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(Re)acquaintance with Praxis

A Poetic Inquiry into Shame, Sobriety, and the Case for a Curriculum of Authenticity

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IN THEATRE THERE IS A WARM-UP ACTIVITY where each member of the troupe moves into the circle and shouts at the top of their lungs, “I am available.” It is a simple act, but it is also incredibly difficult. To open ourselves up is an act of vulnerability, where one enters into a space of uncertainty, risking the chance for judgment, rejection, isolation. However, as Brown (2017) suggests, it is also “the birthplace of love, joy, trust, intimacy, courage—everything that brings meaning to our life” (p. 152). They are not words—love, joy, trust, intimacy, courage—that we often hear within education, but they are words we need to begin to reach for as we seek to facilitate curricular spaces that encourage critical consciousness, that disrupt idealization and myth (Freire, 1973), and move toward a way of being and knowing that is grounded in our humanity. It is within such spaces that, by allowing ourselves to be seen—both the beautiful and the broken aspects of what make us who we are—we learn to embrace authenticity as a means of praxis, possibility, and hope. Authenticity allows us to be with our (im)perfections, to acknowledge ourselves as whole. It is within this acknowledgement that we might begin to learn to revisit definition, not as truth, but rather as simply another reflection of human yearning to be seen and heard, to be valued, to be worthy of love.

We exist as profiles
 students
 teachers
 negotiating upon
 with/in a landscape of survival
 where only the shadows
 seem to speak our names
 The buoyancy of our (im)perfection
 caught in shrouds
 patterned with inscriptions of shame

we cover
 our bodies
 minds
 sel(f)ves tangled
 in a cloak of
 dependency and definition
 that strangles the voices of
 authenticity
 until no more
 can
 we
 breathe

I am an educator, a mother, a daughter, a partner, once a teacher of children, now a teacher of teachers. I am also an alcoholic, now in recovery, but an alcoholic who spent a long time living in the shadows of shame—an unavailable specter of performance. Across the space of this article, I weave poetic inquiry and *currere*—those artful, spiritual, reflexive, and connected processes of meaning making—as I seek to (re)consider my experiences in active addiction and recovery as a metaphor for the possibilities that exist when we acknowledge ourselves as (im)perfectly whole, entering into relationship with one another, ourselves, and our knowing. This acknowledgement of imperfection allows us to enter into a curriculum of authenticity, where it is our humanity rather than definition that propels us forward toward deep understanding and knowing and toward meaningful relationship with the self, one another, and with content. Palmer (1999) remarks, “we all know that what will transform education is not another theory, another book, or another formula but educators who are willing to seek a transformed way of being in the world” (p. 15). I would like to suggest that this transformed way of being in the world requires a new level of presence in relationship to self and practice, a way of being that embraces imperfection and acknowledges all the facets that make up who we are as educators—as people. It is my hope that, through authenticity, we might begin to transgress those definitions that bind us and move toward a curricular landscape that welcomes imperfection and those messy stories that shape who we are, what we know, and what we do.

Poetic (Un)certainty

Poetic inquiry allows us to enter into a space of uncertainty and authenticity where “our action is our knowing” (Lather, 1991, pp. x). It is within these motions where we might be moved beyond definition, entering into experience in a manner that is mindfully present and consciously aware of the layers that shape our ways of being with and in experience. Seidel (2017) suggests, “poetic inquiry reminds us to cultivate uncertainty, to slow down, to reconnect with life and one another,” creating at the same time a means of transgressing, while also acknowledging those fragmented patterns that leave us rushing toward what she identifies as the “market-driven commodification of universities” that fail to acknowledge the fragility of the human experience (p. 153). Irwin and Springgay (2008) remark, referencing Nancy (2000), that “meaning is constituted between beings” (pp. xxi), beings, I would add, who are seeking a sense of self and purpose within their lives and work. Within education, Martusewicz (1997) advises, “we search

