

# More than Artistry: The Integral Aspect of Autobiography

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## ABSTRACT

Autobiography has generally been recognized for its literary and artistic aspects, and as a result has been largely overlooked as an instructional method in adult and continuing education. This paper argues for a wider use of autobiography in adult and continuing education programs, proposing that autobiography actually encompasses not only the artistic and literary aspects of life writing, but also the theoretical and philosophical. Based on the autobiographical writings of adult learners collected over a decade of teaching, the author suggests that in the course of bringing these dimensions of their lives together, these writers further not only their understanding of themselves and their world, but also their commitment to educational practice, action, and change.

## RÉSUMÉ

En général, l'autobiographie est reconnue pour ses aspects littéraires et artistiques, et par conséquent est souvent ignorée comme méthode didactique en éducation permanente et en éducation aux adultes. Cet article maintient qu'on devrait utiliser plus souvent l'autobiographie dans des programmes en éducation permanente et aux adultes parce qu'elle inclut non seulement des aspects littéraires et artistiques de l'écriture personnelle, mais aussi des aspects théoriques et philosophiques. En se basant sur les écrits autobiographiques des apprenants adultes qui ont été rassemblés pendant une décennie d'enseignement, l'auteur nous suggère que tout en rassemblant ces dimensions de leurs vies, ces écrivains ont non seulement élargi leur compréhension de leur monde et d'eux-mêmes, mais aussi leur engagement à la pratique, l'action et le changement pédagogique.

## INTRODUCTION

Everyone has a story to tell, a misfortune to relate, a memoir to write. In writing a life story, the author imagines and then gathers onto the written pages the scattered pieces of a life. Imagination and literary expression appear to interact continually as writers shift from remembering to writing and from writing to remembering. This act of life writing entails both the artistry of imagination and the literature of the written word. Whereas life writing—autobiography—was limited in the past to more or less famous people, more recently it has come to be used by a more general, wider public as a means of personal development through life-review, self-reflection, and self-definition (Gornick, 2001). Some adult and continuing education educators have recognized its value as a tool to enhance literacy skills, while others have drawn on it to promote self-directedness and empowerment (Dominicé, 2000; Rossiter, 1999). Still, this important tool for promoting literacy, creative writing, and self-understanding has had a limited presence in most areas of education, as well as in other disciplines. And perhaps because autobiography has been generally assumed to serve only the literary and artistic domain, educators and professionals have overlooked the value and relevance of autobiography for their adult and continuing education programs.

In this paper I propose that autobiography, while it may be assumed to further only the aspect of personal self-knowledge, actually serves a broader purpose, indeed, so much as to merit inclusion in this issue, whose theme centres on the importance of continuing education's role in promoting a civil society. Autobiography, I suggest, encompasses not only artistic and literary dimensions, but also the scientific and philosophical. I consider these three related aspects—the artistic/personal, scientific/theoretical, and philosophical/moral—as they are revealed in the autobiographical writings of students in adult and continuing education. I suggest that in the course of bringing these dimensions of their life together, these writers further their own development, enlarge their understanding of self and the world, and reaffirm their commitment to practice, action, and change. In this way, autobiography can serve educational goals, not only personal, but also societal, which extend into improving professional practice and strengthening civic life and the public good. For this purpose I turn to the many autobiographies of my graduate and continuing education students in Canada, the United States, and Europe, which I have gathered for nearly a decade. Immersing myself in these narratives, I have been struck by the instances of recollecting, meaning making, self-awareness, and self-construction that are contained in their stories. Through the abundance of metaphors that these student writers draw upon to characterize events of their life, I recognize aspects of the artistic; in the instances of their reflection, analysis, and intentionality, I recognize the theoretical and the moral.

## AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND ADULT DEVELOPMENT

Since the 1950s scholarly interest in autobiography has grown within the field of literary theory, as well as in other disciplines (Gullestad, 1996). Among the literary theorists, Olney (1972, 1980) and Randall (1995) examined autobiography from the perspective of psychological development. Smith and Watson (1996) compiled edited collections of feminist literary analysis. In education, Witherell and Noddings (1991), Dominicé (2000), and Rossiter (1999) have examined story as a powerful tool in the work that teachers and adult learners do. And Josselson and Lieblich (1999) have advanced autobiography as a source for narrative research.

