

Memoir to Meaning: A Narrative and Analysis of Childhood Experiences

by

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Abstract

This thesis project is an exploration of the self in finding how personal childhood experiences impact our lives. “Phenomenological research is the study of lived experience. To say the same thing differently: phenomenology is the study of the lifeworld—the world as we immediately experience it rather than as we conceptualize, categorize, or theorize about it. Phenomenology aims to come to a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences (Max Van Manen, 1984).” Through the telling of seven key points of memory, flashpoints, in the form of short stories, I reflect the significance of the event, my emotions, the senses I recall, my own speculations and perspective as a child, and how I was transformed from that experience. After the series of short stories, I will conduct a thorough analysis of these aspects from a pedagogical perspective, reflecting on how the self, the child-self, is valued, is taught, and develops from the pedagogy of life experiences. Chang describes autoethnography as “transcend[ing] mere narration of self to engage in cultural analysis and interpretation (Chang, 3, 2016).” Chang continues: “mere self-exposure without profound cultural analysis and interpretation leaves this writing at the level of descriptive autobiography or memoir (51).”

Keywords: Phenomenology, Flashpoint, Pedagogy, Autoethnography

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Dedication

I would like to give a special thanks to my sister for always being there for me, even when it seemed like we were mortal enemies. I'm so glad we grew out of that phase. Your love and encouragement have always been a cornerstone in my life. You have been and always will be my best friend. To my mother, thank you, too, for your love and strength, and for showing me that it's not always easy to parent, but to always do everything in love. Thank you to my father, who has shown me strength and mercy, trust and care, leadership, and support. Thank you for guiding me to be the person I am today, and for showing me how valuable I truly am.

Introduction

Before you start reading the following short stories of my childhood, a sketch of the past, I would like to acknowledge the genuine and unconditional love and support my parents, sister, and I have given and received to and from one another. Though some of the stories you are about to read may cause feelings of discomfort or fear, I feel deeply in my heart that all of life is a series of experiences that shape who we are. From our first true fear, our unspoken worries, and spoken regrets, to instances of silliness and excitement, we are learning. Life is a pedagogy. If we are open to change and value risk taking our adventures can broaden our imagination, teach us innovative solutions to struggles, and offer joyful intersubjective relationships.

In this statement I would like to point out that while I reflect on my own experiences and perspective, I am positive that those both named and unnamed in my memoirs were also experiencing flashpoints. “[The] notion of *pedagogical flashpoints* is an invitation to examine specific instances in which bodies educate and are educated in sociocultural difference in various formal and informal contexts[.] By sociocultural formations we are referring to the making of the self as an occasion through which socially and culturally situated bodies are construed and experienced within and against histories of racism, patriarchy, heteronormativity, ableism, speciesism, and class inequality (Kraeche and Lewis, 3, 2018).” These flashpoints in our lives are moments of memory that shape the results of our experiences and can impact development. If we are open to flashpoints, these moments of epiphany can teach lessons that will result in the way we process information and feelings, the way we act and react, our mannerisms, our biases, what and who we feel we trust or distrust, and even our preferences.

Following the short stories, I will analyze what I have learned through remembering certain points of my own childhood experiences. In the first analysis I will focus on one specific memory

and take a deeper look at the emotions that took place in the moment, how the experience changed aspects of my understanding, and how this one flashpoint had directly affected my life moving forward. In the final analysis I will summarize my findings through reliving the revealed key flashpoints in my childhood as told from the short stories.



The Long Walk

It's not easy being eight and having a little sister. My parents are always busy. My dad is in the military, and my mom works nights as a police officer and detective. I guess, in a way, my sister had to become my best friend. We were always there for each other. Mom always keeps a lot of stuffed teddy bears in the trunk of her squad car... in case a kid gets scared or hurt out *there*. I feel pretty safe in my home and neighborhood. The hospital and fire station are right down the road. I can even walk to my elementary school! There are a few nice neighborhood kids we can play with. Maybe it's not so bad being eight and having a little sister.

Our morning always starts super early. It's Fall and we have to wake up before the sun does. I can hear the chirping of crickets, and then of songbirds. I remember the little girl across the street from us told me that some birds are named after the sounds they make. I hear the "*Bob-White... Bob-White,*" song outside my window. It's a lower tone that's a little dragged out, then a quick, high-pitched chirp. So pretty. So familiar. Another morning, and we've got to hurry and get

dressed for school. When we're ready, Mom walks us over to the neighbor's house. My sister and I have to wait there and eat breakfast because it's too early to go to school. Mrs. Hilda always gets an early start on her meals for the day. I smell the sweet aroma of goat, vegetables, and herbs simmering on the stove. My neighbor is *Hispanic*. I'm not sure what that means, but I know they cook good food! My sister and I watch cartoons and eat our cereal. When the sun starts shining in the front yard, we say our goodbyes to Mrs. Hilda her husband, Mr. Ed, and start our journey. Although our school is only two blocks away through our neighborhood, it feels like a long walk. A big part of me just wants to stay with Mrs. Hilda and wait for her good cooking and watch cartoons. I know that Mrs. Hilda will be there waiting for us after school. It'll seem like a short walk, then!



