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Becoming the Self: Personal Development in the Context of Therapeutic / Transformational Writing

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Abstract

The concept of personal development in Western cultures is not new (Foucault, 1990). What has changed are the methods used to enact personal development, the sources from which inspiration and information are drawn, and the desired results (Foucault, 1980). Drawing on Martin Heidegger's conception of being and the authentic life and Friedrich Nietzsche's conception of the *eternal recurrence*, this article attempts to illustrate how the eternal recurrence and striving to live authentically can help guide our writing as therapy, or personal development, and uncover those experiences, objects, and individuals that have become inconspicuous. While the current article is largely subjective in its interrogation, the attempt to couple philosophical thought with a practical exercise of self-discovery and care through writing is comparable to other personal development, or therapeutic, enterprises.

Keywords: personal development, the self, writing therapy, authenticity

The concept of personal development in Western cultures is not new (Foucault, 1990). Consideration of the self, taking steps to adhere to societal norms, and concepts of what make a "good citizen," have been constant throughout history (Foucault, 1980). Personal development has been, and continues to be, entangled with a perceived need to meet societal expectations. What has changed are the methods used to enact personal development, the sources from which inspiration and information are drawn, and the desired results (Foucault, 1980). These aspects of personal development vary depending on time, geographical location, and cultural influence (Georges, 1995), and these variations work to form multiple constellations that are difficult to generalize. For this reason, the current article focuses on my lived experience—and the sources that have informed my resulting point of view—with the hope of illustrating the benefits associated with writing as a therapeutic and transformational tool. This examination exists within a historic flow of changing beliefs, information related to the self, and writing as an extension of that self. The current examination also exists within the realm covered by Plato's conception of *pharmakon*: a realm where writing is interpreted as both poison and cure (Reveley, 2015; Stiegler, 2012). In other words, within the act of writing both benefits and disadvantages exist. Therefore, this examination does not claim to be exhaustive; it is meant to serve as an illustration of a self and writing as an active engagement with that self.

What is Personal Development & Why Writing?

Celia Hunt and Fiona Sampson (1998) define personal development as "... any process of beneficial self-reflexive change which [sic] an individual chooses to undertake" (p. 200). They also illustrate the conflicts that arise in regards to the term personal development, the potential for harm that exists in the process, and the ambiguity inherent in the term. These authors attempt to clarify the potential conflict surrounding the term "personal development," stating that personal development "... include[s] practices which develop personal confidence as well as obviously self-exploratory work" (p. 200). Finally, Hunt and Sampson go on to delimit the different forms writing can take with regard to personal development and therapy in their examinations, but an examination of what constitutes the personal, or the self, is required to more deeply understand that which we are attempting to develop through the process of writing.

Although Mary Stuart's (2005) investigation is primarily concerned with the potential for shame or esteem inherent in the writing process, she demonstrates that the act of writing is an engagement with the self and others and that writing works as a medium through which we manipulate, perfect, and perform our socially constructed selves. In other words, Stuart sees writing as an integral part of being in the world, and being amongst others (Sheehan, 2015, p. 197). Others are always present with us as we write, and therefore, writing itself is a social act (Stuart, 2005). As in Heidegger's philosophy, the ever-present others contribute to our understanding of the world.

Many scholars have attempted to delineate what it is to live an authentic life, attempting to uncover best practices for self-development and living among others. Both Heidegger and Nietzsche's work on the topic of being has been influential for me in this respect. Both thinkers provide loose frameworks for investigation while laying a solid foundation from which to begin understanding the self and the position in the world that the self holds. Both frameworks leave much of the work of discovery and decision-making in the hands of the individual, and both provide just enough guidance to keep the individual from getting lost among the intricate web of meaning-making relationships that connect the self to others.

