Poetic reflexivity and the birth of Career Writing: An autoethnographic love story

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"*Coherence is an achievement, not a given. This is the work of self-narrative: to make a life that seems to be falling apart come together again, by retelling and 'restoryin' the events of one's life*." (Bochner, 1997, p. 429).

Abstract

The intention of this chapter is to show how autoethnographic research might promote reflexivity among career professionals. We aim to answer the question: can writing one's own life and career story assist career practitioners and researchers in identifying patterns, idiosyncrasies, vulnerabilities that will make them more aware of the elements that are fundamental to career construction and that have been mentioned in a variety of disparate places in the existing career literature? What interested us as career researchers and co-creators of the narrative approach *Career Writing* in considering the innovative intention of this book, was how writing our own career story could deepen our professional reflexivity and might also help others to do so.

Introduction

The intention of this chapter is to show how autoethnographic research may be an innovative way to promote reflexivity among career professionals. What interested us as career researchers and co-creators of the narrative approach *Career Writing*[1] was how writing our own career story could deepen our professional reflexivity and might inspire others to do so. In this context we define reflexivity as a "doubling of the self" (see Hunt & Sampson, 2006, p. 4) where as a multi-voiced person, able to express and at the same time observe myriad selves, "we are both inside and outside ourselves simultaneously and able to switch back and forth fluidly and playfully from one position to the other, giving ourselves up to the experience of "self as other" whilst also retaining a grounding in our familiar sense of self" (see Bolton, 2010, p. 4, in Lengelle, 2014). The idea of using a writing process to promote professional development is not new (Bolton, 2010; Hunt & Sampson, 2006) and in our own work on the development of career identity we show how creative, expressive and reflective writing can promote the internal (with one's self) and external (with others) dialogue which drives career-identity formation (Meijers & Lengelle, 2012; Lengelle, 2014). In autoethnography, researchers do this dynamic work "simultaneously, moving inward and outward and inward again, from epiphany, aesthetic moment, or intuition into an "interpretive community," the group of researchers who also write about our topics and whose conversations we want to join" (Adams, Holman-Jones, and Ellis, 2015, p. 49).

[1] Career Writing is a narrative career identity formation approach where people use creative, expressive, and reflective writing to develop a new story about who they are and where they are going. In the method those writing work actively with life themes. The approach is founded on a model of identity development by Meijers and Lengelle (2012). For a full overview see, Lengelle (2014) and Lengelle & Meijers (2015).

This chapter – true to autoethnographic principles – combines the story of our own career development through time with elements and interpretations from the existing career literature. We aim to respond here to questions such as, "what has shaped me and led me to the career I now have?" and in our case, "how was Career Writing born: what made our careers as poet/writing teacher and educator/researcher come together and shape a method and approach to life that is more than the sum of its parts?"

In the process of peer-review of this chapter, a colleague asked whether the use of our stories only – and then from two highly-educated academics – may make this work less applicable or too elitist for career professionals in general. In response, we argue that it is precisely this approach to our stories that can reach others: we make ourselves accessible and vulnerable; we draw back the curtain of educational level and status and show how we have struggled, wondered, dealt with our preoccupations and acknowledge the influence of happenstance. This exploration is about what patterns we might discern and how identifying experiences and their meanings (and the different voices/selves within the self that factor into career-identity formation – for a fuller description of career identity, see Meijers & Lengelle, 2012) that will serve us as we assist others in shaping their careers and identities through reflexive practices.

Chapter Structure

The chapter begins with a description of why career professionals might consider writing their own career story and discerning patterns of influence for themselves via autoethnography. It then describes the motivation for this research method and continues with the individual stories of each author as well as how their stories come together and

resulted in the development of the narrative method Career Writing. Subsequently five important elements for discerning what contributes to "career choice" are listed: painful life experiences, personal/family/cultural history and influences, chance/fate, talents/aptitudes and dialogue linking the aforementioned elements. The chapter ends with the news of one of the authors being terminally ill and this portion of the personal narrative reads like a festschrift. The conclusion of the chapter emphasizes the use of this type of reflexive narrative activity for promoting personal and professional development**.**

Context and motivation

In current career literature, scholars speak of career counsellors' needing to facilitate the development of "poetic creativity…necessary to help turn scattered stories and emotions into experiential vignettes that reflect the students' efforts to get a life." (Savickas, 2010, p. 16). We also know from training teachers responsible for career counselling in higher education ourselves that once these professionals have a taste of their own poetic creativity through Career Writing, they become thirsty to invest in further professional development (Lengelle, 2014) and are less likely to reduce career learning to a set of "skills" and compulsory reflection exercises that frequently bore and irritate students and might in fact lead to a decline in reflection (Meijers & Mittendorf, 2018).

