

Hope as a catalyst for action and the flourishing of humanity.

In this session I will share some of the insights I gleaned from my PhD research noting the challenges and obstacles I encountered along the way in both my practice and the research and the significance of these insights to extending knowledge and education for social transformation. Undoubtedly, I might have succumbed to the feeling of helplessness I experienced when encountering power relations determined to minimize and/or trivialize and control my unique experiences in my unique context. However, I maintained my resilience and nourished my hope with the guidance and encouragement I received during critical conversations with living theorists who are dedicated to reducing epistemicide (Santos, 2014) and contributing to the flourishing of humanity. In essence, I was loved into learning.

Background

While completing graduate studies, I experienced the merits of a holistic approach to learning. More specifically, I discovered that love played a significant role in my ability to have a meaningful learning experience. In 2012 when I completed a Master of Education degree (M.Ed.), I discovered I was a “living contradiction” (Whitehead, 1989). For 20 years I had been reading and attending conferences and workshops, all in an attempt to improve my practice and meet the needs of the learners in my care; however, my efforts were tainted by my mechanistic education and my extensive teacher preparation to be an ontological reductionist (R. Miller, 1991, p. 55). Mann (2008) recounts her struggle with her ingrained cultural approach and the conflicting expectations of academia to develop and defend a single thesis; eventually, she came to understand that:

Euro-Americans cannot see two of anything without immediately assuming that one of them must be the deadly enemy of the other. Only one can be legitimate for them; the other is flawed, an imposter that must be rooted out. This “ONE-thinking,” as I call it is a direct reflection of the Manicheism rampant in European and Euro-derived monotheisms. It is in profound conflict with the cooperative binaries of Native American cultures. ... The dissonance between Native and European ways of seeing is only compounded by the very unilinear Puritan sermon format shoved down the throats of American academics as the one, true form of discourse. (p. 42)

I realized I too was guilty of “ONE –thinking” as I tried to discover the absolute formula to frame my pedagogical approach. Santos (2014) writes:

To be a learned ignorant in our time is to know that the epistemological diversity of the world is potentially infinite and that each way of knowing grasps it only in a very limited manner. ... The learned ignorance of our time is infinitely plural, as plural as the possibility of different ways of knowing ... the impossibility of grasping the infinite epistemological diversity of the world does not release us from trying to know it; on the contrary, it demands that we do. This demand or exigency, I call the *ecology of knowledges*. ... If the truth exists only in the search for truth, knowledge exists only as an ecology of knowledges. (p. 111)

Even though I know my explanations are limited by my “Eurocentric” experiences, in an effort to avoid “epistemicide” I am obliged to seek an “ecology of knowledges” (Santos, 2014). As I generate my own living theory, I am not bound by any limitations or parameters of existing theories or colonial thinking. My living educational theory is based on my core values and lived experiences which explains the principles which I chose to guide my life and hold myself accountable to. I include insights from current social theories and my own educational

experiences. Together, these insights form the “explanatory principals” that generate the “standards of judgment” for my living-educational-theory (Whitehead, 2009).

Educational sustainability (the freedom to think *and* act holistically based on the assumption that everyone and everything is connected) requires a holistic approach to learning. My interpretive qualitative study explored the generation of my living educational theory as I introduced love into my practice and discovered the obstacles and challenges to living more fully according to my values of love, hope, and joy. Using a narrative inquiry methodology and methodological inventiveness, I drew on 6 years of data collection from my personal journals and lived experiences to make the process of living narratively explicit. I am a multi-sensory learner and I need to begin with some sense of a big picture and preferably a visual of that big picture before I can delve into a learning journey. The image below includes three images depicting the beginning of my journey and what I imagined my journey would entail (the triskelion knot), the actual journey (the complex map), and my journey after I concluded (Indra’s Net). See figure 1.

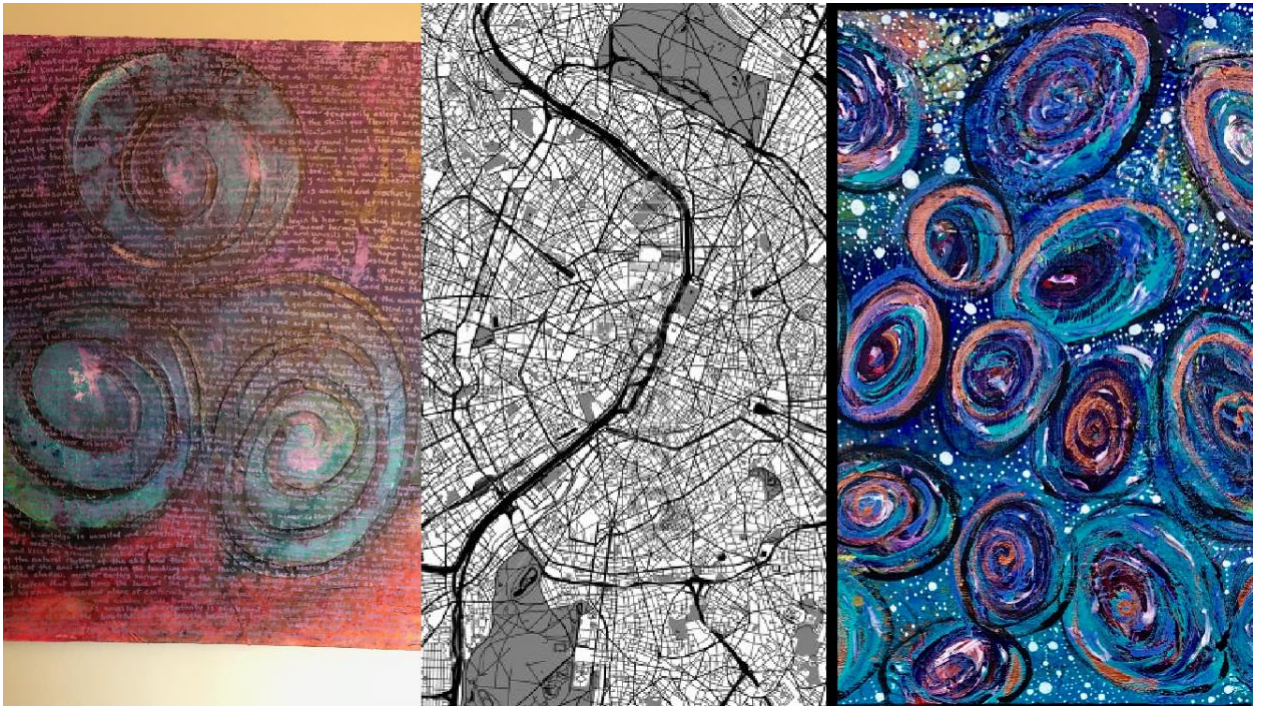


Figure 1

The essence of my living-theory

This has been a very daunting and difficult journey for me as I did not expect it to be so disturbing and challenging. I thought I was going to focus on how love influenced me as a teacher, researcher and learner, and how I loved my students into learning. Although I did share some of that process in my dissertation, writing about that has revealed to me that the micro-moments of connection (Fredrickson, 2013) and the spurts of soul-centric being (Plotkin, 2008)) were simply not enough and may have contributed to the dehumanizing of the learners in my

care as I perpetuated a superficial sense of choice and an illusory understanding of education and freedom. I agree with Gatto (2005) who writes:

One...thing I know is that eventually you have to come to be a part of a *place*—part of its hills and streets and waters and people—or you will live a very, very sorry life as an exile forever. *Discovering meaning for yourself*, and discovering satisfying *purpose* for yourself, is a big part of what education is. How can this be done by locking children away from the world is beyond me. (p. 62; emphasis in original)

Locked away in the classroom with me could not provide my students with the environment they needed to develop no matter how creative, courageous or loving I was; especially when I did not even realize that this very same environment was interfering with my own flourishing.