for others who will affirm our lives, share our aspirations, our questions, who will care that we are alive and help connect the ‘me’ to the world” (p. 101). There is no certainty in the relational, simply possibilities and openings that allow us to move forward. Poetic inquiry embraces uncertainty, allowing multiple meanings and understandings to exist within a word (i.e. imperfect becoming (im)perfect), a poem, or the research itself. It is within this multiplicity of meaning that we might find ourselves negotiating upon a landscape of reverberation and identification. To find even a glimpse of one’s own story upon the layers of another’s telling opens hope. However, society has imprinted upon us a dangerous catechism of difference, which, rather than addressing our core needs as humans—as educators and learners—rather creating space for dialogue, for identification, recognition, and a celebration of our difference, instead, becomes an egotistical armor of shame that leaves us disconnected and unaware upon our search. Poetry, as Neilson Glenn (2012) notes, “holds up the mirror and rips off the mask” (p. 19). This ripping is not a violent act, but rather a necessary one as we are often so deeply attached to the stories we have been told and the stories we tell ourselves (Brach, 2003; Brown, 2017), those stories that leave us feeling trapped and alone.

Poetic inquiry allows us to enter into a space of relationship with self and experience in a manner that does not enable attachments, but rather allows us to reconsider where they come from, what they mean, and enter into a space of movement where new possibilities are revealed. Poetic inquiry moves us beyond an attachment to knowing and toward a place of being. Leggo (2008a) quotes Griffin (1995) who suggests that “poetry does not describe. It *is* the thing. It is an experience, not the secondhand record of an experience, but the experience itself” (p. 93). The past echoes within the experience, but the relational nature of poetry moves us beyond stagnation as we enter into a place of knowing and being that is shared, where our understandings are multifaceted, layered, and fluid, reflecting a life that is neither predictable nor perfect.

Stillness

watching
 waiting
 like the breath
 held between my lips
 a body, mind
 contorted toward
 a place
 of being
 (un)recognizable
 our utterances
 only echoes of another time
 another moment
 that crosses
 upon the space
 of now

Like poetic inquiry, curriculum is the text of experience, a living document of human expression that is always evolving and open to interpretation. It is within such a space that we might enter into deeper ways of knowing and authentic ways of being.

Mythical States of Being

My story begins on the outside, a little girl who moved from town to town, school to school, caught up in the shame of her family, the stories she was told, and stories she told herself. They were stories about not being enough, of expectation and disappointment, and within the hollow gaps, when there was an opportunity for breath, there was hope, too, that existed within those stories. It was that hope that brought me to the classroom, that allowed me the opportunity to teach and to think that I might see the child who felt invisible or hear the child who had lost their voice. Long ago, I had been that child, and it had been teachers who had created the space for me to see some glimpse, some beauty within myself, and my experience, that I had not been able to see on my own. Yet, that sense of lack laid a heavy burden upon my sense of self and practice. Brach (2003) intimates, “when we live our lives through this lens of personal insufficiency, we are imprisoned within...the trance of unworthiness. Trapped in this trance, we are unable to perceive the truth of who we really are” (p. 2). Unfortunately, as opposed to challenging these perceptions, the current culture of education often contributes to this sense of lack and insufficiency. When I began teaching, I arrived broken, wrapped up in the stories I told myself about my past, myself, as well as an idealized vision of what it might mean to be a good teacher. This vision was not a result of a psychotic break with reality, but it reflected layers and layers of history within the field of education, layers and layers of my own personal history, all contributing to my brokenness and sense of discomfort and disconnect.

