Back to the Border Country: Autoethnography as Self-Guidance in Adult Education

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the transformative potential of autoethnography as a form of self-guidance within adult education. Drawing on the metaphor of border country as a liminal education space, I examine how narrative identity is shaped, disrupted and re-storied through lived experience. Living within constructivist and post-structural understandings of narrative identity, I use evocative autoethnography to explore my own stories of motherhood, autism advocacy, grief, faith, professional identity and belonging. A key outcome is the creation of a Heart-land Map, illustrating the movement between multiple life narratives and how life events can prompt shifts in narrative identity. The findings suggest that transformative learning can occur when individuals critically revisit their stories and seek to re-align their dominant narrative with experiences of authenticity, belonging and purpose. I hope that the article contributes to scholarship in adult education by positioning autoethnography not only as a qualitative method and methodology but as an ongoing instrument of reflexivity, narrative re-storying and self-guidance and as such provides a lens through which learners and practitioners can navigate periods of uncertainty, identity transition and personal transformation.

GRAPHICAL ABSTRACT



Introduction

This article is an autoethnographic revisiting of my research, exploring the potential of autoethnography as a form of self-guidance within adult education. Using the metaphors of the border country and changing track, this research was written as a story of my Stories, gathered from what I felt were key times and events in my life. As I gathered the stories and re-lived them in the telling, I explored, in the context of narrative identity, what they told me about myself, my life. Using a heartland-map graphic and reflective conversation I explored which story, when dominant, would be most authentic and helpful to me now.

Once upon a time…

I grew up in Donegal, a border county, in border country. We have an identity all our own up there – not really Northern, our nearest neighbours are in the six counties so that's Northern

Ireland, still Ulster but different, the bottom tip of the county connects to Connaught, also not us. So, we're not Northern, definitely not Southern, often feeling othered in the nationwide narrative, my origin story began in a place in and of itself. For me, leaving or arriving there means travelling a wild empty road, nothing to see for miles but bog and whin bushes… border country as I know it.

My call to the border country came in the middle of the Covid lockdown. The world, if not my mind, had slowed down. In my mind I had an image of switching tracks, the steel mechanism that changes the direction of a train track so that the train coming later can continue in a different direction. In seeking a new direction, exploring further study in my plan for a change of track, one evocative phrase stayed with me… "in the border country" (McCormack, 2014 p.167). Even without reading the article then the phrase spoke to me. Border country in this context (McCormack, 2014; Hunt & West, 2012) is the space in adult learning where learning and therapy converge, where ghosts from the past are reawakened, where identities are questioned and risked and where anxiety is a constant threat.

Where the "cracking up" of the old self may be a necessary step in the creative birth of the new, expanded awareness of self and selfhood.

Setting the scene

Throughout this article, readers will encounter extracts from some of the Stories shared in my research, these are shown in indented ***bold, italicised font***. Written in a metaphorical border country, a liminal space of reflection, opportunity and courage, I invite readers into the experience of these stories. I share my visual representation of narrative identity and how our dominant story might change track. The findings/discussion section of this article is literally just that, a reflective discussion - the questions asked and responses elicited while re-visiting and reflecting on my research.

Though, careerwise, somewhat late in my discovery of autoethnography as a research method, that in itself was transformative. Autoethnography provides readers with the opportunity to experience the story told by the researcher and to explore their lived experience, their place in society, their story as data. For me the value of autoethnography (Bochner & Ellis, 2016) is two-fold, in the necessary, and valued, authentic self-reflection of the writer and in the invitation to the reader to experience the narrative through another's perspective. Turning lived experience into critical knowledge, allowing both the researcher and the reader to question taken-for-granted assumptions and recognise possibilities for change.

When I began my research, my wandering into the border country, I was searching for my own authentic story. I found it, and the experience of that in self, and life and career has been

transformative, both in providing a new perspective on my own story and a roadmap to reflect on the stories of others. In inviting the reader into this metaphorical border country, I offer more than just my stories. I invite readers to cross over the into this territory and consider what might come into view when dominant stories are given the possibility to change track.

