dialogue these potentially revealed prejudices would play a crucial role in 'opening up' what is to be understood (Gadamer, 2007).

III. Earthy on Heidegger

This section portrays Earthy as the 'academic' (Earthy's word) giving the lecture on Heidegger that he himself requested to give. Later he reveals his true identity as envisioned but the response he received did not match what he was expecting. The following excerpts are from transcripts of a video recording of the class itself. This first piece is from his lecture on *Sorge*.

It means the things
that matter to us.
What really matters to you?
What are our concerns?

I don't have the answers to this question.

When we're doing these interviews,
when we're doing this research,
when we're dealing with these individuals, and
when we have this shared dialogue,

these are things that are
awakened in my head,
and I'm listening,
and I'm changed.

Earthy seems content with not having the answers and what may be 'awakened' is a new sense of Being, of personhood, standing in the openness of listening to another. *This* is what matters to him. Earthy continues his lecture, speaking now on personhood:

They said,
“What does it mean
to be a person?”

I wonder,
was I an abyss,
just floating somewhere,
or really did I exist?

Did I have creativity?
Was I able to say I am a person?
Not just a human carcass,
walking through life,
but am I
a person?
The answer was,
“yes.”

The pauses, silence, spacelessness and timelessness were most salient in this presentation, and aimed to be captured in the poetic stanzas. What he questioned about personhood as well as the very fact that he responded by questioning draws us in to his quest for knowledge of, or rekindling a recognized, loving, and warm state of wonder. Heidegger (1984) claimed that in wonder the most usual “steps forth in its unusualness” and compels us into primordial questioning, that is, the acknowledgment of “beings as beings” (pp. 150-151). Earthy, *displaced* in ontological wonder, acknowledges that what it means to *be* a person, is simply, that he *is* a person.

Despite Earthy’s profound lecture on Heidegger, he relayed a dislike of his role as lecturer. Moreover, his plan to ‘drop jaws’ when he revealed his true identity was unfulfilled and instead he was met with a complete non response and an unrelated question posed to another speaker. In this last section, Earthy shares his lived experience of ‘Earthy on Heidegger.’

IV. Earthy as Earthy

Earthy tells us how his ideas to run the previous class finds him longing for the rich dialogical experience that drew him in during the first class. The narrative reflects an ontological journey through

concrete experience of pushing into the unknown, creating the space to experience a practical wisdom, a deeper self understanding, and a clear 'knowing' that draws him back to a sense of what feels right – the wonder of shared dialogical interaction with others. In Earthy's words:

I wanted to walk in there and
"I'm a Doctor So-and-So."
and then later on
hit them with the reality of,
"That's not what I am."

And, it was some point in the class
where they actually started
talking about individuals
being incarcerated and everything.

And I spoke up on it.
I'm like "I have experienced that!"

[they] didn't even notice it.
[they] didn't even know.
[they] didn't even notice it.
[they] thought it was just like nonchalant like it was just –
went right through them.
I don't know it actually had any effect.

The restructured text highlights the repetitious manner of his expressed disappointment. The lived experience of twenty-six years in prison - a huge piece of Earthy's historical being - was completely missed by the students and he lets us feel the pain of that. Yet later he makes it clear that he does not want to be put in that box exclusively either. Perhaps Earthy's failed intention to astonish or 'surprise' the students in order to spark wonder in them supports what Heidegger (1984) speaks of when he argues that astonishment, awe, and admiration are different than wonder as they are all a "turning away from the usual thereby leaving it alone and bypassing it in its usualness" (p. 144). What Earthy missed here is that which truly sparks wonder in the students is purely *being with*

Earthy's *being with* them, in dialogue, being open and transformed alongside him.

In this next passage Earthy comes full circle but more as a spiral weaving his experiences together in an acknowledgement of how Being rises from dialogue. It is through this dialogue that brings others along on the path of discovery and new understandings.

And the way I'm looking at it from here on out,
I like for the students
to be able to actually ask me a question
and create that room
where *I can have my own* creativity.

And let that individual
start asking me questions
then I can speak from my experiences,
what's inside of me,
what I feel,
how I live, how I embrace life.
The energy of the life -- it just goes on and on with me.
You know?

And I think every time that we do this --
it's bringing us closer;
it's bringing us to a better understanding
and it gives me something to make me just say,
"Wow, I'm glad to be a part of it."

How can I make it better?
And I'm looking forward to the next time
we come into the class.

I'm coming in as Earthy.

Earthy here proclaims the joy of being part of what could be viewed as a 'usual' process, one of guest speaker in a university classroom. Yet, given a string of interconnected and dialogical experiences, he acknowledges the unusualness in his own being, as he plans to return to the next class as 'Earthy.' We see the unfolding of his

beingness, and the joy that stems from sharing that with others, and being a part of a whole. Hansen (2010) speaks of the joy and cheerfulness of wonder, and citing Arendt and Heidegger, states, “in wonder you experience a stepping out of your own Ego” and step into a “homecoming – or ontological familiarity” (p. 172). Earthy returns to Earthy, gratefully and enthusiastically – a valued and meaningful homecoming.