She gathers

a circle
 patterned
 with the echoes of love
 shunned ordinariness
 filtered by the rosiness
 of children’s laughter
 all those images
 of who
 she
 we
 they
 should have been
 linger violently
 imprinting
 lovingly
 lecherously
 lasciviously
 impressions of who
 she
 we
 they
 should
 be

Our understanding of what it means to be a teacher is shaped by numerous contradictory and colluding images. These images are reflective of deeply imbedded myths and meaning that often leave us confused and conflicted, seeking and ashamed. We find ourselves negotiating within a reality of broken images, expectation, and desire. Britzman (1991) suggests:

What makes this reality so contradictory is the fact that teaching and learning have multiple and conflicting meanings that shift with our lived lives, with the theories produced and encountered, with the deep convictions and desires brought to and created in education, with the practices we negotiate, and with the identities we construct. (p. 10)

When I think of my teaching journey or consider how my pre-service teachers (re)present themselves within practice, I find myself bombarded with images. There is the image of teacher as “a passive body, a conduit of knowledge, an empty jug to be filled with the curriculum that is proportionally doled out to students” (Sameshima, 2007, p. 34). There is the strong but loving disciplinarian, who hints toward the days of the common school movement when teachers “demanded order in the name of sweetness, compelled moral rectitude in the name of recitation, citizenship in the name of silence, and asexuality in the name of manners” (Grumet, 1998, p. 51). We are told, a teacher must be someone who can “nurture and challenge [students] coach and guide, understand and care about them” (Ayers, 1993, p. 8). Yet, we are also burdened by a neoliberal agenda that demands accountability and a creates a sense that one is always being watched and must prove oneself as sufficient—efficient—performing according to external definitions of best practice. Beyond all those images exists a human desire for connection, purpose, worth—desire that exists both beyond and within our images of teacher. However, even within that desire, “we seek transcendence from this imperfect ‘humanity,’ this essential emptiness of being” (Martusewicz, 1997, p. 102).

There are whispers in the doorways
 fragments of a body
 mind
 soul
 fragments
 of our being
 told
 caught within a shroud
 of ghostly trepidation
 we speak
 (our)selves unrecognizable

Teaching is at once both autobiographical and political, it serves different purposes for different bodies and institutions, and these purposes are not fixed; rather, they are always in motion. Sloan (2005) comments, “every educational practice implies some underlying image of the human being” (p. 27). What is it that we are really teaching pre-service teachers in relationship to the social—to the soulful—to those aspects that allow them to enter into authentic and meaningful interactions with their students, themselves, and one another? Miller (2005) comments, “our culture and education systems, have become obsessed with acquisition and

achievement...[we are] not interested in educating the whole person” (p. 1). When the focus exists within a space of conformity and mechanistic outcomes, we are all lost.

In her hand
she holds
 an apple
rotten
rotting upon her palm
 the stench echoing
an absence
she cannot
name
outside
 abomination

What is the image that we offer when we focus so distinctly on mechanistic outcomes? What happens to us as educators in our own ways of being, when we get caught up in proving our mastery of these outcomes, within practice? It is not transcendence, but rather oblivion.

The window cracks
across a reckoning
absence
where the shadow
of longing
condenses upon doing
the image
 lost
in a kaleidoscope of doubt
where even in the fractures
where they say the light
shines
we are blind
breathless
 and alone

Moore (2005) asserts, “Our current focus on facts and science and skills highlights a certain dimension of human reality but overlooks others. An emphasis on the mind has generated a neglect for the soul” (p. 9). When we find ourselves so focused on proof of outcomes and checking boxes, we forget to take time to consider who we are as educators, who we are as people, and we fail to acknowledge education as relational. Instead, we fall into an egotistical space of fear where emptiness collides with survival.

The echoes
of inconsequential
absence
linger

leaving crevices
upon the caverns of our
consciousness
self(ves)
swept silently
like unwanted cinders
collecting
in piles
We stumble toward
becoming
unable to recognize
obstructions
to want
to what?

