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DOCTORAL DISSERTATIONS AS LIMINAL JOURNEYS OF THE SELF: BETWIXT AND BETWEEN IN GRADUATE SOCIOLOGY PROGRAMS*

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The sociology dissertation process is a liminal journey, a passage characterized by ambiguity, uncertainty, and crisis in which the student self is abandoned and a new professional self claims a world of power, authority, maturity, and responsibility. The theoretical perspectives of Victor Turner, Arnold Van Gennep, and George H. Mead are extended to conceptualize the "liminal self" who undertakes this difficult and problematic journey of transformation. Experiential methodology, in which theory and autobiography are combined, is employed to explicate the dissertation as a conflictful rite de passage and to critique doctoral projects that unreflexively adopt "technical formulas" for success and thus deny the possibility of liminal transformation.

For academic and applied sociologists, professional writing is a doorway to institutional power, a route to discovery of the professional self, and an effective means of communication with professional colleagues. It is our goal to outline the dimensions of the dissertation project as an uncertain, liminal journey and thus to map the contours of a distinctive and life-changing aspect of professional education.

In general, the discipline of sociology and its doctoral students lack theoretically framed, experientially grounded understandings of the dissertation writing process. For the novice sociologist, the path through and beyond the door of professional literacy is uncharted, mysterious, and sometimes threatening—and yet it beckons and tantalizes generations of graduate students who struggle, often unsuccessfully, to find their footing on its course. Graduate training guides and supports many who seek the way to professional maturity as writers and scholars. We examine one of those paths—the doctoral dissertation—in this paper. In what may appear at first to be a paradox to some readers, we argue for greater theoretical clarity in understanding the dissertation as a ritual process, while concluding at the same time that the experiential mystery and uncertainty en-

countered when writing a dissertation are essential aspects of a liminal process that transforms the self.

We begin this paper with a methodological orientation, offer a theory of writing as ritual, and explicate the link between writing and the self. We then critique several factors that lead to ritually "flawed" dissertations in sociology, review the institutional context of dissertation writing, and discuss internal barriers that students bring to their dissertation projects. We present last an experiential account of how one student (Deegan) confronted her internal barriers through the act of writing and finally accepted her ritually transformed self as a professional writer. We conclude that although the bureaucratic and pedagogical uncertainties which obscure the dissertation process can be reduced, the dissertation as a liminal journey betwixt and between the student self and the professional self remains a transformational ritual whose outcome is inherently uncertain.

METHODS AND DATA

The methodological framework adopted here is experiential (Reinharz 1983, 1984) and thus combines autobiography with theoretical analysis to (un)cover and (dis)cover reality. Hence our discussion necessarily includes direct autobiographical accounts that generatively inform our theory of ritual and serve at the same time as didactic examples of our theory. For readers unfamiliar with the use of autobiographical accounts in theory development, we strongly

* Many people helped us to become professional writers, and we gratefully acknowledge this tremendous social effort. Elwin Powell initially influenced the writing of this paper. The authors are under great obligations to Professor Shulamit Reinharz, who read an earlier draft and contributed valuable criticisms and suggestions. We especially thank those of our students and colleagues who have taken the liminal journey and have shared their insights and experiences with us.

recommend the pioneering work of Shulamit Reinharz (1984), who provides a model experiential study of traditional graduate training and its failure to reach and transform the self and others. Her work is an excellent account of a liminal journey through graduate school and its possibilities for human growth, knowledge, and change. Many other sociologists also have written about various aspects of this process, although less fully than Reinharz, in prefaces, methodological appendices, and reflexive anthologies (e.g., Becker 1986; Hammond 1964; Horowitz 1969; Riley 1988; Whyte 1961). Guided by Reinharz's insightful methodological exemplar, we join this reflexive tradition to present our experientially informed theory of the ritual process.

