

THE ROLE OF IMAGINATION
IN AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

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CERTIFICATE

I certify that this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not being submitted as part of candidature for any other degree.

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ABSTRACT

By telling and retelling their life stories in everyday social interaction, adult learners describe times of continuity and change in their lives, and give an account of their self-formation. A disjuncture between the learners' life stories and events experienced either in their social context or in their inner life invites their reflection on its significance. Transformative learning occurs when reflection on such experience leads to interpretations which change the learners' meaning perspectives and their social practice. These changes are incorporated into a new version of the life story. Adult education approaches to perspective transformation have generally emphasised the interpretive role of critical reflection and thinking. Autobiography, as a metaphor for transformative learning, proposes that transformative learning also has the quality of a narrative constructed with imagination. Through ongoing interpretation of events in their inner and outer experience, learners compose their lives and their life stories.

The social context is a dynamic setting for autobiographical learning. Its structures and institutions concretise the learners' social and cultural tradition, which has been shaped by design and historical circumstance. Through the prejudgments of their tradition, learners perceive reality and construct corresponding lives and life stories. Theoretical approaches to interpreting life experience differ in their estimation of the value of the learners' tradition. In adult education theory and practice, Habermas' critical theory has been enlisted as a conceptual basis for perspective transformation. Little attention has been afforded to either Gadamer's hermeneutic consciousness, or Ricoeur's critical hermeneutics as ways to understand the interpretive activity which leads to the learners' self-formation and the re-invention of their life story.

Six former Roman Catholic priests participated in a cooperative inquiry, telling their life stories of remarkable change in life choice. They sought deeper self-knowledge, as well as an understanding of the widespread social phenomenon of Catholic priests choosing to marry. Their autobiographical accounts indicate that, as they gradually composed new life narratives, these learners gained personal authority as the authors of their lives. The stories also indicate that, at one time or other, a state of stagnation developed in the authors' lives. Despite the learners' lengthy periods of consciously attempting to resolve

the stalemate, it was an act of spontaneous imagination which illuminated a way through. The explanatory understanding of autobiographical or transformative learning proposed here claims that imagination, which bridges the domains of conscious and unconscious knowing in the author, is a partner with critical reflection in interpreting the life in its social context. Through transformative or hermeneutic conversation, adult educators may foster and promote the formation of autobiography and transformative learning. Further research, linking autobiography and transformative learning, would purposefully explore the role of other internal processes in transformative learning, such as feeling, and examine their relationship with imagination. It is likely that the acknowledgment of imagination as integral to transformative learning would lead to research which considers models of personhood other than those which emphasise ego as the conscious director of knowing and learning.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Although autobiography may purport to be the account of one life, it soon becomes apparent that the life is embedded in a web of personal and social relationships. This thesis is an account of research in which many lives are touched, in which many lives have played some part. In the foreground, are the lives of those whom I have called Dan, Luke, Mark, Matt, Paul and Stephen. I deeply appreciate and thank the five co-researchers who joined me in this research project. Our willingness to entrust our lives to each other, and to tell our life stories together is the basic ingredient in the conversation which brought forward a rich collection of narratives. Their early confidence that the project is worthwhile encouraged me greatly. Their willingness to wait during the long time it has taken to complete this thesis has supported me. I have had the privilege to listen to and read their stories many times. The beauty and courage of these stories of life is a source of delight to me. I offer my colleagues my gratitude, and my admiration. To Stephen, whose life became the major focus of this explanation, I extend my sincere gratitude for his generosity and openness.

In the near background, are the women who married Stephen, Paul, Matt, Mark, Luke and Dan. Though they are unseen, unnamed, and mostly unheard in the life stories, their presence is woven through the lives and narratives which are told in this account of transformation and transitions. I appreciate also their support and interest in this research project. A co-operative inquiry into their autobiographical learning would be of immense value in bringing to light their life stories too. Without their narratives, the phenomenon of the departure of Roman Catholic priests from active ministry cannot be fully understood.

Since we first met to discuss this research project in 1986, I have valued the capacity of David Boud, my supervisor, to listen to me, to encourage, to question, and to offer the kind of critical comment which opens doors to further research. I gladly acknowledge the patient trust he has placed in me to explore a variety of fields of learning in this study.

During my time of employment at United Theological College, I was fortunate to have two periods of sabbatical leave without which I could not have completed this work. I appreciate the generosity of the College, and the encouragement of Faculty colleagues, students and friends at the Centre for Ministry, North Parramatta. I am indebted to Ms Glenys Biddle and Mrs Lynette Thorn at Camden Library for their courteous and helpful assistance in locating books and articles for me through inter-library loans.

I began this study newly married. I made a foolish promise to myself that the project would not tax the energies of Kate, or become a source of extra responsibility for her in parenting, or be a disadvantage to our children, Daniel and Isabel. I realise that the extent to which this promise has foundered is beyond easy reckoning. I am profoundly grateful for Kate's encouragement, patience, and timely good-humoured impatience. In the long years of part-time study, she has offered me the space I needed to explore this research project, and has provided extensive practical help in the final stages of preparing this thesis.