I came to the realization that I have a significant amount of soul work to do so that I can love myself into wholeness and unveiling this insight became the focus of my research. Although the process of coming to this awareness was excruciatingly painful and difficult at times, it was indeed a worthwhile journey as I am now more hope-full.

Hope

One of the key discoveries in my research and the writing of my dissertation was the addition of hope to my previously identified key values of love and joy. West (2008) writes that “To be wise is to opt for a costly hope, an earned hope, a blues-inflected hope that grapples with despair. ...

We emerge with new energy from our wounds, new wisdom from our scars, and a new name from our bruises, equipped with a new armour of truth and justice” (p. 217). As a result of my harrowing journey, I am now more prepared to enter the next phase of my personal development to wholeness and to put my theory into action.

My personal scars and wounds have revealed to me the importance of authentic choice and the recognition that I do have options. Previously, as a teacher in public schooling, I was trapped in what Plotkin (2008) calls the adolescent phase, which according to Plotkin, most of society is stuck in and a place where:

Arrested personal growth serves industrial “growth.” By suppressing the nature dimension of human development (through educational systems, social values, advertising, nature-eclipsing vocations and pastimes, city and suburb design, denatured medical and psychological practices, and other means), industrial growth society engenders an immature citizenry unable to imagine a life beyond consumerism and soul-suppressing jobs. (p. 6)

It is only by attempting to explain how love influenced me as a teacher, researcher, and learner that I am able to recognize that I was in a state of arrested personal growth and as a teacher in the public schooling sector, I was contributing to the suppression of the personal growth of my students. Again, I am embarrassed by my naivety. I thought I was challenging the oppressive environment so that my students could have more meaningful, relevant, self-directed, and determined learning opportunities but this was simply my ego trying to out-smart a dysfunctional system. I too was oppressed as a cog in the wheel of a system created in the height of the industrial era and instead of trusting my instincts more fully, I allowed my ego to seduce me into thinking I could make a difference. I am not suggesting that I did not make some small differences along the way; I know I did but they were not enough and actually did more harm than good by prolonging the inevitable. Plotkin (2008) writes that:

As soon as enough people in contemporary societies progress beyond adolescence, the entire consumer-driven economy and egocentric lifestyle will implode. The adolescent society is actually quite unstable due to its incongruence with the primary patterns of living systems. The industrial growth society is simply incompatible with collective human maturity. No true adult

wants to be a consumer, worker bee, or tycoon, or a soldier in an imperial war, and none would go through these motions if there were other options at hand. The enlivened soul and wild nature are deadly to industrial growth economies—and vice versa. (p. 8)

Plotkin's words give me hope as I embark on the next phase of my journey seeking to enliven my soul. What concerns me now is that it is quite possible I would never have recognized this without making an explicit effort to think about and explain what I do and why and to imagine other possibilities.

Time and Choice

In the hustle and bustle of life as a teacher in the public system there is little, if any, time for reflection and collaboration. In the chaos of life in the machine my actions were ruled by bells, timetables, timelines and accountability all designed to make me and my efforts more efficient. However, the opposite is what actually unfolded. As I strayed from the traditional dictates of schooling searching for opportunities to create more meaningful experiences for my students, I became a less efficient teacher by traditional standards. I did not keep a detailed gradebook or a compilation of structured lesson plans with objectives and expectations and I did not have clearly planned units of study for the term integrated with tests and assignments to assess and evaluate learning outcomes. Instead, I focused on getting to know my students and guided them as they investigated and explored and encouraged them as they took risks.

Unfortunately, I now recognize that I was not as successful as I once thought I was as my alternatives to the traditional system were not very efficient either. The first problem is that the alternatives I was encouraging are not designed for efficiency but more for sustainability; nonetheless, my efforts were neither efficient nor sustainable.

In the brief scheduled time I had with my students (75 minutes per day when there was not a mandated assembly or scheduled drill), we often experienced so many interruptions it was extremely challenging, if not impossible, to create an environment for authentic learning. As Gatto (2009) explains,

When time is tightly scheduled, we are compelled to attend more to the appearances of attention and concern than to the reality of those qualities; without uninterrupted time you haven't a prayer of synthesizing the fact bits thrown at you. It's possible to memorize the official meaning of those bits, but in the time available no possibility remains at arriving at your own careful conclusions. (p. 143)

I have discovered, in the free time available to me in my retirement and in the writing of my dissertation, that many of my classroom experiences were spent attending to the appearances of meaningful relationships and learning. Even though I was not expecting my students to memorize and regurgitate bits of facts, I was expecting them to explore, discover, be curious and to question. When I witnessed brief moments of this, I would feel satisfied and check off the little box on my mental checklist that I kept in the event I was questioned about my practice. Being preoccupied with accountability I was not able to be fully present for my students. And even if I was, and I believe there were times when I was, how could my students have any meaningful learning experiences when they knew they could be interrupted at any given moment by a number of things, and in the worst case, the bell ringing denoting the end of the period and the abrupt end to the time to think that particular thought on that particular day?

"It's okay," I would say to my students, "finish your thought" and more often than not they would look at me a little blankly and I could see they were clearly preoccupied with the number of things (many of which they preferred to having a conversation with me if they had the choice) they had to do in the next 10 minutes (grab a snack, meet a friend, go to the bathroom,

exchange their textbooks, make a phone call, check their text messages or social media accounts) before it was time to be seated in their desks in a timely manner, prepared for the next subject of study. There was no room for the slow movement in our schedules even if I pretended there was. There was no time for my students or me to draw our own careful conclusions, so how could any real learning take place?

So now what?

I agree with O'Reilly (1998) who suggests that ...the task of our time—and really, it's a poet's task—is to find words again that will mediate between spirit and matter. But I do not have time or skill enough to write that poem, so I'm trying to find a diction that unsettles the issues just enough to let us see them new. Perhaps it would be more accurate to call it not a value-neutral language but a value seeking language. (p. 13)

The values that I seek are love, presence, reverence, awe, mystery, authenticity, soul, spirit, connection, community, and I believe it is time to recognize the need for naming and seeking these values within public education. What is education if it is not about the things that will improve our world and all the members of its community. The time is ripe for an intellectual revolution.

After two decades in the classroom, and an extensive amount of energy and effort to participate in the reform movement, I conclude that reform is not enough—it is too slow and too narrow, reform does not address our underlying assumptions and as such reform continues to perpetuate the pragmatic model and is actually a part of the problem.

In his edited book, *Authentic Dissertation*, Four Arrows (2008) critiques formal education and focuses on the problems within higher education stating:

a number of us believe that in many ways, directly or indirectly, the “academy” may be partially responsible for our collective inability to significantly mitigate warfare, global warming, social and ecological injustices, domestic violence, loss of habit, racism, economic despair, loss of the commons etc. (p. 1)

Similar to the authors featured in Four Arrows's edited text, I believe that we need to embrace a more holistic approach to learning, addressing the emotional, spiritual, psychological, and physical needs of learners and learning. I agree with Holt (1989) that living is learning: “It is impossible to be alive and conscious (and some would say unconscious) without constantly learning things” (p. 157). If we are learning all the time, and I believe we are, then we need to acknowledge and embrace learning in all forms and ways. There are many ways to live and so many ways to learn. As I try to live a meaningful life, I tend to the needs of my body, mind, spirit, and emotions and I thrive in situations where this is also recognized in formal learning. Focusing on the whole learner will provide an opportunity to understand unique values, create time and space for reflection, and encourage action, which may provide some effective solutions to the problems that plague our world today, specifically, challenges in formal education at all levels.