Heidegger sets the stage for interpretation through his investigation of being, and Nietzsche's conception of the eternal recurrence acts as both impetus and reminder behind critically engaging with the self and its current position within the world. I argue that writing for personal development is a practical exercise which makes conspicuous those aspects of the self and the world which Heidegger claims are hidden from us in our average "everydayness" (Sheehan, 2016, p. 197), and can be used as a concrete way to address our current position in the world.

The Self in the World and in Ink

To understand that which we wish to develop (the self), or that which is shaped (by cultural and societal forces), we must begin with an understanding of being. What does it mean to be? Heidegger asserts that any investigation, if it hopes to provide useful insight, must begin with a firm understanding of Being (to be) (Inwood, 2013). A quick overview of some of Heidegger's terms is required to ensure clarity. Heidegger uses the term "Being" (with a capital "B") to represent to be, and he uses "being" (with a lowercase "b") to represent beings (for clarity, the term "entities" is used here rather than "being") (Inwood, 2013). Heidegger also uses the German word Dasein, which specifically refers to human being (entity) (Inwood, 2013).

In Heidegger's view, there is Dasein, and there is the world in which Dasein exists (Harrison, 2010). The world of Dasein is a historicized world: the world exists prior to Dasein's entering it and continues to exist after Dasein has exited it (Harrison, 2010). The world is the meaning-giving context into which Dasein is thrown (Dasein does not

choose to be born), and Dasein becomes involved in a mix of meaning making relationships with the other entities within the world (Harrison, 2010). Heidegger is concerned with "... meaningfulness and its source. [He] interprets the essence of 'mind' in terms of what he calls 'being-in-the-world,' where 'world' means meaning-giving context opened up by and as ex-sistence" (Sheehan, 2015, p. 10). Dasein exists within meaning and develops a mix of relationships of meaningfulness with the world and all of the other entities (current or historical) within it (Harrison, 2010). The reason meaning is considered a mix of relationships is that meaning does not pre-exist Dasein; meaning is not "out there" waiting to be found. Instead, it is created through Dasein's interactions with others (others who are also creating meaning), and entities that exist alongside Dasein within the world (Harrison, 2010). In other words: "... to ask *what* something is to ask how someone is involved with it, interested in it—that is, how that thing is significant and meaningful to that person" (Sheehan, 2015, p. 35). Heidegger is also concerned with how things (entities and others) "out there" have come to be hidden, to be inconspicuous, and how Dasein has lost "... the understanding of how things become meaningfully present at all" (Sheehan, 2015, p. 11).

Like meaning, entities (beings) do not simply exist "out there"; they are not floating around, unattached from Dasein, existing in isolation (Inwood, 2013). Entities are like Mary Stuart's (2005) potential reader: always present with the writer during the process of writing. Other entities offer potential and are always present *with* Dasein as Dasein exists in the world. For example, while spatially removed from me, there exists an "other" who is in a bank. This other presents me with the potential to withdraw or invest money in the bank. There are also stores and store owners who accept my money in exchange for goods, thus giving meaning to the piece of paper Dasein calls money. Without Dasein, money is meaningless. The bank, money, teller, and store are not simply "out there"; they present potential that can be realized if so desired. The bank, money, and teller are also mixed up with the economy, capitalism, and so on, which play a part in an ever-expanding relationship of meaning.

However, examining this relationship of meaning is not where Dasein places most of its energy (Inwood, 2013). Instead, Dasein tends to take others, entities, and this relationship of meaning-making for granted in its average everydayness, which is what Heidegger refers to as the *inauthentic life* (Inwood, 2013). In average everydayness, Dasein takes for granted those entities and others that hold potential. The entities and others are treated as "out there," left unquestioned and unexamined, they are inconspicuous (Inwood, 2013). Living the inauthentic life, to leave entities and others inconspicuous, is to miss out on and obscure the richness of "being-in-the-world." To live authentically is to question, assess, and actively engage in the relationships of meaning in which Dasein is rooted (Inwood, 2013; Harrison, 2010).

