

*Article*

**Life Challenge Memory Work:  
Using Collaborative Autobiography to Understand Ourselves**

Judith C. Lapadat, PhD  
Northwest Regional Chair  
Professor, School of Education  
University of Northern British Columbia  
Prince George, British Columbia, Canada

Nancy E. Black, MLS  
Access and Information Services, Geoffrey R. Weller Library  
University of Northern British Columbia  
Prince George, British Columbia, Canada

Philip G. Clark, MEd  
University of Northern British Columbia  
Curriculum and Instruction, School of Education  
Prince George, British Columbia, Canada

Richard M. Gremm, MSc  
Community Health Program  
University of Northern British Columbia  
Prince George, British Columbia, Canada

Lucy W. Karanja, MEd  
Curriculum and Instruction, School of Education  
University of Northern British Columbia  
Prince George, British Columbia, Canada

Miss Mieke, MEd  
Counselling, School of Education  
University of Northern British Columbia  
Prince George, British Columbia, Canada

Loriann Quinlan, MSc  
Psychology Program  
University of Northern British Columbia  
Prince George, British Columbia, Canada

© 2010 Lapadat. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

---

### **Abstract**

Using memory work, a group of eight adults in a university setting wrote, shared, and theorized memories of life challenges we experienced. In this study, we have adapted and refined memory work as a method, and we model this by presenting and examining a comprehensive case example of memory work. Our memories were of four main types: stories of dangerous events, the unruly body/self, leaving home/returning home, and negotiating social relationships. Processes of writing, performing, witnessing, and theorizing led us to identify ruptures and turning points that revealed ways in which we have been culturally inscribed as well as our agency in integrating social discourses into our identity. Our results point to the value of collaborative autobiography as a route to insight, a way to build community, and a means to democratize research.

**Keywords:** memory work, collaborative autobiography, cultural inscription, identity, writing as method, qualitative research

**Authors' note:** Nancy E. Black now also is a doctoral candidate in the School of Library Sciences, University of British Columbia; and Lucy W. Karanja is a doctoral candidate in the Faculty of Education, University of Western Ontario. We thank Rey Singh for his assistance with this study. Address correspondence to Judith C. Lapadat, Professor, School of Education, and Northwest Regional Chair, University of Northern British Columbia: Terrace Campus, 4837 Keith Avenue, Terrace, British Columbia, Canada, V8G 1K7, [lapadat@unbc.ca](mailto:lapadat@unbc.ca).

---

### **Introduction**

We should not give up. . . . Even if at times we do not give the complete story, as we never can . . . we must start somewhere. . . . We can bring an empty bowl with us wherever we go to be filled. And it will be filled: with the stories, the living history all around us, the truths people are, quite literally, dying to tell. (Gwen Bell, cited in Hall, 2005, p. 196).

In many forms of qualitative inquiry, narratives provide both substance and method (Chase, 2005). Lincoln (1997) described storytelling “as an imperative human practice, but also . . . in the metaphoric sense, storytelling enables us to reconnect with the ceremonial, sacerdotal, and quotidian dramas that mark our own worlds and work” (p. 51). The telling of one’s story is both a construction of self and a performance of self, in which the listener/reader/viewer is implicated as witness, audience, collaborator, and co-constructor. Reflexive placement of researchers within the narrative event constitutes them as vulnerable observers (Behar, 1996). No longer invisible behind a screen of objectivity, researchers look within autobiographically even while gazing outward at the other; researchers scaffold their understandings and worldviews even while conspiring with the other to co-construct his or her story. The autobiographical act of telling stories takes place publicly, discursively, performatively (Pollock, 2005), and within a framework of sociohistorical narratives (Haug, 1987) or Gee’s (1996) “big ‘D’ Discourses” that simultaneously enable intersubjective understanding and constrain the meanings that can be taken from the stories.

## **Memory work approach**

Memory work is a qualitative research approach first developed by Frigga Haug (1987) and 13 other women in a research collective in Germany. Explicitly feminist in its aims and epistemology, this method, as originally conceived, involved all-woman nonhierarchical research collectives formed around a common theoretical interest. Each member of the group descriptively wrote out personal memories elicited by a consensually chosen trigger phrase or theme, and these texts were then shared with and analyzed by members of the collective. The focus was not on autobiography in the sense of constructing a coherent public account of the self (Bruner, 2001; Lapadat, 2009) or on understanding each individual woman but, rather, theoretical, feminist, and sociological. Members of the research collective sought to understand “the process whereby individuals construct themselves into existing social relations” (Haug, 1987, p. 33) and thence to liberate themselves from their subordination to these social practices. The method worked by collapsing the subject and object of the research (the women were both the researchers and the researched); by focusing on the particular; by interrogating the memory stories to see how people reproduce society’s norms and how they resist; by attending to inconsistencies and silences; and by using comparison, feedback, and multiple points of view. The overarching aim of the approach was emancipatory: to transform “the self-constructed prisons of everyday life” (p. 41).

The topic of Haug’s (1987) memory work research was female sexualization: how sexuality is socially constituted, the sexualization of female bodies, the expression of gender, and the sociocultural relations between men and women. Many research groups subsequently have taken up memory work as a method for conducting collaborative research. Following Haug, a number of implementations of the method have involved all-woman groups working within a feminist perspective and have focused on gender issues, especially how gender is constructed by and experienced by women. Examples include Crawford, Kippax, Onyx, Gault, and Benton’s (1992) research on emotion and gender; Gannon’s (2001) poetic reconstruction of collective text to represent “the collective girl” and the emotional isolation she feels; Lammers, Ritchie, and Robertson’s (2005) examination of the nature of and women’s responses to emotional abuse within heterosexual relationships; Gillies, Harden, Johnson, Reavey, Strange, and Willig’s (2004) study of embodiment based on women’s accounts of sweating and of pain; Rocco’s (2004) account of how women’s desire for heterosexual marriage is discursively produced; and Kaufman, Ewing, Hyle, Montgomery, and Self’s (2006) examination of women’s relationship with nature.

Using memory work, Crawford et al. (1992) constructed a theory of emotion. Gannon (2001) and Lammers et al. (2005) also worked with emotion, specifically emotional isolation and emotional abuse, respectively. By examining bodily memories, Gillies et al. (2004) sought to bridge discursive and material worlds implied by Cartesian dualisms, and both Rocco (2004) and Kaufman, Ewing, Hyle, Montgomery, and Self (2006) aimed to identify and disrupt hegemonic heteronormative discourses. Each of these studies elaborates themes consistent with Haug’s (1987) original formulation of the method.

Recently, the memory work approach has been applied by mixed and male research groups as well as female ones, in a variety of settings, and to examine themes that are not necessarily predominantly gender-focused. For example, Crawford et al. (1992) sought data from other memory work groups outside of their own memory work collective to complement their own memory stories examining emotion. Specifically, they gathered data from a group of young men on their memories of childhood transgressions and also about danger, as well as from groups of young women on these and related topics, and from a mixed-gender group of university students on the topic of fear.

Purohit and Walsh (2003) used memory work to examine heteronormative discourses in middle school in two projects, one involving a mixed-gender whole class and the other a small group of girls. Connor, Newton, Pennisi, and Quarshie (2004), a mixed-gender memory group of doctoral students, used collective biography/memory work to examine how bodily transgressions and discipline are used in schools to construct students as docile subjects, and how students then work to “inscribe themselves into the discourse” (p. 506). Tynan and Garbett (2007) used memory work to examine their lived experience of working collaboratively as university researchers. Mahoney (2007), although not strictly following a memory work method, described how he used a related collaborative storytelling approach to construct reflexive fieldwork relationships with gay men while researching intimacy in their social relationships.

As memory work has evolved as a research method, researchers have formalized some aspects of Haug’s (1987) original method. Crawford et al. (1992) have specified guidelines and steps within each of three research phases, which have been further refined by Onyx and Small (2001). Onyx and Small also have compiled a summary of the range of topics to which a memory work approach has been applied, as well as an overview of methodological adaptations and issues.

An example of one way that memory work methodology has shifted since Haug’s (1987) first articulation of it relates to the “writing turn” in qualitative inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Richardson, 1997) and current perspectives about autobiographical writing as method (Ellis, 2004; Lapadat, 2009; Wall, 2008). Although Haug argued that memory work should not be biographical or autobiographical in approach because biography implies linear causal development, a number of contemporary researchers have construed their memory work studies as (auto)biographical (Gannon, 2001; Lapadat, 2009). Stephenson (2005) agrees with Haug that self-stories that are linear, coherent, and deterministic resist interpretation but also has pointed out that autobiographical writing need not be approached in this way. She has argued for adapting memory work method to specifics of time and place to accomplish politically engaged social research. As Behar (1996) has written, “autobiography has emerged, for better or worse, as the key form of storytelling in our time” (p. 26).

