

Life, Interrupted

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Abstract:

In this autoethnography, the author explores his experiences with the hard disruptions that occur when confronted by others in ways that lead him to question, at times, the very ground of his being, his identity, and his place and purpose in the world. Finding a nexus for understanding these disruptions in interruptions, a story of his life struggles unfolds as a series of passages through gateways to transcendence. In the end, these interruptions, as harsh as some of them may seem, are proposed as necessary “moments of rupture” that allow for the eruption of infinite possibility, joy, and a spirited life.

Keywords: autoethnography | disruption | epiphany | interruption | shadow

Article:

Nothing would ever exactly fit together and solidify. . . would never grow calm, never feel at ease; life was a hell on earth of loose ends, uncertainty, violence.
Nichols, 1974, p. 449

Courage is the self-affirmation of being in spite of the fact of nonbeing . . . *the courage to be is rooted in the God who appears when God has disappeared in the anxiety of doubt.*
Tillich, 1952, pp. 155-190 (italics in original)

Interruption

There are moments in a life when *something*—an insight, an epiphany, an image, a sign, a trauma, a loss, or even a shadow or an insult or a transgression (real or perceived)—seems to just “break through” into the ordinary flow of everyday life—out of nowhere, so to speak. A vision, a dream, a metaphor, a conversation, a significant person, a hint, a sign, a clue, a memory, or a sacred/spiritual experience. . . just sort of “shows up.” And a crisis (split/separation) is born! Something . . . bursts into consciousness and grips our awareness. C. G. Jung (1964) called this phenomenon an “irruption”—a breaking or bursting in (an incursion or invasion). Religious historian Mircea Eliade (1957) proposed that what is really going on in such a moment is an “inbreaking” or “hierophany”—a rupture—which opens a window on a new and

different—deeper, fuller, broader—consciousness. What happens is that, at some moment, we experience a breaking or a bursting apart of our daily, ordinary, experiential reality. Suddenly, we find ourselves moving—sometimes rapidly, sometimes more gradually—from the “profane” phenomenal (natural, ordinary, routine, everyday) world of daily experience into a greater consciousness of another world—a world of transcendence, of spirit, of possibility—and maybe even of the sacred. We enter, if only for a brief while, into a greater awareness of the numinous (mysterious, spiritual, or supernatural) aspect or realm of the “great reality” that encompasses but somehow transcends ordinary, everyday being.

Of course, sometimes, the rupture or interruption is of a different order. Or so it seems at first. Instead of epiphany, what emerges is fear, or grief, or pain, or anger—emotion just sweeps over us, and life is . . . interrupted.

In either case, sometimes the threshold between the two worlds is narrow, and the passage quick. At other times, it is broad and shrouded in mystery, and our progress is slow. But before we cross this threshold, there is that moment of interruption.

This is the moment that intrigues me.

The work of Jung and Eliade draws our attention to such moments as something to be probed, played with, attended to, caressed, built upon, embraced, written, dialogued with/ about, engaged with.

Meanwhile, back in this ordinary, everyday world of participation and observation, I take my stand as an ethnographer—one who observes and participates actively, consciously, mindfully—attempting to probe and interpret the deeper meanings of human experience. I am an ethnographer of spirit—an “accidental ethnographer” who seeks some sort of sign or something that will lead me forward in my search. In the quest to grasp the deeper meanings of phenomena, the attentive ethnographer notices that there are *signs* (openings?) in our world, if we will but attend to them (Poulos, 2009)—and that these signs can sometimes lead us, if we are willing, toward a greater sense of our place in the cosmos.

Such attention, aimed at deeper—and perhaps broader—consciousness, may help us to make meaning out of the seemingly indecipherable morass of experience.

In the face of anxiety, such an irruption (of a sign as well as of what the sign points to) is almost a necessity.

Ironically—at least sometimes—it is such irruptions that may have brought on the anxiety in the first place.

Certainly, these experiences of “interruption” (irruption, rupture, hierophany, disruption) are often unsettling. They may be nearly overwhelming. Anxiety can be—as Tillich (1952) points out in *The Courage to Be*—deep, paralyzing.

Anxiety is, at times, *existential* anxiety.

But in a lifelong search for the deeper meaning of Being (and beyond), such an irruption is a clue that can lead to something beyond anxiety—to a new level of awareness, to a moment of transcendence.

The Shadow¹

To understand my story, you have to think first about the human shadow. Much has been written about this phenomenon, which Jung (1957, 1959, 1989) thought of as the “dark side” of the personal unconscious—the repressed, despised, misunderstood, disowned, and unwelcome parts of our selves that reside somewhere just underneath the surface of the persona (face) that, under ordinary circumstances, we work hard put forth to the outer world. As Erving Goffman (1959, 1963, 1967) pointed out, much of our everyday communicative energy is aimed toward “face work”—the intricate and involved maintenance of a positive social image. But, of course, the fact that we work hard to present a positive “face” to the world does not negate the existence of our “dark side.” The face can, in fact, easily fall under a shadow, and thus become disrupted.

