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Multimodal life writing with middle-school students: a literacy of empathy with/in one another

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MULTIMODAL LIFE WRITING WITH MIDDLE-SCHOOL STUDENTS: A LITERACY OF EMPATHY WITH/IN ONE ANOTHER

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MULTIMODAL LIFE WRITING WITH MIDDLE-SCHOOL STUDENTS: A LITERACY OF EMPATHY WITH/IN ONE ANOTHER

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Dedication

This project is dedicated to

my wife Kim,

who continues to encourage, understand, and
give of herself while I tend to this work.

Your way of being, the person you are, inspirits me

and continues to harken my heart

in a grounding of love, respect, and way of living.
Abstract

Educators’ and students’ lives become validated and purposeful in the creation of, and attentive tending to, life stories. With/in the creative space opened through life-writing theory, students and teachers can come to develop a deeper sense of empathy towards the self and others in the classroom community. Utilizing arts-based research via narrative and poetic inquiry, life writing, and multimodality, I spent five months working with Grade 6 students in a Calgary middle school in the creation and sharing of life writing, and in subsequent group interviews. I collected data to be hermeneutically interpreted within my own poetic-inquiry texts. In these texts, I was able to tease out four thematic threads woven together in the fabric of my writing: Place, Other, Self, and Teacher. In the interpretation of data—student texts and my own—the rich empathic understanding of self and other became deeply apparent. If instituted as curriculum in classrooms, life writing can help in forging more empathic social futures for all members of a classroom community. This literacy of empathy, this wisdom of shared vulnerability, cultural respect, and political vitality, will result in a deeper understanding of what we need to live well together with/in these complicated cosmopolitan times.
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**Introduction**

I came to life writing because I needed to. I needed to not in order to complete a project for my graduate program at the University of Lethbridge, but I came to it because my life craved it. I came to it because I could no longer live with the juxtapositions inherent in my life, in my way of being without attending to them deeply. In life writing, I am able to write my truths and questions, face them, linger with them, and gain the courage to go about the messy business of untangling and unfurling from that with which I can no longer live well with. Jones (2014) writes of an “academic world caught up in the very world (of planned obsolescence, disposability, and consumerism)” (p. 19). It is this f(rigid) model of industrial education, and the withdrawal of human connection that the theory, the choice of life writing, aims to combat through a re/newal of understanding the self and the other, and how we can come to live aright in this place, in this time (Aoki, 1986/1991/2005). Aoki asks what it means to live well; what it is to live with/in “the zone between curriculum-as-plan and curriculum-as-lived experience [and] learning to dwell aright within it” (p. 163). As teachers, as humans, our goal is not to overcome the tension in our lives, but to learn to live well in accepting that tension, and to embrace the possibility of understanding that the tensionality holds. We must learn to live to accept the questions that arise, we must try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms, like books written in a foreign tongue. [We must not] now strive to uncover answers: they cannot be given…because [we] have not been able to live them. And what matters is to live everything. (Rilke, 1933/2013, p. 24)
We live with/in a society where human contact has been relegated to e-contact via instant messaging, button clicks, and emojis. We are witnessing and raising a generation of humans who do not have the opportunity to learn empathy and compassion through direct human relations, what Herriot (2014) describes as “the industrial economy [finding] ten thousand ways to prostitute the collective eros at the very core of community” (p. 110). Often, children and adults are spending hour after hour glued to personal devices, lacking real human interaction and social activity. The cruelest messages are sent at the push of a button, and the resulting reaction is often unseen. The sender has no idea of the impact of his or her communication, and the recipient is left alone to make sense of complex emotions. In order to live well, we must understand, we must bear witness to how we affect those with whom we live. Life writing opens anew opportunities of literacy—the literacy of the self, and the literacy of the other—perhaps even a literacy of empathy with/in one another and a wisdom of vulnerability in acts of writing and sharing (Morden, 2012).

A recurring theme in much of my writing involves the moments when I have become shocked awake—vibrantly present to the moment and opportunities that exist with/in each moment. Life writing is an open invitation to linger with these “moment(s) of risk, moment(s) of opportunity” where we become “startled to see ourselves anew. A stop is a moment of possible recognition, or reinvention, a reminder of what has been lost, an offering of what possibilities we might consider” (Fels, 2012, p. 334). When we seek a way of being that is different from that in which we currently dwell, we allow one’s self the space and time to become aware and recognize that these moments can be astonishing (from tonare, “to thunder” in Latin) (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2015).
Curriculum sojourner and scholar Erika Hasebe-Ludt draws on Heilbrun’s (1999) description of these moments as being with/in “a state of liminality…to be poised upon uncertain ground, to be leaving one condition or country or self and entering upon another” (Heilbrun, as cited in Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, & Leggo, 2009, p. 99). The discord I feel upon the threshold of opportunity is re-imagined in terms of possibility. I find myself more aware of the opportunities that lie in hovering near the thresholds, between self/other, place, and way of being. The poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1933/2013) writes that “if you hold close to nature, to what is simple in it, to the small things people hardly see, all of a sudden [these] can become great and immeasurable…in your deepest consciousness, watchfulness and knowledge” (p. 24). In these spaces or folds, we find the rich and true meaning of our lives (Aoki, 1986/1991/2005).

In exploring my be/coming as a life writer, teacher, father, and husband, I present a number of liminal vignettes, which harken my calling to this way of being.

Lim en One

The class hushed as Matt¹ began to share his story. An engaged learner with literacy-learning issues, Matt had struggled in my Humanities class thus far. When it came to making meaning from writing in particular, this Grade 6 student would rush, be the first to slap his pencil down on his desk, and announce: “What do you do when you’re done?” However, during the past week, we had been focusing on creating and sharing of life writing. This particular prompt was: “Who is someone, anyone, that you would give anything to be able to spend just five more minutes with and why?” Until this point, we had focused on ‘external’ indicators of who we were as people, such as personal heroes,
favourite foods, and favourite movies, but this was the first time we had delved into internal, historical personal narratives.

Matt raised his hand to share and paused, waiting for his classmates to quiet down. His narrative started with his dog, an old blue heeler that he had grown up with. As the story evolved, we learned about the importance of friendship between animals and humans, loyalty, and love. As he neared the end of his narrative, Matt paused and took a deep breath. As he attempted to continue, his voice cracked, and his head slumped down onto his desk. His tiny shoulders began to heave in sobs, and he released his emotions.

This story had been sitting with/in Matt for two years. As it turned out, his dog had been attacked by coyotes and, as a result, had had to be put down. As Matt’s shoulders heaved, there was a long silence in the classroom. His peers, silent and reflective, spoke without words regarding the power of Matt’s narrative. Such long pauses can reflect a thoughtful mining of memory, a spark of connection, as Connie Blomgren echoed in a written comment after I had also shared a story of loss in a graduate class:

Thank you for your sharing today of your story. The long pause after you initially finished speaks to several things...including how powerful your story was/is...do not interpret the pause as anything more than processing time...one never knows what echoes your story may bring up. (C. Blomgren, personal communication, July 14, 2014)

A few moments passed after Matt had shared his writing, and another student, Eric, began to cry. Then he told his story about how his aunt had recently been diagnosed with breast cancer, and how he was scared of losing her. This prompted Mike, a recent immigrant from China, to put his head down. When prompted, he told us between sobs
that he was worried about his sister, whom the family had left back in China upon immigration.

In Matt’s sharing, and our collective listening of the story, many others felt empowered to share and encouraged to become vulnerable in the safe place we had created with/in our community. Students had begun to discover the power of life writing as a method to better understanding the self and the other in the collective sharing and experiencing of loss, and the complexities of our life texts.

**Limen Two**

We sat in Turcotte Hall of the University of Lethbridge, that first summer session of the Literacy in Globalized Canadian Classrooms graduate cohort, working with Dr. Cynthia Chambers and Dr. Erika Hasebe-Ludt. The class, a true snapshot of teachers in and around southern Alberta, held a nervous energy. We could feel and sense it. This course was NOT what we were thinking it was going to be. In spite of the front matter and literature dispersed in beige manila-tag envelopes and emails, we were ill-prepared for what was at the heart of this course: Learning to live well in this place, with these people. Assumptions had abounded that the course would revolve around ways to get students to be able to read and write in traditional confines of linear literacies: reading and writing. Perhaps there would be a smattering of new technologies thrown in because we all knew, as twenty-first-century ‘with-it’ teachers how important digital citizenship was, as well as the luxury and benefit of SMARTboards. So, our nervous energy was heightened when, on this day’s syllabus, we could see that we were being asked to share selected texts from recently written autobiographies—a first assignment handed in early.
What was the purpose?  
Do we have to?  
Mine is going to suck.  
This is embarrassing.  
This is a smattering of the thoughts that were racing through my mind at this point. I saw that I was third to share, and I was dreading it. The two people before me shared some funny and interesting anecdotes, and as we discussed composition and purpose of the story, the meaning of the vignette, my anxiety grew. I was being asked to share about a moment from my late teen years that had changed my life, and I had debated whether or not to include it within my first draft because it was so hard to write about, let alone speak and share. The writing was about the moment I had heard that a friend of mine had died in a car crash after being ejected head first through a window when the car hit the ditch.  

But, 13 years had passed, and writing it down had actually felt good, cathartically lightening my spirit. But now, to speak that moment for the first time in 13 years, in front of strangers, on this violently hot Lethbridge day, seemed overwhelming.  

I began to tell the story of the phone ringing. Silence. Of my dad coming up the stairs 15 minutes later to tell me the news. Sweating, my voice cracking, I could barely get the story out. Several pauses and catching of sobs made it possible.  

I sat there afterwards in silence, in the midst of pedagogy, intentionality, and curriculum-as-lived (Aoki, 1986/1991/2005). Moist eyes met my own, and from their seat amongst us, Erika and Cynthia created the space for my story to settle with/in each of us.
Cynthia came over, and we talked about the power of speaking a story, of the shared collective power of story, and she thanked me for sharing.

The direct impact could not be planned. The outcome could not be sought or planned, for that would come off as disingenuous or leading. However, the wisdom in the creating of the open and safe space for us to share the shards of our beings, the ignored, hardened, and heart/full vignettes, was what stayed with me. The impact of that sharing, and feeling of safety, trust, empathy, and compassion was the foundation on which our cohort was built. It bonded us, taught us what literacy was, and why twenty-first-century literacies were not linear, but organic and living, and that our stories mattered, because, as Thomas King (2003) states, “the truth about stories is that that’s all we are” (p. 2). I have carried this lesson, this moment with/in me for three years. It has guided my practice, influenced my being, and helped me to face some difficult truths I live with in compassionate and empathetic ways. This moment has transformed my practice.

Limen Three

This past Friday, one of the magnificent Chinook days of our Calgary winter this year, a solitary figure stood at the threshold of my classroom door. The figure stood strong like a pine amidst the torrents of spring flooding as the Grade 5 and 6 students flooded past. As the last student trickled out, the young woman stepped over the threshold and asked if I could talk for a minute.

~Stop~

Delivering my lesson via discussion of *The Giver* in Grade 6, I glanced over and saw Jenna whispering and looking at me. Her friend snickered, looked up, then quickly down at her book. This went on several more times, until the bell finally rang, dismissing
the group. Feeling somewhat vulnerable, and wondering what the two had been talking about, I approached them as they left the class.

“Nothing. It was nothing,” the friend iterated. “Jenna was just talking about the book.”

Instances like this occurred throughout the year, increasing in venom and resulting in my questioning why Jenna was so angry with me…why she had chosen me to single out. This sounds strange, feels difficult to type, because we are told not to let the wrath of students bother us, but truth be told, it did hurt, particularly because I had no idea what I had done, and I had to stand in front of Jenna and 60 other students each day and teach. I felt constantly ridiculed and mocked, even though it was clearly only one or two students.

Eventually, I called Jenna to the office and we talked with the vice-principal about appropriate social behavior and how we cannot all get along all the time, but we have to be respectful. We had several more meetings and discussions, all to no avail. It seemed that Jenna was not going to change her mind towards me, so I waited out the year, feeling insecure and completely exposed to the ire of an angry twelve-year-old.

~Stop~

A new year, a fresh start. The first week of school was exciting and vibrant, and I was relieved in the same way a bullied child is relieved when the bully moves away. Jenna was no longer in my class and I was free of her thick, negatively shrouded shadow. As I was talking with kids at lunch one day, a group of former students walked in, as they tend to, Jenna amongst them. Sullen and angry-looking as ever, she stayed at the back of the crowd while I chatted with the more talkative Grade 7s at the front. As the group
began to walk out, Jenna whispered something to the others, and they all began laughing at once. My neck turned red, and a pit dug in my stomach. It was not over.

Over the course of the next few weeks, we had a few run-ins in the hall, always with her looking upset and angry, mocking me. At one point, when a teacher came up and told me she had been saying awful things in class about me, I had had enough. I called her to the office, and asked her to sit down in our conference room.

“Jenna, what is wrong? What have I ever done to you?” I seethed.

“I don’t know. I was only joking,” she responded.

“Joking? This is not normal behaviour. People do not joke like this. It has gone on for more than a year now, and it is going to stop. You are making it difficult for me here, and you are being mean. There has to be a reason why,” I demanded, keeping my emotions in check.

“We’re just joking,” she cracked through tears, mouth pursed in an angry snarl.

“It has to stop. You do not have to like me. I do not have to like you. But this is stopping now, or I’m going to involve you, your parents, and the principal,” I threatened, starting to panic.

She agreed and left the conference room. I felt as though nothing was resolved, but I had treated her well, and I had set up my next move.

The rest of the year passed with her looking the other way when we crossed paths in the hall, and me glad she was doing so, although the tension never broke, was ever-present.

The year ended, and hearing that Jenna was going to the Calgary all-girls’ school made me sigh in relief.
The girl stepped forward and asked if I knew who she was. I looked at her face, now the face of a young woman, likely 15 or 16.

“Sorry, I have no idea,” I told her.

“It’s Jenna,” she responded, smiling shyly, and tucking her now-short hair behind her ears.

“Jenna? Hi! How are you?” I questioned, scared, throat thickening these four years later.

“I’m good. I had to come see you. I had to apologize for how I treated you. It wasn’t fair,” her voice quivered, but her face was gentle now, at peace—which was in direct contrast to the constant sneer and sallow eyes I knew her for. Her voice was confident, and though clearly this was Jenna, her entire aura was different, positive. She had changed.

“Wow! I’m completely speechless. What made you come back here?”

“Just this. I had to apologize. I’ve been meaning to, wanting to for a long time, but I didn’t know how. I was scared. I was so mean to you,” she confided.

Stunned, eyes stinging in this moment of courage, of transformation, I tried to tell her that it was old news, that it was forgotten, but the truth was she had hurt me. She had scarred me, and that relationship had been carried in my heart all of these years, a negative, deep stain that burdened me. She knew that. Jenna knew what she had done.

But now, here she was before me, truly changed, and completely vulnerable in her apology. We talked back and forth for a bit, her asking about my family, my asking about
girls’ school and now high school. We laughed, and talked—free in the space of forgiveness, opportunity, and courage.

As the conversation drew to a close, she again tried to apologize, but this time, I cut her off.

“Jenna, you have apologized. You have made my week, my year. We’re all good now. No worries,” I told her.

We hugged as she left, the wounds healed, and my dark stain lighter, my memories in this place transformed, as was the present. In life writing, we open ourselves up, become vulnerable. Each moment, each pause, each stop an opportunity for realizing a different path, a new way of being. In pausing and lingering with Jenna, in her courage and my forgiveness, we were changed, released of past selves and past anchoring burdens, lighter in spirit for having bonded. These lingering moments at the thresholds, these limens, when noticed and attended to, act to change present, past, and futures in meaning/fully and heart/fully wise ways.

**Methodology and Project Context**

As a Grade 5 and 6 Humanities teacher-researcher in Calgary, Alberta, I am interested in how people are connected, how we can come to understand our similarities and differences with/in our community, how we create a safe space for students and teachers to develop empathy for and with one/another, and how we can learn to live well together. I believe we must come to “live with ethos and empathy in relation to others in and outside classrooms; creating more collaborative and constructive learning and living communities” (Hasebe Ludt, Sinner, Leggo, Pletz, Simoongwe, & Wilson, 2010, p. 23). Life writing has been a key component of my curriculum for two years, and as such, the
implementation and delivery of the project was seamless. Students were already well versed in the artful practice of life writing and the sharing that entails. Each member of the Grade 6 class would complete a piece of writing in narrative, poetic, or drawn mode, and then we would spend time sharing our writing for those that were feeling the urge to share. During the writing and sharing, students were encouraged to be mindful and present in order to honour their own story and the stories of their peers. During sharing, I would often take notes of significant texts, wonderings, and wisps of thought that I felt were pertinent to the project. The data I gathered was then woven into my life writing within the framework of poetic inquiry. My final product reflects my interpretations of interviews, action-research data, student writing and sharing, and my own life writing in the context of the lived curriculum with my students.

The school population is drawn from middle-class suburban neighbourhoods in northwest Calgary. The student life writing was completed within the context of the classroom, as writing is a regular part of my Humanities curriculum in Grade 6. Interviews were conducted as part of the regular class, and the interpretation and analysis of collected data was completed in a spare room situated in our school. The project was completed over a five-month span, beginning in November 2014 and ending in March 2015.

At the outset of the project, a colleague explained the project and participant-selection process to the class. A colleague then drew 2 names at random from an envelope for each category (male, female, Alberta Education Special Coding, English Language Learners). Participants who returned permission forms to take part in the project delivered the forms to my colleague, who kept the names secured, private, and
unknown to me until the end of the project. I conducted small-group interviews with each student in the class as a part of the project. This is part of my regular curriculum with life writing and did not interfere with, or take away from, student learning in any way. Rather, it enhanced student learning and understanding of each other and their writing. Upon completion of the project, my colleague handed me the sealed envelope which, having been kept in a locked drawer, contained the names of the students who had granted me permission to use their data in the creation of my final research project. This alleviated any power that I had over students. Students were allowed to remain partially anonymous by each selecting a pseudonym that they would be referred to in their own texts and my poetic writing as part of my inquiry. Participants and parents and/or guardians were informed that for the duration of the project, I would be working closely with the students in group interviews, discussions, and interpretations of their multimodal life-writing projects. Students and parents were informed that I would be using narrative inquiry, which meant using stories to interpret lived experience and to collect data. Participants and parents were informed that the project’s purpose is to determine the effect of life writing on the development of empathy and understanding towards the self and peers within our classroom community.

We typically spend two hours per week inside of the Humanities classroom creating and sharing life writing. This project took place over a five-month span, culminating in March. My conducted interviews took place once per week for 10 weeks, with each group, and lasted for 15-20 minutes per interview. During the interviews, I was able to take notes and reference students’ texts that they were discussing in class.
Life-writing theory inherently involves writing about topics that are sometimes difficult for writers to uncover and explain. Writing, sharing, and listening to the stories can put participants, students, and the teacher in vulnerable positions. It was the intention of the study that through the writing and sharing of complex life stories, we would come to understand ourselves and our community in a more thoroughly empathetic manner and way of being. As such, I reminded potential participants that I would always be available for discussion and talk should they become anxious or fearful during the project. I made it clear that I would provide referrals to counseling services should the emotional toll appear to be too much for the potential participant. In the letter of consent, I ensured that potential participants and parents and/or guardians were aware that if they disclosed some issues in their texts, I would be bound to break confidentiality and might have to contact police and/or welfare agencies. I am bound by the Alberta Teachers’ Association (ATA) ethics and the Child Welfare Act, and thus I instructed potential participants and parents and/or guardians that texts produced throughout the course of this project, and this year, must be texts that potential participants were comfortable with sharing. I clearly indicated to parents and potential participants that participation was voluntary and that participants could withdraw from the project at any point without negatively impacting student grades.

Collected data and student texts have been woven into the heart of this final project, which is a collection of life-writing and poetic-inquiry texts, arranged thematically upon interpretation and analysis. The decisions about how the poems were woven together and arranged, both thematically and with respect to form and format, will be further discussed under the chapter heading “Harkening the Call of Poetic Wisdom.”
Theoretical Framework: Arts-Based Research

I have conducted this project purposefully within the overarching framework of arts-based research, within which life writing, multimodality, narrative inquiry, and poetic inquiry each have their grounding.

Dwelling With Life Writing

In our contemporary cosmopolitan Canadian classrooms, teachers and students are faced with evermore-complex contexts, curricular demands, and competitive pressures to succeed within the larger Canadian society. However, what we need in order to live mindful, whole lives is a literacy of engaging with/in ourselves and one another (Morden, 2012). In order to navigate our selves, our identities, and our lives, we must have the means by which to do so; we must be able to dwell with ourselves and others. Zaborowski (2005) describes dwelling as the fact that we can settle down in the world without either radically fleeing from the world or becoming wholly caught up in it, as that which “makes us first of all human, namely, the increasingly important human capacity … the ability to reflect on reality in a questioning, abiding, and attentive way” (p. 516).

For Zaborowski and the philosopher Martin Heidegger (1971), to dwell means to be alive in the moment—to attend to, and to be mindful of, what is happening in the present moment. Studying, co-constructing, and drawing narrative meaning from the act and theory of life writing allows us to dwell with our selves and the others with whom we dwell.

Chambers, Hasebe-Ludt, Leggo, & Sinner (2012) define life writing as a theorizing approach to educational inquiry and a method for it; a curricular and pedagogical practice; an artful and literary expression; a political and personal way of
being in the world; and a philosophical and spiritual attunement in relation to this world (p. xviv).

Chambers et al. (2012) remind us as well that “stories present possibilities for understanding the complex, mysterious, even ineffable experiences that comprise human living” (p. xx). Within my life-writing project, each participant, including myself, brings unique experiences, histories, and understandings that must be attended to if we are to mend and transform understandings of the self and the other in contemporary cosmopolitan classrooms. As life writers, “we seek to know our locations in connection with the past, the future, and others, as well as with our unfolding sense of self-identities” (Hasebe-Ludt, et al., 2009, p. 4).