Many of the methodological dilemmas of memory work apply across related domains of qualitative inquiry, and concern matters of reflexivity, writing about memories (Wall, 2008), the nature of autobiographical storytelling, and the dilemmas of collaborative writing (Lapadat, 2009; Lapadat, Bryant, et al., 2009). In collaborative autobiographical writing, there are ethical boundaries in what can be shared or witnessed, along with an urgency to write truthfully, vulnerably, and nonvoyeuristically (Behar, 1996). Ellis (2007) has pointed out that “ethical considerations in doing research with intimate others are different from those in doing research with strangers” (p. 5). Mahoney (2007) discovered that crossing the fieldwork relationship boundary into friendship can sour, with personal costs to the researcher, such as hurt feelings, termination of the research relationship, loss of friendship, and ongoing interpersonal discomfort or hostility, not to mention the emotional impact on the other, which the researcher has failed to mitigate. Writing collaboratively and autobiographically with others is risky because of the personal vulnerability it engenders, and because miscommunication in this context might impair not only the research outcome but also one’s sense of being heard, respected, and cared about. Factors like a commitment to respectful communication, a sense of trust, and a solid preexisting friendship or working relationship can help smooth the interpersonal bumps (Lapadat, Mothus, & Fisher, 2005). A related issue involves the final ownership and writing up of the collective work, and the ethical and logistical challenges inherent in this process (Gannon, 2001). Haug (1987) and Gannon addressed this by publishing collective work under their own names, whereas Lapadat, Bryant, et al. (2009) have explored montage as a writing approach and partial use of pseudonyms to retain a degree of anonymity.

In the memory work project that we report here, our group came together by happenstance rather than because of sharing a homogeneous theoretical foundation or the intention to form a collective. Our group comprised seven graduate students taking a course on qualitative methods along with the professor teaching the course. We were mature men and women with diverse cultural and professional backgrounds. Most of those of us taking the course enrolled by choice because we were interested in learning about qualitative research methods and were planning to use a qualitative approach in subsequent graduate research.

The professor's interest in memory work derived from her ongoing work on written interaction as an approach to communication and learning, autobiographical writing as data, and considerations in writing up qualitative research. Although she had not participated in memory work research before, she was intrigued with the potential of the method to synthesize all of the above elements while also fostering a sense of collaboration in doing research and drawing on the resources we each brought with us as individuals: our memories and experiences. She also wanted to explore the method's value as an instructional approach, a line of investigation that has been documented elsewhere (Lapadat, 2009). Therefore, in our implementation of memory work we drew on the memory work research method and elaborated some of its epistemological principles, such as the notion of discursive construction of meaning, without pursuing explicitly gender-related themes.

### **Method**

Before initiating the research as a class project, we discussed the proposed research and the possibility of coauthoring a paper in the future based on materials generated in the class. As all members of the class were unanimous in their wish to proceed, we sought and obtained university research ethics board approval for the class research assignment and for the subsequent collaborative analysis and writing. Methodologically, we followed the memory work research steps outlined by Onyx and Small (2001), which are a succinct restatement of those formalized by Crawford et al. (1992).

Phase 1 of the research involved choosing a research focus and trigger phrase by consensus then each producing a written out memory related to the trigger phrase. Our chosen focus was "a life challenge." Each class member wrote a memory according to the following guidelines: (a) write 250 to 500 words, (b) use third person (he/she), (c) use detailed description, (d) avoid interpreting or evaluating the experience, (e) use an expressive style of writing, and (f) provide a hard copy for all class members (course handout, following Onyx & Small, 2001).

In phase 2, we brought our written memories to class and read them aloud to each other. After each reading, we engaged in a preliminary discussion of the memory, which was led by the author of the piece. As we engaged in this collaborative discussion process, we were conscious of comparing across the memories looking for both commonalities and differences, and of focusing on broad social processes rather than on individuals. In commenting, we drew on our theoretical and cultural knowledge, and we recorded this discussion by making notes on a media projector. Although we previously had agreed that we would write only memories that we would feel comfortable sharing with the group and that any of us could choose to withdraw at any point from the sharing process, it quickly became apparent that the memories we had chosen to write were laden with emotional content. Therefore, our group commentary also included statements of affirmation and emotional support.

In phase 3, each of us independently wrote interpretive reflections on our own written memory as well as on the group collection of memories, then brought these written reflections to the class for further discussion. Although invited to rewrite the original memory based on the phase 2 discussion, none of us pursued that option. The phase 3 writing yielded eight different interpretations, so in the discussion we attempted to identify overarching themes from our set of writings and discussions, referencing collective human experience, cultural knowledge, and social theories. We recorded this discussion using field notes.

At the end of the course, all of the class members reaffirmed that they still wished to coauthor a paper based on the memory work research. However, there was a lag of 5 years<sup>1</sup> between the end of the course and returning to the analytic and writing up process, at which time we undertook another cycle of consent, and seven of the original eight went on to coauthor this article. The analysis and writing up was led by the first author, who conducted a thematic analysis on the phase 2 field notes and drew on the written memories, field notes, and interpretive reflections in writing a first draft of this article. All of the written documents and analyses, as well as iterative drafts of the article as it took shape, were provided to the group of co-researchers, who provided ongoing substantive and editorial feedback. Two of the coauthors presented a conference paper on the findings developing further the notion of cultural inscription, prior to the final revisions to this article (Lapadat & Karanja, 2008).

### **Methodological aims**

We contend that memory work is a flexible methodological approach that can be adapted to a variety of purposes, settings, and groups. It is not limited in aim to building feminist sociocultural theory, nor, in practice, is it applicable only in homogeneous groups. As a method, it is compatible with analytical approaches such as thematic analysis, autoethnography, and narrative analysis.

Our intention here is to reveal our method by modeling it. Our memory work project differed from Haug's (1987) formulation in the nature of the group, setting, and purpose (as described above), as well as in constraints: the university ethics process, the timeline, and the fact that the three phases were completed as a course assignment. Although we followed traditional guidelines for conducting a memory work study (Onyx & Small, 2001), we reconstrued the method from an interpretivist autobiographical, autoethnographic perspective. This included a focus on narrative analysis, the performance component, and reflexive analysis. As well, we used thematic analysis as a tool for understanding.

To examine and model our memory work method, we stay close the texts we generated in each phase of the research process. First we present a descriptive account of the written memories, along with the discussion themes that emerged following the telling of each memory in phase 2. We then go on to describe the third phase of interpretation. We illustrate our memory work method by describing the interpretive insights that emerged in our collaborative group through writing and discussion. We end by commenting on the methodological promise of memory work; It engages researchers in writing and performing memories collaboratively.

### **Phase 2 analysis**

The topic of life challenges yielded eight unique stories, reflecting our memories of past or ongoing experiences. They varied in how they were located in time, whether they recounted a single event or a series of events, how the event(s) related to the central challenge, whether the challenge had been resolved or was ongoing, the perspective taken, and the types of meaning

each of us attributed to the experience. Yet, despite their differences, the stories related to each other in multiple ways. Subsequently at the writing up stage, we saw that the memories we told could be classified into four main types: dangerous events stories, the unruly body/self stories, leaving home/returning home stories, and negotiating social relationships stories.

We read our pieces in the following order: Ruby, Lindsey, George, Lekisha, Anna, Cash, Jordan, and Sarah.<sup>2</sup> As the discussion progressed, we began to observe some common characteristics, and we ended by considering the set of memories as a whole and proposing themes that seemed to run through them. Subsequently, the first author coded each statement in the field notes, drawing on the proposed set of themes but also noting other themes that seemed apparent. In this section, we present the memories in each of the four categories along with the discussion that accompanied the reading of each piece, then end with the initially proposed themes relating to the whole set of memories.

### **Dangerous events**

*Job loss (Ruby).* Ruby and Cash each told a story of a dangerous event. Ruby recounted the experience of losing her job:<sup>3</sup>

When she arrived at work that summer morning, she saw her boss. It flashed through her mind that it was odd for her boss to be at work when she was supposed to be on vacation, but she was too weary to ponder this. Instead she consciously avoided her boss and tried to quietly slip upstairs to her office.

But her boss had been purposefully waiting for her. Her boss called to her, I need to talk with you, she said. They walked towards the meeting room. Her boss held a file. This is going to be bad, said her boss. She heard this and thought I'm so tired of hearing that, if I never have to hear that again, I will be so happy. They were in the room, the door was shut, they sat at the table, her boss opened the file and read: effective immediately your employment is terminated.

Her boss looked up, give me your keys, she said. She gave the keys to her boss. Her boss continued reading. You have lost the confidence of the management team. She heard those words and thought, well, the management team has lost my confidence, too. Her boss was still reading. You may choose to be fired, or you may choose to resign and I will accept your letter of resignation.

A choice, she thought, a choice? This is no choice. Everything was unreal, dream-like. Time had frozen. Her body had frozen, her blood had frozen.

Ruby went on to describe the process of moving out of her office and going home that day, her response to the threat (seeing a lawyer), and a healing ritual that she performed with a friend weeks later (writing things on rocks and throwing them into the river). Then she told about a talk she gave at a conference on the topic of surviving job loss, where she explained that "she was the breadwinner and she was afraid of losing everything," that "there is no shame in being fired," and that afterwards "her career had taken a new, exciting direction." Her piece ends with: "It is over now. It happened a long time ago, but not so long ago. Sometimes she even forgets that it happened at all."

We classify it as a dangerous event story because of the way Ruby’s language presents the event. It was something sudden that happened to her that elicited feelings of shock and trauma, that was life changing, and that later she saw as a crisis she had survived. Especially, the words, “she was afraid of losing everything” point to the danger that she faced and the possible outcome that she feared, which could have included loss of her career, self-esteem, financial security, home, and family.

