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Intensity

A Collaborative Autoethnography

Ken Gale, Ron Pelias, Larry Russell, Tami Spry,
Jonathan Wyatt

Abstract In this collaborative autoethnography, the five of us explore the experience and ethics of writing—and living—from/in intensity. We have been writing together since meeting at the Third International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry (QI), when we made a commitment to write over the following year to, for, and with each other. It became an experiment in the craft of autoethnography, exploring questions of intimacy and connection manifested through collaborative writing, a series of texts exchanged via e-mail. This essay's sequence of writing during July and August 2008 follows a period of silence. Senses of intensities emerged from our collaborative autoethnographic practice over this period: We remain unsure of what intensities might be, and in the fluidity of this lack of certainty we feel we can claim a pedagogical practice of inquiry that comes from this writing into our always not-yet-known.

Keywords: *intensity, collaborative writing, autoethnography, ethics*

All: Introduction

In this collaborative autoethnography, the five of us explore the experience and ethics of writing—and living—from/in intensity.¹ We have been writing together (three of us based in the USA, two of us in the UK) since meeting in May 2007 at the Third International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry (QI), when we made a commitment to write over the following year to, for, and with each other. It became an experiment in the craft of autoethnography, exploring questions of intimacy and connection manifested through collaborative writing, a series of texts exchanged via e-mail. In May 2008, we presented an anthology of our first year's writing at QI. For perhaps two weeks following the conference there was an ecstatic flurry of e-mails—and then hush.

This essay's sequence of writing, written during July and August 2008, follows this silence. Senses of intensities emerged from our collaborative autoethnographic

practice over this period: We remain unsure of what intensities might be, and in the fluidity of this lack of certainty, we feel we can make claim to a pedagogical practice of inquiry that comes from this writing into our always not-yet-known. Energised by living on precipices and thresholds, fueled by feeding in fields of expectation, it seemed that in living and working with our practices of collaborative writing as method of inquiry, we frequently experienced the liminal. Our writing was done in response, in anticipation, and always in between the two, the three, the four, the five, and so the fueling of these always liminal spaces was in terms of intensity. At times our sense of intensity was both found and expressed in terms of the pressures of love, of care, of laughter and concentrated attention, and at others it was less of the body, of affect and its organs, and more of its disorganization. We lost ourselves in the presence of differentiation; we found ourselves in the surging of flows, the pace of gradients, and the emergence of new and unexpected expression. And always in the to-ing and the fro-ing of the writing, the perpetually simmering and sometimes boiling heat of intensity was there as a generative force, driving its creativity and demanding reflexivity as the next set of fingers poised and hesitated over the keys.

Jonathan begins.

Jonathan: Searching for Intensity

I have been noticing my experience of our current quietness.

There has been life and its demands for each of us. As well, it is as if we are collectively drawing breath, allowing the experience of the conference—and the sense that we have of our work thus far—to find new form before we move on. Redrawing our landscape, perhaps.

(So far, so mature of me. So far, so cool. Because, boy, am I missing you.)

For Ken and me, our doctorates were finished last month. As I begin writing this, Ken is away on holiday, and our ending and his absence have been prompting me. I feel myself stepping back, wondering what both our ending and his absence mean.

I am not finding any of this easy. I sit to write and can't. I hold the pen, but it stays still. Nor can I read. I no longer know what to read. I have lost focus. Nothing drives me. I search, but I find only aridity and emptiness, and they scare me.

At a session at QI about “auto/writing,” which Larry presented at, people talked about ethics. In the discussion, I shared that I find myself looking for intensity of experience and that this is ethically worrying. I write from and into intensity. I am on the alert for moments and encounters that will offer me this. I yearn for them, so

when I am with someone I am asking myself, “Do you, does this experience of being with you now, make me want to write? Is this intense enough?”

There are ethical problems with this position, I realize. It places pressure on people. It’s exploitive. It’s self-interested. It is not a practice of care, not a practice of love.

But I think that I am also missing the point, in that intensity—or do I mean connectedness?—by definition can’t be planned for, can’t be manufactured. Such a view rests on a humanist notion of the subject. It depends upon there being me and others who are separate and individuated, there being a world that is separate and outside me, and upon my fostering instrumental contact with them/it.