We draw on our own lifeworld experiences and on those of numerous friends, colleagues, students, and other professional acquaintances to weave a logically coherent (Gilbert 1989), empirically grounded theory sketch of a crucial component of graduate education. We do not offer the reader an invariate truth, but we present a "working hypothesis" that will require reconsideration in light of changing conditions (Deegan 1987; Mead 1899). We invite those who recognize aspects of their own experiences in our analysis to share their struggles and insights with their students and colleagues in ongoing theoretical and axiological dialogues (Hill 1977, 1984a). Through such discussions, professors help their students to distinguish between ambiguities and uncertainties that are liminally intrinsic and those which are socially extrinsic to the dissertation process.

Our analytic task, as Sylvan and Glassner put it, is "to make coherent sense of the social world rather than to manipulate empirical phenomena through experimental and other methods" (1985, p. 1). Not all readers, however, will identify with or comprehend the self-transforming character of the ritual process outlined below. These readers will include graduate students who have yet to confront the dissertation requirement. In addition, we note below that the dissertation ritual is often flawed, resulting in PhDs who lack full-fledged professional selves. We anticipate that many of the latter will find our experiences fantastic and our theory incomprehensible. At the same time, we are encouraged by a growing number of colleagues for whom our analysis strikes a resonating

chord as they reflexively ponder their own graduate experiences and struggles.

Empirically, the authors are embedded in the institution of higher education. Together we draw on a combined total of 45 years of experience in the academy as graduate students and professors. The first author, Deegan, is a full professor whose early graduate years were marked by a terrifying self-conflict over her master's thesis (Deegan 1973), followed by a stressful but rapid trip through a doctoral dissertation at a leading department of sociology (Deegan 1975). She completed her *rite de passage* and, as the author of numerous articles and the author/editor of six books, is an accomplished scholarly writer (e.g., Deegan 1988a, 1989, in press; Deegan and Brooks 1985). As a professor, she has served as a thesis and dissertation advisor for 16 years. As a life-partner, twice she has materially and emotionally supported another person's dissertation work, and often she has commiserated with friends as they became entangled in the dissertation process.

The second author, Hill, also has spent many years in the halls of academe—in classrooms and administrative offices and as an active author (e.g., Hill 1984b, 1989a). He is atypical, however, in having earned two doctorates in different disciplines: geography (Hill 1982) and sociology (Hill 1989b). He has twice trod the doctoral path, once as a novice and again, more recently, as a seasoned investigator. Although his experience is not specifically detailed in this paper, it corroborates directly the ritual model offered below. His first dissertation was indeed a self-transforming liminal experience, whereas the second doctorate was self-confirming rather than transforming. We also note in passing that we are prior contributors to *Teaching Sociology* (Deegan 1988b; Hill 1987). From our informed location in academia as professional writers, we draw on our combined store of empirical observations and experiential knowledge to "frame" (Goffman 1974) a theoretical understanding of the sociology doctoral dissertation as a ritual process.

WRITING AND RITUAL

In American academic circles, as in many others, completion of the PhD dissertation is a standard criterion signifying the arrival of a particular type of professional writer, one who

enjoys the powerful legitimation and the authoritative voice of the scholarly establishment (cf. Mooney 1991). As significant milestones, completed dissertations are recorded faithfully in *Dissertation Abstracts International* and are reported periodically, by department, in the *ASA Guide to Graduate Departments of Sociology*. Upon approval of the doctoral dissertation, typically the final step in certifying professional sociologists, the student status is dissolved. The successful dissertation author, as authority, is absorbed into a new community of certified intellectual experts. The novice, amateur self becomes the professional self; the liminal passage is completed.

The transition from student to professional author is reached through the ritually organized struggles and triumphs of the liminal self during a rite of transition. In keeping with previous theoretical work (Deegan 1989; Deegan and Hill 1987; Mead 1934; Taft 1915; Turner 1967, 1969, 1974, 1979; Turner and Turner 1978), we interpret writing a dissertation as a dramatic ritual and as an opportunity for symbolic interaction. Here we introduce "the liminal self" by extending and combining George H. Mead's concept of "self" with Turner's concept of "liminar" and Van Gennep's formulation of *rite de passage*. Mead defined "the self, as that which can be an object to itself, is essentially a social structure, and it arises in social experience" (1934, p. 140). Succinctly put, the "self" is composed of the "I" and the "me" in which "the attitudes of the others" constitute the organized "me," and then one reacts toward that as an "I" (Mead 1934, p. 175). Combining these ideas, the "liminal self" is a transitional self wherein the structure of the self is altered through a *rite de passage*. The result is a new formation: the professional self (Taft 1942).