What to expect

If this research were a movie or a tv series and you were to watch the Teaser Trailer of what was to come, you'd see sweeping scenes of wild rugged country, think Montana or Pettigo (Donegal), you'd see sea-weed heavy, grey skied beaches with foamy waves and an open heartland where pathways can be found and chosen and changed. Then in the Promo Trailer, to invite you further into this journey through my Stories, you'd see clips from a TV show, a thunderstorm in The West Wing, flashbacks of an overwhelmed teacher who didn't feel trained or equipped for her role. A happy girl, smiling inside and out, on a solo trip to a Canada. A career(s) woman independent and becoming her job, a single girl waiting in both impatient and expectant faith. A mother howling in grief for the babies she carried but never held before burying the grief too so she can smile to keep going with her small, happy children. A warrior advocate, battle scarred and bloodied, skilled in trading in the dark currency of deficits and needs. A little girl in need of a diagnosis and a friend or a Saviour. A woman of faith who wears her Courage (literally) on her arm… and then you'd be invited to learn more, to experience it for yourself.

Enter the Warrior

I think he was about 10 months old the first time I wondered if something was wrong. I noticed he'd stopped saying the words he had previously said. He was also a little bit harder to figure out, the same things that settled the other kids didn't work on him. I couldn't say what I thought it was though…I knew what I thought it was, I literally couldn't say the words though…probably because saying it makes it more real. It was because of what it was, because it felt then that there were such negative connotations associated with autism – like if I named it, I'd open the door to stigma (Goffman, 1955) and he'd be different. It seemed that if I named it then the gorgeous wee boy would be replaced by the stereotype, and he would no longer, or ever, make eye contact or never give me a hug or say I love you. I spent about a year saying, "the A word", before I could "progress" to saying, "spectrum or ASD". Hearing someone say "autistic" was like piercing my heart…as if that meant he'd be a different wee boy, that he wouldn't love me or show his feelings. It also brought fear, huge fear, of the

unknown, of how I could or would be able to help him, of how the system "works" and what his life would be like.

This was the hardest thing I've ever done, putting aside all my fears and desire to put my head in the sand and hope any issues would go away, I had to push forward. There were phone calls, voicemails and phone calls, emails, and forms – and that was before we ever got an appointment for anything. I knew that early intervention was crucial in supporting children like the wee boy, but it seems that in real life, Ireland doesn't do early intervention. Waiting lists for assessments through our public health system are years long (explain the early part of early intervention to me again!). Then if you ever do make it to the top of that list and get an assessment, the waiting lists for actual therapies are even longer (tell me how intervention works again!!). We even have a statutory process in place to look after the needs of our children. Assessment of Need (AON) (Disability Act, 2005).

I often find myself wondering who thought "Special Needs" was the best phrase to use – yes, I'm sure it is better than whatever terms were used before and yes, we can of course say that all our children are special, wonderful kids – but that is nothing to do with anything. I find "special" in this context at best disingenuous and at worst insulting – not because of what is says about the children but if these children, their needs are special and this is how we treat them, what does it say about us as a society, as a country? Special in this content, in my experience, can mean optional extra, something outside of the norm, that we'll absolutely "strive" to get to when resources allow, if resources allow. When we started out on our journey towards therapies and assessment (with a view to getting a diagnosis), we knew that paying for private therapies was the only option…we'd have to take care of him ourselves, no one was coming to help.

On our journey we met almost every letter of the alphabet – PHN, AMO, SLT, OT, HSE, AON, AIM, NCSE, NDT, CDNT – it was overwhelming and I'm familiar with both the education and health sectors, with reports and systems and processes – what must this be like if you don't know how this works, or worse still expect that it works the way you'd expect.

We started our private speech and language and OT appointments, one appointment each week, in three out of every four weeks. There were more forms and waiting lists and letters. There was active worrying and uncertainty

and a never-ending feeling of needing to do more to help this wonderful wee boy. Selfishly, my most difficult thought was "will he ever say Mammy?"

When he was three and a half years old, in October 2019, after more phone calls, emails, after appeals and complaints and after more forms, we finally got an assessment which confirmed that the wee boy had autism. That was a very tough day. A friend said to me, "he hasn't changed, the wee boy, your wonderful wee boy who went into that assessment, is the same wee boy that came out, nothing has changed with him". Yes, nothing had changed with him, but he was different, and my greatest fear was what would that mean for him, for his life, what help would he need, what supports would he need and by now it was abundantly clear that in Ireland there is very little help and very few supports available. The advice is always "be That parent", "whoever shouts the loudest gets heard and gets help". I remember thinking "I don't want to be That parent, I want to be a normal (now I know to say typical) parent, busy with the day-to-day, not in a battle for sanity and survival with the System." It was exhausting. Working full time, coming home to a wee man who was happy to see me, would run to the door but then freeze and stand back because he didn't want to touch me or have me touch him. We had to keep our doors and windows constantly locked because he loved to run and climb and had no sense of danger at all, and if he was in difficulty couldn't call for help. If he was in pain, he couldn't say. I had an A4 sheet with the 40 words he could say – all nouns (verbs are trickier in expressive language). None were Mama.