In the same way that the majority (84%) of therapists go into therapy as part of their personal and professional development, though only a minority are required to do so in their graduate programs (13% in North America) (Pope & Tabachnick, 1994), career professionals may benefit for similar reasons. The self-examination and exercising of

emotions involved in reflexive journeys such as we're suggesting may help, as happens in therapy, professionals cultivate (1) more empathy, (2) an ability to better anticipate unstated feelings, (3) an understanding of the dangers and potentials of transference, and (4) ways to de-stigmatize the need for help – one "calibrates the instrument" in working with others. (Reidbord, 2011).

We have argued recently too that imagination is a vital part of developing career agency, where agency is not a fixed characteristic or aimed for destination, but an emergent quality that requires playfulness and dialogue to arise in an ongoing way (Muijen, Lengelle, Wardekker & Meijers, 2018). Such learning processes differ fundamentally from matching paradigms, psychometric testing, or insights gleaned from personality-type models. The results of such categorization and mapping traits and talents are scarcely grist for the mill of narrative self-exploration.

As narrative career practitioners and researchers, we behold each person's evolving story (i.e. identity) as a complex landscape of idiosyncratic voices, where some voices have been squelched, others may be screaming at one another, some are blocked or muddy, and some have been dominating mightily. In our work, as alluded to above, the self is conceptualized as a dynamic multiplicity of voices. This idea we borrow from Dialogical Self Theory (for a detailed overview see Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010) – here selves, or so-called "I-positions", may limit and confuse our ability to develop and "decide" but they can also be creatively played with and observed and move us forward in an ongoing dance of integration (Lengelle, 2016). This myriad of positions that make up this dynamic and multi-dimensional "self" can be constructed, viewed, integrated and reorganized in the form of an evolving narrative.

We propose that it is also beneficial to deliberately narrate our own lives and serve our students and clients better because when we write about ourselves honestly, we experience how vulnerable we are as we tell of our particular pain and unearth life themes and can empathizes with our clients and students. We can also see in what ways random events and chance have played a part in our life and career choices; as we make note of this, we often experience firsthand – and hopefully with some humour – how irrational the nature of choice-making is.

Our motivation for writing autoethnographically and encouraging others to do the same is at once intended to create of identity something 'coherent' (as the Bochner quote at the start of this chapter suggests) while paradoxically respecting the 'incoherence' inherent in 'self stories'. We may hope ultimately to befriend our humanity with some compassion and notice our often illogical paths and yearnings. In doing so we will likely be able work more effectively with the paradoxical writings and tellings of those we aim to be useful to.

Method

Autoethnography involves the writing of lived experience in order to shed light on cultural, social, and even political dynamics (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). It is a "research method that allows the author to write in a highly personalized style, drawing on his or her experience to extend understanding about a societal phenomenon" (Wall, 2006, p. 146). It has been previously used in careers' research to explain the construction of career assessment and counselling procedures as well as to explore how self, theory and practice came together (McIlveen, 2007, p. 301). In doing scholarship with the aim of "producing meaningful, accessible, and evocative research grounded in personal

experience…" (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, p. 274) autoethnography seeks to identify archetypically human patterns, without generalizing in a quantitative way.

We decided on autoethnography for several additional reasons, first because the method parallels narrative learning processes we mean to facilitate with students and clients through Career Writing, stimulating the internal and external dialogue as described to above. Second, we wanted to engage readers. Academic reading can sometimes feel impenetrable to practitioners and "…the academic self is frequently cut off from the ordinary, experiential self" (Bochner, 1997, p. 421). Third, we also wanted to walk the talk of vulnerability in the process of taking a step in our own reflexivity as career researchers and trainers. We each tell our own story first and then how our work came together.

The story of Reinekke

When I was in my early twenties, one of my first writing teachers at the University of Alberta, Eunice Scarfe, asked our group of 15 women writers if any of us had lost a parent young or had emigrated. I said yes on both counts. My father had left our family after we came to Canada when I was five. Eunice went on to explain that if we had suffered some form of exile early in life, we were more likely to become writers. Perhaps her theory was based on anecdotal evidence, but it got me thinking; you might say it was my first experience in realizing that perhaps my urge to write stories and poems and keep a journal were attempts at meaning making. I note that this notion strongly resembles the ideas of career researcher Mark Savickas who says that our preoccupations are often at the source of our occupations because people attempt to "actively master what they have passively suffered" (1997, p. 11). In a similar vein,

American career coach and author Barbara Sher, from her many years of practical experience, has described career *drive* as a combination of pain + talent (Sher, 2013). Perhaps my pain was a split family, being an immigrant kid, and my talent was connecting (and writing) – looking back, I believe I was driven to forge new connections; words became a powerful resource.

