

The tale of the pink slip

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Abstract

In this article I trace my journey from having a settled career as a teacher in an elementary school, through the dislocation caused by receiving a pink slip, to embarking on a graduate research thesis. This narrative includes within it excerpts from other narratives I wrote en route while I was pursuing the degree. The narratives differ stylistically because each one was written for a particular purpose, at a particular time, and for a particular audience.

Introduction

I have often told myself the story of how I became a researcher and in telling this story I have imbued certain events with a magical quality as if they were signposts guiding me towards graduate school and selecting my research topic. I often tell it to myself with a sense of amazement at how it all just seemed to fall into place as if it was “meant to be.” Polkinghorne (1988) describes narrative as “the primary form by which human experience is made meaningful” (p. 1). He adds that narrative creates meaning by “noting the contribution that actions and events make to a particular outcome and then configures these parts into a whole episode” (p. 6). His observations certainly seem to describe my experience.

I have organised this article in six sections including the introduction. In the next section I outline my personal circumstances and the political climate in education which prevailed at the time this narrative begins. In the third section I describe the critical incident which changed the course of my career in teaching. For this section I draw on the narrative I wrote for a Writing Research class in which I enrolled in my second year at graduate school. In the fourth section I trace two pathways which I followed after the critical incident and which led to my decision to apply to graduate school. In the fifth section I use excerpts from another narrative, this time from my journals, as I write to try and understand why the topic I have chosen is so important to me and to search for “a way in” to arrive at my research questions. In the sixth section I reflect on the process of narrative and use an excerpt from my master’s thesis to describe why I consider understanding of self to be an important part of any research project.

Setting the scene

I begin the narrative of my journey in the 1980s. Two major events occurred in the middle of that decade: my fortieth birthday and leaving my marriage of 18 years. At that time too I started seeing a therapist and contacting a new sense of who I was and what was important to me. It was an exciting time as I questioned decisions I had previously made and contemplated new possibilities. I devoured books on feminism and women’s spirituality. I participated in workshops by Starhawk and other feminist leaders. One book in particular that became important to me was Natalie Roger’s (1980) “Emerging Woman: A Decade of Mid-life Transitions” with its cover illustration of a woman emerging from a tunnel into the light. It was at this time that I also started journaling.

As far as my career was concerned, I had resigned my teaching position at an elementary school on Vancouver Island when my daughter was born in 1970 and I had worked on short term contracts and substitute teaching while my two children were young. In 1980 I returned to a regular teaching position as a teacher-librarian. Shortly afterwards I became aware that the education climate in BC was changing. The old paternalism was being replaced by harassment and bullying by provincial and local government officials. Staffing needs were changing as enrolment dropped in some areas and teachers were force transferred. The question of budgets arose. The government claimed there was not enough money to pay teachers and Vander Zalm, the minister of education, gave teachers the option of volunteering to give up three days' work (and pay) or have the government legislate six days without pay. Opinion was divided amongst the teachers. The majority volunteered to give up three days but there were many who were vehemently opposed to that position. Morale amongst teachers was plummeting. In our staffroom we insisted that everyone who came in should bring a joke to tell or pin up on the board.

The critical incident

As I indicated in the introduction I wrote this account (Martin, 2000, p. 4) for a Writing Research course. We were expected to prepare a piece of writing to read to the class thus I wrote this narrative for a specific purpose and audience.

The Pink Slip

In January 1986, as part of the cutbacks in education, fourteen teachers in the school district in which I was teaching, were handed pink slips. A rehiring process took place before the end of the month and all but two of the teachers were hired back, most of them to the positions from which they had been let go. They were allowed to choose, in order of their seniority, what job they wished to have, from the list of available assignments. However, the district administrators had told the local Teachers' Association that they expected the teachers to request to be rehired to their former positions, to facilitate continuity for the students. At that time I was about three above the cut-off line. I was outraged by the process and thought that as an association we should protest the manner in which this was being done. As teachers we did not make a collective stand and I, too, was silent.

In May, four months later, I was one of the twenty-five who were handed pink slips. Again, there was the "Cattle Market" rehiring process. I was close to the top of the seniority list and, when it was my turn to go in to the rehiring room, I did not choose the assignment from which I had been laid off. Instead, I selected a position which had been filled on a temporary basis for a number of years, the Hospital Homebound post - one of those positions which no one knows too much about, and which is funded on an inconsistent basis. That was not a popular choice with the district administrators, since I had been let go from a part-time job and I was now selecting full-time employment. The administration tried to rule me disqualified, however I had previously consulted with the executive of the Teachers' Association and I knew I had their backing. I knew, too, that the regulations were on my side.

