It is not, ‘I think therefore I am.’ It says rather: ‘I am human because I belong. I participate, I share.’ A person with Ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed, or treated as if they were less than who they are. (Desmond Tutu, 1999, No Future without Forgiveness, p.31)

In the Spirit of Ubuntu: Stories of Teaching and Research offers a collection of stories to encourage teachers and researchers to embrace the spirit of Ubuntu, which can guide our work. These authors seek to bridge their academic work with community engagement, well-being and transformation. Many of the book’s contributors demonstrate a research commitment to working collaboratively with underrepresented communities, who are viewed not as “objects” to be studied or rescued, but as partners in a shared project. Others demonstrate how self-reflection informs and transforms their teaching practice. Overall the writers show through their stories, how an ethic of care, respect and reciprocity applies to teachers as well as researchers and works toward the decolonization and humanization of schooling and the academy.

From the Foreword by Ngugi wa Thiong’o:

The stories here are united in a common quest for Ubuntu but in the process they become an important contribution to that common quest... They should be read as an expression of the common quest for a more humane world.

The cover photograph was taken by Esther Kogan at the Caroline Wambui Mungai Home, Wangige, Kenya.
In the Spirit of Ubuntu
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Scope
Cultural studies provides an analytical toolbox for both making sense of educational practice and extending the insights of educational professionals into their labors. In this context Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education provides a collection of books in the domain that specify this assertion. Crafted for an audience of teachers, teacher educators, scholars and students of cultural studies and others interested in activity, pedagogy and cultural studies, the series documents both the possibilities of and the controversies surrounding the intersection of cultural studies and education. The editors and the authors of this series do not assume that the interaction of cultural studies and education devalues other types of knowledge and analytical forms. Rather the intersection of these knowledge disciplines offers a rejuvenating, optimistic, and positive perspective on education and educational institutions. Some might describe its contribution as democratic, emancipatory, and transformative. The editors and authors maintain that cultural studies helps free educators from sterile, monolithic analyses that have for too long undermined efforts to think of educational practices by providing other words, new languages, and fresh metaphors. Operating in an interdisciplinary cosmos, Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education is dedicated to exploring the ways cultural studies enhances the study and practice of education. With this in mind the series focuses in a non-exclusive way on popular culture as well as other dimensions of cultural studies including social theory, social justice and positionality, cultural dimensions of technological innovation, new media and media literacy, new forms of oppression emerging in an electronic hyperreality, and postcolonial global concerns. With these concerns in mind cultural studies scholars often argue that the realm of popular culture is the most powerful educational force in contemporary culture. Indeed, in the twenty-first century this pedagogical dynamic is sweeping through the entire world. Educators, they believe, must understand these emerging realities in order to gain an important voice in the pedagogical conversation.

Without an understanding of cultural pedagogy’s (education that takes place outside of formal schooling) role in the shaping of individual identity–youth identity in particular–the role educators play in the lives of their students will continue to fade. Why do so many of our students feel that life is incomprehensible and devoid of meaning? What does it mean, teachers wonder, when young people are unable to describe their moods, their affective affiliation to the society around them. Meanings provided young people by mainstream institutions often do little to help them deal with their affective complexity, their difficulty negotiating the rift between meaning and affect. School knowledge and educational expectations seem as anachronistic as a ditto machine, not that learning ways of rational thought and making sense of the world are unimportant.

But school knowledge and educational expectations often have little to offer students about making sense of the way they feel, the way their affective lives are shaped. In no way do we argue that analysis of the production of youth in an electronic mediated world demands some “touchy-feely” educational superficiality. What is needed in this context is a rigorous analysis of the interrelationship between pedagogy, popular culture, meaning making, and youth subjectivity. In an era marked by youth depression, violence, and suicide such insights become extremely important, even life saving. Pessimism about the future is the common sense of many contemporary youth with its concomitant feeling that no one can make a difference.

If affective production can be shaped to reflect these perspectives, then it can be reshaped to lay the groundwork for optimism, passionate commitment, and transformative educational and political activity. In these ways cultural studies adds a dimension to the work of education unfilled by any other sub-discipline. This is what transgressions: cultural studies and education seeks to produce—literature on these issues that makes a difference. It seeks to publish studies that help those who work with young people, those individuals involved in the disciplines that study children and youth, and young people themselves improve their lives in these bizarre times.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to acknowledge our community of authors. Without their humanism and vision, as well as their patient support and graciousness during the writing and editing process, this work would not have been possible. Additionally to those individuals and community members whose lives inform these projects, we send our heartfelt gratitude. Special thanks go to Esther Kogan, for providing the original photograph for the front cover, George Mungai for his poem “We are” and to Shirley Steinberg for her belief in this book. Last but not least, we thank our families for their unconditional love and enthusiastic support of our lives and work.
In his book, *Discourse on Colonialism*, Aime Cesaire has made the apt observation that culture contact is the oxygen of civilization, that cultures that don’t make contact shrivel. I think one could say the same thing about stories; that sharing stories is the oxygen of the human spirit. But the stories told here are not fictional but rather stories of personal encounter in the quest of the truly human embodied in the term Ubuntu. Every individual no matter the culture and community they come from has experienced reality in a unique way and therefore each person has something unique to contribute to the common spirit of our being. Such stories then become like the streams that make up rivers that flow into the common Sea.

The stories here are united in a common quest for Ubuntu but in the process they become an important contribution to that common quest. Ubuntu has to be seen, not as an abstract term that has no base in material existence, but rather as an expression of the highest being of that existence. This is important in a global society that has become divided into a majority of nations in Africa and Asia and Latin America that live in poverty even as they see ninety percent of their natural and human resources consumed by a minority of rich nations. They are the most needy yet they are the most giving. But within each and every nation there is also the division between the wealth of a social stratum at the top, and the poverty of a vast social majority at the bottom. The ever increasing demographic of the homeless, the beggar, and the prisoner in nearly all nations of the earth is really a metaphor of a world divorced from its being.

These divisions between and within nations have left wounds in the human heart. An economically, politically, culturally and psychologically liberated Ubuntu is the only way of healing the wounds and the scars. These stories, *In the Spirit of Ubuntu*, tell of personal journeys in the quest of such healing practices. They should be read as an expression of the common quest for a more humane world.
INTRODUCTION

Becoming Human

When we stay with a story, refusing the impulse to abstract, reacting from the source of our own experience and feelings, we respect the story and the human life it represents…. (Bochner, 2001, p. 132)

From the perspective of the early 21st century, becoming human seems more than ever a work in progress rather than a given. With this in mind, we offer a book of stories because we believe that sharing stories can help us grow into our humanity. Taking the narrative turn in research and teaching frees us to let go of the master narrative of academic power and privilege in order to learn, humbly, from the diverse peoples with whom we share our lives and the world. If we take care not to lose ourselves in isolation, but unite our search for self-knowledge with an equally strong commitment to community well-being and transformation, stories can offer powerful tools for the renewal of educational scholarship and practice. They provide much needed warmth within the too often chilly byways of academe.

In the Spirit of Ubuntu: Stories of Teaching and Research is a collection of experiential narratives representing a range of voices and styles, grounded in different communities, landscapes and personal histories, yet united in a desire to join self-reflection and engaged storytelling with the social justice agenda that informs each author’s particular work. With our stories we search for ways to reintegrate the individual with the communal and the secular with the sacred. Out of a feeling of deep respect and gratitude, we associate these ideas with the spirit of Ubuntu—a Southern African worldview that Desmond Tutu (1999) describes as “the very essence of being human”:

It is not, “I think therefore I am.” It says rather: “I am human because I belong. I participate, I share.” A person with ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed, or treated as if they were less than who they are. (p. 31)

Our opening chapters draw directly from three lived experiences of Ubuntu. The remaining nine chapters offer a selection of autobiographical narratives, research reflections and educational projects from around the globe. We have organized these narratives by three themes—healing, respect, and community—interlocking dimensions of our shared humanity, embodied here by the single word Ubuntu.
Ubuntu

The spirit of Ubuntu was in the air at the Second International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry held at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign in 2006. It was here that I was fortunate to be scheduled for a panel with South African author Dalene M. Swanson, whose presentation, “Humble Togetherness and Ubuntu,” stayed with me long after the conference ended and was one inspiration for the concept behind this book. In her chapter, “Where have all the Fishes Gone: Living Ubuntu as an Ethics of Research and Pedagogical Engagement,” Dalene weaves the concept of Ubuntu into a many-layered story of her lived and educational research experiences in South Africa. For Dalene, Ubuntu offers a generative pathway toward understanding and transcending the paradoxes of positivist research and neoliberal politics to arrive at a place where the deeply human is discovered and cherished, forming a basis for a transformed ethics of research and pedagogy.