In autobiography, the writer's life is transformed into written text, in the course of which the author steps back and reflects on the pattern of her life, on the meaning of certain events and experiences, and on the possible larger story revealed. French autobiographer and historian of discourse Philippe Lejeune (1989) defined autobiography as "retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality" (p. 4). Through writing, the author elaborates and communicates a point of view of the self and of "how I became who I am" (p. 124). Lejeune suggested that writers of an autobiography enter into an "autobiographical pact," a contract whereby they commit to the task of coming to terms with their life (Eakin, 1999).

According to adult development theory, learning and development continue throughout life. A person never *is* but is always *becoming* his or her self. Development is directed toward greater inclusiveness, complexity, and coherence of personality (Mezirow, 1991). Jung (1954) described this process as "individuation," of becoming all that one is capable of becoming; Erikson (1980) called it "integrity," coming to terms with our life, a task that entails enlarging our perspective to encompass more than just our own history. Eakin (1999) observed that "autobiographies offer a precious record of the process of identity formation, of the ways in which individuals employ cultural models of identity and life story . . . to make sense of their experience" (p. 27).

Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio (1999) affirmed the important place of autobiography through his concept of the "autobiographical self." The autobiographical self is the "organized record" of our life: our place of birth, our needs and desires, our typical way of coping. Damasio explained that when we talk about our self as a unique individual or when we talk about our self in relation to the people and events that have shaped our life, we are talking about the autobiographical self. This self serves to promote the growth of human consciousness and, in its more complex level, it becomes the conscience that guides individuals' concern for themselves and for others. With

a perspective that concurs with Damasio, literary theorist Paul Ricoeur (1991) pointed out that to gather our life into the form of a narrative provides the basis for an ethical stance toward a “good life.” And he posed the question: How could an individual assign to his or her own life an ethical quality “if this life were not gathered together in some way, and how could this occur if not, precisely, in the form of a narrative?” (p. 158). Thus, Ricoeur suggested that it is through our stories that we as individuals come to know ourselves as ethical beings who then turn in the direction of a “good life,” which they may express in their roles as parents, partners, educators, or citizens for a civil society.

### NARRATIVES: COLLECTION, ANALYSIS, AND FINDINGS

What began as a novel instructional experiment in my adult education classroom has emerged as a powerful and enduring instructional method. I have been proposing to my students in a course on adult learning and development the option of writing their life story as their chosen (elective) final assignment. Since receiving my first autobiographical paper, my use of autobiography has extended to several of my other graduate and university continuing education classes. The assignment is simple and straightforward: “Imagine that a publisher has asked you to write five chapters of your life story. Consider what might be the title for each of the five chapters; then write 2 to 3 pages for each chapter.” (Further details of this assignment appear in the Appendix.) It should be mentioned that when this option for a written assignment is introduced, most students claim it, likely for its novelty and seeming ease of completion, and they approach it with excitement and anticipation. However, for many, the task becomes more compelling and complex than they first envisioned, and each is free to choose whether to maintain a descriptive approach or engage more deeply in reflection and resolve (Karpiak, 2003). Interestingly, whereas I become the recipient of the document, I am most often not the audience, this position being granted more subjectively and personally—to a daughter, a future reader, or life itself. And perhaps for this reason, my position as instructor seems to recede as the task unfolds.

Early in this process I resolved to understand more about the effect on my students of having written their stories. With this purpose in mind I invited one group of student writers of a university continuing education course to participate in my autobiography research six months after their course had ended. Those willing were asked to resubmit their autobiography and engage in an interview concerning their experience of writing. Fifteen Canadian student writers became part of this study. Through taped individ-

ual interviews with these students, I explored the process and effects of their autobiographical writing. Among the questions asked were:

- What, if anything, did you learn from the autobiography?
- For whom was your autobiography written?
- What were the most enjoyable and what were the most difficult parts of the process?

On the basis of the narratives and the interview data, the major themes concerning both the experience of writing and the uses made of their autobiography were analyzed and described in earlier papers (Karpiak, 2000, 2003). From these students' comments, I came to appreciate the transformative power of autobiography.

Collecting, reading, and rereading their chapters left me at times awestruck at the capacity of these writers not only to traverse and live through the various struggles of life, but also to express what they have lived through and who they are now in ways so personal and powerful and so unlike the writings of their more formal assignments. As would be expected, in the course of their writing, students look primarily to the past as they relive and remember events of their life. Invariably, they reflect upon these events and on their meaning and significance. And finally, most often in the last of the five chapters, they turn to the future and they project themselves into possible choices and directions still ahead. In the following paragraphs, each of these periods of past, present, and future are explored with illustrations from selected student writings.