The Love Story

I am an experienced classroom teacher and one of the explanatory principles (Whitehead, 1989, 2008, 2011) of my teaching practice is that I love my students. I refer to Peck's (1978) definition of love to explain to my students what I mean by love: “the will to extend one's self for the

purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth" (p. 85). This is a living standard of judgment (Laidlaw, 1996) that I am willing to be held accountable to, and I wanted to know when I could act in accordance with my standard and when and in what circumstances and situations I was not able to do so.

I have been trying to teach and live more authentically, to demonstrate consistency between my values and actions (Kerber, Klamfleitner, McCune, Bayne, & Knottenble, 2007). When my actions do not align with my worldview, my values, and/or my professional intention, I experience tension. This tension, according to Whitehead (1989), is a living contradiction, "holding educational values whilst at the same time negating them" and recognizing, articulating, and identifying these discrepancies "moves us to imagine alternative ways of improving our situation" (p. 4). Within this space of dissonance there is potential for growth. I examined and identified obstacles and challenges, and explicitly named and shared what I have done and what I plan to do in the name of love. My inquiry included examining my data and my narratives for recurring themes, key words and concepts, unanswered questions, paradoxes, tensions, and new questions. Reviewing my data and my stories with these ideas in mind allowed me to explore where "story lines interweave and interconnect," and identify the explicit and not so explicit "continuities and discontinuities" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 131).

Leggo and Sameshima (2014) claim "we need spaces for many kinds of research, including research that focuses on fictional, narrative, autobiographical, artful, and creative knowing" (p. 539) so that we can uncover "beginnings long lost and conclusions mysteriously hidden" to contribute to educational transformation" (p. 542). Embracing alternative ways of knowing, researching, and representing through multiple lenses creates an opportunity to reveal some of the nuances and mysteries of my practice and specifically, how love has influenced me (positively and/or negatively) as a researcher, teacher, and learner.

Educational Freedom

I experienced a shift in educational freedom when I experienced being loved into learning. Prior to this experience, I rarely experienced educational freedom and this is one of the main reasons I became a teacher. I believed there was a different and more meaningful way to experience learning and I hoped I would be able to discover it and share it with the learners in my care. My motivation increased exponentially when I became a mother and again now as a grandmother. What I have learned is that there is no single model or definitive approach that is right in all situations for all learners. I have learned that there is a term (holistic education) for what I believe was part of my intuitive pedagogy, and finally, I have learned that love, particularly spiritual love, which I define as the willingness to embrace and act on the idea that everyone and everything is connected, is an essential requirement for me to have a meaningful learning experience. I did not learn this in isolation in a particular course or from a specific book or from mandatory professional development; I learned it from living and from trusting myself—only then could I turn to academia and make sense of the theories I encountered. In addition, I learned that the entire process was more meaningful if I was guided by someone who trusted and respected me, someone who believed in me, someone who loved me and someone who I in turn could trust, respect, and love..

Whitehead (2009) makes a distinction between education and *educational* by explaining that an experience is only *educational* if it allows students to draw their own conclusions and formulate their own ideas that are supported by their own lived experiences, which enables them to create unique epistemologies and ontologies that contribute to the flourishing of humanity. In other

words, ideas are not imposed upon the learner; the learner's valued lived experiences enable him/her to internalize theories from disciplines and make new meaning, personal meaning, of theoretical ideas.

Similarly, Buber (1996) promotes the idea of doing *for* others and not *to* others to create an ideal learning environment that respects the uniqueness of individuals and their freedom to learn and be. Likewise, Dewey (1938) advocating for the value of experiential learning as the foundation of a meaningful education, emphasizes the importance of intellectual freedom—freedom of observation and judgement that occur for purposes that are worthwhile (p. 61). Buber and Dewey, along with many others, challenge the traditional notion of education as a banking model where information is received and stored and regurgitated on request forcing learners to remain ignorant and worse yet, stifling creative and critical thought. An environment for learning that does not include a space for emphasis on the process of inquiry but just the products is oppressive. Challenging an oppressive system is complicated, controversial, and at times chaotic. In order to liberate learners, we need liberated leaders. Whether referring to students, teachers, or administrators, it is not simple to move from an environment of oppression to one where intellectual freedom flourishes. Freire (1993a) explains that people who have been subjected to an oppressive environment become fearful of freedom after internalizing and living according to oppressive maxims.

I wholeheartedly agree with Holt (2004) who claims that:

Next to the right to life itself, the most fundamental of all human rights is the right to control our own minds and thoughts. That means, the right to decide for ourselves how we will explore the world around us, think about our own and other persons' experiences, find and make the meaning of our own lives. (p. 4)

Freedom, according to Holt, is the right to choose how we live, including how and when we learn. He maintains that regardless of how well intentioned we are, this kind of educational freedom will never exist in our current model of schools. Holt (2004) highlights the absurdity and inherent contradiction in the idea that we can mandate critical, creative, independent thinking “in a place where we coerce and bribe, wheedle, motivate, grade, rank, and label” (p. X) .

Freedom includes choice and independent thinking and “in a place where every part of their lives and thought is decided, controlled, and judged by authorities, how could children learn to be skeptical and critical of authority?” (Holt, 2004, p. 204).

Love

I am particularly interested in the spiritual principles of holistic education because I believe that love is a core component of spirituality and that both are essential to meaningful learning. I believe that one way to educate the heart is from the heart and with love. J. Miller (2007) maintains that all teaching falls within three distinct categories (transmission, transaction, and transformation) and that students benefit when a teacher's approach includes all three because at various times, students prefer one approach over the other. Goethe asserts that “you only learn from someone you love” (as cited in Forbes, 1996, p. 5) and although my ideal learning environment includes someone who loves me, I believe I can also learn from someone who does not love me; in fact, I can learn from someone who does not even know me but the best learning environment I have experienced is one where I feel loved.

Much like holistic education, love resists absolute definition (Loreman, 2011). My working definition of spiritual love is the willingness to embrace and act on the explicit and the

mysterious ideas inherent in the maxim that everyone and everything is interconnected. The application of this definition in the classroom, among other things, means that the relationship between teacher and student is non-hierarchical and is based on mutual trust and respect. This is definitely not a new or unique idea and many have written and researched this concept by studying soul, care, compassion, empathy and so forth, but only a few (Cho, 2005; Freire, 2000; hooks, 2011; Loreman, 2011; Ricci & Pritscher, 2015) speak specifically and extensively to the pedagogy of love, and in particular a sacred and/or spiritual love.

I believe that holistic teaching is a sacred act primarily because it requires the educator to enter into a spiritual journey with other learners in an attempt to create a space for each to discover their own sacredness. Cho (2005) describes this process as a more global endeavour and maintains that it can occur “by turning away from one another and toward the world in order to produce knowledge through inquiry and thought” (p. 95). One way I believe this can be accomplished is through love for the whole person and the process of learning, including the tensions, beauty, suffering, pain, joy, and mystery. Cho (2005) claims:

Knowledge emerges only through the invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other. Love marks the splitting of the teacher-student that structures the truth of the void of the relation by pushing both parties into the world in the pursuit of knowledge. (pp. 94-95)

Cho describes a learning environment conducive to sustainable education. The encounter is one of knowledge creation and when the student and teacher part, each is more equipped to continue their learning journey because of their encounter. The student is not dependent on the teacher or a particular set of standards or expectations, but seeks to know simply for the love of learning, the love of self, and the love of others: essentially, a love of living. Likewise, the teacher is not dependent on the student for a sense of purpose or self-fulfillment and continues to seek loving encounters for the sake of loving and learning.