Discovering a way of knowing with the potential to revitalize educational philosophy and practice is at the heart of “Towards an African Peace Epistemology: Teacher Autobiography and uMunthu in Malawian Education.” In this chapter Steve Sharra offers the story of how his educational research evolved from a study of teacher autobiography to a profound search for a unifying philosophy and pedagogy of peace arising from uMunthu, the Chichewa word for Ubuntu. Along the way, he traces the historical, political and theological roots of a Sub-Saharan worldview that challenges us to draw the well-being of the human community to the center of our educational thinking.

In “Ubuntu: From Poverty to Destiny with Love,” Anne Mungai describes how the shattering loss of her daughter inspired her family to return to Kenya and initiate a grassroots community project to serve countless children orphaned as a result of disease, violence and poverty. During this journey, she rediscovers the spirit of Ubuntu as fundamental to traditional Kenyan society, yet undermined by the social ills engendered by colonialism. She describes how the Caroline Wambui Mungai Foundation revives the spirit of Ubuntu in her Kenyan community and provides a replicable model for addressing the needs of orphaned children throughout the world.

Implicit in these stories of Ubuntu is an urgent need for healing—healing within self, community, and the wider socio-political and educational contexts in which we live. Finding ways to uncover and speak the buried histories of those that have been “othered”—denied their essential humanity through oppression, becomes an essential tool to begin the broader healing of both the oppressed and the oppressor. Authors in the next section explore the experience of being othered from three unique perspectives.

Healing

In “Being Otherwise, Teaching Otherwise,” Michael O’Loughlin recounts his experiences growing up as a member of the working poor in a rigidly class-stratified Ireland. Marked early by “sanctioned inferiorization” Michael’s examination of his personal history generates a multileveled narrative that explores issues of
social class, race, and migrant status and how broader historical and biographical legacies contribute to the development of our subjectivities. Building on his experiences as an educator and therapist, he explores the importance of inner work, and the value of forms of pedagogy that allow children to engage with spectral memories and historically transmitted trauma. His approach has particular relevance for marginal groups in our world, most particularly Indigenous groups and groups who come from long historical lineages of oppression.

As a Native American scholar and woman, Frances Rains (Choctaw/Cherokee & Japanese) carries the responsibility and promise of generations of Native women whose courage, leadership, and steadfast devotion to their lands and peoples have been erased from history. In “Even When Erased, We Exist: Native Women Standing Strong for Justice,” Frances traces the outstanding contributions of Native women to their Nations, both before and after the onslaught of cultural genocide and land theft by Western colonizers. In the very act of writing these lives back into history, her scholarship uncovers the devilish work of racism, sexism, and greed that has rendered their important voices silent until now. Recovering these stories is a profound act of historical healing that offers lessons, not only about the past, but also about the present, as Native women continue to speak out forcefully against the injustices that rob all of us of our humanity.

In “Growing Up Gay Deep in the Heart of Texas,” Rob Linné describes his early confusion at learning his sexuality marked him as other within his own family, school and church. Through a series of autobiographical vignettes he traces how this othering launched him on a journey to understand the dynamics of love and hate we are taught as young people. This journey informs his life as a teacher educator where he searches for ways to discover the healing and forgiveness that are at the heart of being truly human.

The act of othering is central to the critique of Western research practices explored by the authors in the next section. Decolonizing the research act involves a radical rethinking of many of its basic premises and power imbalances, and a search for new methodologies. Such rethinking is both a challenge and a source of important new learnings for nonindigenous scholars seeking respectful partnerships with Indigenous peoples. At its heart, decolonization strives for Ubuntu’s open spirit of respect and the honouring of all members of the human community as part of the research act.

Respect

“Closing the Distance: Partnering with the Indigenous Peoples on Whose Lands We Earn our Living, tells the story of my research journey from ignorance to an evolving understanding of the Indigenous peoples of my birthplace—Long Island, New York. Along the way I retrace my early stumbles and discoveries and show how my original project changed from a traditional graduate school “problem statement,” to one more resonant with the ideas encountered in multiple conversations with the Shinnecock people who became my teachers and ongoing research partners rather than the “subjects” of a study.
In her self-reflexive narrative, “Paths In: Transformations of a Painter,” Kryssi Staikidis recounts her experiences being mentored by two Maya artists in their Guatemalan studios. She examines her positionality as student, artist, cultural outsider and ethnographer. Her artistic apprenticeship in an Indigenous context becomes a unique method of decolonizing art education inquiry. Along the way the three artists transform their research relationship into one of shared artistry and mutual discovery, learning together that the language of art can foster deep understandings, reciprocities and friendships across cultures as well as life-long transformations within the self.

Jenny Ritchie describes herself as “a Pākehā, a citizen of Aotearoa/New Zealand of European ancestry, committed to social justice and cultural equity within education.” As a scholar, educator, and mother of six bicultural children and grandmother of one, she is deeply committed to exploring collaborative educational research methods that centralize Māori worldviews and values within a Western monocultural educational context that has excluded such understandings. In “Bicultural Journeying in Aotearoa,” Jenny traces an academic journey that led her to enact decolonizing practices in early childhood educational research. Along the way, she and her Pākehā and Māori co-researchers articulate pedagogical approaches that are profoundly grounded in Māori ways of being, knowing and doing. Her story demonstrates ethical research methodologies that flow from generous hearts and open minds.

The authors in the final section are teacher educators reflecting on their own practices. All three model the importance of honouring community in the teaching and learning process, where both teacher and learner are united in a search for meaning and a commitment to human flourishing.

Community

In service learning, Diana M. Feige has found liberation from a troubling, disquieting sense of the inauthentic in the role of university professor. “Confessions of a Reluctant Professor: In Gratitude to Service Learning” is a deeply personal account of her struggle to integrate her spiritual and professional lives. Through stories of how service learning—a pedagogical option that marries academics with action, curriculum with compassion and community—Diana weaves a deeply reflective celebration of how we can expand the boundaries of our classrooms to include the wider world of the human community.

As language arts teacher educators at the University of Hawai‘i, Donna Grace and Rhonda Nowak work to enliven curriculum that is increasingly divorced from children’s lived experiences due to the culture of standardized testing generated by the United States No Child Left Behind legislation. In “Place-Conscious Learning: Bringing Local Culture and Community into the Curriculum,” they share two projects that demonstrate how critical and creative inquiry into local issues awakens teachers to the role community can play in engaging high level learning within language arts classrooms that dare to expand beyond their four walls.
INTRODUCTION

In “Today I am Proud of Myself: Telling Stories and Revaluing Lives,” Elite Ben-Yosef describes the work of a weekly literacy class she taught in a recovery home for women who live together while working to reclaim their lives after prison stays, substance abuse and other traumas. Through sharing stories, tentatively at first, and then with increasing power and expressiveness, the women embark on a communal journey toward finding their voices, coming to new understandings about their self-worth, and forging new spaces for themselves and the world.

It is our hope that the readers of this book will find encouragement for engaging in new ways of writing and thinking about research and education. Most importantly, we present this work as one way to move from isolation to interconnectedness and to move the human spirit—the spirit of Ubuntu—to the heart of our discussions, lives, and work.

NOTES

1 Out of respect for the term Ubuntu and the human ideals toward which it points, the editors have chosen to use the initial upper case when employing this word.

REFERENCES


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UBUNTU
WHERE HAVE ALL THE FISHES GONE?