Learning is a deeply human endeavor that requires us to move beyond the cinders that light definition upon our consciousness and enter into a practice of authenticity. Palmer (1999) asserts:

We can no longer afford a system of education that refuses to get engaged with the mess. We must be willing to join life where people live it—and they live it at this convoluted intersection of the sacred and the secular. (p. 20)

When we fail to acknowledge our humanity, when we fail to consider the impact of our own experiences on our practice as educators, we end up contributing to a culture of alienation, shame, and discontent. When we begin to reconsider the purpose of education, recognizing that it is not a process that can be defined within the limitations of the institutional, political, or even the personal, we create an opportunity for presence and connection where we might begin to see education as an act of eros as we learn how to be with ourselves and one another, how to be in the world. Freire and Freire (1997) note, “to be in the world necessarily implies being *with* the world and *with* others” (p. 32). When we enter upon the landscape of curriculum, recognizing it as a space of shared encounters between (im)perfect beings, we create new spaces for knowing and being with and in the world. Such a process calls on us to engage holistically, lovingly, and authentically with every being and moment that we encounter—recognizing that the idea of perfection is simply a reflection of our (im)perfection.

A Collision of Consciousness

When I began teaching, I found my consciousness wrapped up in an image. I imagined myself, a teacher sitting in a circle with her young students, being present and available while supporting them as they grew both in knowledge and awareness in relationship to themselves and the world. I also imagined myself full of energy and love, always well prepared, organized, and ready to inspire. Even within those images of what I perceived to be positive—images of my own potential success as an educator—I found myself afraid. I, like Brach (2003), “lived with the fear of letting someone down or being rejected myself” (p. 1). I had bought into the myth of meritocracy, which, as Boler (1999) intimates, “places success and failure squarely on the

individual, decontextualizing the student from any mediating factors of social or cultural context” (p. 47). I was no longer the student, but the myth was deeply imprinted upon my sense of self, my sense of worth. I believed that, if I worked hard enough, I could be successful as an educator—as a person, but if I did not meet up to the expectations I set for myself or those that were set for me, then I was a failure, and it was my fault.

Don't step
 on the cracks
 those essences of
 wondering
 wandering
 self
 caught
 in the lines of erasure
 that define
 and refine
 self
 along the uneven
 tracks of hope

I remember, student teaching, sitting in a circle with my fourth graders. I remember soft voices that were barely audible as each child read every word of the stories they had written and how uncomfortable I felt. I wanted to give each child the opportunity to be heard, yet at that moment, I was deeply aware that not only were they not really being heard, but I was losing the attention of the group. I was afraid that they were in fact actually getting nothing out of the experience. I also remember a sense of queasiness in my stomach, exhaustion in my body, and a feeling of shame as I thought about the previous evening. Leggo (2008a) suggests “that the personal and the professional always work together, in tandem, in union, in the way of complementary angles” (p. 91). These angles are not always soft and supportive, but rather they can be jagged, eating away at one’s sense of self and worth—professionally and personally. I was at the commencement of my career as a teacher and beginning my journey into alcoholism. I was entering into what would end up being a long and deeply isolating experience. I wanted so desperately to make a difference in the lives of my students, to have a grasp upon my own life and choices, to do the right thing, to be a good teacher and a good person. Instead, I found myself wrapped up in a cloak of failure that strangled any sense of hope. Over the course of my early teaching career, I continued to search for something to fill the absence of what I felt was lacking. In my mind, I listened over and over again to the stories that I had been told, of not being good enough, and I believed them. I spent hours trying to perfect each lesson, reviewing curricula to determine which might be the best, the holy grail that might ensure my success as a teacher, that might allow me to move beyond the shadow of failure that seemed to follow me with every step. In my obsession, I found alcohol, first as a partner who helped me relax in my quest for perfection and then as the abuser who reinforced all my fears and lead me to slowly disconnect further and further, from even the self I thought I knew.

The body drips
mind bound
drowning beneath an
intoxicated grip
where whispers hide
beneath a veil
that slides across consciousness
weakened by the echoes of
never
never
enough
 always
 less
my hand reaches for
the mirage of a life pre-server
 a bottle
 that floats violently
within absence
carrying me out to sea

I was caught up in what Brach (2003) refers to as the “mistaken identity,” where we are caught up in stories, stories we have been told, stories we begin to believe, and the “stories we tell ourselves. We believe that we are the voice in our head, we believe that we are the self-character in our story, and we believe our view of the world” (p. 21). I wanted desperately some answer, some sense of direction that would free me from myself, my story—my shame. Yet, the shame of my own failure to do what I thought everyone else could do, in my classroom and in my life—my inability to perform according to the image I had established for myself in the classroom, my failure to stop after one or two or three drinks, my failure to be good enough—left me feeling alienated and alone. It was a viscous cycle. I wanted so to be seen but was so afraid of what, of who, it was that others would see.