## REMEMBERING THE PAST

Writing their story sends students on an archeological dig into their history to recover and reassemble the pieces of their life. They write about what was and what happened; they recall, remember, revisit, and review early events and experiences. Some begin with their birth and the details of their family of origin; some even open with the courtship and marriage of their parents. Many recall their first experiences of school, their relocations to new communities, love relationships gained and lost, cultural dislocation, personal failures, and efforts to surmount adversity. Through the titles of their five chapters they capture and highlight key life events and turning points that now come to be associated with their present sense of self. These turning points are encapsulated in their various chapter titles: "From the Himalayas to Halifax," "Meeting Mother," "The Diverted Dream," "Vulture Culture," and "Baseball, Cops, and Blood."

The narratives and the associated emotions of joy, sadness, anger, humour, and distress contain such evocative language, often hardly recognizable from

their other assignments in language and tone. As an example of their use of humour, one student opened his narrative with a description of his very first attempt to attend school.

At the age of six came the long awaited first day of school. As the school bus pulled up and the door opened my German Shepherd forced her way between the bus and myself and would not let me onboard. The driver's attempt to move her met with a ferocious growl and a full set of teeth. This was enough to convince him to blow the horn for my mother. She in turn had to come out in her pink housecoat and drag the dog away from the bus. All this of course caused sheer bedlam on board the bus as children were screaming with delight and throwing everything imaginable.

Marly titled her opening chapter "A Life Well Pieced" and described her history as patchwork pieces, a metaphor that she sustained throughout her narrative.

A strange conglomeration of patterns, stitches and hues pieced together to provide comfort, warmth and security. Such were the quilts produced by my ancestors and passed on to each generation. The quilts were used to teach practical skills in the needle arts as Grandma quietly repeated lessons learned during her lifetime, family history and wisdom of a life well lived.

These quilts, these pieces of art, pieces of lives, were used to instill a sense of community in the Quilting Bees held throughout the year. At 50, as I review my life (lessons learned, achievements, disappointments and regrets) I think in terms of these patchwork pieces amassed to represent my life.

A graduate student began her narrative with a reflection on the primeval nature of reading and ended by professing her own love of it.

Symbols. Marks hardened in ancient clay. Charred wood scrawled on the rough stone of caves. An alphabet of letters transformed into words conveying the ideas and feelings of one human mind to the mind of another. We call the ability to translate the written symbols of our spoken language "reading." Reading. The ability to read is the finest single thing I have ever learned.

Student writers drew on such a range of metaphors: the "brushstrokes" of their life, the colours of their life, and self-authorship from "a puppet to a dancer." One woman first alerted me to the evocative power of metaphor through her beautiful illustration of her life process of "crossing over" as a black woman, characterizing the various periods of her life through the

metaphor of “crossing over”: first, from home to kindergarten, then into an “integrated” neighbourhood, later into higher education, and finally “crossing over” to the professional world of education and training of adults. Her story illustrated metaphor’s capacity to reveal meaning, pattern, and coherence in our life.

## REFLECTING FROM THE PRESENT

Martha Watson (1999) described autobiography as “an interplay, a collusion, between past and present” (p. 18) and observed that its significance lies not only in its uncovering of the past, but also in its *revelation of the present*. Writing about past events and turning points prompts writers to shift to the present tense, through which they make connections between past and present and reflect on the significance of past events to their present life. Some begin to see the past in a new way, now noting something different in it that was not seen before. Others articulate their new-found understandings about their own actions and those of others, as did one student, as she considered her past behaviour: “In retrospect, I played the role of the innocent. I believed tomorrow would always be there.” They make observations about the past and about life in general; one student wrote: “The lessons I learned were through pain or loss—very much like life.”

In effect, these writers drew conclusions about their life. As an illustration, Louise opened her narrative with a description and reflection on the events of her childhood and then turned, below, to comment on their effects on her adult life and even on the lives of her children.

My children all married and had children, in whatever order. I can see clearly that some of the problems they had, and have, are directly due to being raised in an alcoholic home, and it hurts my heart. I wish I could undo it, and that I would have left sooner—then I have to remind myself that I did what I thought was best at the time. I wanted them to have two parents at any cost. The cost was too high . . .

