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The Courage to SoTL

ABSTRACT

Using Parker Palmer's *The Courage to Teach*, and in particular the notion of the undivided life, to guide reflections through the process of collaborative autoethnography, we reflect on our lived experiences with the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). The central question being: How does Palmer's idea of the undivided life enable SoTL scholars to explore notions of identity and integrity that are intertwined with our academic practice? Ultimately, we found that Palmer's insights provoked us to think deeply about our identities, and while perhaps we did not always see ourselves on the paths he illuminates, his work, and our collaborative ethnographic process, helped us to illuminate our own paths. More specifically, we share five themes arising from our collaborative autoethnography related to the importance of context and positionality, defining a SoTL scholar, the power to diminish, the importance of relationships and community, and collaborative autoethnography as method and process. Our stories highlight the need for us to see our community as complex, messy, and deeply human, and we remind readers of the need to think about the ethics of all methods and the power in our everyday practice to include or exclude.

KEYWORDS

Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, academic identity, collaborative autoethnography

INTRODUCTION

In this paper we explore the concept of the "undivided life," an idea that arose as we discussed why we joined the 2019 International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSOTL) International Collaborative Writing Group (ICWG) and how we wanted to approach our work together. In initial conversations, we shared how we each experienced being a SoTL scholar (and what that even means), the challenges we faced, and what we hoped to gain from our collaboration. During this time, seeds of commonality began to grow. We heard shared stories of internal conflict, internal confusion around our identity, and a feeling of harmony that was always just out of reach. As we tried to narrow in on how we might frame our work together, one person mentioned *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (Palmer 2007). As a group we read Palmer's book to use as the foundation for our exploration of an undivided life.

Published originally in 1997 and re-released in 2007, Palmer reflects on the culture of collegiate teaching and the connections between one's self and identity as a teacher. He builds a framework for exploring teaching practice and inner being as an educator through three foundational principles that encourage us to consider what we do not know, question what we do know, and push for this discovery to be valued institutionally. First, good teaching comes from both exploring and living an undivided life, where the threads of our personal and professional selves are woven together to create a complex and honest identity we can share with our students. We are encouraged to "live divided no more" (Palmer 2007, 172) and to "find a new center for one's life, a center external to the institution and its demands" where one discovers "solid ground on which to stand outside the institution – the ground of one's own being" (Palmer 2007, 174). Second, we must move away from the teacher or the students as central to our practice, and focus on the subject and give it "our attention [and] the respect and authority that we normally give only to human beings" (Palmer 2007, 105). Lastly, Palmer argues that teaching should be an outward practice with colleagues invited to engage in our craft. Such relational exchanges create communities of congruence (Palmer 2007, 178) that build connectedness, foster diversity and growth, and embrace honesty within our practice. Communities of congruence "provide a training ground where people living undivided lives could develop the skills and habits necessary to take their values into the larger world" (Palmer 2007, 179). For Palmer, these principles lead us to both authentic teaching and deep educational reform. The idea of living an undivided life was felt deep within our bones:

Many of us know from personal experience how it feels to live a divided life. Inwardly we experience an imperative for our lives, but outwardly we respond to quite another... there are extremes of dividedness that become intolerable, when one can no longer live without bringing one's actions into harmony with one's inner life (Palmer 2007, 173).

Why did we attach so strongly to this idea of an "undivided life"? Simmons et al (2013, 12) explores, through the eyes of faculty, the liminal space at the intersection of academic identity, and engaging with SoTL, finding "powerful and often hidden tension is internal; engaging with SoTL leads to troubled knowing. It requires us to develop the capacity to become comfortable being in a nexus of discomfort created by SoTL work." Kensington-Miller et al (2015) explored the marginal spaces where academic developers' identities reside, finding them feeling like a "chameleon on the tartan rug" (p. 287). After each of us read *The Courage to Teach*, we found a pain we had not previously been able to name, something that runs deeper than the tensions and messiness around identity development, leading to a sudden epiphany that we were living a divided life, one where we had slowly let our university's values consume our own personal values and "become the landscape of our inner life" (Palmer 2007, 174). A realization that what we cared most deeply about, the ways in which we dreamed of affecting change, our inner north star was dying. We were driven to better understand what it means "to live divided no more [and] to find a new center for one's life, a center external to the institution and its demands" (Palmer 2007, 173). This new center took on even deeper meaning as we found ourselves doing this work in a pandemic.