Hasebe-Ludt et al. (2009) discuss the “potential risks and ethical obligations that arise when we open the doors to our own and others’ lives, and through this opening, seek and embrace transformation through education” (p. 1). This relates well to my own study on empathy through multimodal life writing and narrative inquiry. I must be ever-present and mindful of the precariousness and necessity of this work. The authors go on to question: “How are geography, autobiography, and memory connected? What is the curriculum of being human?” (p. 2). In my life-writing project, I wanted to study the effects of my attempts to transform the classroom empathetically, to see how we can all come to perceive ourselves differently, as transformed through empathetic relationships in a middle school in Calgary, Alberta. Hasebe-Ludt et al. (2009) write that “through relating to each other, we attend to our own education and to better understanding who and how we are in relation to others in the world” (p. 3). We need to understand
narrative, place, and temporality, in order to understand our selves and others more deeply.

Kadar (1993) submits that it is the act of the “disclosure of the self [that] defines the text” (p. xi). In my work, I am interested in what I call the wisdom of vulnerability, which will rely heavily on creating the community and context whereby writers, listeners, participants, and researchers feel comfortable enough to be put in precariously safe places in the acts of creating, sharing, listening to, and dwelling with life writing. Kadar goes on to relate that reading habits must change when we look at life writing. For Kadar, we must “read in a way that allows our own habits and prejudices to show through” (p. xii). It is this discovery of self and the other that guides my inquiry project. I am interested to see how my own practice, prejudices, and preconceived attitudes towards learners transform as I read, linger with, construct, and attend to, this project.

Heard (1995) has written extensively on the art of life writing and its importance in understanding our homes and our selves. For Heard, “home is what can be recalled without effort—so that sometimes we think, oh that can’t be important. Memories are the blueprints of home” (p. 2). In her experience, Heard maintains that writers must start from home—from what they know because “that’s where the real home is: inside” (p. 2). Heard further stipulates that when we are writing, how we are in the world, how we choose to dwell in the world, is important. These views and understandings matter and in writing, we are forced to speak even when we so desperately want to remain silent, because our voices matter. Heard implores writers to “fall in love at least three times a day” (p. 60). By falling in love each day, by loving more than immediate family members, we come to understand better our world and our place in the world. We
develop the empathy that we so deeply need to survive in our current social, cultural, political, and economic context.

Heard (1995) encourages writers to explore ideas, values, and notions such as synchronicity, injustice, ancestors, death, and the beauty in the everyday. Her topics of life writing encourage the writer to explore depths and crevices of their experience and discourse that will help them to understand who they are with/in this one life they have to live.

Christensen (2000, 2009) has written extensively regarding social-justice issues inside contemporary classrooms. In her writing she encourages the exploration of injustices. She also stresses the importance of community building and being able to listen to one another, to accept each community member for who he or she is, and to accept that there are diverse ways of exploring, understanding, and being in the world. In her work with students, Christensen (2009) discusses the need to “construct a classroom where students feel safe enough to be wild and risky in their work” (p. 1). It is in the sharing of our deep and important stories that their magic takes hold. It is this wisdom of vulnerability paired with a deep listening that will work to create empathy and understanding in and for all members of the classroom.

Christensen (2009) situates her life-writing practice within critical literacy theory, stating that when we begin from the premise that students need to be “fixed,” invariably we design curriculum that erases students’ home language and culture; we fail to find the strength and beauty in the experience and heritage that students bring with them to school (p. 2).
Like Cummins et al. (2005), Walsh (2008), and Danzak (2011), Christensen (2000, 2009) advocates for each and every unique learner and story that enters her classroom. Canadian classrooms need this pedagogy, this lived curriculum, in these current tenuous contexts. Rather than basing her life writing on deficits, Christensen sees gifts. Ultimately for Christensen, as a life-writing theorist, the act of writing is political. It thus helps to shape not only our understanding of our lives, histories, and contexts, but life writing can also help to shape a better future for each of us.

Christensen (2009) writes that “putting students’ lives at the center of the curriculum also tells them they matter—their lives matter, their ancestors’ lives are important” (p. 4). When teachers work collaboratively with students in creating multimodal life writing, we must remember that the heart of the story, what truly matters, is the personal narrative.

**Dwelling With Multimodality**

Within this project’s scope, I deeply hope that through the implementation of a multimodal life-writing theory, I am able to avoid the alienating effect of traditional approaches to literacy in education, which have resulted in devastating and outdated pedagogies placed more in the realm of exclusionism, individualism, elitism, with overt ties to segregation and the Euro-centric belief that assimilation is the correct way to educate. I utilize multimodality, what Walsh (2008) defines as a “literacy of the meaning making that occurs at different levels through the reading, viewing, understanding, responding to, producing and interacting with multimodal texts” (p. 106). I personally define multimodality as the complex, interwoven layers of meaning making negotiated, produced and interpreted through gesture, objects, viewing, speaking, listening, writing,
and various digital means of communication. Multimodal life writing opens doors of opportunity for students, rather than closing doors in despair. It allows and celebrates what Hasebe-Ludt et al. (2009) define as literacy engagement with words, stories, and poems: “[W]e hope that [meaning makers] can remember their own stories, gain the courage to tell them and to address the complicated issues of living ethically and with empathy among all our relations” (p. 12).

Many educators would agree with the ideas behind multimodal theory, but in practice, they continue with a traditional model because, as one of my colleagues put it, “If they can’t read and write [English], what good are they going to be? They’ll drop out of high school.” I would argue that pedagogy is indeed, as the New London Group claimed, “a teaching and learning relationship that creates potential for building learning conditions leading to full and equitable social participation” (Cazden, et al., 1996, p. 60). If we are to engage our increasingly diverse Canadian classrooms in learning, it must be done with respect and honour, not through exclusionary, alienating traditional approaches that benefit no student in our classrooms. This project posits that it is through a multimodal approach to literacy, and indeed education, that our students “remake themselves. Students will reconstruct and renegotiate their identities” (Cazden, et al., 1996, p. 76) based on the layers of acceptance and learning that will take place in these classrooms. Diverse learners in complex, contemporary classrooms have much more to offer and provide in our classrooms than current linear notions of literacy pedagogy allow. We must value, respect, and share the diversities of these students in order to create a social and cultural fabric that will benefit classrooms now, and Canadian society in the future.
When our classrooms are closed off to a significant number of stories, each learner suffers. The opportunity for new immigrants, English Language Learners (ELL) born in Canada, and students with learning codes to share and make meaning of the world is completely lost. Multimodal texts such as digital stories, picture books, dual-language identity texts, etc., provide opportunities for all learners and teachers in our classrooms through critical literacy, which “addresses imbalances of power and, in particular, pays attention to the voices of those who are less frequently heard” (Pahl & Rowsell, 2011, p. 129). It is in these multimodal texts “that students invest their identities and become the protagonists of their own stories” (Lopez-Gopar, 2007, p. 170). It is in this sharing and risk taking that we move our classrooms, and thus the world, forward towards an inclusive and respectful future that does not favour one form of literacy, one language, or one race of people.

It is the use of multimodal texts that provides the vehicle for engagement, design, and learning to take place between learners who may not speak a common language, and which allows all students to feel a part of the ‘common text’ of the classroom. The informed practice of a multimodal pedagogy will allow each learner to “generate meanings based on her or his previous experience, culture, and knowledge of social and image conventions” (Serafini, 2010, p. 93). The greater the number of perspectives and ideas shared between learners, the greater and more in-depth the understanding of a given topic or identity will be.

When ELL students see themselves as integral and valued members of the classroom community, as with all learners, it allows them to “construct an image of the [self] as intelligent, imaginative, and linguistically talented” (Cummins, 2009, p. 244).
Barriers are brought down and the entire community gains access to invaluable insight, information, ideas, and perspectives that would not be possible without the implementation of a multimodal pedagogy. Language is seen as a valued diversity and as an asset, not a segregating disadvantage certain to relegate the ELL student to, at best, mute mediocrity in an unaccepting and uncaring society. In terms of power balance, with the use of multimodal texts, students “might transform the situation and provoke the possibility of new identities, relations of power, and narrative forms and functions” (Enciso, 2011, p. 22). Multimodality allows for equity in the classroom, and for a much-valued power balance between learners and between learners and the teacher, which a traditional view of literacy education does not allow.

At the core of multimodal life writing is the relationship between the teacher and the student. The expectations of students have shifted in the classroom in the twenty-first century. Prensky (2010) points out that today’s students “want to make decisions and share control. They want to be respected, to be trusted, and to have their opinions valued and count. They want to create using the tools of their time” (pp. 2-3). In short, today’s students want to have their identities respected in the classroom community. The change will be impossible without this respect, because “students will be reluctant to invest their identities in the learning process if they feel their teachers do not like them, respect them, and appreciate their experiences and talents” (Cummins, 2009, p. 236). Teachers must create an environment for risk-taking and identity investment in order to reap the true benefit of multimodal pedagogy. Without this empathy and compassion, all tools of multimodality will remain just that: tools. “ELL students will engage academically to the extent that instruction affirms their identities and enables them to invest their identities in
learning” (Cummins, et al., 2005, p. 3). Teachers must be able to establish these opportunities in class through multimodal literacies. The extent to which teachers create an environment for identity investment, compassion and caring, is ultimately a reflection of that teacher’s curriculum and pedagogy: “As they open up identity options for students, teachers are also defining their own identities” (Cummins, et al., 2005, p. 12). Teachers must be honest with themselves and what they know to be right. They have the chance and ability to construct situations of power shift and critical literacy in their classrooms.

Heard (1995) touches on the importance of what she calls “visual archaeology” and the power of photographs to stir memories and bring them back from the recesses of our minds (p. 77). I would like to broaden this term and rename it “artifactual critical literacy,” as discussed in Pahl and Rowsell (2011). This form of literacy stems from students bringing in artifacts from home to “honour the home experience” of the child in order to gain the confidence and courage to discuss, write about, and interpret their lives, and rebalance the scales of power to allow equity and equality of all learners and participants in having their voices hear and honoured (Pahl & Rowsell, 2011, p. 130). For my purpose in this project, photographs provide important data and structure for my final written product. Poetic inquiry theorist McCullis (2013) argues further that the “combination of photography and poetry…capture[s] the wholeness and complexity of the human experience and create[s] empathetic reactions in others” (p. 95).

**Dwelling with Narrative Inquiry**

It is important to note that life-writing theorists Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, and Leggo (2009) and Prendergast (2009) write of life writing as an artful approach to
research, and that there is a strict delineation between art and research. Prendergast writes that poetic inquiry is not poetry, but inquiry in the direct form of poems. McKerracher and Hasebe-Ludt (2014) submit that life writing and the hermeneutic interpretation of the stories are “opportunities to expand the domain of art education” (p. 118) to work towards a pedagogic approach and curriculum of empathy and care of the self and the other. Through this practice of artful narrative inquiry, we are gifted the possibility of deep reflection on the lived experience, developing a greater sense of equity, equality, and justice, main tenets of a democratic society. For William F. Pinar, the arts-based approach to research and writing “allows us to (re)connect with memory, to reach out from the self to others/the world/the cosmos through stories that are profoundly relational as well as self-reflective” (Pinar, as cited in McKerracher & Hasebe-Ludt, 2014, p. 120).

The multiplicity of modes and deep re/searching and mining of personal lived experience and interpretation of life, and the consequent artful creation and sharing, invite deep contemplation, understanding, and empathic living during complex times of rapid social, political, educational, and cultural transformation. We can develop a generative, more holistic approach to understanding who we are, how we are with others, and where our place is in Canadian society.

**Dwelling With Poetic Inquiry**

Poetry
Slows us down
Calls us to play
Invites us to listen,
Opens ways of knowing,
Provides a site for dwelling.
(Carl Leggo, 2005a, p. 93)
An Artful Way of Being

Poetic inquiry allows for the becoming and an organic nature of classrooms, students and learning. It is inviting, it is accepting, and it is not rigidly elite and dis/cluding. It is in/clusive and replete with a sense of wonder that is not final, it is not perfect. The poetry winds and extends, not finding final answers, but seeking to artfully unfurl tufts of stories we encounter. Never finished, never final.

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What is a Poem? (Unfinished)

Dr. Leah Fowler once Told me in correspondence That she truly believes that it is When we are lost and Don’t know where to turn, When we’re truly stuck, That is where we find our selves, Where our creative spirit kicks in.

A poem is being stuck, Frustrated and coaxing words from Nether regions of the mind, Teasing tongue mercilessly.

A poem is in/spiration On a sweaty and restless night, A rush to put pen on paper Before the moment is lost, Lapped up in a barrage of Anxious thoughts that seem to strike in the solace of Midnight breezes weaving deftly Through gentle lilac leaves, Pushing a shroud of feathery clouds
Across the deep ink night.

A poem is the silence of empathic understanding
The stillness and reverence of children,
As a peer recounts a family tragedy,
That wracks his soul and leaves him
Barren.

A poem is the knowing that you carry with you
In your being, with/in your practice,
More wisdom and good, more empathic learning
And wisdom,
Than the small thinking of a provincially mandated
Achievement Test
Can deconstruct and damage.
A poem is walking and talking with
An intern teacher,
Fresh and full of ideas and wonder,
Willing to listen,
And unscathed by the cynicism and sinister beings
Some seasoned teachers can bring.

A poem is attending to students,
Aokian walking with students and inviting
Them to dwell, be, and listen
To their own hearts,
And the hearts of others,
Learning to linger and striving to build
Empathic and compassionate communities.

A poem is an email from a colleague:
“Had a chat with Jack yesterday about how much he misses your class because you made
it feel like a family. He said he knew so much about his classmates and felt so close to
them.”

A poem is having the patience
To listen to a child screaming at you,
And to know that the child,
At this time,
Needs to be able to scream,
And that it is not personal,
It just is.

A poem is silence and listening,
Knowing now is not the time to share your story,
But listen to that of others,
That others need to be heard,  
So that you can learn.

A poem is feeling comfort in solace and solitude,  
And allowing the beauty of the Byzantium night sky  
To stir, silence, and comfort,  
Under its vast cloak,  
Creating that careful realm between in/significant.

A poem is living to embrace  
The new,  
The different  
With/in a sense of wonder, of delight, and curiosity.  
A poem is forgiving and forgetting  
As much as it is seeking the new  
And never seen,  
For in forgiving and forgetting,  
We are able to see anew.

A poem is a conversation that lasts  
3 pots of steeped tea,  
Linger ing over topics and themes  
We do not normally delve into,  
The only sign of the passage of time  
The mounting tea bags and water  
Rings on the table.

A poem is the wisdom that it is never complete,  
Never final,  
But continuing to wind and unfurl,  
Continuously becoming.

Poetic inquiry is a form of qualitative research that allows the researcher and volunteer participants to “synthesize experience in a direct and effective way” (Prendergast, 2009, p. 545). In this case, the experience is the e/affect of life-writing theory on a middle-school Grade 6 class in a middle-class Calgary classroom. I was able to conduct interviews and write my own poetry based on my classroom observations, interactions, and wonderings, as well as share numerous life-writing stories within our classroom for the duration of this research project. The data collection and analysis were
stripped down and artfully represented in poetic formats that detail the rich lived experience of a teacher and students over the course of six months.

The research data I was able to collect and synthesize into poems is powerful, deeply moving, and highly articulate. Of poetic inquiry, Prendergast (2009) writes that it “will carry within it the power to move its audience affectively as well as intellectually” (p. 546). The poetry that we wrote together as a class, and the life writing that we were able to create and share often moved us to laughter, tears, and moments of silent, deep listening in which our bonds were strengthened as the “yarn became more tangled in creating our stories and tying us together in a community” (Bob, interview, January, 2015).

In the practice of poetic inquiry, the researcher is invited to slow down, to bear witness to the wonderful “flashes in the familiar, holes opened up like portals to disclose vistas never visited” (Leggo, 2000, p. 11). In the carefully constructed time I have spent in writing, reflecting, sharing, and being with students and my self in this project, I have been able to bear witness to the extra-ordinary lives of each person I dwell with. I have come face to face with some of my own deep-rooted feelings and unsavoury characteristics that I seek to attend to, not fix, but find new possible ways of being. McCullis (2013) theorizes the approach of poetic inquiry as “a window into the heart of human experience” that allows for the possibility of a deeper ethnographic understanding (p. 83). Poetic inquiry has allowed me to question, to linger in the “whys” and “how comes?” I have been fortunate enough to be enriched with the stories of the students with whom I dwell in this empathic community. David Jardine writes that “children can bring about the transformation and renewal of the centre” (as cited in Wiebe, 2012, p. 198). In
slowing down, and listening, the class has become closer, enriched, and deeply intertwined. The empathy this particular group is able to show one another is astounding and is a noted characteristic of this group. The students in this group are patient, kind, and through my interviews and poetic meanderings, I have indeed come to the conclusion that poetic inquiry and life writing theory have each played interloping and interwoven roles in this gelling of community.

Poetic inquiry is not that shiny new method that all the teachers are implementing in their classrooms. It is not formulaic, but hermeneutic. It is not fixed, or linear, but transformative and intuitive—it is enchanting and teasing, inviting and enriching. As Wiebe (2012) writes regarding programmed teaching, “perhaps our striving for what is a best practice, what information is of most worth, or what is the best way to say this or that, is ‘thin’ like chicken noodle soup without the chicken, or the noodles” (p. 201). Poetic inquiry, and poetic ways of being, do not fit the mold of predictability and a one-size-fits-all education system. Poetic inquiry invites “imagination [that] will lead students [and educators] to the confidence to live outside of the structures which restrict them” (Wiebe, 2012, p. 202)—the very structures that we are enduring in the forced extension of provincial achievement tests, programmed curriculum, and professional development in our city and province. Poetic inquiry has encouraged me to more deeply believe that what we need is to work towards understanding the self and the other, what Wiebe (2012) calls a “translation of experience, particularly the inner, often unseen experience” (p. 202). I need this understanding, this sharing, in order to live well, to understand my being, my place, and my life in the presence of others in a diversity of places.
In poetic and interpretive inquiry, the writer/researcher is able to use the data collected during interviews, noticings, field notes, and journals, and then use that data to interpret the phenomena that has occurred; make sense of what is happening in his or her own words, in that time and in that place. The writing itself, if honest and honouring the writer’s experience, “will carry within it the power to move its audience affectively as well as intellectually and will deal with the kinds of topics that lead into the affective experiential domain” (Prendergast, 2009, p. 546). As a researcher of my experience, and that of my student participants, my goal is to explain my personal interpretation of that qualitative data collected with/in myriad texts to help me directly explain and infer my experience to the audience. I hope to educate and connect with the audience through my vulnerability and articulate synthesis of data so that, when finished a reading of my work, the reader/writer can better empathize and understand the complexity, possibility, and wonder of life writing.

Within these complex, hyper-speed, and demanding times as a teacher in Calgary, Alberta, the practices of poetic inquiry and life writing have re/focused and rejuvenated my pedagogical being and knowing. In these practices, Leggo (2005b) intones that “by writing about our experiences, we can become more effective teachers, as well as teachers motivated by more joy and hope” (p. 441). Poetic inquiry, teaching, and living demand that the researcher/writer be attuned to moments, be reflective, be present, and be thought/fully more human. The practices help to humanize students once more, moving them to develop caring and courageous relationships and bonds more brimming with meaning and understanding than the most clearly articulated Learner Outcome from the Program of Studies. Quite often, those in the field of education who find themselves more
in tune with rank-and-file pedagogy and curriculum that adhere to fads, ‘experts’ doling out sit-and-git advice, and linear-based practice, admonish relationship building with students. They may come equipped with phrases such as “of course, we all do that” or “yeah, that’s the basics of education…let’s move past that.”

Underhill states that “the first snag to avoid is surely that of adopting a set scheme because we have read about it in a book, or because it suits someone else” (as cited in Leggo, 2005b, p. 446). In these times, we cannot allow the cold heart of linear practice to diminish or decimate the need to be human, to share and understand one another in deeper, more richly empathetic and complex ways. Poetic inquiry requires us to unclutter that which is not of utmost value from our lives and to “listen deeply…hear what is not being said…be empathetic, and aware, non-judgmental, and cautious” (Neilson, as cited in Prendergast, 2009, p. 550). Poetic inquiry and life writing constantly remind us to be questioning: What is of most worth? What is important to me in this time? What does this student, this human need most right now in this moment? Poetic inquiry asks us to dig into our hearts, past judgments, cynicism, brash and negative thinking, and into what is truly important in our lives and in our curriculum. Poetic inquiry requires that we give time and space to ensure that we do not “turn away from each others’ pain [and] refuse to honour their winding paths, the complex journeys they have made” (Neilson, as cited in Prendergast, 2009, p. 551). Poetic inquiry requires us to work towards a place of living well together in these complicated times.

In the method of poetic inquiry, as is the case in narrative inquiry, the writer/researcher is just as likely to discover truths about self as to reach understandings of the other. Prendergast (2009) reminds us that “creating poetic inquiry is a performative
act, revealing researcher/participants as both masked and unmasked, costumed and bared, liars and truth-tellers, actors and audience, offstage and onstage in the creation of research” (p. 547).

Leggo (2005b) suggests that this is precisely what educators need in order to balance our lives and make sense of our lived experience. We must “attend to the inner life. As educators we need to listen to our spirits, our hearts, our imaginations, our emotions, our bodies, our minds” (pp. 445-446). Poetic inquiry invites the researcher to attend to the self, to evoke one’s thoughts, feelings, and experiences and to write these ‘lines,’ expose these inner lives, in order to understand self and others more fully.