Later, near the end of her narrative, she reconnected once again with her past and, this time, contemplated its impact, for better and for worse, on her identity.

Some days I drive past some of the old spots. Out near the location of Auntie’s farm are country roads named after pioneers we used to visit. A cottage subdivision, named after my grandparents, on the land which was their homestead. Pieces of the mosaic of my life. My heritage of unconditional love and caring on one side. Mixed messages and criticism on the other. Complicated the task of knowing who I am.

Another writer, Regina, organized her narrative around the lessons learned at critical moments of her life. Her first chapter, titled “Gina Makes a Plan—God Laughs,” described her unplanned and unexpected pregnancy and the birth of her first baby, which to her was “a major life event” that threw her world into chaos and shattered her belief of being in control.

Here was a little boy who made me feel a rainbow of emotions. This forced me to realize that not every decision I made was based on pure logic. The control I felt over life never existed, but was an illusion I created to deal with the world . . . In letting go of a reality that never existed I became stronger, not weaker, and prepared myself for the next stage of development in my life.

This apparent tendency of the student writers to make meaning of the events of their life appeared so frequently and spontaneously as to suggest that it might have been their unconscious motive for writing. It also suggested that this search for understanding and meaning was a natural inclination and perhaps even a motive for continuing their education, as so many students in the course of their studies have intimated.

## IMAGINING A FUTURE

As writers came to the end of their narrative, and having understood more about their life and the way in which events have shaped their identity, they most often turned their eye to the future. From this perspective they expressed their resolve for how they ought to or want to live—the sorts of things they want for their children, what kind of partners and friends they hope to be, to what they aspire as professionals, in what way they intend to serve others, and what they hope to leave behind. As an illustration, Don, who looked back over his difficult life as a learner and chose to describe the educational process through the metaphor of a turbulent sea, expressed his hope and vision of becoming a special kind of educator.

With time it is my deepest hope that I will develop into a teacher that can create the safe harbor for my students. That each student will find a space within the classroom that invites them to give voice to their ideas and experience. So someday a student will say, “Don was my light-house.” This is the supreme legacy of a teacher-learner.

And Regina, who earlier faced her need for logic and control, ended her story with the addition of colour and whimsy into her life.

I bought two pairs of very impractical heels, one in red and the other in orange. I now refer to them as my sitting shoes. I actually don't wear them very often, but I see them every morning sitting among my practi-

cal shoes. The sight makes me smile. They remind me to take risks and to enjoy the simple joys of life with a confidence that I am living my life true to who I am.

## THE EMERGENCE OF THE ARTIST, SCIENTIST, AND PHILOSOPHER

### *Integration and Adult Development*

Up to this point, I have described the students' processes of recalling the past, reflecting from the present, and imagining the future, activities that appear to characterize the writing of most of my students, as it does most of the more formal and public autobiographical writing. In order to look more closely at the personal and developmental significance of these processes, I drew on the work of developmental theorist Ken Wilber (1995), who has provided a valuable framework that may serve for analyzing personal narratives. Throughout the past two decades Wilber has devoted his attention to the theme of lifespan growth of consciousness toward greater personal integration and complexity. First taking a historical, societal perspective, Wilber observed that whereas modernity contributed to the differentiation of science, art, and morality, it is the present task of postmodernity to reintegrate them. The needs and challenges of a civil and global society are of such a complex nature as to necessitate a world view that would bring together what was earlier differentiated, a world view that integrates "the Big Three"—science, art, and philosophy.

Wilber applied this same imperative to individual development. In his view, to develop is to go deeper into experiences, or knowledge, or consciousness, to go broader so as to widen our contextual frame, and then to integrate the two (the depth and the breadth) into a framework that is now more inclusive and complex. Accordingly, an integrative world view on the part of the individual would bring together the exterior span of the sciences, the interior depth of art, and the community of philosophy. Wilber suggested that the effect of integrating the "I," "it," and "we" is to bring together the artist (represented by the "I"), the scientist (the "it"), and the philosopher (the "we") in each of us. This sort of integration approaches the post-conventional, integrated stages of development that Wilber refers to as "vision-logic."

Consequently, as individuals confront work or societal issues, problems, and concerns, whereas they might approach these initially from the perspective of the factual, scientific "it," they would be moved to delve further into their interpretations, now exploring their own history, feelings, and attitudes concerning these issues, and thereby including the personal "I."