The Fave Tree

Being a big sister is not always easy. I've got to keep my eye on my little sister, Mary Ellen. Dad is in the military and Mom is a police officer. She works late at night, so I've got to help Dad with Mary Ellen after school. I help with snacks, help her put on her shoes and clothes, brush her hair, and basically keep her out of trouble. It was pretty hard because Mary Ellen was pretty feisty at seven years old, and she had an irradiating energy that I could feel from across any room. Her intensity shined so bright at times that it felt overwhelming just being next to her. No, sir, it's not easy being ten years old and having a little sister.

One day after school Mary Ellen and I were climbing trees in the front yard. We called our favorite tree "the Fave". I'd always climb high atop the large dogwood tree and sit on this one branch that crossed under another branch. I'd pretend it was my office desk in a tall building. Mary Ellen liked to hang on the lower branches and swing like a monkey. There was this neighborhood bully, Jeremy Anderson, who'd always come around and pick a fight. He is a big boy, and strong,

who lives down the street with his grandma. Boy, he loves to chase Mary around the Fave. I think Jeremy was just lonely, but he sure likes to start trouble! While chasing Mary Ellen around the Fave he jumped up and swung on her favorite monkey branch and ... BAM! CRACK! It snapped and Jeremy came slamming down to the ground! Jeremy yelled and got really mad.

Looking Back...

Over the years Jeremy and Mary Ellen had developed a sort of Tom-and-Jerry cat-and-mouse relationship. Mary and I would watch Power Rangers on the television every day after school and on weekends. Mary pictured herself as the pink ranger, and I the yellow. We'd imagine Jeremy as a goon in need of being put in his place. While my thoughts remained internal, Mary often took action in aggression. Mary was by no means a bully, but she knew that she'd have to defend herself from one. She was about half the size Jeremy was. When he'd pick a fight, Mary was never one to back down.

...Squeezing your hand.

When Jeremy broke that branch and fell, he instantly flushed red with embarrassment. He wanted to pound my little sister, but I couldn't let that happen. I quickly climbed down and put myself in between them and said, "Hey! Y'all need to calm down! See what happens when you're in a hurry?" Mary Ellen started to giggle. Jeremy's face continued to turn beet red as he hung his head in shame. We helped him up and he walked home, wiping the dirt from his pants. I'd rather stay out of trouble, and it's hard keeping my little sis safe and out of trouble sometimes. Nope... it's not easy being eight and having a little sister.

Nitro

I had this dog one time. His name was Nitro, and he was a yellow dog. I believe he was a mutt that was part boxer. We got him from Tennessee when we were visiting my Pa, he's my dad's dad. This big stray dog was runnin' around the back yard chasing me and my little sister, Mary Ellen. He ran super-fast! I remember he was running circles around me and bit my pants. That dog dragged me around like it was nothin'! It was a cold winter in Tennessee, so I was wearing two pairs of pants. My outer pants slipped down, and he had a good ole time draggin' me around the yard. My dad thought that Nitro would be a good protector for us because he showed such love and playfulness. Looking back, Mary believes that Nitro was protecting us from dad's booming voice. There was no way we could leave back for North Carolina without Nitro. Looking back, I suppose his name was Nitro because he was so fast, like a car with nitric oxide in the tank.

About a year later I was playing outside with Nitro in the yard. We'd chase each other back and forth. I remember it was a cold afternoon. It must have been during the weekend because all I wanted to do was play all day. Someone had left the gate open and Nitro got so excited! He ran super-fast out the gate and I panicked. He seemed to be like a streak of yellow, he was so fast. I got so frightened because I was alone, and he was running. I felt I had to chase after my furry playfellow and get him home. The problem was, Nitro thought we were still playing. The more I chased him, the more he ran. I called, and cried, and ran so fast. We ran up the street, and I saw we had made it to the fire department. I stopped, knowing we were pretty far from home. I sat and cried. That dog stopped, turned around, and came back for me. All I had to do was stop. It seems silly now, but it taught me a lesson. When life seems too crazy, and we're trying to chase something we really, really want, sometimes we need to stop and relax, and let things work themselves out.

Sometimes we learn these lessons as adults, but they start in our childhood. This story had a moral.

I just didn't understand until I got older.

Baby Tooth

I was always told about the tooth fairy. How magical the stories were: This magical being who would trade a nice big quarter for my baby teeth. I remember being a kid, maybe three or four years old. Mary Ellen must have been a tot or baby back then. I was so excited when I felt how wiggly my first loose tooth was. I was so proud to show my parents. I remember feeling it with my tongue, moving it back and forth. I had a tingle of excitement! I pushed my finger on it and moved it all around. I ran to find my mom but remembered she must have been busy or at work. I ran around trying to find my dad. Oh, how proud he would be that I was growing up! All I wanted to do was make my daddy proud. He was always working so hard and so tired when he'd get home. This wiggly tooth is sure to get his attention.