Gaylie (2012, p. 118) writes:

The place of poetry
Belongs to silence,
Trust, care, love,
And it is at once
Powerful and gentle.
The place of poetry is also
A place of vulnerability.
For many people,
A difficult place.

A methodology for poetic inquiry is to position it as an artistic practice carried out within a research framework that cannot and must not diminish the critical/aesthetic qualities of these kinds of poems as poetry.

(Monica Prendergast, 2009, p. 549)

A Found Poem From the Writings of Prendergast and Leggo

Poetic inquiry nurtures trustful living,
A communion with its
Connotations of deep connections
And relationship—
Heart resonating with the hearts
Of others—
A transformational process of self-creation
And being attuned to the lived experience of others.
And to remember that as poet,
I too am the poem.
Poetic inquiry/living brings us closer
To the data,
To the lives and lines of

Our selves, of other.
Researcher, participants.
Masked, unmasked.
Costumed, bared.
Liars, truth tellers.
Actors, audience.

Allowing truth to show its face
In mysterious moments of coalescence.

Poetic inquiry invites us to listen deeply, interpretively,
Listen under words;
Hear what is not being said.
For how can we turn away from
Each other’s pain
Refusing to honour winding paths
And complex journeys
Of the others,
Of our selves?
Poetic inquiry is a window into the
Heart of human experience,
The wholeness and complexity of
Human experience
Which creates empathetic reactions
In others,
Space to pursue fresh ways of seeing,
Of observing and examining experience—
A basic capacity for
Human dwelling.
Harkening the Call of Poetic Wisdom

This chapter of poetic inquiry represents a culmination of research for this project. Each of the sections begins with the word *harkening*, which etymologically can be traced back to the verb *to give ear, listen* in Old English (from *heorcnian*, “to hear” in Old English) (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2015). In the 1800s, the verb *hark* is linked back to hunting dogs who retraced their steps to find a lost scent. Each of these etymological foundations of the verb *hark* is meaningful in the creation, interpretation, and organization of my poetic inquiry project as I came to retrace the roots and routes of the course of my life in order to better understand my *place*, my *self*, my *relations with the other*, and my *self as teacher*. In the rendering of this life writing text, I have both listened to, and heard, my heart deeply, and I have come to understand my self in different and meaning/full ways. The life writing research has been rendered into four sections, each of which was formed hermeneutically upon the completion of my poetic inquiry. As a researcher, I closely read and reread my poems, and was able to extract common threads amongst them, entwining the writing with/in themes of *place*, *self*, *relationships, and teaching*. Of course, each of the poems could be housed within different sections, depending on the reading and interpretation of the poem. That being said, then, the writing, and the reading, are never truly done, but left open to change with the interpretation of the reader.

The sections of poetic inquiry begin with writing that reflects the importance of place in our lives, and from that grounding and understanding of place, how we come to know and understand ourselves and the world differently. Ideas of place, and the importance of place can change over time, as different aspects come to be interpreted
differently, such as my own poems about my house and town growing up. The following section is based on research of my own self, and new understandings of who I am at the time of writing. Even in readings of these poems weeks after writing, they have changed, I have transformed, yet they help me to better understand who I was and am now, though as Leggo often intones, the more I discover about myself, the less I know, and that is a lot to know. From poetic inquiry of self, the writing moves towards the theme of relations with the other, and how I, and others, have come to understand ourselves and those with whom we dwell in this world—how we come to know ourselves is often based on how we know our selves with the other. The final thread with/in the organization of these poems is based on my life as a teacher. This section is directly influenced by, and a part of, each of the previous sections—that is to say, harkening of the heart of teaching requires us to understand place, as well as relationships with self and the other in order to become a teacher who dwells well with/in these complex cosmopolitan times.

Throughout the artful texts, I have used a variety of fonts, italicized texts, bold texts, and word arrangements in order to more creatively and articulately interpret data and make meaning for myself and my audience.

**Harkening Heart of Place**

Teaching and working with Aksisstoyiitapiiya’kii [Dr. Chambers] has been a rewarding experience, one where I have learned more about place. This has helped me to understand that my autobiography is embedded in the land of my ancestors. (Narcisse Blood, 2009, p. xvi)

The hope that by describing the places I live I can learn to be both here and there with others, better. (Tasha Henry, 2012, p. 136)
It is not the grudge, but the grief that matters, and what we are going to do about it. It is where we are that matters. By learning to do what is appropriate in this place, and doing it together, perhaps we can find the common ground necessary to survive. (Cynthia Chambers, 2008, p. 125)

What the Towering Lodgepoles Tell Me

Our car comes to a rest
on the banks of the
North Saskatchewan River
[which, more quickly than ever,
gnaws, erodes, devours the bank
next to our cabin]
and I disappear,
  engulfed,
  blended,
  intertwined,
  interlaced
with/in the
lodgepole and aspen groves
Indian Paintbrush and Juniper.

I crave this moment,
this re/kindling , re/spirit ing,
this place.
“...The further inside you the place moves,
the more your identity in intertwined with it."^4

I have come to know this place:
to know there is a survey stake
from 1919,
pounded by some wild adventurer
covered in mosquito welts,
lapping up life,
hammered in due left of the second curve
in the winding path.

To know that the beavers linger and whittle
and otherwise busy themselves across the marsh
on an island flanked by river’s current,
some two hundred feet from the cabin.

To know there is an old GWG jacket,
faded water bottle
trapped on the inside pocket
discarded amongst the brittle thicket
of flood-killed willows
behind the cabin,
its lining mistaken for a kill site.

My wife asks where I went
but never why.
My father in law
knows why I go without any questions,
just stories about the land he
has cultivated and uprooted;
homesteaded at 19.

It took me years of this wandering,
this losing of myself in place—
in Barrio Norte of Buenos Aires,
the hills of San Cristobal de las Casas
medinas of Marrakech
the folding spine of abandoned rail beds,
still stretching across the
wide back of the prairie
near my home in eastern Alberta.

To understand the pull,
to understand that the
further inside the place I move,
the more my
identity becomes intertwined
with/in that place;
that they become more and more
one and the same

In the solace sought in the solitude\(^5\)
and reflection in the respite
of moose paths and deerways,
next to the constant smoothing and erosion
of the North Saskatchewan River,
in coming to know the place,
I am beginning to know my/self.
Canadian curriculum theorists must come to understand that the topos from which they write is the physical, imaginary, and sociopolitical landscape they share with the communities and children on behalf of whom they work and write. (Cynthia Chambers, 1999, p. 12)

206, 5th Avenue West Hanna

Where I grew up, an only child, insecure, sensitive my world as I know it is tremoring walk lightly, tread deftly, fade to nothing

The CNR is sending dad away for a new job, a better position, away from us and in the heat of that time, on that night before departure, fault lines appear in angry outbursts that I, his only son, am an embarrassment. In that moment, I hate him; but my mom’s begging eyes lead me upstairs
to console him, his shoulders shaking, back to me, telling me that it’s ok for guys to cry sometimes. and I tell him it’s ok, that I don’t hate him, though it took me twenty years to let this go. The elementary school Where I cut my teeth on the east side of Calgary and spend many nights running from teaching; running towards the students Where school board directives inhumanly directed us to show no emotion; invite no counter thoughts, to toe the school board line upon the closure of the school, the slow death of a community Where I unabashedly and openly wept with students of three years on our last day, moment, time, together. Room 16, Language Arts Where I was called to the office—out of character in grade 8, to see my mom standing there, shak/ing, shake/n, shook. There was an accident. Her brother, My uncle, Gordon Was dead. We had just seen him. His daughter wasn’t aware, Didn’t know—she has to know. We have to find her. And so I re/enter the classroom, Changed. In that moment. And murmur “I, we, have to go.” Laprida 1070, dept. 6A Buenos Aires, Argentina Where I have locked myself away Physically/emotionally
from anyone that ever mattered.
Suspicion, mistrust, and misguided expectations
d/evolve into pain, shouting, throwing ugliness
that I can/not let go of
not because I’m a masochist,
but because I have a fear of
this is the best I can do.
J.C. Charyk Hanna School
Where we started grade 10
as a class of 52
whittled down to 38 graduates in 3 years;
8 drop outs– the Heathens,
Whose school lives were so utterly miserable
that dropping out gave them hope
that the world could get better.
And we let it happen:
the Haves, the teachers, the community,
We went through each day,
each violence,
and passed it off, shrugged, laughed, mimicked,
and let it happen.
That shame is with me still.
Nurse’s Room, Simon Fraser School,
Where I watched,
a witness for my Assistant Principal,
As Sherman Mark
Emptied his pockets, removed his jacket,
socks, and his tattered backpack
of papers like leaves in a swirl,
A hapless search
for contraband that was never there,
a lost 15 year old dignity shredded in front of two adults
another wedge, another roadblock,
back turned,
trust ripped away,
And he is still suspended
indefinitely.
As if that is going to help.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

When I Think of Poland…

When I think of Poland,
I think of my family

The countryside.
My Irish accent throws people off.
I’m actually Polish
And I want people to know my history,
Where I’m from…

Where my family is from,
So they know me better.
My grandma helped to make a special day
Where we make perogies
And dance.

Everyone in the area comes and
It lasts all night… there’s beer, sausage,
Laughter.

People here don’t know about that
Side of me…
What’s important and who I am…
Sharing this helps people understand me
And why I might be someone
More,
Someone different than they think…
I don’t want to lose my culture,
I want to share and protect it—
It’s a part of me.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

With the certainty of death people will be less likely to take life, and one another, for granted. (Narcisse Blood, as cited in Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, & Leggo, 2009, p. 40).
Walking With Narcisse: Dwelling by the Pond

On July 11, 2012, I had the opportunity to walk with, talk to, and learn from Narcisse Blood and Ryan Heavy Head. Our young graduate cohort in the M.Ed. program at the University of Lethbridge was learning about the literacy of the land and “what it means to live Blackfoot” (R. Heavy Head, personal communication, 2012). I look back at this experience tenderly, with gratitude and sadness, upon hearing of the tragic passing of Narcisse Blood. His writings, films, teachings, and life have rhizomatically touched each of us in this cohort, and past cohorts. Narcisse’s honesty, courage, and wisdom will continue to linger with us, even though he has passed to the other side. This poem is a collection of found phrases from that day spent dwelling around the ponds in the Elizabeth Hall Wetlands on the shoulder of the Oldman River, winding its sandy way through southern Alberta.

Nitsiniyi’tak

Do you understand the land
Enough to become a part of it?

Once you have a name for something,
You will start to pay attention to it.

There is a literacy, an understanding,
In birds nests and coulee depths.

There is a different time in Blackfoot:

We have to pay attention to anomalies—
What is happening when the mallard nests are placed
Up on the edges of the coulee, away from the water?
Sights.
Signs.
Sounds of the wild; of animals, of people.

Elders are our living libraries,
With advice on how to live now,
How we lived—Your books are a stand in
For our elders.

We must pay attention to the gaps in our knowledge
To remind us of the disconnects we have with nature.

What can the land teach us?
Land is what feeds us all connections—
Land is not a big thing.
When we take more than we need,
That affects everyone.

We need an education of attention, of attending
To signs, to the rectangles in our lives
That box us in.
We are spiritual.
We are not afraid of death.
Hell was scared into me.

We need to have failure so we can learn.
Is education about learning or is it about control?

Our goal is to become human—
I don’t have time for that some say...
You do what you feel you need to do.

What is the difference between being Blackfoot and Becoming Blackfoot?
What is it that you’re living?
If you can tell a story, you have lived it...
Becoming Blackfoot has afforded me the opportunity to cope
Instead of drinking to escape reality.

What do you lose when you lose a language?
Richness.
Texture.
Our language is older than the Sphynx. The pyramids.
Where are we and what do we need to live here?
We can’t be cavalier and collectively fail.
We’re all here together.

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The more rooted I am in my location, the more I extend myself to other places so as to become a citizen of the world. No one becomes local from a universal location. (Paulo Freire, as cited in Chambers, et al., 2012, p. 104)

**In the Late Winter Slant of Gentle Light**

My daughter Holly and I
Sojourned to Hanna, Alberta
This past weekend
To visit my parents—
Papa and Gamma.

In my life,
Too often I am too busy
To travel the 214 kilometers
The two hours to Hanna,
And often rely on my parents
Visiting us in Calgary instead.

So this trip was unique; special
For Holly and her grandparents.
It wasn’t until we were packing to leave
That I realized how deeply special the Intergenerational times spent connecting Are for me, too.

*“The further inside you the places moves, The more your identity is intertwined with it.”*

206, 5th Avenue West, Hanna, Alberta,
Has been my home
Since I was Holly’s age in 1980.
The home has been renovated
On top of renovations,
Altered,
Housed different guests and a small Pack worth of dogs.

For many years,
I yearned to be away from it…
Cut-off, separated,
Only to now find my self called back,
Drawn in/to
The familiarity of the desolate landscape
And shrinking town
In east-central Alberta,
Drawn to/wards the two-story stucco home
Which has housed much of my life.

Was my act of escaping a passage?
A right—a need to independence?
Why am I called back now?

The prospect of middle age looming?
The prospect of senior citizenship hovering over my parents,
Harbouring the certainty of life’s only certainty—death?

As we were packing,
Holly decided it was time for a walk
And she toddled off down the steps
And sidewalk for half a block,
My shadow traipsing along her unsteady steps.

We turned, headed back
Towards Papa.
The late winter slant of gentle light
Silhouetted his figure,
And with/in that pristine moment
I was lost in time.
The flurry of
Past

becoming

Present

becoming

Future

Blurred my eyes in tears.

I imagined the deep joy for my father,
The fulfillment
As his only son
Guided his granddaughter
Along the cinder block retaining wall,
Retracing his own steps,
34 years prior—
a snapshot in time,
Me in the place of my father,
Holly in mine.

And in that slant of light
Illuminating her joyous innocence,
Holly beamed in the simple delight of running,
Winter wind whispering through her hair,
And being with those she loves most.

We kept walking,
The three of us
Along sloped and cracked
Sidewalks
Partitions still familiar to me
Every bump, signature, crack,
Partially warn by my own sneakers and tires
In youth.

In those tender moments of faint familiarity
Of sharing and exploring,
Of coming to know a place,
Through the fresh eyes of a toddler,
I felt at peace.
I felt at home.
I yearn to share,
To kindle that place,
Those echoes and familiarities
With Holly.
With my dad.
Those echoes have shaped, rooted, and made me.
They will,
In turn,
Deeply shape Holly.

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To read the place means you are able to dwell within it, to inhabit it, to
gather from it knowledge that makes life there possible, as well as
intelligible and meaningful. (Cynthia Chambers, 2012, p. 187)

**Renewing Relationships as Wayfinders Together**

Collective Experience,
That phenomenon of drawing tighter;
Entwining with other
For having experienced an event together
Is a magical, elusive
Human emotion.

The Olympics in Vancouver;
A musical concert;
Terrorist attacks in Ottawa—
Comfort.
Reassurance.
Relationship.
We naturally seek that unifying collectivity.

When Chambers (2008) tells us
Of Narcisse Blood speaking
Stories of place;
Of being Kainai—

“and through these stories,
he renew our relationship as a people
who have travelled to the places
together…
and with our students.
It is through these stories
We become friends and relations,”

They remind us of the importance
Of story in becoming human.

When Ellie tells in conversation
That “sharing makes [her] feel better
That people know what [she] has been through…
So they can comfort her”
She renew our relationship as people
Who have travelled places together.

When David relates that “[he] feels
Really happy to share his writing so
People know [he] gets really angry,
They can be calm with [him]”
He renew our relationship as people
Who have travelled places together.

When Stacey confides that it is
“important to share sad stories
so people know more about you…
they understand your sadness better,”
She renew our relationship as people
Who have travelled places together.

Bob intones that he notices,
That he “feels,
We are closer,
We’re open to accepting,
To opportunity of knowing our selves
And each other”

*He renews our relationship as people
Who have travelled places together.*

For we have traveled this year;
As a community,
Through and amongst hundreds of
Stories,
Shared as we wayfind in our classroom,
Dwelling with/in
The collective of each/other
Using story to be/come
Friends and relations,
Entangled, knit, and knotted.

**Harkening Heart of Self**

It is very difficult for us to comprehend and value our own lives. It is much easier for us to see things outside ourselves. In the process of claiming our own good writing, we are chipping away at the blind gap between our own true nature and our conscious ability to see it. (Natalie Goldberg, 2005, p. 166)

Though death is howling at our backs and life is roaring at our faces, we can just begin to write, simply begin to write what we have to say. (Natalie Goldberg, 2005, p. 178)

**Self Realization**

We need to
Pay attention to the
Thresholds
In which we
LINGER
—interconnection—
Making the
PAST, PRESENT ILLUMINATED.

*Geo Graphiein*—earth writing.
Longing, (NOT)—belonging,
On Thresholds poised to *poner*
One’s self in uncertain
Ground
Country
Condition
Or a New
Entering.

Remembering the moves that have passed
Always paying attention to the
Thresholds, knocks, and doorways
Found between
Destinies.
And make meaning from
<inter>CONNECTIONS.
Because Barbara Kingsolver is
Fecund with knowledge and
Reminds us
The greatest of all gifts is to know our
PLACE
In this unending journey
SEEKING and SEARCHING
To ATTEND to
Where you
ARE and IMAGINE
Where we might
GO.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Found Poem From Life Writing and Literary Métissage as an Ethos for Our
Times to Antoine de Saint-Exupéry,

From Dan Buchanan (who has loved your book The Little Prince for many years and has recently bastardized it.)

I first and foremost would like to say that
I am not writing to you in order to beg forgiveness.
I do not feel bad or responsible for
making your book a shared piece—
just between you and me and our readers.
Your drawings were fine,
and even as an adult, I
could see the boa constrictor,
and not the hat.

Before you get angry,
I want you to know that I think the current version of the
text is superior to the original anyway—
you know that it had been translated many times—
and you know how translations between languages go—
something gets lost.
It’s a common place—
and in the métissage that I’ve taken the liberty of creating,
our lives are forever interwoven.

Don’t be scared—
I’ve had a pretty good life.

You likely want to know
what the hell I’ve done to the book.
Well, just as the Little Prince had to travel
and experience before he truly
knew where he belonged and
developed a sense of his identity,
I too needed to travel
and create stories
and understandings from others
for my life
based on my place,
past places, and
places yet to be.

I don’t know who I am yet,
and maybe I’m more confused than ever,
but I have stories to share,
and a rudimentary understanding
of what that means.

So—the changes.

I added several pieces of my own writing from class.
Check them out.
I think you would like a few of them.
One is a poem to my dead grandfather.
I thank him for the identity he has given me,
and the importance of place he has instilled
in my mother
and now me—
though it took 33 years.
There are found poems,
torn up bits of an autobiography,
quotes,
text messages
and life writing that seemed to fit your message
at certain points in the book—
I think I have heightened the understanding of that message
for our adult readers.

Intertextuality plays a dominant role in our book—
you had drawings and written text—
I’ve taken the liberty of adding texts
from the land
such as plants and sand
(African sand at that),
turtle shells, musical representations,
written text, photographs,
graffiti, collage, *miksang* art,
and some painting.
It’s the intertextuality that helps
with the hermeneutical approach
to/wards our book for others.
I’ve also taken the liberty of removing
some of your original written text from the book—
it no longer fit our message.
Sometimes I recycled it,
crossed it out,
painted over it,
or moved it to a more appropriate place in the book.
Don’t worry,
it’s all explained
and there is a method
to the ‘madness.’
I think that the interpreted message of our book
is still relatively the same.

I changed the title.

And the cover.

Sorry.

I went with a head.
With lots of different languages on it—
you can appreciate language
and the worlds it opens
and closes—
you spoke a few.
The new title,
which I can’t really say,  
and you won’t know,  
means  
Listen to me! (imperatively speaking)  
in Blackfoot.  
Sopoyaapistisitiita.  
I know...a tongue twister.  
But since we are sharing the book,  
I thought it would be nice to have a blended book cover.  
You got to keep the longer biography in the back,  
and the whole back page  
and spine are still yours.

I did change the perspective  
that the book had on adults  
—listen—  
our pasts are always with us anyway—  
so don’t get pissed off.  
If we share these stories,  
the inner child will be happy.

So, there you have it,  
Antoine.  
It feels good to get this off my chest.  
If you don’t like this version of the book,  
it will be changing in years to come anyway,  
so don’t sweat this version being forever—  
it’s quite ephemeral  
when placed next to forever.

Truly yours,  
Dan Buchanan, your co-author who is writing this from his cramped and sweaty apartment in Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

The Difficult Work of Be/Coming What You Say

“I wish I could read that book.  
Your journal—but I haven’t”  
My wife states,  
Eyes brimming, fine corners of mouth  
Downturned—  
My sign I have wounded her.  
“At least in there, I know  
You reflect, that you think and are
Vulnerable,
I never see that.”

A true paradox in her world—
A husband who swears by the power,
The wisdom of vulnerability,
Which opens doors of empathy and understanding
Be/tween our Pinar-ian “complicated conversations.”

Is it pride?
My own esteem-judgment of my own stories
And emotions as worthless?
Perhaps my role in society as strong, silent, man…

The truth is
To openly display my emotions;
To think before defensively
Tongue lashing with blame,
Is difficult.

It is difficult questioning, self-transforming work
Replete with tension
With contradiction.

I slip on the guise of hypocrisy,
I feel.
The emperor’s new clothes in the classroom,
But for my own complex relations;
For my wife, for us
I must face these difficult truths and
Begin to
See clearly what I want to be;
What I am now
And embark on this complicated work
Of becoming vulnerable.