The group’s phase 2 discussion immediately followed Ruby’s reading of the memory piece, and was led by Ruby herself (see Table 1). Themes<sup>4</sup> we identified included the use of ritual to promote healing (“throwing the rocks in the river was a way of healing”) and moving on or through the challenging experience. We discussed Ruby’s sense of agency (even though she was “numb” and “in shock” as she was being fired, “she was still thinking ahead to collecting her things” from her office and the steps she would take to “see a lawyer”), as well as the ways in which she lacked agency due to the external source of the challenge: Her workplace was a “toxic environment,” and the choice her boss gave of resigning or being fired was not really much of a

Table 1. Themes Identified During Phase 2 Discussion

|                           | Ruby | Lindsey | George | Lekisha | Anna  | Cash | Jordan | Sarah |
|---------------------------|------|---------|--------|---------|-------|------|--------|-------|
| Resolution                | **** |         | *      |         | *     | ***  |        |       |
| Ritual                    | ***  |         |        |         |       |      |        |       |
| Healing                   | **   | *       | *****  |         |       | *    |        |       |
| Moving on/<br>through     | **** | *       | **     | **      | ***   | *    | *      |       |
| External<br>challenge     | **   | *****   | **     | *       |       |      | *      |       |
| Turning point             | *    | *       |        |         | *     |      |        |       |
| Commonality               | **   | *****   | **     | **      | **    | *    |        | *     |
| Nature of<br>memory       | *    | ****    |        |         | **    | **   |        | *     |
| Emotions                  | *    | **      | *      | *****   | *     |      | *      | ****  |
| Internal resources        |      | *       | **     | *       |       | ***  |        |       |
| Agency                    | ***  |         | *****  |         | ****  | *    | ***    |       |
| Cultural script           | *    | *****   | ****   | ***     | *     |      | **     |       |
| Identity                  |      | ***     | **     | *       | **    |      |        | ***   |
| Internal challenge        |      | *       | **     | *       |       |      | *      | *     |
| Affirmation               |      | *       |        | **      |       |      | *      | *     |
| Moral                     |      |         | ***    |         |       |      | *****  |       |
| Question self             |      |         | **     |         |       |      |        |       |
| Metaphor                  |      |         | *      | *       | *     |      |        |       |
| Body                      | *    |         | *****  |         |       | *    |        |       |
| Spirit                    |      |         | ***    |         |       | **   |        |       |
| Control                   |      |         | **     |         |       | *    |        |       |
| Separation from<br>roots  |      |         |        | *****   | ***** |      |        | *     |
| Loss                      |      |         |        | **      | ***   |      |        | *     |
| Point of view             |      |         |        | *       | ***   | ***  | **     | *     |
| Cycle of change           |      |         |        |         | *     |      |        | ***   |
| Silence                   |      |         |        |         |       |      | **     | ****  |
| Put others<br>first       |      |         |        |         |       |      | *****  | *     |
| Negotiate<br>relationship |      |         |        |         |       |      | **     | ***** |

Note. Shading from dark to light represents themes shared by 7, 6, and 5 participants, respectively.

choice. We talked about resolution of the challenge, how the challenge became a life turning point (“good things can come out of negative experiences”), and how this account can be read as a “triumphant tale of overcoming.”

The story of surviving job loss resonated with group members, some of whom had had similar experiences (commonality). We also noted that the role of “breadwinner” references a cultural script, and that assumptions and expectations go along with this social role/cultural script. Finally, we commented on the nature of memory, how the experience was remembered; it was “crisp; burned into memory. [The] description recalls the details of the moment.”

*The river (Cash).* In contrast, Cash told a memory of a near-death experience when he was attending summer camp during his boyhood:

It wasn't the first summer camp he'd been to but he thought it would be the last this day. Everyone was at chapel. . . . The camp was situated. . . . by a swollen glacial river. . . .

As he headed towards the chapel Jack caught Cash's attention. “Hey Cash!” Jack called out. . . . “We should take a few [inner tubes] down the river” . . . . Jack. . . always acted tougher than he really was. Cash thought it might be interesting to see if Jack really had the guts to do it. . . . They would be rebels and everyone would be talking about them if they made it. Everyone had been given strict instructions not to go near the river. . . the river was frothy and angry today. Cash took the chance. He and Jack would be talked about forever if they were successful. They would be legendary.

They selected a large inner tube and . . . . both managed to lay themselves out on the tube. . . . the river seemed alive and it moved them out of sight of the camp immediately. . . . All of a sudden the river brought the adventurous duo around a corner. Straight ahead the river collided with a huge logjam. There was no way to avoid it. . . . There was not enough time. . . . Both Jack and the tire tumbled in the water under the logjam. Cash could see the surface, as everything seemed to move in slow motion under the water. There was a peace there that was hard to understand. He just knew everything would be alright. He felt himself grab for something. . . . it was Jack! Jack was hanging suspended from a jutting log and was bobbing up and down in the water. He was crying and screaming “let me go, let me go, we're going to die!” Cash knew he was telling the truth. . . . He saw a log [downstream] and made the decision to swim to it. . . . he could feel the current help him. As he grabbed the log the river tried to take him. . . . with all the strength he could muster, Cash pulled himself up onto that log.

Just then a counsellor appeared. . . . Jack was still screaming and bobbing up and down. He didn't look so tough now. The counsellor somehow. . . . lifted Jack out of the water. Cash . . . was able to navigate the logs to make it to shore. . . . “I'll never do anything like that again!” screamed Jack half-crying. “Yeah, me too” muttered Cash but somehow knowing deep inside that was not true. . . . No big deal. He had survived this and because of that he was confident that he would always feel that peace when things were really bad.

As recounted by Cash, this memory involved peer pressure, disobedience of rules, and risk-taking which put the two boys into a dangerous situation that nearly lost them their lives. Cash's memory fits the classic pattern of danger tales told by young men, as identified by Crawford et al.

(1992). In the young men's memory work group reported on by Crawford and her colleagues, "most of their memories were about the risk-taking involved in breaking rules and/or pushing at the boundaries" (p. 94) with one of the two categories of danger memories describing "[getting] into dangerous situations as a result of peer pressure" (p. 94). Cash's memory has the further element of self as hero, once again a triumphant overcoming.

Our discussion began with observations about the nature of memory; Cash "remembers bouncing in the water—how the mind slowed everything down." It was a "moment frozen in memory—like Lindsey lying in bed; Lekisha drinking the cold glass of milk; Ruby concentrating on her boss's words—peace in the midst of the challenging moment." This led us to consider the relationship between the body and the spirit, for example, how Cash drew on internal resources at the crucial moment, and how, subsequently, the "friend in the river was so traumatized that he changed spiritually, whereas Cash knew that it was not his time to die." We considered how Cash remembered being out of control and having a lack of agency as "a normal day . . . spins out of control," a situation which was resolved internally, through finding "peace in your mind, which helped you get out of the life threatening situation" (moving on/through). Members of the group commented on how "a life challenge situation puts things in perspective" (commonality), and contributed several related anecdotes about how a crisis experience significantly alters one's point of view.

### **The unruly body/self**

Three of us wrote memories that related an internal battle constituting an ongoing challenge. Lindsey described dissatisfaction with her body weight, George wrote of his persistent insomnia, and Jordan described his struggle to silence himself and repress his own wishes for the sake of cohesive family relationships.

*Wedding day (Lindsey).* We have included Lindsey's story in full.

It had rained through the night but by morning the clouds had moved on and the sun was shining with all its glory. It was a beautiful July morning when Lindsay awoke. She lay in bed for a while thinking about the day ahead and her future. She was not nervous for the reality of what was to take place that afternoon had not yet sunk in. To Lindsey, it was just another day, with the special treat of going to a wedding. But this was not just any wedding; it was her wedding. She looked at the clock, 9:35am. It was time to get up. She showered and went downstairs to the kitchen only to find chaos. Her fiancé's sister Shannon beckoned to her to get in the chair so they could start working on her hair. The flowers arrived and the scent of roses, lilies, and wildflowers soon filled the house. With rollers in place, Lindsey was scooted to the deck where the esthetician was waiting to apply her makeup. Her sisters had just arrived from the salon and Lindsey barely recognized her younger sister Ashley. Back in the chair, rollers were removed and the smell of hairspray was noxious. A box was brought over to us and out came the veil, which was expertly put in place. She looked at the clock to find out it was only 11:00 am. Her hair was set high with rolling curls, her make-up carefully applied, and all that was left to do now was wait until it was time to put on her dress.

That time finally came and Lindsey began by putting on the pearl necklace and earrings that her soon to be mother-in-law had given her. Lindsey's older sister Janice pulled the simple ivory dress out of the bag and Lindsey slipped the dress over her darkly tanned skin. "You look so beautiful", Janice replied, with tears

streaming down her face. Lindsey walked to the full-length mirror and couldn't believe what was reflected back to her. She had anxiously waited for this special day but as she looked into the mirror she had never felt so disappointed in herself as in that very moment. The bride that stared back at Lindsey was not the picture perfect bride she expected to see. This bride was fat. Her dream of being skinny on her wedding day did not come true and she finally realized that her struggle with weight would be a never-ending battle.