And so, "we," a group of scholars from four countries and six academic institutions, including faculty, educational developers, institutional leaders, and doctoral students, have adopted an

unconventional style and method to share with you our process and reflections on the courage to SoTL. Inspired by Palmer, in particular the idea of the undivided life to guide our data collection and analysis through the process of collaborative autoethnography, we reflect on our lived experiences in SoTL. We explore notions of identity and integrity that are intertwined with his idea of teaching practice and through this work we share the stories that arise. The central question being: How does Palmer's idea of the undivided life enable SoTL scholars to explore notions of identity and integrity that are intertwined with our academic practice? We found that Palmer's insights provoked us to think deeply about our identities. While perhaps we did not always see ourselves on the paths he illuminates, his work and our collaborative ethnographic process helped us to illuminate our own paths. More specifically, we share five themes arising from our collaborative autoethnography related to the importance of context and positionality, defining the SoTL scholar, the power to diminish, the importance of relationships and community, and collaborative autoethnography as method and process. These themes build on and support scholarly discussions about identity, power, ethics, method, and the SoTL community. Our stories and the method we use highlight the need for us to see our community as complex, messy, and deeply human. We remind readers of the need to think about the ethics of all methods and the power in our everyday practice to include or exclude. We must always remember that at the heart of SoTL are people.

HOW TO FIND THE COURAGE

We were struggling to capture the essence of our intent when one of our team suggested "What about . . . the courage to SoTL?" as a title. We reflected on this idea, and, as we had done throughout the process, thoughtfully and intentionally discussed if this was representative of the work we as a group wanted to do. The answer was yes; the courage to SoTL captured the ethos of our work.

Palmer observes that "good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher and good teachers "possess a capacity for connectedness" with "the connections made by good teachers are held not in their methods but their hearts—meaning heart in its ancient sense, as the place where intellect and emotion and spirit and will converge in the human self" (Palmer 2007, 10–11). Teachers who are passionate about teaching, students, and the subject share a similar trait, "a strong sense of personal identity infuses their work" (Palmer 2007, 11). When that identity is lost, when we lose heart, we become divided internally from why we teach, who we teach, and what we teach. As teachers find themselves leading a divided life, Palmer (2007, 17) asks, "How can we take heart in teaching once more so that we can . . . give heart to our students?" To return to an undivided life, teachers must "attend to the inner teacher not to get fixed but to befriend the deeper self, to cultivate a sense of identity and integrity that allows us to feel at home wherever we are" (Palmer 2007, 33). While attending to the inner teacher, Palmer (2007, 106) pushes that we conduct an "eternal conversation about things that matter, conducted with passion and discipline" with each other, as a community of congruence. Such discussions are focused on inner lives and teaching, rather than methodology, about how we push to be better teachers and that we get connected with our teaching through reflection. According to Palmer (2007, 106), he "understand(s) truth as the passionate and disciplined process of inquiry and dialogue itself, as the dynamic conversation of a community that keeps testing old conclusions and coming into new ones."

“The Courage to SoTL” is part a play on the title of Palmer’s book (2007), and part a reflection of the depth of feeling that arose through our process as we revealed ourselves to each other and to ourselves. Such is the magic of telling our stories through collaborative autoethnography. Collaborative autoethnography, autoethnography, and personal narrative are methods that require vulnerability and courage—they are methods of the heart (Custer 2014; Kehler, Verwoord, and Smith 2017; Sparkes 2007). Scholarly distance is removed as we become our own data. However, you, the reader, will note that we use “we” throughout this article. The use of “we” is adopted to anonymize our individual voices and to make us feel less exposed (Sword 2019, 187). You will find individual quotes, but we will not name the source. It will all be “we.” “We” is not just about limiting exposure, but also about community.