Somewhere in this territory, along this road, I realised that autism wasn't scary, it was just different, and that the wee boy was still the wee boy. I also learned that I had a new role and a new story – a warrior. I clearly recall seeing the image one night as I stood by his bed. He was asleep after we'd read the same page of the same book about 30 times, and I said the word cucumber another 20 times because it made him laugh – emotional cause and effect, any connection is good. I stood over him and prayed for him. In my head I could see the image of a female African warrior, in tribal dress, with paint markings and jewellery on her upper arms, and a spear in her hand – a warrior –this was how or who I am now."

Position … A long time ago, in a paradigm far far away (30 years earlier)

My research tells the story of my journey into the border country (McCormack, 2014; Hunt & West, 2012). There are stories in how I got there, beginning when the world stopped in 2020.

In a non-chronological, out of sync wandering I look backwards to move forwards, from a positivist, 'psychology is science' background, to new ground. I use the metaphor of border country throughout to represent the territory accidentally discovered in this transformative time in education, a liminal space (McCormack, 2014), to me a place in-between, a place of pure possibility (Bochner & Ellis, 2016),

This journey of pure possibility is transformative precisely because my previous research had been from a positivist position, with a strong empiricist focus, where the researcher is there but set apart, controlled for and unseen.

Finding myself in a time in life and a place in society where it feels difficult to be seen and to be heard, I place significant value on my voice and agency and on the stories of others, local stories (Bochner, 2001) and on my stories.

Taking the ontological position that we form our identity through the narratives we tell ourselves throughout our lives, I agree with Grant and Zeeman (2012), that we all live storied lives where our stories are embodied and performative, formed from dialogue. Stories help us shape and make meaning from our past and present experiences, emotions, and behaviour.

I love stories. I see my life in stories and make sense of my life through my stories. I speak in stories, I tell stories to myself about myself, I'm interested in the stories of others, personally and professionally I get to know people through their stories.

I explored my lived experience and my stories, leaving behind (mostly) my positivist roots and working from a constructivist, post-structuralist position, exploring "the relationships between human beings", in this case me as participant researcher, "their worlds and their practices of making meanings through language". (Speedy, 2005, p.63)

How does that work …? (Methodology)

I use an autoethnographic methodology to explore narrative identity. Autoethnography is 'a form of self-narrative that places the author's lived experience within a social and cultural context' (Reed-Danahay, 2009, p.30). Far from my psychology roots, Speedy (2005, p.63) describes this writing as inquiry as an attempt to capture the readers' attention and engage them in conversation…assumes a reflexive, situated researcher… leaves much unsaid, uncertain, and incomplete. It is, at best, a balancing act between form and content… playful, often poetic, often experimental and often fictionalised…it tends towards distillation and description rather than explanation or analysis…it attempts to provide sufficient substance to contribute towards scholarship in the field as well as sufficient space to engage the reader's imagination.

Like the liminality of the border country, Bochner and Ellis (2016, p.66) position autoethnography in a space:

> between science and art; between epistemology and ontology; between facts and meaning, between experience and language; …between a commitment to document the reality of what actually happened and a desire to make readers feel that truth coursing through their blood and guts.

In their evocative autoethnographic approach they "…combine the systematic, 'scientific' methodologies of ethnography with the evocative, creative, and artistic elements and forms of storytelling." (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p67).

It was both enlightening and validating to see Bochner and Ellis (2016) outline how autoethnography can re-present lived experiences. They explain autoethnography as an orientation to research where writing (graph) is central. It involves the outward looking towards culture (ethno) lens and the inward reflection towards self, as vulnerable observer and they emphasise that a variety of forms and diverse styles can be used to express some form of concrete action.

Looking back now on my time in the border country, the stories I tell were the core of my thinking and the beating heart of everything I felt throughout. In exploring my stories, some might call it analysing my data, I spoke with myself often, asking and reframing questions. In the second part of this article, we can sit in on such a conversation, where I found myself vulnerable in revisiting stories, and yet consumed with the desire to have my stories told.