Lindsey has structured the telling of this memory in an interesting way. Her reference to her battle with body weight is embedded within a memory of the morning of her wedding day when, surrounded by female family members, she prepared herself as a bride. She details the steps of having her hair set, her makeup applied, the arrival of the flowers, and so on, and only in the final five lines does she reveal the emotionally wrenching challenge that she faced on that day, a challenge which is "never-ending" and remains unresolved even at the moment of telling the memory. A member of the group remarked that, "the memory as written is suffused with light, with joy, until the ending, when a dark element is introduced."

We discussed the cultural scripts that govern social passages and rituals like weddings: "We hold idealized images about particular experiences, such as the wedding day, or childbirth. We get hooked into images and expectations." We observed that "weddings can become huge productions" and that "there are industries to tell you what a wedding should be, which leads to impossible expectations," such as being "the picture perfect bride." With "the pressures of conventions [it's] hard not to 'fit the mold'; people push you into fitting all the conventions." The (often unrecognized) pressure to conform imposed by cultural scripts was identified by group members as a commonality that we each have experienced, and thus we affirmed Lindsey's experience.

Lindsey's memory also elicited discussion of identity. "Can we change who we are?" We noted that, due to the pressure of cultural expectations, a person "can begin to focus so much on an issue like weight that it becomes who I am." We also talked about the nature of memories – "what can be important to a person can seem minor or invisible to others" – and that it can take courage to revisit memories because of the emotions they elicit. Memories play an important role in healing and in therapy. In one sense, the source of Lindsey's challenge was constructed as internal, relating to a personal expectation she had for herself, and the disappointment (emotions) she felt in herself for not attaining that goal. Yet, given the pervasiveness of cultural expectations for women's appearance and especially as represented by idealized media images of brides, in a very real way the challenge came from an external source, and was so powerful that it threatened Lindsey's sense of identity. These observations support Haug's (1987) earlier findings about female sexualization.

*Insomnia (George)*. George wrote about his experience with insomnia:

The invisible sphinx had been with him all of his adult life; an invasive force waiting at all times to mete out consequences and pose the monotonous riddle: what have I done this time? It often seemed as if the sphinx would only be satisfied if he withdrew into some sort of monastic existence, cloistered not only from crude vices but also from virtually all stimulation of any kind: no risks, no passions, no changes. In early adulthood it seemed like this controlling entity could be bargained with. Maybe he was a stern mentor providing good discipline. Wake up and rid yourself of decadence. Caffeine, alcohol, rich food all must go. Love the cleansing discipline of a healthy lifestyle. He took the bargain long enough to know it would never be

enough and always returned with mirthful irreverence and defiance to caffeine, his drug of choice and elixir of early morning serenity. And there were lots of sunrises. It went in cycles he rode like waves. If he limited the coffee to a cup or two early in the morning he could go for days, a week even, with reasonable sleep. Never longer though even if he totally abstained from caffeine. . . . The cycle became the bargain for years and the entity a nuisance to be alternately placated and ignored. . . . meditation, relaxation exercises and lots of herbs and other concoctions . . . . none of it had the slightest effect on that old predictable cycle . . . . With age insomnia worsens. . . . Increasing fatigue made the old bargain unacceptable. Sleep hygiene strategies were tried. . . . prescription medications. . . . cognitive behavioural strategies. . . . body chemistry. . . . sleep restriction. . . . cope with a chronic sleep deficit. . . . performance anxiety which ruined the sleep cycle. A sleep diary helped deduce the optimal amount of sleep required. In the end it was almost easy. Sleep was attainable once he knew how much he needed for optimal functioning and, at five and a half hours, it was a lot less than he would have imagined. The innate vulnerability remained, and had to continue to be bargained with, but with this final piece of the puzzle in place there was now a very real lever of control. The powerful alien entity was reduced to an unrecognized bad habit.

George wrote this as a monologue, both humorous and poignant in tone. He portrayed himself as the main character locked into a lifelong battle against an alien being, a metaphoric sphinx who is a moral authority sitting in judgment of him and punishing him with insomnia for his failings, whatever they might be. He described his attempts to work out the puzzle posed by the sphinx (what he was doing wrong that caused the insomnia) and to gain control over that wrong behavior and therefore the insomnia through moral bargains, lifestyle changes, changing his cognitions, and medical regimens. His written account ends with a resolution of sorts, yet George acknowledged that, in fact, the challenge remained ongoing.

Our phase 2 discussion began by the exploring the ways in which George framed this challenge as moral and constructed his own actions as showing moral failure. He spoke of “guilt—this must be something I have done wrong,” berated himself for “lack of insight,” and questioned himself, “How could I have arrived at the right way sooner?” In the text of the written memory, he positioned himself as decadent, undisciplined, and defiant, trying to bargain with the “sphinx” who is a “stern disciplinarian,” who tests George and punishes him when he finds he finds him wanting. It is a “Faustian bargain,” one that he cannot win. Of the memory stories we shared in this group, only Jordan’s challenge also focused on a moral aspect. Although the challenge is internal, George has externalized it as a battle against an alien foe.

Like most of the memories shared in this group, there was a sense that “the endpoint is different than the beginning. There is a sense of coming through to a different end,” in this case through “solving a riddle” (moving on/through). George’s story elicited a discussion of Cartesian dualisms, and in particular, the “mind-body split” that is characteristic of the “Western-European heritage” shared by many of us in the group. We talked of how the “body reacts,” “the body can’t live within that prison,” “the body tries to tell you something,” and about “the spirit trapped within the flesh of the body” (body; spirit). Interestingly, this resonates with the findings of British researchers Gillies et al. (2004), whose memory work constructions on the topic of bodies and embodiment, specifically as represented in memories of sweating and pain, also yielded Cartesian dualism as central to their accounts.

From identifying the mind/body separation apparent in George's account, we moved on to talking about "seeking balance" and healing. George's experience could be read as "seeking to recover." "The body is a resting place for the spirit; [he was] trying to find Chi," seeking the "spiritual element." We observed that due to the "individualism in our society, we are disconnected from the environment and feel the need to control it and everything," and that "this mind set leads to trauma" as well as to "vicarious traumatization." These observations about control and trauma resonate with the findings of Kaufman et al. (2006), who used memory work to examine their own relationships, as women, with the natural world. They found that they had been socialized in a gendered manner to hold hegemonic values that nature is separate from humans and subject to control, and to repress embodied knowingness of how body and nature are connected. We talked of George's desire for control, sense of agency (for example, choosing what to attend to; persisting with his stressful job despite the insomnia), and identity search ("who we are; who we want to be"). Despite "insomnia [being] an ongoing struggle," "the solution is, one day at a time." We talked of the Sioux medicine wheel as a model for healing: "when we move through trauma, the best is to achieve a balance of the mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical."

*Suffer not the children (Jordan)*. Jordan also recounted a memory of an internal struggle with himself. He wrote a long piece that compiled memories of several years of holidays that he had spent with his son on the boat of a friend (his former brother-in-law), at the friend's invitation. Because of its length, we paraphrase the account here, and include a few illustrative excerpts:

Jordan began by telling of a friend who had taken up sailing, and he revealed his own dream of learning to sail. This was followed by a list of reasons why he could not take it up: prohibitive costs, the class barrier, and his lack of nautical knowledge. But, "time passed and Jordan received a phone call from a distant friend inviting his son and him to [the ocean] for a fishing trip. . . . The invitation was a glorious opportunity for Jordan to spend time with his son Elliott, and perhaps reconnect with his old friend Ernie." Ernie's boat was a motor boat, not a sail craft. Jordan summarized the trip:

Ernie was both generous and selfish. He loved to share and show his things. Some things of Ernie's could be used, some things could be touched, and other things could only be looked at. Ernie's boat was all three. . . . It was Ernie's way or no way. . . . From the time Ernie launched the boat to the time Ernie hauled the boat out of the water, Ernie did most everything. Ernie dropped and weighed anchor. Ernie cooked. Ernie set the lines. Ernie dropped the crab pots. Ernie did nearly everything there was to do with a running commentary. Every action either before or while he was doing it was performed like an instructional video.

As Jordan wrote about episodes on the boat, and especially Ernie's refusal to let him assist with any of the tasks of boating, he used the device of layering his thoughts (in italic script) into the descriptive account:

"Let me do something," Jordan once asked.

"No! You two are guests. Just enjoy the fishing. You don't know anything about boats and I wouldn't want anything to happen to...uh ...you guys," Ernie emphatically replied.

*"You mean your boat," Jordan thought. You're having all the fun. You're doing all the stuff that makes a boat fun. . . . What do you mean I don't know anything about boats?*

Jordan described a moment when his son hooked a fish:

Like a flash Ernie was at Elliot's side passing on encouragement. "Not too tight. Hold it .. Hold .. Reel it in. No, like this.. Give me the rod." Ernie took the rod from Elliot and reeled the fish in near the boat. He locked the reel and passed the rod back to Elliot and told him not to let go. Jordan was at his son's side ready with the net to land the fish. The fish zig-zagged in and out of the net's range. After Jordan's first failed attempt Ernie insisted that Jordan give him the net. "Here give me the net. I'll show you. If you don't get it in, it'll get away and I'll be out a lure."

Ernie netted the fish after several tries. The fish flopped on the deck. Ernie smacked the fish on the head and cleaned it then proclaimed that that was how it was done.