 The bottle breaks
yearning
as emotion floods
upon the floor
the foul stench of
shame sticks to our feet
stepping
 upon
stepping
toward
 breath
open
breath we cannot
quite catch
lost

within a trance
hope and
 humiliation
affixed
 upon consciousness
images drip upon the floor
blurred by fearful
intoxication
 and the (im)possibility of becoming
a self
 we cannot
quite imagine
possible

Delusion

Alcoholics live in a world of delusion, where we drink to escape a pain that is immense, yet the fear of being found out is also so profound that sometimes it feels like the only option is to enter further into the pain. We lie to ourselves, and we lie to everyone else around us.

My breath
aches
 upon a lumbering melancholy
bottled up
by shame
 echoing
within veiled movements of longing
beyond
consequence
 a tree falls in the forest
but no one
listens

Knapp (1996) offers that, at first,

the drink feels like a path to a kind of self-enlightenment, something that turns us into the person we wish to be, or the person we think we really are...alcohol makes everything better until it makes everything worse. (p. 66)

When I first began drinking, it was about escaping into a world where I could imagine my best self: creative, energized, emotionally aware. Even when things began to get out of control, I still wanted to believe this, and I wanted desperately for others to believe it too. I remember once going to a school concert. It was my first year with my own classroom. I had spent hours trying to find the perfect outfit. As I prepared myself for the concert, I had a couple of drinks; it was only a couple; that was what people did I told myself—they drank a beer with their dinner, listened to

music, and had another while they got dressed. I wasn't drunk when I got to the school, but there was a hole burnt into my dress, the remnant of ash from a clove cigarette I never would have smoked had I not had a few drinks. I was standing by a little boy that evening, a first grader I didn't know. He looked at me and said, "you smell like beer." There I was, perfectly put together in my black linen dress with the hole only I could see, and a little boy I didn't even know saw through that hole and saw my shame. I smiled and said "hmm it must have been something I ate for dinner." Yet, for the rest of the evening, as I listened to children sing, I felt naked and afraid that someone else might see what that little boy had seen, and then, they would know me—they would know my failure. Shame painted each step I took. I was unable to deeply engage, unable to enter into relationship with myself, other, earth—I was unable to grow. I wanted desperately to figure out how to cloak the gaping hole inside myself so that no one would know, and yet there was a part of me that was frantic to be seen—to know that I was not alone.

A light flickers
 on the bedside table
 time does not stand
 still
 within an empty sleep
 where hope creeps with/in
 agony

I was deeply bound by shame. I desperately wanted connection and a sense of direction, but I feared what would happen if I acknowledged my needs, and so I hid within my own perceived performance of normalcy. When I finally acknowledged that I had a problem, that I had lost control and needed help, a new world of possibility opened to me.

In whispers
 the children speak
 hidden in the echoes
 of unuttered absence
 the unseen
 circling their utterances
 with the darkness of illacquaintance
 until in the distance
 the
 whip-poor-will
 calls

Suddenly, I did not have to perform as if I fit within the definitions I had played to. I remembered my students from long ago who whispered stories no one could hear and realized the possibility that existed in what I could not say then: "this isn't working, let's stop and try something else, find another way, that works for us." I was reacquainted with myself and began to acknowledge those definitions and influences that had left me so deeply enveloped and alone. It was when I allowed myself to be seen, when I finally put down alcohol and began to embrace myself—my living as messy, imperfect, and whole—that I began to find peace. Through sobriety, I began to recognize that my imperfections did not need to be a source of shame, but rather they were what made me

human. Sameshima (2007) suggests, “[t]hrough experience, we create our understandings of life and who we are, what we stand for and what our conceptions of the world are. Our experiences create who we are” (p. 11). We are human—(im)perfect, and when we learn to embrace our wholeness, no longer ignoring the shameful aspects of ourselves within experience, we create space for connection and the opportunity to see ourselves beyond shame. It is here where we might enter into deeper spaces of relationship, insight, and being—here, where we might enter into authenticity.