Indeed, Zweig and Abrams (1991), working from a Jungian perspective, point out that “Everything with substance casts a shadow.” A human being is a substantial, complex sort of creature, to be sure. So a human shadow is inevitable. Zweig and Abrams go on to argue that we must become aware of the nature of the shadow that we each, as complex, semiconscious human subjects, cast. They go on to further explain the nature of the shadow: “The shadow goes by many familiar names: the disowned self, the lower self, the dark twin or brother in bible and myth, the double, repressed self, alter ego, id” (p. 3). In other words, the shadow consists of those parts or aspects of ourselves that we cannot, or sometimes will not, face—“that part of us we fail to see or know” (Johnson, 1991, p. 4), that we do not like, or that is socially ugly or unacceptable.

The shadow is that dismissed part of us, that part that we do not wish to acknowledge. The shadow is the “heart of darkness” (Conrad, 2010) that beats in each of us. And, therefore, the shadow may well remain hidden, obscured, for a very long time. Perhaps the darkness is so dark that it scares us. Perhaps the darkness is just too much to bear. Whatever the case, each of us, according to Jungian theory, harbors a Mr. Hyde—a shadow self—somewhere within the skin, the cells, the consciousness of the Dr. Jekyll that is the everyday persona-ego that we show to our world.

But sometimes, that shadow jumps out of its hiding place and presents itself in the everyday world, catching us off-guard. And, for a moment, or for many years, it can grip us, holding us in its sway. The problem, of course, is that *this* kind of “seizure” or “irruption” can make it very difficult to walk in the ordinary world of functioning humans. We may take on negative living patterns, developing neuroses or engaging in addictive habits or building destructive communication patterns. Once these patterns are established, once we begin to live lives of deception and betrayal and outburst—what Brian Spitzberg and William Cupach (1998) have called “the dark side of relating”—the patterns are difficult to break. In any case, according to

the Jungian literature, if the shadow is not somehow met, faced, owned, and dealt with, the “buried” side of us—the side that we may ordinarily find horrifying, the side from which outbursts and other dark emanations can come—may take over.

But the shadow can be dark, thick, nearly impenetrable. And it can become powerful, overwhelming even, if we are not attentive. The trick, according to Jung, is to become *fully conscious* of our shadow side, to wrestle with it, and to integrate it into our consciousness. As Jung (1938) puts it,

Unfortunately there can be no doubt that man (sic) is, on the whole, less good than he imagines himself or wants to be. Everyone carries a shadow, and the less it is embodied in the individual’s conscious life, the blacker and denser it is. (But) if an inferiority is conscious, one always has a chance to correct it. Furthermore, it is constantly in contact with other interests, so that it is continually subjected to modifications. But if it is repressed and isolated from consciousness, it never gets corrected (p. 131).

So in everyday life, it just happens that sometimes the shadow jumps out from behind itself . . . and presents an opening. These irruptions rupture our sense of who we are and serve as a fault line that forces an upheaval and reconfiguration of identity in deep and powerful ways. What follows is a story of rupture, wherein the energies of the human shadow irrupted into the life-world . . . and a door opened . . . presenting the possibility of a new consciousness of the numinous, of the mystery of being (Marcel, 1960), and of a whole new world of infinite possibility, joy, and a spirited life.

But I must begin at the beginning.

I must examine the origins and the contours of my shadow.

The Stage Is Set

Growing up, I wanted to be a happy kid. I really did. My “nature,” according to my parents, was to be “good,” which, in translation, meant I was *quiet*. This changed as I emerged into the wider world beyond my home. Like many young boys, I began to discover the power of my voice. But my voice did not seem welcome, and it often ran head on into the “authority” of my father. Some days, he seemed to be bursting at the seams with anger at what he perceived as my defiance. Fortunately, he was not around all that much. But, naturally, when he was around, my reaction to his reaction to me was, well, unfavorable. To put it lightly, we began to butt heads. So he redoubled his efforts, asserting his authority even more vigorously.

And I dug in my heels.

But my dad’s message was clear: I should keep my newly discovered mouth firmly shut.

And do what I was told.

I could not seem to manage either of these.

The trouble was that often, what I was told to do—when it wasn't just simply to “shut up”—was something along the lines of “Eat those Lima beans, boy!” Naturally, if I was going to do *that*, I probably wouldn't have needed to be told. So we had ourselves a standoff. I spent hours at the dinner table—defiant, yes, but also indignant at the injustice of being forced to even consider eating such a thing—feeding those Limas one at a time to our little dog.

I was not happy about this arrangement.