*Yes, Ernie that is how it is done on this boat. You fish. We watch. We keep you company. Jordan smiled at Ernie and muttered how it was so exciting he just wanted to pee. It's a good thing Elliot is having such a good time and is really too young to realize what's going on here.*

As the holiday ended, Ernie offered to invite them again next year. Jordan thanked his brother-in-law and gave him money for gas. As he considered how to respond to the invitation, he contrasted his son Elliott's perception of the trip—"Dad, I had so much fun. Can we do this again next year?" with Ernie's version—On the trip back. . . Ernie retold the story of how much fun and enjoyment they had on their first real fishing trip on the ocean, and with his own ironic thoughts:

*It was sure swell of you to call and invite us up. I'm so glad your sister told me ahead of time how much it would cost you so I could contribute. It was nice to be told ahead of time how I might help my son spend some quality time with his Uncle. It is too bad I don't know more about boats.*

But what Jordan said was, "Great. I know Elliott will be looking forward to it." He concluded the account with: "On the way home Jordan wondered if [his friend] would show him his sailing album again and maybe teach him to sail if he bought a boat."

This holiday memory of Jordan's bears a remarkable resemblance to the holiday memories discussed by women in Crawford et al.'s (1992) memory work group. They described how, as adults, the pleasure of a holiday often "seemed buried within what was usually a problematic event" (p. 135). Although one source of discomfort arose from feeling uncertain of one's competence in the new, unfamiliar situations encountered on holiday (p. 136), they theorized that a major reason that holidays typically are more problematic than pleasurable is that "as adult women we are expected to place the interests of others ahead of our own comfort, to be unselfish" (p. 138).

The problematic nature of the holiday, the anxiety about competence, and the obligation to put his son's needs ahead of his own were strong themes in Jordan's account. He explained that although Ernie's attitude never changed in 5 years of fishing trips, Jordan's feeling was "not wanting to fight it and get his son involved; it was a constant struggle" (moving on/through). He believed that "maintaining the relationship for the sake of the child is more important" than his own feelings of frustration, as "this is his uncle whom his son loves; kids' perspectives are so different," and he did not "want to colour his son's perspective with his own" (point of view). This rationale for silencing himself was both moral and emotional. We commented that "people get so focused on self and things" and asked, "What parts of life do you let other people control, whether wedding or boat?" We saw cultural scripts at work (getting along with the in-laws;

preserving childhood innocence) and the importance of negotiating relationships. Putting others first appeared as a value that guided Jordan's choices and provided a sense of agency when faced with an external situation that challenged his agency: "Family obligations need to be navigated; [one] gives up some degree of control for the sake of the kids."

### **Leaving home/returning home**

The memories written by Lekisha and Anna were about leaving home: the experience of separating from one's community and birth family. Sarah wrote about returning home as an adult to live with her mother.

*Blind spot (Lekisha).* Lekisha recounted her actions and thoughts one evening when she received a letter from home, a country far away:

After a long day, all that Lekisha cared for was a long warm bath, a cold glass of milk, and a long undisturbed rest. . . . Lekisha enjoyed her bath and then stretched herself on the couch to relax, as she slowly sipped on her cold milk. She reached for an envelope that she had quickly torn open and read its contents immediately when she got it from the mail box, when she came home that evening. She now needed to read the mail again, slowly and carefully, taking in all details and reflecting on everything that had been written. Lekisha knew it would take another eternity before she could receive another mail from home, so she cherished every mail that came, though far apart, and read it many times over. As she read through this mail, . . . it seemed to bring back all the memories that she had held dear ever since she arrived in Canada.

The few mails that Lekisha had received previously had triggered such immense nostalgia about home that she wondered many times whether this was the same Canada that she had so longed to come to. . . . She remembered the little book that she had received in school many years back. . . that took her on a geographical "tour" of Canada as a country, its beautiful major cities and their social and economic activities. It was this book that had given Lekisha the dream at that early age, of visiting Canada one day. . . .

Living in her new found "home" for a short while, Lekisha started to realize how hard it was to be "home", away from home. . . . The culture of the people of Canada was new to her, making it more difficult for Lekisha to quickly integrate and feel comfortable . . . . She lived with memories of her home all the time and as she lay on the couch that night, she reminded herself that living away from home was a challenge, and she had to cope with it anyhow!

Lekisha has organized her account around a central metaphor: "The blind spot is something that you can't see; you have to venture into the blind spot to see what you could not see before." This insight eloquently captures the dialectic nature of personal growth. Our personal blind spots are those aspects of ourselves or our perceptions that await maturation, but until we challenge ourselves by taking the risk of stepping into the unknown, we do not even know what is that we don't know. Leaving home is a classic developmental challenge; through separating from one's roots—one's family and community—an individual experiences new insights about his or her

identity, the home that has been left behind, and the necessity of finding the internal resources to cope with and move through the loneliness, homesickness, and sense of culture shock: “No matter what, we have to cope with challenges.”

Lekisha writes from the perspective of being in the midst of this separation from her roots, which is more acute because of “being away from home in a foreign land.” She describes the emotions of being “lonely, longing for home,” how she “cherishes getting the mail,” “reading the letter over and over,” being “homesick,” and feeling a “sense of isolation.” The experience of separating from her roots presents the difficult insight that those left at home cannot share her perceptions or her experiences of being away, so there is a loss of shared point of view: “Those you have left can’t know what the new culture is like,” and “Do those you have left understand the importance of letters?” This is a plea for emotional support from home, yet the letters are few and far between, and in them people from home admonish Lekisha to “focus on your studies” (cultural scripts).

This story called forth affirmations from others in the group and a sense of commonality, as others offered anecdotes about their own parallel experiences of leaving home. One of us recalled “waving goodbye and being happy, then only later realizing what things you have taken for granted and now left behind.”

*Losing Mariposa (Anna).* Anna’s memory provides a contrast to Lekisha’s story, as Anna also wrote about leaving home, but from the perspective of looking back on the experience after many years:

On the first day of school, a mother stands near the classroom door with a few other mothers. . . . The woman thinks, “Now that she’s busy, I’ll slip out and she won’t notice.”

She makes her move, and the little brown-eyed girl looks up. She is the tiniest girl in the smallest front desk. She wears her brown hair in two long braids. “Bye Mom!” The little girl calls out and waves.

Or, at least this is how the mother tells the story of that day. The girl remembers it, too. First day of school, the most important day of her life, the day she had waited for all through the long, long summer. Nothing could spoil this day. . . . She was a big school kid now.

Fast forward, waving good-bye again. It is Sunday of the Labour Day weekend, a hot September day. Anna helps load her green samsonite suitcase into the back of her friend Dean’s Camaro. . . . She can’t take much; Camaros don’t have room for luggage. . . . So she hugs them all, and says good-bye. There they all are on the front porch: her father, mother, and three younger brothers, hanging over the porch railing waving, as she climbs into Dean’s car and they drive away.

Seventeen years old, leaving home for the big city, a 750-mile drive, to go to university. The 8-track music plays. “I’d like to be/ under the sea/ in an octopus’s garden/ in the shade.” Dean, thinking she has fallen asleep, sings along tunelessly. She doesn’t cry.

Later, she cries. In her utilitarian room in residence, she puts photos from home in a big collage on her bulletin board: her brothers, her parents, theatre group friends, the mountain, the cats.

The last day of Christmas exams, students gather in the residence commons room in the evening, before everyone leaves for Christmas break. They order pizza and gather around the piano. Someone plays, and they sing carols. One by one, people drift away. Finally, the piano player plays, “You can never go home again...” and Anna too runs back to the privacy of her dorm room, her head down so the long hair will screen her face.

In his book, *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*, Stephen Leacock begins by describing the town of Mariposa, “There it lies in the sunlight sloping up from the little lake . . .” With him, we are transported back to the little town of our memories, only to end up, finally, at the “Mausoleum Club in the city,” having “half forgotten Mariposa, and long since lost the way to it.” You can never go home again.

This account, like Jordan’s, presents the central challenge or dilemma from multiple points of view. The process of leaving home to start the first day of school as a small child is told first from the mother’s perspective (as reconstructed by Anna based on many retellings by the mother, as this has become a family anecdote), then retold from the small girl Anna’s perspective. This first separation from her roots foreshadows the event of leaving home years later once again to attend school, the 17-year-old Anna’s experience as recalled by the older Anna of today. “This first leaving starts a cycle—a chain of events that keeps unfolding and each time leaving something behind.” In writing this memory, Anna embeds within it a reference to the author Stephen Leacock’s (1931/1982) story about the town of Mariposa, from his book *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*. In doing so, Anna characterizes her life, and, more grandly, the human experience, as a cycle of change, characterized by stages of separation and loss, until finally one becomes so far removed from one’s origins that “home” becomes an idyllic memory to which one can never return, separation thus being a metaphor for death.

Yet, within this cycle, Anna portrays herself as agentive, “making choices that turn out to be good,” like Lekisha, stepping into the blind spot and once there, “dealing with it – attaining the balance” despite homesickness and the emotions of sadness and loss. Each new location yields insights about identity and culture: “You see it in a whole new light, with brand new eyes; you see your own culture from a different cultural perspective.” At the same time, you cannot go back as the “you” that you once were as you have changed in fundamental ways, and while you were absent the “home” also has changed. The home of your memories no longer exists: “The ‘you’ that comes back can’t relate to what is there” (nature of memory). This is the bittersweet paradox of life: The growth of personal and cultural insights, knowledge, and experience gained through taking risks and engaging in life’s challenges are irrevocably paired with the loss of one’s childhood innocence, identity, family, and home. Yet, perhaps all is not truly lost, as we retain the memories.

