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Dancing the Threshold from Personal to Universal

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Dancing the Threshold from Personal to Universal

How do we connect the personal and universal and how is intentionality connected to its union? The dilemma of connecting the personal and the universal has been one grappled by artists, poets, and performers for ages, but now questions come to us as ABER scholars, artists and educators to inquire where these connections are located. My philosophical underpinning has sought ways to connect the personal and universal, private and public and my scholarly, performance and poetic work has been rooted in the tradition of the lived curriculum and the soil of autobiography. This soil has always had the ingredient that our stories have the capacity to utter one another, and form and inform one another. My expression is not only for my own well-being, but a way I can both listen and offer a gift, an entrance point for someone else, to access their own understanding, perception, and perhaps be moved in some way (Snowber, 2005, Richmond & Snowber, 2009). This is the paradox, beauty and mystery of interconnecting autobiographical work, whether that is poetic, narrative, artistic or embodied ways of inquiry for others and ourselves.

The invitation to be deeply human is what I would see as an ethics *within* our aesthetics. The

call to humanness calls forth an interconnection to the world and opens up the capacity to stand in an ecological stance in connecting inner and outer landscapes. Engagement in arts-based practices beckons the researcher, artist, scholar and educator to live in the garden of hospitality. Hospitality requires a sensibility of the other, said so beautifully by essayist Nancy Mairs (1989) many years ago, the gift of autobiography and narrative “invites you into the house of my past, and the threshold you cross leads you into your own” (p. 11).

I have thought of her statement for over fifteen years now as I have plunged deeply into the land of arts-based research and known there must always be a consciousness of connection of the personal to the universal and as an educator to bring my students to these interconnections where the landscape of the inner life and creativity are broken open to pedagogy. My invitation to students, colleagues and myself is to let out our narratives, and in particular our body narratives within education, but always to co-create a better world, one more human, creative and filled with the possibility of being more conscious and generative.

The focus of my work for many years has been rooted in embodied forms of inquiry; the body is messy, filled with delight and difficulty. Even as I write this piece I need to attend to a deep listening to what is going on within my body. I have been diagnosed with a pulsing tinnitus, and as much as I dislike the restraints of a health issue, the pulsing sound within my head opens up connections to other parts of my body, including the relationship to kidneys, ears, and blood flow. Everything is connected, and it is often in coming up against a limit or health issue, one is reminded to the importance of all systems working together. The body calls one to grow inward, grow down into the roots of ones soul, but only to be brought forth to others to see, just as the foxglove or hibiscus breaks forth from the soil. These are important questions as a field that must be addressed, and I welcome the opportunity to begin to unravel the ethics of connecting autobiographical work within the field of arts-based research to a larger purpose, which can be nurtured and illuminated.

For years I have explored the body, dance, movement and aspects of physicality, as a way of embodied inquiry. My curiosity continues to lie in not only what I know, but more importantly in what I don't know. Embodied ways of knowing have a huge capacity to open up places of a visceral wisdom, which has the potential to connect heart, soul, imagination, mind and body. I have said many times, “we do not have bodies, we are bodies,” and embodied places of inquiry open up a phenomenological understanding of who one is and who one is becoming. I have always been grateful for my heritage within the field of curriculum studies, and connections to phenomenology, and I believe these fields are foundational to arts-based research methods and arts-based inquiry. Body knowledge and body wisdom is somewhat of an endangered species in our world, particularly in the academic world, and there has been more emphasis on the outer body, what one looks like, rather than the felt body, or what would be called the “lived body,” in more phenomenological terms. It

is the lived body, which becomes the place of knowing, and the place that allows the skin, belly, fingers, feet, and shoulders to become the place of deep listening and expression. There is a body intelligence, which the mover and dancer can explore in the relationship between the body's capacity for insight, perception and understanding. This said, it is crucial, there is first, a somatic connection to one's own personal experience, before connecting to the other. They go hand in hand, foot in foot, and work very much together, just as the relationship between my kidneys, liver, ears, throat and sinuses work in connection to one another. I would liken the connection from the personal and universal to the blood in the body. We need the blood to survive. And there is going to be an arts-based methodology, or any other, it will need the blood to flow from the personal to the universal to be relevant and sustainable.

I was told by the ENT (Ears Nose and Throat) specialist a week ago that my pulsatile tinnitus may be connected to the architecture of blood flow, and thus the reason for more significant tests. Yet this metaphor of the blood is capturing my attention as I think about the juxtaposition between having our own personal inquiry connected to the larger community, however one articulates, whether that is the school, neighborhood, university or culture. Delving into the autobiographical and personal is an inquiry into opening up all the cracks of our lives; both personal and professional. I have never been one of those teachers or writers who could separate the events of my life from the classroom, whether that is a loss of a loved one, transition, or health issue. I have found myself teaching through tiredness, tears, and times of elation. Lament has had its place in my published writing as well as my classroom. My own availability to my own grief has allowed others to honor their own life passages that include loss and the significance to them in terms of opening up both their personal and teaching lives. The opportunity to honor all the fabric of our lives, propels one to what truly matters – a call to have voice and archive the lived curriculum. The many lessons in life, whether through a pedagogical possibility, the natural world, or within an intimate connection with another bare weight and levity to what it means to be human. And in this amazing project of humankind, we are invited into the interconnection and interdependence of this fragile and beautiful life. This is a humble endeavor, and I recognize the relationship between these words: human, humus and humor. My hope and fire in my heart is there can be both lightness and heaviness in the circulatory network of the call to be arts-based researchers, who honor what matters both individually and collectively.

My own research practice has taken me into exploring dance and poetry within site-specific work and creating performances outside in the natural world. My practice of walking an inlet around a body of water in Port Moody, British Columbia for twenty years has birthed dance and poetry, which explores these connections between human and humus. The earth, sea, eagle, and heron lessons continue to shape and inform my inquiry, and in turn shape others, as I share the performative aspects, including writing and performance. Here the visible and

invisible become partners and the wind, and life energy transmuted through the blood is invisible, and I am moved to bring forth form. I am recreated in soil and sky, salt and rain, and I offer my own work to others. However, unless I fully give myself to the practice of walking and listening – the food for the artist and researcher, I have nothing to give. Creation gives to me in its infinite abundance, and I come to its feet as a place of libation, offering my own life. Here I am given the lessons of what it means to journey in this field in the years ahead. To walk humbly, and in humanity, knowing the weight, yet giving way to levity. Humor, human and humility become the blood of dancing from the personal to the universal.

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About the Author

Celeste Snowber, PhD, is a dancer, poet, and educator who is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University outside Vancouver, B.C. Canada. She has written extensively in the area of arts and embodiment and is author of *Embodied Prayer* and has co-written *Landscapes of Aesthetic Education*. Her poetry has also been published in a variety of journals and she is presently working on several full-length collections. A passionate mentor of graduate students, she focuses her work in the area of embodied ways of inquiry and arts-based research. Celeste continues to create site-specific performances in the natural world, which include dance and poetry in sites near the ocean and is has created a performed on a full length show entitled, “Woman Giving Birth to a Red Pepper.” Her website can be found at www.celestesnowber.com and her bodypsalm blog can be found at www.bodypsalms.com.

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