Speaking the Unspoken

As educators, it is experience that shapes the ways in which we perform upon the curricular landscape of being and doing, teacher—human. These experiences are not limited to the classroom, nor can they be explained by someone else’s script. However, far too often our perspective, our sense of self, our understanding of experience, gets caught up in the ghostly whispers of the stories we have been told, those stories we begin to tell ourselves about who we are and who we should be. We are isolated within the frays of someone else’s definition, afraid to move outside the shadows, to be recognized as anyone other than who we “should” be. We are afraid of our own imperfection, our own humanity, and far too often we remain silent. Brown (2017) suggests that, “sometimes the most dangerous things for kids [and I would add all of us] is the silence that allows them to construct their own stories—stories that almost always cast them as alone and unworthy of love and belonging” (p. 4). What would happen, within education, if we began to speak of our discomfort, if we began to acknowledge our fears, our feelings of inadequacy? What would happen if we began to acknowledge that things didn’t feel quite right and learned to move in a spirit of authenticity that allowed us to share the many facets that shape who we are and what we do?

Split performance
 the self remains
 A disrupted fragment
 figment
 of my imagination
 feeling
 nothing
 distortion
 crumbles
 reality
 slivers
 of the impossible
 leave splinters
 upon
 my cognition
 a self (dis)integrating

The practice of authenticity calls upon us to enter presently into knowing, “waking up our true self” (Brach, 2003, p. 25), becoming open to the moment, to ourselves and one another.

Sameshima (2007) offers, “being open in the moment means listening intently, simultaneously seeking relationality, acknowledging connections and appreciating the fullness of presence in the present” (p. 35). There is often discomfort when we become honestly present within experience—it is messy, unpredictable, and at times painful as we come face to face with the revelations of our own imperfection. However, Ketcham and Kurtz (1993) respond, “[t]o deny imperfection is to disown oneself, for to be human is to be imperfect” (p. 43). As educators, our actions reverberate across the landscape of our classrooms and our lives. As Brown (2010) notes, “our unexpressed ideas, opinions, and contributions don’t just go away. They are likely to fester and eat away at our worthiness” (p. 53). The unexpressed self lingers in a space of communal isolation. Authenticity disrupts that isolation, creating opportunity for connection and communal transformation. There is nothing comfortable about this practice; however, as Snowber (2006) intimates, “it is these uncomfortable spaces which hold the fires of transformation” (p. 220). Authenticity is an act of eros—an act of love. To love, hooks (2000) suggests, quoting Peck (1978), is “the will to extend one’s self for the purpose of nurturing one’s own or another’s spiritual growth” (p. 10). This act begins as Brown (2017) offers, when we learn to “to stand alone...[to brave the wilderness]...the wilderness of uncertainty, vulnerability and criticism” (p. 31). Standing alone, we are exposed—no longer hidden by the shroud of shame—it is here where we find connection, hope, and possibility—it is here where we find love.

She crouches
 A body burdened
 wounded
 in the shadows
 by a warping sense
 of insufficiency
 desire lingers
 in her isolation
 reaching
 toward
 eros

When we learn to love within experience, we are no longer bound by fear, we are instead able to acknowledge “the human life-as-a-whole,” (Kurtz & Ketcham, 1993, p. 45), we are able to move into authenticity. Moving beyond the shadows of expectation and shame, we no longer have to waste time caught up in the agony of isolation and yearning. It is through authenticity that we may move into a space of connection as we begin to accept ourselves as whole, as imperfect and evolving, as relational beings making sense together of experience, of life, and the lessons we learn across that great expanse.