The following May over sixty of us, many with ten years seniority, were laid off. To me it was clearly a political move by the district administration. They were able to eliminate whatever programmes they chose. They also "protected" some positions and personnel, thus making them immune to the effects of the seniority clause. They knew they needed to cut about ten full-time

positions, but the way in which they chose to do it kept people in a state of fear and uncertainty, and pitted teacher against teacher. This time I was a long way down the list, and, when my turn came to go into the "Cattle Market," the hospital-homebound position was no longer available - it had been selected earlier in the process. I was faced with the situation of choosing either a position in the school at which my ex-husband was principal, or "bumping" a friend, who was two places below me on the seniority list, from the library job she had held for a number of years. I chose the library position. A week later a colleague told me she had heard the principal of that school state publicly that no one who had "taken" a job from one of "his" teachers was welcome in "his school." He was referring to me and the new kindergarten teacher. I learned later that the kindergarten teacher's husband had confronted the principal. I did nothing. I felt guilty and ashamed.

I spent that summer backpacking in Peru and Ecuador, in a completely different world. When I thought about my work situation, I decided that I was a professional and would go into the school and do a professional job. However, when September came, it was a different matter. My friend had removed everything that could be of help from the library. I felt the wrong-doer rather than a victim of the system. By the end of the first week, I found myself unable to face going into school. I went to see my doctor who recommended I take time off. That time stretched into eighteen months until I decided to resign. I couldn't see myself going back as "I hadn't really resolved anything." I did not have another job to go to and, in fact, had no idea what I would do.

Two pathways

As I look back on the years following my resignation from teaching I appeared to follow two separate pathways both of which led me towards the decision to apply for graduate school; one was the Teacher Workshop pathway and the other was the Women's Self-Esteem pathway.

The teacher workshop pathway

During my leave from teaching, when it became obvious to me that I had no heart for returning to the education system, I registered for an in-depth career planning course which took place one evening a week for 13 weeks. There were six of us in the group, all women between the ages of 30 and 50, and all looking for a change of direction. During the first six weeks we participated in a number of activities which helped us become aware of our values, our personal preferences about a work environment, our personal strengths, our dreams, and many other aspects which might influence our choice of an ideal job. Next we each made a poster representing the information we had gathered about ourselves and then we took turns presenting our posters to the other members of the group who brainstormed all the possible activities, jobs, and careers they thought might fit the presenter's profile.

When I presented my poster one of the suggestions was "Reiki." I had no idea what Reiki was but the woman who suggested it said it was a hands-on healing system like therapeutic touch. My immediate thought was "How can I heal others when I need so much healing myself?" and I put Reiki on the back burner. However, a few weeks later I saw an advertisement in a local paper for a Reiki course and I signed up. I loved the gentleness and the contemplative atmosphere; it seemed to be just what I needed at the time and I started exchanging sessions with some of the people I met on the course. My experience with Reiki led me to explore other alternative healing modalities. I took a second Reiki workshop and the basic level Acupressure workshop. About the same time I heard that two psychiatric nurses in my community had started up a local wellness

centre offering body work, counselling, and acupuncture, as well as ongoing support groups. I contacted one of the nurses who I knew and started volunteering at the centre as a general receptionist and person-on-the-spot to answer questions from people who walked in off the street to see what the centre was about. After a while I began offering Reiki sessions to clients for a donation towards the rent and in this way I became part of the community of practitioners who were working at the centre.

In addition to working individually with clients, the two nurses delivered wellness workshops to businesses in town. One day they were approached by the local Teachers' Association to present a workshop as part of a Professional Development day. It turned out that neither of them was available to do the workshop so they asked me if I would be willing to take it on. I struggled with the decision of whether I would go back into the system which I had left with so much hurt and anger the previous year. I decided I would. I designed and presented two half day workshops which, in my naïveté, I called "Wellness is Loving Yourself." They were a great success. Both sessions were full and many teachers who came to the morning session wanted to return in the afternoon.