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

Just be attentive towards what rises up inside you, and place it above
everything that you notice round about. What goes on in your innermost
being is worth all of your love. (Rainer Maria Rilke, 1933/2013, p. 36)

Bending Thoughts Back

When I pause and take time to reflect,
To bend my thoughts back
I could almost snap
In fragility:
A winter worn limb
Of a prairie poplar
Clenched and tossed against its will,
By wicked northern winds,
Yet,
If rigid or frozen
It splinters into shards.
The truths from which I hide
Pop up in all aspects of my life.
Facing these barren truths is terrorizing
And liberating in process.

Truths are surfacing in
   Arguments with my wife;
   Anger in the classroom;
   Moments of harsh judgment;
   Truths of inadequacy and esteem;
Hidden, but present and leering—
   Why can’t I let one argument go?
   Why do I judge colleagues?
   Why do I need control?
It is in this act of bending
My thoughts back to face and trace
The rhizomes of my truths
That I be/come honest
And able to right my/self;
Face forward
With knowledge
And wisdom of my imperfections
And vulnerabilities;
A prairie poplar in the spring,
Awakening to potential—
Perhaps more malleable and more
Wont to bend with/in the slight
Chill of a breeze.


Each have wedged their
Opaque lenses deep
With/in my thought—
Heavily clouding, Enshrouding, poisoning
The reality;
And darkening bright opportunities and
Fresh beginnings.

The family I married into—
Small-town ranchers and farmers
My
Judgment imprisoning each
Action
Comment
Way

Until
In my mind they were

But

I have learned in

Reflection.
Retraction.
Thought/full questioning.

To control my inner cynic.

To counter argue
  Counter view
What has become my nature—

This helps me witness and attend to
Beautiful acts of kindness, purity, and love
More bountiful than the few
Human blunders to which we are each entitled.

Ironic that someone cynical (doglike in Ancient Greece)
Must forgive humanness.

I am reminded of writing
Students were asked to generate
—to write two phrases—
  1. the ugliest thing ever uttered to them.
  2. the most beautiful thing ever uttered to them.
Amazingly we cling
  Fresh sores
To the few awful slurs
Yet let the beautiful noticings
Wash like quicksilver over and through our minds.

I must,

If I am honest in
  Needing change
Harness and ensnare
The plentiful flashes of human beauty
I am witness to
And release
The few shadows my cynical self is enslaved with…
In release
I am renewed.

Feel the Shroud of Stars Extended Infinitely Above

Poet Mary Oliver (2003) implores: “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”

Will fresh spirit, inquisitive questions &
Wonder
Become trodden, trampled by the multitudes
Of others,
Wayfaring on a well-worn passage?

“Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”

Will you spend it,
As many do,
Counting down days on a calendar,
Like collapsing dominoes,
Whiling away what should have been,
But never was;
What ceased to be?

“Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”
Will you cherish tender moments,
The sleepless nights with child
As precious time,
Or will you listen to ‘experts’
Who dare you to touch your child
For fear of developing dependency?
Do not linger at the door,
But have the courage to listen to your heart!

“Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?”

Staring satiated at a screen,
Anxiously and absently crawling
Through minutes—
Neither loving nor hating,
But not feeling—
just numbed?

“Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?”

Will you clasp claws onto grudges
And blacken your heart with resentment and
Pride?
Trudging through each day,
Each relationship and encounter
Sentient with moments of acrid festering?

“Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?”

Will you take time for friends
And the welcoming heart(h) of love,
The tender moments spent with
A child, a wife,
That fade like the silver dew frosting
The beards of August aged wheat?

“Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?”

Will you live in a moment of reflective solitude
To be with yourself,
To know your truths and to
Feel the shroud of stars extended infinitely above,
With the same awe of a child,
Or the wonder of Mary Oliver’s grasshopper,
Part of the daily humus;
The prosaic
That sustains us.\footnote{11}

"Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?"

\begin{center}
\textbf{Lingering Longer With/in}
\end{center}

In this practice of life writing be/tween
My/self/students
I find myself.
Lingering longer
With/in—
\begin{itemize}
  \item Unbalanced atop a precipice,
  \item What Leah Fowler describes as
  \begin{itemize}
    \item “stumbling into fearful places
    \item of the abyss.”\footnote{12}
  \end{itemize}
\end{itemize}
For this writing requires attending
To the core of who I am
To the frailties and realities
Of
\begin{itemize}
  \item How I came to be
\end{itemize}
In this city
In this time.
Calling into question
Rooted beliefs, relationships, and recurring actions.

I question now,
Rather than ignore.
Pause rather than react.
For this writing requires honesty; truths
Which can be blunt.

Why am I so quick to anger
With my wife,
Whom I covet more than any other person?

Why is my first impulse overtly negative;
Cynical—
Almost on social impulse.

What has shaped that in me—to view people negatively first?
Would I have recognized this shadow
Without writing my/self in this project?
Why do I block/control my wife’s feelings;
Deny her emotions?

In re/cognizing these qualities, these ways,
I begin the difficult work of
Mending my/self.
Of mending my tangled relations with other(s).
I am forced to climb from Fowler’s
Dark abyss,
Seeking mending, seeking truths
In attending to my self and the other;
Learning to live well
in this place,
in this time,
With/in others and self,
For
“a poem is a path in the frozen
tundra of the heart.”

And I Am Fragmented With/in That Place.

The moments,
like etched copper,
Be/come permanent in the splintering of my self—
Remnants lingering (from remenoir—to remain)
In those scenes,
Remembered and traced
In shallow minings of the past—
That shock me awake and
Require a constant tending to.

I like to revisit these dark moments
These fragments of self, strength, sadness and vulnerability
To better understand who I am,
How I came to be,
And to witness the past as present.

They amount to a small handful,
these splinterings,
But they whole me again.

I revisit my Grade 8 class,
Where I am called to the office,
My mom there in tears
Telling me her brother,
My uncle Gordon,
Is dead in a car accident,
And I am fragmented with/in that place.

I revisit the moment
I awaited my wife Kim
Pacing outside her unit
At the Peter Lougheed Centre,
Seeing her bright and questioning
Face through the mechanized doors,
Delivering the news
Of her cousin’s death that morning—
A post-operation
Clot killing him instantly.
And I am fragmented with/in that place,
Tending to my wife
Crumpled on the white tile floor.

I revisit the gentle spring day
At our family cabin,
Feeling whole and vibrant
Alongside the North Saskatchewan River,
Stretching and crackling awake from its long
Winter slumber.
Peace pierced permanently
With a phone call
And news of my cousin Kelsey’s suicide
Hours before  
Along the banks of Cowan Lake  
In Big River, Saskatchewan,  
And I am fragmented with/in that place.

A piece of my self left in the moment and space  
Of these events,  
To be revisited cautiously and mindfully,  
Able to be vulnerable  
Safely;  
To seek the piece of my self,  
That remnant remaining  
Etched in time.

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Cruel Words Are Slow Waters to Recede

A page split in half  
One side for the kindest words  
ever shared with you  
The other  
For the cruelest.

Which would jar to life  
First for you?  
Which side dominates?  
In a class of 11-year-olds,  
The cruelest words  
The most sinister of intentions  
Cling to their souls  
Like locusts on stalks of wheat.  
“The mean one pops in first  
because it scarred my heart” (Ellie).  
In their thoughts,  
Quickly surfacing:  
“You’re fat.”  
“You’re ugly.”  
“Cut yourself and die.”  
“You should die, faggot.”  
“Useless Gaylord…”  
“You were a mistake for Mom and Dad.”

Slow waters to recede,  
Their brine corroding the soul,  
Rusting,  
Changing forever the target…  
Do we  
Choose to cling to the awful
And
Ignore or counter the kind
with doubt and cynicism?

Is there a reason my own father’s
Acidic words:
“You’re a goddam embarrassment…
why can’t you be like the other kids?”

Are ever-present
In spite of redemptive
Words and actions
Over the past 20 years?
Does it even matter if we choose to hold on to,
Or
If the words themselves linger…
Uninvited guests embedded in our identities?
What we must choose
Is our care with words
Which inflict and infect
Those we hold dearest in our lives:
“Don’t throw words out into the world
Without caution.”14

I Wonder at the Wisdom of Keeping Secrets

I wonder at the wisdom,
The thought and intention
Of keeping secrets
From those we love.
The act of keeping—
Of silence itself—
A lie;
A dishonesty and eventual truth-slap
On the cheek—
A shock of glacial water
From which we emerge
Changed, different.

A student ponders why
Parents never told
Never explained that a
Brother was adopted.
Another torn up that family dogs,
Believed to be at grandparents’ farm,
Were long dead from a .22 shot.
The truth untold—not lied to,
But deceived
And left alone,
Disregarded.

The jilt of secrets continues to linger
With me—
Explained in one-time-onlies
And never-to-be-mentioned-again-conversations.

**I have:**

a half brother,
6 years older,
a stranger and unknown
until his name, his being
was shared with me at age 22.

**I have:**

an uncle disappeared,
enwrapped in confines
of the boreal forests of northern Saskatchewan
afflicted with undiagnosed schizophrenia—
Oliver’s name is seldom mentioned.
His death a mystery of secrecy and
purposeful forgetting.

**I have:**

Grandpa Calvin Buchanan,
a foreign figure to me,
dead at age 66,
his life, his way of being
kept from me:
the bouts of alcoholism,
of leaving/abandoning family.
The dependency and brash life
cut short.

I wonder at the wisdom of
keeping secrets from/
of discluding
those whose hearts harken
the knowing, whose very being
would benefit from the knowing
souls craving the sharing and community
yet kept afar—distant by
intentional silence.

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To Make Sense of Suicide

“I tear up; I cry
thinking of my coach...
when I heard he committed suicide
I was very sad, very depressed”

Phil,
The courage to share
To become vulnerable and
Teach us about your life.

I too have struggled,
Continue to struggle…
Pounded by questions, memories
And despair—
The finality of death—
The inexplicable death by suicide.

My cousin Kelsey Dale Buchanan,
A parallel life to my own
In so many ways,
But so different in just as many.

We were left reeling in June,
The aftermath of his action,
Unglued, changed.

Like myself, he was:
An only child.
A teacher.
A father.

Unlike myself, he was:
A lost lonely figure.
A son grieving the death of father.
Afflicted with alcoholism.
A man living with depression.

And so,
We didn’t know.
Didn’t know we should be helping,
Rather than pitying and tongue clucking
The family rumours
Fuelled by his behavior in the months
Leading up to his death.

Our final moments before his death
Paralleled in juxtaposition.
In parallel provinces.

My night spent with my wife
And daughter,
A crackling fire,
A gurgling river—
A meaningless bickering.

His night spent whirling
In drunkenness,
Retrieving a shotgun,
Starkly alone in a trailer,
A glimmering lake,
The dichotomous tumult in his mind
Playing out at its shores;
And a sudden blast—
Sick silence deepened
By the leaving.
His family left to
Explain,
Blame
And wonder
At what lead to his final choice,
Emboldened with alcohol
Mind sick, untended.

The sudden leaving
Presented by suicide
Changes us,
Leaves us barren.

But Phil’s sharing;
His courage to become vulnerable,
Has helped me to write,
To free my guilt and my own questions,
To unburden in the heavy leaving
Of my cousin,
Of his hockey coach.
Stumbling Steps in Naming

There are times spent reading
When I am so immersed,
So involved in the words
I could swear they were written
Like jigsaw pieces, cut deftly
To fit; to give structure and explanation
To my life;
So much so that when I startle awake,
I am not sure if I was transfixed or lucid;
I marvel; I pine; I fill
With wonder that another could put to words
The pristine emotion I have
Vied to represent for years.
The result can leave me
Euphoric in a collective sense of identity
Or in despair; a shell hollow
Of life—
Distraught that the writing confirms
What I have long suspected.
Is this not the wisdom
Of vulnerability I seek?
This sharing can shred you of ego
And illumine that emotion; that part
Which I long ago
Buried below layers of learning—
But continued to rhizomatically dwell, linger, and be/come
My identity.
Herriot realized, in his writing, that
“[He] saw all that was missing and [his friends]
saw all that was there.”
A line that lay with/in me,
Burrowing deeply into my core;
My soul
Leaving me sleepless; exposed and
Fully naked in his writing, completely vulnerable,
For I, too,
Cannot see what I have,
But lament at what I do not have,
At what used to be
Rather than be amazed and astonished by what is
Available in the mundus of life,
The fecund plentitude in which we dwell.
The writing serves to
Slap me awake; to be thankful
For what I have and not
What is missing.
How did I lose that beautiful naivety?
How did negativity burrow itself
Unchecked, into my being?
Perhaps it matters not,
But the realization does—the seeing,
The naming and realization.
It is a step towards the mending I do in
This writing,
However small and stumbling.

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**Truth to Self**

It’s true,
This idea that if you
Practice the art of deceiving your
Self
Often enough with the same deception,
You come to know
That lie as truth;
And you’d swear you’re being honest
At least
I do.

And I begin to wonder
Which of my
Truths
Began as they are now—
Real.
Or were they rehearsed and
Acted in/to truths
But born as lies?
I came headstrong into this
Thinking yesterday,
Writing with students.
Our topic: Telling unknown truths
About ourselves.

And in that moment,
I iterated an old lie:
That I loved living in
Buenos Aires.

**Truth to my self:**

I love the
Idea
Of living in exotic
Capital Federal,
The life of a *porteno*.

**Truth to my self:**

I hate to be thought a fool
By friends, family, and my self.
And so,
The myth of my time in Argentina
Was born…
To save me from my shame.

Looking deeply back,
Now I see I spent my time there
Trying to fix a girl who could not be fixed,
Who lived selfishly and
Dangerously and self-fulfilled
Many failed prophesies.

It was living as a *porteno extranjero*\(^\text{16}\)
In Barrio Norte del Capital
That I learned true shame;
How weak I was
In chasing the dream of what
Could have been—
A traveling, traipsing, whimsical love…

Begun in Budapest;
Built on disloyalty and deceit.
And thus,
My lie began.

**Truth to my self:**

I knew she would cheat on me,
Just as our relationship
Had begun.
When you build on cracks,
The crevices can engulf you
In tumbling pieces.

Truth to my self:

I am still angry with her for
Hurting me,
For diseasing me in mind and
In body.

I learned there what depression was,
The difference between solitude and
Loneliness
And how to live a lie.

Truth to my self:

I didn’t love Buenos Aires.
I loved the idea of
Before Sunrise love.
But in doing so,
I have lived this lie;
Coaxing it to become a truth.
In this writing,
In this vulnerability,
I can begin to accept
My truths,
My self.

A Difficulty in Listening

My wife Kim tells me I seem
So withdrawn;
So afar
When we meet in groups;
And I am…
But I am not apart.
I feel more a part
As I practice the call
To listen,
To give space,
To share time,
To linger in thought…
Rather than listening just
As a means to tell my own story.
I listen to honour the stories of others,
I want to value
The lives with/in which I dwell
And in half listens
And guided conversations,
I cannot do this.
But in my listening,
It is obvious
I am not clearly communicating,
That I must speak even though
I most “desperately want to remain silent.”

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

“You are one of the happiest people I have ever met.
Even now,
with the photos you post on Facebook,
you seem so happy.
I hope, inside, that you are as happy
as the person I see in those photos,
as the person I remember from University.”

One of the Happiest People I Have Ever Met

This is not me.
This is not what I feel;
Who I am.

And the duplicity,
The dichotomous duality
The falsity, the fraudulent façade,
Un/nerves me and clingwraps to me…

Is there the possibility that if
This is what others see,
Then this is who I am?

Seldom do I let the kind words of others
Chink my mental armor
And settle with/in.
As is the case with many,
Negative self-talk roils in me;
Has saturated my existence,
So that I do not hear what is said,
Let alone what is not said.

I do not hear:
*You have won the Prime Minister’s Award for Teaching Excellence.*
**But rather:**
*You don’t deserve that award, you fraud. There were many applicants.*

I do not hear:
*You are a Learning Lead at your School for a reason.*
**But Rather:**
*No one else wanted that job—it was left to you.*

I do not hear:
*Your friends admire and respect you.*
**But Rather:**
*They find you annoying and distant at best. It’s too late to call them and catch up.*

I do not hear:
*I think you are so cute.*
**But Rather:**
*My wife has to think I’m cute—we’re married. I’m old, scarred, and mostly grouchy.*

I do not hear:
*You are a good writer.*
**But rather:**
*I am a hack—anyone can ‘make this stuff up.’*

I do not hear:
*That was tremendous leadership*
*At the staff meeting,*
**But rather:**
*You spoke up—as principal, I am obligated
To thank you.*

I need to hear.
I need to listen to what others say,
Who know me well,
Who tell me what I am,
Because far too often,
What they say
And what they don’t say,
Is far more valuable,
More beautiful and meaningful,
Than the hateful words
Ringing out in my mind.
As Carl Leggo (2005b) poetically intones, “In poetry, 
I am seeking to listen to the rhythms 
Of the heart, 
And to hear the ways 
That my heart 
Resonates 
With the hearts of others” (p. 450).

People are changed, not by intellectual convictions or ethical urgings, but by transformed imaginations. (Madonna Kolbenschlag, as cited in Leggo, 2006, p. 77)

The Seed of Cynicism
A shell,
Deep rooted, cloaked, and buried,
With/in,
of
Cynicism
Pride,
Complaint
Ridicule of hard-to-reach students and colleagues,
Hides with/in it
A naked vulnerability,
A deep a fearsome questioning
Of my abilities,
Of my lack and inadequacy,
A low esteem and negligible confidence
That masks itself in the sinister, cynical,
Shell I bear.
Through disclosure and openness,
Through the un/masking and honesty,
I attend to that sinister seed,
When it sprouts tendrils.
In this intentional act of attending,
I find the hope,
The possibility of transformation;
Of re/imagination the “frozen tundra of [my] heart.”

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Harkening Heart of Relations

Through relating to each other, we attend to our own education and to better understanding who and how we are in relation to others in the world. (Erika Hasebe-Ludt, et al., 2009, p. 3)

Each one of us must go out into the world and engage with others (Bauman, 1993). Each of us has to be open to learn about others without prejudice and with trust in a mutual intent to do no harm. (Erika Hasebe-Ludt, et al., 2009, p. 69)

Most of us are afraid of love, afraid to love, afraid of the unpredictable and mysterious and invisible dynamics at work in love. Research is not possible without love, without the heart. (Carl Leggo, 2006, p. 77)

Courage of Silence

Carl Leggo writes:
“It takes courage
to know when to be silent” (2005a, p. 99).

It is
The silence,
The pause,
Aokian in its metonymic lingering be/tween,
That jars us awake in its tensionality,
In its attending to the moment—
Not a vacuous void,
But a richly heavy space
In life’s fervent soil.

Know to be—
when your wife tells you you have once again hurt her heart—silent.

Know to be—
when a student shares that her amazing grandfather will die in January, a lost battle with cancer—silent.
Know to be—
when Ellie finishes telling of how she dies inside from the torment her lesbian sister lives in—
silent.

Know to be—
when Phil shares, in sobs, the story his hockey coach’s suicide—
silent.

Know to be—
when a fresh intern wrestles with the overt challenges of teaching, of becoming a teacher in these complex times—
silent.

Know to be—
when a colleague’s absence is announced, and everything is not all right in her shattered, secret, separate world—
silent.

Know to be—
when a colleague shares a beautiful story of her father’s crippling struggle with ALS—
silent.

In silence we honour,
We attend.
We make sense of.
Silence is the courageous gift
Of space we offer amidst
The chaotic cacophony of our lives.

Poetic inquiry serves as a valuable tool to give us the ability to view our data, writing, and conclusions from more empathetic and creative perspectives. (Debbie McCullis, 2013, p. 88)

The following is a found poem about the effect life writing practice has had on our Grade 6 classroom, taken from various interview notes over the course of the project.
This Class Has Changed What I Thought School Was

I feel comfortable,
Sharing stories—
This year I trust the people in my
Class.
They have all shared stories
That have affected them.

I want to share stories
Deep inside of me—it’s hard to keep them in
I know when I share
How people think of me and
How they understand me.

I can express myself without
Being embarrassed—
It’s about self-esteem
And the heart—allowing others to
See how I feel;
Why I am the way I am.

I used to be way more scared.
I was new to the country—
Had an Irish accent, a Polish last name.
I couldn’t make sense
Of how I felt.
Now, they understand me.
They know me
And understand what I’ve been through—
They can support me.

People in class,
Don’t just care about marks.
They care about each other—
They are more willing to
Tell sad stories
Because they feel safe—
When my hockey coach died,
They all know he committed suicide,
And how that was hard for me.
And there have been lots of connections
Between people in the class
That wouldn’t have been there—
They can help each other out,
Or just knowing someone else has
Had something like that happen helps.

I remember most Lucy’s story
About her grandpa.
Everyone was quiet when she shared
Because we were respecting
Her story; we were thinking of our own
Losses.
They saw a sad classmate,
And were sad for her,
Thinking about life in her shoes.

This year we are more united,
And there is less conflict—
No one picks on anyone
Because we know them better.
I haven’t had anyone telling me
I’m annoying this year.
This class has changed what
I thought school was.

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**Enduring Life Curricula**

A famous quote greets visitors
To Room 34 in my school,
My homeroom.

*“Education is what remains
After one has forgotten
What one has learned
In school”*²⁰

I placed it there,
Among other meaningful quotes,
Not because I believe
Schools do not serve a purpose,
But to honour the lives we have
Outside of these walls,
The learning that occurs
In the currere of life,
Which is much more vibrant
And meaningful
Than greyishness of prescribed
methodology, text-books, and
standardized learning.
My own heart,
Upon careful in-dwelling,
Reveals robust moments of curriculum
None of which occurred in the confines
Of a school classroom.

My father Cliff taught me
What it means to sacrifice,
Spending six years of his life commuting
From Edmonton, Mirror, and Calgary,
After the C.N.R. closed its doors in Hanna.
Concerned with my fragility,
My parents decided commuting weekly
Was a better option than severing
Roots and moving.