I was raised with two sisters and a brother and am the third child. The fictional stories I wrote as a kid were frequently about big, happy families, but also, themes of being orphaned and displaced were common. My first name was unfamiliar in Canada and few could pronounce it. I also had short hair and many kids mistook me for a boy; I wore my brother's hand-me-downs – brown corduroy pants and green t-shirts – which didn't help. My peers teased me about my name and this too made it difficult to truly feel 'landed' as an immigrant. Affected by feelings of being a stranger in a strange land and being pained at times by a sense of not belonging and yearning for connection, my vocation may have grown in part out of this predicament. That, along with a talent for writing, and coming from a family of eager learners and storytellers with a tradition of pursuing university education set me on my path of writing and healing. Indeed, my career path and vocation are not surprising – not nearly as unpredictable as the unique result of being poet, teacher, and researcher might suggest.

As part of the immigration experience, I was also confronted with two languages in a very formative period of my life. I recall being about six and sitting in a classroom where I was asked to complete a test but was completely unable to do so because of my lack of familiarity with English at the time. An adult saw my dilemma and came to my rescue, telling my story for me, and getting me put appropriately back in kindergarten

where I could play with other children and, in that playful space, learn English. In reflecting on this now, I'm quite moved by the compassion this stranger showed me and this may have been a seed in my draw and propensity to be a vulnerable teacher: recognizing the vulnerability in my students and facilitating them always with this in mind (McRorie, 1974).

In that kindergarten class we would paint and our teacher would write on the back of the paintings what we told her they meant. It was empowering that someone was listening and took those words seriously and even wrote them down. In a similar vein my mother encouraged us to paint and she also wrote down titles and meanings on the back of our canvasses. These were some of my first conscious experiences of feeling heard, reflecting on a creative work, and belonging in a safe and imaginative learning space. Interestingly, the visceral and embodied also played a part in my kindergarten classroom, with a most memorable day dedicated to textures – we put our hands in buckets of jello, pushed our fingertips into a bowl full of wet marbles, sat with our feet in white flour, a soft place I remember not wanting to leave.

What I am driven to do is to help people heal, through writing/storytelling, so they too may regain a sense of belonging or connection – with themselves firstly, and then in their families, at work and in their communities. I want to do this in the context of providing a "soft" place, even if hard truths are articulated and tears are shed. Creative challenges and compassion in the learning space are my mottos for good educational practice.

That said, the story of my vocational interests and aptitudes would not be complete without a story about my parents. My father, who I developed a close

relationship with in my teens and into adulthood, emphasized the need for personal development and handed me a copy of Alice Miller's *Drama of the Gifted Child* (Miller, 1981) when I was 15. He wanted me to read it so we could discuss it at length and he also insisted that I speak up and challenge him in his arguments. When I went to live with him at 16, he literally said to me, "I want you to speak up when you don't agree with me; I never want you to think to yourself, 'the asshole is home again'". He also sent me to a psychologist in my early twenties, saying, "next to a university degree, a driver's license, and typing diploma, you must do this, because it will save you a lot of time in life." This set the tone for our rich conversations that continued until his death in 2013. It is noteworthy that in writing this section, I had to stop to cry, feeling both grief and gratitude; I sense vocations cannot be unravelled without such vulnerability and an acknowledgement of the help we have received from others.

I also had the great fortune of having a caring stepfather who helped me with schoolwork. He firmly believed in my writing and had been a teacher and school principal. He often said, "editors are a dime a dozen but truly creative people are rare; keep writing". He also cautioned without discouraging me, "writing is the longest apprenticeship in the world" and he constantly corrected our grammar as we spoke, even interrupting joke-telling to make sure we got the words right. I smile as I remember this and note that both my fathers loved to educate. My step-father ran a vocational college in Northern Alberta, Canada for the majority of his career and the core messages I took from both him and my biological father were that education was important, but that formal education wasn't enough for personal development, and that men support a woman's (i.e. daughter's) success and accomplishments as a matter of course.

My mother worked for the government and did her civil servant job like an entrepreneur. She always had great intuition about which clients she should go see in her role as liaison between the provincial government and private land donors to expand provincial parkland. Her bosses, she reported, were frequently caught between the discomfort of not being able to control her while having to acknowledge that she got very good results. She is a natural networker, a woman who trusts strong gut feelings, embodies and offers creative thinking as she continues to read and study into her senior years. She is also a painter and I always feel that my creativity in writing, if somehow inherited, is from her. She also has a fierce survival savvy, born in WWII in Amsterdam where she and her mother went hungry and were witness to war crimes.