I was greatly assisted by my friend, Peter Kelleher, priest and clinical psychologist, who generously volunteered to read this thesis in preparation for the final draft. I appreciated his questions about the research process, and his comments on some aspects of the phenomenon of Catholic priests departing from ministry. Due to his close scrutiny of the text and his helpful observations, I made some revisions to present a clearer text. I value his encouragement and support.

I have been glad for the interest, support and encouragement of my brothers and sisters, their partners and their children, and of all our friends. They, also, are part of my life and my life story of remarkable change. Their anticipation of the completion of this thesis has helped to make it seriously imaginable. I appreciate the help which my brother-in-law Paul Dunn gave me in converting the data on my computer files into a form suitable for use with our new computer.

I offer this thesis as a way to thank all who have blessed my life. They are part of my life and its story. Most of all, this work expresses my gratitude to Vera and Alex, my parents, whose courageous journeys in life are my greatest heritage.

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PREFACE

In 1983, I found myself undertaking a midlife sabbatical, engaged in the project of trying to make sense of the personal chaos I was experiencing. In my twentieth year as a Roman Catholic priest, I was constantly wearied by a malaise I could not name clearly, other than as a sense of loss. At the time, I was experiencing satisfaction in many dimensions of my vocation in the priesthood, and enjoyed a good reputation as a priest. Nevertheless, I had a pervasive sense that, like the woman in the parable (Luke 15: 8-10), I too had lost my coin, the coin of my vitality. I was constantly tired, caught in a cycle of exhaustion and recuperation. I knew that by simply doing less work I would not find a lasting answer to the question at the centre of my life. I was sure that I needed to review my life thoroughly. So, during my sabbatical, I determined to search high and low for what I had lost, hoping that I would regain what I needed to sustain my life as a priest.

I had a premonition that the road ahead of me would mean more than the recuperation of my lost vitality. Having been a dutiful son in the priesthood for so long, I was disturbed by my conviction that I must now claim what was my inheritance. The path which I set out on was the prodigal journey of an elder son (Luke 15: 11-32). I was both hopeful and fearful about where I might end up. In the hope of finding wise accompaniment on this journey, I had chosen to engage in some therapy and spiritual direction. For the sake of some professional development, I pursued simultaneously some courses in a Master of Pastoral Studies program. In this program, several of the course instructors encouraged us to articulate accounts of our life's journey by using journal exercises, drawings and clay. These imaginative and playful methods surprised me in proving to be very effective in my discovering and naming what had been troubling me. The assigned reading introduced me to the work of Jung and Proff, and drew upon developmental theorists such as Erikson, Levinson, Kohlberg, Gilligan and Fowler. These conceptual frameworks helped me name my experience and understand how my sense of self had been changing.

However, it was in a class on Adult Learning that I was introduced to “learning from experience”, and that proved to be my most stimulating learning discovery of all. I was excited to find new ways of perceiving what had been taking place in my life; ways which left me with a sense of dignity as a learner from life itself. The feelings I had in this class were much different from the mixture of shame, guilt, foolishness and ineptitude I had felt for a sizeable period of my therapy. I do not want to diminish the challenging effect that my therapy had on me, nor its contribution to my making a major change in my career. However, in the Adult Learning class I had discovered the reflective approaches to experiential learning of Boud, Kolb, and Mezirow in particular. These presented me with a way of working with the stuff of life that regards the subject of it all as a learner rather than as a client. I came to regard my newly emerging self-understanding and stance in life as an outcome of learning from my life experience.

For now I had come to see my life as having two important dimensions, rather than a single purpose. Although for some years I had found the exercise of ministry to be exhausting, I still had a deep seated desire to be a priest. At the same time, now I recognised in myself a similar deep seated desire to marry and to have the opportunity for parenting. Though marriage and priesthood are declared to be incompatible callings in the official policy of the Latin Rite of the Roman Catholic church, I developed the conviction that both vocations belonged in my life. I formed the intention to marry, accepting with regret the suspension from active ministry which my choice to marry would entail.

At the end of an extended sabbatical, I took leave from active ministry. I needed to let my new self-understanding and my decision mature. In explaining my choice for marriage to others, I expected to meet the disappointment and disapproval of many. I wanted to weather these storms before I married. After a year, content that my decision was genuine, I resigned from the active exercise of priesthood in the Catholic church. I married soon afterwards, in December 1986, and made a new start in life.

This change to my previous life choice constituted for me a major departure from my explicit and publicly affirmed stance within the Roman Catholic Church. It was a *remarkable* change because it contradicted important elements in the matrix of religious meanings and lifestyle which I had valued for a long time. My choice to marry was tantamount to expressing publicly my conscientious disagreement with the Roman Catholic church's requirement of celibacy for the exercise of priesthood. Implicit in my choice for marriage, was a declaration of my unwillingness now to accept the authority of the church to construct totally my personal and social identity. I had claimed a larger measure of authority for my own life.