In Victor Turner's theory of ritual, "liminality" is "the state and process of mid-transition in a rite of passage" (Turner and Turner 1978). Specifically:

During the liminal period, the characteristics of the *liminars* [the persons who enter this phase] are ambiguous, for they pass through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state (p. 249).

The liminal period bisects the past and the future; those who enter it are, in Turner's famous phrase, "betwixt and between." In the process of creating dissertations, liminars leave behind the familiar world of student essays and term papers to enter a realm in which new forms of writing are demanded, a new

sense of authority is required, and a new sense of self is called forth.

The doctoral dissertation is created by the self during a *rite de passage* characterized by ambiguity and uncertainty. The student liminar embarks toward an unknown future, one that cannot be known at the start of the passage no matter how many exemplars he or she has seen; no matter how much thoughtful advice he or she receives. As Turner stated:

The participant [or liminar] is likely to be governed in his actions by a number of interests, purposes, and sentiments, dependent upon his specific position, which impair his understanding of the total situation (1967, p. 27).

Liminars begin their journeys embedded in the situation and concerns of the student world, experientially ignorant of the challenges and transitions that lie ahead.

The dissertation process (which can take years) is—if we adopt Van Gennep's (1960) approach—a transition ritual in which a person undergoes a change from everyday life and then reenters the mundane world possessing a new status and having undergone an inward transformation. The rite of transition is dangerous because its path is laden with challenges and obstacles, including unforeseen rivalries, enemies, and bureaucratic traps; myriad opportunities for self-doubt and self-deception; and the real possibility of failure. The passage is "risky" (Richards 1986). Successful completion of the transition ritual, in which years of preparation are invested, is not guaranteed. A struggle with the self takes place as well.

The doctoral *rite de passage* incorporates a dialogue between society and the self, a dialogue that society—through its representatives in the academy—eventually endorses (or rejects) and from which the self emerges secure and transformed (or withdraws, disappointed, in failure). Mentors, advisors, and ceremonial elders line the ritual path, pointing out many (but never all) of the menacing obstacles and pitfalls. Family members, financial benefactors, and fellow students may cheer the liminars on their way. In addition to the social character of this ritual, the passage also incorporates a dialogue within the self, a dialogue of self-reflection, self-directed exploration, and sometimes loneliness. The liminal self, the one who wishes to become a writer-scholar, must successfully claim independence and originality—must enter the realm of the pioneer—while judiciously heeding society's expectations for academic excellence.

scholarly rigor, and the balancing of imagination and conformity.

Writing a doctoral dissertation provides a pathway to professional maturity and self-assurance. These professional traits, however, result only if the student already has personal maturity and self-assurance. Graduate school, in short, is no place for the immature personality still in search of an adult self. In addition, many factors (including several structural and material factors such as institutionalized racism and economic inequities) obviously can prevent or defeat the successful completion of doctoral projects. Egan (1989), for example, specifies several negative effects of professional socialization, but we maintain that the fundamental threats to the self on a liminal journey can never be wholly eliminated. Indeed, danger and emotional conflict are characteristic ingredients of the doctoral dissertation for a key reason: the doctoral *rite de passage* is a *possibility*, not a social certainty (cf. Sylvan and Glassner 1985, pp. 7-8); its outcome cannot be guaranteed by causally manipulating structural variables. Supportive faculty advisors, liberal stipends, clear statements about dissertation requirements, and excellent exemplars cannot eliminate the reality that the dissertation student is embarked on an uncertain journey of personal challenge and self-transformation.

