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Ease on Down the Road: From Diagnosis to Graduation and Beyond, An Auto-Ethnography

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Running Head: EASE ON DOWN THE ROAD

EASE ON DOWN THE ROAD: FROM DIAGNOSIS TO GRADUATION
AND BEYOND, AN AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHY

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PIM 70

A capstone paper submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for a Master of Arts in Social Justice in Intercultural Relations
at SIT Graduate Institute in Brattleboro, Vermont, USA.

August 14, 2016

Advisor: Mokhtar Bouba

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Student name : _____ Amber M. Alford _____

Date : _____ July 15, 2016 _____

DEDICATION

This paper is dedicated to my father, Samuel Edward Alford. He was an incredibly kind and loving soul. Leading by example and with compassion, he taught me the importance of overcoming challenges. Education was so important to him that even after undergoing a major operation to remove a large brain tumor he enrolled in and completed a college math course. He lived life to the fullest and died doing what he loved. I also dedicate this paper to my mother, who instilled in me a love and hunger to learn. She continues to inspire me by her dedication to helping those in need and always challenging personal and societal limitations.

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I would like to thank all the people who turned me down or passed me up, forcing me to follow a different path than I had planned for myself. To all the people who supported me and believed in me despite my constantly changing my mind and direction: my parents, Samuel Alford and April Jolimay, who showed me unconditional love, taught me service and compassion, and inspired me to change the world; Duane Jolimay who took on the responsibility of raising me and my sisters when our father passed away and gave me the money to complete my studies when my aid ran out and the banks denied me; my advisors who challenged me and didn't give up when I continually dropped off the face of the planet during this process; professors Ryland White, Charlie Curry-Smithson, Janaki Natarajan, and Karen Blanchard who made a strong impact; my friends who continued to ask about my progress towards my degree for five long years; my aunts, uncles, and cousins who housed, fed, and encouraged me, expecting nothing in return; My internship supervisor and later, friend; the crew at Kleverdog Coworking; and my fellow students at SIT. Most of all, I would like to thank Chris Ashford for believing in me and making it possible for me to finish this long journey. There are so many people who have helped mold and shape me in this process, if I didn't specifically name you I am sorry, it doesn't mean you are any less important to me. I could go on for the entire page limit naming people who made it possible for me to complete my degree.

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List of Abbreviations

ADA: Americans with Disabilities Act

AIDS: Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome

CPS: Child Protective Services

DNA: Deoxyribonucleic Acid

eTAG: Empowerment through Art and Graffiti

IEP: Individualized Education Program

IT: Information Technologies

LMS: Learning Management System

PI: Practitioner Inquiry

PSAT: Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test

RP: Reflective Phase

RPQ: Reflective Practice Question

OCR: Optical Character Reader

OER: Open Educational Resources

SARS: Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome

SI: Social Identity

SIT: School for International Training

SSDI: Social Security Disability Insurance

TP-SJIR: Theory and Practice of Social Justice in Intercultural Relations

UCLA: University of California, Los Angeles

Abstract

This study was envisioned following a personal acknowledgement of perceived suppression of the author's "unorthodox" approach to the research design process resulting in the desire to explore the role of the researcher's experience in research design and ultimately in higher education. The author began feeling lost and overwhelmed in the pursuit of her Master of Arts degree. She felt that her particular values and methodology were not being validated or supported. Through the use of narrative, the author analyzes her own experience navigating higher education as one of the first in her entire family to do so, with the added challenge of a mental health diagnosis. Follow along as the author takes you on a journey to the past in order to understand how the challenges she faced can lead to changes in the way mental health is perceived in higher education.

Preface

Playing in the sandbox under the grapefruit tree in my backyard, I spit in the dirt creating a fresh mud salve to cover the many bug bites on my arms and legs. Later in the house, my father cleaned the bumps with rubbing alcohol which, "would sting," he warned, but would also take away the itching. These were the years before pesticides intended to "improve" agriculture killed the mosquitoes and what seemed to be every other bug in California, before we really explored the dangers of these chemicals and their harm to the environment, before my father and many others in my small, rural town died of cancer. If only I could go back to those days when the biggest concern in my life was a flying, blood-sucking creature with six legs. Since then, people have had to survive cancer clusters, AIDS, cult related mass suicides, global warming, rolling blackouts, the West Nile virus, SARS, Swine Flu, the 9/11 attacks, multiple wars, gas shortages, terrorism, and genocide.



Figure 1

Despite the alternative atmosphere at SIT, students are for the most part expected to “toe the line.” Some just did what they were told, and rarely questioned. When we questioned, our degree was eliminated and the administrators involved us even less.

Growing up, the messages I received from society went something like this: go to school, chose a major, graduate, get a job in your field, devote your life to that company, retire, travel, and then you die; and at some point in the midst of all that get married and have children. Then one must raise their children to go to school, graduate, get a job, retire, etc. My experiences and learning have followed more of a spiral, where each action has a direct or indirect action that leads in another path and back to the start, picking up elements and changing direction as it goes.

An interest in the performing arts led me to animal training. I applied to a world renowned program, but was placed on the waiting list. So, I decided to start my university studies where I studied animal behavior, which led me to choose to major in psychology. Psychology led me to human behavior, which led me to counseling adolescents. Seeing abuse while working in the field, I decided to go back to school for my masters degree studying social justice at SIT Graduate Institute. My experiences at SIT led to an interest in education for social justice, which led me back to animals and a desire to work in education, attempting to bridge the divide among groups and towards a better future for all living beings.

After my first practicum was cut short, I packed my luggage and moved to Oaxaca, Oaxaca, México. I did not know how long I would be there so I booked a one way flight. My logic at the time was that, while I looked for a second practicum site, I might as well work on improving my limited Spanish language skills, for the language requirement of the program. I ended up renting an apartment for two months then flew back to the United States to help my

sister with her first child, my niece. My work with street artists in Mexico led to an interest in art for social justice. My connections in Mexico led me to my second practicum site at a liberal arts college in Southern California.



Figure 2

As part of my second practicum, I organized an event around street art and activism. Students and guests were encouraged to express visually the issues in society that were important to them. One of the participants painted a picture of a man holding a sign reading, "Animal Liberation Now!" At the time I didn't think much of it, except to notice that it stood out. On returning to the United States, I was hired for two positions assisting adults with mental illness. There I began to reexamine my life and plan my next career move. I was tired of having jobs, I wanted a career that married all of my interests and passions.



Figure 3

Introduction

“Pick your left foot up when your right foot's down. Come on legs keep movin'.
Don't you lose no ground. You just keep on keepin' on the road that you choose.
Don't you give up walkin' 'cause you gave up shoes, no. Ease on down the road.
Come on ease on down the road. Don't you carry nothing that might be a load.
Come on ease on down the road.”

-Lyrics from “Ease on Down the Road” from *The Wiz*

In 2005, I was diagnosed with a mood disorder. This did not come as a shock. I first studied psychology my junior year of high school when I was, unbeknownst to me, in the midst of a major depressive episode. Like many psychology professionals, I have a family history of mental illness, and the desire to understand what was happening to me and my loved ones drew me to the field. The brain is an amazing organ. I wanted to know how it worked. I also wanted to know how to “fix” myself, because I felt broken. Like the rest of my family, I tried to hide the brokenness and blend into my surroundings. It wasn't until my junior year in college when I sought professional help for the first time.