In my research I asked the question, "**What is it like to explore some of my key stories and identify those which if there were the dominant story would bring value and authenticity to my life, to my daily lived experience at this time in my life?"**

Narrative identity – What do stories do?

Stories entertain us, engage human emotions, simulate social experiences, they teach us how to be human (McAdams 2015) and narrative identity is formed by integrating social roles, values and attitudes, showing how the self from yesterday became the self of today and will become the same or different self of the future. (McAdams 2018). People use stories for social, directive or self, functions. *Socia*l in that people enjoy sharing stories with others and I find myself thinking of the importance of not just the telling but also of the listening (O'Neill, 2015) to stories. *Directive* in mining stories for guidance which could be helpful in the current situation. Or *Self* providing continuity and integration or a means of boosting morale - an interesting finding from Liao et al. (2018) showed that positive meaning making in self-

defining memories predicted enhanced self-esteem one year later. I found myself wondering, is this another way of suggesting that self-esteem is influenced when the dominant or preferred story is positively aligned with the individual, or the opposite, where there is dissonance between self-defining memories or stories and the individuals preferred or dominant story?

McLean, Pasupathi, and Pals (2007) suggest that narrative identity is built up gradually overtime as people tell stories of experience to and with others so that eventually:

> selves, create stories, which in turn create selves…through repeated interactions with others, stories about personal experiences are processed, edited, reinterpreted, retold and subjected to a range of social and discursive influences, as the story teller gradually developed a broader and more integrative narrative identity." (McAdams & McLean, 2013, p235).

I could identify with Anderson and Glass-Coffin (2016, p.66), talking about strong reflexivity and reflecting on "one's self and experience at different points in time", for example, drawing on different vignettes from diaries at different points in this life to explore an academic career or familial relationships (Humphreys, 2005; Guyas 2005). McAdams (2018, p. 361) described identity as a life story which had "…settings, scenes, characters, plots and themes, a big story, a personal myth (McAdams 1990) which situates a person in the world, integrates a life in time and provides meaning and purpose".

Narrowing the lens on narratives, others (e.g. Alea, 2018) look at specific scenes within a life story, focusing on high and low points, turning points with a view to examining emotional themes such as redemption and contamination. This resonated with me as I explore specific occurrences such as grief, career progression, motherhood, advocacy and faith within my own stories

Similarly, Dunlop (2018) talked about the changes over time in the key "landmarks", that is, events and stories identified by people when retelling their stories at different points in time. Concluding, he emphasised the importance of exploring the ways in which narrative identity is dynamic over time and across contexts. This resonated with me, because it aligns with the image I was creating of the heart-land "traffic-maps", the dominant narrative, changeable over time, like selecting one route over another before setting out or switching track midway through a journey.

In seeking to explain how narrative identity is formed, Dunlop (2018) suggests a hierarchical model where role-based stories contribute to a broader narrative about who we are, so I would hold my stories about me as an advocate mother and me as a guidance practitioner beside each

other and these would feed up to my broader narrative about who I am and how I came to be me. Smaller stories then position themselves in a hierarchy feeding up to their relevant "bigger" story. I agree with McAdams' (2018) thoughts that this model is perhaps neater than is realistic for mapping narrative identity and I agree with McAdams and Dunlop that smaller role-based stories do have a role to play in the bigger narrative scheme. McAdams suggests a more literacy/ short-story collection as an option using Strout's (2008) Pulitzer Prize winning collection *Olive Kitteridge* as an example – a collection of stories, connected but not adding up to a novel, with the story of the main character to some degree running through all the other stories, with recurring characters and themes and a distinct and emotive tone.

I loved this idea, because I took it as confirmation that the heart-land "traffic maps" analogy that I had been using to describe my stories in this research would be possible. In my exploration of my narrative identity, my storied life, my thinking is that we, as with Olive, have a broad landscape with many events and characters, not all in focus at once but all adding something somewhere to be brought into focus at their time or at an unexpected time. Some are key events, some are small events, that play a key role, high points, low points and turning points.

The route from one point to another can be "selected" as the dominant story, much like heart-land "traffic" maps shows several routes, some with tolls, some with delays, some with motorways and we can select which route to highlight as the route we are travelling. The setting, the border country hasn't changed but the dominant story can change.

