

## **On Returning to School: Adults' Lived Experiences**

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In this paper, I use a phenomenological and hermeneutic approach to explore the lived experience of graduate students returning to school. The paper begins with a reflexive narrative in which I connect adults' experience of graduate school with children's experience of elementary school. The paper then reports on some of the research interviews I conducted with 30 graduate students. I interlace direct quotations from the interviews with my interpretations of the students' experiences. I argue that the boundaries between child learner and adult learner are socially constructed and not ontological.

Dans cet article, j'ai utilisé une approche phénoménologique et herméneutique pour explorer l'expérience vécue d'étudiants gradués retournant aux études. L'article débute par une narration dans laquelle je compare l'expérience des adultes à l'école graduée avec celle des enfants de l'école primaire. Un compte-rendu de quelques entrevues faites auprès de 30 étudiants gradués est rapporté. Des liens sont établis entre des citations d'entrevues et mes interprétations des expériences des étudiants. Je souligne alors que les frontières entre l'apprentissage de l'enfant et celle de l'adulte sont sociales et non pas ontologiques.

*It is wonderful to be in the classroom without being responsible for anyone's learning but my own. Yesterday I sat and read for hours. I did not even realize that so much time had passed. It seemed like only ten minutes ... my mind seemed to be suspended by my own questions. At one point I started to cry because I felt so open and fresh, like a newborn baby. I feel so vulnerable, so young ... it is as if I'm renewing my own heart, seeing with new eyes and crying real tears. In a very real sense, I feel as if I'm rediscovering the world. (A graduate student, 1993)*

### *Introduction*

This study begins with an examination of qualitative methodologies as they apply to the problem of understanding the experience of returning graduate students. The discussion of methodology supports the narrative which follows, a section that I have called "Beginnings of the Inquiry." In it, I tell of an experience in a graduate class that became my impetus to inquiry, a personal connection to my investigation. I began to realize that I was responding to this new learning situation in ways that echoed my childhood response to schooling. I wondered how other adult learners experienced their return to school. My reflections led me to inquire into the continuities and discontinuities between child and adult experience.

The literature concerning the experience of adults returning to school is extremely limited. The Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (1988) investigated the anxieties of adult learners in the process of school reentry. Drake (1991) relates the journey of the learner to its mythological base, as a metaphorical interpretation of the archetypal hero's journey. The study which I will describe, however, endeavours to expose the complexity of the lived experience of the individuals who consented to participate in my study, where, as Grumet (1988) observes "categorical meanings are suspended" in order to deepen understanding of the "dialectical interplay of our experience in the world and our ways of thinking about it" (p. 67). In my study, this dialectic can be perceived as a duet between the voices of the participants and my own.

### *Approach to the Inquiry*

My research perspective is consistent with the narrative approach to the study of educational issues. Narrative inquiry is an approach which draws upon stories of educational experience to elucidate aspects of education. Jerome Bruner (1986) describes the necessity of both the narrative and the paradigmatic traditions for investigation of the whole spectrum of educational endeavour. He suggests that they diverge in their treatment of the subject: investigations in the paradigmatic mode seek to explain the dynamics of theory, while "narrative deals with the vicissitudes of human intentions" (p. 16). Educational researchers like Eisner (1991), Clandinin and Connelly (1994); phenomenological researchers like van Manen (1990); and feminist theorists like Code (1991) and Oakley (1981) are but a few who express the urgency for qualitative research methods into the understanding of human experience. Gadamer, as well speaks to the problem of meaning in the connection between the researcher and the research when he says that

“understanding begins ... when something addresses us. This is the primary hermeneutic condition .... The essence of the question is the opening up and keeping open of possibilities” (1960, p. 266). For this reason, my study begins with my own experience and extends into the life world of the people who came to talk with me. From this point, as Grumet suggested, it is possible to consider the interplay between the individual and the world as we know it.