Living Ubuntu as an Ethics of Research and Pedagogical Engagement

In the Spirit of Joseph

Deeply disappointed, I stood looking at the gate, chained and bolted closed. There was a fine stillness that threaded itself diaphanously through the soft zephyr of early afternoon, like the breath of dissipated anticipation. The red brick school building stood there empty and alone as if mocking my memory of the happenings within it some years prior. I could discern the dappled shadows of the past behind the veil of an existent manifestation of reality. I could feel the sunlit-afternoon ghosts of that present intruding on the past, trying to trick my consciousness, attempting to reconstitute history and replace it with current phantasms of a vacant school and post-apartheid South Africa, like simulacra, as if they were the new ‘real’. The background white noise of nearby traffic and the faint lull of waves against the barnacled pier in the nearby harbour seemed, for a moment, to pause, and the audience of my consciousness hushed as if some premier performance was about to begin….

I had been very excited to revisit this school, one of the schools in which I had engaged in my doctoral research all those years ago and in which I had dreamed, wished, aimed to go back and give back for so long now. Even a quick visit would suffice, at least for now. And here I was, finally standing in front of the main entrance of the school, and it was empty! The whole school was steeped in the silence of absence. My word-thoughts of what I had wanted to say when I greeted him again, the principal of this school that I had admired so much, and to the teachers and the people and the humanity within the community herein, were now lying as splintered shards of discarded possibility on the ground, and the fragments disintegrated and seeped into the red dust like playful demons of failed intent.

There was a nation-wide public sector strike on. I knew that many schools had closed their doors in sympathy and in safety to their community. Teachers were striking too. There had been strike action when I had engaged in my research in this region of South Africa years ago, but it had not really impacted these schools in this bay. Nor had the historic fishing village with her mixed-race community been directly affected at that time. Now, I was in the country for such a short ten days before I had to move on and return to Canada. I’d hoped beyond hope that there would at least be some staff present that I’d known before in the school, characters that I’d written into my narratives. Even if the school were closed for
classes, perhaps they would still be there bustling about. I played with the mental images of the faces from my narratives, from my past lived experiences, hoping for them to come alive and become re-embodied in the flesh outside of the words.

As I drove my hired car up the same unchanged winding roads towards the school, I wondered what their reaction would be to seeing me again after so many years. While the possibility of disappointment dampened the sense of excitement, hope, and anticipation of seeing the people of this schooling community again, my thoughts were primarily focused on an existential question of consciousness: What would it be like?

But...there were just ghosts for me. Just the remains of objects of past activities marking in similitude where happenings might have occurred, of phantom events within school buildings, along pathways, behind closed doors, closed meshed windows, closed metal gates, bolted and chained: just the remains of memories; the remains of the day before me; and with it, the shattering disappointment of lost opportunity to fill the substance of that space.

Only the haunting caw of a seagull as it flies (fore) shadowingly overhead breaks the silence that has pervaded this static moment, as it also signals a change of scene. It is as if the seagull is heralding some new emergence, reminding me to be ready and open to receive new messages, to expect a visitation, to recognize a harbinger of sorts, and to stand as internuncial witness. As I stay standing, longer than I needed to, trying to capture a sense of past presence and place, grasping at an illusory real, I am aware that I am in fact waiting for something, something to happen. I stand still in front of this school as if in expectant anticipation of the unexpected...and as I do so, he enters from the left.

“Goeie middag, mevrou! Kan ek mevrou miskien help met iets?” I turn to look at him perplexed. I had not seen him appearing from the wings into the vision of this scene of absent presence. He is wearing the blue overalls that designate workmen and workwomen in South Africa, but in contradiction to this class referent, he is carrying a black leather report folder under his one arm. His face is wrinkled with years of sunburn and his hair shows hints of grey. He smiles, turning his head to one side deferentially, and I see his mixed-race heritage with the signs of Khoi-San descent in his facial structure. I extend my hand to shake his, and I reply to his greeting: “Goeie middag, meneer! Ek wou kom kuier. Ek was lank gelede hier.”

He nods his head as I explain that a few years back I had come home from Canada to engage in my doctoral research in this school and two others in the vicinity (Swanson, 2004). He sees the resignation in my face and responds sympathetically, with an “ag, shame, mevrou,” as I explain my reason for being here at this moment. I tell him that I had come back for a conference and a quick visit to South Africa, and had hoped to visit the school, the principal and teachers that I had befriended here before. I knew that the students would be new and that the other students I’d known would have passed on to other things and left the school by now, but I had hoped to visit with some of the school community members that might still be ‘holding the fort’, so to speak. He laughs with me over my last comment. He nods with understanding and compassion in his eyes,
recognizing my disappointment as if it were his own. He sighs and drops his eyes to the ground as if to think about this situation a little longer and afford it the quiet gravity of this moment. We both look at the ground where my thought words had disappeared, and there is a moment of silence again. The breeze stirs little dust balls on the ground and about his dusty workman shoes, sturdy with large laces, that have been worn well with several years of walking in this community. We stand and are both thoughtful.

Choosing the appropriate moment to speak again, he lifts his eyes with the intentness of issuing important words. Converting to English, probably because he had heard that I was now living in Canada and my Afrikaans was less than fluent, or because he recognized that I spoke it with the accent of an English speaker, he tells me that he remembers the principal and teachers speaking about me, “the South African teacher from Canada,” and how they had spoken so highly of me. “Ja, for a long time,” he says, with an accent on ‘time’ to give it importance and with another nod of the head.

This compliment comes across most sincerely, but I also understand it in the cultural parlance of graciousness that I remembered as being so prevalent within this fishing community, their heart-felt politeness, their sensitivity to the feelings of others, their careful deference and bestowing of honour on people they deeply respected. Speaking slowly, which, from my perspective, is a cultural code borne from humility and intended to give each word the weight of meaning and respect it was intended to bear, he says: “I wasn’t here at the school at the time, but I came to be more involved with the school soon after you left, and they used to speak of you, and you left a good impression. They would be very disappointed to know that they missed you today. Ag, siestog! What a shame! I am sorry!”

I reply with a gracious ‘thank you’ and tell him what an honour it had been to be welcomed into this community, that I often thought of the people I had come to know in the community and wished them all well, and that I had been very grateful for the opportunity to engage in research and with such a wonderful community. I explained my gratitude for the gift of their wisdom and hospitality, and that I looked forward to meeting them all again. And then as if we both simultaneously realize that we had not formally introduced ourselves, we exchange names with a “nice to meet you” at the end of the greeting.

It is then that he begins to share his story. At the time, I was not prepared for what was to come. I was still caught up with my own disappointment, but as he spoke in deliberate and carefully formed words, I soon realized that I was again being given something very precious. My senses initiated a shift of consciousness that opened me to humbly receiving what was to be one of the most sacred gifts of humanity I could ever have been given, the sharing of an important narrative, the telling of a precious life story, full of reverberating meanings and wisdoms that that telling entails.

“I am Joseph Hendriks,” he says with a hint of pride, and realizing that I probably have no idea of what he is talking about as I would not have had access to local provincial papers in Canada, he continues:
I am the caretaker at this school, but on Sunday’s I am the community pastor. Over the last few years I have become increasingly involved with the school, because I am concerned about our youth here. I pray for them on Sundays and I try to take care of them during the week. I support our teachers and principal because I know what hard jobs they have here in this community and the difficulty with our youth. It is because of our youth that it happened. They tried to get rid of me because I was speaking up for our youth.

I look perplexed at his last statement and he continues his narration carefully and slowly, undeterred:

You see, the skollies and the drug dealers, they are damaging our youth, corrupting them and ruining their lives before they have a chance for anything in life, and I was trying to stop them. Because I was close to the kids in the school, I could see what was going on, and I was telling the police, and they didn’t like me as an informant, the drug lords that come into our community. They come here because our community is poor and our kids are so vulnerable. There are no prospects for them because there is no fish in the harbour. No fish! Where have all the fishes gone? They have been plundered, the big boats come from elsewhere, and the fishermen have ransacked the seas, so there are no fish. They did not stop until the fish were all gone. And as you know, this is a fishing village that has grown around this harbour. It has been our way of life for many, many decades.