No. Moments of intensity just happen. I receive writing from one of you and I feel alive and connected, and I feel intensely, and it is a gift. We are together and we read and it is a gift. I can no more seek such experiences out than I can plan to feel good. I am simply present, a part of it, or I’m not. I simply do or don’t. Perhaps all I can do is help create possibilities. Deleuze (1990) would talk about “haecceity” in this context: the assemblage of the moment. The sounds, the time of day, the people, the smell. I am always part of an assemblage; that’s my connection. I am always inextricably connected, but there are moments when I choose or am in a position to notice it. My ethical responsibility always and only is to be “not unworthy of what happens to (me)” (p. 149).

I long for intensity, for connectedness, though it is not always an easy experience. I romanticize it when it seems distant, but when I am present with intensity, it can be disturbing—or worse. The pain that I sometimes write about is intense. Not bitter-sweet (see Gale, Pelias, Russell, Spry, & Wyatt, 2012), just bitter.

I don’t know where this is taking me. I dread having nothing left to say, feeling shorn of imagination and passion. This may be the fear that lies behind my longing for intensity. The fear of feeling flat. Dead.

Writing has taken me into connection with you. I take an axe to the frozen sea inside me, as Kafka would put it (Begley, 1997). I feel less dislocated, less empty. “Because I write for, I write from, I start writing from: Love. I write out of love. Writing, loving: inseparable. Writing is a gesture of love. *The Gesture*” (Cixous, 1991, p. 42, italics in the original).

Ron: The Calm and the Intense

I have been a poor member of our group, receiving your wonderful writing but not returning even a passing acknowledgment to all its power, its yearning, its connection. My plan this morning was to read again the writing you have offered since my

last e-mail and to respond. When I opened my e-mail, there was another gift, Jonathan's latest writing. I feel now even more negligent, more remorse at not writing sooner. I fall into Jonathan's description of being called by "life and its demands" as well as his sense that we may be "collectively drawing breath." But I have not gone without noting the joys and sorrows that have come to our group, the "bittersweetness" of living. I have been with all of you, even in my negligence.

I enter again with some random thoughts. I am intrigued by Jonathan's desire for intensity (ethical or not) as an interpersonal motive and as a catalyst for writing. Because I recently have been living in a space marked with intensity, I long for the quiet and security of the settled. Perhaps, after all the labor of forging our friendship, we have been breathing in the comfort of knowing what is in place, secure.

In some ways, this is for me a more generative place for writing, a space where I feel free, safe to say what I think, where I can stand above, reflecting with leisure, on whatever issue I want to address. Such a space, I know, does not carry the urgency and the drama of living in intensity.

It does not insist that I address what is often most present. I have used writing in those intense moments, but more often than not the narratives I then tell do not stand still. They come to me as works in process, a way of trying on possibilities. I find myself feeling more confidence in the stories I tell when intensity has passed, when I am settled, sometimes, settled into a comfort with my own confusion, with my own irresolvable issues.

I hear Jonathan when he says, "I dread having nothing left to say, feeling shorn of imagination and passion. This may be the fear that lies behind my longing for intensity. The fear of feeling flat. Dead." I know this space, this fear. I am reminded of the couples who, when things are going well, sabotage the calm to prove to themselves there is still passion within the relationship. I am also reminded of the seduction of drama and wonder if its long reach pulls us away from the pleasures of the present, the everyday, if its power keeps us, as Stafford (2003) would have it, from being as fully as we might be "scribes to the world."

I have been speaking primarily from the stance of a writer, trying to reflect on what we might miss if we center our attention on the intense, the dramatic. In doing so, I have left behind Jonathan and the intense drama of what I take to be in his last e-mail: a sadness, a longing for connection, a reach for the meaningful, gifts that do not mark endings but beginnings, a bittersweet jazz, to borrow from Tami, that keeps one afloat. I feel this as an existential space that couples despair and possibility. I know this space.

So here is where I am. First, I am without words that claim a fix, without the comforting or troubling insights of a good counselor. Instead, I offer a writing gesture

of love. In that love, I want to say, “I think I know what you mean. I think I know how you feel. I too have been there.”

Empathy’s claim carries its connection and its caution.