I found my dad and opened my mouth really big. I couldn't stand still; I was so excited. I pointed to my tooth, then wiggled it back and forth. I was so happy to show him! Dad held my face with one hand, his fingers easily wrapping around my jaw and cheeks. His hands were warm as they cradled my face. With his other hand he wiggled my tooth. *This is it!* I thought. Dad asked if I was going to get my tooth out myself. I wasn't sure. This was my first loose tooth. Dad said, "I know a way to get that tooth out."

An exciting and happy moment quickly turned horrifying. My dad had me sit on the soft and fluffy couch. He towered over me, so strong, and so big. I wondered *how* he would get my tooth out. My dad was in the army, but he loved to do construction and carpentry in his free time. Dad had something in his hand. He bent over me and the thing came closer to my face. It was a pair of needle-nose pliers! Dad held my face with his other hand. His once soft and warm hand moments before now felt dry, hard, and strong! I was so scared as he said, "Open your mouth. Open up!" I wiggled more than my wiggly tooth, flailing all around as I grabbed his strong arm.

“Stop! Stop and sit still!” Dad shouted at me as he started pinning my belly down to the couch with his knee. Now holding my arms down with his wide hand, he gripped my tooth with the pliers. I sat still, knowing it would be over soon. It’s just a small baby tooth... With one swift yank, it was done. Tasting the iron in my mouth as the blood dripped around my tongue is unforgettable. I sat up and moved my tongue around my mouth, feeling the soft gummy area where my tooth once was. Dad handed it to me with a smile and reminded me to put it under my pillow. I wasn’t sure that the tooth fairy’s quarter could really make me feel any better about what just happened.

After this experience I learned fear for the first time. I was upset to have learned to fear my own father, the man I admired most. The one man I wanted to please and receive approval from. I never told him about any wiggly teeth after that day and warned my sister not to speak a word to Dad when she feels a loose tooth. Sometimes growing up can be scary.

Queen of the Remote

I remember growing up I was *Queen of the Remote*. One way that I bonded with my dad was by watching television with him. I just started watching T.V. by myself, all of the time. My sister and mom never really joined me, except when the Mighty Morphing Power Rangers would come on! Then Mary Ellen definitely leap up onto the couch, bend her legs up like an accordion and watch with me. I had deemed myself Queen of the Remote.

When I was around nine or ten years old Mary and I would eat a bowl of cereal after school, pick at our homework, and play while waiting for Mom and Dad to get home from work. I enjoyed playing with my Polly Pockets and Littlest Pet Shop toys, and I didn't really pay any attention to what Mary would do. I would always be so focused on my mini figurines and their tiny worlds and habitats that I would build dramatic or silly stories for the miniscule figurines; fully immersing myself in that *reality* of play. When I'd get bored, though, all of my attention would be on what's on T.V. After putting my toys away I walked into the living room from my bedroom and saw Mary there... *lounging* on the couch. One hand propping up her head, while the other... held *my* remote. I told her, "Give that to me! I am *Queen* of the Remote! *Ha, ha, ha!*" Mary Ellen stared at me for a moment, then rolled her eyes. She thought I was joking, but man was I serious!

I stepped onto the couch saying, "I'm *Queen* of the Remote! *Queen!* I'm *Queen* of the Remote! *Queen!*" Yes, I must have been so annoying. I didn't care. I wanted what I wanted. Mary never watched T.V. like I did. She should just give *my queenly scepter* to me. I started marching on the couch, from one side to the other, still chanting, "I'm *Queen* of the Remote!" All of a sudden, *swoosh!* With one swipe of her hand, Mary Ellen caught my legs! My body turned as I fell off the couch, landing toe-first like a ballerina! Oh my *gosh*, it hurt! Mary sat right up, kind of shocked at what just happened. I felt like I couldn't move my left foot. *Something* was wrong. All

sorts of emotions came flooding in: guilt, shock, anger, fear, resentment, and even a bit of amusement at how silly the situation was, and how Mary had *finally* taken up for herself.

Mom and Dad weren't home at the time, which meant we still had time to work out what we were going to say and do. I got up and I found that I couldn't walk, instantly felt a sharp pain in my left foot as I tried to stand. There was a sort of strange pressure that I baffled me. I couldn't walk, at least not in a *normal* way. When Dad finally got home, I found that I could not alter the truth. I was standing on the couch and got knocked off. Dad had listened with disbelief that I was hurt, thinking that I just wanted attention or to get Mary in trouble. He said, "*Get up. Walk it off. You ain't hurt.*" I started trying to walk it off, but the pressure in my foot didn't feel right. I couldn't step forward. I turned backwards and started walking with the pressure on my heel instead of in the ball of my foot. Dad laughed, "*If you don't walk right, I'll take you to the hospital.*" My eyes widened as the fear of giant needles raced into my brain. "*They'll give you one hundred shots in your foot.*" My dad folded his arms and smiled as he watched me. Like a game of chicken--two cars speeding towards each other to see who would turn first--we each stood our ground waiting to see who was bluffing. As scared as I was at even the mental image of a needle, I knew something wasn't right with my foot. I had to walk to the car. I *had* to make it to the hospital.