The courage to SoTL is also about the courage it takes to engage in the scholarship of teaching and learning. In part, it is simply the act of naming oneself as a SoTL scholar, which can be challenging within academia given a perception (Boshier 2009; Tight 2017) by some that SoTL is “less than” its other research pursuits. There is also the challenge of whether one fits into definitions of what constitutes SoTL because efforts to define the field draw boundaries, creating an inside and an outside. Consequently, there is courage in simply naming oneself a SoTL scholar, particularly when your research may not fit with professional, disciplinary, and/or institutional understandings of what constitutes SoTL.

At first glance, for some, *The Courage to Teach* may not provide the appropriate vantage point for a discussion of what it means to be a SoTL scholar. It may seem to be too much about teaching and not enough about research related to student learning. It may be too much about faculty and not enough about educational development. As a group, however, we are faculty and teachers and scholars and educational developers across ranks and roles. “We” are not one role, and neither are those who engage in SoTL. As a group, we believe that using this book as our lens provides a bridge between identities as a scholar and teacher, allowing these traditionally siloed practices to be bound together with a thread fundamental to both. In truth, the questions posed by Palmer encourage us to explore our inner terrains—regardless of what professional label we adopt. Just as Palmer (2007, 30) speaks to “the teacher within” who leads us to work that gladdens us (Palmer 2007, 31) so too are many of us drawn to the work of teaching, learning, and educational development because it speaks to our inner selves and gladdens us. The questions that Palmer pose are inherently valuable for all of us as we seek to support ourselves and our communities.

OUR RESEARCH PROCESS

We joined the ICWG with an interest in autoethnography and personal narrative. Autoethnography has a rich and varied literature (see Lapadat 2017), emphasizing that we are in and of the world (see Custer 2014). Autoethnography, the use of personal narratives and or autoethnographic vignettes (Allin 2014; Duarte 2007; Kehler, Verwoord, and Smith 2017; Little, Green, and Felten 2019; Verwoord and Smith 2020; Yahlnaaw 2019), offer insight and understanding into the connection of subject, identity, and culture. Such reflections “illuminate in fresh ways the “messy,” nuanced arena of teaching and learning” (Ng, Carney 2017, 11) that are not typically measured through quantitative outcomes. For us, autoethnography allowed us to align with the practices of SoTL research which emphasize critical reflection (Duarte 2007; Cook-Sather, Abbot, and Felten 2019; Verwoord and Smith

2020), “grounding in scholarly and local context” (Felten 2013, 122) and Palmer’s (2007) notions of the “inner landscape.” We chose collaborative autoethnography as our method using a group-based narrative with pooled anecdotal personal experiences and individual self-reflections with the intention of exploring cultural and social meanings and understandings of higher education and teaching. This allowed us to provide opportunity for personal reflection while ultimately creating a collective perspective as part of the research process (See Chang et al. 2013; Lapadat 2017). This process is complex, emotional, and transformative, yielding rich qualitative data.

Recognizing we needed ethics approval, we used that task to collectively clarify our research design. To that end, we designed a set of reflective questions (table 1) that encouraged us to explore the concepts discussed in *The Courage to Teach* and their application to our own SoTL practice with a focus on leading an undivided life. Data collection began with individual reflections on Palmer’s book and the questions posed. We then undertook an iterative process where we paired up and shared our individually written journal reflections. Next, we met synchronously and used prompts to help our partner explore specific aspects of their reflections, then the group met synchronously to engage in thematic analysis of the written reflections. Each of us was tasked with verbally sharing themes we saw arising across the reflections. These meetings were recorded and transcribed verbatim, as per Bowden and Green (2005), to ensure an accurate record of responses. After the transcript was shared, we met again to reflect on the collaborative autoethnographic process and the methodology and its impact on our findings. This process, of movement between individual and group work, is consistent with the process model identified by Chang et al. (2013, 24).

Table 1. Reflective questions guiding our collaborative autoethnography

| REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS FOR DATA COLLECTION | |
|--|--|
| 1 | What does being a SoTL scholar mean to me? |
| 2 | What does an undivided life, as a SoTL scholar, look like to us? |
| 3 | Do we see our lives as undivided? |
| 4 | What are the lived experiences of us as academics with regard to pursuing an undivided life? |
| 5 | Why is living an undivided life important to our identity as a SoTL scholar? |
| 6 | Can you share a story/experience where you were leading an undivided life in your SoTL practice? |
| 7 | What are the supports and barriers in our pursuit to living an undivided SoTL life? |
| 8 | What have we learned about our own SoTL identities, and from others’ identities and experiences? |

KEY THEMES ARISING

Using Palmer's idea of the undivided life to inform research around the intersection of identity development and academic practice, we identified five themes.