I just finished teaching a four-week class called “Writing for Scholarly Publication.” There were 17 graduate students in the class, most of whom were writing autoethnographic essays. I read their essays, energized by their potential, moved by their prose, and concerned about them as both scholars and people. Yet, despite arguing for the importance of our work, I wondered if it mattered. In my best moments, I am a true believer. In those moments when I am least happy with myself, I am the character in a Dilbert cartoon who says to another character, “Tell me some boring story about your life and I’ll pretend to enjoy it.” Perhaps these feelings have something to do with how much I find myself now carrying, how long I can live in the intense, how I must at times protect myself from empathy’s easy pull. Perhaps these feelings are fed by my initial thoughts of retirement, wondering if I need to distance myself from what has so long been my identity in order to find alternative scripts. Perhaps I’m just weary, drained.

I do know, however, my own ethical charge and easy downfall: When I find myself wallowing, wondering if it all or anything matters, I believe I am being ethically suspect. The meaningful life asks that I live in a space of caring, a space our group has forged. I thank each of you for allowing me to be there with you.

Tami: Together

July 7, 2008

I’m sitting here working on a book proposal but long to be with you all in language. Since QI, our words are now infused with the data of our bodies being together, performing together. Truly, now, when I am feeling a bit thin or down, I think of standing with all of you. The power of that co-presence is still palpable. I can call it up and feel its substance, our substance, our stance together before witnesses.

I feel most alive when performing. It is as if energy expands into another space and time where we—performers and witnesses all—are not in a “suspension of disbelief” but rather in another place of meaning-making where we might heal or hurt or help, where we might collide or commune, where the words put forth are gambles, ante-ups, parlays into the vulnerable, venerable darkness of writing.

I had a bit of a breakthrough with my therapist. I am more than three months on the other side of a bout with depression and anxiety. We usually take this time to

critically reflect upon the origins and particular reasons, the certain textures of the bout so we can cull enough data to offset or at least lessen the severity of another round of shadow. I see that the last sentence begins with, "We usually." There is nothing usual about depression, and yet when one is "in" it, it is nearly impossible to remember that there was ever anything else, ever any other way of being, ever any other life. But always, there are words. And my practice of words with you all foregrounds the experience of prayer for me in the process of writing. The following passage from a presentation at the last QI was inspired by Jonathan's phrase "lost religions" as well as our work together as a whole:

One of my lost religions is Catholicism. When a Catholic walks up to the priest to take Holy Communion, the priest holds the wafer to the outstretched tongue and says, "The body and blood of Christ." The tongue says, "Amen," and then he, because he is *always* a he, places the wafer on the tongue, wherein you are to swallow the body- and blood-in-a-wafer of the savior. The wafer, however, usually sticks to the roof of the mouth, flesh against flesh, resisting the patriarchal directive to swallow.

Now, I replace wafers with words. Writing is communion. No longer waiting for them to be placed in my mouth by man, words are the body and blood of life and of loss. Making the absent present, words reconstruct the body of a lost mother, or father, or son, or holy ghost. Writing of his absence helped me find my son, helped me know his presence, and then his stillness, as a gift, as a prayer, as a Hallelujah.

July 26, 2008

I'm here on a train, and you are all with me. Maybe it is the imprint of words made together, meanings formed, co-performed in linguistic co-presence with one another. Some articles ago (Spry, 2001), I talked about autoethnography in performance as the somatic becoming the semantic, or the body becoming word through performativity, blood pumping through the letters manifesting a body of our work together. I feel the epitome of this theorizing more than ever before. I move through the world in somatic conversation with our group.

August 1, 2008

Sitting in the middle of my garden on a perfect 75-degree summer day, the 5-, 6-, and 7-foot-tall hollyhocks form an organic fortress embedded within a quarter acre of yellow yarrow, cone flower, coreopsis, gay feather, cosmos, zinnias, joe-pye weed,

lilies, dahlia, phlox, nasturtium, bee balm, primrose, black-eyed Susan, monk's hood, lamb's ear, mullion, herbs, sunflowers, wild geranium, goldenrod, daisies, and more. It is intense. And I sit there because of it. I sit there because of it, Jonathan, because I need the intensity of the colors, smells, butterflies, bees, and memories of people here and gone like I need food. I'm reading Denzin's (2008) new *Searching for Yellowstone: Race, Gender, Family, and Memory in the Postmodern West*, wherein he seeks to reimagine, remember, and retell the myths of democratic America, all of which were genomed from intense experience. I want to reconfigure our imagining of intensity as part of the necessary mundanity of need rather than an ethically or morally questionable craving.