As I examined my life stories, brought to mind and re-lived in the sharings, I realised that at any given time there was always a dominant story and that dominant story could switch over time. I created the Heartland Map (Gallagher Marron, 2024), not unlike a narrative google maps where the story track, like the journey route, can switch from one story to another.

Mapping Heart-land and story

This graphic representation of my life stories shows some of my stories represented by the various paths. At various times in my life, different stories have been the dominant story, the story from which I took my identity at that time, these are represented in different colours.

It was both surprising and interesting to me that when I created this graphic, the completed shape, to me, resembled an anatomical heart, with the various veins and arteries running through it. I am happy with this as a representation of my life Stories – my heart, my life is in my stories, is in my Stories.

As the dominant story changes, the track switches, a different colour story now becomes the dominant story. The landscape of the heart-land is scattered with events, major, minor, big or small, and any one or a combination can cause the dominant story to switch.

I had an epiphany, a transformative realisation. I could not always (or ever) predict or control when a dominant story would change track but now, I was aware of the process, and I did have to power to switch back or to change the dominant story track. I don't have control over the circumstances, events, environments but for me the power is in the story I tell about myself and the dominant track I'm on.

How does the track switch?

Significant events, happy or difficult, big or seemingly small, can force the dominant story to jump to another track – grief, trauma, marriage, disability advocacy, powerlessness, lack of voice or agency. Equally daily life can lead to a gradual shift from one story to another, often unnoticed until you realise that the scenery is this territory has changed and the dominant story is no longer what it was.

Re-Storying – Mapping the Heart-land



These are a visual representation of how I think of my storied life.

Each pathway is a story, events, experiences, education or anything that has influence on me has the potential to switch the track of my story to another track.



Each different colour represents a different dominant story. Sometimes the dominant story will work for me. Other times the dominant story doesn't align with an identity that feels authentic or helpful for me.





In the image below you can see two colours. Where the dominant story had been the yellow track, then switched to the blue tracks over time.

When I realised that this was not a helpful dominant story or identity for me, I could, over the course of this research, **Re-Story** my narrative identity and switch back to the yellow track. The previous blue is still visible beneath – the experience of the previous Story (track) has not disappeared.





The Little Man's Mam

That's when it happened, I switched tracks. This wasn't the time for grief, to show it, or to feel it, this was the time to mind this little man and later today break the news to his sisters and try to help them understand how something so sad and incomprehensible to minds and hearts of 5-year-olds, 4-year-olds and 3-year-olds could be happening in their family. Later my husband told me that after they left me at the hospital the little man didn't settle all day until it was time for them all to come back to get me. He spent the next two weeks sitting on the other pillow in my bed, watching over me. And I spent the time, loving and minding and reassuring him that I was ok, and he was safe, and everything would be ok. My husband bought another tree and planted it with the others in our garden…we have five trees now…

In my need to parent and take care of my little people, I didn't realise that I'd missed the road to feeling the grief. I just felt shock, disbelief – how was I this person? How was this my Story? How was this happening to me, why? This can't be The plan. Put it all away and don't look at it, that hole is so black and so deep, if I look it in the eye, I may be swallowed whole. I may disappear into it, never to be seen again…is it already too late?… I was shaken to my core, and I was angry with Him.

Six babies

From October 2012 to February 2015 we'd lose five babies, without any medical confirmation, but as their mum I know, three were boys and two were girls. The girls stayed with me a very short time, the boys a little longer, they really tried, but all went "back to Heaven" were the words we used to explain it to the three little people here. With each trip to the hospital, with our visits to Glasnevin, when I'd look at the photo of the tiny white coffin that fit in the palm of my hand, with each "failure" as I saw it, (Quinn, 2022), I turned further from Him. I was so hurt and so angry. I've seen Him work; I know what He can do. He knows I know, and yet my babies died… was it because I had already wandered away from Him, I know He isn't vengeful, He doesn't keep score but if I had prayed more might at least one of my babies have stayed?

This was the darkest time. I've never heard cries, howls, noise like that before – I've heard it said, that the sound from a mother who has lost a child is a haunting, unnatural sound and that makes perfect sense to me – losing a child is an unnatural thing, of course the sound of that pain is unnatural. When I did

let those sounds out, dared to look towards the black hole where the grief monster dwelled, it was usually in my car. It was when I was alone and in-between places, again on the edge, the border country where grief and everyday life skirted around each other on the way to somewhere else. Mostly though, I tried to shut it all away. I thought my kiddies needed me to be or seem happy and honestly if I looked directly at that big black dark hole, the grief monster would devour me, and I would be gone.