As a young mother of four and a divorcee, my mother arrived in Canada in her mid-thirties, got herself employed and went on with life in determined fashion. She didn't hide her sorrow, nor was she overpowered by it. I remember camping trips and creative projects (e.g. building a picnic table together on which she painted a large abstract leaf), and her overall joie de vivre. From her I have absorbed a can-do attitude as she modeled initiative taking and independence. My mother also had a critical voice and there was no doubt about what she expected in the way of respect and good behaviour. This made me sensitive to the power of language to both harm and heal. One of my sisters and I now study non-violent communication (Rosenberg, 2015) which has many parallels with my work of healing through writing; as siblings with the same parents, my sister and I realize our child selves at times still feel fragile and we can be overly self-critical.

I began teaching creative writing shortly after completing my MA degree (in Pedagogy from Leiden University, The Netherlands). I had just returned to Canada at age

25 and instead of getting the good-enough job to start earning money, I went to the local college and university extension department to launch writing courses. It took me years to earn a living wage, but a consultant friend had advised me after graduation that one shouldn't 'bury a rock' (i.e. one's dream) because, he said, "rocks always come up; the frost pushes them to the surface anyway; might as well get on with it without delay." His rock metaphor helped me stay on course with uncompromising enthusiasm and focus.

In the years that followed, I taught more and more writing courses and was hired as a writer-in-residence for our city's university hospital. In the meantime, I also married and had two daughters. Working from home became important and I developed online writing courses, this time for Canada's online university (Athabasca University).

By the time my work began to merge with Frans', I had more than a decade of teaching and writing behind me and a job as a visiting graduate professor. However, what I noticed was that I wanted to be able to describe better what was happening in the "black box of writing and healing;" I was ready to embark on scholarly work to become a better professional, both through research and theory building. I remember that around 2006 I was invited by the University of Alberta to speak to PhD students about writing and personal development. I drew my model on the whiteboard and spoke of going from a first to a second story (for overview see, Meijers & Lengelle, 2012). When someone asked me what learning process was at the heart of this movement, I could not answer. I knew the learning process intuitively, I had exercises to help people move through it, but I could not name or describe what occurred in what I called the "transformational space." It was time for conceptual and professional expansion.

The story of Frans

I am the son of a small town blacksmith and my mother founded and ran a household supplies store beside the blacksmith shop. My parents only completed primary school because they had to go to work early to earn a living. Born in 1950, I grew up in a very homogenous environment; everyone in our small Dutch town was Roman Catholic and white and there was a consensus about how to live, how to behave. Rituals accompanied every stage of life. This kind of environment would ordinarily lead to a secure and predictable future with no great need to reflect about life's meaning and direction. However, although I grew up living most of my childhood within a ten-kilometer radius of our family home and in a recent biography project still referred to myself as a "small-town boy," *times were a changing* as I grew up (with a wink to Bob Dylan). This change began with the opportunity to pursue education beyond the vocational level, unlike most of my family including my siblings.

This wonderful opportunity for expansion, however, was also very disorienting and frequently put me in situations where I had to figure out what the rules of engagement were. In the psychological reports that were made about me in my childhood school years, I was described as a boy who had an above average intelligence, came across as somewhat rigid and formal in his beliefs, and had a tendency to be passive and socially awkward though independent. These assessments also revealed that outwardly I appeared at times unemotional but this wasn't the real state of affairs.

For many years I referred to myself as a chameleon and like Reinekke, I too felt like a stranger in a strange land. However, my exile had to do with class and education, and expressed itself in a fear of becoming disoriented or lost and striving for recognition

in the academic and professional world I became part of. When I entered university to study the sociology of education, I realized the problem of children like me in higher education was not that it was only personally disorienting, but that their success was often determined and complicated by a host of other barriers. The birth of my calling happened as a combination of my own unresolved pain and disorientation, and the liberating conceptual understanding that grew in me about the struggle of children from working-class backgrounds. This struggle was real and ubiquitous. The desire to make educational success easier and school more meaningful for children like myself was the start of my life's work. That my calling has everything to do with themes surrounding orientation and identity and my own life questions is truly no coincidence.

When I entered university, in the late sixties, there was also an historical movement across Western Europe and the United States to challenge the status quo and push back against the establishment. Bob Dylan's song, "The times they are a-changing," was my favourite for many years. The repressive rule-bound culture of the fifties was being systematically broken down as the post-war generation that was reaching adulthood rebelled and questioned established practices, rules and institutions. I grew my hair long, was part of a band, and participated actively in student movements and demonstrations. My focus was primarily on educational reform. I was also a draft dodger and began my academic career early when my proposal for PhD research was approved. That said, at the time very few Dutch academics were publishing in English (i.e. internationally) and I did not always find the mentoring I required as a young academic in the departments where I worked. As someone from a working class background, I also did not know how to ask or reach out to become part of important networks that might have benefitted me.