That workshop was a turning point for me. I had thoroughly enjoyed the experience and I realized that here was something I could do which would be of value to teachers and healing for me and earn me some money. I developed a few different workshops and produced a brochure which I mailed with an introductory letter to all the Professional Development chair people in BC. I also made appointments with Professional Development chair people locally on Vancouver Island and visited them personally to talk about the workshops. I began to get bookings from local Teachers' Associations as well as individual schools. One district engaged me for workshops which we held at a resort over two days. The format was very popular and we repeated it twice a year for three years. During the next few years I travelled throughout the province and to Calgary and the North West Territories presenting workshops.

During this time teachers were increasingly being blamed by government and the press for perceived short-comings in education and children's learning. There was little acknowledgement, appreciation, or respect for the job which teachers did, so in each workshop I included activities which focused on self- and group- appreciation and respect. Also at the beginning of each session when teachers were introducing themselves I would ask them to share one joy and one frustration of their job. This enabled them to connect emotionally with others in the group. I would find that often teachers would stay past the time when the workshop finished, sitting in groups, talking to each other and sharing their stories. The feedback from the teachers was enthusiastic: "We didn't know how much we needed this." They identified telling their story, being heard, listening to other people's stories, and making connections as valuable parts of the workshop experience.

During the years I was designing and presenting the workshops I looked for research to inform and support what I was doing. I found a few articles on teacher burnout but nothing else which seemed to speak to the personal world of teachers, their wellbeing and emotions.

A few years after I started presenting workshops the British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF) hired a full time wellness coordinator who was responsible for making presentations and

training teachers who would go into schools and deliver wellness workshops at no charge. The number of workshops I was booked for started to decline, probably partly as a result of the free availability of the BCTF sessions. I was faced with the question of “What now?”

Women’s self-esteem pathway

A few weeks after I finished the career planning course I saw an advertisement in the local paper for a co-instructor at the local community college to help with a job re-entry programme which was partly funded by Federal and Provincial departments. Having just completed my own career exploration I thought I knew something about the topic, so I applied and was appointed. Courses lasted for four weeks and were repeated a number of times throughout the year; some were co-ed while others were for women only. It was heartening to see the participants in the women-only groups flourish. They wrote poetry, made up plays, talked about feelings, and enjoyed each others’ company.

As the courses neared the end the women would become quieter. They said they were afraid that they would slip back into their old ways when they didn’t have the structure, motivation, and support of the group. I realised how much the course had meant to the women and I also realised that no matter how many new skills they had learned and practised they were not likely to be successful without a certain level of self-esteem. I decided to investigate to see if I could raise some grant money to put on some women’s self-esteem classes locally. I talked to the coordinator of mental health whom I knew and who had a good record for securing grants for projects. He was encouraging but said it would take time. I decided I didn’t want to wait so I put up notices around town advertising a six week self-esteem group for women for a fee but also with a sliding scale. The group filled up quickly and I put names on a wait list for the next group which I started a couple of weeks later.

The groups were very popular and obviously filled a need. At times there were four groups running concurrently. We continued over a period of five years. The women were a mixture of ages from 18 to 78. Social Services and the Indian Band funded some participants. I enjoyed running the groups. Each one was different and I appreciated the resilience, humour, and warmth of the women. As each group progressed women would often ask if they could see me for an individual counselling session. This was something I did not feel qualified to do so I would refer them to the local lay-counselling services or to professional counsellors in the community. I realised, however, that I regretted not being able to provide that service for the women.

The two pathways meet

The reduced demand for the teacher workshops coincided with my realisation that I wanted to be able to provide individual professional counselling for women. For the first time I started thinking about the possibility of going to graduate school to do a counselling degree. So ten years after the Pink Slip incident I applied to take an M.A. in Counselling at the University of Victoria and named “Teachers and Emotions” as my research area.

Starting with my own story: narrative writing to understand

During my first year in graduate school I took the mandatory research course but it concentrated on quantitative methods which I knew would not suit my purpose. By the end of that year I still had not managed to focus in on what aspect of teachers and emotions I wanted to research. That

summer I was visiting a friend who was doing her doctorate at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) and when I described my struggle to reach clarity she told me “You have to start with your own story.” With that advice in mind I registered for a Writing Research course and used it to support and motivate my exploration of writing to understand. I documented my autobiographical process in my thesis and the following are excerpts from my journal as presented in my thesis (Martin, 2000, p. 6).

