

## **Lessons from Becoming, Being and Unbecoming Early Childhood Educator:**

### **A Male Existence in the Lives of Young Children**

As a gay male who has chosen a profession in direct relationship to the lives of young children, I responded to a proposal's call to share my life's story and to tell of my narrative in a way that highlights the practical challenges I face each day in the early childhood work world. The editors of what would soon be a monograph series, *Go Where You Belong: Male Workers as Cultural Workers in the Lives of Young Children*, encouraged chapter writers by inviting us to sing our song, tell our story and attract others into our work.

I quickly landed on Sumsion's (2002) notion (metaphor) of becoming, being and unbecoming as a way to spiral into and through my experiences. Sumsion (2002) suggests that this metaphor constitutes a journey, "Throughout one's journey, one both shapes and is shaped by the landscapes through which one travels" (p. 3). I find myself amidst such landscapes and as I reflect back in writing I develop an awareness of my life's shape and form and can bring glimpses of these forms to existence.

My influences extend to van Manen (1990) who speaks of phenomenological research as a way to express the lifeworld experiences and make meaning in events and in the experiences we have. I have followed van Manen's work and have interpreted and reinvented my own research based on his notions of seeking the meaning in educational experiences as well as Vagle (2009) who speaks to bridling meaning, "I use Sartre's image of intentionality as a 'bursting forth toward' to describe what it was like for me to bridle my pre-understandings and developing understandings as I studied moments" (p. 585). As Vagle, I find Sartre's (1956) philosophies hold my attention in researching the lived experience as he speaks to peering into the keyhole to witness another's moments only to find that when he looks back another is looking in on his experience.

In researching my own experience and taking on the retelling and revisiting of my own realities, I also find Apple (2004). He recognizes that there are “groups of people (African American activists, Native Americans, those of Asian descent, gays and lesbians, members of the disability rights community, and many other groups) who feel that their cultures and histories are not being represented in the curriculum (p. 179). He goes on to suggest, “Yet, I am worried that with the conservative restoration, many of the more socially progressive gains are being washed away as we move more and more towards a curriculum that is “safer” and has very few elements of social activism in it” (p. 179). Apple’s statement leads me to Stroud, Smith, Ealy and Hurst (2000), as they point out what could be obvious, but is not in our current era as they suggest that ensuring children have male role models in their developmental years is important. The perplexing issues surrounding why few men enter the early childhood profession and stick with it couples these researchers’ messages. Further, I turn to the work of Wiest, Olive and Obenchain (2003) who show us that the biases against men working directly with young children. These pervasive issues we face as men in the lives of young children bring me to the edge of my own story.

I know that there are times I can choose to hide or withhold parts of my experience, which makes me culpable in keeping me repressed and at other times the terrifying reality of others who would simply rather see my existence wiped away than allow my in-born sexual orientation to be expressed through me feels insurmountable. Oppression is a crazy and powerful moving force in our world. I tend to speak of it as an umbrella metaphor, where each phobia and –ism is a spoke of the umbrella. We cannot simply tackle one spoke and say we are doing our duty to dismantle the pervasive biases that persist (Derman-Sparks, 2010). Instead, I choose to enliven my voice through retelling three poignant epochs along my life’s journey that illumine my activism as a gay teacher. The following three short stories come out of my book chapter in Watson and Woods’ (2011) *Go Where you Belong*.

## **Becoming**

Still close to my heart and mind is my becoming, my learning through the experiences of Amazon Cooperative preschool, a so-called “experimental” school. We used to respond and chuckle together by saying we were a really long experiment of over twenty years. The school was an off campus housing program, affiliated with the university and utilized as one of the many laboratory sites across campus. I *grew up* in this vegetarian and hippy cooperative to become a teacher of young children. This was certainly a *becoming teacher* period for me, a central component to my life’s formation; helping me to develop my teaching, learning and research ways in the world. I learned how to be firm and loving, have boundaries, teach through fun and exploration, conduct morning meetings, plan daily activities for various age groups, keep center schedules, discuss important topics in staff meetings, cook vegetarian meals, clean for large groups and so forth.