Context and positionality matters

Resonating through our conversations and consistent throughout SoTL literature (Felten 2013; Matthews 2017; Little, Green, and Felten 2019) is that context and positionality matter. The way in which we addressed the questions posed above cannot be separated from our contexts and our positionality. As a group we differ in ages, career trajectories, disciplinary background, institutions, current positions, citizenship, and parenting responsibilities. We are all self-identified white women.

We also acknowledge that our stories are constrained and limited by our experiences. As one team member asked, "I wonder if this ... experience would have been different if we had one or more males in this group or ... people that have identities that are different than ours?" We wondered how our reflections were impacted by our positions within a predominantly female and gendered profession of educational development (Bernhagen and O'Gravett 2017; Green and Little 2016). Are our reflections heteronormative and white? How would our reflections look if we "came out as white" (Nicoll 2007)? What is the meaning of "whiteness" in our lives (hooks 1994, 104)? Because our primary focus was on our professional identities, deeper analysis of our personal identities' impact on SoTL remains outside the scope of this project but provides the authors with potential new projects.

As with Palmer's teaching, the threads of personal and professional selves are woven together to create the complex and honest identity of the SoTL scholar. While context and positionality matter, there was also a sense that "we all have slightly different reasons, be they external, the institution, our job role, or internal beliefs and values, which [shape] our perceptions of our experience of how we lead this undivided life, we've got lots of common threads." In the context of power, we are unsure if those in a less divided space are there because of the power to choose, because of the context, or maybe because of choices made. While recognizing the uniqueness of each situation, how can we identify which variables, internal or external, allowed for a less divided life? How do we expand this opportunity to others? Those in positions or context leading to a divided life may not even realize how much less or more divided our lives are compared to others.

Defining SoTL scholar

As we share our reflections on divided/undivided lives the questions (table 1) that focus our perceptions as SoTL scholars are important because they start with the premise that we define SoTL and identify ourselves as SoTL scholars. From that context, we discuss a sense of having a divided or undivided life. Through our conversations, it became clear we had different interpretations of what SoTL was, ranging from valuing, promoting, disseminating high-quality teaching and learning to publicly sharing our research related to our classrooms. Some invoked Felten's (2013) set of good practices as our guide. There were several contestations of the idea of "scholar" ranging from issues about the exclusive, elite, and positivist language of the term "scholar," to questioning if there was maybe

some hierarchy implied in the use of the word “scholar.” As one of us noted: “Is someone who dips their toe into SoTL a SoTL scholar? Or someone engaging in SoTL? Is there a quantity of SoTL you must achieve to reach “scholar” level?” For us, this discussion raised additionally powerful questions about “who really gets to say It is okay to be a SoTL scholar?”

Our lack of consensus about what it meant to do SoTL, what it meant to be a scholar, and even if we actually identified as SoTL scholars helps illustrate the insightful tensions throughout our conversations about the divided and undivided lives. In spite of our different starting points, there seemed to be a shared sense of the feelings associated with living divided or undivided lives. As Palmer writes, “Many of us know from personal experience how it feels to live a divided life. Inwardly, we experience one imperative for our lives but outwardly we respond to quite another” (Palmer 2007, 173). When we talked about feeling divided (which arose for a variety of reasons) we talked about “feeling exhausted, feeling pressure, feelings of being marginalized, being alone . . . we had a fractured existence.” As one of us noted: “The tug-of-war between what made me happy and what I felt I had to do to make everyone else happy was exhausting.” As SoTL scholars there are tensions between “how we do and why we do things” in contrast to “how others are actually viewing it or pursuing it within the university . . . and I think that leads to a lot of the divided life we have as scholars.”