It also seems that pushing grief down doesn't make it go away, it finds a way to be heard, it sends its co-workers anxiety and fear out in its place. I became so anxious about nothing and everything that I finally sought out someone to talk to. It helped to be heard, to tell this story in a place where I felt freer to fall apart….to share what I truly felt… I didn't like this path, didn't want this path, it felt sad and hopeless, and I felt abandoned, by Him and by me – the real me, the Happy Girl, she was no longer here.

"Might she ever come back?" my counsellor asked one summer evening.
I recall looking at the painting of the butterfly on the wall in the corner of the room…I was very familiar with that painting now.

"I don't think so." I said.

And I meant it, from where I sat that evening, it felt almost impossible that she could ever return. The happy, spiritual, joy filled Story would never be heard, never be told again."

Where do I belong & What is my Story?… (Findings)

What does it mean for you when the track changes?

That's the key to everything; the whole research question and the answer depends on what it shifts from and what it shifts to. I found that when the dominant story aligned with where or what felt authentic to me, then the journey was smooth.

What is authentic, how do you know?

I looked back and revisited where I felt belonging, not othering, not exclusion, not fitting-in, but true belonging… that's what is authentic to me.

What if you're on the wrong track?

I was on the wrong track, when I wandered into the border country, into this liminal educational space. I needed to switch track, literally and figuratively.

What does that mean?

I was so engulfed in the embodiment of the battle-bloodied, negative-by-necessity story of the warrior that I felt I'd lost my authentic self. There was a dissonance I initially wasn't aware of and then couldn't explain until I realised that my true language is positive, strength-based, faith-fueled, power-for-good and I'd lost sight of that. It was only when I revisited my stories, memories, dreams and images (Romanyshyn, 2007), that I realised I had completely lost sight of that track.

In my previous research, scholarly writing had a consistent format where data was examined and analysed and findings and further recommendations discussed. It is a reliable format, often considered the norm, the typical structure. Autoethnography, to me in many ways, is representative of many of the ways I am and feel different, it doesn't conform to what I had previously learned was the typical research format. As we say in neurodiversity acceptance and advocacy, different ways of being, different brains, different stories are all valid – different, not less. In reflexively analysing the data, as participant researcher, I asked and still ask many questions of myself.

So, were you analysing data or (re)living stories?

Both.

Reflecting on what was and wasn't shared with me, by me, I identified or re-lived key stories from my journey so far and found themes – liminality, a border country space for transformation was a familiar presence; positive outlook and self-belief; faith; educational experience where I felt ill-equipped and unskilled and education where I felt a significant sense of belonging and highly skilled; family and running through all other themes the sense of inclusion and belonging.

When you say belonging, what does that mean to you?

I once heard it said (Brown, 2019) that the opposite of belonging isn't exclusion, the opposite of belonging is "fitting-in" … a performative inclusion where we change or mask who we are to fit in to the "norm". In contrast, true, authentic belonging is a welcoming #ComeAsYouAre… where we are welcomed and accepted for who and how we are.

But what if who or how we authentically are doesn't serve our purpose?

All my years of advocacy for my son taught me that the master narrative of a strong education system, alongside societal care and provision for the weak, does not align with my local stories, my lived experience where systems and process come before people. This means, people must try to work the system, provide evidence of quantifiable need. In advocacy, resources and supports are acquired through a dark currency of deficits – focusing on positives and on strength can be harmful. Supports can be removed because it seems that they are no longer needed, when in fact the supports are what has led to the improvement. This trading system is the common currency in all things disability and special education, with no acknowledgement of those masking and that "fitting-in" or is it blending in, is not belonging.

But is it not progress if supports can be done without?

Imagine a child struggling in school and the teacher suspects the child is short-sighted. The teacher talks to the parent, the parent takes the child for an eye-test, and the child is given glasses. Now the child is thriving in school, his work has improved, he is happy because the glasses have allowed him to fully engage in what is happening.

Now imagine that the teacher or another professional working with the child suggests removing the glasses because "he's doing so well now, he can probably manage without them" … we'd never even suggest that because it is completely illogical. Yes in theory removing the accommodation can show "progress" as the support is no longer in use, this must mean progress has been made. The local story or lived experience will tell a different story - the accommodation is enabling the engagement. Yet whether because of lack of resources or lack of training or both, similar suggestions are frequently made to remove the accommodations given to neurodivergent children.