I want to continue this discussion of intensity and its role in writing, but I also want to send this now to all of you since I have been sitting on it a while. Love.

Ron: Chasing the Intense

"I want to reconfigure our imagining of intensity as part of the necessary mundanity of need," Tami writes. I have been living with this sentence for a week now, puzzling over its claim, turning it this way and that, wondering if I can settle into belief.

I've known the intensity of gardens, with their racy rub of color and their other guests who ask me to consider who belongs. Sometimes, I've bullied my way in; other times, I've made a slow retreat.

I've lived in the mundane, feeling it as, well, mundane, wanting it forgotten as it often is but sensing the mundane is mundane because of how I am present.

I've met the intensity of depression, Ûthe deep feeling that nothing matters. At such times, need escapes me.

I write to discover the intense. As long as I think intensity is present, I carry on with belief. When I cannot find the intensity, I lose faith, abandon whatever I am writing.

I write to rid myself of the intense. In words, I find escape.

I write not knowing what is intense. I try to convince myself I've found it. I write trying to create need.

Standing in bookstores, I often feel overwhelmed thinking about the intensity the writers before me brought to their work and the ease with which I dismiss them.

I am honored when members of our group mark us as a circle of importance, a circle that lives with intensity. That is a narrative I can easily embrace; it is also one that makes me wonder what constitutes the intense. In our strange and wonderful correspondence, words tell the intensity of our being. What to trust? What to feel? What words? What now?

Tami: What Now?

This is wonderful, Ron. My immediate reaction is a particular engagement with the last paragraph.

“Our strange and wonderful correspondence.” Yes, what now? Who are we now, now that we know this writing of ours seems to have some sort of efficacy for others? The reaction to the performance in May was quite moving. “What to feel?” The intensity of our performance was, for me, unique. Performance is often intense, but this one was different. And we were just standing there together reading. No staging, no movement, no memorization, no rehearsal of persona/character. I’m not sure what it was yet.

I know I am rather mixing our ideas of intensity and who we are; I think they are linked somehow. It is feeling jazzlike, as if I am listening hard to the riffs and changes and bridges of our voice(s).

Larry: A Prayer for Pilgrims

We are dealing with so many themes and strands we can barely contain them. And they follow that quiet period.

Here’s mine:

The seasons are askew. The calendar marks the time as summer, but the cool wetness is appropriate to the spring. David and I are driving around a Vermont that is as green as its name. It feels like Ireland. Everyone is unsure of their footing, picking their way through the damp soil. I turn inward with a gesture of moist planting, but there are no tender shoots.

The seasonal rhythm of my life slowly turns upon the event of the hundred-mile pilgrimage in June. I want to tell people about my time with pilgrims this year because it made a difference.

My return to pilgrimage each June and to my Catholic friends has become my closet life—but not entirely closet. It’s more like my life just after I came out. Straight friends might know that I’ve been out dancing or to a party, but they want me to spare them the details. Now, academic friends know that my research takes me to New Mexico, but they don’t want to hear about the Masses. They immediately mix up the religious practice with the opinions of the pope. If my friends knew that my grandparents were racist and my parents were sexist (they were), would they want me to spare them details of my last visit? What if my family were loving people and my times with them were significant moments in my life? I suppose it’s a moot point since they’re dead.

This year I could not actually walk the pilgrimage. It was a spiritual crisis of sorts. The rhythm of my liturgical year was broken. I have come to depend upon those hours of walking in the bright desert sun as a time of return. It is there and then that I pray my concern for the illness of friends, for injustice, for physical and spiritual hunger in the world. I sometimes lose my way and forget where I am (in the various meanings of those phrases), but the effort of pilgrimage brings me home to my basic values. This year there was no place for my concern. Not walking the pilgrimage this year threatened that whole project.

I had called my friend Corina to ask her what I might do as a support person along the route. I could not imagine staying home in Brooklyn. I thought maybe I could help serve food or clean parish halls for the pilgrims. Corina told me that the organization for meals was already in place. There are groups, basically women—the *Guadalupanas*—who take care of that. I didn't know the pattern, and I would only get in the way. Corina told me she would think about it. Two weeks later she called me just as I was leaving the house to take a subway into Manhattan to see a movie. She was excited because she had been talking with a friend who paints icons. He had described an icon of the Good Shepherd he was just completing. This shepherd was on a journey, and he was knocking on the door of an adobe house. The context of Father Bill's icons is often New Mexican. The house was the color and material of the Earth. Corina thought it would make a wonderful card to give to the pilgrims as they went on their way. So she arranged for printing, and she asked me to write a pilgrim's prayer to be printed on the back of the card.