### *Participants*

I interviewed 30 graduate students, recruited through an invitation to explore with me their lived experience of returning to graduate school. Our meetings involved research conversations, rather than prescriptive or rule-bound interviews, following from the premise that the study was not concerned so much with explicating right answers as it was with deepening our mutual understanding of our experience. Conversations were taped and transcribed, then analysed in order to identify both common and individual themes and topics. Throughout the process of considering my study design, doing my research, and analysing my data I tried to remain aware of my presuppositions, consistent with the tradition of qualitative methodology.

### *Beginnings of the Inquiry*

A question presses itself on us; we can no longer avoid it and persist in our accustomed opinion. (Gadamer, 1960, p. 330)

Important questions, at least for me, often appear out of a vague feeling of unease. The story with which I choose to begin tells of a question that grew out of my considerable unease about a learning situation and pressed on me at a tacit level of my being. While stories are not always connected to questions, in this case the question and the story are inextricable.

In a graduate class I attended several years back, the professor had us pass a sheet of paper around the room. He expected us to fill in a space indicating subjects in which we thought we were knowledgeable. Glancing at this piece of paper, I experienced an odd feeling. It seemed to have origins deep within my being. This feeling became stronger and stronger as the dimensions of the paper seemed to squeeze me with its straight lines, tight spaces, and predictable sequences. Suddenly I was reliving the feel of my Grade 3 desk. It was huge; I felt awkward in it, it seemed like so much desk

for such a little person. My little arm had to reach almost out of my torso in an attempt to connect with the inside of this voluminous desk. My fingers probed within this dark, cavernous mouth, nimbly and deftly avoiding some one else's old abandoned gum. I grabbed my pencil crayons, with their slippery, familiar feel, welcoming them to this new task that Mr. V had just rattled off. We were to draw a number line.

I turned to a fresh new page in my math scribbler – a page full of so many possibilities. Perhaps I knew a number line probably meant linear construction, perhaps not. Nonetheless I saw other possibilities as the numbers started to become visible, my imagination gathering them in from all around. The numbers seemed to flow out of my pencil crayon and onto the paper, making their way in the shape of a funnel, spiralling bigger and bigger and bigger at the mouth, until finally they moved off the page, all around the room, out the door, and into infinity. That was my number line. *Slam* went Mr. V's ruler across my small Grade 3 hand. That slam left marks that were straight and unyielding. Suddenly, as an adult, I saw no difference to those marks on my wrist that day many years ago and the lines on the piece of paper in that university class.

I found myself objecting to this task, this framework imposed by another. Yet, to what was I objecting? To suggest that I was objecting to authority or the memory of subtle forms of punishment would be partially correct, but too simplistic. Both the experience in my former Grade 3 class and my university class had similar, predictable ways of dealing with knowledge. In the third-grade class, my life experience dictated that I saw more than one way to draw a number line. But the teacher did not acknowledge or speak of this. In the university class, I saw knowledge understood as consistent, uniform, and with one right answer. Yet, I believe that there are many important subjects that defy being treated or defined as we treat or define lines on a page. In that graduate class, why didn't I ask: "What kind of knowledge are we speaking of here?" Perhaps I did not know at the time that this was an important question to me. It may have been that I was so used to objectifying knowledge and so conditioned to think in ways that separated me from understanding myself and others. Connelly and Clandinin (1985) state "teaching and learning need to be self-consciously open to alternative constructions of scientific knowing, of aesthetic knowing" (p. 180). I concur, but with a caveat: the objective ways of knowing that evolved in the Enlightenment are dominant in teacher education today. As Rita Arditti (1979) wrote in *Feminism and Science: Science and Liberation*: "The emphasis on the analytical method as the only way of knowing has led to a mechanistic view of Nature and human beings" (p. 366).