Our dachshund, Heidi, seemed indifferent. She chewed the Lima beans slowly, unlike any other meal she ate, apparently unsure whether she should eat them, but unable to stop once her mouth was on the job.

I was sympathetic.

And my dad was just steamed.

Still, to this day, I will not put a Lima bean in my mouth.

My brother and I were boisterous, active young boys—and, like most kids our age, did not fully grasp (or believe in) the adult injunction against noise. We suffered from “youthful exuberance syndrome” (abbreviation: YES!), which today would probably be diagnosed as ADHD, and drugs (speed, mind you—go figure) would be duly prescribed to silence us. Our saying “YES!” to life had its consequences, which were usually, it seemed to us, out of proportion to our “crimes.” Embracing, as we did, our active, imaginative, and (sometimes) combative impulses, we found ourselves making new discoveries each day. Imagination, of course, was its own reward. And we often found great delight in engaging in that which we were not supposed to do. The forbidden fruit is, after all, the tastiest in the garden. *Always* better than a forced Lima bean! Eschewing the notion that kids who sat still and quiet were “good,” we pushed the boundaries of adult tolerance. Naturally, we found ourselves in hot water at home and at school. And in the car.

The door slams, too hard, shaking the whole car. My door is yanked open, and with a quick jerk, I find myself on the side of the road. He drags me around to the back of the car, says, “Bend over and grab your ankles.” I hesitate. But the glare I get tells me I'd better comply. Slowly, I bend forward, grab my ankles. His belt slides through the loops fluidly, snaps as he doubles it. I clench my teeth and bite my lip as the blows rain down . . . but I will not break, will not cry, will not let the pain win.

And I will not let him know he is getting to me.

I will not.

That day, I had my first little conflict-inspired epiphany:

He cannot hurt me—he cannot get to me—unless I let him.

But—

Along the way, I began to quietly harbor misgivings about this whole project of living. At a very early age, I began to feel ill at ease, anxious.

School intensified this feeling, as I was, for the first time in my life, truly under *surveillance*. In the early 1960s, the disciplining of school-aged bodies was much like the disciplining of

imprisoned men explored by Foucault (1995). We were lined up, put into rows, watched, monitored, tested, evaluated, corrected. It was a sudden shock—an interruption of the more carefree, open days of early childhood.

So, as I said, my anxiety began to intensify, under this new regime of being monitored, evaluated, and corrected. As time went on, I began to suspect I would never really feel “at home” anywhere. I often did not feel safe, and I rarely (if ever) caught even a glimmer of a notion that I “fit in” in any circumstance.

But I kept my misgivings, and my anxiety, to myself.

My little secret.

I have carried that secret for years.

Of course, my misgivings may have been natural, since in our family (or at school, for that matter) what might happen next was up for grabs. There were moments of hilarity, fun, and even intrigue—or at least, absurdity—and there were times, I guess, when you could call us happy. But there was always an edge to it, a sense that something was wrong, that the whole thing might blow up at any moment.

So living in my family was a mixed bag, at best. Sometimes it was great. At others, it was painfully obvious that most of us shared some semblance of that anxiety that bubbled around in my gut most of the time. Often, you could feel a shadow hovering in the air, over in the corner, largely ignored, but barely concealing the darker energies that seemed on the verge of invading our lives, full force. And, as events beyond our control unfolded, the shadow seemed to grow. One fine Thanksgiving day—1970 to be exact—as we sat down to dinner with my dad’s family, my forty-one-year old uncle, who was comatose from the cancer that had ravaged his whole body for six months, expired in my grandmother’s den. A dark day, inaugurating a period of darkness that lasted many years, had dawned in our family. My grandfather, who was 75, soon followed my uncle, after several months of physical decline. And shortly after my grandfather’s death, my aunt, aged forty seven, died in her bathtub, of some sort of massive heart attack. In a brief span of time—roughly a year and a half—my father’s family was devastated. From a boisterous, combative, lively “big fat Greek” family of five, they were reduced to two—my now permanently depressed grandmother and my bewildered father.

In our own family, by now six strong (I have an older brother and two younger sisters) a silence descended upon us as we struggled to grieve, to make sense of our loss—a silence that took years to shake off, a heavy, dark, brooding silence that morphed into moments of sharp pain, anger, and fear. Occasionally, violence—scary, dangerous, volatile, sometimes bloody—exploded from those misty, darkened corners of our home. Pain, hurt, frustration, humiliation, brooding silence, anxiety, fear, even terror soon became commonplaces in our “dwelling place.” Various addictions—and addictive tendencies—along with accompanying codependent systems (Beattie, 1989; Black, 1995) began to emerge.

Indeed, our family *ethos* was ruptured, deeply.