Despite statistics showing that about a fourth of the American adult population has some form of mental illness, there remains a strong stigma against mental illness. Only a few generations ago, people with mental illness were placed in institutions and all but forgotten. Now, those like myself are integrated into the general population. The topic of mental illness is rarely talked about except in the event a tragedy occurs, like a mass shooting and when mothers murder their child(ren), or as the butt of a joke for entertainment in movies, music, and television as illustrated by Davis (in Adams, 2010) stating that disability in general, which includes mental illness, is romanticized or pathologized by the media (Adams, 2010, p. 482).

Luckily, treatment and understanding of mental illness has come a long way. Now that we can live a normal life, we expect to be able to do so, but the challenges are still present and the support and treatment options do not always exist. Careers. Partners. Children. These are things we want for ourselves, just like everyone else. Since becoming an adult, I have had to work hard to be able to feel worthy of these dreams.

The biggest struggle has been with my education. As a child, I was a very bright and motivated student; my identity was strongly linked to my intelligence and academic performance. As my illness developed, my cognitive abilities faltered and for the first time in my life, I was not only struggling, but failing. I couldn't get up in the morning to make it to class. If I made it there, I couldn't focus on the professor during lectures. Every aspect of my life became fractured and scattered. The diseased part of me wanted to give up, to drop out, even to cease to live, but my real, true self wanted to rise to the occasion.

This capstone is the story of my journey.

This paper seeks to explore the following question. "How can institutes of higher education in the US support students' mental health and wellbeing during their enrollment and encourage the success of students in a manner which is inclusive?" The author will be using examples from her life and experiences during the on-campus and Reflective Phase (RP) of her degree work to address the issues students with mental and psychological disorders face while attending post-secondary schools in an auto-ethnographic narrative study of mental illness in higher education.

I had intended to write a capstone related to my practicum, but along the way, I realized that the journey to my capstone was a more profound story. Much like Dorothy Gale¹ and her friends' journey to the Emerald City (see Footnote 1), I have discovered that my path to obtaining my Master of Arts Degree has been the most valuable lesson. After completing this part of my journey, I, like Dorothy, the Scarecrow, the Tin Man, and the Cowardly Lion, will present myself to the leaders of the institution asking for what they have promised to give me, only to realize I already have that which I seek. I can only be given the acknowledgement of and recognition for my achievements (See Footnote 1).

I chose to tell my story to bring attention to the fact that there is still a long way to go in providing assistance for students with disabilities related to psychological disorders, which are mostly unseen and under-acknowledged disabilities.

Literature Review

In this section I will explore a wider variety of literature regarding the prevalence of mental illness in higher education and the obstacles students with mental health diagnoses or symptoms of mental illness face during the typical college years. One fourth of the adult American population is suffering from a mental illness. Mowbray et al (2006) found in a meta-analysis that “approximately 12–18% of students on college campuses have a diagnosable mental illness.” With a growing rate of students attending college and the rise of the prevalence of mental illness, there is a greater need to address how to assist students in seeking help for psychological symptoms and disorders (Mowbray et al, 2006).

¹ Dorothy Gale is the heroine of the famed children's books and political allegory, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* by L. Frank Baum, 1900, originally published by the George M. Hill Company in Chicago. Though *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* was written as a political allegory about American currency, I feel it can also serve as a wonderful analogy to illustrate the struggle to overcome adversity in my life and in the pursuit of higher education.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Rehabilitation for Persons with Disability Act require that colleges and university make accommodations for those with disabilities including those with mental and psychological disorders (Mowbray et al, 2006). Of those who qualify under the two acts, about 8-9 % of students benefiting from disability services have mental, psychological, emotional disorders. (Mowbray et al, 2006). However, the burden of identifying need and seeking assistance lies solely with the adult student (Mowbray et al, 2006). According to AUCC and McGivern as cited in Mowbray et al (2006), “Students with mental illnesses often do not disclose their disability or seek out services due to fear of stigma, inequitable treatment, or embarrassment.”

A study of 2,785 students from large universities across the country conducted by Eisenberg et al (2007) found that “[of] students with positive screens for depression or anxiety, the proportion who did not receive any services ranged from 37% to 84%, depending on the disorder.” In addition, Eisenberg et al (2007) determined that the “[p]redictors of not receiving services included a lack of perceived need, being unaware of services or insurance coverage, skepticism about treatment effectiveness, low socioeconomic background, and being Asian or Pacific Islander.” Results from another study (Yorgason, Linville, & Zitzman, 2008) found that university students were prevented from seeking help mostly due to lack of time and knowledge of services. The next most frequent reason preventing people was no reason; they simply would not seek help if they were experiencing mental distress. Yorgason, Linville, and Zitzman (2008) concluded that this was due to stigma about mental health care in general.

According to Ben-Zeev, Young, and Corrigan (2010), there are three types of stigma a student must overcome in order to seek help for a mental illness: societal, self, and label

avoidance. In contrast, Eisenberg et al (2009) concluded that only self-stigma and not that of parents or peers prevented help seeking. Eisenberg et al (2009) also found that the severity of the mental illness and the stereotype of being dangerous had a positive relationship to seeking help from a professional, while if the person was perceived to be weak and not ill they would be more likely to recommend informal help from a self-help book or friend.

The best method found so far for removing stigma has been found to be contact with people who have a mental illness. This can be scary for those with a mental illness because they must first “out” themselves, overcome their own internalized stigma and risk the loss of friends and harassment from others. Ways in which one can lower the barriers to help seeking due to stigma and other reasons are found through education, awareness campaigns, and training of post-secondary school staff in recognizing early signs and how to help a student in crisis (Mowbray et al, 2006).

Too few professionals in post-secondary education are thinking holistically to determine how to best serve students. In the past and to some extent still, colleges and universities pass off students with mental health concerns to the larger community, feeling that providing for mental health services is not the responsibility of the school and is unrelated to education (Mowbray et al, 2006). Some institutions do not provide mental health services because they feel that providing care will draw a large number of students with mental and psychological disabilities, which they do not want (Mowbray et al, 2006). Similar to mental health services in the community, services are often given to “acute and/or less severe mental health problems, and those with serious mental illnesses were excluded, forced to find their own care, or relegated to other sectors, such as welfare or criminal justice systems.” (Mowbray et al, 2006)

Blacklock et al as cited in Mowbray et al (2006) points out that students may be required to visit multiple departments to receive the care they need. Blacklock et al as cited in Mowbray et al (2006) goes on to suggest that “[w]hile multiple entry points into the campus mental health system may be advantageous, the lack of coordination can create serious confusion in the minds of students.” These students are already experiencing what can be for any student a confusing and stressful time.

Primary and secondary schools are required by law to create Individualized Educational Programs (IEPs) for students with disabilities, which is legislated by the Americans with Disabilities Act, however post-secondary schools fall under the Rehabilitation for Persons with Disability Act which does not require students to tell of their disability or for the school to test for it. Unlike in primary and secondary school, professors do not have to modify curriculum, but must make accommodations if the student seeks help (Samuels, 2009). Again the responsibility lies with the student.