I also learned some hard life-lessons such as not saying to a parent that their child was “manipulative,” but instead letting them know how genius their child was at getting their needs met. Learning how to relate with multiple constituents was a life-altering experience for me. I felt like such a failure as that parent pulled their child from our program because of me. I felt as if I would never recover, but had to keep on going at the same time. The director helped me to become acutely aware of the fact that some parents do not trust schools up front and look for a way to leave before they really even begin and that I would grow from this experience.

It was at Amazon that I learned parents may leave your program and remove their children from your education and care when you aren’t mindful of their perspective and aren’t gracious enough to listen and promote their existence as parent and co-participant in the school through one family experience. I learned that I could cry about the things I did not do well, but still persevere in the face of adversity, such as when my conversation with the “manipulative-genius” child’s parent did not go as planned and my put down led to her immediate withdrawal from our program. The director wondered

if the family had issues with our inclusive philosophy and open stance around supporting gay and lesbian families as much as anyone else in our school.

I also learned about staff hardships and the difficulties of collaboration and listening. I learned how hard it is to work with a burned out teacher who slowly throughout the year took everything out of our room, from books and puzzles to markers and music, and she neglected the spaces by not creating a place for childhood. On the day our director finally decided to let her go, due to much protesting from student employees and my threat to leave the program if we didn't have an intervention with my co-teacher, I opened the outdoor shed and found all of our classroom materials stuffed away.

I was mostly shocked that I had not paid enough attention to notice all of the materials go from the classroom spaces over many months. I kept trying to make due and cover up for my co-teacher, a 35-year veteran teacher who came to us with eight letters of recommendation. My challenges with her opened my eyes to the underside of early education teaching and the control some desire to have over others. I learned to be ingenious and keep children engaged under stressed circumstances, but came up against my edge when I walked into the school early one day to find this teacher sitting on top of a child rubbing his back and saying, "We love you Chris!" While Chris is firmly stating, "Get off of me!" I seemed to stay calm as I declared, "You heard his words and he was clear, now get off of him and it is time for you to go!"

As I reflect back on my becoming teacher moments, I realize that through this adversity of my co-teacher's control and my breakdown in communication with a parent I became a much stronger teacher. I resolved to be a better teacher and to give children places for play, engagement, learning and socialization, not just hollow spaces where teachers entertain children. I learned that thoughtful construction of spaces into places makes all of the difference in the flow of learning; that through this mindful construction of where and how we live in learning places, children can put their attention on

great life questions such as how to peacefully negotiate for materials and spaces to create wonderment and invite big questions like how butterflies are born or what happens when you mix paint on your skin.

I grew from my first years' daze of *what did I get myself into* through *I've got power in teaching what I know* and landing on the realization that *I have so much to learn* working with parents and the community about children's educational experiences. When I graduated with a French and Italian romance language Bachelor's degree, I stayed at the cooperative for one final lead-teaching year to glean and harness anything from my dynamic director. Each of the five years I was employed in the program brought me more curiously closer to the director, her family, and her values of relationship, touch, joy, wisdom, and acceptance of otherness. Her dynamic engagements fostered a love and desire to carry forward this precarious *way*, which included enjoying every day and the experiences we have with one another in life. Her transmuted values reminded me of my mother, father, sister and extended family and our relationships and values for loving, living, communicating, and educating as a way to raise a family amidst a community of families.

I believe that those formative years in the coop, where I was utterly accepted as a gentle person who wanted to nurture and educate children, formed my confidence to persevere even through my tough middle years. I call these years my *being educator* phase, a time when I feel secure and solid in my views of education and I begin to influence others with vision and insights. I have had so many experiences from the good to the bad and ugly in my work-world, much of it related to my gender and sexuality and society's pressures for men (me as a man) to perform manly jobs; a preschool teacher or director not the accepted profession. Something more along the lines of my father's profession of Lumber Jack or my uncle's Mill Worker vocation would be more accepted.