My uncle Brian,
A solitary figure living in the
Hinterland of the Canadian Shield,
At Dore Lake in
Northern Saskatchewan,
Taught me a lingering lesson
In respect for all things living,
When we spent time
Tracking the cacophony of
Agonized calls from a raven,
Entangled in fishing line
And Jack-pine branch.
Without word or direction,
He held the bird tenderly,
And instructed us on how to
Untangle the razor line
And free the corvus corax
From certain death.

Kim’s younger cousin,
Full of vitality and life,
Taught me
That we need never stop caring,
Even for a trapped porcupine,
Fallen ten feet down
An upright culvert.
Their innate sense of life suffering
Ensured my determination to
Help raise and free the
Imprisoned from a certain arduous
Death.
My mother Grace,
Living up to her name,
Has taught me the definition of
Loyalty,
As she continues to stand
By her sister,
Afflicted for a lifetime by schizophrenia—
Highs and lows, paranoia, obsessiveness, living in altered reality,
Time and again hurting my mother’s heart.
Yet, my mother remains loyal and true to her sister Gloria.

My brother-in-law and friend,
Jerome,
Who lives life simply and generously,
Constantly taking time to be present
To those he holds dear,
So thoroughly enjoying precious moments,
The air thickens with love,
With heartfulness.

My wife, Kim,
Who teaches me time and again,
That love,
The possibility of living with a generous heart
Is worth the pain and suffering
Endured in attending to the needs others
In our lives.

We Were Lied To

Betrayal can sear,
especially when completed by someone
you feel you can trust, confide it in...
but this time was different...this was bigger.
my friend, Seyi,
waiting in line to enter the restaurant,
but denied because he was wearing white shoes,
while others,
Caucasians, allowed to enter,
while my Nigerian friend was made to wait,
standing there
alone
embarrassed.
We asked
We pried... what was going on?
“Your friend has white shoes on”
was the reply....
and I pointed at my white converse,
his eyes, embarrassed, ignored me.
“How did I get in here then?” I implored.
“Listen, your friend has white shoes. He can’t come in.”
I looked at Seyi,
our eyes meeting,
and we knew in that moment,
we understood,
that in spite of what we are told,
what people say,
that racism is alive,
it is ugly,
and it dehumanizes
all involved.
We were lied to.

How Do You Attend to Your Fires Within?

Do you find time to breathe?
Inhale and BE;
make whole
and recover from the
singes, frays, wounds,
with which life is accompanied?
How will you attend to your fires within?
Will you ignore, misguide, or replace
with a digitized hyper-version of reality
thereby feeding the fire
or seek a whole-ness in place;
solitude, solace.
How do you attend to your fires within, my child?
I was taught, was storied,
with tales of a grandfather I never met,
who traipsed the prairie,
a whimsical silhouette on the ocean of rolling soil,
relishing the dust and roots
of crops failed; and thick shoulder-high heads of wheat
knocking on overall pockets,
beards clinging to denim.
How do you attend to your fires within, my child?
With patience, I was taught to appreciate the
vastness, the depth, the stories,
of the prairie home of your grandmother—
my mother.
And in this attending,
I came to know her.
I came to know myself because of her
sharing, vulnerability, wisdom.
There is a wisdom indeed in stories
of arrowheads for which we were
hunting and mining together.
Of rusted Russian threshers
slowly decaying into the land,
on which I’m certain her youthful outline dallied and leapt,
when I gazed closely with closed eyes.
She became re/youthed with me
in such a way that we met again;
we spanned decades
to attend to each other and I listened.
I listen more now
to that time,
than I did in the moment.
As I sit here, attending to my own fires through word,
through memory mining.
How do you attend to your fires within, my child?
Will you, as we round the corner of a long-forgotten mountain trail,
that your mother and I once devoured in our youth,
capture my visage, connect with my past
and attend to your fires within
carefully and peacefully embracing
the space that
was
and
is
with/in myself, my story, your/self?
How do you attend to your fires within?
Letter from Dan (Your Grandson) in Lethbridge to John Mcleod From Colgate, Saskatchewan

Dear Grandpa Mcleod (whose name doesn’t spill off my tongue with ease),

Hi. I never knew you or smelled mints on your breath,  
Or saw the loving gaze that you gave your wife (my grandma that I also never met)  
Never had that modeled for me.  
I never saw how you were with your grandchildren—  
My cousins  
Or how you reacted  
To my mom  
When she got pregnant and gave birth  
To a child that she got rid of  
With a man  
Whose name she won’t speak.  

I never had you explain to me why you bought all  
Of that Russian machinery that still  
Rusts and decays in your yard.  

You loved baseball, and football  
And trips to Kamloops across windswept prairie  
During the “dry years” in Saskatchewan  
Climbing from earthen, dirt world of vast expanses  
To rock and tree.  
And then soon felt claustrophobic and you had  
To cut your vacations short to return to the soil that you loved,  
Even though during some of those times,  
The roots of the grains could no more cling to the sandy earth  
Than coil around your ankle like a serpent.  

You loved walking the land  
Watching, understanding, and listening  
To the land—  
Collecting arrowheads, and fossils, and pieces of grass stalk.  
We still have your fragments and chips of stone centred and  
Hung on a maroon canvas, encased in glass from your farm windows.  
A piece of your barn was turned into a frame for  
The spoons my mother (your daughter Grace) collects.  
—I collect too. Too many things and it  
Drives my wife crazy—  
But I don’t want to lose those stories.  

My mom, your daughter,
Loves walking the land too.
Loves going to check out the East quarter or West quarter
(I should listen more deeply)
Or some remnant that remains, that she clings to.
She’ll walk it continuously, enjoying the intermittent
Croaking of frogs, the silhouette of an owl perched in
Feral overgrowth of caraganas behind your house…
Or the wisp of a warm wind on a prairie night.
And pointing out where the apple trees, cherry trees,
And old ponds are that you used to watch the children play in.

And although it tore my mother apart on the inside,
She was the last of her siblings (your children)
To sell her section of land.
But you would like that Dave Jr. Mcleod
(your grandnephew)
Bought my mom’s section of land and
Plans to raise his family there.
More and more, I’m seeing how important roots are.

You never got to see your house,
So filled with life and love,
Slumped into the earth, abandoned and hollow—
A death trap for birds and small, curious creatures,
It scared the shit out of me
When my mom would take me there.
And she never understood why I hated it.
Why I couldn’t see what she saw
Wouldn’t piece together the history from the
Ashes of your house that burnt down
When a prairie fire encircled it.

I never understood her either.
But now I do and I’m 33.
I wanted to thank you for what you have taught me
And the values you have given me
That your great-grandchildren will inherit.

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“You are So Loved…”21 Thoughts Upon Ottawa Shooting

In these,
The darkest moments,
“You are so loved.”

Young man,
Fallen soldier with/in our nation’s heart,
“You are so loved.”

A nation inhales
And circles tighter
“You are so loved.”

Little girl
Shaken/ing at Grandpa’s cancerous diagnosis,
“You are so loved.”

Ellie,
Scared of jeers and taunts directed at a sister,
“You are so loved.”

Kelsey,
My tragic cousin, destiny in your hands,
“You are so loved.”

My friend,
Living in a women’s shelter, world suddenly terrifying,
“You are so loved.”

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Wisdom of Wet Flies Cast

My dad’s friend Vern Nunweiler,
Who recently passed away,
Told my dad
On a particular visit,
That he regretted
Not taking me fishing more often
At Helmer Dam for rainbow trout
In his aluminum boat.
And my first thought
Upon hearing of his death,
Was how grateful I was
For his time spent
Teaching me about
Wet flies, dry flies, casting, reeling,
And flooded outboard Evenrude motors.
So maybe much of the guilt and regret
We carry on our backs,
Is unfounded; imaginary.
Perhaps what we have done,
What we have given, shared, tended to
Is enough,
And we should focus on that
And not the overwhelming weight
That guilt and regret carry.

Guilt of the In/Attentive

Dear Holly,

This is a letter poem
For you to enfold yourself with/in
In the future,
Written in my present,
From a dad who is not always present.

You are growing up
Being raised in
Complicated times;
Where distraction constantly envelopes
The attention of a people,
Including your parents
Who feel inadequate.
Who feel bored.
Who feel empty without technological validation.
To the point where
Your beautiful mother declared
“We have to be more mindful of using our phones in front of Holly.”

For we have fallen
For the allure of its call
Its instant confirmation
Its 21st-century digital gratification;
“to zone out, to numb our minds”
When truly in our courageous
Path together
We know that our minds yearn
Not for numbing,
But for attending to—
“Latin for stretching”
Those joyful moments
You so deeply and richly
Supply us with—
The way you cock your eyebrows
In spritely moods,
Your mimicking babbly and
Tickle, tickle, tickle.
Your soft pats of endearment
And your cries of frustration
All require—
Deserve— our attending,
For they are fleeting, will not last,
Will be transformed and
If we are not open
To dwelling wholly with you
With/out digitized distraction
Of friends three times removed from
Someone we used to know.
We are lesser, hollow, incomplete
And complicit in teaching you,
In cultivating you towards distraction
Away from your heart;
From our heart,
From attending to the other
Sharing with the other,
These quotidian moments,
The beautiful prosaic
That matters most.
Lessons of the Amaryllis

Amaryllis lay dormant—
As bulbs,
Accumulating potential energy until,
In a mad rush,
Lush shoots burst forth,
Flowering in three weeks’ time—
Wonderful gifts of patience and wonder.

... 

A student recently reminded me of the patience
And time
Amaryllis require in be/coming,
And the stirring reward in the waiting.

Amidst the noise and frazzle of Friday farewells,
A figure stood, waiting at my doorway—
Rocking nervously foot to foot—
For an invitation across her/my state of liminality:
As we were “poised upon uncertain ground…
Leaving one…self and entering upon another.”

Our eyes met in a flicker of fleeting
Re/cognition,
And she asked if we could speak,
If I had a minute,
Assuring it wouldn’t take too long.

My mind, cluttered from the morning chaos,
Lurched back in time, trying to place a
Name to face?
Name to face.
Name to face!
Memory landing five years prior—
A second year at my current school,
Team teaching sixty-five students,
Unable to reach one.

Jenna, who now stood before me,
Had blossomed; had be/come,
A fading whisper of her former self.
Five years prior,
She had shaken my every confidence
As a teacher.
Snide comments made under breath in
Mid-lesson,
Stern stares of hatred,
Penetrating eyes,
Which had me questioning if I could reach her
Or any student.

We set up meetings,
We conferenced to no avail,
Tension fading when the year ended,
Though I carry/ied that dark relation with me,
Deeply embedded,
Still stinging upon reflection.

Now, in the present,
The student before me,
15, had blossomed,
Present(t)ce exuding confidence and care.

“I have to apologize,”
She blurted.
“For how I treated you,
for what I did and said that year.
I’m so sorry.”

Shocked present suddenly,
I looked away, transformed—
Emotional in the space of honesty, courage, and vulnerability
Carried forth by this former student.

The past was present was future
In the vulnerability she had shown.
She continued to explain,
Our conversation turning to me;
To our divergent lives briefly entwining again—
Sharing in our joys—
Fatherhood, honours student, grad student, IB program.

Drawing to that natural closure of conversation,
She broke into apology once more,
But I stopped her
A wave of my hand.
She had gifted me the  
Wisdom of apology; of vulnerability. 

She had gifted me a witnessing of  
Be/coming in humans;  
That some require more time—  
More time  
Than a ten-month school year can provide  
In order to be/come.  
Jenna taught me the beauty in  
Patience and forgiveness,  
And with a hug,  
We went our separate ways,  
Shadows no longer lingering dormant,  
Hearts more full.  
Pasts, presents, futures,  
Becoming. 

Gaining Wisdom Through Sharing

Pain does not end or stop.  
It rests and rears its shadow  
Sometimes when we least expect,  
Shrouding our minds,  
Making life as we see it  
More opaque. 

I thought of this today—  
A day of reflection, thought, and mindfulness  
For Canadians  
Following the tragedy on Parliament.  
A dark day for Canadians,  
But also a reflective time  
To be thank/ful for our vast country  
And its diaspora. 

It hit me again today during  
An assembly focused on story,  
Focused on suicide.  
Families telling their stories, sharing. 

I dwelt on my cousin Kelsey,  
His final moments last June,  
By the lake in Big River,  
Hopeless and at his
End.

Finally making the decision that he
Had had enough.
And he had.

And so, while on the phone
With his helpless mother,
Stuck in Black Lake in the far northern hinterland,
He took out his rifle,
And ended his pain.

And in our sharing circle,
After the assembly,
I knew not to share that story,
But to provide space and place
For our community to share, to be.
Vulnerable.
And they were.

We never know what someone
Copes with in silence,
Enshrouded in darkness.
So we shared and listened.

Phil opened up
About his hockey coach
Dead by suicide.
Phil, a boy in a house of five other boys,
Feeling completely alone, ignored.
Lips shaking and
Rivulets escaping eye corners.

A girl, bright and fresh as spring aspen,
Opening up,
Sharing that chemotherapy—a last resort,
Has failed her grandpa—
That Christmas may be different this year.
We learn empathy through
Sharing
We gain wisdom and
Heart/fullness
Through sharing and
The wisdom of vulnerability
Forged in trust.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~
An Interview Poem

_I feel safe when we share—_
_Like we’ve warmed up to each other—Dawyne_

_We listen when we share—people stop_
_Moving and listen and that makes_
_Me more comfortable—Ellie_

These words
Sprinkled with/in student interviews
Reflect,
Magnify the importance of this work
This writing, listening, attending to/wards
Other—
That which we un/learn in our
Attention-deficit society,
But can be experienced, taught
And can illuminate
The magnificent in life,
The beauty in empathic dwelling.

The community, I explained today,
Is tighter,
Closer
Enfolded and layered in story—
Story shared and story deeply heard.
The very meaning of shared experience
That glint of bond and trust,
Lessens, un-damages, the effects
Of oft cold, industry-driven
Results!! Results!!
Chilling classrooms
Preoccupied with testing, marketing, branding.
We are discovering and learning each other.
That is the meaning of this work.

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~
Achingly Tender and Precious Roots

Jamie,
A quiet and sullen boy,
A shadow,
Medicated for attention deficit.
It was only this year,
Our second together,
That we hear, we listened, gave time

To what Jamie’s struggle was
A mother,
Now cancer free
Had battled the vicious disease
For years

Hitting Jamie with a harsh reality
“Squarely in the gut”
and so he “would complain of stomach
ear
headaches
just to
“hear his mom’s voice
on the other end of the phone
because for a while
he didn’t know
he couldn’t know
if he’d ever hear it again.”

Life writing has freed him
“allowing him to tell stories
that no one else knows
that no one has heard
and that helps others understand
why I’m droopy, distracted, sad.”—Jamie

The sharing was bitter;
Choked with emotion
And classmates
astonished in/to empathy,
Suddenly understanding Jamie
Suddenly understood that
The tendrils of our being
Those sacred,
Hidden,
And achingly tender and precious roots
Shape
En/courage
And deeply affect us.

Jaime’s wisdom in sharing
Shocked us into understanding
And we thank him
In our silent acknowledgement
Of his pain;
Of his deepest fear.
We, too
Encircle, tighten,
And bind in the sharing.

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

The following lines were put together post-interview with Dwayne, Bob, and
Leah. Their magical and in/spirited words stay enfolded with/in me…

An Interview Found Poem

Because that’s basically what
Life writing is…
Passing story yarn. —Bob

Dwayne’s Fold

Sharing helped the class to understand
Who I am,
What makes me me.
I remember (a girl) sharing about
A grandpa who was dying
Of cancer…
And I could relate and
Understand her…
When I was 5 or 6
My grandpa had surgery
That was successful,
But the bacteria in hospital
Killed him slowly.
We waited…while he died.
That changed how I saw her…
I felt like I can relate to her
I understand since we’ve gone through the same
Kind of thing.

Leah’s Fold

We know people more
And everyone likes to share—
We get to know people better;
We care for them...
I remember Lucy’s writing and sharing
About her grandpa—
It stuck in my head.
Everyone was quiet when she shared
To respect her story—
They saw a sad classmate
and were sad too,
Because they know her and were sad
Because of that.

Bob’s Fold

Life writing is the top thing
That has brought us together.
Life writing connects us more;
I know about Lucy’s relationship
With her grandpa,
And that Catherine loves
Ringette so much—I never knew that
Before.
We’re open to opportunity.
This year,
It’s comfortable to be with anyone
In the class—
We’re just more kind to one/another.
Last year, we would
Get mad.
Be mean.
Call names.
There was more conflict.
This year, the sharing and writing
Has helped.
It makes me sad to think of next year
That we won’t do life writing.
I’m scared my new class
Won’t understand...
They won’t pass the yarn,
Because that's basically what
Life writing is…
Passing story yarn.
I haven’t had someone tell
Me I’m annoying…
This class has changed what I thought school
Was.
I’m worried I won’t be able to express
Myself next year.

I was overcome by an experience of stillness, of wanting to be completely
and meditatively quiet, to simply allow the work to penetrate my endlessly
distracted life and draw me into an understanding of Life that is deeper,
truer, and indeed more hauntingly beautiful than anything my conceptually
overburdened imagination could possibly imagine. (David G. Smith, 2012,
p. xii)

While I Absently Attend to the Screen in Front of Me…

To be with those for whom you care deeply
consists of more
than a physical proximity.
There is a closeness,
a comforting connection
in the act of listening,
tuning out and decluttering
the mind of distraction
and being,
lingering with
the one(s) we care for.
The gift of time, attending
can be matched by nothing more intimate
than listening to learn, to be;
not listening merely to bide time
to respond
with one’s own story.

Children, no matter the age
are particularly sensitive,
vulnerable to this connection…
A student complained in class, creating a chorus of laments toward partial parenting of parents attending to hand-held screens and a giving obligatory “uh huhs” in story pauses, essentially shouting in spaces between curt responses: “I DON’T GIVE A SHIT ABOUT YOU.”


I, myself, feel the sting of this autopilot vacant parenting when my daughter, 19 months of age, rejoices, shouts, babbles with/in my tuned-out presence, her voice the fuzz of a between channel on the AM radio dial.

Her actions unnoticed, as I seek gratification from strangers I’ll never meet, who thumbpress ‘LIKE’ on a post I made: A photo of Holly, while the real-life Holly awaits my response: a hug. A smile. Any acknowledgement…

She quickly grows impatient with/in my blank, silent, and still presence. Knowing, now, my black phone holds more importance in this cherished, fleeting time, than does she—(battery life>life)

—Our only time at this time—

than she does.

Damage done. The message is sent in silence, and the opportunity lost.
I recall living moments in class,
exuberant learners lingering with me,
need to share, connect, interact,
be with me,
only to be met with silence, rejection,
an angry stare directing them back
towards their seats in silence.

As I struggle to make anecdotes,
forced to record, evidence capture,
document what happens,
to appease our board, our higher-ups,
while students go ignored—
recording information presently
for the future which has never come,
but continues to loom—
“to not capture evidence is to
disservice students” they say,
but I feel to ignore present
students to record for the future
is an atrocity, a negligence.
I can not BE with my students
while documenting their actions
to death,
thus vilifying their vibrancy
as an obstruction.
My work is to care, to be, to listen, and attend to the needs,
of those held close in my context.
I can no longer absently attend
to the black rectangle clutched in my palm,
while the dear lives of those I love
play out for me to embrace
in each waking moment
of each day…
My numbness, our numbing oblivious,
can no longer be fed,
for it is written.
I have faced it.
I have written it,

“Authentically…truth telling to
…reimagine and remake [my]
world…” 23

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~
If I could spend an extra few minutes with anyone in my life, it would be my grandpa, whom I never even met… which may seem strange, but I have heard many stories about him, about who he was as a person, and what he liked to do… He loved to spend time on the open prairies of his homestead, walking, exploring, and understanding the land. We have a set of arrowheads, mounted on canvas that help to tell the story of the land, before he tilled it, and dirtied his nails constantly in the toil of topsoil. I know ‘of’ him, through conversations, education from my mother, but that is not complete, that is not knowing, that is knowing one side, one person’s thoughts on her father, not a grandfather. The knowing is partial, wisps of hints that swirl in my imagination. I know that he was honest, hard working, and resilient, having survived as a farmer through the great depression that ravaged southern Saskatchewan, scarred and poor, but still on his land. I won’t ever know, except in my imaginings, what Christmas morning would have been like on their farm, What my mom was like as a teenager, How he greeted those he loved, And how he dealt with sadness, My youthful inquisitiveness and questions. I have, as a memory, his rusted Russian-built machinery, that still outlines the outskirts of the home quarter, and the apple orchard he tended with my grandma in the summer, that surrounded the now burned-out
homestead.
I still have, in our shed at home,
tools I scavenged from a rain-sunk
Quonset—
a saw, flathead, wood rasp, hand plane.
Each of which he held in a former life,
and I continue to cling to,
along with the wisps of imaginings
of who he was.
The never-meeting is not a sadness,
but an imaginative wondering,
more present now that my daughter Holly
is constantly in the loving company of her
grandparents.

Harkening Heart of the Teacher

Through engaging in life writing and auto/biographical writing as
research, teachers can meaningfully and powerfully articulate and reflect
on the dynamics of change happening in these spaces and places.
(Erika Hasebe-Ludt, et al., 2010, p. 22)

As their writing teacher, my job is to try to help them speak again. To help
them trust their own voices again. As a writer, my job is to keep walking
out of the fire of silence myself, to keep telling the story of falling in and
climbing out again, to let my voice sing. (Georgia Heard, 1995, p. 3)

I am convinced that by writing about our experiences, and ruminating on
those experiences, and interpreting those experiences, we can become more
effective teachers, as well as teachers motivated by more joy and hope.
(Carl Leggo, 2005b, p. 441)

Note—here is an excerpt of an email I have drafted for our Minister of Education that I
have not sent:
Hello Mr. Dirks.