The issue goes so much further than knowing you need help and seeking the help needed. The research paints a grim picture of the current state of colleges’ and universities’ willingness and ability to provide the care needed once students overcome stigma and choose to seek help. Mowbray et al (2006) lays out a very detailed plan on how post-secondary schools can and should help students, from awareness raising and education to treatment and academic accommodations. The main takeaway is that early intervention is key to success, followed by the proper infrastructure and funding needed to address mental health concerns of the student population. Clearly defined collaboration is needed by academic institutions and mental health programs to best benefit recipients. (Mowbray et al, 2006).

Research/Practitioner Inquiry Design

How does a disabled-postmodern-feminist-constructionist student researcher select design methodology? This was *the* question for me as a researcher who identifies as such. I wrestled so much with this question, that I even proposed to research social justice in social science research, but I soon spiraled into a seemingly never ending pit of “what’s the point?” meta nonsense.

It is important for me to not only discuss problems I see, but to also help find a solution for solve the problems, therefore I chose to use an emancipatory/critical approach. Robson (2002) discusses a realist approach as a solution to problems in previous research paradigms. This approach is equated to “gunpowder” (p. 29), where research acts as a catalyst of change (Robson, 2002, pp. 27-28).

For this paper, I attempted to create a narrative qualitative study that explores my primary question, following the example of emancipatory, descriptive research. According to Robson (2002), emancipatory research purports “to create opportunities and the will to engage in social action.” A descriptive study explores the thoughts and feelings around the focus. If knowledge of the topic is enough for the researcher, the research would instead chose an exploratory approach (Robson, 2002, pp. 60-61). As researcher, I chose to employ a qualitative approach because it gives a voice to the stakeholders.

As stated in the literature review, the best method of reducing stigma is contact with those with mental illness. I could not ethically ask of others what I was not willing to do myself and therefore I chose myself as a subject. My research was twofold; I explored the challenges faced in low socioeconomic households to rise from poverty through education, and to also

discuss the additional barriers mental illness creates in the pursuit for higher education. My research aimed to paint a more complete picture of how I came to understand my role in society, particularly the microcosm of university and graduate school.

In auto-ethnographic research, the researcher is the subject. Creswell (2007) states that “in a narrative study, the researcher reflects more in *who* to sample,” and that the subject(s) “need to have stories to tell about their lived experiences.” A fellow student asked me during the RP phase if I thought anyone had sought professional help to cope with the stress of RP and if they, as a result, received psychiatric medication. Another student “outed” herself in class as having a mental illness. These two cases indicate that my experience was not a single incident. The secrecy and shame around struggling with a mental illness is something that needs to be explored and addressed. Too often we hear about mass shootings at schools like Columbine High School and Virginia Tech where the tragedy was ascribed to perpetrators with a mental illness. Recently, the massacre at the Orlando gay nightclub, deemed the worst mass shooting in American history, was also attributed to man who was suffering from delusions, like his father. If for these examples alone, this is an important issue to discuss and work toward solutions.

I dissected the SIT Facebook student group, and yammer student group forums/conversations, of which I was apart, from the start of my on-campus phase in the fall of 2010 through the RP phase ending June 2016. The yammer group and SIT Facebook groups will provide context and comparison for the author’s story. I also analyzed personal electronic correspondence between myself, students, faculty, and administrators as a starting point. Through analyzing these electronic documents, I have used narrative to expound upon themes found within. I also inspected these e-documents for the five elements of plot structure:

characters, setting, problem, actions, and resolution as utilized by Yussen Ozcan as cited in Creswell (2007).

The first step in research is to decide the focus. Sometimes the focus is decided for the researcher, but when the focus is left to the researcher starting can be paralyzing. Robson (2002) explains the process of finding a focus as such,

“Finding the focus involves identifying what it is you want to get information about. Until you have done this, further planning is impossible. If you are deciding for yourself, with few or no external constraints, this decision will be driven by what you are interested in and concerned about.” (p. 47)

This could not be more than true for myself. Through the process of completing my practicum and conducting my literature review, the issues I discovered I was most interested in and concerned about are animal welfare, mental illness, and human-animal interaction.

The next step is developing the research question. Some of the considerations a researcher must consider are knowing the subject matter, choosing a field of study, “avoiding the pitfalls,” and the revision process where the researcher must “cut it down to size” (Robson, 2002, 56-61). I did not feel like I sufficiently knew anything, except my own experiences. My experience was interdisciplinary and therefore so was my topic. I was interested in exploring my focus through the lenses of psychology, anthropology, animal welfare, disability studies, and social justice.

Instead of following my intuition, I tried to please my advisor and I found myself getting stuck over and over in areas other than my interests. My first advisor required me to submit a question for approval before I could sufficiently research a topic. The result was that once the

literature review began on the approved question, the research influenced the topic in another direction. I proposed a research focus that was too large and broad in scale. But how could I scale down enough for the research to be manageable and still be satisfied with the validity of the results? In the end I realized that the overall purpose of the capstone paper was to synthesize learning from courses and practicum, however logistics of RP got in the way. My ultimate purpose was to use my capstone paper to position myself for a better future. I was not seeing the forest for the trees.

Presentation and Analysis of Data

Narrative 1: Race, Class, and Hierarchy of the Isms

“I’m not a fucking racist!” I yelled as I stormed out of the classroom.

All semester I struggled to keep my composure in Social Identity (SI), one of the required foundational courses of my Master of Arts program. I bottled up the overly emotional outburst brewing within as I “examin[ed] the impact of societal power and privilege on [my] own social identity development.” According to the 2013-2014 SIT Course Catalog, the purpose of the course was to develop “[s]kills of inclusion,” however what often resulted was a series of confessions and attacks.

I managed to get as far as the administrative building before I could move no further. I was sobbing loudly, wheezing and gasping with every other breath. A woman I had never seen before walked by and asked me what was wrong. I could hardly breathe, yet I attempted to recount the events leading up to the moment in question.

Weeks before, the class was tasked with “analyzing the relationship between various dimensions of oppression (‘isms’)” (2013, SIT Course Catalogue). Presentations had

commenced. My group chose classism, while the presenters that day were discussing racism. In an attempt to spark meaningful discussion on the topic, the racism group facilitated an exercise using clear cups and M&Ms. Each time a statement the presenters made applied to you, you were supposed to place an M&M in the cup. The M&Ms were to represent privilege. During our discussion of reactions to the exercise, I raised my hand. I had a criticism of one of the statements, "I have never been followed around a store based on my appearance."

I have in fact been followed around a store on numerous occasions because of my appearance, which had nothing to do with race. The way we attend to our personal appearance often serves as a strong indicator to others who we are and where we come from.

I was born in a rural community in Central California to middle class parents with agrarian backgrounds. My father was a high school graduate working as a slaughterhouse mechanic and my mother, a preschool teacher. By the time I was four years old both of my parents were diagnosed with cancer and became unable to work due to symptoms of their illnesses and difficult treatments. Losing our livelihood caused the family to suddenly crash into the ranks of the lower class. Our family subsisted on Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) checks and help from family and friends. We fed ourselves with food from our garden, eggs from our chickens, and government issued food distributed at the local community center at regular intervals.