September 11

I'm taking Leslie's advice and starting to write my own story. It was far easier to write and talk about issues from an impersonal (so called) perspective. I have successfully managed to distance myself from my feelings during the last few years as I have been presenting workshops to teachers, and now I need to reconnect with my subject, to move into the feeling place, not just talk about emotions. I feel very vulnerable. Why is it so important for me to write about teachers and emotions? What is it about emotions that moves me?

October 14

Facing my emotions all these years later - so much anger and so much pain. I walk around, avoiding sitting down to write - when I'm walking around and when I'm driving the car, there's so much I want to say, and when I sit down, it dissipates. Why teachers and emotions? Because of my experience of not valuing my emotions and not feeling supported? Why am I doing this? To keep my connection with teaching? I can feel tears. I had never really believed that I would not have a job, not teach. What I need to write most is what I am not saying and not feeling. I am thinking too much about what I need to write instead of writing it. I think I'm afraid of an immense sadness, of a loss. I miss teaching, I miss the children. I'm not a teacher any more. That seems poignant. I lost my community and I lost my life work. I haven't realized until now how important that was. It was, and is, important for me to do something which I believe is making a difference and to express who I am through my work. I had not fully realized that. The loss of identity with a community, a group of people coming together with a common purpose.

October 28

Standing up for what I believe has always been important to me. It seems that a large part of my emotion about the layoffs is shame and guilt at not standing up for what I believed was right, not acting on my values.

November 7

So what else was there besides the shame, guilt, and loss? There was anger. I was angry we were not valued. I felt anger at the system and I felt powerless to do anything about it. I keep remembering the scene at the Cattle Market where the administrators were ranged around the tables. I get angry all over again. What's the relevance of understanding my process all that time ago? How does that add to the body of knowledge? How can I apply that to teachers today?

June 21

I realize that much of my distress, the shame and isolation I felt, was a result of how my peers reacted to my challenging authority and how I, in turn, reacted to them. I recognized that, while I had broken some of the tacit rules, I was also bound by others. It was also apparent that as a group we, the teachers, had policed ourselves. I had been just as silent as my peers, so I cannot

approach my inquiry from a self-righteous position. It is important to recognize how easy it is to become complicit. One theorized purpose of co-constructed emotions is that they keep the group together by discouraging the challenging of the status quo. Those who do step outside and question are often isolated or ignored (White, 1993).

There are many instances throughout school life in which teachers feel very strongly about an issue but do not allow themselves to speak up about it because of the rules concerning appropriate behaviour in their setting, or they may speak up and suffer the repercussions. There are often emotional repercussions either way. I have therefore decided to interview teachers and invite them to tell me about a time when they perceived themselves to be out-of-step with their peers, that is, thinking and feeling differently from their peers about an issue. By focusing on peer relationships rather than relationships with administration, I am attempting to equalize the power dynamics within the system. Within the experience of being out-of-step, there will be an emotional component. I am also interested in finding out how that emotional experience affects the individual teacher's well-being and the well-being of the staff.

It took almost a year of writing to process my own emotions about the Pink Slip incident and to arrive at a research question. Later I read an article by Nias (1996) in which she commented on the lack of research on teachers and emotions. She speculated that one of the reasons for this lack of research could be that inquiring into other people's emotions might bring one too close for comfort to one's own. I heartily agreed.

Reflection

I am ending my narrative here at the point at which I had decided on my research question and had become grounded about my own emotional journey. My journal writing had convinced me of the importance of self-reflection and self-knowledge in the research process. I conclude with an excerpt from my master's thesis (Martin, 2000, p. 3):

As I embarked on the process of proposal writing, I found myself referring to my year's exploration as a "prelude" to writing my thesis. I realized I was discounting it because it was not the "formal" part of my process. However, as I progressed with the so-called formal part, I became clearer that the year's work and my personal writings were, in fact, an integral part of my thesis. They were important for several reasons. First, since I am writing about the subject of emotions, it is important that I understand my own emotions, positions, and perspectives as clearly as possible. Second, my personal writings allow me to make my own biases and perceptions clear to the readers of this work. Third, my writing enabled me to be honest with the people I was interviewing. Reconnecting with my own experience meant that my relationship with the participants was based on common understanding. I was no longer a distant researcher. Fourth, one of my intentions in writing this thesis is to affirm the value of taking oneself and one's emotions seriously. Therefore, to call my year engaged in writing "a prelude" devalues the process and perpetuates the very attitude I want to discourage. Last, my personal story is important because, no matter for what, or for whom, I might think I am writing, ultimately I am writing to try and understand myself better.

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