## **Being**

After I left Amazon, I directed in an afterschool program where I would be the center of gossip by mothers out in the soccer field bleachers, worried I was going to turn their school-age children gay; as

if I had such power or desire to manipulate another's being in these ways. I called this *being teacher* experience the Stepford Wives phase, to relate back to Levin's (1972) satire and horror. For me, the Stepford Wives were a group of highly controlled women, whose free will and thinking was taken away so they could please their husbands and look good to their neighbors as if keeping up appearances was of the utmost importance.

During this period, I learned that school-age program teaching and directing is the last frontier in education. Mostly, we were seen as after-school sitters, not as fellow educators and colleagues in the school. However, I was in a state of being, in a more comfortable place within myself as an educator and human being. I felt as if I understood the multi-layered facets to my work as a teacher and director. It was hard to shake my confidence because my self-assurance was very high. Amazon and my University of Oregon experiences had taught me to stand on my own two feet and not compromise myself or my values for teaching and learning. However, I did not realize that I may have placed myself directly in harm's way, not having the protective membrane of my former accepting and caring co-workers. While comfortable with myself and in my role, I faced many challenging events to deepen my being.

The more I've lived in *being educator*, the more tools I've acquired in my own actualization (Mazlow, 1943). An example of this revolves around some of the hardest issues I've faced with staff and parents. During my doctoral degree and about nine years into coordinating and directing at the university lab school, our school underwent an expansion and renovation. I was incredibly busy learning to teach graduate students, researching Reggio Emilia, developing practices of documentation, collaboration and reflection in the lab school, and hanging on to my co-directing role.

During this wearing period, Oregon briefly opened the rights for gays and lesbians to obtain a marriage license and we had a teacher marry her partner. Being on a liberal university campus most of our community were encouraging and compassionate at their teacher's happy occasion. This teacher wanted to celebrate her marriage in the school and shared her newspaper photo with her classroom of

families and children. After two years of teaching with these families, everyone already knew the teacher personally and had met her partner during a family potluck or other community event, to which the staff's family is commonly invited. Also, being in a school that takes anti-bias education seriously, we supported this teacher's right and choice to celebrate in her school community, just as any other teacher has done, no matter a person's sexual orientation. While supportive of her decision, one family was also conflicted by their religious beliefs and worried about how to broach the conflicting conversations between church and school with their four-year-old daughter.

The family wanted help to determine how to proceed with developing their religious faith in their daughter's life and the incongruent values and messages she was receiving about her teacher's life in juxtaposition with her church. The family did not approach me with their concerns, but instead went to my co-director. She took on this challenging situation by meeting with the family and taking a listening stand to aid them through their troubling internal conflict. Me, on the other hand, I was quite upset. I wanted to point out that our community would not support the biases represented by such religious beliefs and that we would want them to consider how they were hurting their teacher's being. Needless to say, my one-sided view was clouded by my own intolerance of a family's beliefs, which left me not wanting to listen or respond to them. I also felt righteousness in believing that our program's stance would supersede the encounters of prejudice such as those presented by this scenario. Living in a bubble does not create a healthy world-view and I knew that I would need to grow internally to accommodate differences of beliefs and opinions, even when they directly affected me, not just a teacher in my community.

I had this nagging thought in the back of my head, one I attributed to my *being educator* phase. I kept wondering what I might have done when presented with a similar parent concern myself. What would I have done if I did not have a co-director willing to take up this problem? I felt an internal calling

for my professional growth, to stretch in my thinking and to grow through my natural and comfortable way of believing.

I suddenly recognized that I had to reach into the zone of listening and seek to understand the other's point of view, even if I didn't share their same beliefs. Although I do not believe such questions about sexuality being a choice and being able to influence another's orientation by acknowledging one's own difference, I had to face real-world realities that even in my liberal community this way of thinking was alive and well and very much contrary to my own experiences in life. Having lived my entire life in a hetero-influencing culture, where the norms, the images, and the societal values do not support being gay or lesbian was counter to the claim that one "chooses this lifestyle" or has a "sexual preference" in my opinion.