He stops to clear his throat then continues, meticulous in his explanation:

So the fathers of the kids, they have no work. There is terribly high unemployment and the fathers just lie about and drink, and so the alcoholism is very bad. So the kids get neglected. And then we have other social problems here, the violence with the gangs, and domestic violence and rape.

Resonating with the despairing discourse the principal had deployed all those years back during my doctoral research in relating the conditions of the community, he continues to explain with a sigh:

There is lots of it. It is very bad. The kids have no prospects and there is not much hope of getting a job or doing better than their parents, so they get involved with drugs. And for the drug dealers, this is easy money because there are so many kids they can get their hands on. So our community suffers and we can’t get out of this vicious cycle. We are dependent on the fish. The fish is our hope and there is no fish.

He turns for a moment towards the harbour and looks wistfully at the sea beyond the school as if imagining a harbour brimming with fish and a community ‘saved’ and ‘healed’ by the emergence of prospect, hope and possibility. But reality intrudes; it is a messianic wish, and he turns back and continues:

That is why they plotted to get me, those skollie drug dealers, because I tried to stop them and I kept on telling the police. So they tricked me. One day, I
was driving in my old car and at the stop street, a car pulls up next to me and a youngster turns down the window and asks me if I am the pastor, and I say “yes,” and he says he has good, cheap parts for my car and I must follow him and he will take me to the place where I can get the parts cheap-cheap. I followed him because I thought they were being kind to me because I was the pastor and next thing I am on a lonely road towards one of the beaches here and the youngster stops the car. As he does so, three men jump into my car and hold a gun at my head and tell me to drive. They tell me where to go and the next thing we are driving towards The Strand. They hold the gun below the level of the window and tell me not to try any tricks. I try to flick my lights and drive onto the wrong side of the road to get the attention of passing cars, but they threaten me that they will kill me if I try that again.

He stops for a moment to fidget with his report folder then tucks it back under his arm. The sun is hot and I can feel the sweat running down my back. He must feel it too and he takes out a handkerchief to mop his face:

Then at a place that is very remote they make me stop along the road and they force me out of the car and shove me in the boot, and then they drive again, and I know they are driving towards The Strand.

He pauses again and I imagine that the flood of memories of the situation he was in, of his own fear, must be difficult to relive and retell. But he continues, intent on his story:

I prayed. I cannot tell you how much I prayed in the boot of my car, because I knew what they were going to do with me. I lay there in the dark and I prayed, and I knew I must try to do something before it was too late. And you know, The Lord was with me because I decided to flip the boot open, but I just happened to do it at exactly the time when the car came to a stop at an intersection, and because of that, I managed to jump out and I ran and I ran as fast as I could. They tried to come after me and they were shouting and shooting but they did not get me, and I managed to get away. I ran through the dunes and just kept on running. I’ve never run so fast in my life. I was covered in white sand like a ghost but I kept on running until I eventually got to a roadside store. I went in there and the people helped me phone the police and they came right away. They sent out a squad to look for the skollies but they could not find them, and they took me home and made sure I was safe with my family. It was a terrible thing and the whole community was badly shocked. Everyone was in fear, but they were very supportive and ready to protect me. Everyone was very kind and they were very concerned about the skollies coming back to murder me. And one day I get a phone call and I am asked to meet a man down by the docks, so I go down there and he tells me that he was told to tell me that they did that because I was telling on them to the police and they wanted me dead as a result.

So I kept very low for about a month or so, and I said nothing and I did not go many places, and I just kept a low profile. You know, I was scared for my
life. It did not feel good having to look behind your back every moment, worrying about the safety of your family, imagining every moment when you hear a sound, that they are coming to get you…. It was not good.

I was trying to take in the full horror of his story, and for a moment I tried to imagine his situation. The breeze stirred again and it was like warm breath on my clammy face, but my sweat turned cold down my neck. I made a comment about how sorry I was and how awful it must have been. The story was shocking! The afternoon turned, and shifting his feet and tucking his report folder under the other arm, he again continues:

You know, I could not live like that. For a while I kept low, but I realized that this was not the way. I could not keep on living like that in fear and that I wasn’t helping anyone. So I changed my approach. I started to get out into the community again. I spoke up for our youth in church again. And I realized that working against the drug dealers like that wasn’t the right way. It wasn’t going to work. So I actually approached them. I arranged to meet with them and I invited them to talk with me. I showed them I wasn’t afraid and that I had changed my approach. And many of them agreed to speak with me, and slowly I befriended them and asked them, “Please, look what you are doing to our youth! You are destroying these young people’s lives. This is not right!” And I appealed to them to please change their ways, and some of them came over to the right side, and they stopped their drug dealings with the youth here. Some of them even came to our church. So now I am back in the community and I continue to help our youth. Recently we started a job training centre for the unemployed youth here to try to find them other work because there is no fish. I am praying it will help a lot. I pray for our youth everyday.

It is often difficult to grasp the full impact of a narration and to understand what has been given, the preciousness of the gift. From disappointment, I was given an unexpected offering of learning. He gave me so many gifts of wisdom, the meanings from this tale and from their telling unfold in layers and across time. The telling offers moments of insight and sagacity in each pondering and remembering, in each epiphany it evokes, and in each recasting of the narration in my mind and spiritual communion with it. Like a textured coat of many colours, the story holds multiple understandings of ways of knowing and being that we can only be humbled by its generative living power. This Joseph, like his biblical counterpart, forgives his brothers that sell him off. He, like his counterpart, wears a coat of many colours, but he has given this as a gift of himself to his community and through the telling of his story. The interrelated lessons of this tale are many and each holds importance and position in how we engage with our lives, of its purpose, of education, of approaches to community engagement and research, of society, ideology, justice, and our earth. It gives us more than any of this. It gives us hope.

One of the foremost lessons I gained from Joseph’s story and which, for me, is manifest in daily other revelations, is the understanding of how social justice
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cannot be slathered off from the larger ecological concerns that impact issues of poverty, opportunity and cultural epistemic access and affirmation. They work together as a whole, and like other binaries of Western thought, their separation is ideologically problematic. The particular and the universal, the local and the global require being understood as multi-articulate, reciprocal, concomitant and intermeshed. The subjugation of people, their way of life, their knowledge systems and wisdoms, their socio-economic, political and cultural aspirations, are part of a broader global historical discourse of subjugation that marks the land and people in localized ways through geographies of difference, and it enacts its violence across time and space. “Where are all the fishes gone?” Joseph asks, delineating the relationship between the devastation of the seas, the denial of a community’s livelihood and historical way of life, and the drug addiction and despair suffered by the youth of this community.

Just as holism and a larger vision of humanity and ecology as being ever-interrelated is nurtured back into life through Joseph’s story, so the appreciation of that which Joseph was expressing in his actions of care, compassion, forgiveness, and an expansive inclusivity, was, in fact, Ubuntu. His encompassing sense of humanity and his great generosity of spirit bore these out. His capacity to transcend personal fear and self-interest, to overcome the limitations of an oppressive context and step aside of the mocking shadows of despair, was the life and spirit of Ubuntu. It was with Ubuntu in his heart that he had the courage to approach the drug dealers, those who would have him murdered, and win them over. It was a show of Ubuntu that he succeeded. It was (with) Ubuntu that he gave back to his community and to the care for its youth. He modelled Ubuntu for these youth. It was with Ubuntu that he shared his story with me, and he gave Ubuntu in its telling and in the lessons I received from the giving. Joseph’s story was the spiritual gift of Ubuntu.

Ubuntu: An African Philosophy of Being

I come to an understanding of Ubuntu through lived experiences, having grown up in apartheid South Africa. I attended university there during the height of the liberation struggle, witnessed the release of Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, and with fellow South Africans and others around the world, I celebrated the transition of my country of birth to democracy. I became aware of the concept of Ubuntu from an early age. My mother, who spoke conversational Zulu and who had experienced close relationships with Zulu people since birth, was careful to expose me to the responsibilities, contributions and consciousnesses of citizenship and community in an African context. I experienced Ubuntu, first hand, through love and friendship with Xhosa, Zulu and Sotho South Africans, and other Southern Africans I knew, and was often welcomed into indigenous communities. Nevertheless, I was also acutely aware of the difficulty and near impossibility of achieving Ubuntu in many contexts of segregated South Africa, as well as my role and responsibility as being collectively implicated in this as a white South African (Swanson, 2006; 2007a; 2007b).