As a result, I often felt that I was working in isolation and this later drove me to establish my own networks and research groups.

The other inheritance from my working class background, despite my parents' hard-working, practical and loving way, was a lack of emotional awareness. Emotions were there, but no one spoke about them. Having emotions was considered "not done" and this has had a lasting impact on my personal and professional life. A stark example of growing up without acknowledging feelings was when I was 18 and my father died without as much as a conversation about his illness or overt expressions of love. This left me with unresolved grief that showed up years later and for which I sought counselling.

It was then that I began to get an inkling that I was spending a lot of my time in my head. In order to gain a sense of control over my life, I strove to rationally understand and explain everything that was happening to me and as a result I became conceptually strong, without fully realizing that I was lacking connection and an affective knowledge of myself and others. This, I believe, is part of the reason I didn't so much "choose" things in life, but rather I followed the random opportunities that came my way and reacted to them.

As a result of these beginnings, my personal development did not keep up with my professional progress. I had a conflict with one of my early bosses that I was not successful in resolving properly or to my satisfaction. I had friends and a stable home life but had not learned to emotionally invest or identify some of the internal conflicts that were holding me back. Although I came across as jovial and engaged, the place I most experienced a sense of meaning and connection was in the long hours of working alone

and later, in conversations with a few cherished colleagues. Waking up to my limitations began in part when I had a heart attack in my early fifties.

It was a shock to be confronted with my mortality. I realized I could have died and left my then teenaged daughters without a father. I had the wherewithal to request a conversation with the hospital psychologist when I was in the ICU and when I asked him what I should learn from the experience, he wisely replied, "it is not what you *should*, or even what you *can* learn from it, but what you *want* to learn from it." These words have often returned and have become a kind of life motto. Over the years they have provided a thread of continuity in my career and personal life; this way of responding to whatever life challenge appears is ingrained. Along with the development of more emotional awareness, this motto allows me to be more "response-able" for my life without condemning myself or blaming my background or my lot in life. I liken these words to having a "growth mindset" before that concept was coined by Carol Dweck (2006).

What Mezirow (2009) called the disorienting dilemma and Savickas (2011) calls the preoccupation or life theme, I see as inroads to create our own wisdom out of pain, and that is what I realize I've done and am now doing. When I have been asked to speak about career counselling in the 21st century at schools and for business, I have often caught myself saying, "wisdom is the ability to see the pain behind the things" which is a concept I first heard in the work of Daniel Ofman (2013). This is also what is at the heart of *Career Writing*: the starting point of learning is to identity and be with the painful challenge of a boundary experience (Meijers & Lengelle, 2012).

Reinekke and I started working together at a point when I realized that careers work needed more creative approaches. The overly rational focus in guidance that

showed up in information provision and career competencies started to irritate and dissatisfy me greatly. In 2002, a colleague and I wrote an article about the role of emotions in decision-making (Meijers & Wardekker, 2002) – this was a precursor to the work that would follow. In 2007 Reinekke and I began developing our ideas around career-identity development as a learning process that is both cognitive and affective. I see that creativity is a way to access and integrate both. In the beginning, however, I did not fully realize how important it would be for me to develop myself emotionally and make my own personal development a priority. Doing so has enriched my life on many levels and without this learning I would not be able to speak of career and identity development as I do now.

Our work together

In 2007 we both went to the *National Association of Poetry Therapy* (NAPT) conference in Portland, Oregon. Reinekke was a NAPT member and Frans was looking for more creative ways to approach career guidance. He was familiar with narrative approaches and intuited that this was likely the direction to go in to seek more integrative and effective career learning methods in education. Reinekke was teaching the graduate course, *Writing the Self,* and other writing courses for personal development and was looking for ways to professionalize her work further (e.g. research and theory-building).

It would seem at first that describing what became our mutual career is merely a coming together of ideas and fixing skill gaps, but our sharing and blending and creating a new intellectual project (i.e. *Career Writing*) became more than the sum of its parts. In terms of the Dialogical Self Theory (DST), we might speak of two I-positions forming a

third position or hybrid position, where the gains made are qualitatively different and represent a meta-level integration (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010; Lengelle, 2016). As Frans likes to say, "for us, one plus one equals three".