By extending their concern beyond their personal self to inquire into their significance for the larger community and social sphere, they would be including the “we,” the aspect of a civil society and the public good. The integration of these three would serve their self-development toward a more integrated, complex, and inclusive perspective and stance. On the level of its citizenry, this integration would also serve society’s needs, issues, and struggles through affording a more complex and integrated perspective of how these are to be approached and addressed. As an example of the growing tendency of writers to integrate these three dimensions, author Peter Abbs (2003), in his recent book *Against the Flow*, opened each chapter on an autobiographical note that recounted his relevant experience to the particular theme, thereby placing himself squarely in the centre of his critique, his theory, and philosophy concerning education.

### *O’Faolain and Gébler’s Stories*

Writing an autobiography yields not only a new understanding of the author’s life but also the possibility of changing that life. This aspect was illustrated by Irish author Nuala O’Faolain (2003), who in her second memoir recorded not only the happenings of her life, but also her observations *on* and conclusions *about* life: “I don’t believe that life offers us many consolations of the same size and weight as it offers us hurts” (p. 152). And in this second memoir she also highlighted the effect on her life of having written her first memoir. Through the course of this first memoir, she came to know that she was no longer the same person that she was prior to the writing—writing that first memoir had changed her, had affected the course of her life. She observed: “I am not at all the same person, when I handed the manuscript over to the publisher, as I’d been when I began. A memoir may always be retrospective, but the past is not where its action takes place” (p. 52).

I noticed in O’Faolain’s memoir the extent to which this integrative aspect that Wilber (1995) described appears. For instance, having detailed the many events and happenings, O’Faolain directed her attention to her own processes of personal survival (the artist) and wrote: “I grew a skin over my wounds first by finding words for them and then by purging the words of their power—by making them utensils in a job, a task” (p. 187). Later she theorized about the value of autobiography (the scientist): “Surely the self has begun to move toward health when it takes itself seriously enough to tell its story?” (p. 192). And, finally, she expressed her moral stance regarding life (the philosopher): “But when we object to the death penalty it is because one life stands for all life” (p. 186).

Author Carlo Gébler (2001), in the last chapter of his published memoir, looked back over his life story and made this observation about his own

literary process: "The story was in two acts: act one, what happened, act two, what I understood" (p. 379). This observation led him into further self-reflection: "My new take on the past had initiated a miracle. These thoughts made a little hole in my head and out of the hole all the toxins that had accumulated over forty-four years began to trickle away" (p. 402). And this healing, in turn, led to his theorizing about the benefit of autobiography: "You can't change the past but, with understanding, you can sometimes draw the poison out of it" (p. 405). Both of these authors illustrate the transformative power of writing our story, not only for an enlarged understanding of our life, but also for integration and healing.

O'Faolain and G bler, both being seasoned writers with published memoirs, might lead one to assume that this kind of self-reflective process is limited to experienced writers working in a literary context. But as I turned to my students' autobiographies, I was struck by the close correspondence between their comparatively short narratives, written for a class assignment, and the more developed, lengthy, professionally published memoirs of writers like O'Faolain and G bler. When students write their life story, they similarly remember and record events and experiences, and, then, like O'Faolain and G bler, they turn to observations of themselves, of others, of learning, and of life, and as their attention turns ahead, they also imagine a possible future for themselves and for others. As they compose their autobiographies, they, too, emerge as artist, theorist, and philosopher. In the paragraphs that follow I illustrate through their autobiographical writings how these actions of self-reflecting, theorizing, and philosophizing are revealed.

### *The "I," the Artist*

[Autobiography] is unquestionably a document about a life, and the historian has a perfect right to check out its testimony and verify its accuracy. But it is also a work of art, and the literary devotee, for his part, will be aware of its stylistic harmony and the beauty of its images. (Gusdorf, 1980, p. 43)

The qualities or criteria distinguishing the artist, the "I," include interiority (taking the inside view), subjectivity, sincerity, and truthfulness about one's inner state (Wilber, 1995). Interiority implies self-awareness and self-understanding and the willingness to explore one's depth. And whereas these student writers of autobiographies may not have any more self-knowledge than anyone else, what is significant, according to Vivian Gornick (2001), is that "they know who they are at the moment of writing." She added, "They know they are there to clarify in relation to the subject in hand—and on this obligation they deliver" (p. 30).