While an ongoing project of ‘nation building’ draws on the political aspirations of a strong, united South Africa, renewed and healed from a divided and ruptured
past, it highlights the challenge of incorporating Ubuntu as a pan-political philosophy of engagement, not only operating in the interstices of human relationships but at the institutional, structural and national levels, a somewhat utopian endeavour (Swanson, 2007a; Marx, 2002). Nevertheless, Ubuntu as a guiding principle for nation-building in South Africa serves as a signifier of commitment to a collectivist program of healing, redress and forgiveness, as has been exemplified in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s (TRC) mandate (see Tutu, 1999; Battle, 1997), even if this has been critiqued as being via a glorified and imagined past (Marx, 2002).

Nobel Prize laureate, Archbishop Desmond Mpilo Tutu, who, in 1995, became the chairman of post-apartheid South Africa’s TRC, was a strong advocate of Ubuntu. For Tutu, the spiritual power of Ubuntu humanism served as an important platform for providing rules of engagement in TRC hearings. The ethos and tone of proceedings were critically important to the hearings in order to enable, in an ethical manner, the recovery of “truth” through narratives of atrocities from the apartheid era. These terms of engagement were also necessary in the subsequent processes of forgiveness, reconciliation, transcendence, and healing that arise, cathartically, through the humbling process of truth-telling.

As I have grown to understand the concept, Ubuntu is borne out of the philosophy that community strength comes of community support, and that dignity and identity are achieved through mutualism, empathy, generosity and community commitment. The adage that ‘it takes a village to raise a child’ is an African wisdom borne from an understanding and way of being aligned with the spirit and intent of Ubuntu. The obsessive Western focus on individualism and the continued colonizatation of African indigenous peoples through the new forms of global capitalism have served to diminish the importance of African collectivist humanism and Ubuntu as a philosophical and communal way of life. The increasing verticularity of Western dominant norms over indigenous wisdoms and perspectives has, through the modernistic project and the dominance of Western-interested techno-centricism, subjugated such knowledge forms and undermined their resurgence (see Swanson, 2007b).

In the South African context, just as apartheid threatened to erode this traditional African way of life – although in some instances it ironically strengthened it through galvanizing collectivist support and creating solidarity amongst the oppressed—so increasing industrialization, urbanization and neo-colonial globalization, threatens to do the same.

South Africa’s ready embrace of global capitalism and globalizing neo-liberalism, post-democracy, has set back the project of Africanisation. The global project of progressivism set the course for South Africa in its desire to be competitive on the global stage and significantly participate in global affairs. This came at a cost. At the time when South Africa came out of isolation and was welcomed back into the international arena, a new wave of imperializing capitalism disallowed the possibility of community healing and restoration by preventing the “insurrection of subjugated knowledges” (Foucault, 1980, p. 80) of the Southern African peoples and an abandonment of “a historical knowledge of struggles” (ibid., p. 83) and its earlier
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politico-ideological purposes. This has been despite Thabo Mbeki’s initiative, as previous President of South Africa, to engender an African Renaissance, whose said purpose is to assist in ‘ending poverty and oppression’ and to ‘regain dignity’ for all South Africans. In this sense, incompatible ideologies have resulted in contradiction and fragmentation rather than the unification ideals of nation-building. Ubuntu is a victim of this incommensurateness and rupture. It struggles for recognition, realization and legitimacy within (indigenous) communities, and against misappropriation and complete subjugation on a national, political and institutional level. But, to appreciate the complexity of this, we need to understand Ubuntu more fully as an important historical thread of Africanist knowledge systems. It is to be appreciated as the salt of much of African philosophy, an African way of life, and as a norm and value within African community contexts.

Ubuntu is short for an isiXhosa proverb in Southern Africa, *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*; a person is a person through their relationship to others. Ubuntu is recognized as the African philosophy of humanism, linking the individual to a collective of ‘brotherhood’ or ‘sisterhood’. It makes a foundational contribution to indigenous ‘ways of knowing and being’. With differing historical emphasis and (re)contextualization over time and place, it is considered a spiritual way of being in the broader socio-political context of Southern Africa. This approach is not only an expression of a spiritual philosophy in its theological and theoretical sense, but as an expression of daily living. In my own work (Swanson, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007a, 2007b), I have spoken of it in terms of a ‘humble togetherness.’ For Tutu, Ubuntu is a way of knowing that fosters a journey towards ‘becoming human’ (Vanier, 1998) or ‘which renders us human’ (Tutu, 1999), or, in its collectivist sense, a greater humanity that transcends alterity of any form (ibid.).

This ‘transcendence of alterity’, as I understand it, is not the collapsing of difference in the sense of ignoring the social and political effects of power that ‘difference’ and discourses on difference constitute in daily lived realities within communities across the world, where the arbitrary nature of constructed ‘difference’ enacted on diverse geographies of the body are made to appear ‘normal’ and ‘real.’ Instead, it is a conscious attempt to reverse these effects in bringing together an understanding of the common investment of humanity as being inextricably bound up together, in ‘a bundle of life’ (Tutu, 1999), whose pleasure and pain, survival and demise, recognition and subjugation, are all part of a common responsibility, a trans-phenomenon of collectivist concern for earth and other. In recognition of an interconnectivity with the land and all of Earth’s citizens, a disposition in consonance with Ubuntu would mean becoming receptive to others and other ways, while offering a generosity of heart and spirit. It is centered on an accepted communal obligation to justice rather than ‘individual rights.’ It would mean a way of seeking inner sanctum that gives rise to compassion, self-effacement, mutual understanding, and humble spirituality. It attests to a belief that the individual is implicated in the whole and that the self bears witness to a transcendent, trans-phenomenal capacity for human good, no matter how complicated and ethically complex that ‘good’ might be(come).
Most saliently, and in great consciousness of the complexity of global politics and contemporary social problems we face in the world as ever interconnected humanity, Archbishop Tutu remarks that: “You can never win a war against terror as long as there are conditions in the world that make people desperate – poverty, disease, ignorance …” (in Lloyd, 2007, p.1).

A notion of ‘humble togetherness’ or Ubuntu in facing the shared responsibility of world poverty, may go a long way to addressing these problems and provide alternatives to the way governments act in response to ‘threat’ and ‘fear’ as well as to the perceived need to ‘protect their own interests’. Ubuntu undoubtedly emphasizes responsibilities and obligations toward a collective well-being. On a global scale, greater co-operation and mutual understanding is very necessary to a sustainable future for all with respect to the ecological, moral and social well-being of its global citizens, human and otherwise. Ubuntu provides legitimizing spaces for transcendence of injustice and a more democratic, egalitarian and ethical engagement of human beings in relationship with each other. In this sense, Ubuntu offers hope and possibility in its contribution to human rights, not only in the South African and African contexts, but across the globe. In support of this final assertion on human rights, Tim Murithi, Programme Officer at the United Nations Institute for Training and Research, writes on a culturally inclusive notion of human rights and its implications for a new international charter. Murithi (2004) asserts that the global campaign for human rights needs to be given new life. He believes that this needs to be achieved through reformulating the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In reference to the universal ideals of social, economic and ecological justice, Murithi avers that we need to re-articulate our aspirations to human rights far more in the ‘language of obligations’, which would commit more unambiguously to action. He notes: “In essence, a re-articulation of human rights from an ubuntu perspective adds value to the human rights movement by placing more of an emphasis on the obligations that we have towards the ‘other’” (p. 15).