Yet my memory from Grade 3, although distant, was powerful enough to make me stop to think and to question. I found myself wondering: "Does my childhood experience as a student give birth to the second adult experience as a student?" Perhaps in returning to school the adult returns not only in the physical sense but in the psychological sense as well. Primarily because the past intermingles with the present it may be nearly impossible to understand or ascertain the starting point of an adult student's experience. I found myself wondering about boundaries – where does the child start and the adult end? An experience I have as an adult student will quite naturally flow out of the past. Since school is the most extensive experience that a child has, this sense of continuity is not surprising. I do not experience this present time as an adult student as being altogether separate from past time spent as a child student. These questions about my own graduate school experience have led me to wonder how other adult students experience being back in school. I wondered about what the experience of returning to school was like for them. Were they returning in the same way as I? Was there similar interlacement between their experiences as returning students and their childhood experiences of school? To find out, over the next six months I had research conversations with 30 other adult students who had returned to school.

### *Adult Learners': Perspectives on Returning to School*

#### *Feelings – Fear.*

*JENNIFER'S STORY: My son was starting Grade 1 just about the same time I was starting graduate school. I remember him being all upset and saying 'But mommy I don't know anything ... I can't start Grade One when I don't know anything.' He was so upset. When I looked into his face I knew I was feeling the same way about going back to school. I was worried – like I didn't know enough or that I wasn't good enough.*<sup>1</sup>

Jennifer's comments may point to the notion that fear is a universal feeling among human beings. We all face fear; however, I wonder just how different is Jennifer's fear of going back to school from that of her child going to school for the first time. Her child's fear may have more to do with the unknown because the child has not had the experience of school and does not know what to expect. Conversely, Jennifer's fear, the adult's fear, may have more to do with the known. I was initially surprised by Jennifer's candour. In truth, I was quite touched by it. Jennifer's vulnerability helped me become more open to the truth of my own experiences. Buber (1988) refers to all real living as meeting: "I and Thou" (p. 11). The dialogue between Jennifer and me created a kind of transparency between two people. Through speaking with

Jennifer, I realized just how much I had been conditioned to hide my fear. I then considered how students often manifest their fear through becoming silent, a point that Fine (1987) addresses.

*DAWN'S STORY: It wasn't until I took this course from this professor that I realized that I had been a nice little girl all those years in school. I simply did the assignments to please. When this professor started asking me hard questions dealing with my experiences, my emotions, I realized how little thinking I was doing on my own. It really struck me how separated I had become from myself. I now understand why so many people talk about finding themselves.*

In speaking further with Dawn it became evident that she felt a certain amount of anger and sadness around this event. Her next question, "Where was I all those years, Karyn?" led me to recollect the experience in the graduate class that I described above. Had I also not been surprised by some faint echo of my childhood self long past, then I would have missed seeing something new.

Perhaps there is hope in knowing that we can unlearn years of conditioned patterns that we may deem harmful to our own education. The poet, teacher, and writer, Natalie Goldberg, suggests "the trick is to keep your heart open" (1986, p. 28).

Upon returning to school is the adult student not being given the chance to author, to relearn, to open, the past with all of its preexisting notions in an attempt to create a new interpretation for the present/future? Children, and to a lesser extent adults, seem to have that openness, that preparedness, for learning. If learning is to occur in graduate school, is the adult facing the great challenge of being child-like again? Does there need to be a certain willingness to leave behind what we already know so we have the chance of seeing something new?

*Feelings – Leaving.*

*KERRY'S STORY: When I came to this university as a graduate student, I left everything about me behind. It is hard because I don't have family here and most people here seem to have their own lives. They put their day in and leave. Yet, in an odd way, it is good to be away from home because I am discovering new things about myself. In some ways I look back to my old life and I think it was quite stale; suddenly, I feel younger and more vital.*

The actual physical move offered Kerry a chance to move away from the mundane, and all of the expectations circumscribed by patterns within the mundane. Although his move may not have been easy, it seems to have

offered Kerry a chance to discover new things about himself. This, of course, is not to suggest that a move will open everyone up to new possibilities and potentialities within his or herself. After all, some people can travel to the most exotic worlds and want everything to be like home. They stay in hotels that suggest home, sleep in beds that suggest home, and have encounters with people that suggest home. However when we are adult learners, being away from home does seem to offer us the opportunity of swimming in new waters, and making different choices as to how to deal with the sharks and the dolphins we meet. Such choice is not always available to the children in our schools. Yet, if the experience of being in graduate school is a good one, if one really becomes a student again, not just in registration alone, then in a sense there is a chance to remake oneself. To grow – to become – to develop. What else is learning?