In the discussion that follows, we acknowledge the location of doctoral studies and their challenges in a bureaucratic and capitalist milieu. We restrict our analysis, however, to the intrinsic, unavoidable threats within this milieu that are generated by the student's search for a professional self. We focus specifically and primarily on the role of the self—and the transformation of the self—during the process of writing a dissertation. Note also that we do not address the equally important problem of how to learn and teach the mechanics and the formal aspects of good writing as do Becker (1986), Anderson and Holt (1990), and others. As Natanson (1970) expressed it, our theme is "the journeying self." Accordingly, we present the dissertation project as a liminal journey.

WRITING AND THE SELF

"Professional writing" is a particular skill, a habit, a trained way of connecting ideas and written words. This learned facility is possessed

and exercised by what Jessie Taft (1942), remarking on the training of social workers, called "the professional self." Taft's perspective on professionalism—as the enactment of creative and socially engaged roles undertaken to accomplish specific, liberating tasks—applies directly to sociologists. As a means to sociological accomplishment, professional writing is simultaneously challenging, elusive, exciting, and mundane. Professional writing is a creative, socially engaged role through which sociologists can act meaningfully in the institutionalized world of ideas and professional relationships. For skilled professional authors, writing becomes an extension of the self, the mind, one's intelligence, and his or her emotions (Mead 1934; Taft 1915). Although there are many ways to engage the world, generating meaning for others through the written word is an exceptionally powerful way of being for the self and the other.

Mind, society, and the self are connected by written words. Writers speak to those they know in their immediate worlds of everyday, face-to-face interaction, but writers—especially professional writers—also speak to those who are unknown to them, who reside beyond each writer's particular situation and specific lived experience. Through writing, the self can speak to—even argue with—many others. The self as writer shapes the ideas and institutions of society, now and in years to come. The location of professional writers in social networks of institutionally-ordered resources and advantages directly empowers "the professional self." Unlike amateurs, professional writers are lodged in a privileged, powerful structure of authority and legitimation. This power is rooted in the interconnected worlds of publishers, critics, libraries, reading groups, universities, postal and communication systems, word processors, computers, and so on. The power of professional writing is reinforced by professional organizations, collegial friendships, and access to capital and time.

Internally, professional writing also extends the writer's self in powerful ways. The writer's once fuzzy ideas are clarified and objectified through disciplined writing. The writer's self is reflexively strengthened and rewarded by its own creativity and increasing insight. Professional writers also generate tangible, identifiable products that are claimed individually through copyright and signed by name. For professional writers, this productive capacity helps counter the deindividualizing forces of a world that is con-

trolled by anonymous organizations and massive social movements.

FLAWED RITUAL: THE DISSERTATION AS TECHNICAL FORMULA

The liminal *rite de passage* outlined above is an ideal type from which actual experience can deviate in profound ways. The professional self is a desired but not a necessary outcome of writing a dissertation. In some cases, which we regard as particularly tragic, dissertations are completed, but the amateur self remains unchanged. This is a significant problem in sociology, reflected in the inability of some of us to be productive writers and/or to find intrinsic rewards in scholarly research.

In our discipline, students writing dissertations too frequently are encouraged 1) to analyze canned data sets collected by others rather than to frame and launch original investigations; 2) to filter canned data according to narrowly defined, predetermined procedures; 3) to confine literature reviews to prior research that asks similar questions rather than challenging or critical questions; and 4) to employ ideologically unreflexive interpretive formats. Rather than complete a liminal journey in which the student proposes, confronts, and resolves the ambiguities of original research, the student—although with much labor—merely follows a prescribed technical formula. Ritually speaking, this formula reduces uncertainty and conflict (a situation welcomed by the student self) but also strikes at the essence of liminality; the journey becomes uneventful and fundamentally crisis-free.

When technical formulas replace the liminal journey, an unreflexive technician rather than a professional self is produced. The dissertation as *rite de passage* is short-circuited; the heart of the ritual is flawed. Technical dissertation formulas can be mastered while leaving the self unchanged. Without ambiguity and creativity, without challenge and danger, without a genuinely liminal journey, the self cannot make the transition to professional writing and a professional self.