Permeated by a feeling of “dis-ease,” our world, our home, our family . . . everything . . . was upside down. We could not get a grip. In the communal life of a family, various forms of mental illness, addiction, and dysfunction have a way of spreading from person to person, lodging a deep anxiety into the collective consciousness (Beattie, 1989, 1992; Black, 1995, 2002; Bradshaw, 1995, 2005; Satir, 1983). Family dysfunction’s constant companion, denial, has its own way of rupturing the world of possibility—via covering, caretaking, controlling, and impression management (Beattie, 1989, 1992; Black, 1995, 2002; Goffman, 1959, 1967)—limiting options, and disrupting, perhaps severing, any potential feeling of *relation*. We were connected, to be sure, bound together by our pain and our resentment. But we did not communicate, did not listen, did not empathize with each other. Each of us was drowning in his or her personal sorrow, isolation, and suffering.

My brother, eighteen months older than me, is my friend and my nemesis. One morning, he taunts me from the corner of the den. The verbal blow lands, finds its mark. We know each other’s weaknesses as well as the backs of our own hands. Searching quickly, I find an opening and offer my well-timed retort, zeroing in on his vulnerability with razor-sharp acuity. And he jumps on me, fists flying, pounding with a fury I haven’t ever felt, or seen, even in the movies. I find myself thinking maybe I went too far. Meanwhile, I turn over to protect myself, but he shoves the back of my head down, slamming my face into the hard tile floor. I pull up, blood spurting out of my mouth. I spit, and large chunks of my two front teeth, only recently grown in permanently, fall to the floor. I stare in horror, and scream, as loud as I can manage with a mouth full of blood, “Stop!” He just gets up, stares at me for a moment, and walks calmly out of the room.

So much for brotherly love.

Along the way, amid the chaos and drama and violence, I began to suspect something was wrong with *me*. After all, much of the fury around me landed on me. Unable to otherwise make sense of the abuse, violence, fear, and rampant rage, I concluded that *I* was defective.

I internalized the family’s pain.

Since I was defective, it almost never came as a surprise when, although I was a very good athlete, I wasn’t chosen to play. Or when some kid—my brother, a kid from school—hauled off and punched me, at what seemed to me the slightest (or even no) provocation. Or when I was simply ignored, or shut down, by those who were supposed to love me. The kind of self-loathing that emerges from circumstances like the ones I faced at home and in school has broad repercussions. The most obvious of these is the inability to feel grounded or whole within oneself; a permeating anxiety, accompanied by repressed anger, and eventually depression, becomes a way of life. I lived, for a very long time, with what felt very much like a broken heart. Beyond the inner life, this sort of shadow-induced malady also has a way of showing itself, no matter how much you try to hide it, and making people feel uneasy, anxious, even angry.

To me, “dis-ease,” anxiety, sadness, fear, and anger were, well, “normal.” But these energies clearly made others uncomfortable.

Anxiety carried its own risks. Predators can smell fear in all its forms.

Often, when my family of origin was together, we would sit in dark, brooding, pained, reproachful silence.

At other times, the silence would be interrupted by a sharp remark, a reproach, a retort, an insult, a disapproving glare or comment, a jab, or a harsh command.

And all hell would break loose.

Conflict! Anger! Violence!

Or the cold shoulder.

And, each time this happened, eventually a deeper, darker, brooding silence would descend upon us.

Sometimes it seems like my life was, for a long time, nothing but a series of interruptions like this, followed by anxious, brooding silences.

So much for feeling at home.

Friendship, Interrupted

To complicate matters, our family moved every two or three years. We never even physically (much less emotionally, spiritually, or communally) “settled” in one place long enough to call it home. To this day, when someone asks me where I am from, the answer is complicated. I cannot bring myself to say I’m from Georgia, though I spent most of my formative years in that state. I never really knew what a “home” was, or what it meant to be “from” somewhere, until I came of age, and had my own family, far away from where I grew up.

Still, not all of my life moments were strained. Like many kids in situations like this, I sought relief through affiliation with others beyond the family—with friends. And I sought affiliation through affinity.

The first time I remember really having a true friend happens just before fourth grade. We have moved (yet again) to a new house, in a new neighborhood. Soon after the moving truck arrives in our new driveway, my parents shoo me out of the house. Trying desperately to get my bearings in this new place, I wander into our yard and look around. Scanning along the street for other kids my age, I notice movement in a yard a few houses down on the other side of the street.

I stroll in that general direction, trying to appear nonchalant, hands shoved into my pockets. Time to investigate. . . .

(Hmmm . . . is this an early sign of the ethnographer to come?)

As I get closer, I realize I am seeing a familiar scene—a kid, about my age, brandishing a plastic “Wiffle” ball bat, is tossing some sort of ball in the air and knocking it across his lawn. He watches where it lands, picks up another from the pile at his feet, takes a savage swing, watches it sail. Eventually, the pile runs out, and he saunters out to retrieve them. I watch for a while, from a distance, trying to get a bead on what’s going on. Everything looks familiar, except for the “ball,” which appears to be smaller than usual and which flies in a crooked, almost zigzag, trajectory. As I move closer, I realize that the objects he is hitting have hair.