Ubuntu is not to be taken as another meta-narrative for global engagement, however. It should not take on the dominant position of yet another scatological Truth. It should not become the new ‘said’ in Levinas’s terms, ‘the said’ being that which strives for universality, solidarity and closure, but should maintain the openness of ambiguity and uncertainty that resides uncomfortably with the tensions, challenges and possibilities of the ‘Saying’ in relation to encounters with global ‘others’ (See Edgoose, 2001). Its misappropriation and recontextualization (Bernstein, 2000) might also become dangerous in its new configurations through prevailing power relations in the contexts of its adoption. These are always the dangers of philosophy at the level of ‘implementation’ or as universalized ideology. Much like Hegel’s (1820) owl of Minerva, who spreads his wings only with the falling of the dusk, philosophy can only speak of events in their hindsight, rather than command a power to project prescriptively on a generalized future. In the same sense, Ubuntu should always find its source and rootedness at the level of one human being to another, of a human being to the earth, of a human
being within community, as difficult as that is to understand or define or as complex as its various constitutions may become. While Ubuntu values obligation and responsibility, it is also defined by acceptance of difference and sacrificial care for another. Ubuntu’s power is with its ethical spiritual commitment, its propensity to value humility and human dignity, not with its capacity to impose a set of values on an-Other.

Nevertheless, as principles for pedagogic engagement, and as a guide to living within an ethic that places responsibility for social and ecological justice within a web of interrelated collectives, Ubuntu has much to offer, not only within the Southern African context, indigenous peoples and historical location from which it arises and has lived and breathed, but in what it offers for all humanity across the globe as to be interpreted and embraced variously within their situated contexts. On a personal level, it has also offered a way for me to understand the importance of an ethics of engagement in educational research. It is to this that I turn my attention now.

A Research Journey as Pedagogic Journey of the Self

I completed my Ph.D. at The University of British Columbia. As previously introduced, my dissertation is a critical exploration of the construction of disadvantage in school mathematics in social context. It provides a reflexive, narrative account of a pedagogic journey towards understanding the ‘pedagogizing of difference’ (Swanson, 1998, 2004, 2005) in mathematics classrooms and its realizations as lived disadvantage in and across diverse socio-political, economic, cultural, and pedagogic contexts. As mentioned, I returned to South Africa some years back and stayed for several months to engage in fieldwork in schooling communities there.

Two of the communities in which I engaged in research were situated in contexts of relative and extreme socio-economic poverty. Consequently, ethical issues associated with respectful ways of being in research with such communities, the moral dilemmas faced through research engagement, the positionality of research relationships, the power relations invested in such relationships and through institutional engagement, as well as the researcher’s ‘ways of seeing’, all became critical issues of concern in the research process. It was necessary for me to find less objectifying ways of being in research; ways which would disrupt and decolonize dominant meanings, not contribute to ‘deficit discourse’ (Bernstein, 2000) and ‘disadvantage’—meanings produced from privileged perspectives.

It was here that Ubuntu provided a vision and framework for me for respectful engagement in research of this nature; one that permitted reflexivity, reciprocity, community connectedness through a sense of ‘humble togetherness’, and cross-cultural understanding. It also provided opportunities for life-enriching and transformative experiences, and, importantly, spiritual growth. A focus on Ubuntu in its socio-cultural and political context, helped to highlight the multitude of interrelated moral, ethical and ideological dilemmas faced in fieldwork experiences in a context of ‘poverty’, while paradoxically also serving to provide a way through the quagmires and contradictions, and achieve transformation through a transcendent
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spirituality. It is through my narrative exploration of research issues, ambiguities and contradictions in their full, often irresolvable and ungraspable complexity – narrative that often bordered on autoethnography – that Ubuntu was drawn into my research, shaping my research experiences, in ways that offered lived pedagogies of hope and possibility.

The Narrative in Context

To exemplify only a small aspect of this research engagement with Ubuntu and how, through a reflexive narratizing, it might deconstruct hegemonic meanings and allow for other possibilities of being in the world, I will offer an extract from a narrative in my dissertation. I have elaborated on this in Swanson (2005, 2006, 2007a, 2007b, 2009a, 2009b).

To set the scene, I am sitting in the office of a principal at a missionary elementary school situated in a shanty or informal settlement. The conditions of poverty are evident everywhere.

The Narrative Excerpt...

“You mathematics education researchers,” he says, half jokingly. “I don’t know.” He laughs and shakes his head a little self-consciously or to be polite perhaps. He knows he is positioning me now as one of ‘Those.’ He is congenial and friendly about it and I can see that he hopes I don’t mind! I don’t mind…I understand and appreciate this in context of this cultural aspect of South African humour. “All these new methods and this progressive education thing,” he continues after a long pause, “and these kids still don’t know their times tables! So what is the good of all of it?” At first, he assumes the posture of someone in debate, but then he jumps up and starts to stride across his office, gesticulating as he talks. I sit on the other side of his desk as he performs for me, explicating his argument against progressivism in an extemporaneous and agitated dance. “When I grew up, we did it by rote, and at least I can work out my budget and do multiplication without having to reach for a calculator…But these kids today, if you ask them what is two times seven, they don’t know.” He goes on: “But we have to embrace this progressive education thing.”

I realize that this statement has more to do with his positioning of me as “a white South African mathematics teacher,” or even more so, “a white Canadian researcher,” and his own relational positioning in this context, than it is about the pedagogics or politics of educational progressivism itself. And despite this…for a moment…I want to ask what I think are crucial questions, which, for me, highlight the contradictions of the statements I have just heard from the principal of this elementary school. I want to ask him why it is, that from my perspective, I have not really evidenced any real attempt to engage in any progressive education practices within these classrooms…why I have seen so much rote learning…when any pedagogic learning took place at all…or why I have seen, from my perspective, so much apparent indifference…why it is that corporal punishment is still used.
here when it has been made illegal to engage in physically punitive practices in South African schools...why so many of the teachers are so seldom in the classroom when the National Minister of Education at the time, Kader Asmal, has made urgent and repeated appeals to teachers across the country to take their jobs seriously for the country’s sake, for the sake of our youth and the future generation of South Africa now in creation? Where does the proverbial ‘buck stop,’ who is responsible, who cares, why not, and how can we make a difference?

I want to ask him why he closes the school early so frequently, causing very small children to have to walk home alone, often unescorted back to their homes in the informal settlement where they are not attended to or protected because their parents or caretakers are at work? Where does his responsibility to the community end … or where does it start? Why does he use class time to have meetings with his staff, and why so frequently is learning interrupted for apparently, from my perspective, inconsequential issues? Why does he legitimize teachers’ missing classes by engaging in these practices himself? Why can’t meetings take place after school?

A part of me wants to speak out. I want to tell him what I think. I want to tell him that I think it is not right. That this is ‘just not good enough’! Is this what we were all liberated for…? Wasn’t it to try and make a difference, to turn it around, to ‘fight the good fight’! Not to give in to oppression; not to submit to the authority of poverty and consequently the authority of privilege that establishes the poverty; not to succumb to the worst form of oppression, in Freirian terms, when the oppressed begin to oppress themselves.

I want to ask him why? Why he is not seeing it, why he is so bound by this model of oppression, this discourse of poverty and situated experience that he cannot step outside of it, even for a moment, to see what it is like.... Is it that poverty is so rooted in ‘situatedness’, that it is so delimiting, so strangulating, that we cannot create even a momentary spark of insight? Does it require a stepping aside, a looking awry, a new platform, another place, a firm patch of new ground, to find it, to visualize it, to imagine? Does envisioning require the separation or abstraction from local context and its firm rootedness to be able to provide perspective, generate new interpretations and conceptualizations, provide them with the flesh of real hope, of tangible possibility?

And I know at this moment that there is no Ubuntu here…there is only me – the researcher, and him – the principal…And then the blinding moment of anger passes and I am back within this situated reality. I look out of the window. I see two girls scuffing their shoes in the red dirt. The dry dust rises in a small wisp of smoke. Then one girl suddenly grabs the other girl from the back by her hair and pulls her down into a kneeling position. There is anguish on the victim’s face, but she doesn’t resist. And it appears to me that this has happened to her many times before and she is no longer indignant, resistant, affronted. Was she ever otherwise given the space to be such, I wonder? Her hopeless resignation angers me.