Broken pieces
 shattered
 across arrangements of longing
 a self
 (un)spoken

Many years ago, before I stopped drinking, I remember working with a student teacher; she was creating an identity collage, choosing images that she felt reflected her sense of self and her student teaching experience. She was immediately drawn to a wine glass—the beauty of the droplets, the burgundy liquid, the allure of the escape. She talked about how overwhelmed she felt in the classroom, how a glass of wine helped her relax and let everything go. I saw myself in her picture.

Enough exists
 when the sun sets
 upon the stacks
 of evidence
 A body
 remembers
 to breathe

I wanted to share my story with her. I wanted to share how that escape felt when my relationship with alcohol went sour. I wanted to talk about my own sense of disappointment in teaching, how exhausted I felt, and how often I felt like a failure. But, I remained silent, fearful of judgment—afraid to be seen, to be recognized as the person I believed I might really be. Through the silence, I remained, caught—still disconnected. I wonder, what might have happened to myself, to that young woman—my student, if in that moment I had spoken my truth? While I cannot answer that question, what I do know is that, when I finally admitted that I was an alcoholic, I opened the door not only to rediscover myself, but also to open myself up to relationship, connection, and praxis. My sobriety allowed me the space to enter into authenticity, and it is through authenticity that I have slowly regained myself, becoming present to the physical, emotional, and spiritual worlds around me, accepting life as fluid—something that can neither be defined nor manipulated, but rather experienced. Knowing is grounded in compassion and availability of self, an availability that is grounded in authenticity. It comes with awareness and acceptance of self as evolving and (im)perfect, situated both historically and in the present.

When I was drinking, I was lost, a self-disconnected. However, admitting my disease was a tremendously frightening experience for me. It required that I face my shame directly. I could no longer pretend or hide within the hollowness of someone else's approval. Instead, I had to own my pain—my imperfection—I had to acknowledge my humanity and enter into the “wilderness” (Brown, 2017). This was an act that was counterintuitive to everything I had learned. I had spent much of my life hidden, afraid of being discovered as unworthy—as the unlovable person I believed I was. To speak my truth was a suicide of sorts, as I entered into a space of vulnerability and authenticity where the ego cannot survive, where the self I had claimed to be could no longer exist, a space where my (im)perfect self was now forever exposed. However, despite the discomfort, it is authenticity that facilitates a curricular space of breath—freedom, where learning becomes the work of being human, of living inquiry as opposed to a simple acquisition and performance of purpose and perfection. It is living inquiry that allows us to respond to experience, engaging with knowing, seeing, doing in a manner that is relational and fluid—temporally grounded in our common and individual humanity, rather than the ego. Buscaglia (1982) offers that each one of us has

a need to be seen, a need to be known, a need to be recognized, a need for achievement, a need to enjoy our world, a need to see the continual wonder of life, a need to be able to see how wonderful it is to be alive. (p. 32)

These needs cannot be met within a space of should, but rather they are met when we embrace our humanity, our (im)perfection and enter into authenticity—into a space of reality, a reality that exists outside definition. Palmer (1993) notes, “Reality’s ultimate structure is that of an organic, interrelated, mutually responsive community of being. Relationships—not facts and reasons—are the keys to reality; as we enter those relationships, knowledge of reality is unlocked” (p. 53). To live within reality means living connected and communally, authentically, and (im)perfectly.

Shared Possibility

Within human nature, learning is complicated, complex, and always evolving. Possibility does not exist within definitions of perfection, but rather within the stories of our (im)perfection. Authenticity allows us to engage reflexively across the landscape of our shared stories, stories of longing, loss, shame, hope, stories of our experience of being (im)perfect—human. It is vulnerability and the intentional entrance into this space that create the opportunity for one to enter into the practice of *currere* (Pinar, 2004). Through this practice, we move toward what Sameshima (2007) describes as a “dialogic and dialectical space [shared] between learners and others” (p. 287). It is within such practice that we begin to engage in relational autobiography, sharing experience as an epistemological process. Leggo (2008b) reminds us, “we are always located in an intricate network of relationships that shapes our stories and identities, our desires and hopes, our ecological connections to one another throughout the earth, always breathing with the heart’s rhythms” (p. 23). When we begin to move beyond reflection, toward the reflexive dialogic, our experiences of (im)perfection become part of a living aesthetic—a temporal movement toward possibility.