Then there are moments in time, spanning from hours to years, we felt undivided. For Palmer, living an undivided life comes when “we free ourselves from institutional constraints and gain power to confront the institution” or when as teachers we “honor our own commitment to the importance of teaching” (Palmer 2007, 176–77). For us, it was not necessarily lives writ large that we experienced as undivided, but rather moments, classes, projects, meetings, conference sessions; it was within different communities, in varied contexts; it was never one ongoing sense of being undivided. Yet those moments of feeling undivided were described as joyful, connected, passionate. The moments of feeling undivided were linked to those moments or experiences when we felt “kind of at home,” as “a strong sense of personal identity infuses their work” (Palmer 2007, 11).

One of the insights gleaned from our discussion about moments of feeling undivided is the degree to which living a divided or undivided life is not a binary. It is not an either/or—at least not for us. “I have to admit that I do not think the binary of divided-undivided works for me. Maybe I’ll come to a point where I feel that I’m fully living from the heart, living an undivided life . . . from a place of integrity . . . but I see it as more of a journey . . . with markers toward undivided lives . . . but also places in the path that lead us to mazes, or roadblocks or diversion and sometimes we have to double back to our path.”

In the midst of our conversations, there was a provocative question raised. “I also wonder if we should live an undivided life—[maybe] separation and compartmentalization is perhaps a good thing? In a culture of pressure, is this one more thing for us to feel pressured to achieve?” The idea of leading an undivided life is interpreted as a normative good but we wondered if in some circumstances, advocacy (by ourselves or others) for the undivided life was irresponsible? For example, if you are an educational developer working with someone in a precarious position, are there implications for them, in terms of their careers, if at this time they choose to lead an undivided life? How does the idea of an undivided life fit with work-life balance, power imbalances in the workplace, or even working during a pandemic? In some ways, Palmer’s invitation to live a life undivided is designed to be an antidote to the division

between our inner selves and professional selves, but for some and in some instances, division is what is required. Sometimes, we need division as a means by which to function, and in that division, there are the moments—the experiences of joy, passion, and community. This need for division was expressed by a member of our team when we met, in the midst of the height of the global COVID-19 pandemic. They observed that our conversations were “actually making me feel like work is normal and that I’m connected to doing something that’s meaningful.”

Power matters

“There was lots of talk about feeling exhausted, feeling pressure, feelings of being marginalized, being alone . . . we had fractured existences . . . people being described as less than or fluffy.” Fractured contrasts to whole. Fluffy becomes negative in an academic context when it is assumed that fluffy is normative and thus unscholarly. Margins only exist relative to a core or a center. All of these binaries speak to the social and cultural contexts in which we work, and they speak to power. “No individual or social group finds itself on the “margins” of any web of relationships . . . without some other individual or group having accumulated enough power to create the “center” somewhere else” (Enloe 2004, 19–20).

Throughout our conversations, sometimes consciously and sometimes unconsciously, we reflected on a myriad of manifestations of power in our lives as self-described SoTL scholars. In our discussion to adopt “The Courage to SoTL” as the title for our article, we believed that as a community, SoTL scholars engage in courageous acts of scholarship in the face of an academy that is not always welcoming to SoTL research. There is power in the cultural, institutional, and disciplinary norms that control and delimit what constitutes knowledge and scholarship. Engaging in SoTL can be an act of resistance but resistance has repercussions. “There is also lots of push-back, lots of snide criticism, lots of resistance . . . and that’s hard on the soul . . . It can be exhausting to try to advocate in spaces where fear resides, where visions clash.” Another manifestation of the power of disciplines to legitimize particular types of scholarship is the need for scholars to engage in two tracks of publishing - one to make the individual happy and one to make the institution happy. As noted in Billot, Rowland, Carnell, Amundsen, and Evans (2017, 10) “one of the formidable challenges that individuals faced was how their SoTL work was valued for promotion and tenure/permanence.” This feeling, for some of us, that somehow we needed to prove ourselves within our respective discipline so we could “be like everyone else” in our field and prove ourselves as SoTL scholars resonated throughout our conversations.