Feeling humiliated, I turned around, facing my father. I walked baby-step by baby-step backwards, balancing my body with my arms stretched to the side, guiding and gripping things near me as I went. I made it to the front door. I inched out the door, taking a little step down to the cold brick and concrete porch. Holding onto the beams and rails I cautiously stepped backwards down each chastising and shaming step. I made it to the ground. The concrete pathway to the driveway was hard and cold, and quite unforgiving. I chose to step onto the cold, but gentle, grass, placing each step deliberately, and keeping the pressure on my heels as I crept. Inch by inch I held

my breath, pausing to catch it every now and then. Finally, with *real* tears in my eyes, I shouted, “*I made it to the car!*” Still doubtful, my dad shook his head and walked to the car, keys in hand. Mom and Mary stayed inside as we *casually* drove away.

The ride to the hospital was a blur, as my only focus was on my throbbing foot, and the wet streaks running across my face. After a while in the waiting room we were moved to a triage assessment area, then to an x-ray room, and finally to a single patient room awaiting the results. Still feeling shame from my actions, amplified by my father’s disbelief, I waited patiently for the doctor to get back. *Who’s going to win chicken, now*, I thought. The doctor finally arrived, x-ray images in hand, and presented them to my dad. He explained that I had a “freak accident,” and landed on my toes when I fell. I had broken the *growth plate* in my left foot! Broken! “*I told you!*” I exclaimed to my dad with boastful glee! My dad quickly hung his head in shame, shaking it again--not in disbelief, but in resentment for the way he carried on with me before. As a child, this feeling was outstanding: I had gotten confirmation from a *doctor* that I was right about the way I felt. *I had* broken my foot! My dad looked at me with sorrowful eyes and said, “I’m sorry, Dorth. I’m so sorry I didn’t believe you.” I am quick to forgive him, as I knew I was hungry for attention at home and would soon get tons of it. I love my family, and even though we pick with each other, I know they still care.

A couple of days later Mom had told me that her parents, Mema and Papa, were going to come for a visit. *Now’s the time to rub it in*, I thought. I snuck to my room and grabbed the blue, purple, and black magic markers from my pack. I held them in some water with a rag for a few minutes allowing the ink to run and soak into the rag. Making sure no one was around, I used the markers and the ink-soaked rag to *enhance* my bruises, and to add a few extra ones, dabbing the ink around my foot. Mary caught me in the act... but just rolled her eyes and turned away. When

my Papa saw all the color on my foot, he held me so warmly and loved me so much! I was in *heaven* getting all that good lovin'! I was getting attention for a *real* problem, even if I had exaggerated it a bit. Much like the boy who cried wolf, I'm sure my parents didn't believe a lot of the things I said or did for attention. But, just like that boy, eventually the truth comes out! One lesson I learned from this ordeal: Sometimes even *queens* need to share the remote.

The Angel Award

Summertime was always so fun in Fayetteville when Mary and I were little. It was so hot, though, that sweat would pour down our foreheads and cheeks as we'd play outside. When Mom and Dad would get some time off work we'd travel to Tennessee to visit our aunts and grandpa, take a weekend vacation with the camper to Travel Resorts of America, or we'd just go to one of the public pools in the city. I would always look forward to our next family adventure.

One particular summer when I was around four or five years old Mom and Dad took us to a large swimming pool complex. I remember there was one really huge pool that most people would play in, as well as a kiddy pool for moms and tots, and even a couple of hot tubs. Mary was dressed up in her frilly little pink one-piece bathing suit with ruffled shoulder straps, while I had on a one-piece bathing suit with horizontal stripes. Mary Ellen was still pretty small, maybe around three or four years old, so Mom blew up some arm-floaties with cute cartoon characters on them. Mary and I would play around the edges together, me dunking myself under the water and splashing around when I came up, and Mary bobbing around on the surface of the water in her cute little floaties.

Fayetteville is a fairly large city, and there were lots of folks and their families who came out to cool off that day. I didn't really pay much attention to Mom and Dad. I was having so much fun by myself and with Mary. Lots of other kids were swimming around and sinking to the bottom of the pool to pretend they were playing "tea party" with their friends. Other kids were diving to the bottom and performing handstands with their feet straight up in the air! Watching all these cool kids play, I didn't realize that Mary had worked herself to the middle of the pool and her arm floaties were slipping off.