I remember how utterly alone I felt when I was drinking, desperate to be seen, while at the same time so afraid that I might be found out. I was wrapped up in something that took me away from experience, from myself, from relationship, from knowing. Fearful and numb, I remained static until the pain began to break through the wall I had created for myself. The night I finally admitted that I was indeed an alcoholic was both excruciating and liberating for me. In that moment as I faced my fear, I no longer had to hide in shame, and I opened myself up to possibility. As I began to honestly engage with experience, to admit what had happened and was happening to me—in my life and my teaching, I was able to finally move forward. However, this did not happen in isolation. It is important to share autobiographically—authentically—reflexively as a means to reconsider experience.

Beyond brokenness

a body
mind
self
rebuilds
stronger in those spaces
where emptiness crept

Pinar (2004) comments, “The point of *currere* is an intensified engagement with daily life, not an ironic detachment from it” (p. 37). There is no need to “edit life” (Snowber, 2006); it is within our lives where we derive meaning. When we begin to embrace experience with a manner of authenticity, we enter into a space of meaning that is shared. It is here where we might come to better know ourselves and one another.

Communion

we arrive
 selves exposed
 within the fluidity
 of life’s breadth
 waking outside
 intoxication
 arms outstretched
 with the (im)possibility
 of breath
 across a line of whispers
 we are
 you are
 love(d)

Authenticity elicits feelings of vulnerability as we acknowledge our personal (and worldly) imperfection and risk rejection. I admit, when I began writing this article, it was with a sense of great hesitancy. I do not advertise my alcoholism; however, it is a part of who I am, it shapes my lens, and the experience within active addiction and recovery shape how I live and teach. I cannot detach myself from the text nor can I detach myself from my experience. I must embrace the truths of my experience of longing, defining, and disconnection as a means to create a space for relational engagement. This does not mean we divulge our darkest secrets to everyone we encounter, rather it means we make ourselves available, even those aspects we fear. We exist as educators, as (im)perfect beings, trying to make sense of ourselves and our practice amidst discourses that define and position us as less than. When we begin to acknowledge the power of those discourses, when we begin to admit our (im)perfection, our shame, and the sense of isolation that exists when we try to perform according to those discourses, we move further toward our own humanity, further toward transgressing those practices that leave us isolated. We are (im)perfect—human, we are educators who entered the arena with intention, people who live within and outside story. It is through the practice of authenticity that you (I) might return, reflexively, to y(our) own pedagogical negotiations and yearnings, (re)turning to self, to community, to the thoughts and actions of body/mind/spirit, to shame and failure and hope, all moving us further toward praxis and possibility.

reflections
 upon the circle
 fluid reverberations
 of authenticity
 and a beckoning self
 reunited

Brown (2017) offers, “you will always belong anywhere you show up as yourself and talk about yourself and your work in a real way” (p. 25). As we become real, acknowledging ourselves as (im)perfect, as well as the influence of those stories that have led us into isolation, we become reacquainted with the wholeness of who we are within our lives and our practice. It is here that we might enter into a space of living inquiry. It is here that we may respond to experience, engaging with knowing, seeing, doing in a manner that is relational and fluid—temporally grounded in the spirit, rather than the ego. It is the presence of this spirit, that authentic, (im)perfect self who exists in relationship, that transcends personal and intellectual boundaries and definitions, that moves us toward a communal space of knowing, becoming, and accepting—a space of praxis and belonging.

And so, I step
 with imperfect motion
 into the circle
 and shout,
 “I am available!”

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