*Feelings – Uncertainty.*

CASSIE'S STORY: *I had forgotten what it feels like to struggle with such uncertainty. My learning this term has been like going over hills and valleys. Some days I wake up to solve one problem and then I discover that this has opened me up to search for more answers. I have always thought of myself as a lifelong learner ... going back as a graduate student, however, has a certain quality about it that is different from being in school as teacher. I don't know, in some ways it's as if I'm being pushed into a relationship with self, yet I'm the one doing the pushing. Maybe that is why time has a different feel to it; because, in a funny way, I am forced to live with myself. Weekends are no longer distinct from the rest of the week; it is all the same, sort of like my time as a very young child when all the world was mine. At school, as teacher, time has a buzz-y-ness to it; the children take me away from myself, and my own learning, because they need so much of me. So, it is an adjustment to spend much of my time with myself and my own questions. It is a privilege, a gift, to be back at graduate school and as much as I love teaching I know I will never have this time to learn with such depth. Life's not like that – this is the detour.*

The struggle with uncertainty is a common theme in literature. The poet Gwendolyn MacEwan describes this struggle eloquently:

Admit there is something you cannot name,  
a veil, a coating just above the flesh  
which you cannot remove by your mere wish  
when you see the land naked, look again ...  
the moment when it seems most plain  
is the moment when you must begin again. (1969, p. 30)

Perhaps we who would be educated must struggle with uncertainty. In fact, this struggle may be what makes learning possible. For Cassie, a return to graduate school has meant a return to the uncertainty about learning she faced as a young child.

*Feelings – Rediscovery.*

ELLEN'S STORY: *It is wonderful to be in the classroom without being responsible for anyone's learning but my own. Yesterday I sat and read for hours. I did not even realize that so much time had passed. It seemed like only ten minutes ... my mind seemed to be suspended by my own questions. At one point I started to cry because I felt so open and fresh, like a newborn baby. I feel so vulnerable, so young ... it is as if I'm renewing my own heart, seeing with new eyes and crying real tears. In a very real sense, I feel as if I'm rediscovering the world.*

Ellen also seems to find freedom to learn in a way that was quite different from when she was in the classroom as a teacher. In educational circles these days, there is much talk about the need for the teacher to be a learner along with her students. After speaking with Cassie and Ellen I question how realistic is it to place a teacher in position of "owning her learning" when she is, in fact, responsible for the learning of the whole class. What may be the difference then, between being in school as teacher and being in school as adult student?

*Feelings – Passion returns.*

ELAINE'S STORY: *Life back at school is: time spent as a graduate student; everything else is merely a slice away from that [i.e., time taken away from being a graduate student]. To others around us it may appear as though we have become completely self-centered. The writing, thinking, never stops; your thoughts may temporarily go underground but resurface at any moment. You take every opportunity to engage everyone around you in your research. And somehow everything relates back to your research; my family is sick of it, even my books in my study wind their way into every room of the house. One thing is certain; I have started to become curious again, devoted to and fixated on my new found reading and research, like a child with a favourite plaything.*