The encounter of Frans's I-position as "skilled conceptual thinker" and Reinekke's "skilled creative and therapeutic writing facilitator and poet" did not only mean our melding resulted in a "creative writing facilitator with a good conceptual understanding" or "a social scientist who had become creative." The confluence of our preoccupations and the ways in which we had each tried to cope with them, made the merging of our work and lives both more tension-filled and in the end, more fruitful. We became meaningfully better at what we thought we already did so well!

The birth of our narrative method *Career Writing* meant that we'd created something qualitatively different, something neither of us could have envisioned before. In order to achieve this, we had to both 'fall in love' with what the other had already had a lifetime of practice at and re-examine things we thought we already had down pat. Reinekke learned to love academic reading and sharpen her conceptual thinking, which improved her abilities as a poet. Frans learned to love personal development and hone his intentions to learn about relationships; his theories that had always had an academic rigour now also breathed with life.

We determined and affirmed that the motor for identity and career learning is the internal and external dialogue one has about experiences – that this is indeed what makes identity formation (e.g. career learning) possible. In order to integrate the boundary experience of our meeting, we embarked on a new dialogue, both with each other and with ourselves. Put in DST terms, Frans's tendency to disconnect and avoid feelings and

Reinekke's need to connect and have her feelings met with compassion, created tension and *a decentering movement* that felt like an attack on both our default identity narratives. We could no longer do more of what we had been doing (too well) and our encounters in many ways created more pain than we had previously experienced on a conscious level. The visceral metaphor we use to acknowledge this is: our wounds became visible and we poked harshly into the other's hurt with the way in which we each had learned to cope with our own.

Upon reflection and in conversation with each other during this writing project, we realized we have surprisingly similar life themes or preoccupations (i.e. feeling like a stranger in a strange land). Reinekke as exiled stranger and immigrant aware of her social status as a child of divorced parents and a misfit regarding language, clothes, and her name. Frans as exiled stranger with regards to class and milieu. We indeed realized looking at our individual stories and in the way we trigger each other that we both work within the tension of wondering if we measure up. We are both pre-occupied with filling that gap in ourselves and we want to help others do the same. It is no surprise then that our meeting immediately increased our opportunities for doing this work better and expanding it, yet the development of our mutual calling and joint work and personal life would also greatly amplify the struggles we each experienced in relation to our life themes (i.e. preoccupations).

On a basic level the other's mere presence meant we were being asked to, "please give up the safety mechanisms that you have taken a lifetime to cultivate and which have worked for you, and please do so promptly. I need you to do this, so I will be okay." Our meeting and interaction led to a boundary experience, a term we use in the identity-

learning theory for Career Writing (Meijers & Lengelle, 2012). Indeed, we were made to question previous identifications and bonds and embark on a journey of identity learning. Our old stories and ways of being would not and did not suffice to bring our work and personal lives together.

On the other hand, our similar handicap (i.e. both feeling like a stranger in a strange land) and the vocations that we had each pursued and created to cope simultaneously produced a centering movement (Hermans & DiMaggio, 2007). We were committed to the same thing (i.e. personal development) and our identities grew stronger and we gained confidence in both our work and in our personal lives. The magnetic pull that would birth our new calling and partner relationship was a complex mixture of experiencing and dialoguing about our pain and developing talents – again, the combination of the latter two elements are at the heart of our drive (Sher, 2013).

To conclude our story, we propose that our joint career was born out of mutual sources of pain resulting in similar ambitions but opposite and yet complementary ways of coping. The simple (i.e. one plus one is two) equation is that Frans' commitment to conceptual thinking and academic work gave status and professionalization opportunities to Reinekke, allowing her to feel like less of a stranger in her professional life and context. At the same time, Reinekke's creative and affective approach to teaching and learning, gave Frans' work more depth and allowed him to see that for his professional development, personal growth is a prerequisite; he began to feel less like a stranger in his personal life. However, the more complex equation or "third position" or "hybrid position" (i.e. the gains we had not predicted and meant one plus one was indeed three) was that Frans's professional success deepened and came alive (which for instance

resulted in us both gaining international recognition) and Reinekke noted unexpected but important improvements in work and personal relationships.

Results and Discussion

After writing these stories and checking with each other and two additional colleagues about their content, composition, and emerging themes, we talked about what could be gleaned from our stories. As is the intention of autoethnographic work, we used them as material for our self-reflection and to identity patterns that might offer others insight as well.

We identified four key elements in our stories that appear in the career literature and a fifth (i.e. dialogue) tying them together in the process of meaning-making.