“Who really gets to say It is ok to be a SoTL scholar?” This question, posed by one of the members of our team, reminds us that while engaging in SoTL in general can be seen as an act of resistance from the margins, there are also acts of disciplining within the SoTL community. One of those acts of disciplining is around definitions. While definitions of what constitutes SoTL is important to our understanding of ourselves as a community, definitions can also function to signal what counts and what does not count as SoTL “scholarship.” Language such as rigorous, quality methods, replication, and method signals to us a preference for particular kinds of a “scientific” or positivist approaches. As argued by Nancy Chick (2014, 3): “If naming something gives one power over it, the pervasiveness of “method” and “methodology” (the rationale and logistics for a project’s structure, evidence, and analysis), “data” (evidence of student learning), and “quantitative or qualitative” (types of evidence and modes of

analysis) leaves many of our colleagues powerless in SoTL.” Definitions of what we do act discursively to include and exclude, to create insides and outsides. Definitions are boundary markers.

Role definitions are also about power. It also became clear that understanding and interpretation, of our institutional roles by ourselves and others, directly relate to our sense of ourselves as SoTL scholars. As one of our team observed, “we’re kind of working in the edges and working the cracks and, you know, just try to . . . squeeze this in. And I saw that resulted in a lot of anxiety and stress for people . . . just trying to walk that line depending upon where they were in that kind of power and privilege structure.” At times the telling of our stories felt risky and dangerous. We felt vulnerable as we were all “deeply embedded in [our] their personal biography” (Bukor 2015, 305). But we did not all feel vulnerable in the same ways—that sense of vulnerability varied according to our roles as faculty or educational developer or staff or student, varied over time, varied in different positions within institutions and varied across institutions. Consistent with our observations about the applicability of the “undivided life” we wondered if the ability to lead an undivided life, consistent with Palmer’s vision, was a privilege that not everyone has and that his invitation to the undivided life is not sufficiently attentive to the constraints and pressures felt by many.

The power to diminish and the act of diminishing are not just about definitional debates in the literature or broad abstractions like “institutions” and “culture.” We are able to label particular forces as arising from a culture or within an institution but our conversations reminded us that these sites of power and acts of power which diminish or convey messages of “less than” are practiced and manifested in our everyday practices of our workplaces and through our lives as within the academy. “Beneath the sense of SoTL being invalidated, I think there is a sense of feeling personally invalidated.” A random comment about fluffy becomes a label for our work and, maybe by extension, ourselves. In our research, who we cite or do not cite becomes an act in acknowledging authority, building credibility for ourselves and others (Billot et al. 2017, 6). There are cases of the infamous “reviewer two” who uses anonymity to delegitimize methods or voices. Power resides in who is invited to speak and in what context, in who is invited to publish or work in teams, in who is “allowed” to do SoTL as part of their work and who isn’t. There is power to silence and marginalize in too-often unexplored spaces of assumed gender and race neutrality (Yahlnaaw 2019). Everyday acts of power that diminish have deeply human and personal consequences. None of this is to suggest we do not evaluate, critique, engage in ideas and challenge each other. This isn’t an argument against “scholarship” but rather a call to remind ourselves and others of our own complicity in supporting structures and processes of power that diminish, silence, and exclude.

Relationships and community building

“Relationships . . . and I struggle with kind of defining this because I thought in some sense It is relationships with others or institutions or [the] discipline of SoTL . . . but It is also a relationship with our self.” Relationships are implicit to both our conversations of power, because power is always relational, and connected to community. Relationships and community were seen as counterbalancing the moments of feeling less than, alone, and isolated. Our feelings about the importance of relationships and community echo Palmer’s emphasis on the importance of community and relationships.

One type of community Palmer talks about are communities of congruence. Communities of congruence are the coming together of those who have chosen to live an undivided life with others who

have made the same decision. “People who use such language, the language of the heart, need a place to practice it, to grow accustomed to it, to have it affirmed by like-minded people before they speak to a larger audience that may range from skeptical to hostile” (Palmer 2007, 179). As a group we problematized the idea of the undivided life and wondered if it was an option for everyone, the importance of communities of people brought together by shared values was a central theme in our conversations. The shared values that resonated throughout our conversations included a commitment to make a difference in the lives of students regardless of our role definition, a belief that SoTL is essential and valuable, and a willingness to challenge boundaries between research and teaching, between different identities and between disciplines. It is within these communities that we feel less divided and we feel supported. “Through those communities of us joining together . . . and actually talking about what it is to be a SoTL scholar . . . [sharing] feelings of the inner world that we maybe have not given enough opportunity to sit with or discuss . . . when we find groups that we can, that can be really powerful.” These communities are vital because not only are they spaces where we share our inner worlds, they are places and space that help build our resilience. Communities of congruence, for us, are absolutely spaces for the sharing of the “language of the heart.”