Initially I thought that writing this paper would merely give me a chance to understand what the experience is like for students in graduate school; however, it has given me much more. For some, the experience of being back has been like a renaissance. And for many, the experience has been one of returning to an earlier sense of self – with childlike curiosity and playfulness

about life. Yet how does this renaissance occur? And why? Had I not been surprised by my curious reaction to that piece of paper in that graduate class then I would have missed seeing something new. But I cannot help wondering on some level whether I was not open, almost prepared for something new. I think of the words of Carse (1986) who states, "to be prepared against surprise is to be trained. To be prepared for surprise is to be educated" (p. 23). In retrospect, I now realize the unexpectedness of my reaction in the graduate class marked a new beginning for me as a graduate student. Suddenly I understood that my being back at school went beyond holding a glossy I.D. card that presented my student photograph. It went beyond attending classes or doing research. For all intents and purposes, being back opened up a relationship with myself and the intense love of knowledge I possessed as a child. Some people, like Natalie Goldberg (1986), whom I cited above, have a love of learning that seems heated, open. My desire to learn, my commitment to learning is more quiet, but still there, silent, circulating just beneath the skin. For some such people, as myself, graduate school may be a chance to bring this love of learning forth.

### *Relationships in Graduate Study*

*JAN'S STORY: He made such an impression on me. He respected each and everyone of us and this came across in everything he did ... he made me rethink the teacher's role ... I feel so inspired, I only hope in some small way I can do the same for my students.*

Being back at school places one in a relationship with a teacher. But if it is a positive one, what is the quality of that relationship? In talking further with Jan it became apparent that he had entered a relationship that was almost familial - a relationship with all of the nuances that van Manen refers to as a pedagogical relationship. van Manen (1994) suggests that

'pedagogy' ... brings out the relational quality between teacher and student, in a manner unlike any other educational concepts such as curriculum, instruction, or teaching. The term 'pedagogy' shares with terms such as 'friendship,' 'love,' or 'family' that they evoke first of all an implicit relational significance. (pp. 140-141)

Moreover, van Manen goes on to suggest that

our relation to a real teacher – someone in whose presence we experience a heightened sense of self and a real growth and personal development – is possibly more profound and more consequential than the experience of relations of friendship, love, and so forth. (p. 143)

*JUNE'S STORY: This sounds almost sentimental but I fell in love with learning all over again because of one professor. I sat there like a wide-eyed child that first day in his class. I realized how important he is, I get downright defensive if anyone says anything about his quirks or idiosyncrasies because he is my friend, my mentor.*

Surely a great teacher is someone we can never forget even though he or she may not know about their far-reaching effects on us.

*JILL'S STORY: I felt like a caged animal. I felt like I needed to break out. I felt very, very, very, frustrated. This person [instructor] would actually change my commas around. I wanted the commas in a certain place for a reason. I know the rules of grammar. I know how to write. Sometimes, she would change – put a sentence in, that would take the whole essence of my paper away. It seems like I have done nothing but learn the answers to a certain professor's questions.*

Jill did not enter into a positive pedagogical relationship with this teacher. However, I think that it would be simplistic to infer from Jill's story that being back in school either introduces one into a pedagogical relationship or it does not. In order for there to be a pedagogical relationship, there must be reciprocity. There must be trust on the part of both participants in the relationship. As Bollnow (1989) has said, "trust demands a response. There is no trust without faith which we have toward a person who has trust in us" (p. 38). Moreover, perhaps some students do not appreciate professors who want to engage them in their own learning. They may, in fact, be critical. For example, Chris, another of my participants, said "I came to get information. I know what it is I need ... I paid a lot of money to be here and I'm not getting it."

*Feelings – The experience of disappointed expectation.*

*BEN'S STORY: I expected Graduate school to be enlightening ... I know it is a common notion that Graduate students should do their own work but you pay all this money ... I don't want to come to classes and then teach the classes myself ... I came to get information.*

Ben's story suggests that an irreparable rift may develop when expectations fail to meet with reality. Jim's story is similar.