1. Pain. In our stories, we confirmed that "we try to actively master what we have passively suffered" as Savickas claims (Savickas, 1997, p. 11). In both our cases, what troubled us motivated us too. Our joint calling is also where both our preoccupations met. Indeed, one might say *Career Writing* is a method that *helps people to reconnect with themselves and others in creative ways in the pursuit of meaningful career learning*. It is noteworthy that what had made us suffer and had made us compensate for that suffering has made us strong in ways that were ultimately imbalanced – we had taken our coping to exaggerated and dysfunctional levels. For instance, Reinekke tended to worry and obsess over personal dynamics and Frans tended to blanket feelings with conceptual musings. In our work together and in service of others, we became keenly aware that our work should for instance not be cause for rumination (Lengelle, Luken & Meijers, 2016) and that the

emergence of agency requires a safe holding space of imaginative development that does not limit itself to the cognitive realm (Muijen, Lengelle, Meijers, & Wardekker, 2018).

2. History. Our family and cultural patterns influenced what was expected, what was possible, and what should be questioned. We are both influenced by hard-working Calvinist Dutch culture that our parents also passed on to us, but also by the more jovial and forgiving Catholic background of Frans's parents and Reinekke's mother. We also had additional powerful influences that allowed us to break away from traditional norms. Frans was influenced greatly by the societal shift in the 1960s and Reinekke was influenced by her emancipated mother and a father who asked her to engage in critical dialogues early on and encouraged her to question his (white male) authority. The outcome of these histories was two conscientious, autonomy-focused individuals who were ready to take each other on to break down established dysfunctional patterns on both personal and institutional levels.

3. Chance/fate. Conversations with many of our friends and colleagues over the years confirm what researchers like Pryor and Bright say in their book Chaos Theory of Careers (2011): we are all influenced by the random events, chance meetings, and the luck we have in our lives. No one can tell of a calling or career without saying something like, "And then I happened to run into so and so…" or "A position opened up, just as I was about to give up on that." These random events include our own meeting, as well as running into particular teachers or books at crucial times in our lives, the fluke of the generation we were born into (i.e. different political and social environments) and the influence of current economic realities (e.g. equal opportunity; precarious labour). Of

course ‘chance’ alone does not determine opportunity, how we respond to those opportunities is what ultimately matters.

4. Talents/aptitudes: whether inborn or a gift of socialization, we concede that particular talents and aptitudes (and lack thereof) have also influenced the development of our careers. Reinekke developed a knack for writing at a very early age and is socially outgoing. Frans is entrepreneurial like his parents and learned early on that he was a good speaker with a penchant for keeping audiences interested in his messages while also making them laugh. We are both blessed with enough brains to write and do research, and with enough love for people to teach and engage with others, build networks, and rejoice in another’s success. Conversely, neither of us is a science or math whiz, which may explain our preference for qualitative research and our destiny of ending up in the social sciences. Though talents are emphasized in career guidance literature, they do not give people a sense of direction or provide meaning, but they do limit and enhance people’s ability to make particular choices (Savicakas, 2011). Once people have established an inkling of their route or sense of direction, talents are useful and invaluable tools to live out and enact a vocation. If Sher’s equation, pain plus talent is drive, the talent is the cart and the pain is the living, breathing heartbeat of the horse that pulls it in a particular direction.

5. Dialogue: the process of meaning making through dialogue ties the previous four elements together. It is through both the internal dialogue (conversation we have with ourselves) and the external dialogue (conversation we have with others) (Lengelle, 2016) that we begin to integrate the parts of the ‘self’ that make up identity stories we can use to live by and adjust as needed. That is why a process like autoethnography is useful to

promote reflexivity: it is a way of engaging the dialogue about experience that brings disparate career influences together meaningfully.

The conscious integration of pain, cultural and family history, chance, and talent happens when we can reflect upon and find the language to articulate connections. It is not about constructing the 'truth' but rather to put together meaningfully a story of how we have become and what we would like to become good at. To use a metaphor: if one's pain, history, fate, and talents are the materials to construct a calling or career, dialogue becomes the blueprint for building.

An unexpected chapter

And they lived happily ever after…. or rather, stories (i.e. career narratives) must change as society changes and as our own lives do. This became starkly clear in April 2018 when Frans was diagnosed with a terminal ureter cancer with an estimated life expectancy of less than a year. For Frans this means the premature ending of his life and work; for Reinekke this means losing both spouse and primary work partner.

The fact that career identities are always changing has been brought home to us more powerfully than ever and meant that this chapter was not complete after the initial draft was done. We are in the process of a fundamental re-narration and we hope this chapter will give others courage to contemplate, explore their (career) stories and cultivate the precious internal and external dialogue that has made (and still makes) our own career learning possible and immensely rewarding.