The students' writings reflected the artistic "I" in two most significant aspects. The first involved their capacity for self-expression, through imagin-

ing and writing about past, present, and future (as was highlighted earlier in the paper). For many students, writing their life story was unlike any other assignment they had done; most had never written about themselves in such a personal way. And in the course of writing, they discovered a capacity to write with clarity and honesty that was not previously evident to them. The second instance of the artistic concerned the willingness of these writers to explore themselves, to gain understanding of themselves, and to develop insight into their behaviours and actions. In other words, these writers were willing to explore their own interiority and, through the act of writing, to become known to themselves (just as authors O'Faolain and Gébler had done). Throughout their chapters these students explored their own tendencies and needs, the roles they had consciously and unconsciously played, and the dispositions and life events they believed to have shaped their life. They described decisions, difficult choices, and determined action, as well as the consequences of these on their life. One writer characterized the course of her development in this way.

I've come a long way from those dark days in Detroit. That day of childhood dreams where the seeds of the future were planted. Remembering where I came from is humbling and I don't ever want to forget my roots. I appreciate what I have achieved because of where I began and where I am now.

### *The "It," the Scientist*

Author Toni Morrison (1987) described life writing as "a kind of literary archeology: on the basis of some information and a little guesswork you journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply" (p. 12). As the student authors engaged in the reflective process and as they theorized about themselves and about life in general, the scientist emerged. The criterion for the scientist is the presence of a match, or correspondence, between the acts as they are disclosed and the propositions that are stated (Wilber 1995). As Vivian Gornick (2001) has noted, truth in an autobiography has not so much to do with the relaying of actual events, but rather with the effort of the writer to engage with the experience. She concluded, "What happened to the writer is not what matters; what matters is the large sense that the writer is able to make of what happened" (p. 91). She noted that we get credit not for the living, *but for the story*.

Having stepped away and become a thoughtful observer of various events and happenings in their own life, the student writers drew conclusions about their life and of life, in general (just as O'Faolain and Gébler had done). They offered their perspectives on various life themes, among

these being how little control we have over our life. As one woman reflected: "When I look back, my life took such curves at every stage. That is one thing now I am sure about. That nothing is what you plan it to be. You should always plan for the unexpected." One man, for whom a chance course in world religions triggered a crisis of religious belief, summed up what was gained: "While none of us has the option of writing our own prescription for life's goggles, critical thought, should we choose to utilize it, allows us a hand in who we become."

Another theme centred on the lingering nature of some childhood issues and needs that, despite time and maturity, could still be triggered by present events. Some writers came to understand that the lessons we fail to learn earlier re-emerge to be learned over and over again. And several noted the burdens of our "cultural baggage" as we traverse through life. Students, especially those who had suffered early childhood school humiliation, offered insightful comments and suggestions concerning the tenderness of young children, as this writer does.

Sometimes I think that teachers forget that children are people too and that they deserve as much respect and patience as an adult does. Their young minds are there to be molded and nurtured. One comment or action could squelch their creativity, self-esteem and motivation toward obtaining a successful education.

One young woman wrote about her stressful childhood of family abuse, cultural dislocation, poverty, and death. But through this she has emerged with an understanding of the "storm" and its process.

Struggling is not the end of the world; it's all how you look at it. I've learned that everyone goes through the storms of life, but there are three steps to that, the period before the storm, the period within the storm, and the period after the storm.

And, finally, as one writer reviewed the events and experiences of her life, she noted the ever-present reality of change—how many of these events had been unplanned, yet so momentous in their effect. Presently coping with a marital separation, she offered an observation about life and change, and through her comments she, as "scientist," illustrated the correspondence between life events and the emergence of relevant propositions concerning life.

The only thing I can say with some certainty about life is that it will always change . . . My life was progressing down a comfortable path and I was beginning to feel secure in the direction I was going, or so I thought. I am finding that the old saying, the more you know the more you do not know, is very true. I have come to the realization that life is very humbling and knowledge is a way to stay open and focused and a path to continual growth.