Writing a dissertation by technical formula wraps the doctorate in the trappings of change, but lacks the opportunity for self-transformation. Students who complete formula doctor-

ates reveal the unsatisfactory nature of their experience in comments such as these:

"It doesn't matter what I do, it's all a joke."

"I have no ideas. I hope they don't find out before I get tenure!"

"I don't care about my work and nobody else does either. So what?"

These examples illustrate the cynicism that emerges when the liminal journey is replaced by unreflexive adherence to a technical formula.

It is fundamentally unsatisfying to earn a doctorate without transforming the self. Outwardly, friends, relatives, and academics join in celebrating the award of such degrees, but the festivities are hollow. Inwardly, the perceptive individual is not deceived. Many unreflexive technicians eventually sense their lack of fundamental accomplishment or burn with a simple envy born of their inability to be the professional writers that others applaud. Some seek other ways of transforming the self after earning the PhD, including competitive grantsmanship and pursuit of administrative ambitions, but those career alternatives and their scholarly consequences lie beyond the scope of this paper.

The ceremonial award of a doctoral degree, *per se*, does not call forth a fundamental change in the self. Ceremonial trappings cannot substitute for the lived challenges and uncertainties of the liminal journey. The transformation of the self occurs within the student, and the completion of a doctoral dissertation is taken symbolically to signal this anticipated change. No matter how many cues, aids, supports, or ceremonial props are provided by others, it is the student self that must change, and this transformed self is most acutely aware of the profound nature of its transformation.

THE INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT OF THE LIMINAL JOURNEY

In the United States, doctoral dissertations are written in hierarchically structured, bureaucratic organizations embedded in a capitalist society (Deegan 1989; Hill 1984a). Unfortunately, the institutional fabric of graduate education rewards those who divorce scientific endeavors from meaningful, reflexive human action in the name of objectivity and speed. In this situation, the liminal passage is surrounded and complicated by dangers and diversions

rooted in the alienating and controlling institutional patterns of our society.

These patterns, reinforced by myriad institutionalized social forces, can disguise, bury, and seriously distort the challenges and rewards that are uniquely specific to the writer's *rite de passage*. In addition to seeking the power of professional writing, many doctoral students are strongly attracted by the power to teach, to certify others, and to earn money, by the power of prestige and by the power to control bureaucratically the lives of others. The temptation to plagiarize, "fabricate" (Goffman 1974), or otherwise submit a fraudulent dissertation is frequently strong. In a bureaucratized capitalist system, the self and the doctoral dissertation can become commodities, "things" to be produced and sold on the capitalist market (Young and Massey 1978; Young and Walsh 1984).

The university is a social setting in which academics sometimes vie for power over colleagues, students, friends, and lovers (for classic examples of academic skirmishes, see Martindale and Mohan 1980). That is, the student's struggle can become overlaid with external conflicts (cf. Stanton and Schwartz 1954). When doctoral students are caught up in organizational power struggles, the liminal path to professional writing is obscured and often lost. Bureaucratic and capitalist battles frequently replace each student's important battle with the self.

In the best of worlds, students learn that institutional and interpersonal power games differ radically from the challenges to the self posed by the liminal journey. Whereas the commodification of both knowledge and the self characterizes life in a society where work and labor are alienated from the self, the liminal self is on a dangerous journey to empower the self. Wise mentors and perceptive students understand, however, that this liminality—the status of being betwixt and between—makes the self particularly vulnerable to change, attacks, power struggles, and other forces that separate the self from experience. Paying attention to this possibility is a pragmatic necessity for liminars in search of the professional self.