From my reading and from conversations, I was aware that experiences of remarkable change were to be found in other lives also. I had heard of people whose changes appeared to be an almost total about-face. Some had become pacifist after a lifetime of engagement in military activities. Others, now conservationists, once had been exploiters of natural resources. I was impressed also by the example of feminists I knew. In the face of disapproval and threat, they had struggled for years to articulate new perspectives, and to develop a new practice for themselves in their work and relationships. I recognised, as an element common to these other remarkable changes in life choice, a major discontinuity in relationship with a significant social or institutional context for the person's life. Just as I had, these others had made choices which required a reconstruction of their personal and social identity. They too had changed at least some of their central values and meanings, and adopted a new stance in their generativity and relationships.

At the time of my exit from the priesthood, I had felt some responsibility to offer an account of my decision for change to my family and relatives. I also wanted to explain my choice to authorities in the Catholic church, and to colleagues with whom I had lived and worked. I earnestly wished to present a coherent explanation which would show my choice to resign to be responsible, truthful and understandable. In the official estimation of the Catholic church, a decision like mine is one of failure and desertion. Accounts of priests leaving active ministry are not offered publicly, not even within the Catholic church's media of information.

With the benefit of two years of sustained self-reflection, I had come to understand my new life choice principally as an outcome of learning from experience. This is how I presented to others my situation of change. Through reflecting on my experience of accounting for change, I discovered that what emerged was less of an explanation, and more of a new telling of my life story. As I offered my explanation to others, I sensed that my understanding of my story of transformation was deepening, and I desired to know my life better.

Some opportunities to tell my personal narrative came when I sought out friends to tell them of my journey of new learning and my marriage. At other times, I found that I was asked for an explanation so that they could understand the changes which had come about in me and between us. There were also chance meetings with former colleagues in the priesthood. Although many of those to whom I offered my account acknowledged it as creditable, I felt a certain frailty in the face of disbelief and disregard from others. I came to realise that, although my story lacked the clarity and firmness needed to compel their understanding, it appeared, nevertheless, to have a menacing strength. This was because it challenged the Catholic church's official interpretations of what motivates priests to leave active ministry and marry. Beyond my intention, my resignation seemed to confront some who remain in active ministry in so far as it called them to question their stories. I recalled that priests I had known, who had resigned, were considered by some other priests to have been rejecting the priesthood. I estimated that my resignation, too, might be perceived as disdain for the priesthood. I felt relief when people understood my narrative explanation, and rejection when some interpreted it as showing that I had acted unwisely, without care for others, and without loyalty toward the Catholic church.

On the other hand, some people expressed mixed feelings in response to my account. Some voiced anger at the Catholic church's persistent refusal to permit people, such as myself, to remain priests and marry. They expressed their grief at the loss of a companion in an enterprise which we had shared for a long time. Many showed concern about where I would find alternative employment.

Since my adolescence, when first I had told my story of vocation to gain admission to the seminary, I had had other occasions in which to account to church authorities for who I am and what matters to me. The story I was relating now was not the life story that I had told on any previous occasion. Though my new account differed markedly from past tellings, it still had connection with them. As a narrator, I desired and felt some need to show that, despite real changes, there was continuity between the self who undertook the sabbatical journey and my new self.

This latest account did not merely add information about my life, like the most recent entry in a diary. This new telling of my life story was qualitatively different because it was reinterpreting the events of my past, and reshaping the accounts that I had given previously. I anticipated that people who value consistency over coherence, might find my explanation and me less trustworthy because I had changed my story.

Though this latest version appeared to me to be the most coherent account of my remarkable change that I could offer then, I suspected that it was not the final account at which I might arrive. I discovered that the story I was telling was forming my life, as well as describing it. I was confident that as I understood better this process of mutual transformation, then my life and its story would become even more coherent. Thus, my story would be a persuasive explanation, and I too would be understandable and acceptable. Perhaps the explanation I would offer would even encourage and prompt some authorities within the Catholic church to take another look at its regulations about celibacy and priesthood.

This brief introduction to this thesis tells of my struggles to understand what had been happening in my life, and it tells of my transformation. Though my learning brought times of aloneness and pain, I also found great relief at having found at last what I had lost. A fuller account of my remarkable change, is to be found in Chapter Three, as the story of Dan. It describes my recovery from what had stifled my vitality, and my great joy in finding a life's partner.

As I began to live my new life story, I found that I had already started to construct and authorise a personal and social identity based on new meanings, beliefs, values, sense of purpose and social relationships. I sensed a continuing need and desire to find an explanation for my remarkable change, which I might offer to others as a worthy and credible account. This thesis reports the research project which emerged from my desire to give such an account.