On Wednesday, I went home as a teacher elated to have the freedom and choice as a professional to teach the way I believe teaching should happen—with student choice, voice, and genuine engaging inquiry. This was because the Calgary Board of Education had made the decision, based on beliefs and what is right for student learning and teachers, to cancel PATs for Grade 6 students.

Then the news came down today that you had reversed the board’s decision. What is the rationale behind this? There is absolutely nothing you can show me, as a professional educator for 10 years, that students or teachers benefit from standardized tests. Standardized testing leads to standardized teaching and learning...nothing new, nothing exemplary—rote memorization of facts. Do you know or understand this, Mr. Dirks? Have you EVER stepped foot and taught in a classroom of students, trembling at having to write a PAT, full of anxiety when learning should be full of wonder and joy? Furthermore, applying a standardized test is an antiquated approach to teaching and learning. The “statistics” these tests provide matter little as they only indicate if students can read and discern the answer to generally poorly written questions.

We have spent years working towards an assessment structure that values feedback, engaging students to become active, democratic members of their communities. Then, you take away their feeling of having a voice by TRUMPING a board’s decision much like a totalitarian dictator. How do we function as teachers within a supposed democracy when those in power do not follow democratic process by hearing the voice of the people?

You have made a mistake, Mr. Dirks.

I could be angry, bitter and hopeless
That our government, our own ministry,
Does not understand education,
Does not understand the concept of meaning/full Education.

But I choose not to be.

I choose to walk with my students with/in the curriculum
We have created.
Within the community that has rhizomatically
Earthed itself in our school:

“Had a chat with Jack yesterday about how much he misses your class because you made it feel like a family. He said he knew so much about his classmates and felt so close to them.”
I choose to honour students
For the unique stories and experiences
They bring to my class,
That they choose to share in our safe community.

I choose to allow students the freedom to write the stories
That speak to their hearts,
That connect their minds in empathic inquiry,
And are not formulaic credos an ‘expert’ has deemed
What a story is.

I choose be with children inside the classroom,
And learn together,
Not dictate rote facts and Specific Learner Outcomes
That minute thinkers would have you believe are vital.

I choose to allow free thinking and exploration,
Not standardized, formulaic thinking that
“Robots can perform adequately”—(Bob, class discussion, Feb. 6).

I choose to live by Jackie Seidel’s (2012) writing that
“everything that is alive only happens
one time ever” (p. 274).
And in understanding this, there is no room
To waste lives worrying or ruminating on
Step-by-step story creation,
Killing creativity
With SLOs and scripted teaching.

I choose to make space in our midst for
Compassion
Creativity.
Freedom.
Exploration.
Diversity.
Empathy.
Sharing.
Celebrating.

Not deficit and competition.
Not have vs. have not.
Not control and educational rigor—(Latin for “stiffness”).

I choose to accept that I do not know
All of the answers,
That many different answers exist,
And in knowing this,
We are more filled with wisdom
Than with barren, fact-filled minds.

I choose not to rush in order
To “cover the curriculum”
Delivering a boring, topsoil-deep curriculum,
But to allow opportunity to grow,
To learn, to receive feedback, and to celebrate.
Allowing each student to become a part of,
And not apart from.

I choose to build community,
Not anxiety, competition, and fear.

I choose to listen,
Because there is nothing more important than
Learning to listen and honour
The lives of those we are closest to.

I choose not to believe that education
Is a one size-fits-all institution,
But that education should
“include all children completely
with rich purpose and full human experience.”
This is the wisdom of poetic teaching.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Sit and Settle With Writing

I need to sit with this writing a little while longer,
I need to let it sit with/in me
and turn over, become.
Write about giving
the space to breathe,
to allow teachers to become
without punching holes in
filling bags of pedagogy….
Allow new teachers the time
to learn to listen,
to become,
because they are becoming,
to see the wisdom
in finding something positive in every situation,
in every scenario,
no matter how grim or dire.
To see that it was magical,
the advice and time, the literacy that was shared,
to make mistakes
and come to know these ‘mistakes’
as learning, as becoming and process
never finished, never final.
I need the sense and wisdom
to find the confidence
in my own teaching self
to know that my modeling
is relevant and meaningful,
is rich and textured,
and that sometimes,
that is all that is needed,
and in not saying,
in not directing,
I am teaching in a more
thoughtful and meaningful way….
The teacher’s way.
in this becoming,
it may appear to ignoring,
a passing over,
acquiescence,
but never have I been more aware,
more attuned to practice,
my own and that of the other.
This is what I must sit with.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

In the Moments That Startle

Some(times we hear
As though we are floating on our backs
In a wooded lake;
Ears half submerged,
As waves bounce and fill the canals—
Half hearing,
Not listening,
Not present in the haunting call of the loon,
Or the splash of a muskrat’s tail,
Upon submersion.

Not attending to the
Subtle messages sent
By those with whom we choose to dwell.

Some/times students startle
Us into deep listening
With/in “the sound of pedagogy in the silence of
the early morning calm.”

Inhale

“My aunt and uncle told me
I should never have been born!”
David blurted in frustration one day,
Eyes downcast, sobs caged within a
Body tensed in anxiety once more.

“I remember to breathe deeply
in the moments that startle.”

I turn to David and listen deeply,
Giving of space and time
For him to be/come in the presence of
Self/other.

“time to linger in conversation
about essential matters.”

Inhale

“I normally feel like no one
ever listens to me—
that my ideas don’t matter,”
Johnny explains,
Piercing blue eyes curved in worry;
In honesty and vulnerability,
Telling of a deeper
Rooted anxiety; of doubt.

“I remember to breathe deeply
in the moments that startle.”

Inhale

“My dog, Max—
he was really sick.
He died and we didn’t know
what was happening—
Now we have his chain;  
his dog tag.  
That’s it.”  
The student touches our hearts,  
Deeply—  
Unaware in his courage and  
Raw vulnerability,  
In his telling,  
That he would change us,  
Would indeed linger with us,  
Inviting us to

“remember to breathe deeply  
in the moments that startle.”

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

That’s true of writing: following a recipe never works. Words become brittle, won’t pour into the mold we try so hard to fit them into. That’s why writing from an outline usually produces something flat and formulaic.  
(Georgia Heard, 1995, p. 43)

Moments of Pristine Calling

In the midst of major theoretical shifts,  
Top-down directives drowning  
And burdening teachers  
In assessment models  
In anecdotal notes  
In IRIS and  
DOCUMENTATION,
“suggest(ions) that knowledge exists beyond us,
away from us,
somewhere out there
that only a few have access to”

The reason for being a teacher,
For heeding the call to teach,
Can become obscured
In the brackish shit,
Only to become
Crystal clear in coming ‘round a corner
Startling a former student so quickly
Her reaction to hug me
Could only be natural—
A reminder in that moment
Of why we do not choose to teach
But we are called to it.
These startling pristine moments
Remind us of this call.

Dear David—Exposed, Raw

I “examine my past, present, and future
Identity constructions” …
A day, a moment in this day, calls for it.

Dear David
Muscles tensed, neck strained
Wild temper unfurled,

Exposed. Raw.

A spectacle in front of all peers,
Shocked stares lining our path as we walk
My arm on his shoulder
His anxiety,
His host of complexities on display
(His behaviour too erratic for professional testing—
A sad irony)
Over a fear of missing his bus home—
Unable to cope with change—
New driver, New Teacher, New Year
Dear David


But for myself,
A chance for renewal
For neo-construction of my own identity text
Of my/self.
I mine back in mind
To similar circumstance where
My pride
My embarrassment
My need
to satiate control:
Escalated situations,
Damaged Students
Stained Relationship Irreparably.

Steven, removed for the audacity of
Wearing black knit gloves in class
For daring to refuse removal
At my demand—
Who threw a desk
Told me to “fuck off”
And who wrote me off
As I carried his rigid figure to the office.

Dylan, who I brought to tears
With a sarcastic joke
Sinister in its
Unintentional intentionality.

Marcy, whom I bullied
For bullying
For scrawling on
Bathroom walls
Words her dad scarred her with—
and she was 10.

Those moments Velcro-cling to me
They are me.

But...

Dear David,

For David, I was calm.
Like a lone tree amongst crashing trunks,
Protected and sturdy from the storm.
When he yelled,
I knelt beside him.
When he cried,
I held his shoulder,
When he swore,
I gazed at him tenderly; with empathy brimming in my eyes.

There is marked beauty, renewal of self
When you pause
Proceed on unmarked hubris in teaching
And attend to the other;
To Dear David,

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

Kill the Indian, Save the Man

“He’s feral, Dan,
He comes back from that reserve
Absolutely feral,
I can’t teach a feral Micah.”

A passing, seething comment
From a colleague
Borne of frustration, anger,
But anchored to a colonial view
Of a First Nations youth,
Himself adrift
Be/tween
Two lives—
One on a reserve
East of Calgary,
The other in east Calgary,
East of Deerfoot.

I am stabbed again
With Richard Pratt’s words—
“Kill the Indian in him, and save the man.”
Spoken well over a century ago,
Yet still,
Colonization exists,
Breathes,
Is tethered, fed, and tended to,
In views of First Nations youth
In schools.

And so, the question lingers,
How will First Nations youth succeed?
How will we work together
In this educational system
That continues
Year after year,
To honour linear literacy,
Traditional industrial models of
Product Product Product education.
Economy-based education
When some continue to refer
To First Nations youth as
Feral—as though they’re
Wild beasts to be tamed,
Smoothed like Pokiak’s stones,
Rather than honoured
As equal, contributing members
Of our school; society,
To be honoured.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Smoothed Like Stones

Margaret Pokiak32 honours us
In the telling of her story,
Of her time at 8 years of age
Pining
Longing
To attend residential school
Blinded by desire;
By curiosity—
As was Alice
In her adventures in Wonderland.
...but her father knew,
He warned her of the dangers
Of the outsiders—
That they would smooth her
Like a stone in the ebbs of water.
I reflected on the students
I have smoothed; 
Have worn down 
Through threats of phone calls; 
Shooting Steven a chilling glare 
For being Steven. 
Sarcastically degrading a sensitive boy 
Named Oliver— 
Bullying the bully... 
Smoothing them 
Like stones. 
And Jas jolts me awake 
In her telling; 
In her reflecting on Pokiak’s words— 
Her distant life in 
Sri Lanka. 
The cacophony of noise; 
Swirls of food lingering from vendors; 
Saris and singing. 
And she tells of her smoothing here; 
Of her losing here. 
Losing voice in the acquiring of language 
And a new culture— 
A necessary loss 
She explains 
For a better life. 
But it’s the 
Silence 
Between her words 
That tells more— 
The faltering of tongue on foreign ground; 
The reticence of thought 
Of remembering what was lost 
What is being lost 
That tells us of her smoothing— 
We listen, 
Enriched by the power of story 
Made real, brought to life. 
In our silence we honour 
Their telling.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

To be a teacher and a learner is to recognize that each needs the other for its own sense of being. Life writing is the method—at the heart of wisdom. (Janet Pletz, 2012, p. 212)
Jamie’s Wisdom

A quiet, sullen boy,
medicated for attention,
it was only this year
we heard, we listened,
we gave space
to what Jamie’s struggle was:
a mother,
now cancer free
had fought the disease
for years
thus hitting Jamie with
reality
square in his gut,
and so he would complain in class of symptoms—
stomach/ear/head/
aches

Just for the chance
to hear his mom’s voice
be comforted with the
knowledge she was alive
on the other end...
because for a child’s eternity,
he didn’t know,
he couldn't know
if he’d ever hear it again.

For Jamie,
*life writing has freed him,*
*allowing him to tell stories*
*that no one else knows*
*that no one else has heard*
*and that helps others*
*that helps me*
to understand
*why I’m droopy, distracted, sad.*
*It makes us better.*

The sharp sharing of this story
was bitter,
choked with emotion and catching us
off balance.
Classmates, teacher,
astonished into empathy
suddenly understood Jamie
suddenly understood that
the tendrils of our being
those sacred, hidden
and achingly tender and precious roots
shape
en/courage
and deeply affect us.

Jamie’s wisdom in sharing
shocked us into understanding,
shifted, changed our community.
And we thank him
in our silent acknowledgement
of his pain;
of his deepest fear.
We encircle, tighten, and bind
in the sharing.

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

Lessons Learned From My Daughter, Holly

I dwell often,
in memories of myself
as a teacher
before Holly was born,
and wonder what I would change—
what I would do over if I could
what I would
re/create
with/in
the classroom
with/in
myself, students,
After seeing the world
through the lens of a new parent.

On a recent trip to Hawaii,
I marveled at the delicate learning
taking place for Holly,
gingerly placing her feet
amidst the sand and briny Pacific water
Experiencing innocently for the first time
the cool, sucking, glomming texture
of the sand,
entrusting her grandparents
to keep her secure.
Or, her enthusiastic waves at
the weary and tired passengers,
squinting in the dark
at the flickering screens
dropped from the jet’s ceiling,
Holly waving exuberantly,
whole/heartedly,
pointing, smiling, babbling,
each person an opportunity
for connection.
I cringe,
in a fleeting moment of sadness,
at the thought,
the realization,
that she would one day lose this
gleeful innocence.
And I was weighted,
in/spirited
with the immense responsibility we,
as educators,
as guides,
curators,
community builders,
are entrusted with.

Not to be taken lightly,
nor shrugged off,
we must live this
honouring of growth,
of celebration.
we must reflect,
and thus renew,
honour children
wholly.
Holy.
For their
wonderings,
musings
understandings
and learnings.
I consider and dwell
amongst certain students
whose lives call to me
in this moment,
in this tensionality.

And I reflect on Sarah,
whom I scared in Grade 4
with thought/less tales
of the Holocaust
shared, pondered, feared
in class.
Shaken, she left sobbing.
A conversation gone to/o far
for those too young
not to be scared.
I was scared.
How could they not be?

I reflect on Fatima and Mina,
Shaken to the core
in Grade 6,
age 11,
by the unfiltered,
unsupervised,
sexual knowing,
experience—
a call for help
from a peer.
Who lost her childhood,
Who never had growth-honouring.

How can we reconcile this
‘knowing’
at such a young age? What did I do?
Not enough.
It could never be enough.
I reflect on Sam,
living in a crowded
foster home.
Her third.
Abandoned by her mother,
a drug addict (recently deceased),
at birth.
Relinquished by her uncle—
her family,
at age 8.
Living with
Fetal Alcohol Syndrome
and showing more resiliency
every day,
in every interaction,
in every full-hearted attempt,
than I could dream to muster.
Period.
Her identity,
her self-worth,
her value,
hinging on the most
beautiful, creative, and meaning/full
artwork
I have received from
a student.
These I value.
These I treasure and
celebrate with Sam.
They are her hope.
And so, Jana.
We perform celebration-honouring,
growth-honouring,
in the same
way we welcome
each child into our classroom,
each child into our lives.

We honour the whole child,

We celebrate their stories,
We listen. We dwell. We wonder.
We do not control, but we invite.
We do not ridicule, but we encourage.
We do not produce fear, but we explain.
Deeply.

We use our wisdom
gathered from reflection,
to guide us.
We understand each child,
and value
compassion, empathy, kindness
as we mindfully dwell with our students.
“A ‘Curriculum for Miracles’ is not a deficit curriculum. It is broad and wide and deep, holding the whole of life generously without crowding. Only in such a possibility do the deepest sorrow and suffering have a place, to be experienced alongside the greatest joy and transcendent, radiant, peace.” (Jackie Seidel, 2012, p. 275)

With Holly, we will celebrate and be awe-stricken by her curiosity her exploration her learning. By Her. And when growth-honouring is needed, I hope we respond as I have written: with wisdom, compassion, and empathy. Though, as Cohen & Bai (2012) wrote, living up to your written Word can prove to be the utmost challenge. She, They, We are worth that challenge.

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**Settlement in Education**

Arriving. Finally. After an arduous journey From half a world away To seek out and create a new life The settler stands, A silhouetted figure Bold, back muscles taught and Shoulders straight— His etched black figure A connection between the barren land And the piercing blue sky As he surveys what he has come to— What is His.
It would be easy for his mind
To be clouded with the pure
Vastness;
The insurmountable feeling
Of being swept up in the
Rolling prairie fescue
A boat adrift in a tempestuous storm
To see the flatness and sheer
Solitude
As a prison.
But as he stands and absorbs the land
He sees hope, not despair.
He sees challenges
That will need to be met and a
Life that will be cut into
And shared with
The land.
The dream of robust
Crops, swaying in the wind,
The fruits of his toil,
Mixes with his vision of the land.

Echoing this experience
A century later,
I am the settler and I have prospered
And come to love the land—
Become a part of the land
And the land a part of me.
The land is
Education—
The full crops are the understandings
Gained and shared between
Myself and my neighbours.

The beginnings were dire and difficult.
I had come to my land
With preconceived notions, expectations,
And ideas
But the earth quickly did away
With these
And almost as quickly
Tempted me to leave it…
To seek a life elsewhere.
Tried as I may, what had worked
Back home on the land
Did nothing but produce sparse
Clumps of stunted yields.
My neighbours,
Students, parents, peers,
Were reluctant to help me
In my early years—
Disinterested, tuned out
—By the harshness of the land—
And by other settlers who had
Destroyed their hope in it—
Who had told them the land wasn’t for them
That they would never succeed—
The Land would win.
As if that were a win for anyone.

I knew so very little about the land.
But freshly arrived
I could not admit this
Ignorance.
I plied my basal skills
And forged through those first
Few long months on the land
Being kind to my neighbours,
Offering support,
Letting them know their
Homesteads and crops looked good,
Even though I could tell
They were worse off
Than my own,
Dust hewn faces
Grimacing into the horizon.
Banks of topsoil laying against any windstop
Unanchored to the ground
With the crop.

Funny how the land can
Blind you and divide you.

There were others…
Who had faced my
Hardships—
Hardened and set
Unwilling to risk helping me
Or my students in our endeavour.

The Land, the People on the land,
Were constantly changing,
But these first arrivals
Cling to their dangerous notions
Of what it meant to be a settler
And there was no negotiation—
What had worked in the past
Would serve us well now.
And they were content with their
Stunted crops, begotten in a
Lonely and prideful way,
Without contribution
from their neighbours.

But
They
Could not see
Or admit to seeing,
That we were all close to
Starvation
On that land—
Too focused on what
Had worked before.

But something, some hope
Held me to my place.

It was the hope
(later turned into knowing)
Of a shared connection
To the land, and each other,
A shared acceptance, respect
And understanding
That would allow us
To prosper in our
Place.
We began to listen to each other,
My neighbours and I.
We laughed, we cried, we were kind
And we worked the land with new tools
And knowledge
And changed it together
So that we understood it
And it was part of us as individuals—and
Of our community.
Crops stretched from the
Rich, cared-for soil,
New-found energy
Enabling growth seldom seen
In this place, in my place before.

As steward of my place
I have come to trust my judgment
Of the land.
I listen to neighbours
And share the experience of the land
Producing varying crops,
Each individual stalk differing
As each understanding differs
In our community partnership.
Remaining
Honest with myself
With what is truly important
What allows me to exist
In this place.
A shared understanding and
Deep-rooted respect for
the power of the land
And the partners that share it
To produce our flaxen harvest.

From time to time
We have setbacks and failures.
We must reassess our
Approaches—cultivate
And harrow the land
But we return
With new ideas, new methods
To rejuvenate the earth
And once again make it
Accessible to all.

Neighbours move,
And although it is sad to see them go
I am heartened with the knowledge
That we each have changed
For the better
Having affected one another
In our shared community
Amidst the vast, beautiful prairie.
A place not barren and empty,
But a place of hope, courage, empathy,
And understanding.

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~
That’s true of writing: following a recipe never works. Words become brittle, won’t pour into the mold we try so hard to fit them into. That’s why writing from an outline usually produces something flat and formulaic. (Georgia Heard, 1995, p. 43)

Dwelling Momentarily Amidst Curriculum-as-Plan

I missed dwelling today,
In the space shared between
Curriculum-as-plan/curriculum-as-lived…
That beautifully tensioned zone,
“an extraordinarily unique and precious place,
a hopeful place, a trustful place, a careful place—
essential
a
human
place.”

I sat in a place,
Devoid and barren of the richness of a
Classroom mosaic.
A workshop entitled:
“Designing Worthwhile Work”
Where we were withering,
Frost-laden tulips of early spring,
Together under ministerial orders,
Designed to
Enlighten,
Aspire towards
Transform our teaching selves
And thus the lives of our students.

We were encouraged to explore;
To identify TEN orders,
Like Alberta’s commandments:
Though Shalt:

1. Know how to learn
2. Think critically
3. Identify/solve complex problems
4. Manage information
5. Innovate
6. Have entrepreneurial spirit???
7. Use multiple literacies
8. Develop communication skills
9. Demonstrate global/cultural understanding
10. Apply career + life skills

We talked, mulled, and planned.
We were facilitated
   (with samples)
As though 10 commandments
Could guide, transform, revolutionize
Teaching careers and
Lives of students.

Barren of emotion
Akin to a yard machine’s user’s manual,
The experience chilled,
Reminded me to “beware of the boxes”
As Chambers (2012) would write…

Compassion?
Empathy?
Understanding what it means
To be human?

With these ten orders,
I am left to wonder and question:
Are we producing
Humans
or
Commodities,
Marked and measured to ensure
Economic futures,
With the commandments
Bereft of understanding,
Of the literacy of empathy,
Leaving followers
“condemned to plan for faceless people…
defined in terms of performance roles.”34.