There were moments and spaces where we felt less divided, the shape of our communities varied across time and place. The community of congruence could be found in a workspace where we have colleagues, supervisors, or academic leaders who encouraged us to engage in SoTL. Support through community was characterized by one of our team as “colleagues who are active in exploring new approaches to both teaching and learning and are active in the dissemination of strategies in order to share the very best of practice for the ultimate purpose of enhancing student outcomes; colleagues who undertake SoTL even though they are aware it could limit opportunities for their personal professional progression (promotion); colleagues who undertake SoTL despite the snips and sneers.” As Palmer notes, we may also find our communities in centers for teaching and learning or through the activities of centers for teaching and learning (Palmer 2007, 181). The community could be found and created through networks of researchers such as one finds at ISSOTL. For those who may feel they do not have a community of congruence in their home institution, regional, national, and international networks are vital to their sense of themselves as a SoTL scholar.

For us, participation in this ICWG became a community of congruence. Over time, the sense of ourselves as a community evolved. For one member, a central element was care. “I think everyone just demonstrated care for one another and care for what’s going on in people’s lives.” That we continued our collective work during a pandemic speaks to our community and, perhaps more significantly, speaks to how our community was a safe space. As one team member commented: “it actually comes back to community . . . this is a good space. This is a way to step away from . . . worries about how do I get food delivered.”

Collaborative ethnography as method and process

The ethics of autoethnography are gray, context-dependent, and often vary between institutional research ethics boards (Boyd et al. 2013; Guyotte and Sochacka 2016; Lapadat 2017). Some would argue that the strength and richness of such an approach is the vulnerability of telling our personal stories. This courage to tell our stories challenges traditional socio-cultural norms, institutions,

and boundaries (Denzin 2003; Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011). However, as outlined by Lapadat (2017), there are still fundamental ethical concerns when engaging in this scholarly approach, and thus we as a group worked to mitigate these risks to create safe spaces for sharing our lived experiences. Consent was central to our process. It may seem strange to consent to be our own data, but because we were working collaboratively, we ensured consent throughout every step in the process. At any point a member of the team could withdraw. During the writing process, members could veto quotes or themes if they felt uncomfortable with no requirement of an explanation.

Privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity are extremely difficult to ensure in the collaborative autoethnographic process. As researchers we acknowledged and accepted the risks associated with the approach and adopted a variety of strategies to address privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity. To provide anonymity and create a safe space for us to share our stories, we reluctantly decided to anonymize and homogenize our voices. This helps to protect ourselves, our institutions, and our careers, as well as respects the rights and privacy of others who exist within our stories but are not engaged in our telling (Wrinkler 2018). This approach allowed us to create a safe environment for discourse and to be honest with ourselves and peers.

Collaborative autoethnography is both a method and a process. The process had a significant impact on each of us, sometimes in unexpected ways. In our reflections of the process, team members talked about how the opportunity to write, reflect, and share our reflections helped them see the core of what they were struggling with. One team member said this led to a greater sense of being divided, while another remarked it helped them realize “we really aren’t as alone as we think we are.” The option of and practice of the method was seen as an act of modelling the boundaries we want to push through our SoTL practices. One team member stated: “I think being able to engage in this method also honors us as part of our quest for an undivided life, that courage to actually go out there on a limb and engage in the methods that [are not] traditional in many contexts.” The process inspired a sense of agency—both collective and individual. “I think the autoethnographic process really allowed us to see that maybe we need to stop trying to be something that’s defined by someone else. And we need to embrace what we are here and the value that we bring and to show everyone else that value.”

WHAT DOES THIS RESEARCH MEAN FOR SOTL SCHOLARS?