The first time I ever felt ashamed of my station in life was in first grade. I was around six years old. I had gone through a growth spurt and my pants were too short and riddled with holes, so my mom cut them into shorts. Our clothes often came from black garbage bags that had been donated to our church. When they tore, they were darned. If they were too small, they went to

my sister. I wore those cut off shorts every day as the weather got warmer. Noticing my worn out, ill fitting, sometimes homemade clothing one of my classmates asked, “Are you poor?”

When I got home that day I repeated the question to my mom, “Are we poor?” She responded by explaining that we had everything we needed and what we didn’t have, the Lord would provide. There were many people less fortunate than ourselves. She told stories of her childhood living in a foster home with fifteen kids and the hundred and fifty children that came and went during her thirteen years living there.

Her foster parents, whom she calls Mom and Dad, were cotton farmers from Oklahoma who brought their ten children, plus four of the neighbor’s, out to California to find work after the devastation of the dust bowl. Nothing went to waste in their household, they simply could not afford the luxury. My mother learned to sew and crochet, making many of her own clothes. Back then, raw materials were cheaper than store-bought finished products. A hole or tear in an item didn’t ruin the whole piece, it just needed some thread and or a patch. Clothes too worn to be worn, were used as patches for other clothing or rags for cleaning, and sometimes for material in quilts. My father knew how to sew too. He once made himself a hat and blanket out of old denim jeans.

I could appreciate the struggles of my parents’ families and those who came before, but this wasn’t the sixties and seventies when my mother grew up. It was the nineteen eighties and nineties, the Reagan-Bush years. Everything was based on what you had and what you wore. Buying stuff became an act of patriotism, and democracy was equated with Capitalism.²

² Troy, G.(2013). *Morning in America: How Ronald Reagan Invented the 1980's*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Soon kids started bullying me. They spread rumors about me and my family and excluded me from their games on the playground. Once popular, I was left alone. In my loneliness I befriended those who were also rejected, finding friendship in other outcasts.

It wasn't long before I starting defending my new friends who were also being bullied. I was constantly getting into physical and verbal altercations with my classmates and often came home with bruises, scrapes, and on many occasions a bloody nose. I remember very clearly walking up to another student, who was picking on my friend's brother, with my fist raised and ready to strike saying, "If you want to mess with him, you are going to have to deal with me first." I was fearless and angry.

Unlike most children who fought, I never seemed to get into trouble. In my small town bordering the countryside, everyone knew my parents had cancer and most people felt sorry for us. The exception was one woman in town who felt my parents' sickness made them unfit to raise my sisters and I and alerted Child Protective Services (CPS). I remember the preparation for the CPS visit when my mother coached us on what to say and what not to say. This incident lead to a number of precautions to hide parts of our identity from the outside world. It was more important than ever to blend in and appear to be like everyone else.

Not long after my father's death in the early 1990s, my mother remarried and we relocated to the San Francisco Bay Area, also known as the Silicon Valley, in the midst of the dot-com boom³. We transitioned from living under the poverty line to being just barely upper middle class. With the rapid advances in computer technology at the time, my step-father, an IT

³ "The dot-com boom refers to the speculative investment bubble that formed around Internet companies between 1995 and 2000. The soaring prices of Internet start-ups encouraged investors to pour more money into any company with a '.com' or an 'e-something' in its business plan."

What is the Dot-Com Boom? - Definition from Techopedia
<https://www.techopedia.com/definition/26175/dot-com-boom>

guy for an insurance rating company, soon found himself under-qualified for his position. While newer, younger employees rose to great heights those already in the fledgling industry were issued pink slips and left to evolve or die.

Again a shift in my family occurred. With the sell of our house in the Bay Area, we moved back to the Central Valley, purchased a small cherry orchard from my uncle to help him out and became a farming family once again, though it was short lived. The housing bubble was about to pop. My step-father was unemployed and my mother underemployed. Once I became an adult, I lost the income from the death benefit on my father's SSDI. I lived at home most of the time to save money and worked four jobs in order to pay my own expenses and put myself through school. In 2008 our family house was foreclosed on and my parents lost nearly everything.

I too became unemployed, for the first time since I started working at age 12, after providing testimony which prompted an investigation on abuse, neglect, and fraud within my company. Unable to find work during the recession, I decided it was best to return to school for my masters degree which I hoped would open up more opportunities. I sold my car and everything I had of monetary value to afford the cross-country plane ticket to Vermont and to cover the cost of shipping the few belongings I had left.

Walking onto the campus in Vermont I had bleach-blond dreadlocks, tattoos, stretched ears, facial piercings and thrift shop clothing. Having previously been discriminated against based on appearance, for looking poor and suspicious, I did not find the group's statement to be an accurate example of what they were trying to convey and said as much. The response of one of the presenters, was, "But you chose to look that way. We are born with skin color, which can

not be changed.” This led to a lively debate, read as attack, from various members of the class, all white, who aggressively insinuated that I was an ignorant racist.

As the discussion was getting out of hand, one of the professors took charge and stated, hoping to calm the class, “Everyone is racist, because it is systematically ingrained in us by culture from childhood, White or Black.”

This was almost too much to handle. Espousing the Quaker teachings of my youth, I had tried most of my life to escape the racist history of where I was born.

The foundational course of the social justice major, Theory and Practice of Social Justice in Intercultural Relations (TP-SJIR), taught that racism was created as a means of control by the elite and functioned to support classism by dividing and distracting in an elaborate sleight of hand, while Social Identity, also a core course, placed each in its own category. “Isms” were presented as a hierarchy, the most ugly and corrosive being racism, while some such as ableism and sizeism got only a mention.

I could identify with what we were learning in TP-SJIR because I had heard this propaganda and felt the tension, but it wasn't a matter of “Black” and “White”, but rather people were discriminated against due to religion and immigration status. Over and over we heard, “They are stealing our jobs.”

No matter how hard I tried, I could not escape this accusation of racism which I wanted no part of. Nell Painter, in her book *The History of White People*, defines racism as the belief that there are different races of people and the discrimination based on this perceived difference. I believe race is a social construct and that everyone is equal. How could I be likened to someone in a white supremacist group, who believes first of all that there are different races of people and

second that any one group is superior to another? When “White people” say “There is only one race, the human race,” critics of this view respond with accusations of dismissal and erasure of identity. This has always bothered me. People will never come together if we focus on the differences. I do not believe that the discussion of race and identity in this way is helpful. Discrimination, is discrimination, is discrimination. When people unite, this is when the true lasting change will happen.

I lost it.

Later that day I received a summons to speak with the professor after class, scheduled for the following day.

As I waited nervously on the wood and wool couch outside his office I could make out the emotion and volume of the two people inside, but not the specific dialogue. This professor had a reputation for bringing students to tears, which we all laughed about, then secretly and not so secretly cried about when it was our turn.