It's strange that writing a prayer for pilgrims would become that important to me. I wanted it to be full of a pilgrim's experience—the smells and colors and sounds. I wanted to fill it with the vulnerability and yearning of a pilgrim. When I finished it, I sent it to Corina. She pointed out to me that I had not addressed the prayer. She suggested I might address it in the form that she remembered from her childhood, a practice that was almost forgotten. They had once addressed God as *Tatita Dios*. The old familiar form for father was *tata*, and this was an affectionate diminutive, like Papa. The Aramaic word that Jesus used in his prayer was *Abba*, papa. It was this sort of familiarity and appropriation that so moved me about the spirituality of Northern New Mexicans. In a way, they are bold and sure in their spirituality. *Tatita Dios*.

When I arrived in New Mexico, I went to see Corina. She showed me the card. The image was still and peaceful. It marked a pause in a journey, and it also recalled the details of the birth of Jesus. In one of the phrases of the prayer, I spoke of the pilgrims' desire to open their hearts, *como la posada de Belén*, like the innkeeper at Bethlehem. At Christmas time in Northern New Mexico, there is a popular

re-enactment of this scene when Mary and Joseph search for shelter in an unreceptive world of hearts that are closed.

Corina told me that my experience with the prayer would be unique. At first I thought she meant that the dispersal of the cards to pilgrims would give me a new role. She repeated it to me three times. When I left her house, I thought about it, trying to understand what she meant. We had originally thought I would meet each of the five pilgrim groups and give them the cards, but they had already been sent to the group leaders. When I finally visited each group as they came to Mass at the end of a 20-mile day of walking, I realized my opportunity. The pilgrims knew me not as a pilgrim or even as the Anglo professor from New York. They greeted me as the author of the prayer of their experience. It was an opportunity to participate in their culture as a member. I knew them through the prayer, and they knew me. We met, heart to heart.

When I returned to Brooklyn, I was still absorbing my encounters with the various pilgrim groups. I felt a strong need to narrate this experience because that is the way I come to understand my life. When friends, who knew that I always walked the long pilgrimage in June, asked me about my trip this year, I wanted to say, "There was a prayer. I wrote this pilgrim prayer, and I was a member of the pilgrim family this time." But prayer as a form of address and the addressee were a problem to my friends. It recalled my years of coming out in the '70s when I was going back and forth between a straight world and a gay world. In those days I wanted to say, "I met this man, and we made love. I have never felt such peace." But I did not push the tolerance of my friends. I recognize the same glassy stares and wan smiles now. Today I could tell them anything about my sex life but not my spiritual practice. After a few attempts, I learned to silently slip through the door between two cultures, leaving a part of myself behind.

Postscript

Sunny day. Rainy night. A cool summer evening that did not feel like August in New York. Coming home after seeing a wonderful new Woody Allen movie, I had fed the dog and read a little. As I was brushing my teeth, I was thinking of our web of connections. Tami's account of her struggle with depression had been on my mind all day. I was thinking about the ways in which we all have returned to this writing and to each other when we had important things to say.

I was wondering what I had to say in my last post. I knew what I had written, but I wondered what I had to say. Perhaps I will understand when I read it later. In a few

months. Or when we begin to compile our writing in February as we think toward our next meeting in May. Will I know then? Will it be clearer when I sense each of you, listening? But if it is similar to our experience of last year, it will be our performance that completes the thought.

Last time, last year, there was that gap in my writing. A long silence. I thought I understood what I had not written. I thought it was about the erratic heartbeat, the threat of skin cancer, the two years of constant headaches, and the compression of vertebrae. By November I had a meltdown over the 20 or 30 hours a week I was spending traveling back and forth to doctors. When I finally opened your postings in one painful reading, I thought I had written into the silence an account of irresponsibility. When we sat down (and got up) to read our correspondence (in the several meanings of that word), I heard for the first time you calling to me. What I thought I had written was not what I had said. What I thought we had written was not what we had said. Performativity.

Ken: Intensity, Desire, Passion

I have been wanting to write.