Bringing love into the classroom and creating the type of environment Cho (2005) describes within public education has many challenges and obstacles to say the very least. I have met students who are passive, disinterested, compliant, and rebellious and I had to be very creative and courageous to deal with questions and challenges from administrators and parents. In addition, I had to confront my own fears and self-imposed or perceived limitations. However, it is a challenge I embraced with stories of both victory and ruin (MacLure, 1996), because I believe there is hope for change, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant. Freire (2000) claims ignoring or discounting the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means we are essentially supporting the powerful; it is not possible to be neutral. When I returned to the classroom in 2012, I made a conscientious effort to address power imbalance and move from a position of neutrality to a position of action.

How Did I Get Here?

Completing a Master’s degree and creating my own living educational theory changed my life forever and for the better. I had a much deeper understanding of who I was and I wanted that person to show up in the classroom every day. However, I was also acutely aware of how easy it is to get lost within the power structures. My challenge was to remain true to myself and to others.

We teach who we are claims Parker Palmer (2007) and if we do not know who we are then it begs the question “Who is showing up in the classroom?” Self-study is an ideal process for helping us to figure out who we are and who we want to be or become in life and in the classroom. One quickly discovers that the two are intertwined and interdependent.

I am privileged to have had the opportunity and resources to conduct an in-depth self-study during the completion of my Master's degree but I maintain that it is not necessary to do so to study your own practice. Self-study, action research, and living educational theory are three possible approaches for improving one's practice available to anyone willing to make the commitment. Completing a self-study, action research MRP provided me with valuable insights and knowledge about my practice and my worldview, and self-study combined with action research provided a framework for me to approach the tensions and challenges within my practice and life. However, it was, and still is the continued generation of my evolving living educational theory that provided the impetus and framework to ensure that my authentic self was the one to show up in the classroom every day. Self-study and action research provided valuable knowledge but it was the generation of my own living educational theory that provided a deeper understanding; one that gave me the confidence and tools to identify and articulate what mattered most—love.

It was the use of digital media that enabled me to identify love as a core value and working with other living educational theorists who focused on energy flowing values that contribute to the flourishing of humanity provided the support I needed to continue to explore the meaning and role of love in my practice and life. I discovered that the space in-between me and the learners in my care was filled with a life affirming energy founded on love. Using digital media to record my conversations and interactions with students allowed me to review the interactions as many times as necessary and helped me to identify what Fredrickson (2013) calls “micro moments” of love; she describes love in these micro moments as:

the momentary upwelling of three tightly interwoven events: first, a sharing of one or more positive emotions between you and another; second, a synchrony between your and the other person's biochemistry and behaviors: and third, a reflected motive to invest in each other's well-being that brings mutual care. (p. 17)

Fredrickson calls the combined interaction of these three indicators “positivity resonance” which also provides a useful description of the energy flowing value of love I encountered with the learners in my care. Fredrickson explains further that “this back and forth reverberation of positive energy sustains itself—and can even grow stronger—until the momentary connection wanes, which is of course inevitable, because that's how emotions work” (p. 17). Once I experienced and understood this connectedness in micro moments of love there was no turning back; I was energized to seek out and create more opportunities for this kind of connection. Generating one's own living educational theory is a sustainable life-long self-study, action research endeavour. My life, including my practice became a journey of love that will continue until I take my last breath. This is a simple statement and at the same time extremely complex. Since I had experienced some micro moments of connection with my students, I yearned for more but I often experienced the opposite.

Why Did I Stay?

It took me a long time to find some kind of harmony between loving my students and working within a public education setting. Many times I was tempted to walk away or to give up because the constraints, policies, mandates, and other external pressures of public education made me feel helpless. Sometimes, especially on Monday mornings, it would take us a while to get energized and get the conversation flowing in the class but eventually, for the most part, we would get to a point where students were asking questions of each other and prompting each other and anxiously awaiting their turn to speak. They would be onto something very exciting, completely engrossed in a conversation that could change the way they think or something that could be the

seed for personal or collective action and then quite suddenly, everyone's thoughts would be abruptly interrupted by a shrilling, high-pitched beep indicating the end of the allotted time for that particular conversation. Class was over. Time to move on to another subject.

Another example is from when I was teaching a grade 10 class and we were forced to do practice assignments for the grade 10 literacy test and I could see that my students were extremely bored or in some cases so anxious they would not actually benefit. Plotkin (2008), referring to the literacy rate in America, maintains that "studies show that the astonishingly low literacy rate in our country is due not to a lack of schooling but to too much of the wrong kind of schooling. Most children become highly literate on their own if allowed to explore areas of genuine interest" (p. 210). Nonetheless, we had to comply and complete and submit the work. On these occasions, I truly felt like I let my students down. I felt like I was sending a message that they could not be trusted to pass this test on their own merit or that this test was so important and essential to their success in high school that we had to spend extra time practicing. I felt like a hypocrite and yet I stayed.

I now realize there was really only one reason I stayed as long as I did even though I sometimes told myself otherwise at the time. The reason I stayed is because I loved my students, which is the very reason that often made me feel like I should quit teaching. I spent an entire year researching why teachers quit and was actually considering making this the focus of my PhD. What I discovered was that I often felt like I was contributing to the perpetuation of a system that was in dire need of major systemic change and I was guilt ridden and full of shame, anger, discontent, and hopelessness.

Taking time to meditate, reflect, write, paint, and share my concerns with my research support group helped me to reconnect with my values and see the importance of love, hope, and joy in my life and in my practice. I loved myself back into living according to my values and I loved my students into learning which I discovered was a significant part of how I loved myself. I had something to share and my students needed more love—it was that simple.

Where Did I Experience Unconditional Love?

I have always been a passionate educator and I cared deeply for my students, but it was only when Jackie DeLong, an instructor in one of my courses for a Master's degree who eventually became my supervisor and a lifelong friend, told us that she loved us that I began to contemplate love in my practice; this evolved into my theory of being "loved into learning" (Campbell, 2012). Now, I too tell my students I love them. Not all of my students experience this kind of love and when I tell them I love them I know it makes some of them squirm with discomfort, but I also know some of them breathe a sigh of relief. I know this because they have told me in their writing and with their words and actions. Even the students who are uncomfortable in the beginning come to embrace the idea of being loved in the classroom when they understand what I mean and what the practical application of this love means for them.

I do not need my students to love me back; it is enough that they allow me love them. I do need them to trust and respect me and I believe I earn this when I trust and respect them. I do not always like all of my students but I do love them. I am able to love them because I believe I have an ability to see the beauty in them; even when they do not see it themselves. After some dedicated reflection on this topic, I have come to realize that I learned this from my mother and father. They loved me unconditionally and they saw beauty in all human beings. They parented me with an open heart and I now recognize I have an open heart. Perhaps this is why I am able to love my students even when they do not love themselves.

What Is My Inner Voice Telling Me?

Before recognizing the role of love in my practice, I experienced a lot of tension as I struggled to comply with standards and policies that contradicted what I knew in my heart and head. I wanted to be a “good” teacher and for a long time, I thought that meant doing what I was told was best. I complied and I was conflicted. I lived in this constant state of conflict for over a decade and I know it negatively impacted my whole life, not just my teaching practice. When I reflect on this and why I did not do something sooner I believe it was because I never had or made the time to think about it in any depth. I was teaching full time, the mother of three, and the wife of a shift-worker—I was a busy woman. I now understand that I was busy trying to comply and never gave a moment to that inner voice. It takes a lot of energy to ignore that voice and even more to find ways to comply with something you do not believe. At the end of the day, there was not much energy, if any, left over.