After pleasantries, my professor started with the question, “Why is it that every time racism is discussed in class you change the direction to classism?” I responded with some stories from childhood and concluded that from my experiences, in the highly diverse Northern California, people in authority and those who owned businesses were mostly or equally people of color. I repeated a phrase I had heard innumerable times, “The only color people see is green.” He had never heard this phrase, so I explained.

Green = Money. Nothing else matters.

My professor's response was a gruesome story of an older adult male who was beaten to death then sodomized with a broom postmortem for no other reason than he was "Black".

Looking me directly in the eyes he said, "Do you think your problems are worse than that?"

Cue the waterworks.

I sat in silence, my blood boiling. I was making a mental list. Physical and sexual abuse. Neglect. Abandonment. Bullying. Mental illness. Sexism. Ageism. Harassment.

Yes, that was unmistakably a terrible and evil thing that happened to that man, even so, the first thought that came to my mind was, "At least he died before he was raped, I have to live with the horrors of being raped everyday."

I finally spoke. "As bad as that? No. But I have experienced discrimination and oppression. I hardly feel being 'White' has privileged me much."

"Maybe if you tell the students your story in class, they will understand better where you are coming from," He continued.

In SI class, we discussed the phenomenon of the dominant culture pressuring the victim to explain their oppression, and this was the case with me as well. People see their own pain and want to dismiss everyone else's as not being real or as detrimental. There is no need to compare experiences in such a way, it only ends in hurt feelings and further separation.

I wasn't ready to tell my story then; though, the question posed to me that day lingered.

It has taken me six years to finish this paper.

Narrative 2: Class and Higher Education

Though neither of my parents finished their educational pursuits due to the immediacy of managing financial burdens, hard work and education were touted as the keys to escaping

poverty and offering us an easier life. We always made do and learned to become very resourceful, but it was the constant struggle my parents wanted us to avoid. The only way we could do this was through the pursuit of knowledge and acquisition of degrees of higher learning. My mother held an Associate of Arts degree in Early Childhood Development and my father had to leave college in the middle of his first semester to take care of his mother who was ill.

“You have to graduate college, it doesn’t matter from where, or in which subject,” became a sort of mantra. As long as we had goals and reached towards them, my parent’s were happy. As I walked across the stage on the lawn of my undergraduate university to accept my Bachelor of Arts diploma, reaching that highest point of accomplishment, to which I was one of the first in our entire family history to do, I wondered what was next. It was an unexplored frontier and I was entering into it, whatever it was, alone.

Having quit my job the last semester of college to make sure to finish the year off well, I was desperate for income. I quickly blew through my portion of my father’s life insurance benefit, and some of my sister’s. I asked my former boss at the video rental store if I could have my job back and he happily agreed. Also, I started sending out resumes. I answered an ad on Craigslist Los Angeles for a Behavioral Therapist and was hired shortly after. I had scored a real job using my degree. The pay wasn’t great but there was a lot of room for growth and I started training to be a case manager. However, life got in the way. I was terribly depressed after a broken engagement and needed to get out of Southern California. I cried all the time and everything reminded me of my former fiance and the details of our messy breakup. I called my best friend and after receiving her blessing moved across the country to Florida and in with her and her family.

The problems kept getting worse. I applied as a behavioral health technician at an inpatient mental health center and was offered the position, but they didn't want to pay me anywhere near what I was making in California and not enough to even live on as a sole income. To make matters worse, the hours would not allow for a second job, so I turned it down and looked elsewhere. Luckily I was still working for the video store and able to transfer to a store in Florida. As far as steady work in my field, I couldn't find any. This led to one bad job after another, until I was offered a job in my field that paid decent and sounded amazing. The only catch was that it was located in North Carolina. It didn't take long to decide, and I was on my way.

That job ended horribly, as well, referenced in the introduction. After a month working there I was injured on the job. Once taken off the mountain and placed in the office, I started noticing abuse, fraud, and other nefarious activities by the company, which I reported. My supervisors would not do anything to address my concerns, so I moved up the ladder. Each time I was dismissed, until I reached the director of the program. If you are thinking I finally had someone listen to me, you are gravely wrong. Instead, he threatened me and said if I did not like it there I should leave. And I did, but not before I reported what was happening there at the camp to the corporate office. As I was leaving, the company started an investigation of my claims and those of another coworker. In six months, the camp was closed and empty. I sued my company for treatment of the physical injuries sustained and unemployment benefits, both of which I was awarded. It was this experience of working at the "Therapeutic Camp" that caused me to want to study the systems that allowed this kind of abuse and oversight to happen, and to give me the

knowledge and training to find solutions to the problems I saw working in the field with some of the most vulnerable populations.

My title for the company was Residential Youth Counselor/Teacher. The teacher part played a minor role in the job, but a significant role in the direction of my career. One of my students, a 14 year old from rural Georgia asked me one day if elephants were real animals. He had never seen one in person or on television, besides depicted as a cartoon, therefore he believed they were mythical like the Unicorn.

But of course they are real! I have seen them many times in zoos and circuses and I have even ridden on the back of one at the San Diego Zoo in California. Despite the struggles of my childhood, I was starting to see I did not actually have it as bad as others.

One of the good things about my mother remarrying was moving to a more affluent part of California. The richer the community, the better the schools. Our high school biology lab worked with top of the line equipment, better than at my university in later years. We conducted labs analysing DNA and checking paternity using the same technology as adults working in the field. They were excellent at testing students for ability and giftedness and would cater the education to the student. I took advantage of every opportunity provided, but I also took it for granted that this was what education looked like. The requirements to graduate high school were the same as requirements for entry into a California state college.

My family stayed in the Bay Area through my senior year in high school, but my younger sister was not as lucky as my older sister and I were to have benefited from the resources available in the Silicon Valley. In Central Valley schools, the goal was merely to get students to graduate from high school. Most people would go on to work in factory, service, and farming

jobs or to join the military, if they had not already dropped out of school and joined the workforce. My younger sister joined the Army her senior year of high school after meeting with recruiters on her school campus. She knew that our family couldn't afford to pay for her to go to college, so she found her own solution in the military. For a five year active commitment she would benefit from the G.I. Bill⁴ and a \$38,000 sign on bonus.

By sophomore year my fellow classmates and I were all thinking about college. I had already taken my PSATs⁵ and was receiving informational material from colleges and universities. I especially liked the brochure from St. Andrew's in Scotland, where Britney Spears and Prince William later attended, however, I had already decided that I could not afford to go straight into university from high school. This was not a conversation I ever had with my parents in depth, I just knew. I researched my options and what seemed to make the most sense was to start at a two-year community college and transfer to a state university.

Junior year in high school I had my heart set on transferring to University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA). One of my classes offered an optional field trip to Los Angeles to go to the Museum of Tolerance and to tour the UCLA campus. It was so big and beautiful, I had to go there, but first community college locally.