I jump up and move to the window looking down onto the scene in the courtyard, the crisscrossing Euclidean grid of the window frame between us. The bully turns her eyes towards me and looks through the pane...looks through her
own pain…even with a blank undaunted stare…staring into my face contorted with a horrible mixture of anger, disappointment and pity. The Principal sees my reaction and he too jumps up to have a look at what I am looking at. He swears under his breath in Afrikaans, “Darrie blêrrie boggers van graad sewe kinders… uit die blêrrie klasskamer alweer.” His composure is broken, the posturing has disappeared…we are back to the immediacy and brutal ‘reality’ of the moment, and partially recovering his previous tone, he relays to me in English: “Their teacher isn’t here again today,” as if I might not have known this self-evident piece of information. “Excuse me a minute,” he says brusquely, and walks hastily out of the office, across the courtyard, up the steep steps and stops in the open doorway of the offending classroom.

From my visual perspective, the classroom behind the principal’s dominant form is dark, unseeable and formless, like an auditorium when the lights have gone down – ready for the performance…a performance on a ‘stage-in-the-round’. The two girls have already disappeared back into the same room, caught out, scampering like a pair of frightened rabbits back into their dark burrow. I can see the principal shouting and gesticulating threateningly. He is silhouetted against the dark doorway, delineated by the door, and through the windowpane I can hear nothing of what he says…there is only silence…and it is loud in my ears…it is as if I am watching an old-fashioned silent movie, being played out before me…a performance in silence on the theme of silence…visible, audible silence...

I am trying to comprehend the scene. I think back on what precipitated the current chain of events, to make sense of it. I think of the two rabbit girls scurrying away when the Voice of Authority entered the scene…I am a schoolgirl again…waiting in the principal’s office. I am remembering the fear of bullies, bullies that took all forms, classmates and teachers. I am remembering the smell and taste of fear…the fractured, brutal, images of authority and its violent sting. I feel the same sick feelings coming back…deafening fragments of memories. I feel like a bewildered animal caught in the headlights of this strange blinding reenactment of repeated repressive realities...

At that moment…and it was not an epiphany…but a slow blurred form taking root… re-rooting in my mind. It was a slow re-realization of what I had done by wanting to ‘speak out’ and to tell this principal that I thought it was ‘just not good enough.’ It was a re-cognition of my own voice of violence, of what brutality I had done in feeding into the discourse on “disadvantage.” I re-realized that my thoughts, framed within the discursive roots of my socialization, my education and knowledge, my own perceived empowerment as an adult, and my experience of teaching mostly within the context of privilege – which, through the temporal and spatial, defines the moment and place of poverty – had established that “disadvantage” as “plain to see” (McLaren, Leonardo, & Allen, 2000, p. 113).

I began to re-realize that in my initial thought-words of anger, I had been taking on the colonizing voice which produces the deficit, and that creates, validates and establishes ‘the problem’ from outside…from a place out there that can speak unmonitored by its own surveillance…I had been doing the same thing as that which I had surveyed in the courtyard. I was producing and reproducing the very
conditions that produced the bully/bullying in the first place, ensuring its reproduction through my own voyeuristic perspective and reproductive deficit language, albeit a silent language of thoughts.

I too had become a bully. I was complicit with a system or discourse and a well-entrenched paradigm of thinking that constructs ‘the problem’, establishes the ‘truth’ on ‘deficit’, and lays blame…

I realize that my vantage point was at fault. These are the power principles that inform not only the political gaze from the perspective of the self, but also control the distributions of the spatial/temporal dichotomy and that define the political economy of context by assisting in the production of the poverty/privilege hierarchy, and which define the roles of subjects in context…

I hear the deficit voices again…bullying voices…some voices of educationalists, specialists, and well-known people in authority in South African Education…people in the ‘new arena’ of post-liberation education…people I interviewed. “The problem lies with our teachers…they are underqualified, demotivated, lacking experience and expertise, and there is not enough of them. Our failures in mathematics can be directly attributed to the teachers…they are our problem…”

I realize that in my own way, I was feeding into this, re-creating this monster, re-establishing this deficit discourse. I realize that in creating the teachers, principal and their pedagogic practices in this “disadvantaged community” as lacking, as the “real problem,” it was an escape, a way of not facing up to not understanding, not seeing the source of power and how it threads its way into the repressive web.

Yes, I had become the bully. And the bully in the courtyard was as much, if not more, my victim of constructed “disadvantage” and the pedagogy of pain and poverty that it produces as she was a bully in herself. The principal was a victim of it too, and I had not even begun to imagine the strangulating and delimiting conditions that this discourse served to produce and in which he was constrained to operate. This was the ‘pedagogizing of difference’ (Swanson, 1998; 2005) indeed, and a discourse in which I had participated.

The principal came back into the room, looking a little harassed. A ‘sideshow’ had interrupted and seemed to detract from ‘the conversation.’ But, in fact, it was a critical fragment of the whole, a necessary contribution to understanding the resolution of the narrative, and in which our initial ‘polite’ conversation preceding ‘the sideshow’ had been the essential exposition. I, myself, had moved through several modes of looking, premised by various experiential podiums of perspective. Consequently, when I had been angry and critical, my vantage point had been the context of privilege in which I had gained much of my own teaching experience. When I had overcome my anger and realized my role in the co-constructed authorship of power, I had returned to my early youth and to remembering, remembering what it was like to be bullied and to feel the hand of violence and the voice of humiliation…and it was only then that I could begin to understand-feel with a deeper listening – the kind of deeper listening that renders one human.

It had required a range of senses as it had required a shift in perspective. I had moved from a ‘looking on’ and the voyeuristic power instantiated in perspectives of ‘seeing’, to a ‘listening to’, where the eyes are quieted and humbled
by the sights and sounds within darkened silence, and the sense of hearing is peaked…tuning into silence…

This had been my route. Instead of trying to find the “root of the problem” and trying to “root out the problem,” like a cancer from living tissue, I was moving towards searching for “the source.” The source of the problem lay silently behind the construction of “the problem” itself and threaded its way, like a tributary, to my very doorstep… I too was complicit, a collaborator of deficit discourse, a root of “the problem’s” routedness. Now I became responsible as well, through acknowledging that responsibility.

The I-you dichotomy [which Buber’s (1996) I-Thou relationship would oppose] had been broken by the emergence of a new bond of responsibility, a humbling togetherness, a sense of Ubuntu. I needed to listen collaboratively to that “source” in collectively finding a way together of “re-sourcing” towards non-impoverishment, other possibilities and mutual healing. With the sense of responsibility and humility came the opportunity for transformation and transcendence, both political and spiritual. It was the kind of calling in which one could recognize oneself in the image of the other as an organic relationship of ‘humble togetherness’.

In Closing

Ubuntu offers a contribution to an ethic of engagement with the other. It provides a lens, through the embrace of critical reflexive narrative methodology, that helps foreground existing positions of dominance and deficit in discourses in ways that open up opportunities for resisting them. It offers the possibility of dialogue about the nature of transformation and transcendence beyond personal, political paradoxes informed by neoliberalism and neocolonialism. It creates a rootedness with the daily, local and lived. A disposition of Ubuntu facilitates the exploration of less objectifying ways of being in research through the inclusion of the self and the self’s role in achieving humble togetherness with the research community. It offers hope of engendering pedagogies of possibility away from dichotomous discourse and positivist approaches to qualitative research. By confronting our colonizing ways of seeing, a transcendent spirituality may be found through ‘humble togetherness.’ Ubuntu, therefore, contributes to decolonizing hegemonic meanings, heralding the opportunity for renewal and personal transformation. It offers guidance in terms of our responsibilities and obligations to egalitarianism and human dignity. It affords a way of knowing that helps us learn to become human.

NOTES

1 This has resonance with Hannah Arendt’s (1968) assertion that the past always intrudes on the present. There is no objective present divorced from a historical context. It brings in to play the understanding that what precedes us influences how we engage with the world, the choices we make, our values and beliefs in and understandings of that world, and how we proceed with what we claim to know about it. We are always within (con)text, as Derrida implies in his comment: “‘Il n’y a pas de hors-texte’ (There is no outside-text). Extrapolating this to a question of ethics and
WHERE HAVE ALL THE FISHES GONE?

responsibility, we can never be independent of or ‘free’ from obligation in our relationship with others. This would be consistent with Emmanuel Levinas’s philosophy that he calls a ‘first philosophy’, (where philosophy is defined for him as a ‘wisdom of love’). In this philosophy, an ethical responsibility towards the Other precedes subjectivity. There is strong resonance with this other-centered ontology and many indigenous philosophies that espouse that the individual only exists in consummate interrelatedness with many others that constitute a whole with nature and the Earth. Ubuntu rests on this deep humanistic philosophy of obligatory interrelatedness.