Capitalist and bureaucratic battles in the academy are won with surprising frequency by doctoral students, perhaps because of their youthful energy and drive, but typically the liminal battle within the self is lost in ex-

change. Success in bureaucratic and capitalist battles emphasizes and develops skills vastly different from those needed to confront the self on its liminal journey; in addition, the academy all too frequently welcomes and rewards the skilled bureaucratic sharpshooter. Yet when facility in organizational manipulation is gained at the expense of an authentic professional self, academic work eventually loses its meaning and the self goes unrewarded. The lives and the faces of academic politicians, wearied and discouraged by unending institutional wars, provide an occasional horrible glimpse of the abandoned liminal self—its journey perpetually incomplete—wandering endlessly on the plain of defeat and existential angst, unable to write and publish empowering work.

INTERNAL BARRIERS TO THE LIMINAL SELF

Because each self must enter the path to professional writing—a path of power—and must learn to complete it, the journey is individually dangerous. The student self must be left behind. If that self is loved, its passing will be mourned. If it is hated, the journey will be even more treacherous because professional writing emerges from the self: from its knowledge, its expression, and its access to meaning and the mind. A hated self is particularly inaccessible, untrue, and difficult to know.

We do not assert that professional sociological writers necessarily have "healthy" or "normal" selves, but we contend that the self exists in direct relationship to that which it writes. The professional self is a new structure of the self with a specific function: to connect the writer's meaning to that which is written. Creating a professional self involves time, energy, work, discipline, commitment, emotion, and meaning. For this reason, the doctoral *rite de passage* is fundamentally not an easy path.

The self initially is confronted on its liminal journey by many seemingly unanswerable questions. Why try to make this journey? Why is it so hard? Is the self weak? Lazy? Unintelligent? Is the struggle worth it? Why is it easier for some? Does it cost too much time? Too much money? Too much energy? Is my writing important? Is it any good? Who will read it? Will it be brilliant? Startling? Innovative? The best? These questions can be answered, only in

time, by the journeying self—even if others openly provide sensitive, thoughtful answers along the way.

Many questions can be answered initially only in the negative: No, my work is not the best. No, nobody willingly reads bad or pedantic writing. Indeed, few doctoral dissertations, even very good ones, are read unless they are subsequently reworked as books. The first author, Deegan, recalls having read in awe the late Gregory Stone's (1959) unpublished dissertation "Clothing and Social Relations." When she was introduced later to Stone as having read his entire long and complex dissertation, he embraced her, pronounced her the only person who had read it other than himself, and invited her to have a cup of coffee with him. For her, this bond formed the basis of a long and significant friendship.

Others of our acquaintance tell similar stories. Scholars rarely read dissertations except as members of doctoral supervisory committees. It is a memorable event to meet someone who has read one's dissertation freely. The obscurity of completed dissertations is well known by most students. Liminals secretly despair in their knowledge that few will read their dissertations, even while wishing otherwise. They want to communicate, to relate to others through scholarly writing.

Each liminar engages in internal contemplation of these questions. Potential answers, and their relative importance to the liminar, shift and dance along the course of the journey. The important lesson learned by the liminar, however, is that meaningful, empowering answers are not found in endless circles of contemplation, procrastination, and self-doubt, but in hard work: through the act of writing itself.

It is our experience that many of the questions which taunt and disconcert the liminar are answered through the act of writing, an act that too often is set aside. The doctoral *rite de passage* consumes the liminar's energies and passions; it is a tiring journey. Among those who never complete the trip, many report that it simply wore them out. In a few cases, this statement may reflect the truth; the need to pause, to rest along the way, is real. Piliavin (1989, p. 210) reports that "many students find that graduate school takes a serious toll on their emotions, their relationships, and their sense of self." Periods of recuperation, however, too often slide into procrastination and failure to confront the self. Liminals too often postpone

important actions, avoid pressing struggles, and seek situations virtually guaranteed to result in their defeat. The ritual journey, in many cases, is put on permanent hold; this situation, in graduate school jargon, is called "failure to finish" and typically is the origin of the terminal ABD. Paradoxically, in order to finish, the liminar must confront the self through the act of writing.