Feedback on this chapter by our colleague Kat McNichol who has a detailed understanding of autoethnographic and career writing helped us ask a number of new

questions as we begin to re-narrate our story and respond to the new circumstances. She asked us (1) “Reinekke, what insight have you gained knowing Frans is dying? What direction do you see your work going in? What will your calling become? What do you want it to become?” and (2) “Frans - what do you want your legacy to be? What do you want to leave Reinekke with for the future when it comes to your work, your shared calling? Is there a baton that you see her carrying forward? Or, if you feel like you don't want to burden her with your baton, then what are you hoping for? How would you sum up your calling and life work in light of your diagnosis?”

Reinekke

My personal insight before and even more so in the wake of Frans’s diagnoses is that there is always an opportunity for learning, here and now, not in an imagined future. In any transition period when one’s life is uncertain, there is wisdom in staying close to feelings while also observing what is happening and using words to make meaning. I have written 50 new poems in the last six months in the wake of the news and Frans helped me edit a book of Dutch poems and reflections that included a chapter on the first month of his diagnosis. Perhaps one might say, “as long as one is creating from a place of connection, even if the process involves loss and grief” we are restor(y)ing our lives.

I am also reminded how crucial empathy is in everything we teach and learn; everyone is going to be confronted by difficulty and sudden life changes. In my interactions with others, I operate from the fundamental intention to “create no pressure” and hope for the same in return. This does mean that a challenge will arise for me when I have an unmet need or someone else does, and that need cannot be welcomed in some

way. In wrestling kindly with these kinds of 'problems' in my own life, I learn how to be useful to others and stay humble.

The direction I see my work going is further along the same lines. When I say "lines" I mean the directions in which what I call my "warm inner compass" points. I have always followed this, but now do so with more equanimity and openness. I want to continue to bring career writing (and in broader terms "writing the self") to people – both to individuals and to communities. This actually means I want to "bring people home to themselves" in a way that makes for healthier interactions.

Frans

In response to the questions about what I see for Reinekke and the future of work, I first want to say, I don't have a baton to pass on. Everyone has to find out their own baton. In that sense there is no inheritance that Reinekke should feel defined by or obliged to pursue. I want her to follow her own heart – that is what will always bring the most happiness and intrinsic motivation for learning. As a teacher in heart and soul, I would encourage Reinekke and all professionals in our field to keep developing new things, do research, and continue to ensure there are theoretical foundations for the work and methods developed. Every beautiful method is doomed to be misused without the proper theoretical understanding.

I am deeply saddened that my life and work is cut short. I would have liked to do this work for another ten years and watch Reinekke continue her career, with me in a more supporting role. My career yearnings have been realized in some fundamental ways in our years together. In as early as the late nineties I was writing about identity and

narrative in a way that would in part seed the work Reinekke and I took on and developed and that came alive as I became more emotionally alive. This fundamental step in my own learning, this internal and external dialogue that now welcomes emotions, allows me to accept this process of living while dying.

Reflections on the method and research

The issue frequently brought up when critiquing autoethnographic research is that it's too personal and that too few participants are involved to draw conclusions from the work. The viewpoints articulated are after all subjective. That said, the results of this method are not intended to be quantifiable generalizations but rather archetypal patterns – in this way, one might say that the personal can say something about the other too.

We drew from personal experience but we did so as two researchers and career practitioners who have worked with thousands of people in seminars and writing courses. We also made use of research by other narrative career counsellors who successfully work with clients in a similarly self-explorative way. That said, it would be valuable to see if creating an autoethnographic writing seminar for career practitioners and researchers might yield additional and poignant insights; this may be one of Reinekke's future projects.

Conclusion

The question as to whether autoethnographic research can improve professional reflexivity among career professionals is of course not definitively answered. What we aimed to do was to show what it contributed to our own reflexivity and inspire others to

do the same. When we embarked on this chapter, we did not know that the five elements that we listed would emerge so clearly; they emerged as we wrote; our lived experience clearly resonated with earlier readings we had absorbed.

Before this writing we had intuited that the *one-plus-one is three* metaphor applied to us, but only by writing our stories were we able to articulate what that meant specifically. We also did not, in earlier drafts, anticipate that our lives would change so drastically in one year and this chapter gave us a chance to have a kind of life and career review: we are left with a sense of gratitude. Career Writing is the 'child' that was born of our devotion to work and each other. And this autoethnographic reflection reminds us that in putting the pen to the page in reflection allows us to make meaning and give direction to our lives.

Final note

Frans died peacefully on November 16, 2018. Reinekke made the final edits to the chapter based on generous peer-reviewer feedback. The work described here continues, as does the self-reflexive processes that fuel identity learning and career progress.

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