I turned around to tell Mary to look at all the tricks, and BLUMP. Mary quickly sank under the water! I looked around, realizing that we had been inching our way to the six-foot deep part of the pool. In a panic all I could think to do was go in after her. I quickly took a deep breath and pulled myself under the water. Eyes wide open I saw her: arms outstretched grasping for anything, I could see large bubbles coming up from her face. Mary was fighting for her life! Her skinny little body flailed around in the ice-cold prison hoping to break free from its frightening grasp. Diving deeper I gripped her body with one hand. Still under water I looked up and realized that we were very deep under the water. Raising her body over my own I felt the rough concrete surface that was the bottom of the pool. Walking as fast as I could under that watery grave, I made it to the steep wall of the pool. Lifting Mary higher, I pushed her little butt over my head and to the pool's edge. Holding my breath all I could think is, *please be okay*. At that point I did not care for my own safety. I only cared that my sister would live and would be okay.

After what felt like forever, Mary was suddenly lighter than the water. She was being lifted up! Still deep under the water, myself, I felt a big and strong hand grip at the crossing back straps of my bathing suit. Dad was pulling me up! As soon as I was out of the water, I took a breath of fresh and exhilarating air, and quickly raced to my Maria. She was okay! She was a little scared, but Mom was holding her tight with warm comfort. My little sister was safe. I had never felt such relief, and I was thankful. Up to that point, I had never been so grateful in my life.

Looking back, when Mary was born my dad was away a lot because he was in active duty in the Army, National Guard. Mom was a bookkeeper before she was a cop, and I had all the Mommy and Daddy time I wanted. I was a "daddy's girl," often sitting on his lap as we'd watch basketball games together on television. Before Mary was born, Dad had been away in Korea for the larger part of two years, only getting a little bit of family leave time here and there. Dad came

home from his long journey in Korea when Mary Ellen was born and gave her so much attention. I became jealous very quickly. When still a new baby, I bit her chubby little fingers making her shriek so loud that a bit of her terror poured into me! Dad was shocked that I had bitten my baby sister's fingers and decided to teach me a lesson. Dad told me he'd show me how she feels. He took my hand and bit my fingers! After that I never bit my baby sister's finger again--not out of fear of my dad biting me, but because he was right. I didn't realize how I made Mary feel.

A few days after the ordeal at the swimming pool Dad took me to an award shop in town. He said, "I want you to have an award for saving your sister." My dad's smile was so warm and proud. I felt like a hero, the way he looked at me. Walking up and down the aisles I found a nice square granite base, and a tall silver cylinder with a beautiful blue front face. Looking around the shelves for the perfect top my heart skipped a beat. I saw a gorgeous silver angel. Her wide wings were raised and spread with the strength and pride of an eagle. Her arms were lifted high above her head, just as mine were when I was lifting my sister out of the water. *This is the one. This is perfect*, I thought, as I smiled with confidence and glee. I showed my dad. With a nod and a smile, Dad agreed, "Okay. It's perfect." As he took the items from my hands, he told me something I'd come to hold in my heart forever: "You are her guardian angel, you know. You protected your sister, Dorothy, and you always will." The shopkeeper put all of the parts together and screwed them tight. Seeing the angel award, my heart swelled with pride and love. When I got home, I got some red fingernail polish and painted the angel's hair. I was my sister's guardian angel, and I always felt that my mother was mine. By painting the statue's hair red like my mom's, I felt I was honoring both of us. The angel award became a symbol of love and honor and reminded me of my guardianship and responsibility as an older sister.

Mrs. Horton the Babysitter

Mom and Dad seemed to always be at work. Throughout our early childhood Mary and I were watched by family members and friends, and even friends of family members. Our neighbors, Mrs. Hilda and Mr. Ed, would routinely watch us before and after school, but during the summertime we scooted around to other homes of those willing to watch us every now and then. Mrs. Cindy Q. took care of us a few times. We gave her the nickname of “the witch,” because this strange family friend sure acted like she had cursed us. At times there was nothing we could do right in her eyes. Some summers we’d spend with our aunt Tammy and cousin a couple of hours away. Other times we’d take family vacations to visit my dad’s sisters and our Pa in Tennessee, which was around ten hours away! Those trips were actually a lot of fun. Winding around the mountainous roads Mary and I would play a game where every time we’d see the brake light shine in the rear window we’d say, “*BARF!*” Every now then we’d exaggerate it saying, “*Baaa-arf!*” I’m sure it was an even longer trip for our parents.

One particular summer when I was around ten years old my parents found an older lady to watch us during the day. Mrs. Horton had become our new babysitter. Mrs. Horton was happily married to Mr. Charlie Horton, and they seemed to be in their seventies. Mrs. Horton would usually wear an oversized floral housecoat and open-toed bedroom slippers with her hair in curlers and a bed cap. Mr. Horton would usually wear a button-up shirt and long pants held up by suspenders. Mrs. Horton was always gentle yet stern, and Mr. Horton tended to mind his business, work in his garden in the backyard, and share loving glances with his wife. The Hortons shared their home with their two grandchildren, Jennifer and Brad.