How can we actively make entities, others, and the relationships of meaning conspicuous? To a certain degree we do not need to try and make things conspicuous; they often do the work for us. We need to recognize the conspicuousness for what it is and then engage with it. For instance, under ordinary circumstances, I am not aware of the lid on my to-go mug. I do not think about the mechanism that keeps the lid sealed, I do not consider the male and female threads that help the lid stay attached to the mug, and I do not consider the materials from which it was made or who made it. The mug is inconspicuous. It holds my coffee, keeps it warm, and I grab it and drink out of it without consideration. The mug, however, also possesses the potential to become conspicuous. If I pick up the mug to drink and the lid falls off, I am immediately (after the burning sensation stops) engaged with the mug, its lid, and what went wrong; it has become conspicuous and holds my attention. It is during moments like this that, if we are prepared, we can engage with meaning-making relationships at a deeper level. And, it is through writing that we can begin to coax those moments into existence.

Personal Experience

While other styles of writing have had the same results (specifically Metcalf and Simon's technique of Proprioceptive Writing), fiction writing has been both the most effective and enjoyable in my case. Fiction writing has afforded me the opportunity to make things conspicuous. Following the advice of Stephen King (2000) and Shaun McNiff (1998), who said to write to find the story and characters and to trust the process, respectively, I have the freedom to write a narrative that I find both interesting and meaningful. By sitting down and writing prose without worrying about how it will turn out or where it is going to go—allowing myself to be sidetracked and investigating any and all creative ideas that come to mind—I have been able to sort out those themes and characters that I have come to take for granted. Those inconspicuous aspects of my life that I have not consciously given place for expression have come out on the page in ways that make them conspicuous. One such example is my own relationship to alcohol, the idea of alcoholism, and being a father. Through fictional narrative, links between me, my parents, my children, and my general attitude towards being a good person become apparent. I am able to begin plotting those points where my meaning has come from and where it intersects with others. Drawing on Heidegger's theories I can actively engage with these points of meaning and use them to work towards authenticity (authenticity being a state of becoming and not an achievable goal). I am now able to begin picking and choosing what is acceptable for me while pushing those meanings that are not acceptable to the wayside.

This acting towards authenticity is to be seen as an act of becoming. In Nietzsche's view, we cannot *be* something, we can only *become*, or move towards, a certain state of being (Nietzsche, 1974). This mode of thinking is what led to Nietzsche's idea of the *eternal recurrence* (Nietzsche, 1974). A simplified description of the eternal recurrence is that everything (every experience) occurs over and over again, *ad infinitum* (Nietzsche, 1974). The interpretation of this concept that I subscribe to is that, by believing that you are destined to live every moment over and over again forever, you are more likely to work towards becoming that which you enjoy and take pride in, so that your repeating life is as good as you can make it (Nietzsche, 1974). Heidegger's authentic life is the life that, ideally, I would like to work towards becoming and to possess as my recurrence. The eternal recurrence is not so much a reality; it isn't something that happens. Instead, the eternal recurrence is an attitude that guides the way we go about our day-to-day lives. It calls average everydayness into question and implores us to more deeply engage the meaning-making relationships that make up our existence. Fictional writing on a daily basis has become the habit that helps ensure that I am devoting some time to questioning average everydayness.

Through fiction I have been able to engage more fully with those aspects of me that would otherwise be easier left inconspicuous. Below is a section from a short story that I wrote after completing the fiction section of the Athabasca University graduate course *Writing the Self: The Experience and Potential of Writing for the Purpose of Personal Development*. The broader story concerned three teenagers who recently completed their finals and were preparing to attend a grad party:

Jeff wasn't interested in getting drunk at the party. He had grown up with an "alcoholic" for a father and spent too many evenings feeling embarrassed about the way his father was moving through the house, cooking odd dishes involving bologna and cheese slices and watching hockey on TV. His dad was a "happy drunk," and besides the occasional whopper of a hangover, his drinking never really affected anything. Every once in a while there would be the odd Sunday drive, which always lead to the French liquor store, the

only liquor store open in the area. It happened to be a hundred kilometres, or so, away; but hey, it was Sunday; what else was there to do?