Eventually, I came to realize that if I had trusted myself more or was aware of different options things could have been very different but I did what I was trained to do and started searching for theories to support my ideas. I immersed myself in the literature and finally decided to apply to complete a Master’s degree thinking this would help give me the credibility I needed to make my inner voice heard. What I ended up doing, thanks to Jackie Delong and her introduction to Whitehead’s (1989) *Living Educational Theory*, was realizing that I did not need academia to validate my own lived experiences. And I also discovered that I might help to create a shift in education by sharing this knowledge with others. This was something that I came to understand was extremely important to me. It was the only way I could honour my own journey and contribute to something greater than myself. As Cornell West (2008) states, “you must have a compassion for something bigger than your own egocentric predicament” (p. 35). The thing that was bigger than me and my situation was love and I needed to name it and act in a way that recognized this explicitly both in my classroom and my life.

What Did I Do That Was Different?

I felt more aware and authentic after completing my self-study, action-research and believe that generating my own living educational theory enabled me to be more present in my own life and to those I encountered. I was able to trust myself more and arrived in my classroom with a deeper understanding of who I was and what my purpose was in the classroom. Following is a list of the intentions I set for myself and some examples of what I did differently after discovering that I wanted love to play a more significant role in my practice.

1. Create a space for individual truth to unfold;
2. Support students as they discovered and celebrated their own unique voice, their own truths— which includes being uncomfortable at times and recognizing that truths often resides in suffering and “suffering can’t speak if the lies are suffocating that voice” (West, 2008, p. 38);
3. Awaken, or re-awaken, natural curiosity and creativity, and/or inspire awareness of challenges to natural curiosity and creativity;
4. Embrace alternative ways of researching, representing and knowing and challenging oppressive, fragmented, dichotomous, mechanistic, consumeristic, thinking and being;
5. Create an environment where students and teacher could get to know their inner-selves so we could connect to others and our environment more authentically;
6. Recognize and nurture our own gifts;
7. Know and understand gratitude and wisdom;
8. Recognize and embrace Beauty;

9. Stop, breathe, smile.

Is important to realize that I did not do all of these things all of the time and this is only a sampling of some of the activities and ideas we used to create a loving environment and encounter. I involved my students as much as they were willing to be involved and we embraced the organic and dynamic nature of our encounters, so naturally the specifics also changed day to day, moment to moment, and class to class. My presence in the class was also constantly changing—true presence is impermanent. With each experience, both positive and negative, my unfinishedness evolved. I was not the same person who entered the room that first week in September. Nothing would please me more than to be able to say I was able to achieve all that I intended and that I had discovered a way to gently bring love into the classroom but this would not be entirely true.

The variables involved in being more present are as plentiful as the number of students I encounter multiplied by their unique experiences and my own, including the fact that I am a work in progress. Every student and every situation is unique. I try to be fully present and listen wholeheartedly. If I can do that, I can usually provide a space for students to unveil embodied knowledge and glean insights from their own thoughts, ideas, and words. Sometimes just listening and sometimes asking meaningful questions, really just echoing back their own questions, enables students to dig deeper and remain open-minded. This is a more accurate description of what I tried to do/be. However, I don't have a formula for this. My life is being love and bringing this love into the classroom is my vocation. Krishnamurti (1953) states that if teaching is our true vocation, we may feel temporarily frustrated because we have not seen a way out of this present educational confusion; but the moment we see and understand the implications of the right kind of education, we shall have all the necessary drive and enthusiasm. It is not a matter of will or resolution, but of perception and understanding. (p. 112)

My evolving understanding of love is providing me with the drive and enthusiasm to continue on my journey. Loving myself is the most helpful thing I can do to be prepared for loving others. This includes maintaining my own meditation practice and other contemplative activities.

What is my truth?

While it is true that as a result of my efforts to explicitly name love as integral to my practice I did improve my practice; however, it is equally true that my actions did not improve my life. Each time I experienced and witnessed the results of loving my students into learning, I yearned for more. For example, I witnessed first-hand how removing the pressures of grading, marking, and testing allowed students to experience more authentic learning as they became more engaged in learning for its own sake and took more responsibility for what they learned and how they learned it, but I was unable to completely eliminate grading, marking and assignments and therefore they were unable to take full responsibility for their learning. I was obligated to provide a midterm and final grade and although I became very creative at generating grades, the end result was still the same. I had to assign a number to each student which represented their ability to meet course expectations outlined by the Ministry of Education. This simple yet **power full** act could easily undermine everything we had achieved and learned, including their ability to trust and respect me. If I could not have trusting and respectful encounters with my students, which I do not think can happen when one person holds all the power, then I was unable to live fully according to my values.

Truth: Accountability interferes with authenticity.

As I stated earlier, one of my intentions was to be more authentic which meant I wanted to teach in a loving way honouring the whole student. I now recognize that even as I tried to be creatively compliant with grading, marking, testing, and assignments, the fact remains that I was still guided by accountability rather than the unique needs and interests of the learners in my care. As my students selected projects, researched, presented and shared their thoughts and ideas in talking circles and one-on-one conversations, there was always a curriculum expectations mental checklist running in the back of my mind. I would get excited when a question or comment or action allowed me to mentally check a box. I thought I was being clever finding a way around the policies and expectations that I believed stifled learning and hurt students but all I was really doing was deceiving my students and chances are I did not even do that very well.

Students are much better at the game of schooling than we realize Holt (1989). They likely knew even as I did not that this was still a checklist game. If I did not deceive my students then what did my actions reveal? Kohn (2005), writing about unconditional teaching, states that “[a] diminution in what we value, then may affect whom we value” (p. 20). If I was valuing my students’ ability to enable me to check more boxes, then I was not loving them fully. The fact that I had a mental checklist means I was not fully present and I was not listening wholeheartedly or appreciating and valuing what they said or did just for its own sake but also how it enabled me to check more boxes. This realization makes me feel physically ill. Did my students think I valued my mental checklist more than them? Is it possible that at some subconscious level I might have? Did my ego get in the way? Was I more concerned about my ability to find creative solutions than I was about the human life in front of me? Did my students feel less valued? Kohn (2005) claims that “regardless of the criteria we happen to be using, or the number of students who meet those criteria, every student gets the same message that our acceptance is never a sure thing. They learn that their worth hinges on their performance” (p. 20). Is this how my students felt?

I have always been concerned about the well-being of my students from a holistic perspective; that is, their mental, emotional, and spiritual development was important to me, and in most cases, more important than their intellectual development. Kohn (2005) referencing psychological researchers and theorists, argues that “the best predictor of mental health may not be one’s level of self-esteem but the extent to which it fluctuates” and that the real problem is when self-esteem is “too contingent” (p. 201). This is extremely disturbing to me because I know that in spite of my limitations and the limitations imposed on me, I did have some meaningful encounters with my students. Is it possible that I could have done more harm than good if all I did was contribute to a fluctuating self-esteem? Were my students better off before I introduced them to ideas that challenged traditional schooling and the status-quo because doing so within a public institution required they had to leave my class after seventy-five minutes and attend one that was more traditional? Did they believe they were only valued in certain situations under certain conditions? Did they, as Kohn (2005) asserts, “come to disown parts of themselves that aren’t valued” (p. 20)? What did this do to their sense of worthiness? Were my subversive actions contributing to the increase of anxiety and depression in my students? Did I somehow know this and that is why I retired early? These questions are very disturbing but necessary to articulate. and while I could easily decide at this moment to change the topic of my dissertation, I **Truth: Choice is an illusion within public schooling.**

I believed that by encouraging my students to choose what they wanted to learn and how they wanted to learn it, I was providing a more relevant learning environment. However, I now realize there is a serious problem with this statement. According to the Merriam-Webster online

dictionary, the definition of choice (noun) is: “the act of choosing; the act of picking or deciding between two or more possibilities; the opportunity or power to make a decision.” Given this definition, it is true that my students did have the opportunity to exercise choice as they made selections from various options. Since I was teaching philosophy, it was not very difficult to justify almost any topic that my students selected.