In Becoming Vulnerable

In be/coming the teacher
I said/say I am,
   (weary of wanting what I am not)
I have,
In thinking Aoki’s ‘unthought,’
Opened wondrous spaces,
Safe spaces,
Tensioned spaces,
Excruciating spaces—
For when we attend,
When we deeply care about living well with others—
Knowing that the most important curriculum,
Is with/in the creation of “sites of abundance
In which we must seek to live together with students.”

We open up to the Aokian slash—

Learning to live with/in
Joy/Sorrow,
Hatred/Acceptance
Past/Present/Future.
Vibrancy/Uncertainty
Stasis/Transformation

Stopping in at the office last night,
En route home,
I was jolted off balance
In a tensioned site,
Still learning to “accept
That the past is always present,
Always a part of living.”

Robert and I,
Constructed a complex relationship
In the two years we spent together:
Teacher/Taught.
Precarious, Dangerous, Tensioned…
But we learned to dwell together.

He, full of self-doubt blooming into self-hate,
Shaken and scared at the attempt to write,
For at least if he didn’t,
If he chose not to,
He had that excuse,
That power.

We worked, though.
He typed. He voice recorded. He spoke.
His contempt be/came trust.
I scribed and he experienced expression.
He saw himself as a part of,
   No longer apart from,
Prepositions can signify so much in their usage.

I was struck,
Deeply saddened suddenly,
Upon hearing from our assistant principal
That Robert has been struggling,
Immensely,
Now two years removed from my classroom,
From our site
To the point where depression and anxiety,
Geminis of mental health,
Are forcing his thoughts and inclinations
In an escalating fashion…
   Towards suicide,
   That it would be easier
   Than hating himself,
   Than being alone
In his anxiety, in his learning disability.

I wonder, shocked,
At what we can do?
Could I have done more?
My insecurities, my tensions,
Rising air pockets in water,
To burst.

So now I wait.
I have not seen him yet,
And I cannot bring up this private
Knowing with him;
Our relationship severed by age and
Architecture.

I wonder if he will talk to me about it…
Are our rhizomes still alive,
Spared the poisons of his self-hate?

Students/Teachers
So attached,
Yet as we all
Be/come—
Ever be/coming,
We are echoes through and over
Valleys, cliffs, and meandering pathways…
Carried on the wind,  
Messages through shimmering aspen.  
We call. We linger.  
Faintly. Present.  
Coming to “moment(s) of recognition and be(ing)  
Startled awake.”  

---

Nice Shirt, Faggot

Anti-bullying day.  
A chance to unite  
To collectively stand  
With afflicted victims:  
\( \text{The singled out.} \)  
\( \text{The meek.} \)  
\( \text{Those that dare wander} \)  
\( \text{Along a lonelier path—} \)  
Gender, age, race:  
\( \text{Accepted, celebrated} \)  
Only to crash  
\( \text{Plummet} \)  
\( \text{Destroy} \)  
In the moment of a comment  
Walking up the stairs…  
“Nice shirt, faggot. Couldn’t you at least  
Get a man-cut shirt?”  
Glancing at my colleague,  
Unable to make sense of in/sensitivity,  
I became shocked-aware of the deep roots  
\( \text{Evil rhizomes} \)  
Of apathy, of ignorance, of intolerance.  
We have more difficult work to complete,  
Than we can/want to know.  

---

An Aspen Leaf in the Chinook Winds

In conference/confidence  
With an intern teacher,  
New and young with wild ideas  
And vibrancy,  
We discussed her complex class,  
Typical in its fabric  
Of diversities.
“How do you reach them all?”
Leggo’s refrain drifted into my presence:

“This is the teacher’s way…”

The lingering and being with;
With self, with other. Attending in place and time…

“Teachers can feel like an aspen leaf
in the warm chinook winds,” I responded—

Shimmering, whirling in the midst of apparent
Chaos.

But when we pause,
    Slow down for tea and linger in the chaos,
We can take time to be; to “dwell aright with/in it.”
    to reflect and attend—
to notice what is of true import—The unique lives of students.

Small ideas like
Grade rankings,
Pending due dates,
“Quick fix programs/scripted resources,”
PLANNING, PLANNING, PLANNING
And neo-industrial models,
Heap heavily and deflate to the side,
As the joy of being, questioning, exploring
“the teacher’s way…”
Take hold; keep you attached
To the branch, able to see
    able to be/come
Your/self.
An aspen leaf in the warm Chinook breeze,
Learning to dwell well amidst the
Tensionality of a classroom.
A Clearing Amidst the Brambles  
And Ro(u)ot(e)s of a Classroom

My Uncle Oliver,  
Two years younger than his brother,  
My dad,  
Disappeared  
One stark winter night,  
31 years ago…  
After leaving a cabin  
In the deep, dark boreal forest of  
Northern Saskatchewan.

Suffering deeply of mental illness,  
Whisperings of schizophrenia or bi-polar disorder,  
His body was discovered,  
Or rather his clothing,  
By a group of hunters  
2 years later,  
Bringing to end a desperate  
Un/knowing.

I wrote this story,  
Be/came vulnerable in  
Front of our class,  
After a recent complicated conversation with  
My mother  
About Uncle Oliver—  
A spark in our normally mundane,  
Protected conversations.  
(we don’t talk about such things in our family).
But I want to talk.
I need to share and create the protective enclave to share
To be/come vulnerable—*(Latin for “wounded”)*—
Thus knowing that we share wounds,
We do not have to accept pain alone.

Upon my telling
Of my family’s wound—my own complicated conversation,

Carly’s hand darted up, story already spilling out:
An aunt who has recently chosen,
Decided to run away, disappear
Leaving family lost and worried,
Confused and questioning,
Kids, husband, father, left to mend and pull together.

Tyler’s hand next:
Upon accidentally walking in
Mid-conversation be/tween mother and father,
Discussing lingering pain, still present,
Of her brother,
Drowned at age four—
A family’s grief, an uncle unknown.

The class,
Silent in honouring,
Knew they were gifted these stories.
In my vulnerability,
A clearing amidst the brambles and ro(u)t(e)s
Of a classroom was created,
For students to relate
To be/come empathetic, to understand
With/in that vibrant, confusing, tensioned space of
Wisdom.

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

**Seeing Anew the Wonder of the Classroom**

In the intensity *(from Latin *intensus*, “stretched, strained, tight”)*
of a cosmopolitan classroom
in the mass chaos of my tangled thought patterns,
much in the ways of the class
the wonder of each student, the gifts and moments, are lost.

Through working with Amy, my intern,
however,
I am able to step back and observe
as the class be/comes;
continues
and I am warmed in my witnessing of gifts.

Witness to…
A strong and energetic new teacher
whose warmth and generosity of
self and spirit
is a gentle reminder of what is important, of why we enter the classroom.

Witness to…
Complex collaborations and consensus
while students construct and care
depthly in their work.

Witness to…
Kindness from a boy in explaining—
in taking time to talk to a vulnerable boy—
caring for him deeply upon his tearful return to class;
an unknown leader.

Witness to…
The whispers of bright ideas and understandings,
that, from afar, clatter like spilled pocket change,
yet are purpose/full and replete with wisdom.

Witness to…
A teacher learning, be/coming
a blessed mix of in/secure
kindly firm,
drawn naturally to those most in need.

Witness to…
My/self becoming, changing amidst observations,
and these deep reflections and meditations in
past/present
self/other
seeing anew the wonder of the classroom.

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~
Perhaps we should then bear our sadnesses with greater assurance than our joys. For they are the moments when something new enters into us, something unknown to us; our feelings, shy and inhibited, fall silent, everything in us withdraws, a stillness settles. (Rainer Maria Rilke, 1933/2013, p. 51)

**In a Sadness Carried**

All that is needed at times:
A gentle prompt,
A boot scuff on topsoil
To uncover the emotions
Restrained in depths—
To write/share
To comfort and encircle one another.

Ellie did a little inside
When they targeted her,
Made her life hell
For what her sister was—
This—a permanent mark
On a fragile girl who could crack
In the moment of
Thoughtless classroom banter.
We write, we share, we gather
“To learn and to understand—to feel safe
In trust,”
Ellie says now…

How he, David, swept from
“Mr. B, I can’t,
It’s too painful” to
Openly sharing; giving to us his sadness—
A grandma’s sudden death.
“People can understand that I get angry…
that it comes from somewhere.
This year we know more about each other,
I express myself, and work with people better”
David says now…

How she had the strength
To write a letter, a poem,
To grandpa,
Inflicted with cancer,
I cannot conceive,
But the sparks of recognition,
Of knowing that certain sorrow of
Anguished death was
Shared amongst three others—
All of whom had experienced the
Wrath of cancer.
A battle lost,
But they were tighter,
More understood and less alone
For having shared.

“We understand each other better when we write,
when we tell and share. You feel closer and it hurts because
you know them, but that’s ok,”
Phil says now.

Tears welling, a voice shimmering in and out,
The painful sharing of a loved dog’s
Last moments—the needle
The whimper, the sobs…
And silence.;
Classmates giving the silence, the space,
So full with concern and empathy,
And a chord is struck—
Four more tell of a lost pet.
With a commonality and sharing,
The insecure is secured
With/in our group.
We write, we share, we gather.
To learn;
To understand
To feel safe in trust,
And the thriving rhizomatic connections—
Our strong, tender community.

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

I sense their hesitation to break the sanctity of the silence, preferring
instead to allow the story to linger where it seems truly to belong—in the
silent mystery that is teaching. (Ted T. Aoki, 1991/2005, p. 393)
An Opening. A Wisdom.

Jamie, a quiet introvert
Today had the courage to share
And we all learned
We were all taught to see beyond preconceived notions
Of what or who someone is.
To see in/to
The story behind the person—
The layers and rhizomes
That make us who we are.
As he shared, the room grew
Silent—an intensely thick silence of attending—
Of truly being present with Jamie,
His voice cracking
As he explained his fears
And worries—
His mom’s breast cancer;
Surviving,
And her courage—
How he adored her courage—
Saw her as a role model of strength.

An opening.
A wisdom.
For others to share their stories of cancer
Of battles.
And Jamie taught us
About compassion, respect
And not to overlook someone—
To with/hold judgment.

He’d never,
He later explained,
Shared this before—this feeling, this fear.
He still could not speak it, could not say it,
Because “to say it
Makes the cancer, makes the death
Real.”
Eyes down,
Voice quivering and finger fidgeting,
Jamie breathed a sigh.
“That felt good,” he stammered.
“To share. To tell.”
To awaken us to his story.
An Emergent Meeting

“Emergent meeting at 3:05.
Please be there.”
The message crackled over the intercom.
How do you walk this
Fine line as a teacher
When, on days like today
The wind is vacuumed out of the room
And the silence amongst fifty adults
Is thick,
Eyes stinging.
On this day that
Some say we changed,
Our country changed
With shootings in Ottawa.

This is our job—to listen and
Attend to the questions, worries, and silent moments,
The pauses in between speaking,
More full of meaning than the questions themselves,
Which matter most…

On this day we learned,
A colleague, a friend
Was running, hiding
In a women’s shelter
To stay safe from a boyfriend,
Her child’s father,
Deemed a perilous danger to their very being.

So…
How can we pause and
Make sense of this work,
These events…
And still attend to Phil,
Whose hockey coach recently
Committed suicide,
Or Noah, whose anxiety
Is keeping him up all night.

This is our job; our life; our meaning.
To pause. To attend to. To listen wholly.
A Tender Fine Balance

Teaching is a tender, fine balance.
Sometimes we are actors in a play
Both in, and on, a constant stage.
I tire of the power of the myth
That we teach democracy in
Undemocratic ways—
This grates on me, this juxtaposition,
Yet I’ll falter and default to
Control when threatened
As naturally as I may smile
When uncomfortable.

Teaching is a tender, fine balance
Between hope and brutishness:
Knowing when to push certain students;
Knowing the same push
Will guide the next student over
The edge.
And yet,
One other will dig in, immovable,
Unreachable.

Teaching is a tender, fine balance
Between truths and which truths
To leave out—to protect
The children, the students,
When they ask “does ISIS want to Kill us?”
Answering as best I can
Each of their questions;
Pleading ignorance and feeling
Abdul’s eyes first on me;
Then glued to his barren desktop
When students ask about
Islam and Muslim students.
A fine balance to
Create a safe
Community of inquisitive questioners
And those willing to answer.

Teaching is a tender, fine balance
Between work life and a
Daughter who needs me—
A wife (secretively 6 weeks along)
Who needs me;
Between a breath of fresh air, an escape;
My mind clouded with corrupt thoughts
About our freedom; our safety
And that of my colleague,
My friend and her daughter
Seeking their own refuge,
From a war on their home front—
Familial refugees—
With/in a local women’s shelter
Unable to leave, to work—
Prisoners of threats, plans, and what mights.

Teaching is a tender, fine balance,
One fraught with constant inner framing—
Girls in tears,
Told to kill themselves by cutting,
By an ignorant and naïve peer,
Who wept and wailed in the hall
When I confronted him—
Unable to speak, explain,
Because, at the age of 10,
He didn’t know, truly, the depth
Of what he had uttered.
And in that moment,
I could wreck our relationship—
I could threaten and yell,
But we talk, and he cries
Knowing he has done wrong…
And we are ok…

Teaching is a tender, fine balance
Of stern respect and compassion,
One I’ve ruined before
Toppling over the edge of stern
Into spite and anger
Thus losing students forever—
Because students do not forget the wounds of
How you were with them,
As easily as they shed knowledge of the
Grande Paix de Montreal and how that affects us today.

Teaching is a tender, fine balance in which I am constantly
Fumbling towards making aright.
Pedagogically I learned again and again that consciously creating a classroom that was a good and a right place for Marie, with enough space and time for a child like her to participate wholly and fully each day, all day, in everything we did together, was a classroom that was good for all children and also for their teacher. (Jackie Seidel, 2012, p. 279)

“For a Boy Who’s Never Been to a Birthday Party”

“For a boy who’s never
Been to a birthday party”
And felt the kinship of a sleepover
Or sharing presents with peers
School is a difficult, isolating hell.

“For a boy who’s never
Been to a birthday party”
Life is exhausting, spinning, dark
With shoves, leers, and taunts
Anxiety and exhaustion contorting face in pain
School is a difficult, isolating hell.

“For a boy who’s never
Been to a birthday party”
Every exchange, every glance is a threat;
And tensioned shoulders set firm;
Ready for reciprocation
School is a difficult, isolating hell.

“For a boy who’s never
Been to a birthday party”
Self harm and brutalized esteem
Go hand through hand
Ruggedly raw fingers clasping tightly together
School is a difficult, isolating hell.

And so,
“For a boy who’s never
Been to a birthday party”
A teacher requires an extra place of patience and compassion
An arm extended, not a door slammed closed
Because school is a difficult, isolating hell.
We Don’t Have Time

“*My mom and aunt think
I’m the type to commit suicide, Mr. B.*”
David said, plain-faced, earnestly.

The statement stings still
Two months later
The wary face of an
11-year-old boy
the speaker
Still fresh; still presently lingering…

In the same mining of memory,
A colleague’s stinging comment that
“*Grade 9s don’t have time
for personal narrative,
wispy washy stories*”

The comment itself smacking someone
Such as David hard in the gut.

{don’t have time…
*Type to commit suicide*}

I wonder how we don’t have
Time,
How we don’t have space
To share, open, and explore
Our complicated relations,
Our identities
To learn and be with/in the literacy of empathy…

For while Grade 9s
Practice
Practice
Practice

Writing business letters and
Selected essays of varying topics,
Their minds, their thoughts and questions
Yearn for attending.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~
Honesty in Mentoring

We welcomed wholly today
An intern teacher
A new teacher in/to
Our midst
Though I can’t say wholly
With honesty.
I am excited;

And know it’s a strong step for myself,
But questions and niggings haunt
And bubble to the surface
As does espresso
Steamed and gathering as liquid,
My self doubt
Bubbles to the surface
Pricking, stinging with/in.

Are you strong enough to mentor a new teacher?
Can you give up control—allow exploration?
Allow space for panic and chaos?
Will the students like her better???

She’s younger,

Bubblier.

Fresh.

Wonder what happened to
The days I was the

Young-Fresh-Teacher…

In a pencil snap!

A binder click…

Those days are gone.

As Chambers (2004) writes

Though

Courage comes from the French coeur and Latin cor for heart.
To find and follow the path with heart
requires courage and heart.

The pricking sting
The telson
Of doubt and the question of self must play out
Must be sought and given time.
In the exploration,
In that daring game of inner solitude\(^{40}\)

I come to know.

To my/self more profoundly,
more lovingly.

And in that starting to know my self,
I open to the possibility of the other.

\[\text{Hardened Students Harken Tenderness}\]

Moments

Pauses

Re/sonate (Latin: \textit{resonare}—re-sound)

Echo

With/in.

Some waves bouncing closer
In similar circumstance
Or in moments of solace,
And solitude.

\textit{“Be attentive to what rises up inside you,}
\textit{and place it above everything you notice round about.}
\textit{What goes on In your innermost being}
\textit{Is worth all of your love.”}^{41}

Finally unencumbered
With debris of the mind…

The broken blond
10-year-old girl sat across
From my principal
Adjacent to me
Trembling,
Culpable,
Having scrawled,

\textbf{Smeared}
A peer’s name on washroom stalls,
Appended by

“Bitch” “Slut” “Whore”—(paternal nicknames in her life)

Angry, young and seething,
I turned to her and growled
“Why’d you do, Becky?! This is bullying!”
My words,
Their brute force,
Sinking her further
Alienating her from another adult,
Until Mark paused,
Caught my eye with/in a flicker,
And intoned that
“We don’t want to bully bullies”


“An eye for an eye will make us all blind”—Gandhi

That bud of wisdom shaping my understanding,
Molding me towards knowing
That the most difficult,
Hardened
Students
Harken a more tender,
More graceful approach.
Hardened students harken this tenderness.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

**Curriculum Plan/Lived**

There are moments teaching
That, in spite of careful planning
When intended outcomes are not only
Not reached;
They are necessarily abandoned

As paths not taken
Diminished in importance
And fading in the swirl of dust in a rearview mirror—

Sudden stops and swerves
Are constant in practice
And to ignore these signs—these needs
Would be to purposefully constrain and structure a community;  
De-life a vibrancy.

A student stood,  
Her turn to respond in debate.  
Throat cleared,  
Notes checked  
And the class waited.

...  
Moments  
...

Passed

and in that looming stopgap  
my mind raced back  
connected to similar  
moments of fragility  
of vulnerability  
when students were damaged,  
shattered  
with snide remarks, sneers, giggles.

Perhaps  
“because we trust each other,  
we know each other and we’re trustworthy” Jonah suggested.

But the class,  
This class waited while Lucy  
Rolled words on tongue,  
Articulation elusively escaping.

There,  
Standing alone  
Frozen—an immediate victim in years passed—  
A target.

Yet this year  
Whispers of encouragement  
From her team  
Opposing team  
Audience.

The words never came,  
But  
With/in their absence,  
We dwelt in compassion and support.
When ridicule would be easier; expected.

“Our class is safer. More understanding” (Bob in interview)

More likely to swerve to caring than
Following rigidly planned routes.

When Lucy sat,
She was more a part of
Than a/part from
And our community layers fastened tighter
In acceptance.

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Lingering in Lucy’s Wisdom

Lucy,
A lovely Grade 6 student
Possesses that intelligence
   Overlooked
   Undervalued
   Underrealized
   Potential:

Emotional intelligence.

A literacy for understanding her peers’
Facial expressions, posture, eyes…
More attentive and attended to
Than most people give time for…
Indeed her “literacy of the other”
As my dear friend Meghan Morden
Would say,
Is remarkably deft.
So, then,
When she states in class discussion
That “we must be kind
Towards one /another,
That we should listen because
We don’t know the stories that people keep,”
Harbour,
“Of cancer, of anxiety, of abuse
So we should be gentle.”

We stopped.
Towards Lucy’s wisdom, deeply and thoughtfully.

How writing had opened doors for this wallflower,
I later marveled,
Now blossoming
Radiant and unfurling her
Intuition; her intelligence.

I thought of Lucy today
Dozy on my way to work
Eyes sunken and stinging in exhaustion
Catching contacts more easily on heavy blinks,
Skin blanched the white
Of sleep deprivation that new parents understand,
But don’t speak of easily.
Another long anxious night
Of my daughter Holly’s
Fitful sleeps…
Unable since we moved
To settle herself—
Not yet comfortable or ‘home’
And her mother, eight weeks pregnant,
Unable to give
As Holly is used to receiving.
In stark contrast to previous years,
I was not
Dreading work in this state,
My students care—for me, the other. For selves.
I would share my night in a quip
And they would understand.
We have found that
Less and less
Do we need to hide,
Protect
Wall ourselves:

“we’re more open to everyone,
this year it’s comfortable
to be with everyone in this group,
we’re more kind to each other”

Dwayne

Our sharing,
And blossoms of wisdom
From Dwayne, Lucy, Noah,
Linger and re/new
My {teaching}self.
Response to Our Digitallightningspeedrapidactionworld

“Normally I feel like

\[ \text{no one} \quad \text{ever} \quad \text{listens to me}\]

Dwayne explained…

How many of us
Ever
Feel
Listened to?
Ever,
In our
Digitallightningspeedrapidactionworld
Do we make time to
Honour the ideas,
Thoughts,
Stories of those with whom
We dwell—
Attending solely to one person—
Without glancing at a phone or
Fibre optically delivered program?

Our classrooms echo
Our world.

We invite and encourage technology
Yet become upset when students can’t attend to listening…
—and it’s not
that they do not want to listen
or that they have nothing to say…
We must,
In teaching,
Rehumanize and decolonize
The dependence we have developed;
Have grown accustomed to
So that students like Dwayne
Can find their voices
Can be heard
Amidst the turbidity
Technology produces.
His Father’s Son

“My glimpses into strangers' lives expand
my compassion for other people and
deepen my understanding of
the larger world” (Georgia Heard, 1995, p. 94).