Only those who have lived experience of this know this though. The master narrative will talk of meeting the needs of all children, quote the number of additional staff and amount of additional funding provided but the local stories (Bochner, 2001) will tell another story. Autoethnography enables the sharing of these local stories, where readers can experience the lived experience of others, situated in the cultural context, and reflect on what that might tell them about their own stories and society.

To me the appeal of autoethnography is that it "..enables the detailed interrogation and critique of potentially or actually oppressive and repressive cultural institutions, norms, values, practices and logics", where in a broader, less personal, less reflexive form there is

the possibility that the same information could be "…overlooked …represented in benign, magnanimous, or positive terms in rationally nuanced master narratives". (Grant & Zeeman, 2012).

Our autoethnography "local stories" can be told in the context of our embodied, lived experience, also enabling reflective story telling in political, moral and ethical terms (Grant & Zeeman, 2012). I placed value on this because, in my experience, experts in name, (policy makers, managers, clinicians) trading in master narratives, have more power, voice, value, and currency than experts by experience (Reimer 1977 quoted in Grant and Zeeman, 2012), whether that be parents, practitioners on the front-line in client or student facing roles, or the individual do, because there is not always the means to have our individual stories heard. Autoethnography then is both a means to give voice to stories that otherwise may not be told, either to myself or to others, and a reflexive exercise in self-exploration and self-guidance.

Belonging

I look to the shore, my husband is playing with the youngest wee boy, he's reenacting Titanic at the edge of the water, even there the waves pack a punch. They see me and wave, they're proud of me…I just know.

I decide I'm getting out, but I have to get through the seaweed and part of me wants to stay out here…I like the challenge, I am proud of me too but it just keeps coming and won't stop. I can't see a break in the waves, a moment to catch my breath, a moment of peace and safety where a waves won't knock me over or send me under…so I head for the scary imagined danger of the seaweed. This time it is worse, it is clinging to my legs and around my feet and I can't step out of it, there is too much of it, and my heart is pounding, my throat is tightening, the seaweed is wrapped around my ankles too…there is no way to get out of it and I'm in the middle of it… I've left the kids in the waves and the others are on the shore and I must keep plodding through this and I'm scared, overwhelmingly, illogically scared. "I know I'm ok.. I know I'll be ok" I think, but nothing can calm the pounding heart and I start to stagger, my head and my chest moving faster than my tangled feet can keep up…

And then he has me "thank you" is all I say to the strongest, safest arms I know. He was there to catch me, he always is. He held me and I steadied myself, shook of the last of the shark infested seaweed and stepped out onto the sand. What surprised me most..? Part of me wanted to go back in…part of me enjoyed it… "what did you enjoy?"

> ***"The being brave, the trying and believing and doing" I remember her but this time she wasn't alone, now she has company, her people, they are there for her and they believe in her…they believe in me."***

First Things First

> ***"She told me to read about Esther in the Bible – her calling was to use her position of power to influence and help others (Genesis 12:2-3,7). I am amazed to hear the warrior Word come in prayer. All this time I have had a negative association with her, but she can do the Lord's work…with His Word as a Spirit-inspired sword (Ephesians 6:17) in every place where I find myself. She is a righteous, fierce and love filled Warrior, not angry or vengeful. Not a vigilante on a quest but a righteous, upright warrior on an inspired mission." (Personal Research Journal, January 2024).***

> ***I came home wearing my new, or more accurately new-found, courage on my sleeve, literally, one of the organisers spontaneously handing me his wristband, as I was leaving, it was red with just one word… Courage. Even though I was exhausted I smiled all the way home, even on the part where I missed the turn for Emerald Park and Google maps sent me on every little road it could find until I reached Dunshaughlin – it was an adventure. I took me about 2 hours to get home but really I was back on track long before that."***

In reflecting on your sharings and stories, which resonated with you most? Why?

That's a difficult question – it feels like being asked which of my children I like best. All are part of me, each with unique characteristics, joys and challenges and my life would not be the same without them. Some will feel more relevant at certain times as evidenced in the changing track in the Heartland Map. All have a place in this territory.

That said, in beginning this autoethnographic journey in the border country, the warrior story was first, and always most present -although a difficult presence. It is love-filled yet sad, she's losing the fight. The system will outlast her, will wear her down and what happens then, to her, to the wee boy, to the others she tries to help too?