This is the desire that Deleuze talks about. It is a desire that is productive, energetic, and about agency. I have been wanting to write to you all and to be with you in the writing. It is the sense of sharing that is so alluring, so tempting; it is that which draws me in like the spider's enchantments and enticements that we have already talked about in our writing. It is the intoxication of these writing and reading moments that fuels my soul. I am aware of my addiction, and sometimes it frightens me.

So weeks, maybe months have drifted by, our postings flurry like snow storms, dusting me with crystals that refract and reflect in so many directions. I grow sensitive to the foldings in, aware of the new ingredients that flavor my heart and tease new perfumes into the headiness of my delirium. In my wanderings I too sense the unfoldings, the foldings out; I find myself saying words, or grinning with satisfaction, and then, suddenly, feel the tears rolling down my cheek, crying silently as my heart aches in uneasy resonance with the vibrating hum of a new realization in my life.

I have been wanting to write.

I have been circling our texts. I have now read and reread lovely writings from all of you. They are there on my screen, and they glow from crumpled sheets in my bag as I sit looking over the sea, sensing massive volumes surging around me. I have been thinking about the metaphor of the key. What will be the key that will unlock the

door that will lead me into writing with you again? Many keys seem to jangle on my ring; I look at the doors that are there with their keyholes and I become confused. Now, as I write, I wonder to myself why this metaphor is necessary. Why do I imagine doors? And why are they locked?

By introducing myself in this way, I find myself raising so many questions, questions about myself, questions for myself. *My self?* So to simplify, the key for me is intensity. Jonathan, Tami, Ron, and now Larry have all written to and about this in different ways, in ways that embody intensity in themselves, so this will be my key back into our writing.

It seems to me that within and about our group we have a plane of immanence that is both cross-cut and constituted by multiple lines of flight. As a group, we seem to be concerned about our subjectivities in both our individual and collective selves, and as such we seem to be concerned about our becoming(s). It seems to me that our work together is both troubling and uplifting. Sometimes our work is affirmative, and sometimes it takes us by surprise. Tami, I love the depth and acuity of your observation about our “performance.”

“What to feel?” The intensity of our performance was, for me, unique. Performance is often intense, but this one was different. And we were just standing there together reading. No staging, no movement, no memorization, no rehearsal of persona/character. I’m not sure what it was yet.

Larry, you remind us of the upturned seasons.

The calendar marks the time as summer, but the cool wetness is appropriate to the spring . . . Everyone is unsure of their footing, picking their way through the damp soil. I turn inward with a gesture of moist planting, but there are no tender shoots.

So our thoughts and feelings—our “intensities”—take us in different lines and to many places. As nomads, we are unsure where we might be going and what the climate might be. Ours is not a writing about essential forms, fixed values, or foundational knowledge. It seems that we are concerned about our passions, about what our bodies can do, and about what our lives can become.

Jonathan, you travel to the ethics of your intensity “habit.” Tami, you take us to the glorious richness of your garden and the meditative peace that sitting there gives you, both living in the headiness of the moment and being transported to that rich world of memory and friends. And Ron, I lived with you there briefly as you took us to that bookshop. My daughter, Katy, recently gave me a photograph that she had

taken of me in a bookshop in Biarritz: me, there, surrounded and absorbed by mountains of books. I had forgotten the moment. I didn't know she had taken the picture, but seeing the image took me flooding back to that place; the intensity of that moment had lost me in its torrential swim. I was lost in the moment, as you say, perhaps reflecting upon the writers or my unworthiness in their company, but I was there, one with my surroundings.

I want to stay with your words, Ron, for a moment because they move me in my thoughts about intensity. They charge my curiosity, and they ask questions both for me and of me. You say: "I write to discover the intense. As long as I think intensity is present, I carry on with belief. When I cannot find the intensity, I lose faith, abandon whatever I am writing." And then you say, without irony, paradox, or contradiction: "I write not knowing what is intense." I just want to say, "Yes!" For me, it is as if we write as intensity junkies, sharing our fixes in the shooting galleries of love, emotion, and feeling. The talk of need that we share here seems to resonate with the coarse image of the habit.