In fact, I've always believed this was the way I was born and that I've always been different than the majority trying to influence me to be as they are through negative inducements such as losing family, friends, status in my work-world, habitation, and other natural social, political, and human rights enjoyed by masses of people. So instead, I found myself seeking out the positive benefits brought about by my nature, "Does my being gay add to my nurturing qualities?" How can I deny my life as a gay man while working in a field that has so long supported my ability to nurture and be a gentle and loving person to children and their families? These ideas seem to go hand-in-hand in my mind and they make sense to me.

In the end, my co-director handled our particular conflict with grace and I am still unsure of how I would have treated the matter. She stayed listening, she pointed out why we teach from a place of diversity of perspectives and countering biases, and she told them that she would help them to find resources to better understand how to live with their child between two sets of values, those of church/home and of school/community.



For me, I asked myself to stretch in my being educator. I had to move out beyond my comfort zone to transcend barriers that exist between parents, teachers and me. I had to forgive others who had transgressed against me during my *Stetford Wives* episodes and I had to learn to believe in active listening and partnership as a way through tough work-relationship periods. I had to learn to articulate my point of view as my opinion, as something different from others who did not believe the same as me. I had to learn to live within a community which shares many points of view and welcome the other's opinions as a starting place for understanding and compassion.

I began to live in an enlightened state where mindfulness was an ongoing part of my practice at work. For me, this state of being began to look like practicing affirmations for myself that I was contented in my work-place and surrounded by people who recognized my value as an educator, a gay male educator who was impassioned with creative drive to give children the best a society and school could offer; to show the child's strength and capacity through the image of the child as inspired by the work in Reggio Emilia, Italy (Edwards, Gandini, and Forman, 1998).

### **Unbecoming**

An unbecoming period would generally include walking away from whatever I was before, as I was formerly acting in my being educator. However, for me, unbecoming has been about releasing the old to become and be more fully in education. So, how have I released the old of my educator being and what has this release left me with being?

I entered an educational leadership doctoral program in 2003, wanting to explore leadership at new levels. I had been a director and teacher in early childhood education for over 20 years at this point in time. I wanted to explore more education and professionally grow or I knew I would find myself leaving early education entirely. The taxing and thankless job of directing was stripping me of my desire to work with teachers, families and children.

The educational leadership program, the major expansion and renovation of my school, and the birthing of a Maser's specialization in early education were converging, tiring, and transformative. I began to move more and more into teacher education and away from program directing. I began to dynamically influence the pedagogy of a transforming school through teaching the teachers. And, I found myself shedding my old skin of being a program director to move into a new role of professor.

My unbecoming is happening simultaneously to a new becoming. As I fall away from the daily running of a school, I fall toward tenure professor role. I think that tenure-track makes a person unravel from an old way of being. However, I 'm not sure what one becomes through this process? Maybe this is the point, where I stand at the precipice of someone new, not knowing or recognizing who I am yet to be. It is terrifying for me. The judgment of my writing, my research, my articulation and ideas of what school means is so harsh by my peers and colleagues. I never know if others (peer-reviewers) are playing out their fantasies of having power or being the one who holds the knowledge not letting others in (me) or if they really are trying to help me learn to better articulate my point of view, or both in a paradox; one which I cannot escape in my new vocation. I also wonder if this is part of the becoming professor for most everyone in this chosen path of becoming professor (Cooper and Stevens, 2003).

The tenure process has really taken over my life. It affects my daily existence by infiltrating the way I think about my work-life and my future in education. I love research, writing, teaching and community engagement and want to disseminate my experiences and research into the world. I feel as if the constraining peer-review process has hindered my ability to fully articulate my point of view at the same time as has helped me to consider how I articulate my work for broader audiences to understand my thinking. This paradox is difficult and I am seeking a way through to a place of calm and peace of mind. Sometimes I think I am arriving at a mindful state of being, letting go of my need to control the outcomes of my fate. At other times, I begin to unravel as I sometimes encounter the rejection and

feedback that my writing or thinking or research was not accepted by the journal's reviewers for the many reasons explained, even with some conflicting opinions from assessors.