My plans were coming together. I applied to a community college near my parents and registered for classes. But before I could start, I received a letter from the financial aid office. I did not qualify for any financial aid because according to my family tax records from the

⁴ "The term GI Bill refers to any Department of Veterans Affairs education benefit earned by members of Active Duty, Selected Reserve and National Guard Armed Forces and their families. The benefit is designed to help servicemembers and eligible veterans cover the costs associated with getting an education or training." www.military.com/education/gi-bill/learn-to-use-your-gi-bill.html

⁵ Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test, the practice test for the SATs an exam required by most four-year universities in the USA to be submitted with admission applications.

previous year, my parents made too much money. Between the time taxes were filed and I started school, so much had changed in my family. I spoke to the financial aid office and explained my situation. The SSDI payments from my father's death stopped when I was 18 years old, my step-father lost his job and was out of work, and my mother had no income of her own. I wrote a letter and provided proof as instructed and after careful review, my financial aid status was amended and I received 100% financial aid based on need. My older sister, two years ahead of me, was in a similar situation, but instead of challenging the decision like I had, she, with the help of our parents, paid the bill.

During community college I was hired as a part time caregiver and housecleaner for a good friend of the family. One of my responsibilities was to drive and accompany her 92 year old husband to his doctor's appointments. At one of those appointments, I noticed his doctor was a graduate of UCLA. I told him I was going to apply to transfer to UCLA for my third year of college. Without knowing anything about me, the doctor said, "It's very competitive. You won't get in." Instead of recognizing his comments were ignorant, I thought, "Well, he's a doctor, he went there, he would know." I didn't even apply. Instead I lowered my expectations and applied to three state universities. I was accepted to all of them, but that was to be expected. They were known to have very open acceptance policies, which is exactly why I chose to apply to those locations.

Narrative 3: The Development of Mental Illness

My junior year of college started like most, I imagine. My mom moved me into the "dorms," bought me bedding and toilet paper, and other little things I would need living on my

own for the first time, before kissing me goodbye and hoping for the best. I had transferred with a 3.75 on a 4.0 scale and was keeping up my grades. Often an overachiever, I was taking twice the normal full time load of courses, 25 units. I was determined to make it through university in four years and no more. Then I could be free to live my life however I wanted to live it.

One day in my astronomy class we were learning about the phases of the moon in a presentation in the planetarium where the course was held. Suddenly, the stars melted and fell from the domed ceiling to the floor. At first I thought I must have fallen asleep in the dark room. That was not the case. I was wide awake and feeling very strange and frightened.

Over the summer, before transferring schools, I was taking a walk in our cherry orchard and I heard a voice very distinct from my own telling me to hurt myself and others. The voice lasted for a week or two before disappearing. When it started I turned to the public library to check out books on schizophrenia. Then the voice went away without any harm and I nearly forgot about it, until the incident in the planetarium.

Two days after attending a college party, I was walking down the sidewalk to class and suddenly there were little rainbows floating around the trees along the path. I asked someone if they saw the rainbows too. They had no idea what I was talking about. On returning to my dorm that evening, I spoke to my roommates about my recent experiences. They all thought I must have been drugged. I had never even smoked a cigarette, much less tried any drugs. I had only had my first alcoholic beverage a couple of weeks before and I never had more than two drinks. Also, popular media had amply prepared me to avoid being drugged by men and I had been very careful not to put my drink down at parties or let it out of my sight.

That was the end of the visual hallucinations, but soon, I stopped sleeping. This was great at first because I had to complete my coursework and I also worked 35 hours a week at a video rental store, there was no time to sleep. A movie came out that year titled, *I'll Sleep When I'm Dead*, and that was exactly how I felt. I watched television or movies rented from my store until five or six o'clock in the morning when I finally fell asleep on the couch, before waking up at seven o'clock to go to class and start the next day.

Class. More class. Work. Homework. Television. Nap. Rinse, repeat. I rode the wave until I crashed. And I crashed hard.

I had difficulty concentrating, trouble making it to class on time or at all, low motivation, poor memory recall, among other barriers to productivity consistent with those discussed in the literature.⁶ Normally an A-student, I found myself very nearly failing all of my courses. This prompted me to seek help from the counseling center on campus and from individual teachers. I made arrangements to make up work and barely managed to pass all my courses, continuing on to earn a Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology.

Narrative 4: Mental Health and Higher Education

When a student says to a professor, "I tried to kill myself and I am now on medication," what should the professor do? This actually happened to me second semester junior year of college, I was the student. I had scheduled an appointment with a psychiatrist on campus, which ran over into a test for one of my courses. I asked the psychiatrist for a note to explain my tardiness. Normally my professor had a no tolerance policy regarding tests and lateness. As I

⁶ Mowbray et al (2006).

walked in the classroom halfway through the exam, I handed the pink paper with a written excuse to the professor and sat down. On the back of the note, I had written something to the effect of, "I'm sorry. Can we talk after class?" The professor called me out into the hall where I burst into tears. I told him I had attempted suicide and I was now on psychiatric medication. I do not know if his reaction was a universal human reaction or based on the fact that this was an upper division psychology course, so he understood more than most, but none the less, he allowed me to retake my exam on a later date and to make up work I had not turned in during the depressive episode that led to the attempt.

My university, and many others so I heard, had a policy on student suicide. If a student living in the dorms committed suicide during finals week, the deceased student's roommates would be granted an 'A' grade on all of their finals that semester. That first semester, my roommates and I joked about which of us would sacrifice themselves for the team. Not a funny joke, especially considering what happened the following year. Also, I learned that one of my roommates was diagnosed with manic-depressive disorder, so the probability of this actually happening to one of us was higher than in the average dormitory suite.

Because my professor had been so understanding, I decided to approach all of the professors whose courses I was failing. Each one had a similar response. As the medication took effect, I was able to work to meet the extended deadlines and extra credit work I was assigned. The disease was a terrible experience, but the support and understanding from the school was refreshing. I managed to pass all of my courses with at least the minimum required grade to be counted toward my units for graduation in my major.

I managed to graduate with a grade point average I could be proud of, but not quite what

I was hoping. My university studies were completed in four years as I had planned. I was ready to transition into the workforce and get on with my life as a fledgling adult. I finally got my educational “ducks in a row.” The next thing that would bring me back down to the despair of depression would be a relationship. I was not as good with managing relationships as I was my school and work.

When I decided to return to school, four years after my graduation, I had a feeling it would be a difficult transition, I just didn't realize how much. From the very beginning of my graduate program, I struggled.

During orientation there was only a brief mention that counseling services were available. A couple months into the semester, I was hired through work study to convert hard copies of documents into OCR compatible .pdf files and then to audio files. I worked for Disability Services which was under Counseling Services. As opposed to in my undergraduate studies, where I was basically anonymous while using counseling services, in order to seek help, I had to risk exposing my medical condition to an individual who was essentially my employer. My predicament caused more anxiety and delayed the process of seeking help, worsening my condition. I wanted to avoid getting to a level of crisis as experienced in my undergraduate studies so I took the risk and started seeing another staff member, a therapist, in the department. I spoke with my professors individually to make arrangements to complete late work.

During my final semester on campus, a fellow student “outed” herself during a class exercise and I reached out to her privately after class. I discovered that the student was receiving accommodations through Disability Services, which I had never thought of as a source of assistance for mental illness.

I wondered why counseling services had not informed me that this was an option. They were aware that my illness was affecting my ability to do my school work, as well as all other aspects of my life, yet the subject was never broached during my weekly sessions with the therapist.