Mr. and Mrs. Horton’s quaint house was just outside the city. The house was set on a quiet street with a large fenced-in backyard. There was a covered carport attached to the house with a

large metal swing hung by long chains. From the covered carport we'd enter the side door. The front door lead to Mrs. Horton's coveted den, a sitting room for guests only. This fancy room was very beautiful. It had light pink walls, satin and lace couches and ottomans, a handcrafted rocking chair with a beautiful porcelain doll reclining in it. The side tables had beautiful glass lamps with light cloth shades and tassels hanging down. The coffee table at the center of the sitting area had intricate lace doilies longing for teacups and conversation. This was a forbidden room.

When we went inside through the side door, we entered the living room, otherwise referred to as the T.V. room. Here we'd spend most of our time watching *Matlock* and *Murder She Wrote* with Mrs. Horton, or *Quantum Leap* with Mr. Horton. There was a modest plaid cloth couch along a wall, and a reclining chair to the other side of the room. Further into the area the room was divided in half by a countertop where the kitchen lay just beyond. Every morning Mrs. Horton would pour Grape-Nuts cereal into four large bowls, and Mary would come a moment behind her and pat the mounds down to flatten the cereal out in each bowl. *Pat-pat-pat*. Mary genuinely thought she was helping, but Mrs. Horton would always return with an astonished and upset look on her face.

Jennifer and Brad each had their own room in the house. Jennifer was not easy to get along with. She was quite a brat and very spoiled. When she'd get her way, she'd always give us a look, smile widely, squint her eyes, and tilt her head from side to side, with her hands firmly on her hips. This gesture and body language always seem to shout, *See? This is my house. I get what I want*. Her brother, Brad, was a teenager and had a room straight down the hallway from the kitchen. It was there that I was exposed to horror movies for the first time.

While Mary Ellen and Jennifer played together, I'd go into Brad's room to watch some T.V. or watch him play video games on his Nintendo 64. I could watch him play Pilot Wings and

Donkey Kong all day. When he'd get bored, he'd pop a scary movie in. I loved T.V. so I'd hang out with him until it was time to go, most days. We'd watch every Freddy Kruger movie. I had never seen such violent and scary movies before. I didn't have them at home. In the first Freddy Kruger movie, *Nightmare on Elm Street*, I remember clenching the blankets around me tightly with my fists as my body stiffened in fear every time I would hear the long, steel blades fastened to Kruger's gloves screeching as they'd be dragged across thick metal plumbing pipes in a boiler room scene. In another scene Kruger had followed a teenager down a dimly lit alleyway and his arms stretched out from his body, scratching alongside the buildings and fences. There was no escape. My heart would race, my muscles would tense and cramp in fear. When some of the victims would escape, which was not very often, I would feel each muscle relax in relief as I would let out a deep breath, I had not realized I'd been holding for so long.

After a few movies my mind had become acclimated to the fear, and that fear had transformed into excitement. What started out as a curiosity to try some proverbial *forbidden fruit* had become sort of a bonding moment for the older siblings, Brad and me. Though Brad was older than I was, we could relate to having a younger sister, and the desire to get away and do our own thing for a while. Brad and I never even had to talk. He'd play a game or put on a movie and I'd just sit down and watch. I was always the quiet one, compared to Mary.

One day when we were waiting for Dad to come pick us up Jennifer had brought her little dog outside. Mary and I were under the carport swinging on the big metal swing. When the car pulled up, I got off and the dog jumped up in my place on the swing beside Mary. As Dad got out of the car, I heard a very loud and disturbing sound that scared the heck out of me! *Aaarr-Aaarr-Aaarr!* I quickly looked over at where that noise was coming from, and I saw that the dog's leg

had gotten caught between two of the seat beams of the swing. As quick as lightning, the dog tried to grab onto anything it could to get free. He started biting Mary's arm!

All of this happened within seconds. Dad got out of the car, grabbed Mary's bloodied arm in one hand, and the little black dog with the other. In one swift motion Dad dropped the dog and punted it across the carport like a football! I was shocked thinking, *what just happened?* Blood was pouring out of little holes in Mary's arm. The dog shook like it was getting water off its body, then just walked away. Charlie Horton just froze, then took off his farmer hat and held it to his chest cautiously waiting to see what would happen next. Mrs. Horton went inside for paper towels to help Mary.

The look on Dad's face is one I would not soon forget: Anger. His face turned a very deep red, even on his already tan skin. His eyebrows furrowed and twitched on the outer edges. One eye widened, while the other squinted and twitched in rage. His muscular arms were evident, even through his military uniform. I'd bet he wanted to *kill* that dog for biting the blood out of Mary. I tried saying, "It was an accident, Dad! His leg was stuck in the swing!" That didn't matter to him. What mattered to my dad was that Mary was being hurt. He had to save her. To protect her. It was then that I understood something I had not had to consider before: My sister is more important than a dog. It may sound very silly, but in trying to protect a dog from my dad's anger I realized that I hadn't even considered how Mary was doing. I hadn't considered the bit of trauma she had just gone through, or the quick actions my dad had instinctively taken to relieve Mary from her pain. After allowing all of that to soak in I also realized that my dad would always be there for us. He stepped in and saved Mary, despite what Mr. or Mrs. Horton thought. Despite it not being his dog, or not being on his property. Without hesitation my dad took action to prevent Mary from being hurt any further. That is something I had come to admire and trust in Dad. His unconditional

love will always keep him close and keep us safe. My dad was Mary's hero that day and had become my hero in my heart every day since.