Again, I allowed my ego to distract me as I took great pride in being creative in making the curriculum expectations align with their unique interests. When they were doubtful about something they were interested in being relevant to the course curriculum I would assure them that I could make it fit. I would tell them that I was not spending hours creating tests and marking papers or generating and revising lesson plans so I could spend time finding creative ways to demonstrate how and what they were learning met the Ministry of Education curriculum expectations. I took pride in the fact that in over 6 years I had never been stumped by a request. Perhaps if I was less focused on my challenges and accomplishments, I might have realized that my students could never really have the power to choose since they did not have the choice not to choose. Learning in my classroom was imposed just like the requirement to attend school. I wonder how many students would attend school if it was not mandated by the government and an expectation of their parents and/or caregivers. If I was really going to give students choice then I should begin by giving them the opportunity to choose whether or not to complete assignments and ultimately whether or not to attend class at all. This would be real, democratic choice. Anything less than this is simply perpetuating an illusion of choice.

How Did Love Influence Me as a Researcher and Learner?

Mining my data for evidence of how love has influenced me as a researcher, revealed three main themes: awareness, authenticity, and action. However the situations where I identified these themes did not occur in any particular order and rarely existed in isolation. Sometimes it was my action that influenced my awareness and sometimes it was authenticity that influenced my action and every other imaginable combination of the three themes also exists. Additionally, these themes also emerged in how love has influenced me as a teacher and learner and I realized that sometimes it was action in teaching or learning that influenced awareness in research and again every other imaginable combination within the three themes exists within the three roles. I had identified these themes in each role supported by examples and made a sticky note for each one and laid them out on the table. Next, I began rearranging them as I tried to identify a pattern or specific process. What I discovered was that although these bits of data were single episodes and I was able to identify them in isolation, they did not actually occur in isolation but neither was there a pattern or a specific process that I could identify. What I came to understand more deeply was the interconnectedness and the interdependence of the three roles and the interconnectedness and interdependence of the themes within the individual roles and also holistically.

Researching With My Values

Once I became aware of my purpose to include love as a significant part of my practice, my role as a researcher changed. Instead of trying to keep myself informed about the latest theories of education, the Ontario Ministry of Education’s new policies, and my schoolboard’s goals, priorities, and strategic plans, I focused on the things that aligned more fully with my purpose to be a loving teacher. One specific example was the K-12 School Effectiveness Framework (Appendix D) that was introduced in 2013 by the Ministry of Education and filtered down to me through the Board. I reviewed the document in light of what I was trying to do with my students and looked for policy that supported our goals and actions. In the past, in an attempt to be a

“good” teacher, I would have reviewed this document and tried to implement anything I was not currently doing, which usually meant doing to students instead of doing with and/or for students. I viewed my practice from a deficit model instead of an abundance model. Once my awareness changed, so did my actions. Here too is an example of how my desire to be more authentic changed. By considering research from the perspective of how it supported my values and purpose (which included recognizing the values and purposes my students identified), I was being more authentic (living more fully according to my values) instead of trying to be the “good” teacher.

BARN Is Born: Creating a Collaborative Community

The second illustration I provide is one of the first examples of how love influenced me as a researcher but it is also something that continues to thrive. A colleague (Cathy Griffin) and I decided we wanted to share the transformative power of self directed professional development by creating a Living Educational Theory. In 2012, we submitted an application via our Board for funding through the Teacher Learner and Leadership Program (TLLP) and Provincial Knowledge Exchange (PKE) program and we were successful. Our work with Bluewater Action Research Network (BARN) was featured in TVO Teach Ontario.¹

Our first year surpassed our expectations and we continued to apply for and receive funding every year since then. In 2016, Cathy became a vice-principal; I retired in 2017, but BARN continues to grow. The first year we were honoured to have Jackie Delong co-facilitate BARN with us and following our first year, we invited previous participants to co-facilitate.

Sustainability was important to us and we were eager to create an opportunity for BARN participants to become leaders and share in the excitement and energy of having a positive influence as well as secure the future of BARN.

We have video-taped and made available to the public much of this work and have posted links to the research findings which you will find on the Teach Ontario website. Also available to the public via the Teach Ontario site is access to an e-book we created and published which includes an explanation and description of BARN, biographies of participants from that year, and links to their research findings. In 2017, we created a BARN Living Poster so we could share our work and links to our videos publicly.¹

I was committed to this endeavour because I believe like, Allender and Allender (2008) that the embodied knowledge and experiences of classroom teachers is often minimized and/or trivialized in favour of academic research:

The belief that educational research trumps practice, historically and still, is one of the major obstacles. The results of scholarly inquiry have managed to become the top of a top down world. The not-so subtle message is that there is a better way to teach and teachers ought to change their practices accordingly. And, teachers have a way of willingly participating in this system when they persist in searching for the new trick to quickly and magically make their teaching easier. Progress depends on giving up the hegemony of scholarly inquiry. Knowledge has many sources, and they are best honoured when they are part of a lively dialectic. The obvious shift is for

¹ The full document is available at:

<https://www.teachontario.ca/community/explore/teachontario-talks/blog/2016/05/09/values-reflection-drive-teacher-development-in-bluewater-action-research-network>

On this page, you can also follow a link to an example of how BARN was profiled on an international scale by Jack Whitehead (see Figure 7).

teachers to give themselves credit for having an expertise that is uniquely valuable to themselves and others. (pp. 127-128)

There is no trick or magic when it comes to interacting with others and yet I, like many teachers, spent an inordinate amount of time and energy looking elsewhere for answers that were right in front of me (my students) and inside of me (my experiences, values, and embodied knowledge). Generating my own living educational theory provided a process for getting on the inside of that knowledge and understanding, which gave me the courage and confidence to look inward, outward, backward, and forward while imagining other possibilities. I realized that it was my inability to teach according to my values; that is, to teach in a loving way, that was causing my angst. I recognized that the systemic barriers within the institution of public schooling (for example: mandated professional development, testing, grading, fixed schedules, mandatory attendance, imposed curriculum, and other policies and procedures) were causing me to feel oppressed and prevented me from recognizing and valuing my own voice and living out my values. I also knew there were dedicated and passionate teachers who were suffering (like I was) with self-doubt and spiritual fatigue, among other things, and I was literally physically ill thinking about the suffering of students and my peers. My love for self, others, and my practice inspired and called me to share my experience with other teachers. As individuals that is all we can really hope to do and when you work with a group of individuals on a similar journey then there is a possibility that collectively we can affect change at a systemic level.