Slumped into the metal folding chair across from me
the father’s agitation,
his anxiety is palpable.
(from Latin palpare
“touch gently”—
though this is not a gentle feeling)
and in that frosty moment
his eyes averted;
legs jigging in unison
he transports me back
twenty-five years
to his life—
his experience in school.

No longer present,
but present with/in his past.

How has school shaped this man? This father?
How his experience
Continues to be with him…
Continues to shape him…
Continues to haunt him…

How many others like him have I
helped to shape?
A sarcastic comment.
A comparison unwarranted and unfair?
A moment of false listening
to a story—
deceiving no one with my lack of presence
but myself.

These moments remind me
if the lingering power,
the lingering note
we have in the lives of students,
and they in our own.
To forget—to negate or refuse that influence in the confluence of our shared experience irrevocably damages.

*SNAP!* Attend!

Brought to present, the man’s son, a member of my class, taps his knee and averts his eyes… his father’s son.

I must work to keep his experience, his life at school from echoing, from becoming his father’s.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Gift of Silent Reflection

So much is communicated,
So much is gifted,
In that thought/full post-sharing pause
Than any vocal reaction could create.
Those precious, tender & vulnerable
Moments
Lingering as a class
To honour the explicitly
Clear and honest sharing—
An elegy to a dying grandfather
Afflicted with cancer.
In our collective silence
Lies a grasping,
A coaxing of meaning,
That is incredible.
That is astonishingly loud.
That is astonishingly heartfelt and tender
In its solidarity and cohesion.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~
To Walk Well With David

To see David tense and caged
pacing in the hall,
a second time having stormed out
mid-class;
a third time in two days,
could fracture your heart.
But,
in that moment,
that tension of time,
as I gave him space to consider
space to reflect,
talking in calm tones—
“I thought I’d have the answers by now!”
I scream at myself.
“I thought this got easier.”
And
We
Linger.

I give him space,
his face contorted in anxiety;
in defeat.
Being bullied on the bus,
day after day of worry.
Being constantly reminded
that he is different.
In this agony,
this telling and confiding
with/in the space created,
I feel our bond deepen,
our eyes meet,
and he is vulnerable—raw.
Would he allow, I’d squeeze him tight;
let him know we care about him,
that he has infinite chances and opportunities,
because he matters.
In that moment,
I realize it has become easier.
I have not done the ‘easy’ thing:
David is not in the office,
another adult abandoning
this child who
needs to be pulled tighter,
not shunned away.
It is easier for I know
I can now look myself in the
the mirror;
I have not damaged another
fragile child,
as I have with past weaknesses
with my anger and impulse;
spite and pride.
In the act of creating that space
for David to share, be courageous in vulnerability,
I have chosen a new route/root,
a divergent path on which to
walk well with
David.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

A Tallship in Irons

I am in irons.

Sails luffing,
Flapping listlessly directly into the
Headwinds,
A tallship in irons
Floats—
Directionless,
At the mercy of the currents,
Of the headwinds,
Bobbing and tilting.

I am, at times the tallship
In irons.

I am in irons.

There, I stated it.
I wrote it.
With the wisdom that in writing
Comes the ability to transfigure, transform.
“When I name myself or when I am named by others,
I am created (constructed or written) with identities.”42

I am scared of being in irons,
Being that bored teacher,
That deflated teacher,
Who has given up, complacent.
Sails let out,
Grasping for inspiration,
To in/spirit my teaching,
My practice.

But…
7 years in one school.
7 years teaching Grade 5,
Grade 6.
I am the Grade 5 and 6 teacher.

Too scared,
Hesitant to try a new grade—
Fear of failure,
Fear of being unable to ‘control,’
Of not being able to identify with
Older kids,
Keeps me in place,
Static.

_I am in irons._

On the distant horizon,
There is opportunity,
There is transformation,
But for now,
I am adrift,
Grasping headstrong into the wind,
At possibility with/in mandated curriculum,
Threat of another year of archaic
Provincial achievement tests,
Having to prepare students to write
Formulaic newspaper articles
And artificial stories
“beginning, middle, end”…
As though stories have endings, and beginnings…
We are always in the middle,
In the midst.

_I am in irons._

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Pervasive Power of Colleagues

As a teacher and leader at my school,
I like to believe I am seen
As a role model;
A practitioner.
So, I question deeply where my
Leadership was
During a recent staff meeting
Gone awry in
Anger, questions, volatility.

Summed up as stress-induced,
Yet the vicious language
Cut the air and smothered our voices
In malice.

The conversation articulated the story
Of a student—
Troubled and needing help,
Unknown to me—
Yet his teachers’ wounding words,
Adjectives like “ass” and “dick”
Further cementing his fate as
Unreachable—even to those of us who
Did not know him.

And I was
    angry;
    embarrassed;
    ashamed.
Of my self. Of the broken promise I created.
Of the staff.

Yet, for that boy, did I have the courage,
The wisdom,
To stand up and do what is right?
To follow through on what I preach in the classroom.

Hypocrisy.43

Students first?

It creates anxiety and discomort with/in
That we can argue against
Bullying, persecution, stereotyping.
Yet we can brand the most sinister labels
On students, as though they are product.
Final. Always. All Ways.
Rather than continually be/coming
In the poetics of life.

But, the silent majority can sit and seethe,
Blaming colleagues and selves,
For not upholding what we promise—
That each student will be treated with equity and dignity.
How many times will this scene continue to play out
In my career within staffrooms and parking lots,
And snide conversations in the hall,
Before I will take a stand to stop it.

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(Masks created by Jonah, Ellie, and Tyler during a large project in which the group decided to create a play representing a myth of the night sky in the Iroquois Confederacy)

(Below is a visual representation ‘Greed Tank’ by Bob, when he was asked to respond to what makes him worried or sad in the world).
Invitation to all Learners, to All Modes

I try drawing
To show my patience—
It’s something I love
That forces me
To slow down
And show
What is exactly going on—
It adds detail and meaning.

I love ‘greed tank’—
A metaphor of destruction—

An important representation
That I couldn’t do in writing
For he encompasses more than words
Can tell.

To speak or draw my stories
Gives me the freedom
To do what I want—
I can express and tell more
But writing makes me feel stupid,
Like I can’t do anything.
Now Ten Years Old, Now in Grade Five

Writing and sharing life stories,
Researched and heart/full
Is not for the timid or the weak of heart—
The endeavor requires empathy, wisdom, honesty, and courage.
When, in writing club at lunch,
Dara shared with me,
On Google Drive,
A detailed confessional on why she wants to be with her mother,
I looked in/to my heart,
Deeply.
She had borne her soul,
Had shed some weight from her shoulders,
Bringing myself and my assistant principal to tears.

Now ten years old.
Now in Grade 5.
She thinks of suicide,
Of ending her hopeless and
Miserable life—
Living with a mother,
Who confides in Dara her own deepest
Fears of a failing marriage,
Of her own depression and suicide,
Too much. Too much. Too much.
For a girl
Now ten years old.
Now in Grade 5.
We now know
She wears long sleeves to hide bruises,
Wrought on her by an angry beast of a father,
Who lashes her cruelly on
Back, thighs, and arms
With a bamboo stick and coat hangers
When she is bad,
Permanently damaging
Her soul,
Marking her; scarring her,
As a reminder,
Of what she has done.

Now ten years old.
Now in Grade 5.

Trapped and damned,
Beaten if she tells,
She shakes,
And cries tiny rivulets down her
Cheeks.
“She’s a sneaky bully.”
Her former school told us
Matter-of-factly.
But Dara deserved more.
Deserved to have her story known,
Told.

Now ten years old.
Now in Grade 5.

**Summoning the Courage to Teach With/in the Wisdom of Vulnerability**

The quieter, the more patient and open we are in our sadness, the deeper
and more unerringly the new will penetrate into us, the better we shall
acquire it. (Rainer Maria Rilke, 1933/2013, p. 52)

We need to actively create narratives ourselves, as teachers and learners,
as part of these dialogues in schools and communities, narratives that
document the lived curriculum in specific sites where a “cosmo-polis”
(Sandercock, 2003) mixing of languages, cultures, races, and identities
occurs in evermore complex and innovative ways. (Erika Hasebe-Ludt, et al., 2010, p. 25)

The day’s prompt was revealed on the screen at the front of our class, leading to that deep, reflective silence of solitude, as students mined their tangled relations, their pasts, their presents, for “someone for whom they would give anything and everything in order to be able to spend five more minutes with.” Quickly, we were busy writing, filling page with meaning, unraveling and making sense of a life that has touched ours so deeply, it remains ever-present and has become woven into the fabric of our own lives.

While I was writing about my grandpa Macleod:

*If I could spend an extra few minutes with anyone in my life,*
*that is most important to me,*
*it would be my grandpa,*
*whom I never met....*
*which may seem strange,*
*but I have heard many stories about him,*
*about who he was as a person,*
*and what he liked to do...*
*he loved to spend time on the open prairies*
of his homestead,
*walking, exploring, and understanding the land.*
*We have a set of arrowheads,*
*mounted on canvas that help to tell*
*the story of the land,*
*before he tilled it,*
*and dirtied his nails constantly*
in the toil of topsoil.
*I know ‘of’ him,*
*through conversations,*
*education from my mother,*
*but that is not complete,*
*that is not knowing,*
*that is knowing one side,*
*one person’s thoughts on her father,*
*not a grandfather.*
*The knowing is partial,*
*wisps of hints that swirl in my imagination.*
*I know that he was honest, hard-working, and resilient,*
having survived as a farmer through the great depression
that ravaged southern Saskatchewan,
scarred and poor,
but still on his land.
I won’t ever know, except in my imaginings,
what Christmas morning would have been like on their farm,
What my mom was like as a child, a teenager...

I looked up, suddenly conscious that Johnny was struggling; that he had unearthed
a memory attached to deep pain. I came to him gently, knowing now that he was fragile
and tender. I placed a hand on his shoulder, knelt beside him, and asked if he was OK.
His deep sorrow was given permission for release, having been driven deep with/in his
being. The family had recently had to put down their pet cat Digby, and his sorrow was
deep and intense. We were able to talk as a class about the difficulty and guilt of being
put in the position of putting down a beloved pet, and I was able to relate my own story,
as my parents recently were forced to put down their beloved Bichon. The safety,
security, and empathic reaction of the class strengthened Johnny, allowed him to witness
that he was not suffering alone, and in that shared understanding of loss, there was
comfort, connection, compassion, and wisdom.

Bravely and serenely, a young poet shared the text she had created, writing from
the heart courageously, longing for time spent with her grandfather before cancer had
spread its tendrils through his lungs and depositing him in a hospice. Stacy wrote about
longing to have those tender moments of adventure back again, of being able to immerse
herself in that time and fully love the moment, fully honour that man she knew when she
was younger but has had to gently let go. Tear-filled, and voice choking, she bravely
finished her writing, to a string of applause and sniffles, her classmates well-aware of the
importance of this writing, of her, and her family’s struggles, in understanding the
cruelties of cancer. In their honouring, in their present listening, they too, felt Stacy’s pain and empathized with her impending loss, reconciliation of past, present, and future at the tender age of 11. Stacy wrote:

*When I was little*

my Grandpa never stayed in the hospital for more than a week
he was out and about exploring
new places and experiencing new things

*When I was little*

my grandpa used to come up every weekend to ski
but now his legs are too heavy to walk filled with liquid,
a side effect of his chemotherapy
let alone ski

*When I was little*

my grandpa loved food, breakfast lunch and dinner
you should have seen him at an all you can eat buffet
but now he can’t eat as much as he used to
and now the taste of Grandpa’s famous juicy hamburgers is a distant memory

*When I was little*

my Grandpa used to go to all my sports games
and cheer the loudest when I did anything it didn’t particularly have to be special
but now he can’t go to my basketball or baseball games the only way he can see me is on a video tape

Now that I’m older I’ve witnessed someone who has defied the odds who is brave, strong and gentle who has lived, loved and is loved

*When I was little.*

A final member to share, Jonah, is typically a light-hearted, confident, and stoic participant in our Grade 6 community. Having written numerous times about his grandfather, a much-loved German immigrant whose bravery and cunning had helped him to elude the Gestapo during World War II, I assumed that Jonah would once again
write a touching piece on his grandfather. When he went to share, however, something was different. He took a deep breath and shared the most amazing and sad story, becoming vulnerable in front of us all. Jonah’s text, eloquent and heart/full, was about wanting to meet an uncle he had never met: his mother’s brother, who had been killed tragically in a plant explosion years before Jonah was born. He related how he would love to meet this man, because everyone in his family, including his mother, says they see the uncle in Jonah—that he reacts the same way, laughs the same way, and is touched tenderly by the same moments. Jonah, rivulets of tears staining his freckled cheeks, finished his sharing amidst the deep silence of his peers. We had not witnessed, not expected this from Jonah. We were honoured that he chose to so art/fully tell the painful story of his family’s loss, and attend to his own understanding and connection to that loss in this poem:

*My name is Jonah Ryan.*
*I am 12 and have freckles,*
*I can play guitar,*
*I am a unique person.*
*If there was one person that I would give almost anything to spend time with,*
*I would spend time with my uncle Ryan.*
*My uncle Ryan died in a huge explosion at an oil plant he had been working at.*
*My middle name is Ryan in celebration of his death.*
*I wish that I could spend time with him because I have never got to meet him* and whenever my mom, grandma, and aunt talk about him they always say that I *have so much in common with him.*
*He was funny,*
*he was smart,*
he had freckles,
he could play guitar,
he was athletic.
Since he was just like me
but older
he may have been able to guide me
through obstacles that he went through
and that I also may go through myself.

These sharings, three examples plucked from amongst a community of texts, help to highlight the need to work towards “attending to the heart, to the emotional literacy that connects us with others, to what really matters in our life/work” (Hasebe-Ludt, et al., 2010, p. 25). In the ensuing “silence that honour[ed] the text,” the community was able to take time to reflect, to become empathetic co-learners in the intricately woven text of our classroom (Hasebe-Ludt, Bright, Chambers, Fowler, Pollard & Winsor, 2003, p. 111).

I was reminded of what Hasebe-Ludt et al. (2003) theorized: “Writing hurts, sometimes later, it seems to heal, but the hurting is constant and the healing is very slow” (p. 106).

As educators, we must work towards creating the space and the time to allow students to write and share what is truly present in their hearts, attend to what is truly on their minds and to artfully express what is clinging to their souls. They must be made aware that their life stories matter, because, as Kiinaksaapo’op (Narcisse Blood) so thoughtfully articulated, “ultimately, all we have are our life stories” (2009, p. xvi). When we do not create the space for learning about the self and the other, for honouring the stories that have come to make up our life fabric, we are merely continuing the conservative, status-quo, and elitist mapping of public education in Alberta. I am concerned that “the acts of teaching and the teaching profession have become sleek commodities of the capitalist and material world” (Hasebe-Ludt, et al., 2010, p. 23) and the message that this is sending to each member of our classroom, primarily that their lives do not matter, particularly those
students who currently are not a part of the powerful majority/hierarchy in society, the vulnerable learners in our complex classrooms. Through the political act of writing, sharing, and lingering in each others’ stories, we able to live in a “hopeful act, one that [is] crucial for creating a new and different way of living and writing in the academy and in schools, a vibrant act that is vulnerable and unpredictable in its outcome but also necessary to create a new ethos of pedagogy” and new way of living well together (Hasebe-Ludt, et al., 2003, p. 107).

During the 2009 school year, I was privileged to receive two prestigious awards for teaching—one the Provincial Award for Excellence in Teaching, and the other the Prime Minister’s Award for teaching excellence: one provincial-level award, and one federal-level award. At the time, I was excited and honoured, but something was missing. In my core, there was something errant and not quite right; the awards did not sit well with me. Perhaps it was a feeling of inadequacy, or guilt, but the more I linger within the practice of life writing, the more time I spend dwelling and truly knowing the students in our community, the more I realize that the awards were not real. They were not a true indication of my accomplishments—they were the pomp-and-glitz show for teachers that highlighted (necessarily) the diligent approach of those in the profession, but at no point were the lives and ways of being of students honoured. At no point were the awards framed in terms of how students were in a classroom with each other, with themselves. Douglas Aoki (2014) writes that “if you want to convince me you’re a good teacher, don’t tell me about yourself—tell me about your students” (p. 9). I keep this treasured quote with me, now, at all times, for it is my truth. I am a much stronger, a much more heart/full teacher, much more attentive and attuned, to the lives, needs, dreams, and
stories of my students since I have pillared my practice firmly within the framework of life-writing theory. For my personal pedagogy and curriculum, I am confident that what I am doing is right for our time in the classroom. Coming to know, understand, and learning to live well together is what we need in these complex times in the classroom, in the world.

When we write, we do not journal. We do not free write—though initially we are never concerned with limiting, alienating concrete structures imposed by syntax, spelling rules, and form. Our life writing is purposeful, mindful, and replete with possibility. We, as Hunter (2012) writes, “peer into the abyss because it often reveals dark and beautiful truths” (p. 59). When we have the courage to write, and thus share, our truths, our cores, we are learning to accept our selves; we are coming to learn to live well with, and understand, others.

Through the creation and consequent sharing of life-writing texts, teachers and students are inviting the possibility of what Aoki (1986/1991/2005) describes as the curriculum-as-lived, that magical and vibrant curriculum that cannot be planned, is organic, and constitutes the fabric of the complex lives woven within it. We need to honour more whole-heartedly, more soul/fully and attentively, the stories of the self and the other. Educational philosopher Maxine Greene (2007) iterates that educators must re/focus on artfully inviting “individuals to become—to create themselves among beings who are different, to choose themselves as thoughtful human beings, decent and engaged, wide-awake to the world” (p. 1). Through multimodal life-writing practice, we are inviting and celebrating the life stories of those closest to us, those with whom we dwell. Chambers (2012) implores that “what is needed is a kind of literacy and a body of
literature that helps adults and children find their way home, no matter how far they have run, no matter how long they have been running” (p. 188). We must be working towards this return home, a return to who we are and where we learn to live well together. The stories of my students—each and every one of them—echo this call. In honouring life writing as the centrepiece of our pedagogical approach, we learn to live well with the self and other. As McKerracher & Hasebe-Ludt (2014) write,

language and literacy, in all their multiple, artful variations, are key to participating in this [human] commons, to create curriculum in a new key (Pinar & Irwin, 2005), as a mode of in-dwelling aesthetically and thoughtfully in the lived/living world of teachers and students (Aoki, 1986/2005, p. 159). (p. 128)

We are beginning to work “towards new understandings of what it means to become literate in places of teaching and learning that are profoundly affected by the complicated cosmopolitan and ‘worldly’ identity politics of this new millennium (Nava, 2007; Pinar, 2009)” (Hasebe-Ludt, et al., 2010, p. 22). Empathic inquiry invites the possibility of truth knowing, and interpreting the narrative of the other empathetically to imagine better, more equitable social futures. Feminist writer and theologian Madonna Kolbenschlag (1988) writes that after all, “people are changed, not by intellectual convictions or ethical urgings, but by transformed imaginations” (as cited in Leggo, 2006, p. 77). Teachers and students, in writing and sharing life writing, invite this distinct possibility for understanding and transformation, for an empathic world stemming from the wisdom of vulnerability so deeply needed in these complex and difficult times.
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1 All student names that appear in this project have been changed to protect anonymity. Excerpts from student work are used with Human Subject Research permissions from the University of Lethbridge and the Calgary Board of Education.

2 All photographs included within this text have been taken by myself and inserted with purpose into the text in order to add meaning. As such, captions have been left off of photos in poetic texts in order to make their viewing more aesthetic and fluid with the written text.

3 Spencer, personal communication, January 22, 2015.

4 Mayes, as cited in Shira, 2012, p. 147.

5 Writer and teacher Carol Bly (2001) writes that “human beings need solitude in order to take seriously their own ideas” (p. xx).

6 Mayes, as cited in Shira, 2012, p.147.

7 Chambers, 2008, p. 123.

8 Spanish verb for “to put or place.” Castellano Spanish is a treasure I continue to practice upon moving back from Buenos Aires to Canada.


10 Leggo (2006) writes that he is “reminded daily that [he] needs times of quiet contemplation, even aloneness, in order to participate in active life” (p. 85).

11 “I write about the quotidian experiences of backyards, always with a sense of the extraordinary at work in the ordinary, and seek wonder by attending the inexorable, inevitable experiences of the every day, always effing the ineffable” (Leggo, 2006, p. 84).

14 Chambers, personal communication, July 12, 2012.
16 Castellano Spanish for “port-living foreigner.” Porteno is a nickname given to locals in Argentina who live in Buenos Aires, a port city on the Rio de la Plata.
17 Georgia Heard, 1995, p. 29.
19 Leggo, 2005b, p. 454.
20 Physicist Albert Einstein.
21 From an interview on CTV News with the lawyer Barbara Winters, who was a first responder to Nathan Cirillo, who had just been shot while standing guard at the National War Memorial in Ottawa. See Canadian Press (2014).
23 Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, Donald, Leggo, & Oberg, 2008, as cited in McKerracher & Hasebe-Ludt, 2014, p. 120.
24 Spencer, personal communication, January 22, 2015.
27 Fels, 2014, p. 41.
28 Fowler, 2014, p. 47.
29 Wiebe, 2012, p. 204.
30 Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2010, p. 25.
37 Fels, 2014, p. 41.
40 “There is only one solitude, and it is vast and not easy to bear and almost everyone has moments when they would happily exchange it for some form of company” (Rilke, 1933/2013, p. 35).
41 Rilke, 1933/2013, p. 36.
42 Leggo, 2000, p. 4.
43 Greek hupokrisis, meaning “acting of a theatrical part.”