Introduction to Analysis

In following the seven flashpoint events I now fully analyze the *Baby Tooth* story and then provide a separate general closing analysis of my findings through my research and in reconstructing these key memories. I will consider how my findings can be used to benefit and influence strategies and curriculum in my future visual arts classroom. My seven flashpoint phenomenological stories reveal a construction of childhood as reconstructed from memory. In analyzing feelings and aspects from these events I share a better understanding of how I, as a child, think, act, react, socialize, learn, and build relationships.

Analysis of *Baby Tooth*

After this experience I learned fear for the first time. I was upset to have learned to fear my own father, the man I admired most. The one man I wanted to please and receive approval from. I never told him about any wiggly teeth after that day, and I warned my little sister not to speak a word to Dad when she feels a loose tooth. Sometimes growing up can be scary.

In analyzing this memory, I have determined it to be a flash point in my life. Prior to this event my feelings for my father were one hundred percent pure, warm, and trusting. Through my educational career I have been taught the theory that children are born as a clean slate. Many believe children are designed to be molded into whatever culture they are born into, and that they are born trusting and loving their caretakers, until that trust is tested by an event such as this one. Others theorize that trauma is embedded in DNA and passed from parent to child. Others who have dealt with personal trauma may inadvertently pass the effects to their children. “Our bodies were left incredibly damaged emotionally; so much so, that neither was able to establish a lasting intimate relationship of our complexes and anxieties to our children, who have also had to struggle in their own ways (Darder, vii, 2018).”

This natural event of losing a tooth happens for every human being. In my case, however, it was more than a growth milestone. It was a moment in time that significantly changed my way of thinking, feeling, and believing. It was, indeed, the first time I recall having real, personal, fear. Even now the simple act of reading this experience out loud causes my heart to race, my throat to tighten, and my shoulders to tense up. The quick and extreme change of emotion and senses I felt from a joyful excitement to a horrified helplessness caused a rapid shift in my perceptions. Chemically speaking, there are different hormones that are created in response to joy, excitement, and fear. Endorphins were flowing at the gleeful thought of my father being proud of the milestone

of me getting my first wiggly tooth. According to Argang Ghadiri, “Fear activates the amygdala in the brain[.][...] This kicks off the stress-response cascade (42).” Babies can show fearful reactions to noises and fast movements. This fear was new for me. To have this particular and new fear linked to the perceptions I had of my father were particularly difficult to bear. The new belief that my father was scary, and the thought that I couldn’t trust him anymore, were very unsettling.

Over the course of thirty-six years I can say that my father and I have developed a strong bond and unconditional love for one another. Although my trust in him has been rebuilt over time, that flashpoint in my childhood will not allow me to forget how dominant and strong I still believe my father to be. In other situations, in my life, I had come to appreciate his strength and ability to take care of me. I fully trust that my father will always have my best interest in his heart.

I ponder his upbringing, now. I wonder if my father thought he was truly doing me a favor. My father and mother were young when they got married: twenty-one and seventeen, respectfully. Perhaps my father was a bit too immature to consider how I felt during the time of this event. Perhaps his military training made him hard and tough. Maybe his largely impoverished childhood contributed to the way he saw the world and contributed to what he thought was significant or insignificant. “That it is even possible to take a phenomenological approach to child development rests upon a radical empirical fact: To be human means that one is or was once a child (Marc Briod, 1989).” One of the most powerful lessons I learned from my parents was the Golden Rule of treating people the way you want to be treated.

As I take a step back and analyze my own life experiences, I must be considerate of the experiences that helped shape each individual in this world. The study of phenomenological events in people’s lives brings us one step closer to true connection and community: Common unity.

Closing Analysis

Following the very specific analysis of the *Baby Tooth* story, I will now openly explore new thoughts following this experience and research conducted. I will weave together thoughts on contemporary artists with how my new realizations are relevant to teaching visual arts in the K-12 educational setting. While I chose qualitative research as a method to organize my memories, I experience the issues that confront qualitative researchers. One of the primary struggles I had was being honest in my writing when describing beloved members of my family. While I knew it was crucial to be honest, as most qualitative researchers have explained, I felt very uncomfortable revealing intimate episodes within the family and became concerned that I would offend with my frankness. “This kind of writing can inform, awaken, and disturb readers by illustrating their involvement in social processes about which they might not have been consciously aware. Once aware, individuals may find the consequences of their involvement (or lack of it) unacceptable and seek to change the situation. [...] Accordingly, a valuable use of autoethnography is to allow another person’s world of experience to inspire critical reflection on your own (Andrew C. Sparkes, 221, 2002).” This gives me solace in my decision to write honestly, understanding that my descriptions were necessary.