*JIM'S STORY: What is it like to be back at school may be best answered by saying it is like being in love with knowledge when the rest of the world is not. I didn't give up my life to sit in a room of people who are so undisciplined that they can not get away from*

*unloading their trivial lives. I am disappointed to say that I have found 'thinking' marginalized in grad school. I came back to school to enlarge my life. I feel like I'm being cheated if others are simply reproducing their small little lives.*

Dostoevsky asks: "But what is to be done if the direct and sole vocation of every intelligent man is babble, that is, the intentional pouring of water through a sieve?" (cited in Kaufmann, 1956, p. 65). Other adult students like Jim, must be truly frustrated if they believe they are dwelling in an anti-intellectual environment. I wonder where this disappointment leads. How does one foster one's own intellectual interests when one feels alienated, set apart from others?

### *Relationships With Books*

We read books to find out who we are. What other people, real or imaginary, do and think and feel ... is an essential guide to our understanding of what we ourselves are and may become. (Le Guin, cited in Schur, 1991)

No doubt books are an important part of the academic life, much as the paint and canvas are important to an artist. Yet for some graduate students, books may become more than just the tools of the trade, more than objects. Books may actually take us away from the disappointment of living with flesh and blood people and offer us a chance to enter a relationship with someone we respect. Books may become particularly important to those who find themselves in classes with people with whom relationships seem unlikely. The relationship we develop with the author does not disappoint because we have chosen to enter into the relationship. By choosing carefully, we may discover books that help us understand who we are and what we may become. Perhaps this is why our relationship with the book takes hold of us. We in fact may become defensive if someone "puts down" our favorite author or damages a book of importance to us. Anna, another participant said, "I felt like my skin was torn back when my toddler managed to rip a page from my precious book by Munro."

**KIM'S STORY:** *My books and articles do not stay clean for long because I end up scribbling all over them. It is as if I am developing a relationship with the author through my scribbles. I never met the author Aoki, but I end up having a dialogue with him.*

Perhaps books may actually allow us to enter into dialogue, dialogue that may not always be possible in certain classroom situations.

*TERRY'S STORY: Being back at school ... I find there are a lot of 'shoulds' around books. Picking up a textbook is different from the experiences I have with other books. When I have to read this book or that because my advisor has recommended it, I want to resist. The book seems to say: 'You have to read me.' Textbooks have power over me. If they are attached to marks I wonder whether I will have to parrot back what it is the instructor thinks is important or will I be able to expand and move beyond.*

*MARTY'S STORY: I don't like to sell my books, even the required textbooks.*

Marty's words made me think about how the experience with books may be different for others. For example, we talk of ownership in education, yet in our schools for the most part, books are not owned unless of course they are damaged. Does knowing that a book may be yours render the experience somewhat different from simply renting or borrowing?

*CAROLYN'S STORY: It's curious, my experience at graduate school has been a time for falling in love with books. Is this what becoming educated means?*

As a teacher, I read voraciously and indeed I had many relationships with books, although I did not really think of it that way then. I merely read for pleasure as I had always done outside of my formal education. As a graduate student I am developing a stronger relationship with books partially because my day becomes saturated with reading and partially because books become a foundation for my achievement in the academy. I am thrilled to be spending my time reading but, pragmatically speaking, I am also aware of some of the rules around books in the academy. This awareness allows me to make choices by transcending obstacles I deem harmful to my own growth. As a teacher, I believe, I was not sensitive to the subtle rules. For this reason, I wonder how many times I may have unwittingly excluded or failed to recognize the diversity of my students' lived-worlds when I, as a classroom teacher, chose the books for the class syllabus. For this reason, I wonder how both children and adults experience books in our schools?

## *Relationships With Knowledge*

A man must learn to understand the motives of human beings, their illusions, and their sufferings. (Einstein, 1984)

LEANNE'S STORY: *It isn't that I'm brighter than anyone else; I'm an impostor really, but I figured out long ago when I was getting mediocre grades that no one is interested in what I think. What they want to hear is what they think; my job becomes one of figuring out what that is.*

So far, I have mainly alluded to the experience of graduate school as being a chance to become richer – to enlarge a life – to develop relationships with self and others, yet it would seem that some do not experience it this way. Leanne is very much aware that she is “prepared against surprise.” Her success actually depends on how well she goes about it. This she refers to as doing the “studenting thing.” She candidly asserts that she is willing to play the game – to get the 9's, to get the scholarships, to get the university job.