As a result of going in and out of crisis management during my graduate program, I retained little information from lectures and reading. Because work was completed so late each semester, I could not reap the full benefit of class discussions. Long sleepless nights were needed to catch up with the class, further impairing my cognitive functioning. My physical health suffered and relationships newly formed were just as easily dissolved. Other students told me that this was what being an adult was about, that I just had to figure out how to get over it and deal.

Narrative 5: RP and Homelessness

In Practitioner Inquiry, I had envisioned a research project involving my cousins, aunts, uncles, and parents and how their views of education changed over the years. I wanted to ask them how they felt about school and how they viewed college. Was it seen as an achievable goal, or something out of reach? I started to work out the details, but then I realized the capstone was supposed to be based on the practicum, so I changed the topic of the proposal. I submitted a proposal for the evaluation and creation of a resource center in my parents' small town in California where my first practicum was to take place. As a course assignment, this proposal was a practice run; but I wanted to get some of the work done while I was still on campus, so I put more pressure on myself than needed.

As the on-campus phase came to a close, I had to find a way to make it home to California. I had no money. I was essentially stranded in Vermont with my belongings. Through a slight manipulation of the system I managed to receive some additional financial aid in order to fly home. I started an internship with my mother and attempted to work on my Reflective Practice at home. I lived with my sisters in a house across the street from our parents and “paid” for my lodging by doing house and yard work in exchange for a makeshift room in the dining room behind a sheet tacked to the wall.

My first practicum started and ended a few months later, I barely made it through the summer. My mother and I were not getting along and I advised myself out of a job. My RP work was put on hold until I could figure out my next move.

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (as cited in National Health Care, 2016, para. 2)

“An individual may be considered to be homeless if that person is ‘doubled up,’ a term that refers to a situation where individuals are unable to maintain their housing situation and are forced to stay with a series of friends and/or extended family members.”

That was me, “forced” to stay with a series of friends and family members. I took temporary jobs (e.g. cleaning a neighbor’s pool, painting a fence, petsitting) in order to pay for my medication, which was essential for my normal functioning. Eventually I could no longer afford my medication or for a doctor to manage it. I relapsed and fought with my parents constantly.

During the relapse I found myself in need of assistance yet again. I reached out through an email to Disability Services, only to discover that I did not qualify for services because I had not sought assistance from the proper department during my on-campus phase. It was too late for me to seek formal help through the institution and again I had to rely on the individual accommodations provided at the discretion of each individual professor.

I moved out of the house where my sisters lived and in with my cousin and her fiance. There I binge-watched entire tv series one after another. No work was actually getting done, too much was happening in my personal life. I had five years to complete the work, so what was the rush? Three months later, my cousin got married and I needed to find another place to stay. After the wedding I moved to Mexico temporarily to look for a second practicum and to learn Spanish. It was cheaper for me to find an apartment there, and my financial aid money could be stretched further.

Oaxaca was where the work finally started. I got in contact with my advisor and started checking in. I connected with my peer partner and commented on her work. Helping others is a great motivator and also a good distraction. As long as I was commenting on her work, I could pretend I was doing my own. I was trying, but I was putting less effort than I was portraying to others. I do not remember now what it was exactly that led me to my first RPQ, but I was looking at open educational resources (OER) and learning management systems (LMS) like the Moodle site we used to communicate with our professors and classmates, and to submit assignments. I also researched the history of street art and graffiti.

During the day I took Spanish lessons, hung out at the language school, and explored the city. I spent my evenings and nights cutting stencils and partying with a few different street art

collectivos, attending art gallery openings, house parties, and music performances around Oaxaca.

While I was there in Mexico, my sister had her first child. The baby had to be delivered two months premature for the health of my sister whose blood-pressure rose so high that she went blind for four hours. I wanted to be in Louisiana with her. Once my niece came home from the hospital over a month later, and before my money ran out, I purchased a one-way ticket back to the United States and temporarily moved in with my sister and brother-in-law to help take care of their infant daughter.

I worked very sporadically on my papers, mostly researching the history of graffiti in the United States through books I checked out with interlibrary loan. The rest of my time was spent taking turns caring for my niece and helping with the many animals they had at the time, one horse, two iguanas, one snake, and four dogs.

A couple months later, I helped them move across country to California and in with our parents. There was no room at the house for me so I moved in with another cousin and his wife. I took turns babysitting my cousins' children in exchange for room and board.

I still had no idea what I was going to do for a second practicum. My peer partner and greatest motivator finished her work and graduated. When she left the online forum, so did my motivation. I have always been much more externally motivated. After I graduated college, I didn't have anymore goals for myself. In fact, graduation wasn't even my goal, it was what my parents wanted for me. I had no idea what I wanted to do. I had so much trouble on campus, I just wanted to give up.

On returning to California's Central Valley, unemployment rates in the area were around 19%, among the highest in the country, and after struggling for two years I decided to move back down to Southern California and try my luck there. I was offered my internship at the liberal arts college, but it was unpaid. I stayed with my friend in Orange County commuting three to four hours each way by the public bus systems through two counties to get to my internship. After three months of commuting like this, I made a friend near downtown Los Angeles who let me sleep on her floor, until she and her roommates purchased a couch.

Eventually I started renting a room from a friend of a friend. This location cut my commute time on bus down by half, but I was still commuting two hours each way. By this time I was exhausted and getting really depressed. Between semesters, I eventually stopped leaving the apartment and stayed in my same clothes for a couple weeks before showering and changing. My roommate told me I needed to try to leave the house. It was getting cramped and claustrophobic in there.

To ease tension at home, I found a group online through a website called Meetup.com. I looked for coworking spaces⁷ offering free days and found one I liked. I approached the owners and asked if I could do a work exchange, work for them part-time in exchange for free use of the coworking space. They were happy with the arrangement and I was granted 24-hour access to the building and use of the wifi and other amenities, which included a free unlimited annual bus pass. I started spending the majority of my time there, going back to my apartment around three o'clock each morning to sleep. Being surrounded by productive, happy people and having a purpose got me out of my rut.

⁷ Coworking spaces, also called hot desks in the UK, are shared offices and workspaces for freelance workers and startup companies. They are places to work and network often providing social events for members.

I was feeling better. I researched my health care options in Los Angeles and found an income based program through the City of Los Angeles for my mental health and health care needs, which turned out to be free for me. I was back on my medication and regularly seeing a doctor just in time for the second semester of my internship.

However, when the internship was over, my roommate decided she didn't want to share her apartment any longer and I had to move back up to Northern California for a couple of months. I rented a storage unit in Los Angeles believing I would somehow make it back down and rode the train back to my parents' town, moving in with my cousin and his wife again. For two years, I lived out of my suitcase. I finally made it back in July. I slept on my friend's couch for a couple weeks until another one of her friends offered me a place to stay for three months. I found myself in another makeshift room, this time in the living room divided by some sheets hung from the ceiling. Before the agreed upon time was over, my roommate changed her mind and she told me to leave. Turns out, two people with diagnosed mood disorders should not live in such confined spaces. A friend from the coworking space let me stay in his bachelor dorm until I found a solution. My belongings went back into the storage unit.