How BARN Gave Me Hope

I learned that there is hope for the future of public education and as difficult and time consuming as it seems to be when involved in something at the grassroots level, it is actually quite liberating and energizing to live more fully according to your values. The systemic barriers seemed overwhelming at times and I know this contributed to my sense of helplessness. I felt frustrated when I was told how to respond to a controversial situation like the threat of a work-to-rule action or the implementation of a failed electronic literacy test. I also felt undermined when I was given non-negotiable, specific instructions on how to implement late, absence, cell phone usage, dress code, late assignment, computer use, emergency plan, lunch room, and washroom visit policies and procedures. My sense of hopelessness escalated during staff meetings when we were discouraged from asking questions that diverted us from covering the pre-set meeting agenda. We created BARN because we knew others also felt hopeless and frustrated and had something valuable to contribute that was not being heard anywhere else. We wanted to provide an opportunity for educators to ask those burning questions and openly voice their concerns and pose questions without the fear of reprimand, public humiliation, or judgement.

Cathy and I created the space for BARN to be born but it was the participants who held that space open and allowed us to return year after and to collectively flourish. Without their willingness to trust, to be vulnerable, to take risks, to share, and to question, my theory would simply have been words on a page. They gave my theory life; they put breath in my words and spirit in our collective growth. I felt, and still do feel, a great sense of interconnectedness and interdependence with my colleagues. Together we struggled to examine our values, identify contradictions, imagine possibilities, put our ideas into action and reflect on our actions and begin the cycle again. None of this would have been possible if we did not trust and respect each other and believe that it was possible to do things differently; to be better human beings.

BARN Summary

As I stated earlier, BARN surpassed our expectations, which is an example of what is possible when you provide a space, place, and time for learners to determine their own learning journey.

Each of the participants, as well as the facilitators, came to BARN for various reasons but those reasons had several things in common including a desire to be better humans, a desire to improve practice, and a sense that it was time for something different to overcome feelings of failure, frustration and fear.

We continued to be rejuvenated by the energy and spirit of the participants as they openly shared their deepest concerns, challenges and insights. Participants were keen to share because they appreciated the efforts made on their behalf to create a time to examine and reflect on their practice and their life. One of the prevailing themes in the collective voice was that they rarely had time to reflect and/or collaborate and they knew instinctively that slowing down and thinking about what they did and why they did it was crucial to improving their situations. Furthermore, they came to understand that their voice was valued in BARN which was a significant contribution to the sense of community that evolved in BARN sessions. As each individual openly shared their research questions, process, and findings, others benefitted as well as the individual researcher. In the end, most of the participants discovered that although they often felt powerless in their individual situations, they were empowered when they focused on changing self. Their willingness to openly share this with others inspired others to have the courage to face their fears and honestly reflect. The process eventually took on a life of its own as the more people shared, the more they were inspired, and the more they were inspired, the more they wanted to share—a sustainable cycle of learning.

The participants in BARN ranged from new educators to veteran educators, junior kindergarten to grade 12 educational assistants, teachers, teaching assistants, and lead teachers (student success, alternative programs, area resource and curriculum lead) responsible for whole grades (some split-level classes), specific subjects at the high school level including English, math, history, social sciences, drama, art, music, resource, and business and technology studies and what we all learned was that regardless of our diverse roles, we could learn with and from one another. In fact, the diversity within the group enhanced the learning as we recognized the value of having a diverse group of learners that can transcend the boundaries of experience, subject area, and responsibilities. We learned that there is hope for change when the desired change is focused on internal instead of external knowledge and behaviour. The hope arises from the fact that we can make a difference individually and collectively when we live the change we want to see.

I agree with Illich (2002) who claims that “most learning happens casually, and even most intentional learning is not the result of programmed instruction” (p. 12) which is precisely what I witnessed in the BARN sessions. Illich asserts that learners of all ages “should be able to meet around a problem chosen and defined by their own initiative ... in a network or service which g[ives] each man the same opportunity to share his current concern with others motivated by the same concern” (p. 19). This radical alternative to schooling accurately describes what unfolded during BARN sessions, which became a radical alternative to professional development.

Awakening Hope

An alternative program that I was leading and very passionate about and that was quite successful was suddenly cancelled due to a change in funding. A student who was in my class the year before committed suicide. More and more students were being diagnosed with anxiety and depression. The number of teachers and administrators (Board wide) taking stress leaves was at an all-time high. And this was only the local scene.

I had completed the course work for my PhD and was preparing to write my exams. It was during this time that it was suggested to me that I reconsider my original research topic which was love in the classroom and that I write about what does not work in education. Initially, I was intrigued and agreed to give it some thought. I am grateful for the suggestion now as it helped me to realize something of extreme importance to me. While considering this new topic, I became quite distraught. I reflected on my years of practice and all the problems I had encountered, experienced, or created for myself, others and especially my students.

On Sunday afternoons, I participate in a living theory research support group. I began to explain my conundrum to the group when all of a sudden I burst into tears. I do not cry very often, not because I think I should not for whatever reason; I just do not. Perhaps I do not cry often because I have suffered some great losses and it takes a lot to make me cry or maybe it is just my nature. Either way, I knew there was something significant going on when I burst into tears during my Skype call and I knew that I was about to have a growth spurt if I could see this as a challenge and not a threat. As J. Miller (2018) writes, “creative people see challenging situations as opportunities for spiritual growth rather than seeing them as threats. ... Love, creativity and gentleness are closely linked” (p. 11).

My spiritual growth involved the recognition that in addition to the two core values of love and joy that I identified as part of my living educational theory during my Master’s research, I needed to add hope as one of my foundational values. I have learned that hope is an essential value in my life as a learner. I need hope to sustain my joy and nourish my love. Hope and joy are the “energy flowing values” that constitute the “life affirming energy” in my ability to love and be loved; to be love (Whitehead, 2009). In order to be love, I recognize hope as a driving force and like West (2008) proclaims this “Blues-inflected hope” compels me to never give up and I acknowledge that “I am in no way optimistic, but I remain a prisoner of hope” (p. 41). He goes on to say that we acquire wisdom when we engage and struggle with despair and “not allowing despair to have the last word. That’s why hope is always blood-stained and tear-soaked” (West, 2008, p. 217). As difficult as it is to remain hopeful in difficult times, I know that I will always have hope. My hope stems from my understanding that I can make a difference by changing myself and as I change myself, I am influencing others. If others recognize their ability to make a difference and we can collaborate and combine our efforts then our hope grows exponentially.

What Is My New Path?

My eagerness to return to the classroom and love my students into learning was an exciting and enlightening journey. I learned so much from my students simply by listening and having an open heart. J. Miller (2018) referencing Hardin states that experiencing “open love” begins by loving ourselves and gently extends to others and cautions us against moving too quickly “without really extending that feeling of deep love and friendship in ourselves” (p. 13).

Although I have absolutely no regrets about my return to the classroom and I learned that it was in fact possible, although not without many challenges, to love my students into learning, it took me a few years to realize that the demands of public education made it very difficult to do so in a way that enabled me to continue to nourish my soul and love myself in a way that I could continue to awaken to my true being. I seemed to have reached a threshold of spirit; I was on the verge of something but could not seem to get beyond the simple realization that there was something more. Once again, bells, policies, overcrowded classes, mandated curriculum, and my limited skills and experience created a barrier. Perhaps it was time to heed O’Reilly’s (1998) advice and “listen to the texts you’re teaching and face the consequences” and know that when

you are in “the contemplative mode, your life is always on the line” (pp. 14-15). An honest and critical reflection of the situation clearly revealed that it was time for me to move on. I was 2 years away from retirement, and within 2 weeks, I made the decision to leave. I could not stand on the threshold anymore; a different path beckoned.