*Making space for Sarah (Sarah).* In contrast to the nostalgic memories of their lost “home” recounted by Lekisha and Anna, Sarah wrote a pragmatic, gritty, and humorous account of her experience of returning home as an adult to live once again with her mother. Sarah wrote that this proved challenging, as her mother “is a pack rat. . . more than a pack rat because a pack rat may well be perceived as organized, even somewhat clean.” However, Sarah’s mother “was untidy and unorganized in her home environment: den of dirty. . . papers [in] plastic shopping bags. . . magazines against windowsills. . . blankets and pillows laden with cat hair.” She wrote:

Sarah had not received an invite to move back home, but needing a place to stay until she found her own place and having grown up in the disarray or shadow of her mother’s stuff (and survived it), she did not consider the challenges that would face

her if she moved back home. . . . It had not prepared her for the challenge of the situation . . . the musty odor of dirty dishes, dust and death that the cats had dragged in on a daily basis. It was overwhelming. It was disgusting. It was unhealthy. . . . The situation had to be rectified. . . . Should she make an attempt to clean the house and face the consequences or should she live with the situation as it was?

So just before her mother left for the day:

Sarah proposed that she tidy up the house a bit. Sarah's mother agreed. . . . [Sarah] opened the windows wide and began tossing out pillows, rugs and eventually sections of the couch itself. Yellowed magazines were next to go, the rock collection, the dead plants and on and on items were sorted. . . . She drove the contents to the dump. . . . There were a few truckloads to make but the entire project did not take more than the allocated twelve hours. There was just enough time to stop and get a secondhand wicker couch and chair to replace the ragged furniture that had been discarded and burned.

Sarah was in bed when her mother arrived home. . . . When she did finally see her mother, not a word was spoken about the renovations. In fact, no words have ever been spoken about the challenge that Sarah faced when she moved home as an adult and made space for herself.

In discussing the memory written by Sarah, the group identified themes of identity, negotiating relationships, and the cycle of change. "Coming home as an adult requires negotiating a new relationship," which may include addressing "boundaries of privacy and personal space," and "boundaries self and others." There might be a "shift in the balance of responsibility" or a "shift to parenting the parent." Whereas Anna wrote that "you can never go home again," Sarah's memory points out that if you do attempt to return "home," you might not be able to accommodate to that home any longer but instead might have to remake the home to accommodate to your changed self.

### **Negotiating social relationships**

The central challenge in each of the eight memories, to some degree, resulted from a conflict between the behavior/desires of individuals and either the demands of others in their social circles or broader sociocultural expectations (cultural scripts). Two of the memories, however, explicitly identified the negotiation of social relationships as the challenge being faced: Sarah, in her memory of cleaning out her mother's house, and Jordan, in his memory of holidays on his former brother-in-law's boat.

Sarah commented, "My mother and I have never talked about it (my housecleaning binge)," which led to a group discussion on the nature of silence in a relationship. Silence can be emotionally laden, as in a "stony silence" or a "respectful silence." Not talking about something important which is on the mind of each person can be like "the elephant in the room," a metaphor that has been used to characterize the refusal to acknowledge grief, either personally or socially. Unacknowledged, it looms there, overcrowding every thought and action. Just as a silence exists between Sarah and her mother, Jordan also described silencing himself in his interactions with his former brother-in-law, rationalizing that he needed to do so for the sake of his son. He did not want his son to suffer, nor did he want to impair a sense of family harmony, so he suffered

silently, repressing his own feelings and needs year after year (putting others first). For Sarah and Jordan, silence as an outcome of negotiating social relationships might be fundamentally problematic, or it might be a consciously chosen compromise.

## **Phase 2 preliminary themes**

### *Punch Line Poem*

She was afraid of losing everything.  
This bride was fat.  
The innate vulnerability remained.  
How hard it is to be home away from home.  
You can never go home again.  
He would always feel that peace when things were really bad.  
Suffer not the children.  
No words have ever been spoken.

The poem above lists the “punch line” verbatim from each story, in the order that the pieces were read. We have chosen as the punch line the single most simply stated, emotionally resonant sentence that conveys either the fundamental nature of the challenge or the central insight.

Following the reading aloud and discussion of all of the written memories, we engaged in further general discussion of themes and commonalities that linked the life challenge memories. As a group, we noted that conflicts tended to arise from external impositions (such as peer pressure to float down a dangerous river, or being fired by one’s boss), forces that seemed outside of one’s control (the inability to sleep according to a clock schedule), or social expectations (brides should be thin and beautiful; one should be grateful to be invited along on a fishing trip). Even when individuals were agents of their own circumstance (Cash chose to go in the river; Lekisha and Anna chose to leave home; Sarah chose to move in with her mother; Jordan chose to accept the holiday invitation and then chose to silence himself), the challenge arose from the environment that he or she then found himself or herself in (caught in a log jam at risk of drowning, far from home, living in a filthy house, or trapped on someone else’s boat with no decision-making power).

Several of the memories described personal growth; in identifying the nature of the challenge and responding to it, individuals moved from one level of understanding through to another. Our stories reflected an existential quest for balance and harmony. Many elements of the memories were about identity: finding a place for the self, silencing the self, recognizing the vulnerability and resilience of the self, searching for identity, preserving identity, or seeking growth. Some members of the group theorized this identity component as holistic self-development: the separation and integration of mind, body, spirit, and emotions. We noted that many of us engaged in rituals when in a challenging situation. We discussed the ways in which we value experience, observing that people have different perceptions of what is of value, and it can be challenging to deal with people who have different values or points of view. We considered the tradeoff between isolation and social interdependence. The desire for control is paired with its opposite: acceptance that in some situations one lacks or must cede control.

### **Phase 3 interpretations**

Whereas in our initial writing of the memories we had avoided theorizing, in phase three each of us now wrote interpretive reflections about our own trigger memory as well as about the group collection of memories. We brought these written reflections to our next meeting to share and discuss.

Reflecting on the phase 2 discussion about how, when faced with a challenge, individuals seek to reestablish balance in their lives, Cash commented on the central insight he had when in the midst of a life-threatening incident: “Balance was maintained through the existential realization of peace and control in the midst of chaos. . . . The ability to accept emotions of powerlessness gave him power over the environment.”

Jordan also spoke of balance, suggesting that imbalance results from internal perceptions, not from the external events *per se*. Because the locus of control is internal, the self is powerfully agentive; individuals have choice in what they appropriate:

Jordan’s internal dialogue is his recognition and negotiation of perception between what was occurring in the outside world and his inside world. It is Jordan’s internal reality that contains the turmoil, not the external reality of the world. It is the self’s perception of the world that causes an imbalance and it is only the self that can return balance. (Jordan)

Whereas Cash and Jordan reestablished a sense of agency, control, and balance subsequent to an incident in which they experienced powerlessness, thereby attributing a meaning that yielded a resolution to their challenge, however provisional, George continued to struggle with a sense of lack of control. He considered acquiescing to the insomnia, and accepting a view of himself as a person with a disability. However, this resolution would introduce another level of powerlessness, and challenge his identity:

Does he control his life or does the disease control it? . . . Insomnia is, after all, a disability; one of the hidden ones . . . which complicate one’s sense of place in the world. . . . George can’t really accept the label “chronic illness sufferer” without a sense of guilt and fear. He feels totally responsible for his choices and the consequences thereof. . . . He’s also afraid of the vulnerability and dependence that potentially goes with that label and that status. (George)

George commented that the resolution he had written into his original memory, a discovery that he actually needed far less sleep than he had thought, was fictional; he was wanting “so desperately to tell a story with a nice neat ending.” This remark points to the pressure to conform to the narrative script common to North American culture; we feel compelled to tell stories that not only have a resolution, but a happy ending. George’s insight was that life challenges can resist resolution: although overall “a quest for balance seems to characterize all of the narratives, there is not a surrender to the forces of circumstances but nor is there a complete victory over them.” In the absence of resolution, he said, “it’s more important to make a statement in action to self and others, no matter how quixotic, than it is to perpetually acquiesce to circumstances.” As theorized by Haug (1987), we were active, not passive, in how we socially constituted ourselves. In contrast to the internal peace and harmony described by Cash and Jordan, George remarked, “the inner world can be a lonely place even in the most intimate of social settings.”