Throughout this paper I have been flirting with the word *student*. It would seem that one can be a student without being a learner. How we come back to school may largely depend on our intentions. I wonder just how much the experiences of graduate school are determined by our different intentions. Perhaps some students are here on a journey more in keeping with a preplanned package tour. They want the tour to be predictable – finite. They want a ticket to a job. Others may not want the prepackaged tour. Instead they want a relationship that will help them find out who they are in relation to their studies. They have a commitment to ideas. If one's intention is education in the deep sense of the word, then one would expect to do more than just mental operations embedded in a series of tasks involving little personal engagement or commitment. The way we experience graduate school may best be understood from the way we enter graduate school. There is a world of difference between being and doing, learning to get information, and learning as a transformation.

## *Relationships With Institutions*

LESLEY'S STORY: *As teachers, we are accustomed to school; yet, the experience of teaching is different from being a graduate student back in school. It is probably good to have the experience of being a student again. I had forgotten about the power structure in our institutions of learning. Sitting in this desk takes me back –*

*takes me back to being a student. Sometimes I feel helpless. I know just how it is children may feel because I'm now the student!*

I wonder about the power, or lack of power, that an adult learner has. On returning to school, do adult learners have to relinquish the power they may have gained after leaving school the first time?

*BILL'S STORY: Starting back has a fuzzy feeling like it is not real. I had a life with real power and a real identity. Now I go to the library and I am subsumed under the student category. There are offices with strict policies so the institution can run and of course there can be little trust ... my library fine mounted as I tried to search for the book I had returned. I finally did find it, however I am told I must pay the fine. It is the policy. Of course I can launch an appeal. I am told it will do no good.*

It may be difficult to enter into a relationship with an institution, especially if one is used to a more familial relationship. In going back to school, we may face the challenge of institutionalizing ourselves; making ourselves subject to the expectations and normative demands of an institution.

*PAT'S STORY: I went to the library to copy a few articles. As I went through the turnstile to gain access to the library I noted just how unusually crowded the library was. I ascended the stairs to the second floor of the library ... it occurred to me that the library was probably packed because of final exams. This sudden thought produced an odd feeling in my gut. I wondered why I felt such an intense feeling bubbled up in this part of my being. As I went through the second-floor doors I looked around. It was dead silent. No visiting, just people sitting all alone, cramming and stuffing themselves with the appropriate knowledge to spit out later. I could not help remembering being in the same position as those 'poor students!' I wanted to leave as quickly as possible. I grabbed the articles and set to my task at the copy machine. The machine whined its familiar whine and then spit out the first page. With this first page came that copy machine smell that I had forgotten until now. That smell transported me back to the time when I was teaching ... I was now standing in front of that machine as teacher. Strangely, I felt better. I would be the one giving the exam.*

Pat's story sheds light on adult learners' relationships with institutions of higher learning. The usually positive space of the library was fundamentally changed by exam time. Even though the library was packed with bodies, there was not the usual visiting going on. The library never sees a more crowded time yet it was full of separate individuals – not groups – only those quietly, privately stuffing their minds. The stuffing spilled out creating a “stuffy

atmosphere” an atmosphere filled with such tension, that an adult student felt constricted by the feeling of having been in the same position as “those poor students.” There was an actual physical and psychological release from the oppressive feeling only when the copy machine toggled a memory. With this memory came a new outlook. Was there a switch in outlook only because there was an implied change when the role of teacher was recalled? I wonder about the nature of the transfer of power between teacher and student. How do we treat our students? As adults or children? If we treat adult learners as powerless children, are we teaching them to treat the children they will eventually teach likewise? Miller (1988) has remarked on the way we divide people into groups of ‘us’ and ‘them.’ He says:

One of the most prevalent forms of the fragmentation of life is our division of people into “us” and “them.” At this level we ignore our basic connectedness as human beings. Here we can divide people according to colour, people that believe in a particular “ism” from those that don’t and ultimately people that must be bombed in order to preserve our “way of life.” It is much easier to build the bomb when you view the enemy as “them.” It becomes much more difficult when we see the enemy as “us.” (p. 2)

### *Relationships With Self*

**DAN’S STORY:** *Ultimately Karyn, I would have to say that being at school as a graduate student has become an experience of learning to trust myself. I have been through an intense process of rediscovery regarding my education and the best part is that I have learned to trust what I think.*

Dan’s words became of paramount importance to me, making me think of Plato: “Thinking is the talking of the soul with itself.” For Dan it seemed that being back at school had placed him on a path back to trusting himself. But what had he trusted in before, if not himself? I found myself reflecting on the experience of my own education. Indeed, if Dan was anything like me, he would have spent the better part of his schooling learning to think that what is most valued and true is in proportion to how little we had to do with it. Yet how can children learn to trust themselves if they lose sense of the reality of their own experiences and that of others.

I now knew what I had objected to in the aforementioned graduate class. It was not so much the task of writing what I felt knowledgeable about. Indeed, to be fair, I knew that sheet of paper was sent around to ascertain common interests for focus groups. I believe what I was objecting to was the residue of arid intellectualism which tends to separate the knower from the

known. I do remember thinking at that time: "I'm a reading clinician, yet, perhaps we should ask the children whom I have taught what I am indeed knowledgeable about." Moreover, I do believe much of what I value and trust cannot be categorized within the lines on a page. I did not fill that sheet of paper in, and I did not say why.

I believe it would be different today. My experience of being back has been much like Dan's – I too, am learning to trust in what I think and feel within a school setting. I believe that now I would have to explain the difficulties I had with that piece of paper; to do otherwise would mean I would not be listening to myself. Learning to listen and trust myself has only been possible through my return.

### *Further Observations*

This research inquiry began with a personal story, fraught with tension arising principally from the residues of my childhood experiences of learning. Old feelings seemed to echo in the new experience of learning as a graduate student. This awareness grew as I engaged in conversations with the participants in the study. Many of these graduate students, too, shared feelings of fear and uncertainty through to joy and a renewed sense of passion for learning. Had they been numb for so many years?

Making the connection between these feelings and the residual patterns from the past is tantamount to suggesting that adult and child experiences of learning may not be quite so different as most curriculum theorists would have us believe. Van den Berg (1975) points to a culturally imposed boundary between childhood and adulthood, stating "the child today has become separated from everything belonging to the adult's life" (p. 32). An imposed child-adult dichotomy undergirds theories of curriculum development which subsume the experiences of children to a final idealized form that we may call the educated adult. Interestingly, while most of the participants in my study were teachers, it was only their own return to school as learners which created the awareness of the similarities, rather than the differences, between learners of different ages.

In focusing on the similarities rather than on the differences in the experiences of child and adult learners, I realized I was also questioning the kind of knowledge that our education system validates, for *both* child and adult learners. Holt (1983) has argued that schools far too often train children's natural ways of learning out of them. Graduate school seemed to offer some learners the chance to exorcize the over-reliance on objective ways of knowing that seem to permeate much of curriculum theory. A number

of graduate students expressed that this new experience of learning had taken them back to curiosity and play of their childhood. Yet a return to something may also suggest an absence. Perhaps the return to graduate school may offer a return to the childhood sense of self and a return to a way of learning that is far less fragmented. For some graduate students, study may provide a time for mending the imposed child-adult dichotomy. For others it may not. But I believe, to understand ourselves fully, we need to face the discontinuity between our childhood selves and what our cultural history provides us as models of adulthood.

### NOTES

1. Although the quotations in this paper are verbatim, and the events they describe happened in real life, I have changed the names and identifying details of individuals to ensure confidentiality.

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