His dad would go to work, come home, eat supper with the family, and then retire to the living room and drink until it was time to go to bed. His father didn't shut anyone out, and he wasn't mean and never used drinking as an excuse or made excuses for it (unless it was Christmas Eve, and he had to eat a package of breath mints before mass at the Catholic Church).

The problem was that Jeff had grown up with anti-drinking commercials on TV, was subjected to plenty of stories about the problems kids were supposed to have because of alcoholic parents, how it destroyed kids' lives, and he attended more than his fair share of school presentations where a parent comes and recounts the story of how their child was killed by a drunk driver. This exposure was why his father's drinking made Jeff uneasy. All of the anti-drinking material made Jeff feel superior to his father. In his own sobriety, Jeff had taken up a distorted parental role that made him feel he needed to shun his father and make snotty little remarks any time his dad was drunk.

The anti-drinking campaigns had a role to play in the development of Jeff's issues with his father. Later in his life Jeff would come to resent this influence. He would come to regret not being able to make up his own mind about his father. A shadow had been cast that Jeff had no control over. He missed out on looking up to his father because he was too busy focusing on social taboos. People Jeff would never meet had ruined Jeff's relationship with his father.

This excerpt contains divisive issues that can be interpreted in many different ways by many different people in many different life circumstances, and many of the themes are up for debate, however, these concepts are not relevant to the current project. Instead, this excerpt is meant to demonstrate personal development becoming an active assessment of those people, objects, and ideas that surround an individual on a daily basis; those entities and their meaningful relation to us that otherwise go unnoticed. Personal development is an act of slowing down, taking the time to recognize those relations of meaning that we otherwise over look, assessing their meaningfulness, and deciding whether or not to continue incorporating them into the quilt of the self. By stopping to place ideas on a page, by using fiction to create a comfortable distance from those thoughts and then returning to them with the aim of making conspicuous those inconspicuous aspects of my thoughts, I have the space to assess, rearrange, and reinterpret myself and the meaning-making relationships I have with others.

The benefits of, and methods for, therapeutic writing continue to be discussed in academia (Baraitser, 2014; Bolton, 2013; McNichol, 2016; Ross, 2017). Heidegger's philosophy of being and living authentically is one way of focusing my writing, a guide for attention that is both critical and constructive. By using writing as an active way of engaging beings, as a tool to make them conspicuous, I feel better able to critically engage with the world, the meaning-giving context (Sheehan, 2016). Writing is a relatively safe tool for actively engaging with those aspects of life that are typically easier and more comfortable to leave inconspicuous. It is this comfort that Nietzsche (1961) calls on us to challenge through the conception of the eternal recurrence: "Is this moment one you want to experience over and over again?" If not, do something about it. While this is a lofty call to constant action, an ideal

instead of a practical way of life, it remains an effective reminder that we are always in a state of becoming, that we have the option of shaping what we become and changing how we live. But how do we know what to change? By working to make beings and meaning-making relationships conspicuous we can begin to interpret those modes of being and preconceptions that reinforce behaviours and attitudes that we may possess but do not fully realize. By using these philosophical tools in conjunction with writing as a therapeutic practice, I have been able to actively indulge in a self-reflexive exercise that lends itself not just to correction but also discovery. In the fictional example presented above, I was able to connect several disparate beings (family members and social taboos/constructs) whose connections would have otherwise, I feel, gone unnoticed. This practice is of course entirely subjective and hardly applicable to everyone in all circumstances. What is applicable is the example of adapting philosophical concepts into practical exercises that double as both a mode of discovery as well as a technique of self-care. By approaching the writing process prepared with the goal of making the inconspicuous conspicuous, I discovered that I was better able to explore multiple points in my lived experience and make usable sense out of them.

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