Lindsey also wrote about external-internal conflict. Cultural belief systems, and the material world and cultural practices that reflect those beliefs, impose tremendous pressure on individuals

to conform. Whereas in her initial memory, Lindsey described feeling great disappointment in herself for failing to reach her goal of “being skinny on her wedding day” (like George, psychologizing, taking responsibility, and expressing guilt and shame about her unruly body), on reflection she theorized about the cultural scripts that hold women to impossible standards of perfection:

Little girls are socialized to believe that their wedding will be a fairy tale. . . [a] moment that will lead to ultimate and complete happiness. . . . Everything needs to be perfect, most importantly, the bride. Fashion magazines, the media, and society help create the image of the perfect woman or the perfect body. (Lindsey)

This insight extended the phase 2 discussion about body weight and weddings, when we observed that subjective experience is collectively constructed as a cultural script. However, even while acknowledging that such expectations set women up for failure, Lindsey’s desire to alter her body remained very real to her and ongoing. Although Lindsey’s internalized desire to conform remained at the forefront of her mind, she acknowledged a competing discourse that simultaneously denigrates the pursuit of thinness: “While I am consumed of thoughts about my weight, others think that this is trivial in the grand scheme of life challenges.” Therefore, even if she successfully lost weight, she would not be seen as heroic for overcoming this challenge; thinness is the unmarked case. Effortless bodily perfection is a tall order, especially given that whereas its pursuit is not considered worthy of praise, the inevitable failure calls forth scorn and shame. Like George’s battle with insomnia, Lindsey’s struggle with body weight has yielded no ready resolution or happy balance.

Anna’s perspective steps beyond a specific challenging event, leaving home, to the cycle of change characteristic of lived experience. She wrote that leaving home is a metaphor for the process of accepting of one’s own mortality. Memories are a thread that knits together the child’s identity with adult identity in the face of inexorable change:

Leaving home does not just mean leaving behind the little town, but it also symbolizes loss of youth, and the loss of youthful dreams and possibilities. The big city, on the other hand stands for adult responsibilities, daily toil, isolation, and, ultimately, death. . . . The story is not just about leaving a specific town, but rather is about the bigger issue of growing up into an adult identity, while at the same time losing (and trying to hold onto) parts of my childhood self. . . . Memories reflect the childhood self that has been lost and that can never fully be recovered. The images remain, but they are simply ghosts from former times; they cannot be reanimated. (Anna)

In making sense of her memory, Anna turns to literature, specifically to a Romantic world view in which maturation is seen as a movement away from innocence and beauty.

Ruby also wrote about the role of memories in helping people to make meaning from experiences and to cope with challenges over time:

Often we will not immediately see, understand, or interpret what is going on around us, even though our bodies and minds may be sending us signals. We are caught up in responsibilities, expectations (real or imagined or imposed), and perhaps we do not see a solution until some outside action becomes the catalyst for change. . . . Various experiences or memories shape us and carry us through life challenges. This in turn contributes to our maturity, confidence and ability to adapt to situations, events or emergencies. It’s as if these memories are catalogued and filed in our

minds as touchstones for future reference: to help us understand or make meaning from our experiences, to inform us when similar situations arise, to share with others who may learn from us, and for healing. (Ruby)

This point makes it clear that the memory each of us selected to tell was not random or unimportant. We hold on to particular memories and construct them for the telling in the way that we do because they have a particular deeper meaning for us. It is not just the event that one recounts; it is also the life lesson learned.

Lekisha wrote that people are agentive and seek challenges; challenges are not uncontrollable things that just happen to us. By the challenges people choose, they create opportunities to grow, which enables them to reach new understandings. Therefore, challenges are core processes for identity formation and growth; yet because each of us follows a path of our own choosing, there are times of isolation, ruptures in social relations, when others might be unable to share the same perspective:

There is always a blind spot that hides some things from us. I realized that human beings concentrate on building images and expectations of their “ideal” world when they are still outside it, yet they do not realize that such a world does not exist. Reality of things becomes visible only after one has ventured into his or her chosen “world”, and light is shed onto the blind spot. . . . How difficult it is for one person to fully see and understand what another person sees, unless they have a shared world. . . . People choose their traumas, and hence have the responsibility of looking for solutions to their problems. . . . Challenges are stepping stones, (though sometimes tough), as opposed to hindrances to our destinations. (Lekisha)

Sarah wrote about the power of memories beyond the individual. The telling of our stories, as we did through sharing our written memories in this memory work research, and the active witnessing of and careful listening to those stories, enabled a profound level of human connectivity:

There are also stories behind the stories, layers of stories and interpretations and explanations, as there are with memories and experiences. . . . If memories can be viewed as gifts, then what occurred on [the date we read our memories] was a sharing of gifts. . . . Eight people, eight distinct memories. And yet, during the discussion, it became apparent that the memories spoke to fellow classmates and triggered additional stories, additional memories among the others in the group. The memories seemed part of a collective of shared human experiences. . . . The common theme of these memories rests in the reality that the memories trigger other memories and the sharing of these memories binds us. The emotions reflected within these memories and the experiences themselves bind us. (Sarah)

## **Discussion**

In this final section, we return to our initial methodological aims. Having modeled each step of our memory work method, we examine the relationship of theory and method as revealed by our findings and interpretations. We consider the written, performative, and collaborative nature of memory work, and how these characteristics are fundamental to the method. We address some of the ways we have adapted and refined memory work as a methodology, and discuss its broad potential as a tool for democratizing research.

### **Key findings, method, and theory**

Our findings and the interpretations we drew reveal the potential of this method. Among our key findings was the way in which this work pointed to our shared humanity. We each identified with the sense of personal threat in the face of a dangerous event such as drowning or job loss. Such a challenge pushes one to dig deep within to find personal resources to cope and awakens awareness of one's personal strengths and values.

We all identified with the stories of unruly bodies, exemplified in the stories about having insomnia and being overweight, and with the expressed sense of personal unworthiness, despair, and lack of control. Stepping beyond recognition, the process of empathetic witnessing and questioning led us to reframe such challenges as artifacts of sociocultural conventions (cultural scripts) rather than as moral flaws, a level of theorizing in keeping with the historical approach to memory work (Crawford et al., 1992; Haug, 1987). Society imposes powerful constraints and expectations on people. Externalizing the source of the problem through memory work can lead to more productive cognitions and behavioral choices than does pathologizing individuals and their behaviors. We also recognized that individuals have agency, choices in what challenges they take up and how they integrate social discourses into their identity.

The leaving home/returning home stories presented both literal and metaphorical accounts of aspects of human psychosocial development. These stories reflected developmental trajectories including leaving behind family and community, the experience of becoming a cultural refugee, the establishment of an adult identity, the journey from innocence to knowledge, and the growing awareness of one's mortality. These are grand themes indeed.

The memory stories relating to negotiating social relationships also struck a chord in each of us. These stories dealt with how to act in ways true to oneself when confronted with expectations or behaviors of loved ones that conflict with one's personal needs. These stories spoke to maintaining the balance between self and other, how the individual ought to function within society, and the costs and benefits of silence and compromise.

Our group research collaboration yielded personal insights and greater self-understanding that have carried us forward into the future, in some small way, as braver, more reflective, more self-aware people. Each of us identified a personal challenge that we faced in the past but that still holds currency for us, or a challenge that is ongoing. Through the processes of writing, sharing, and theorizing, we have found ourselves better able to interpret or act on that challenge.

In the original formulation of memory work as a method, Haug (1987) identified theory construction as a central aim. Our study did not yield a unified formal theory, nor did we reach consensus on a single theoretical construct that accounted for the commonalities in our memory stories. We discussed the Chinese concept of Chi (Qi), life force or spiritual energy, and examined how each of our life challenge stories reflected moving out of balance or back into balance. We considered the medicine wheel model or sacred hoop of indigenous North Americans with its four aspects of the physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual (Sampson, 2006). We talked about the mind-body dichotomy, a Cartesian dualism (Gillies et al, 2004); about the postmodern critique of grand narratives (Bernstein, 1991); and about a psychological tool, the Johari window, as a way to characterize the interpersonal dynamics of communication (Luft, 1969). Despite identifying thematic patterns, we came away with awareness that there are a multitude of theoretical perspectives that apply to our memory stories, reflective of the richness and depth of the stories themselves as well as the professional, cultural, and theoretical diversity

of ourselves as a group. One conclusion is that a search for a grand overarching theory might be a modernist aim incompatible with our narrative, polyphonic, autoethnographic application of memory work method.

### **Writing and performing memories collaboratively**

In memory work, the process of writing itself is an important methodological element. By writing out memories, we harnessed the peculiar power of writing to crystallize both the central problem faced by each individual and insights gained through the experience. Writing, especially in collaborative contexts, is a tool for thinking (Lapadat, 2004, 2009). The process of writing down memories helped elucidate the events and their meanings, gave authority to the individual's perception of the experience he or she told about, made ruptures and inconsistencies visible, reopened interpretations, and had a therapeutic effect.

We each took what we had written and read it aloud in our memory work group. In doing so, each written memory became a performance. Performance created an opportunity for witnessing, enabling each of us to make emotional, experiential, and intellectual connections with the stories of the others (Pollock, 2005). Our approach was collaborative and dialogical. The cycles of writing, discussing, and reflecting inherent in the memory work research process led us to establish a shared focus, create a dialogue about commonalities and differences in our stories, and identify patterns of meaning. By making the memories available to others to theorize, the multiple points of view others expressed opened new possibilities of interpretation.

The research experience resulted in community building. By telling our own stories to empathetic listeners and witnessing the stories of the others, there was an open sharing of personal vulnerabilities that created a sense of trust, caring, and a deeper understanding of oneself and the others. The process created a movement from the past and present into the future. Our self-insights, new understanding of others' dilemmas, and identification of experiential/social/emotional connections have nudged each of us toward changing our behaviors and worldviews.