### *The "We," the Philosopher*

People tell each other stories to find out how they should act in certain situations, how they related to others, and what their identity and role is. In telling stories, actors are involved in the act of generating value, judging the worth of their lives and social practices. (Abma, 1999, p. 171)

James Olney (1972), a literary theorist who has illuminated the psychological-philosophical value of autobiography, noted that autobiography poses the question: "How shall I live?" (p. xi). The moral perspective of these student writers—what has been learned and what personal philosophy and viewpoint has emerged out of their life and living—represents the final aspect—the "we." The criteria for the philosopher, the "we," includes goodness, justness, relational care, and concern, where actions with each other show kindness and mutual understanding and where the maxims one proposes might be universal (Wilber, 1995). Throughout their five written chapters, but especially in the last one, student writers expressed themselves on matters dealing with learning and education, with personal responsibility and social development. They highlighted the importance of taking personal responsibility for actions and for making personal choices. They focused on the importance of doing not only what is expected, but also what is right. They voiced their awareness that the most important things in life cannot be measured. They expressed their awareness of the universality of many of life's problems, issues, and concerns. And, finally, they affirmed the preciousness of life.

A frequent theme of their narratives centred on the struggle to move from harsh early schooling experiences to becoming adult learners and educators. In one instance, a writer, who in his narrative described his personal struggle to overcome early school problems, revealed his own surprise in breaking with the past.

The early journey could have never predicted my destination. Those that accompanied me for a short time on that road would never guess my present and would have dared not even whisper the possibilities that may become. Non-educators may find it very difficult to comprehend fully the statement that "education is my life." Few will ever fully understand how multifaceted that remark is for me and how I have come into my own.

Craig, who devoted his narrative to his process of overcoming resistance to learning and committing himself to lifelong learning, expressed his passion equally for magic (being a magician) and for teaching, drawing important parallels between the two and outlining his approach to adult education.

Magicians don't use real magic; they can't actually make an elephant disappear or change the color of a handkerchief. They use showmanship to present something that the audience will be able to take home with them. Teachers use a different type of showmanship in order for the students to learn. Just like a student being able to see through a poorly designed lesson plan, the audience can see through a poorly designed magic trick. Ultimately, the most important thing to a successful magic trick is not the magician or the audience, but the magic itself. In teaching, it is the learning that should transcend the student or the teacher.

I will continue to learn new magic tricks, juggling and how to make an elephant disappear. I will also concentrate my efforts on learning what my contribution to adult learning and higher education will be.

Oftentimes the writers' philosophical views were directed to their parenting role and specifically to the kind of parents they want to be, as in the case of Angela, who, being a soldier and one who prevailed even in defeat, articulated her hopes and lessons for her soon-to-be-born baby.

I hope my baby does not choose to walk in my shoes because they were very heavy at times. Yes, the choices I have made and what fate has dealt me have made me a stronger person, but the tears and turmoil it took me to get there were sometimes more than I could bear.

And, finally, these authors envisioned and articulated the kind of people they want to become and the life they want to build. Donna titled her closing chapter "Unfinished Symphony" and captured in one brief paragraph her awareness of self that is, and one that is still becoming.

Well, I'm 27 years old and I feel okay. I know the word okay is small in comparison to life as a whole, but I know the decades I've lived . . . I feel okay. My life so far is like an unfinished symphony, filled with chords and changes and repetitions and of course powerful silence. This symphony is one that amazes me, excites me, and also scares me. This so far is my life as I am. Absolute grace is a goal I want to achieve . . . I see complete freedom from being consumed by things that can steal your spirit.

### *Summary*

Currently in most spheres of society, including the major disciplines, the artistic, scientific, and philosophical dimensions are separated into distinct disciplines that rarely touch one another. However, given the complexity of our world, they need to find avenues to reconnect (Wilber, 1995). As these student writers have demonstrated, when adult learners sit down to write

about their life, they are moved to bring these three dimensions together. In looking at the past, they re-collect the scattered pieces of their life and bring form to what may have been random events. The artist gives these quality, strength, character, and shape, often through images and metaphors. The scientist reflects upon and makes sense of the experiences, furnishes a logic or understanding of what happened, makes statements about their meaning, and draws conclusions. And when the philosopher emerges, the statements center on issues of learning and education (given the classroom context of the writing). But, they also address issues of values and morals, as the narrator's focus turns beyond the self toward the wider spheres of family, profession, friendship, and society. Reading through the stories of my students and the way in which they have expressed themselves in each of these three dimensions (albeit to varying degrees), and following Wilber's (1995) claim concerning the importance of this kind of integration for adult development, then it can be said that at least some have furthered the process of their growth. My own research into the experience of those who had written their stories would support this claim (Karpiak, 2000, 2003). These actions of integration are significant not only as they relate to the development of the individual, but also as they further the development of the citizenry and society. As Maxine Greene (1995) has observed, a person's consciousness is not limited to an awareness "inside" the brain, but rather as reaching out through emotion, intuition, perception, and imagination into the world.