Yes, hair, which sort of flutters in the wind as the “ball” flies. It takes me a minute, but the realization dawns as I watch the next one fly. *That’s not a ball*, I find myself thinking, *it’s a . . . it’s a Barbie head*.

Intrigued, I saunter up to the edge of his lawn. He doesn’t look up.

“Hi. My name’s Chris.”

He shoots a little glance my way, says, “Eddie,” and takes another swing, this time knocking the head into the yard next door. “Wanna play?”

“Yeah, sure, but what are you playing?”

“Barbie head baseball. Drives my little sister crazy. You can field.”

“Cool.”

Thus began a three-year friendship. We were “best friends”—or, as our parents called it, “thick as thieves.” And usually, in just about as much trouble as thieves, though we preferred to think of it as adventure.

I was in kid heaven.

The days were long, summers sweet and steamy hot and free, free, free. Baseball, the neighborhood pool, the woods out back of the house . . . the world was our playground, and we were kings of our domain.

Then, one day, the news comes, news I have been dreading ever since we moved here, news I knew was inevitable, but which I’ve nearly managed to forget about.

Until today.

I find myself sitting on the curb in front of my house, my head buried in my hands, on the verge of tears. Eddie shuffles up, clears his throat.

“What’s wrong, man?”

I hesitate, then blurt: “We’re moving.”

“Oh, shit.”

And the tears come, unbidden and unwelcome.

Before I know what’s hit me, we’ve moved to a new part of our city, forty-five minutes from my best friend, to a new house, a new neighborhood, a new school. The neighborhood is unfriendly, and though not very old, already a bit run down; the kids seem standoffish, entrenched in their old cliques. No entry. These are not my people. I stand, once again, on the outside looking in, hoping for a place to fit.

But the opening eludes me.

Sixth grade. Standing in the hall, lined up for lunch, I shuffle nervously, waiting for the teacher to arrive and lead us to the cafeteria. The new kid, I have no friends here. These are not my people. I don’t feel right. Something’s not right here. “Hey kid.” I turn, and a fist slams into my jaw, hard. I slump to the floor as Brett Morris, the class bully, stalks off slowly, laughing. Nobody moves to help me. They barely even notice. I sit on the floor, rubbing the spot where he made contact. And a thin wisp of despair floats into my nose, slips inside me, takes up residence.

The next year, the first black child I have ever seen in school² is in my seventh-grade class. As an outsider, I feel an affinity with this kid. It quickly becomes obvious that he is not just a black kid, or a new kid—he is also a (VERY) *smart* kid. I walk up to him at recess that first day, emboldened by my outsider status to welcome the new outsider, whom everyone else is actively ignoring.

Besides, I’m the *other* smart kid.

“I’m Chris.”

“Yeah, I know. Ralph. Ralph Jones.”

“Wanna toss this ball?”

“Sure.”

Weeks later, I invite Ralph over to my house after school. As we burst through the front door, I see that my great grandmother, a true Southerner (in fact, a “Daughter of the Confederacy”) is standing in the living room. This is the woman who won’t let us kids sit on her furniture when we visit her house. We are “too dirty”—the forced baths and dress clothes, inevitable parts of preparing to visit her, notwithstanding—so we sit on the floor. I loathe her, and stop in my tracks when I see her, pretty sure I know what’s coming.

She takes one look at us, turns to my mom, and says, “Who’s the nigger?” Ralph looks at me, grins a little, says, “Chris, you never told me you were black.” I laugh. “Not me, man. I guess we better go outside and look for him.” We turn and bolt out the door, not waiting for her, or my mom, to recover. On the lawn, we fall over laughing.

Hints, Innuendoes, and Insults

So I inhabited a rather strange world—a volatile mix of weirdness, and silence, and violence, and anger, and laughter, and . . . an uneasy sense of unpredictability.

The result of all this was that I lived, for a very long time, in the grip of anxiety. I was often struck with a sense that something was wrong—or that I had done something wrong—though I never really knew what my transgressions (actual or imagined) really were supposed to be. I think this is because one of the major pathological communication patterns (Watzlawick, Bavelas, & Jackson, 1967) in a dysfunctional family system is a pattern of indirect communication (Beattie, 1989, 1992; Black, 1995, 2002; Bradshaw, 1995). Rather than confront issues or concerns or problems or conflicts directly, people in these systems tend to hint, speaking elliptically, trying to push their interlocutors to “figure it out” rather than simply saying, “Here’s what’s wrong” or “I feel” or “I need to tell you something.”