Discussion/Conclusion

We have shared with you a story of Earthy’s transformative wonder experienced through, and in, dialogue with others in a university classroom. His journey began as a guest participant, moved through the role of lecturer of philosophy and co-creator of the class, and now, continues with Earthy as ‘Earthy’. After each class Earthy was left with many questions and uncertainties. Conducting the class in such an open fashion afforded him the space for more seeking and longing for ‘knowing’ and wisdom of the truth. From the beginning he showed us how the dialectical process - his deliberation about what was the right action even when he felt conflicting sentiments such as shame and uncertainty - opened him up to the development of an ethical, practical know how, that is, *phronesis*. Gadamer (1974/2006), in discussing how ambiguity in a situation drives the dialectical process, purported that questions make things indeterminate and we can only arrive at answers or understandings that open up to more questions. Part of our role as teachers is to create space for questions and create indeterminacy for those engaged in the learning process.

We have also attempted to bring to the attention the impact of wonder on Earthy’s creative transformation. Throughout his narrative, he gave us glimpses of a wonder embedded in gratitude. Hansen (2012) draws attention to the phenomenology of a wonder that is “connected to a deep experience of gratitude” which Earthy so eloquently embodied (p. 14). Most clear though was Earthy’s portrayal of his journey that brought him back to a newfound gratitude of his own ‘being *as* being’ which Heidegger (1984) emphasized as “what alone is wondrous” (p. 145). We would further argue that what facilitated the arrival of this wonder was the tapestry of dialectical and dialogical experiences in the presence of open and receptive ‘others,’ in what Hansen (2009) refers to as a ‘community of wonder.’

This arrival to an acknowledged sense of being *as* being may be viewed as the development of an ethical authenticity born from dialogical interconnectedness (Nosek, 2012; Taylor, 1991) or as a 'creation' of personhood through creative events suggested by Wieman (1945). Wieman (1945) describes how a series of four subevents of meaningful quality progressively create intrinsic versus instrumental good in persons. Earthy's participation in multiple classes over multiple semesters afforded him a transformative opportunity which could easily be understood as the crucial sub events necessary for an intrinsic creative event that Wieman suggested. The first sub event is the development of an awareness of qualitative meanings born from communication with others (Wieman, 1945). Earthy spoke often of the joy of dialogue with the students demonstrating an awareness of new meaning to his presence in the class. Wieman further believed that an integration of new meanings with those already acquired was necessary and warranted time to pause and assimilate the new understandings. Via Earthy's progressive interactions with each class, new meaning was built upon the prior and together formed the building block for the subsequent classes. Earthy's ability to reflect between classes and during focus groups facilitated the assimilation of each experience and its newly acquired valued meaning. The third sub event, a new felt "richness of quality in the appreciable world" naturally follows the first two (Wieman, 1945, p. 62). If, through intercommunication, new meanings have been woven together, the "individual sees what he could not see before" (p.62). This appreciation is clearly portrayed throughout Earthy's narrative but especially when he spoke of his need to bring back the class structure where there was more dialogue. Moreover, his profound statement that the next class he plans to come as *Earthy* tells us that this Earthy will be one with an increased intrinsic value of his newfound appreciable self and world.

The "widening and deepening community" that occurs amongst the actors who play a role in the total creative event completes the creation (Wieman, 1945, p. 64). Not only is the individual who experiences the creative event transformed but also those who participate with him in the process. Meanings communicated to him from others have become a part of him and vice versa. An increase of empathy occurs where now all who have participated in the creative event are better able to feel, see, and think as the other. Through

this empathic process, understanding and community are created (Wieman, 1945). This clearly and accurately describes what has transpired during this ongoing classroom project. Students reported a widening of horizons and transformed judgments about the parolees and increased intrapersonal insight (Marlow et al., 2014). Furthermore, the professors of the course and Earthy's peers have grown together through the process of participation and reflection.

We would add to Wieman (1945), that the creative event manifested through interconnectedness most likely occurs when participants have tapped into the 'wonder' that Arendt, Heidegger, and Hansen speak of. However, it could also be possible that a state of wonder occurs when the elements of the creative event transpire given the welcoming and open opportunity in community. When a classroom is conducted in such a manner that aims, like the arch of the arrow, to foster wonder and phronetic awareness, these sub-events and their wholeness of a creative event naturally flow from this. It is as if the 'wonder' is the opening or the fodder for the creative good to occur. Nonetheless, they appear to co-exist while 'standing in the openness' creating readiness at the doorstep to wonder (Arendt, 1978).

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Notes

- 1 *Phronesis* is defined as practical wisdom, practical reasonableness, and ethical knowing or know-how. Gadamer described *phronesis* as "moral knowledge", meaning a kind of knowledge in which we make a choice about what to do in a given situation. We come to this choice through both thinking and acting. When the choice is made, the knowledge we possess about it is a deeper understanding about the situation. It is not a factual or final truth. Rather, this knowledge is a different interpretive awareness about the situation and the choice itself that we carry forward into our next experience. For Gadamer, moral knowledge or *phronesis* is an ethically imbued kind of knowing that is grounded in both practical and reflective actions and informed by our socio-cultural, historical contexts.