## CONCLUSION

Nietzsche has been quoted as saying: "Little by little it has become clear to me that every great philosophy has been the confession of its maker, as it were his involuntary and unconscious autobiography" (cited in Olney, 1980, p. 46). Valery added, "There is no theory that is not a fragment, carefully prepared, of some autobiography" (cited in Olney, 1980, preface). And, finally, Smith (1994) insisted that every *practice* is an autobiography. Each of these theorists connected autobiography, respectively, to philosophy, theory, and practice, affirming the significance of autobiography to encompass the many aspects of personhood—the self as artist, who responds personally and subjectively to the past, the self as theorizer, who makes connections between lived events and propositions about life, and the self as philosopher, who takes a moral position on matters beyond one's immediate self. And as Wilber (1995) pointed out, the more we draw on the various parts of ourselves, the artist, scientist, and philosopher, the greater the likelihood of the integration of these aspects within ourselves and the greater the potential for developing our perspective to greater complexity, inclusiveness, and coherence. When adult learners undertake this task, they similarly invest them-

selves in all three dimensions, which are expressed in their attitudes, views, and orientations to learning, education, and the public good.

I hope to have demonstrated that autobiography serves a broader educational purpose and for this reason merits inclusion as an educational method in various areas of adult and continuing education. Readers may recall O'Faolain's (2003) observation: "A memoir may always be retrospective, *but the past is not where its action takes place*" (p. 52, italics added). O'Faolain suggested that the labour of autobiography continues its work into the actions of the future. When students undertake to write their autobiography, they recollect and reconnect with significant and memorable events in their life. Invariably they reflect upon and make meaning of those past events. And then they turn to the future and ask, Now that I know this, what else will I say? And it is important to acknowledge that "*its action takes place*" beyond individual growth and change. The stories of these student writers revealed their concern for life beyond themselves, a concern they now extend to their families, work, and society. And whereas their actual actions in this regard cannot be predicted, their heightened consciousness and intentionality would suggest that they have been changed and that this change will find expression in building their world.

It is fitting for this paper to end with the words of a student who, having written her life story, likened it to a novel that is still being written, and she, as the one who was living it, found herself also the one reading and the one creating and "changing meanings." But the difference between a novel and an autobiography is that the latter is never finished. Like Nuala O'Faolain, for whom change came about from having written her memoir, these students, too, are changed.

. . . my life is the making of a story I couldn't have predicted and one careful planning hadn't phased, couldn't touch. I like the idea of being an unfinished novel, an untold story in the process of the telling. My task in life is reading the book as I'm in the midst of the writing, replete with experiences, changing meanings, and a cast of real people. (Roberta, a student)

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## APPENDIX

### *Guidelines for Practice: Using Autobiography in Higher Education*

- Have students imagine that a publisher has invited them to write their story in five chapters; what would be the titles of the chapters?
- In order to guide their work, ask students to prepare an outline with the titles for your review.
- Encourage them to seek out a metaphor or a central theme that runs throughout their story and that might then be reflected in the chapter titles.
- Encourage them to avoid a simple chronology of their life, such as "The Teen Years," but rather to give these periods an identifying quality or character, such as "The Teen Years: Lost in a Wilderness."
- Offer examples of chapter outlines that others have written.
- Encourage them to choose a title for their story, such as Christopher Reeves' *Still Me*.
- Trust that writers will go as deeply into the various options of "telling" as they are ready.
- Encourage individuals to use this opportunity to reflect on their life, to take something from this exercise—what was their "story;" what was this life about?

## BIOGRAPHY

Irene Karpiak is associate professor of adult and higher education in the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies graduate program at the University of Oklahoma where she teaches courses on the adult learner, adult learning and development, and transformative learning. Her research has centered on adult and midlife development and lifelong learning, and more recently on student autobiographical narratives on themes of learning, development, and change. Previously, as a program coordinator with the Continuing Education Division, University of Manitoba, she developed a wide range of personal and professional development programs for adult learners. She continues return to Manitoba as an instructor in the Certificate in Adult and Continuing Education (CACE) program.

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