So the communication that does occur is really the communication of the family *shadow*—laced with the darker energies of retribution, veiled in secrecy and denial and anger and anxiety, rather than the more functional, or healthy, communication of the *person*. Hints, innuendoes, insults, sharp remarks, and even angry outbursts, once established as the primary (or most common) patterns of communication, can spark anxiety and defensiveness and impatience and resentment in those who cannot “figure it out.” I often felt I was being cornered, or accused of something, or pressed or chastised (though often with silence) for not measuring up, and again for not being up to the challenge of “figuring it out.” And when confronted, the chastiser would dissemble, or refuse to be pressed to reveal what should be done, or known, or understood by me (or anyone, for that matter). Indeed, when I would confront the problem directly, I would often hear something like this, “Well, I shouldn’t have to tell you. Figure it out.”

These head games led to an ever-growing feeling of impatience on my part.

Fast forward many years, and I find myself interviewing for university teaching jobs. Nowhere beyond the family have I seen so much potential shadow energy emerging. On one interview trip, I was warned privately, in hushed tones, about a particular faculty member, who might “make trouble” for me in my public presentation of my research. I would not have thought much of this if only one person warned me; no less than half a dozen faculty members, however, sidled up next to me and whispered some sort of warning in my ear.

When the time for my presentation came, I was nervous as a cat. But, it turned out, the “trouble maker” sat through my lecture in silence, nodding once in awhile. He never said a word to me during the entire three-day visit, other than at the initial introduction moment. “Pleased to meet you,” was all he said.

On another interview visit, I began to wonder why I was never in any given situation with more than three faculty members—until my public presentation of my research. Then, as I entered the room, I felt a palpable tension in the air. I choked down my rising anxiety and forged ahead. Later, I was told by a colleague with inside knowledge that this faculty was described, by one of its own members, as a “pit of vipers” who were often “at each other’s throats.”

On yet another, I was picked up by a faculty member to go to dinner with the hiring committee. In the car on the way to the restaurant, the following dialogue ensued:

“You have a family?”

“Yes, I do. I have a wife, Susan, and two young sons, Eli and Noah. How about you?”

Darkly, “We have decided it’s better *not* to bring children into this world.”

Hmm. I find myself thinking: What does this conversation *mean*?

Just before the interview for my current job, I notice, as I board the airplane, that I don’t feel right. There is a tickle in my throat, and I feel slightly feverish. By the next morning, the big day, I am struck by full-blown sickness, complete with severe laryngitis.

A sign?

To be sure, it is an interruption! I consider my options. It is too late to back out. I decide to forge ahead, and to listen a lot, speak very little.

The strategy works. Two weeks later, I am offered the job.

Apparently, listening really is better than speaking. Within five months, we have moved across the country to start a new adventure in a new place.

Scarcely six weeks later, I wake up and go to work as usual. My Department Head appears in my door, and with a grave look on his face says, “Something big has happened. We are turning on the TV in the conference room.”

This is familiar territory. I have seen that look on faces before.

It happened on January 28, 1986. And again on February 26, 1993. And again on April 20, 1999. And these dates remind me of November 22, 1963; April 4, 1968; April 19, 1995. And other dark days in history.

In the next few moments, watching in disbelief as the towers fall to the earth, we learn that our world has been turned upside down.

Today’s date will be forever etched into our collective memory: September 11, 2001.

Soon, we are all engulfed in CODE RED ANXIETY.

Anthrax. Searches at airports. Armed guards on street corners. Anxiety.

Ordinariness has died, at least for awhile (Poulos, 2002, 2004).

As these dark days unfold, and the “threat level” remains high, anxiety slips toward despair.

One day, however, I am walking along the sidewalk on the way to class, and I remember reading Paul Tillich’s *The Courage to Be* in graduate school (1952). I smile for a moment at the memory—sitting in a corner of the library, alternately focusing on the text and on the little motes of dust swirling in the fading sunlight coming through the window next to my table. And suddenly I recall the opening lines of Tillich’s other book, *The Shaking of the Foundations*, which came before *The Courage to Be*, but which I read much later. The opening lines, it turns out, are lines from the book of Jeremiah:

I look out on earth . . . lo, all is chaos;
I look at heaven . . . its light is gone;
I look out on the mountains . . . they are trembling;
And all the hills are swaying! (Jeremiah 4:23-30, as quoted in Tillich, 1948, p. 1).

Tillich goes on to write, just after the second World War and at the dawn of the Cold War, that “The visions of the prophets have become an actual, physical possibility, and might become an historical reality” (Tillich, 1948, p. 3).

How prophetic indeed are these words!

But Tillich’s existential project does not end at the shaking of the foundations. That is the beginning point. In *The Courage to Be*, he methodically moves us through various forms of courage to the one he wants us to embrace: “Courage is the self-affirmation of being in spite of the fact of nonbeing” (Tillich, 1952, p. 155).