When I was a child, I was very introverted. I would often hide my emotions. In keeping my feelings bottled in, my mother noticed that I had become easily frustrated and overwhelmed. When I had become old enough to write, my mom got me a journal. Later, after I had gotten more comfortable with writing, the pages of my journal became my safe place. I thank my mom for helping me use my shyness, that seemed to be such a large part of my identity, as a valuable tool to observe life unfolding. I could pour out my feelings through words and drawing. After I started

journaling, I was able to speak my words, instead of keeping them within my own mind. Journaling had become a much-needed outlet for my emotions, thoughts, ideas, and questions.

In the university setting visual journaling to reflect and process readings have become commonplace in the Art Education Bachelor of Fine Art program. Having gone through the Graphic Design Associate program, previously, making graphics and different handwriting styles while taking notes and reflecting my thoughts opened a place to say even more. I found that while I enjoy writing very descriptively and capturing vast amounts of detail when I take notes via typing, I would remember my handwritten visual journal notes a lot better.

This thesis project has been a form of retroactive journaling. I was not writing in the moment, as I did as a child. I was made to recall my memory, to talk to my family about the events, and to place all the pieces back together. Time, I have found, has a way of rearranging puzzle pieces. My feelings are part of my memories and lead me to remembering past events from one memory and other experiences from a different memory. As time is ever moving forward, I find that capturing these feeling-driven memories through storytelling is so important. With the possibility of dementia and memory-loss to come with age, I find that writing has helped reclaim memories that might have very well become lost in time. In observing the visual artwork of Ellen Gallagher, there is a coalition between time and space. This lack of closure is what I want to teach children: Their artwork is not a place where mistakes are recorded but is an emerging space that evidences what we find valuable in our lives. How we depict that experience is everchanging and has no right nor wrong.

When I was little and started drawing a lot, I noticed that I would use the eraser to change my marks. I thought about this, even back then, and pondered what my work would look like had I just kept going. I started using an ink pen, being permanent. I developed a skill for problem-

solving, thinking critically, evaluating my work. John Dewey says in his 1944 book *Art as Experience*, “Art is about making decisions,” what to put in, what to leave out, and how to solve problems.

My memories of childhood, embedded in these short stories, are especially important as they have shaped who I am. This is especially vital to know as I consider my art classroom. How will I interact with my students? How will I arrange my classroom environment in a way that is comfortable, safe, and cherishes risk-taking? I wonder why my journal feel like a safe place to me. I realize that every student in my class comes with a past. I want to reflect on my own stories and encourage myself and hear the stories of the children in the art room. When sharing our stories, we develop empathy, leading to the building up of relationships and community. By putting our stories into visual art, this allows me, as a teacher, to have new ways of understanding the children’s’ meaning.

I believe that the perceptions of children are important to consider body language, vocal tone, and proximity of others engaged in the interaction. In the story *Queen of the Remote* my sister was simply reclining on the couch, watching television. I, however, was more animated: projecting my voice, stomping from one side of the couch to the other, and acting superior. Why? As an adult I could speculate that there is no good logical reason for any child to *act* that way. Was I acting? Did I *only* want to have the T.V. remote? In analyzing my own ridiculous actions, I find that children before a certain age use physicality to get to know others. They rarely think about immediate consequences before performing an action. I believe a part of me wanted to play with my sister, while another part of me wanted to show dominance. I was the older sister, which may have made me feel entitled to getting what I wanted.

In *Baby Tooth* the proximity of my dad to me was intersectional, which made the developing fear magnify. His personal space had *invaded* my personal space in a most uncomfortable way. Before the *invasion* of personal space, there was connection and intersection of personal space that was inviting, like an *embrace* of space. I have learned through analyzing this and other memories that the big difference between embrace of space and invasion of space is desire. At first, I wanted to be close to my dad, and then I had wanted to get away. In the same way, having my father tower over me could be perceived differently depending on the context. Given a calm state of mind I may see my towering father as a strong protector; however, given an anxious state of mind I may see my towering father as a threat and someone to fear.

In closing, I would like to repeat that life is a place to learn, to be flexible, to take risks, and has flashpoints through which we build our memories and stories. I have found through this process and analysis that so much can come from the simple notion of looking inward to oneself and asking critical questions. We can find our own internal resources that build our character if we simply reflect on our feelings. Some resources, or tools, are patience, creativity, and the ability to recognize your own self-worth. These resources are built and found through the various experiences we encounter, and by the choices we make for ourselves and the choices that are made for us. Life is a pedagogy that shapes who we are and what we can become. Art serves as a material to record our stories. To live is to learn, and to learn is to grow. May we open our minds to new growth every day.

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