Discussion

During all of the moving and traveling I did from 2010 to 2016, I lugged around a suitcase of books so I could do my RP work whenever I was able to get wifi. Sometimes when I was sleeping on the floor at a friend's house, I would take my laptop to the fast food restaurant across the street for coffee and free internet connection. During business hours, I would go to one of the many public libraries in Los Angeles and stay until closing about 8pm, on a "late" night. I went through two laptop batteries and three charging cables, before finally replacing my

“ancient” computer, which was being held together with vetwrap, a self-adhesive bandage wrap used in veterinary hospitals and more recently doctor’s offices.

That laptop was a kind of analogy of my life, I was barely surviving. I used temporary solutions to get by, until I could finally make a change that was more permanent. Over the years, I became dependant on financial aid and when the aid was cut off, I had to find a new solution. I started doing odd jobs again. I rented out my room and couch surfed around the county for free. I took any work I could get (e.g. listing items on ebay, mechanical turk work for mere pennies a job) and suddenly after relying on myself again, I had the confidence to apply to an actual job. When I purchased a new laptop with money I earned from this new job, and not from financial aid, it was symbolic of the process I took in making myself whole again.

The biggest hurdle in completing my work was in the political and philosophical influence of my first advisor, as discussed by Robson (2002, p. 74) particularly in the areas of topic or focus and design. My first advisor did not believe that topic was relevant or important for my degree study. Toward the end of our time working together I started to believe the tension became personal and obstacles arose due to the desire to no longer work together. He could not work within and around my chaos and I could not work within his structure nor in his timing.

Finding little successes after my financial aid ended gave me the strength to stand up for myself and ask for the things that I needed. To complete my transformation, I requested a new advisor. So much had happened over the five years of on-campus study and RP that I felt neither my advisor nor I could successfully overcome the negative experience together. I could sense he would never trust me and I wanted to move in a direction he was not willing to go. Ultimately getting connected with someone who supported my ideas, and encouraged me in a way that was

helpful, was essential to my success. Despite the challenge of working with our differences, I respect him greatly and thank him for holding me to the highest standard of evaluation.

In Narrative 1, I discussed a very powerful interaction with my professor and classmates regarding race, class, and disability. Davis (Adams, 2010) writes in an essay entitled, “Go to the Margins of the Class: Disability and Hate Crimes,” that “Intersectionality argues that individuals who fall into the intersection of two categories of oppression will, because of their membership in the weaker class, be sent to the margins of the stronger class” (p. 484). Being “White” was my “stronger class,” but with each part of my identity, I was pushed further and further away from the privileges seen by my dominant group membership in my own mind and in the mind of others.

Davis (pp. 482-484) talks about how oppression and discrimination based on disability is widely ignored, partially because society sees disability as a nuisance and the disabled person as a burden. The disabled person is more likely to be a victim of abuse and poor. These societal beliefs, compounded by media depiction of those with disabilities, has led to disability being, “the last significant area of discrimination that has not yet been resolved, at least on the judicial, cultural, and ethical levels, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries...” (Adams, 2010, p.483).

In the words of Davis (Adams, 2010), “But how do we determine, in any philosophical sense, that one kind of identity is more important than another?” (p. 483)⁸. Davis goes on to

⁸ “Historically although the United States was founded on a separation of church and state, religion has been seen as a “holy” category certainly higher in status than, for example, one’s sexual orientation; race, so embroiled in the nation’s history, must be more important than something like disability; and so on--the arguments are based more on ad hoc judgments about the viciousness of different kinds of prejudice than on any principle one can articulate. This seems to be the same unreflective influence that gives priority to race over gender or disability in the intersectionality argument” Adams, 2002, p.483).

comment that, “But while we may acknowledge we are racist, we barely know we are ableist.” Classmates saying that I just needed to “grow up and deal,” the laughs and snickers I get from observers of the outbursts common with my disorder, my advisor saying my problems couldn’t be worse than someone else’s simply because of me being “white”, are examples of microaggressions people with mental illness deal with on a regular basis.

According to Davis (Adams, 2010) “...victimizers are drawn to the double or triple categories of race, gender, and disability. Each of these categories enhances the opportunity for hate and the likelihood that the crime will go unnoticed, unreported, or disbelieved” (p. 484). From personal experience, the hate from within also increases and the victims are more likely to place themselves in situations where abuse happens, because it feels normal and you start to believe that you don’t deserve better.

In Narrative 2, I spoke about poverty and its effect on education. Poverty creates a barrier to attending school. The further one advances in school, the higher the monetary cost, yet parents from working class backgrounds encourage their children to go to college, believing it the answer to financial problems. Health problems of the student and/or the parents create further financial strain. Stress from all sources exacerbate mental health conditions.

Research shows that poverty and mental illness generally go hand in hand, “72% of people with disabilities are unemployed, and their income is half the national average. Among working-age adults with disabilities, the poverty rate is three times that of those without impairments” (Adams, 2002, p.484). My overarching question in this paper asked what can universities do to support students with mental illness, however, through my research I now feel that, by university, the changes may come too late.

Each time I reflected on how my mental illness affected my work and school, the conversation again came back to poverty and classism. It became difficult to separate the two areas of my identity. When I had money and resources available to treat my mental illness, I appeared and functioned as a “normal” adult. But without my medication and therapy, I was told I wasn’t working hard enough and I just needed to manage my time and priorities better.

As long as higher education and healthcare are for-profit industries in the United States of America, students and those who wish to be students will continue to have obstacles to being successful in education and life. Our individualistic society forces people to look for personal, short-term solutions and passes off the blame, responsibility of finding solutions, and reform to someone else. I believe that our society is designed for most people to fail, so that the few at the top can have the most success. So many times in my pursuit of education, success, and happiness, when I reached a roadblock or obstacle I could have very easily given up. Instead, each time I pushed back harder until I got what I wanted and felt I deserved.

I never wanted more than anyone else, just the same opportunities. I want to dream without limit and to live a life where anything is possible. Most of all, I want to love and be loved. By love, I mean acceptance, support, compassion, and respect. Not only do I want to succeed, but I want everyone else to celebrate mutual success with me. People call me naive or idealistic for believing in these values and devoting my life to their pursuit, but I do not care any more. I believe that people who stand in the way are afraid to see what I know can exist, and does exist outside of and in little pockets of the United States. The Social Justice in Intercultural Relations program helped me to open my eyes to this realization. After first seeing the ugliness of the world, we could then look at the beauty. Too many people are caught up on the “ugly” of

the world, like I was. Once I did the work to better myself and I was stable in my treatment for physical and mental health problems, I could finally see the love and support of those around me.

In the words of John Lennon, “All you need is love.”

Once you have love, the rest will follow.

This section is intentionally labelled “discussion,” as I do not want to impose my conclusions on you, the reader. Also, this is not intended to be a conclusion, but rather a beginning.

There are more stories I would like to tell. My vision for this research is to combine my experiences with those of others with visible and invisible disabilities. My desire is that: one, you the reader would be encouraged to tell your own story; two, I would like people’s personal experiences to be viewed as a valid form of knowledge in its own right; and three, I would like to see the individual stories collected and presented in some form of creative project. Once collected, this knowledge can be analysed on deeper levels.

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