In Tillich’s existential project, the courage to be is an active, affirmative response to our mortality. It is a triumphant self-affirmation in spite of the terror, despair, or shaking that may overcome us as we face our ultimate finitude, death. According to Tillich, we must muster the *courage to be* in spite of the reality of our limitations. In the face of human finitude, courage is our interrupting force. Coming to grips with the anxiety that flows into our consciousness as we confront our finitude means we must find a way to take a stand, and to affirm our viability in spite of that dark knowledge and the deep, existential anxiety it brings. Tillich writes, “Courage is the self-affirmation of being in spite of the fact of nonbeing . . .” (Tillich, 1952, p. 155).

Perhaps this happened to us at some point in the days after 9/11. At first, it seemed, we were warriors. Then we were protestors of war. But these energies quickly faded. Somewhere along the line, we just fell into our usual routines again, going about our business—changed, to be sure, but . . . also not so different.

Did this dramatic interruption really transform us? As a recent contributor to *Time* magazine argues, maybe it didn’t change the ways we live our lives all that much: “Terror, we discovered, has a half-life” (Andersen, 2011, p. 64).

Sometimes the interruption fades over time.

Sometimes, “the courage to be” rises slowly, incrementally.

But it rises nonetheless.

Indeed, while many of us experienced the days following 9/11 as moments of deep rupture, crisis, split—there is always an “after.” After the split, eventually, hope dawns once again.

Interruptions as Openings to Infinity

Today, as I write this paper, it is ten years since 9/11. Today, on 9/11/11, we watched the ceremonies at Ground Zero.

And we felt awe at the resilience of the human spirit, even while contemplating—and witnessing the aftermath of—the incredible brutality that humans seem so capable of unleashing upon one another. As I listened to a young girl, who could not have been more than a toddler on 9/11, read the name of her father, who died in the second tower, and thank him for what he taught her, I could not help but think that we humans really are remarkable creatures. We capable of inflicting terrible pain on one another, to be sure, but we are also capable of deep and abiding love.

We are terrorists. But we are also hope mongers.

We are violent, yet we believe love is worth the risk.

We are brutal and vengeful, yet we believe in redemption.

So there are questions I want to grapple withCan such moments of interruption-as-irruption, so often (apparently at least) shrouded in dark cloud, be shown to have a silver lining?

Can these interruptions really be seen as *openings*?

Can moments of *rupture* lead to moments of *rapture*?

And, no, I don't mean “THE RAPTURE.”

Just everyday, ordinary rapture.

Maybe, just maybe. . .

Like Walker Percy's famous protagonist, Binx Bolling, I am now on a search:

What is the nature of the search, you ask? Really, it is very simple, at least for a fellow like me; so simple that it is easily overlooked. The search is what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life. (Percy, 1960, p. 13)

The search is the act of poking around, investigating, to see what is possible. As I embark on my search, I almost immediately find myself falling back in time, in memory, to a turning point in my life. Life can be described, it seems, as a series of turning points. Sometimes these turning points are moments of deep, painful rupture that force us to question the lives we have constructed. One such moment occurred during my journey toward promotion and tenure.

In the spring of 2006, a small subcommittee reviews my case for promotion to Associate Professor with permanent tenure. The case is recommended to go forward to the next step—a full department vote—in the fall of 2006. There are no concerns expressed at that meeting.

Imagine my shock, then, when the department vote in September carries one negative vote. Late September. My Department Head calls me into his office.

“The department has voted on your tenure case. There were three votes in favor, one against.”

“Against? Really?” Knowing that this may cause problems further up the line, I say, “May I ask why?”

“Certainly.”

Though I got an explanation, it was not satisfying. It was filled with ambiguous “feedback”—words like “therapeutic” and “not mainstream.”

Nothing I could get a handle on.

Besides, I knew, from hard experience, that one little thing like that—a single negative vote—can turn the votes up the line in a negative direction, which is exactly what happened. At the next level, the vote was eight against, one in favor.

The tide had turned against me.

And an event like that can change a person forever. The days followed were the darkest days of my life. Between that late September day, and March of the following year, I found myself fighting for my life, for my career, for my livelihood. I also found myself mired in a deep crisis of identity.

And falling into despair.

That single negative vote triggered a series of events that nearly cost me this career, this work that has so much of me in it, this “calling” that I knew—just knew—I had to follow. I have dramatized these events elsewhere (Poulos, 2010), so I won’t belabor them.

But I will follow the thread of this search, and these interruptions, a bit further.

Considering this thread brings me back in memory to that day, years before—that moment of interruption, that day I just knew what my calling was—which was also a day in late September.

...

I am sitting in an Introduction to Philosophy class. It is my first year of college. It is important to note here that I enter college without really knowing what I want to do, other than the fact that I’ve chosen Colorado because I’ve always wanted to ski.