Beyond the ups and downs of peer-review, I have internal university reviews which sometimes leave me confused. I work incredibly hard on my campus. However, my peers are mostly interested in what I've published. I receive high marks on my evaluations for every course I teach. However, my peers pressure me on how much I've published in peer-review journals. And, I work fifty percent of my time at the laboratory school, designing the pedagogy of the school. I sit on two community school boards. I have designed and developed a website related to my teaching and scholarship. I help to facilitate and organize Oregon's Reggio Inspiration Network, a volunteer community organization with over 300 members. I present peer-reviewed research papers at two to three national or international education conferences each year and help my students present at local or regional conferences. I helped to create and now coordinate a Master's specialization in early childhood education with over 50 students in its third year. I work with doctoral students and master's students on their research projects annually. However, my peers are most interested in underscoring my peer-reviewed publications. Their preoccupation, which is now my obsession, with publication is unraveling my experiences of living life and working with children, families and staff in early education.

Ultimately, my unbecoming educator mostly includes losing parent contact and direct experiences of learning with children. I miss this very much so as I find parents teach me through their desires for betterment of their child's life. Children also teach me so much about living in the moment, holding on to curiosity, moving through emotions and not generally staying stuck for too long in one way of feeling and thinking about a world-view. Children are the best of human beings. They offer the world this gift as their citizenship. They are producers of a glorious way of living, not bound by all of the constraints we've put on ourselves as adults. I often wonder who makes up some of our more ridiculous rules in society; those we live by at a cost to our humanity, such as why a forty-hour work week, or why

lock up food and housing in so much expense? And, why we make it so hard to get along with ourselves and others.

Rinaldi (2006) says that our differences in and of themselves are not what is at stake, it is the way we treat the differences in society that is what causes us to lose our ability to listen to one another. Listening is what we are in jeopardy of losing as a fundamental factor to human relationships. Her statements undergird a new question for me. How do I stay intact and maintain the courage to go forward listening as I unravel or unbecome the old me? Is this my pathway to becoming again?

### **Conclusions**

My crisis in the unbecoming educator is only a placeholder for what is to come next in my life. As I move through entropy and come apart at a molecular level, I realize that there is a flaw in the belief of the fatal law; the belief that all life will end in a full heat death. Instead, I have chosen to believe that as life is coming apart, there is a seed of opportunity created from the energy of breakdown. This kernel of energy allows for new life to be born from the ashes of the old. As the wise Marx-Hubbard (1997) suggests, "Life eats entropy!" (Cassette Tape, side A). She goes on to explain that we need all of this breakdown in order to create the energy to take a quantum leap forward into the new creation of life.

I've chosen to believe in Marx-Hubbard's (1997) theory for my own reconstruction. I have encountered the random disordering time and again in my becoming, being and unbecoming processes and I have watched it turn into experiences full of meaning. With this thought in mind, I search out my copy of the book, *A Simpler Way*, by Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers (1996). I open it directly to the page on the complexity of order in life where the word emergence is significant. There is something familiar in this book to the statement of "life eats entropy" by Marx-Hubbard (1997) and it is framed around order or the emergence of life.

Emergence is a common phenomenon found everywhere in life. Social insects are a particularly stunning example. The tower-building termites of Africa and Australia accomplish little when they act alone; they dig only lowly piles of dirt. But as they attract other termites to their vicinity, a collective forms. As a group, they become builders of immense towers. (p. 68).

As we connect our stories with those of others, we find we can build immense towers, bridges to understanding and meaningful moments in the in-between. I wish for life experiences that help me grow and be the best person I can become in the lives of the most wonderful of humans, the lives of young children. This grand desire creates a reordering of my life's priorities and develops a more complex way of seeing into the world. It also carries with it the struggle for meaning and the complexity of identity reconstruction and intense listening that is required of each human being working in teaching and learning.

In the end, as a man in the lives of young children, I challenge others to deeply consider and reflect on their own experiences with our youngest. Who do we want to be when we are standing in front of the best of human beings? Will we begin the labels game? Or, will we seek to live in the in-between where the good rises up into strong and unmediated relationships? I believe that to create this space requires a will to want to stop, pay attention, deeply listen, and generate doubt and the precariousness we feel when encountering one another.

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