### **Adaptations of memory work as a method**

In doing this study, we have adapted and refined memory work as a method. In our implementation, we have embraced the autobiographical nature of our stories. Haug (1987), in contrast, exhorted her collective to avoid autobiography. She claimed that autobiographical stories tend to incorporate unexamined assumptions and to reify a unitary account or point of view. Therefore, a step in Haug's original method was for each member to alter and rewrite her story following group theorizing. None of us opted to rewrite our life challenge stories. Once written, the stories became their own entities, each seeming to stand alone as a perfect gem:

My sense was that once I started writing, the story told itself. I had little concern about the audience. It was not co-constructed. Once written, the story became material, like a work of art that has been signed and hung on the wall. It was no longer open to additions, deletions, or revisions. It's like saying, "this is how I saw it then, when I wrote this." (Anna)

Rather than closing down inquiry, the stories opened it up. We used our memories of experience as starting points to identify how we have been marked and how we write ourselves into social relations, but deviated from Haug (1987) and other memory work researchers in choosing to honor each story as a gift offered by its teller rather than seeing them as needing collective

tinkering. The process itself was transformative without rewriting. We respected the stories as objects of beauty and truth, beads on the string of time, touchstones to be treasured.

The initial consensual decision to focus on a life challenge in our memory work shaped the stories we told. Some reference to agency, growth, and insight is implied by the word *challenge*, and an event of great personal importance rather than something trivial is implied by the word *life*. Moreover, events that people consider to be life challenges are ruptures and turning points, those junctures where coherent linear accounts of the self break down. At such ruptures the taken-for-granted and the disciplining social discourses become visible. We adhered to the established memory work method in using a process of consensus to choose our focus. We can now add an important guideline: The topic of joint focus needs to have breadth of scope and also must hold significance for each member of the group.

Another way in which our method differed from past implementations of memory work is that we did not begin as a collective with shared theoretical interests. Instead, we were a heterogeneous group of strangers with diverse theoretical orientations. Moreover, we used the method in a research assignment in a graduate methods course, and thus faced constraints of expectations, context, ethics, power imbalance, and time. The application of memory work and other autobiographical methods within instructional contexts is a large topic on its own, and we have explored it elsewhere (Lapadat, 2009; also see Ellis, 2004).

### **Conclusion**

In this account, we have presented a comprehensive example of how memory work methodology can be applied in an epistemological framework different than that within in which it originated. Our results point to the value of collaborative autobiography (Lapadat, 2009; Lapadat, Bryant, et al., 2009) as a means to democratize research. Through this memory work study, each of us was able to see that the stuff of research is our own and others' everyday memories, stories, and experiences. Research is not an esoteric set of procedures so much as collectively opening our creative eyes to really listen to stories, our own and those of others, and attempt to understand them. An approach to inquiry such as memory work empowers people to make meaning of their lives. We are all both tellers and listeners, so collaborating as researchers in this way resolves the problem of "othering."

A sense of community and of our common humanity emerged. This is something that people strive for individually, within social institutions, and as nations, yet that is not easily achieved. It was the process of sharing autobiographical stories with sympathetic others and having them actively listen, affirm, offer commentary, and collaboratively theorize that enabled this result. Such is the power of narrative, and of memory work as a method that promotes the writing, performance, and collective examination of personal narratives. Memory work can take its place as a democratizing approach within a broader evolution of collaborative, interpretive, socially conscious inquiry.

Each of us could ask, "Why did I tell this story at this time to these people?" Even though we each carefully selected the story we would tell to the happenstance group, it became apparent as the analytic process unfolded that each story was personally revealing in a profound way. It seems that when one reaches within for a story, the story that emerges is one that needs to be told.

## Notes

1. Although the delay of 5 years was unintentional and runs counter to most recommendations about research timelines, in this case it might have provided group members a healthy distance and time to grow as researchers.
2. All names are pseudonyms.
3. As each written memory was 500 words or longer, we have quoted abbreviated versions.
4. We also discussed procedures and our reactions to them but have omitted those elements of the discussion and coding here. Quotations in this section are from the Phase 2 field notes.

## References

- Behar, R. (1996). *The vulnerable observer: Anthropology that breaks your heart*. Boston: Beacon.
- Bernstein, J. M. (1991). Grand narratives. In D. Wood (Ed.), *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and interpretation* (pp. 102–123). London: Routledge.
- Bruner, J. (2001). Self-making and world-making. In J. Brockmeier & D. Cargbaugh (Eds.), *Narrative and identity: Studies in autobiography, self, and culture* (pp. 25–37). Amsterdam, the Netherlands: John Benjamins.
- Chase, S. E. (2005). Narrative inquiry: Multiple lenses, approaches, voices. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed., pp. 651–679). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Connor, D. J., Newton, R. M., Pennisi, A. C., & Quarshie, A. A. (2004). Tales of body/space invasions in school [Electronic version]. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 10, 495–508.
- Crawford, J., Kippax, S., Onyx, J., Gault, U., & Benton, P. (1992). *Emotion and gender: Constructing meaning from memory*. London: Sage.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2005). Introduction: The discipline and practice of qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed., pp. 1–32). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Ellis, C. (2004). *The ethnographic I: A methodological novel about autoethnography*. Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira.
- Ellis, C. (2007). Telling secrets, revealing lives: Relational ethics in research with intimate others. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 13, 3–29.
- Gannon, S. (2001). (Re)presenting the collective girl: A poetic approach to a methodological dilemma. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 7, 787–800.
- Gee, J. P. (1996). *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourses* (2nd ed.). London: Taylor & Francis.
- Gillies, V., Harden, A., Johnson, K., Reavey, P., Strange, V., & Willig, C. (2004). Women's collective constructions of embodied practices through memory work: Cartesian dualism in memories of sweating and pain. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 43, 99–112.

- Hall, J. D. (2005). Afterword: Reverberations. In D. Pollock (Ed.), *Remembering: Oral history performance* (pp. 186–198). New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Haug, F. (1987). *Female sexualization: A collective work of memory* (E. Carter, Trans.). London: Verso. (Original work published 1983)
- Kaufman, J. S., Ewing, M. S., Hyle, A. E., Montgomery, D., & Self, P. A. (2006). Women and nature: Using memory-work to rethink our relationship to the natural world [Electronic version]. *Environmental Education Research*, 12, 309–326.
- Lammers, M., Ritchie, J., & Robertson, N. (2005). Women's experience of emotional abuse in intimate relationships: A qualitative study. *Journal of Emotional Abuse*, 5(1), 29–64.
- Lapadat, J. C. (2004). Online teaching: Creating text-based environments for collaborative thinking. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, 50, 236–251.
- Lapadat, J. C. (2009). Writing our way into shared understanding: Collaborative autobiographical writing in the qualitative methods class. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 15(6), 955–979.
- Lapadat, J. C., Bryant, L., Burrows, M. Greenlees, S., Hill, A. S. Alexander, J., et al. (2009). An identity montage using collaborative autobiography: Eighteen ways to bend the light, *International Review of Qualitative Research*, 1(4), 495–520.
- Lapadat, J. C., & Karanja, L. W. (2008, October). *Cultural inscription and common meanings in life challenges: Memory work and collaborative autobiography*. Paper presented at the Western States Conference on Rhetoric and Literacy, State University of Montana, Bozeman, MT.
- Lapadat, J. C., Mothus, T. G., & Fisher, H. (2005). Role relationships in research: Noticing an elephant [Electronic version]. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 4(2), 1–16. Available at <http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/IJQM/index>
- Leacock, S. (1982). *Sunshine sketches of a little town*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart. (Original work published 1931)
- Lincoln, Y. S. (1997). Self, subject, audience, text: Living at the edge, writing in the margins. In W. G. Tierney & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Representation and the text: Re-framing the narrative voice* (pp. 37–55). Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Luft, J. (1969). *Of human interaction*. Palo Alto, CA: National Press Books.
- Mahoney, D. (2007). Constructing reflexive fieldwork relationships: Narrating my collaborative storytelling methodology [Electronic version]. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 13, 573–594.
- Onyx, J., & Small, J. (2001). Memory-work: The method. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 7, 773–786.
- Pollock, D. (2005). Introduction: Remembering. In D. Pollock (Ed.), *Remembering: Oral history performance* (pp. 1–17). New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Purohit, K. D., & Walsh, C. (2003). Interrupting discourses around gender through collective memory work and collaborative curriculum research in middle school. *Sex Education*, 3, 171–183.

- Richardson, L. (1997). *Fields of play: Constructing an academic life*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Rocco, S. (2004). Doing Derrida down under: A matter of feminist response-ability [Electronic version]. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *17*, 129–142.
- Sampson, L. J. (2006). *Seeking traditional knowledge as a transformational experience*. Unpublished master's thesis, University of Northern British Columbia, Prince George, British Columbia, Canada.
- Stephenson, N. (2005). Living history, undoing linearity: Memory-work as a research method in the social sciences. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, *8*, 33–45.
- Tynan, B. R., & Garbett, D. L. (2007). Negotiating the university research culture: Collaborative voices of new academics [Electronic version]. *Higher Education Research & Development*, *26*, 411–424.
- Wall, S. (2008). Easier said than done: Writing an autoethnography [Electronic version]. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *7(1)*, 38–53. Retrieved from <http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/IJQM/index>