As I watch and listen to the professor, I am struck immediately by his passion. He is talking about Socrates, of course, but he seems driven by a fire I’ve rarely seen in a teacher. In fact, many of my high school teachers were anything but engaged.

And, as I'm sitting there, I find myself thinking, "That's what I will do."
It did not come to me in the form of a question or an option, but rather as concrete knowledge.

An epiphany.

I simply knew that one day, I would be a professor.

Now, five years after my nightmare struggle with tenure, and ten years after 9/11, and thirty-four years after my initial epiphany, I am, indeed, a professor. I was recently nominated for a teaching excellence award and for a book award; I am Head of my Department, my marriage is stronger than ever, my family is healthy and happy, my career has taken off, and I am writing and publishing at a healthy clip.

I have been called upon as an "inside" expert on the perils of tenure—reviewing cases, presenting panels at the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, engaging peers in dialogues about how qualitative research, which comes under fire in these troubled times (Denzin, 2010; Denzin & Giardina, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011; Goodall, 2008, 2010), can be engaged in ways that speak to and through the controversies that swirl around us.

And, overall, I consider myself to be a happy man. In fact, when I think of my life, for the first time in a long time—maybe ever—I feel joy.

In short, much of what happened on the long, dark journey leading up to this moment seems to have faded into the background.

Anxiety has faded into the fragmented spaces between memory and nothingness—mostly, I feel it as a trace, nothing more, like a dream that I can't quite draw up into consciousness, but cannot fully shake off, either. Thankfully.

I have awakened from the nightmare, and I am, as they say, "on a roll."

But there is more to this story than my own renewal, my singular shot at redemption. I believe there is a lesson here for us all.

And I think that lesson is this: When an interruption occurs . . . perhaps it is time to remember the calling of the ethnographer—to look deeply, to search for pattern and meaning and significance and story . . . to find a way *into and through* the interruption, and thus into a living story that truly opens the way to *transcendence* of pain and anguish and despair.

In Tillich's (1952) terms, a *crisis* is exactly the time to engage "the courage to be," to embrace life's mysteries, and to enter the ongoing stream of human dialogue.

In counseling today, I recounted this litany of "good things in my life." I also noted that one piece of feedback I got in the process of being interviewed for the position of Department Head is that . . . I can sometimes seem *impatient*.

Intriguing.

My therapist interrupts me: “Let’s see where this takes us.”

“O.K. How?”

“Close your eyes and wander back in time. See if you can locate the origins of your impatience. Can you find a time when that first occurred in your life? Go back as far as you need to, and dwell in that place for a moment, to see what insights come to you.”

So I wander, and wander, and wander . . . and I land in my first grade class. As I sit at my desk, working away, I am fully aware, for the first time in my life, of being monitored, watched, evaluated.

I am under *surveillance*.

And, for the first time in my life, my performance has *consequences*.

I am being *graded*, and somehow, I know that this new regime—of being graded—will profoundly affect my life.

This dawning knowledge comes with a clear and powerful bodily sensation: I am queasy. There is a knot deep in my stomach. I am churning.

And something about being monitored like this strikes me as bothersome, burdensome, *intrusive*.

My sense of well-being is interrupted.

Disrupted.

I feel like I *must* perform, and must be *certified*—as good, as viable, as someone of value.

And this nagging feeling—that I may not, in the end, measure up—starts to haunt my every move. I become— and for a long time remain—*anxious, nervous*. To adapt to this culture of constant evaluation, I become a performer. I do what I am told, and I strive to do it well. Along the way, I become a six-year-old perfectionist. It turns out that I am good at this stuff—that learning is, for me, an easy mission—and that I am also good at figuring out what is expected of me, and delivering it. I am a “good boy.”

My first report card certifies me. Every mark is an “A.” I am confirmed. All is well.

But the anxiety—the nagging, queasy feeling—never fades. It is my constant companion. You see, somehow, in that abrupt jump from carefree child to functioning student under surveillance, I have come very quickly to believe that my worth, my value, comes from that confirmation afforded by my elders.

And, as I engage with this old memory, I feel myself shaking, trembling, nearly convulsing with anxiety. And somehow, it feels as if this truth, and its accompanying anxiety, will haunt me for all my years.

What I never really put together, until today, is that my “impatience” is, in fact, a sense of *anxiety* about being monitored, graded, evaluated. And this anxiety translates into my being driven, and quick, and, apparently, appearing impatient.

So it goes.

Today’s therapeutic interruption opened a door for me. I see my shadow, and it is built out of clouds of anxiety.

And, knowing this, the anxiety fades, yet again.

Now, I am onto something.

Time to write.

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Notes

1. The material in this section is adapted from the book, *Accidental Ethnography: An Inquiry Into Family Secrecy* (2009, Left Coast Press).

2. This is Georgia in the late 1960s, and the long resistance to court-ordered busing that flowed from the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision of 1954 is finally breaking down a little.

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Bio

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