Belonging – at the beach. She was doing it, as she does, modelling how to be brave, keeping going, wanting to, even when she couldn't but she wasn't alone and when she needed him, he caught her – the strongest safest arms. She forgets that she doesn't have to do it alone and I loved seeing her realise that he had her.

The Education stories – the teacher who felt overwhelmed and ill-prepared even after her training and the guidance practitioner both then and now, who found the educational experience transformative – she left that territory with new faith in herself and her abilities. She grew in the unknowing, as a "vulnerable" (Ellis, 2016) researcher and now she knows what to do. I think she'll have more stories to tell.

Revisiting the faith stories, old and new, was enlightening. All the stories where she felt she belonged, she was precious, she was herself. She was brave here, both in telling them and how she told them. The visceral grief as a mum, the anger and abandonment she felt alongside the ever present, be there for her children Mum she was. Then the rebirth of the warrior – a warrior for good, faith fuelled joy pounding in her heart.

So, what did you learn?

The call to the border country meant I was in the right place at the right time. Ellis (Holman Jones, Adams & Ellis, 2016) says that some colleagues would say autoethnography has enhanced if not saved their careers, perhaps even their lives. During my MEd, while working on this research, at a group supervision session I heard myself say "… doing this course is saving me."

Why did you say that?

In allowing myself to experience the unknowing, I discovered autoethnography. And autoethnography feels validating to me because it gives voice to lived experience and local stories often powerless and voiceless in the face of master narratives, metrics and policy.

"Just because you can't count it, doesn't mean it doesn't count?".

Exactly, I've experienced the autoethnographic work of others on topics too wide to list but including family stories (Rath, 2018), injury and recovery, (Culkin,2019), adoption (Conlon, 2019), sense-making (Trish, & Seko, 2017; Vicker, 2007) and many on parenting autistic or disabled children, usually (Zibricky, 2014; Britton,2013; Grassie, 2009) but not always (Clasquin-Johnson & Clasquin-Johnson, 2018) from the mother's perspective.

Galman (2011) and Chester (2003) both use autoethnographical research when exploring motherhood and career, and infertility, while also including a spiritual dimension to their work. With my enhanced awareness of my dominant story, the faith-fuelled, positive outlook, warrior for good, it was soothing to find a place to explore, do and live faith,

spirituality and advocacy in a scholarly realm. While nothing had changed everything had changed, transformed.

Autoethnography provides a space to belong and to give voice to my stories and my experience but most importantly to live my stories and to find clarity in both vulnerability and belonging. Thinking as a guidance practitioner as well as someone eager to continue learning, autoethnography to me is a means of self-guidance. It is a space and a way to do what I feel I need to do…share my local stories, advocate and still find my way to the story and the track that serves me best in all aspects of my life.

Does that mean you were lost and now are found? (Luke 15:32)
It means I am still wandering, to me life is wandering. I have a poster in my office, where I met students for guidance counselling appointments – it reads "Not all those who wander are lost" (J.R.R. Tolkien). That's what I mean, life can be wandering, sometimes there is a clear focus, sometimes an unseen or out of sight destination, sometimes and unexpected cul-de-sac or fork in the road. But now, I have a map.

I didn't think you could read maps…?
Ha Ha! You're right! I can't and I know why… because I like to feel my way around. Following directions doesn't work for me because I need to feel where I'm going, get a sense of the territory and work from there. In keeping with all things inclusive and universal design, the Heart-land Map works for this style of engagement. I can revisit my stories, feel where I've been and where I'm at and can re-direct or continue from there.

So how does it end? … (Conclusion)

The time in the border country, in adult education, in writing and research, autoethnographically exploring the blood and guts of some of the stories of my life, lead to a territory both overwhelmingly confusing and spectacularly empowering. There is power in the unknowing, in the sitting (or standing or dancing) and writing.

Taking time, even when there isn't time, to wander the border country, to seek and find, to walk in the unknowing, for me remembering to walk by faith and not by sight, uncovered reawakened passion and career focus, a new skillset or is it lifestyle in autoethnography.

In this research, I discovered the transformative power of autoethnography as a means of self-guidance. A constant-access, open-all-hours self-guidance checkpoint, where I can revisit,

refresh, reset or redirect. I created a map, a means of reflexive navigation so that even when I'm lost, I'm not. This is border country as I know it.

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