As I think about need, I am drawn to Tami's words—words that Ron decided to live with for a while to try to come to know, with which to try to "settle into belief." "I want to reconfigure our imagining of intensity as part of the necessary mundanity of need." I wonder how what I have been trying to say here connects with what you have to say, Tami. I have struggled with the profundity of your words. In what I have to say here, I have postulated a form of intensity that lives within the necessity of an ethical and aesthetic sensitivity. In this sense, I have also suggested an aspirational quality that living with intensity must embody. For me, in so many of my sensings, the lived and remembered intensities of our lives are the benchmarks by which we come to value and know our lives. I think that it is the association of intensity with the "mundanity of need" that is causing me to think and worry about its place in the everydaynesses of our lives.

So while, like Ron, I too "write to discover the intense," it is not as if I want to find out *what* it is. I am not troubled if I can't define it, but I do want to experience the rush it gives me, the headiness of its flow when I feel that I am actually *in* the writing, living the experience of the words in immediate conjunction with that which I am writing. In intensity, I sense tension.

I imagine a bowstring, primed, taut, and vibrating with tension, ready to fire.

In the excitement of the moment of anticipation as the idea is about to be born, I feel my body curl, my tendons pulling my body into strange shapes before the birth moment makes me smile and I can relax into a grin as the words come tumbling out.

I sense my self dancing, body open, in a heaving crowd, eyes fixed on the deejay, almost *seeing* the music pump out of the speakers, feeling myself at one with those around me, sharing a kind of knowing, lost in the immensity of the moment.

And then, again and again, I take myself back to that packed room at Q1 standing there, the five of us, as a group, not knowing what would become but trusting in the moment, in ourselves and what the writing had already done for us.

So what am I feeling now about intensity, about intensities? What am I going to write here? Where have I been since the intensities of our shared moments together? Jonathan, you described a kind of hiatus that you experienced, and I shivered when I read:

I am not finding any of this easy. I sit to write and can't. I hold the pen, but it stays still. Nor can I read. I no longer know what to read. I have lost focus. Nothing drives me. I search, but I only find aridity and emptiness and they scare me.

And Ron: "I've met the intensity of depression, the deep feeling that nothing matters. At such time, need escapes me."

It seems to me that the kinds of intensities that we have all been sharing and talking about recently are somehow connected to passion. Is it too simple to suggest this, and where does such a suggestion take us? Deleuze (1991) notes that Hume argues subjectivity gains its form through association with others, but that it is individuated through passion. I have been struggling with this interpretation for ages because it also seems to say that friendships, associations, and collaborations, perhaps, can be measured in relation to passion. A passing discussion with the bus driver on the way to work is relatively free of passion, but the exploration of the vulnerabilities of self through collective writing is relatively full of passion. Passion seems to play a part in the way in which we begin to conceptualize the relations we experience with others. The corollary of this view comes in the form of a question: What would passions be without others? In my response to a question of this kind, I sense a rhetoric that suggests that it would be a kind of emptiness, a lack of connection, loss.

As I think about this, I sense a passion in what we do and share together. As I feel what we do and share together, I am passionate, and I sense the passion of you, my writing partners, my friends. It is in this sensing of selves that I feel becoming. These are intensities that defy repetition but revel in their differences. Each time we come to know one another, we move on; circumstance, time, and extension operate upon us inexorably. We remember, we write. We write, we remember.

All: Spring

In this space and time, in this writing, we live in the ecstatic flurry and then the hush of becoming alive in the performance, searching and not finding, exulting in the knowing that if we *think* it is there, then it is not. The sounds, the time of day, the people, the smell, the . . . the . . .

Yellow yarrow, cone flower, coreopsis, gay feather.

In this space and time we sense the urgency and the drama of living in intensity, colliding and communing, gambling and parlaying in the venerable darkneses of our differentiating writing.

Cosmos, zinnias, joe-pye weed, lilies.

In this space and time, we learn to slip through doors between cultures, leaving parts of ourselves behind, seeing parts of ourselves unfolding and creatively emerging.

Dahlia, phlox, nasturtium, bee balm, primrose.

In this space and time, in our strange and wonderful correspondence, we become aware of those moments of losing and finding ourselves in the torrential swim of our words.

Black-eyed Susan, monk's hood, lamb's ear, mullion.

In this space and time, we take no trouble to define it; we experience the heady exuberance of the flow, in the writing, living in tense immediacy, with the writing.

Herbs, sunflowers, wild geranium, goldenrod, daisies.

It is intense. And we sit here because of it.

Note

1. This paper is a version of chapter 10 of our forthcoming book (Gale, Pelias, Russell, Spry, & Wyatt, 2012).

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