DEEGAN'S LIMINAL JOURNEY: AN EXPERIENTIAL ACCOUNT

In this section we present an experiential example from which was derived the insight that writing is a means of confronting the self. The example is drawn from the first author's (Deegan's) experience as a master's candidate. Typically the confrontation with the self, together with the transformation of the self, is part of the doctoral *rite de passage*. Deegan, however, was fortunate in completing significant aspects of her liminal journey as a master's student; this eased and shortened her subsequent doctoral passage in important ways. The following account is reported in the first person singular:

I [Deegan] avoided working on my thesis for more than a year after my first draft, pending revision, was accepted. During that period of procrastination, I repeatedly told any willing listener my sad tale about not being able to "force myself" to finish, even though I knew what to do to satisfy my advisor and committee. Then a small but remarkable event took place. A stranger who sat patiently through my litany of woes responded simply, "Then why don't you finish it?" I had no adequate rebuttal, and that straightforward question was the impetus for me to sit down and finish, a process that took only two weeks. I took action that confronted my self-imposed obstacles. The process of doing the writing gave me the answers that eluded months of intellectual attempts to answer the question "When am I going to finish my thesis?"

My answers turned out to be surprisingly simple but (for me) necessary insights:

- 1) I discovered that I did not like to be criticized or told to rewrite my first draft.
- 2) I realized that I hated my thesis topic. I had been unable to dismiss the fact that I agreed to work on a topic which differed from what I initially proposed to study. I

was stumped for the better part of two years, unable to make the best of it (or to dump my work and begin again), to finish the thesis, and to learn from the experience.

- 3) In the process of collecting my own questionnaire data, I became convinced that the methodology was invalid. Again, I neither abandoned my work nor made the best of it until I sat down and wrote the final draft. Only then did I discover that I could demonstrate my mastery of the data collection technique and then critique the methodology effectively.
- 4) I projected my anger at not finishing onto my committee, believing that my mentors were angry with me. I now endure this classic projection as a thesis advisor at the other end of the professional path.

For months I raised these issues in my mind, but did not resolve them. They camouflaged my failure to confront myself, to risk completing my liminal journey, to connect my ideas with words in writing. Deceptively I offered myself—and anyone who would listen—a host of valid methodological objections as legitimations for not completing my project. Too conveniently I convinced myself that I could not be a real writer until others agreed with everything I wrote. I actively avoided conceptualizing writing as a task, a product, a thing to control, to defend, to change as needed, and to use to extend myself. As a result, I postponed my work.

I dismantled my barriers not through abstracted contemplation, but directly through the act of writing. My experience confirms Coker and Scarboro's general observation that "students' writing itself can be a very powerful tool for learning, for empowering students" (1990, p. 218). As I began to write, the answers to my questions became clear. I discovered, as Natanson had noted earlier, "It is perhaps the happy irony of a typifying consciousness that the illumination of its own dynamic is a condition for the achievement of identity" (1970, p. 26). The camouflage dissipated and allowed me to confront my self, my genuine reservations, and my anger. I wrote a thesis that I liked and that my committee accepted. I collected my questions about the research process and its methodological shortcomings and addressed them formally in the last chapter of the thesis. I began to accept and recognize myself as a writer.

My liminal journey, however, was not finished. After I passed my orals and my thesis was approved, I delayed submitting my thesis to the Graduate Office—a simple bureaucratic act required for graduation—for almost another year. On a very deep level (and this was the hardest thing to admit) I did not feel "worthy" to finish. As a woman from a poverty background who recently had recovered from a major physical disability, I did not recognize a "future" professional self that was connected to my past. (In the next section we discuss this problem, the reincorporation of the professional self, in greater detail.) When I finally accepted my master's degree, I understood my hesitation and reluctance. My liminal journey had reached its end.

I was fortunate to come to terms with these issues so early in my graduate career. For most students, in our experience, the vital battles with the self occur during the doctoral phase of graduate education.