Teaching is my vocation. I am passionate about learning and assisting others where I can to learn what and how they want to learn to contribute to the flourishing of humanity. I believe in the hope that our world can be better; we can be better, one person at a time. There are many ways I can do this and I will continue to seek out and accept opportunities to do so. Every day, I see a bright yellow school bus pass by on its way to collect the children for the local elementary school and in that brief moment, I am overcome with a feeling of uneasiness in the pit of my stomach as I wonder how many of those children will suffer at the hands of another today?

I agree with Holt (2005) who states:

And so, in this dull and ugly place, where nobody ever says anything very truthful, where everybody is playing a kind of role, as in a charade where the teachers are no more free to respond honestly to the students than the students are free to respond to the teachers or each other, where the air practically vibrates with suspicion and anxiety, the child learns to live in a daze. ... It is a rare child who can come through his schooling with much left of his curiosity, his independence or his sense of his own dignity, competence and worth. (p. 18)

I was wounded by being forced to implement strategies and policies I knew were harmful to my students. The external pressures to comply and conform undermined my ability to trust my instincts. I was fearful of speaking out against a system that exerted power over me and fearful of judgment from my colleagues. I came up with creative ways to generate grades; I eliminated testing when I could; I tried to run a democratic classroom; I tried to love my students, but anything I did was not going to make a sustainable difference unless I could recognize that I was oppressed and I was contributing to the oppression of my students.

There was also an unspoken culture of compliance and passivity among staff. In over 20 years of teaching, I can recall on one hand the number of times I heard someone say something that indicated they were looking forward to a staff meeting. The consensus was that staff meetings and mandated professional development were a waste of precious time and that the best we could do was attend to receive our directives and then get on with our jobs. If someone asked too many questions, especially controversial questions, they were sometimes treated rudely and publicly humiliated or received a response so rhetoric ridden that it did not invite further dialogue. On one occasion, after asking a question about mandatory lunchtime literacy test practice, I was accused of not being a team player and I was so shocked by the response I simply sat there speechless. This was hurtful as I believed I was very much a team player as I wanted what was best for all, especially my students. I should have asked if students were a part of the team being referenced. In general, staff meetings were an opportunity to deliver Board and Ministry directives modelling the top down approach we were expected to deliver in the classroom not a place for dialogue about the purpose of schooling and our teaching / learning values. Knowles and Cole (2008) claim that “the most meaningful insights often come by surprise” (p. 40). It might be possible for these kinds of insights to occur in a space that honours spontaneous, authentic, and sometimes vulnerable, discussions, but when every minute of the time is pre-planned and accounted for there is no room for surprises.

For over 20 years the most predominant concern I have had and have heard others (teachers and students) express is that there is not enough time to reflect and collaborate. Making time for the unique voice of individuals to be unveiled and heard is more important than any new

policy or mandated curriculum. When I felt my voice was valued like I experienced during my Master's research, then I am more able to value the voice of the other. I rarely felt that my voice was valued in my teaching career unless I was saying something that confirmed the agenda of the current administration. At some point, and I am not exactly sure when, I surrendered; I gave up even trying to have my voice heard. I thought I had re-directed my energies to efforts that I believed could make a difference but perhaps that is simply one of the lies I told myself. In my 20 plus years of teaching, I constantly sought out new challenges and opportunities. I thought I was looking for new and different ways to affect change but I wonder now if I was simply distracting myself from the truth I was unable or unwilling to confront. Faced with this possibility, I am overcome with embarrassment. How naïve of me to think that I alone could make any significant difference in anything but myself. I became a teacher because I suffered as a student and I thought this would make me a more humane teacher and now I think that my idealism actually did more harm than good. How dehumanizing of me.

How can I heal?

Reflecting on my encounters with nature I recognize that being more fully in nature is part of my path to healing. Plotkin (2008) writes: "Nature, too, supports our personal blossoming (if we have any quiet exposure to her) through her spontaneities, through her beauty, power, and mirroring, through her dazzling variety of species and habitats, and by way of the wind, Moon, Sun, stars, and galaxies" (p. 20). As I attend to what nature offers and I seek out opportunities for quiet exposure, I am attending to my wholeness. I am more attuned to the whole me including my spiritual, psychological, intellectual and physical needs. I am beginning to recognize that my human nature is intertwined with nature. Recognizing, embracing, and acting on this insight enhances my connectedness to others, the Earth, and every living thing. I am more fully alive and this is an ideal place for healing and growing.

The recognition of my dehumanizing actions is the catalyst for my healing. Plotkin (2008) claims that it is in this moment of great crisis that the time is ripe for individual and collective transformation:

In this tiny interval of the twenty-first century, we, the human species, will either learn to become a life-enhancing element within the greater Earth community ... or we will not. If we fail, humanity will be reduced to a small number, we will have forsaken our potential as a species (this time around, at least) and we will have perpetrated the extinction of many thousands of species, perhaps millions—beyond those that have already perished at our hands. And yet we now behold the possibility of a radical and foundational shift in human culture—from a suicidal, life-destroying element to a way of life worthy of our unique human potential and of Earth's dream for itself. What lies before us is the opportunity and imperative for a thorough cultural transformation—what eco-philosopher Joanna Macy calls the Great Turning, the transition from an egocentric "Industrial Growth Society" to a soulcentric "Life-sustaining Society," or what economist David Korten in *The Great Turning* calls the transition "from Empire to Earth Community." The cultural historian Thomas Berry refers to this vital endeavor as the Great Work of our time. It is every person's responsibility and privilege to contribute to this metamorphosis. Transformational. (p. 3)

As I transition from an egocentric phase to a soulcentric way of being I am accepting my responsibility and honouring my privilege to be a part of something greater than me—the Earth's dream for itself. This is a space and place where I can live out my values more fully and where I can experience becoming. I have always known instinctively that being in nature is essential for my soul—my essence—but it is only now that I recognize the damage I have done to myself and

my world by ignoring this and/or discounting the significance. I agree with Plotkin (2008) who claims:

Soul has been demoted to a new-age spiritual fantasy or a missionary's booty, and nature has been treated, at best, as a postcard or a vacation backdrop or, more commonly, as a hardware store or refuse heap. Too many of us lack intimacy with the natural world and with our souls, and consequently we are doing untold damage to both. (p. 6)

I realize that I need to embrace the natural world fully to awaken an intimate relationship that laid dormant for far too long. O'Donohue (2004b) refers to this experience as "clay returning to clay" (p. 17) and notes that it is quite common to forget bodied experiences and the fact that we belong to the earth. Simply thinking about the return to clay makes me feel both fearful and hopeful. The natural world, just like human nature, is full of contradictions, paradoxes, uncertainty, and unpredictability as well as patterns, cycles, complex interconnectedness, and rhythms and as I step into the discomfort of this unknown or long forgotten territory I know I will feel extremely vulnerable but I also recognize that in this heightened state of awareness I am more attuned to my own human nature, to my wholeness. Nurturing this wholeness is how I will heal. In this fertile and wild land exists the potential to create opportunities for greater connection and a space and place to be love so that I can flourish in whatever environment I find myself immersed in as I unveil and embrace my future actions.

The journey excites me as well as intimidates me as I contemplate shedding and/or challenging much of what I have previously focused on (mostly intellectual and physical) and develop my spiritual and psychological self to reawaken my curiosity and imagination so that I can play my part in the intellectual revolution. Action researchers, and especially those who embrace a living theory approach to action research, are well suited to be instrumental in this endeavour and I invite you to find your own loving community, or to join ours, and to embrace the intellectual revolution in whatever way you are able at this point in your journey.

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