At the beginning of this process, we knew that an article would be written but we could not have predicted the insights we would glean from the process. Our work contributes to SoTL literature that interrogates spaces of power, positionality, and intersectionality (Chick 2014; Kehler, Verwoord, and Smith 2017; Little, Green, and Felten 2019; Matthews 2017). Through our conversations about living an undivided life we challenge the use of binaries that do not capture the fluidity of identity. Depictions of the field that focus solely on methods, roles, or demographics lack the nuance to capture the dynamic natures of our SoTL identities. Consistent with the aim of autoethnography to connect to broader social and cultural contexts, we raise questions about gender and whiteness. We do not resolve those questions, but they do reaffirm an ongoing need to have a more complex and finessed understanding of ourselves as a community. As a community, SoTL scholars can dissect the variables creating an undivided life and build structures to allow other SoTL scholars to share in undivided moments.

Outcomes of this work illuminate the ways our journey to an undivided life was road blocked by pressures and expectations in our outer life that were both in conflict with our inner life and the joys of being a SoTL scholar. What we found on this particular journey was both a way to have our voices heard and our stories shared, and a support system. Struggles with role definition, by ourselves and others, and struggles with life during a pandemic highlight that the SoTL community is messy and complex. Scholarly simplifications of our community miss the everyday practice of power that functions to exclude or include diverse voices (Beier and Wylie 2010). By pushing to recognize and include diverse voices we can achieve respect for all in our community and recognition for our community as a safe space. A first step can be joining practices such as the ICWG, which models openness, inclusion, and respect on a greater scale. Community based on care fosters collective and individual agency and supports the courage to SoTL.

Our work thus highlights the very personal implications of seemingly random acts of power that actually work to discipline and devalue individuals. Footnotes, role definitions, and comments about our work being fluffy are all acts of power. There is no easy “fix” or way to prevent these random acts of power. While we could easily say organizations must change by offering support statements, funding, and recognition, rather we as a community require each of us to be brave in our push for change. Waiting on or wishing for organizational change leads to despair and defeat. Rather SoTL scholars must undertake a “movement way” in which scholars choose integrity, discover each other to form support groups, find alternative rewards, and most importantly translate “private problems” into public issues (Palmer 1992). We must build a support network of like-minded peers, seek positions of influence to advance this priority, and slowly affect change by no longer giving away our power. We should seek others, including teaching and learning centers, for support, professional development, collaboration, and alternate rewards and recognition. As the movement grows, so will opportunities to affect change include developing a strategy for getting buy-in from leadership and for revised tenure, promotion, and reappointment policies.

CONCLUSION

We created a safe place for discourse, where we could be open and honest, and there was no shame in SoTL. The random acts of power made us feel shame, “less than,” and living a divided life. In the community we created, the value of SoTL was our own practice; it was personal and continues to be fragile. We hope this paper encourages others to not be silent, but rather to demonstrate the impact of SoTL, and that we are not alone but able to find our network by opening up about our experiences and the importance of our work.

Palmer compares the steps to systemic change that would enable SoTL scholars to live an undivided life to a movement. He notes that the first step in a movement is for individuals to make the decision to stop living a divided life. To no longer let our hearts become “. . . a wholly owned subsidiary of the organization” (Palmer 2007, 173). Through this process we found strength, and anonymity, in our group to stand up and be heard, in a way we were not able to alone. We hope that through sharing our stories others who are not just tired in their hearts and souls, but tired of being complicit, will step outside their organization, look for others who wish to live an undivided life and build the coalition needed to change the story and affect change (Palmer 2007, 176).

We encourage you to think back to the moment you decided to go into the field of education, to remember when you felt joy in your heart and soul, to remember your why. Find your people, build your coalition, and help to start a movement. The title of this paper is “The courage to SOTL,” because it takes courage to decide to live an undivided life, knowing the implications it may have. “*No punishment anyone lays on you could possibly be worse than the punishment you lay on yourself by conspiring in your own diminishment*” (Palmer 2007, 178).

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NOTES

1. We are aware that the “Courage to SoTL” does not sound correct if we use the whole phrase “Scholarship of Teaching and Learning” but it does represent our conversations where “to SoTL” was an act naming ourselves SoTL scholars and engaging in SoTL.

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