THE REINCORPORATION OF THE SELF

Intellectual crises, internal conflicts, and avoidance behaviors (particularly when dissertation topics are especially difficult emotionally, as in observational trauma studies or interviews with battered wives) are an integral part of the liminal journey to a professional self. In confronting and resolving these obstacles, the self is restructured. This is emotional, energy-consuming work, and the self is not always equal to the task. One's body is also involved; many students report instances of eating disorders, insomnia, and a variety of psychosomatic illnesses. We can offer no formula for success. Lived experiences, when they result in growth and new visions, are by definition open-ended, problematic, and marked by crises. They are journeys into the unknown. Although bureaucratic, political, epistemological, and discriminatory barriers pose real, objective difficulties for many doctoral students, we have found that for ourselves—and for many people we have known and loved—it is the subjective barriers that remain most conflictful, most mysterious, and most difficult to resolve. Providing the material conditions for success is not enough. It is the self alone that answers fundamental questions,

takes responsibility for making changes, and completes the journey.

Some of the most difficult liminal questions lie in the interpersonal realm, in the nebulous areas between the independent "I" and the socially created "me." Near the end of the journey, the liminar understands that a new and very different self must be reincorporated into society. When the journey is completed, this new, previously unknown self that claims power, independence, and authority must find a social niche, and this necessity raises a host of new questions. Do cherished others really want to love a person of power? Do they know how to speak to such a person? Can they be comfortable around them? Similarly, does the self now accept being a person of power? Does the self welcome the challenge of wanting to be—and perhaps publicly failing to be—a person of power? The empowered self is different from the old self who was known, loved, and situationally meaningful. A liminal journey makes the self a stranger: it stretches and sometimes severs the ties of meaning that link us with the everyday life to which we were accustomed.

Anticipating the reincorporation of the professional self into a matrix of existing and future social relationships is more problematic for some than for others. The transition is eased when significant and valued others—perhaps parents, friends, and mentors—await the imagined self of the future and beckon to it. In such cases liminars find it easier to project pathways beyond the portal to the professional self; comforting echoes of the future reverberate from the other side.

For others, however, the imagined professional self often lacks shape, form, or a well-developed network of future social ties. This situation is often exacerbated for liminars who are people of color, poor, female, and/or disabled. In such cases, the willful search for a professional self, with its attendant claims to power and authority, can be more problematic. The self and the liminar's community of reference may hold tightly and legitimately to a world organized against the professional self, professional writing, and the world of power. Here, at a crucial moment of decision for the liminar, the structured oppressions of our capitalist and bureaucratic society—of power writ large—present themselves as the enemy to be resisted rather than embraced. The decision to take the final step, to complete the dissertation, to claim authority and power, to enter a profes-

sional life where the promise of less oppressed living is within reach, is sometimes a terrible and frightening personal struggle. Resolving the conflict between one's relationship to the social world and one's relationship to a future professional self is often the final (and sometimes the most difficult) barrier to becoming a professional writer.

CONCLUSION

Many, if not most, graduate students who set out to become professional writers—in the sense defined in this paper—rarely complete their journeys even if they complete the PhD. They study, work, and struggle to pass through the portal but never find the way. Barriers lie in institutions, communities, others, and the self. As professional writers, mentors, friends, and partners we can talk about these issues, write about them, share their lived realities with others, and work to attenuate the oppressive structural barriers erected by our society. As academics we can act to reduce the specifically bureaucratic and pedagogical uncertainties that Egan (1989) and others justifiably criticize. We can steer students away from ritually "flawed" dissertation projects. We can—and do—point to the promise and the positive reward of becoming professional writers, knowing that it is worth the effort. Yet we cannot take responsibility for or travel with the liminar into that private realm where self-doubts must be confronted, where answers are found in the act of writing, and where the decision to claim a life of power must be made.

In conclusion, we observe that developing the professional self is only the first liminal journey during a lifetime of full-fledged academic and scholarly adventures. Professional writers enter a liminal state whenever they write, although never again as amateurs. When we begin to write, the end product is never fully known. Unexpected, wonderful, and sometimes terrifying ideas are discovered in the process of writing. Creating the connection between meaning and writing is always a challenge. It is a risky step that confronts the self and that world of others, our readers. In their everyday work, professional writers act directly on their claim to power and reaffirm their place in the social province of the written word.

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