Voices in the Silence is a critical exploration of the construction of disadvantage in school mathematics in social context. It provides a reflexive, narrative account of a pedagogic journey towards understanding the pedagogizing of difference in mathematics classrooms and its realizations as pedagogized disadvantage in and across diverse socio-political, economic, cultural, and pedagogic contexts. Fieldwork occurred within the Cape Province of South Africa, in schooling communities with socio-economic, cultural and historical differences. Research took the form of interviews, discussions, narrative-sharing, and participant observation, in a recent post-apartheid context. In resistance to perpetuating hierarchized, linear or scientistic approaches to research within traditional social sciences and mathematics education, I embrace an arts-based methodology. Through narrative and poetry, I engage with the socio-political, cultural and pedagogic implications of the social construction of disadvantage in school mathematics practice. The dissertation, therefore, offers interdisciplinary approaches to critical concerns of inequity and access, calling on the emotive, spiritual, embodied, and personal domains of experience in problematizing the (re)production of disadvantage. Consequently, I broaden the scope of interpretive possibilities to encompass interrogation of dominant discourses and universalizing ideologies within the social domain, which colonize meanings. These include globalization, neo-liberalism, neo-colonialism, and aspects of progressivism and pedagogic constructivism, in the way in which they compete for hegemony within mathematics classroom contexts as sites of struggle for meaning, informing discursive positions of disadvantage, delimiting practice and disempowering students constructed in terms of social difference discourses such as ethnicity, gender, class, race, poverty, and ability, amongst other positions. The incommensurability of certain social domain discourses produce disjunctions, paradoxes, contradictions and dilemmas, experienced as a lived curriculum of pedagogic disadvantage in the lives of students and teachers within contexts of constructed disadvantage.

The metaphor of ghosts is purposeful in that it has resonance with Derrida’s ghosts that are ever present and absent as they haunt us in our engagement with ‘the other.’ In this narration, I make conscious in my own writing the interlocution with ghosts as a way of exposing how, in Derrida’s (1994) terms, the author or narrator is never fully present to themselves, that we dance with absences we can neither capture nor see, only as shadows of what might be, and that these absences are ever present in what we do affirm as real, always-already erasing that presence. In this sense, absence is ghostliness. I have given more depth to this discussion in reference to the complexities of research and research ethics in Swanson (2007a).

I am reminded of Derrida’s (1994) words in his concluding paragraph in Specters of Marx: “We, in a sense, become mediums, allowing the ghosts of the past to tell their stories, our stories, through us” (p. 176).

Afrikaans for: “Good Afternoon, (Mrs.) Ma’am. Can I perhaps help you (madam) with something?” [This is the polite way of addressing a stranger. The use of ‘you’ would be considered impolite.]

Many of the mixed-race communities in the Cape Province of South Africa speak a dialect of Afrikaans as their mother tongue.

Afrikaans for: “Good Afternoon, (Mr.) Sir. I wanted to come and visit. I was here a long time ago.”

“Oh, what a shame, Ma’am”: The Anglicization of Afrikaans is commonplace in these communities, so that a mix of English and Afrikaans in the same sentence is often heard.

“Yes, for a long time.” “Ja” is slang for ‘yes’ in South African English and is borrowed from the Afrikaans.
“Ag, siestog! What a shame! I am sorry!” ‘Ag, siestog’, is an Afrikaans expression of sympathy. To say ‘I am sorry’ in this context in South African culture does not mean that you claim responsibility for harm done to another as in ‘I apologise’. It simply means that you are feeling for that other person and you understand how they must be feeling. In other words, you are sorry to see that they are suffering.

This is a pseudonym.

Skollie: from the Afrikaans, a common street criminal; someone up to no good; a deviant person.

The Strand: A remote stretch of beach with white ancient-marine sand, where a number of murders of this nature have taken place over the years. ‘Strand’ means ‘beach’ in Afrikaans.

Boot: South African and British English for ‘trunk’ of a car.

“Where have all the flowers gone?” Like the original antiwar folk song written by Pete Seeger and Joe Hickerson, it reminds us of the lyrics in the chorus, specifically the line that asks: “Oh, when will they ever learn?” In respect of the global responsibility of environmental devastation suffered within local communities, reinforcing oppressive social and political relationships within and between them, perhaps we also need to ask, “When will they ever learn?” or more inclusively of the global community, “When will we ever learn?”

It is a web of ‘glocal’ interrelations; an ever-interdependent global mesh of influence and effect that impacts local communities.

Please note that a version of the original narrative appears as Roots/Routes I & II in Swanson, D. M. (2009a & b).

Those bloody buggers of grade seven children … out of the bloody classroom again!

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WHERE HAVE ALL THE FISHES GONE?


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INTRODUCTION

When I was growing up, my father liked to tune in the British Broadcasting Service (BBC) soon after the seven o’clock evening news on the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation. He would do this either before or after dinner, depending on what came first, the news or the dinner. One evening we were listening to the BBC after dinner, and my father motioned everyone in the house to shush up. This was always an indication that something about Malawi was being mentioned in the BBC’s world news, or something with relevance to Malawi, or to the world. My siblings would scamper off to play moonlight games, but I would stay to listen. On this particular evening, the BBC were interviewing Kanyama Chiume. I was about 10 years old or so at the time, and I do not remember what Kanyama Chiume said in the interview. But after the interview ended, my father admonished me not to mention to anyone that we had listened to Kanyama Chiume being interviewed on the BBC. When I asked why, my father said Kanyama Chiume was enemy number one of the Life President Ngwazi Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda. As a result, he was a wanted man, and the government wanted to keep track of his every movement.

I asked my father if he was going to report the interview to the authorities. He said they had probably listened to it too. “Does that matter?” I wondered to myself. Wouldn’t the government in fact be happy that here was one good police officer doing his part to report the country’s enemies to the authorities? Such was my innocence that were I to spot Kanyama Chiume on the street, I would surely report him to the authorities myself. He was one of the people said to be plotting to assassinate the Life President and overthrow the one-party Malawi government. These were people who wanted to bring war to the country, and they deserved to be arrested, or worse, as the government told us. When the news broke on Christmas Eve 1981 that the government had arrested Orton and Vera Chirwa, another dissident couple “wanted” by the government, and put them on trial for treason, most of us felt they deserved it. Who wanted war in our country? Why would anybody want to kill the Life President, a generous, wonderful leader who brought us independence from the British?
This chapter recounts stories from my dissertation research, which arose from a personal passion as a writer whose main subject, broadly speaking, had been the Malawi I grew up in, and its place in the world. Initially I was unaware of how the research would intertwine questions of writing, identity, peace and violence, with those of what in Chichewa, Malawi’s primary language, is known as uMunthu, or ubuntu in other Southern African societies. This story also entails my personal search for identity through literary effort, leaving Malawi and Africa for a diasporic sojourn in the United States, adopting an Africa-centered intellectual framework, and returning with that framework to discover uMunthu peace epistemology, which had been lying in plain sight all along.

The specific goal of my dissertation study was to better understand the role of teachers in interpreting Malawi’s political and social history, and Malawi’s contemporary problems of structural violence. More centrally, I was interested in exploring how those definitions and interpretations of political and social history, and contemporary problems of structural violence might contribute to curriculum and pedagogy in ways that promote peace at the local and national levels, and beyond.

Part of the field work for the study involved conducting writing workshops with Malawian primary school teachers. I worked with 21 selected teachers who came from five schools from different parts of Malawi. We experimented with personal life writing, and then observed how these exercises affected the content of what they taught in the classroom, and how they taught it. I was interested in finding out how the personal narratives the teachers wrote rendered definitions of peace, conflict, and various typologies of violence and dehumanization.

The teachers also used the writing workshops to read excerpts from some of the Malawian autobiographies I had selected, and also to write their own autobiographies. During my preparations for the field work I had read several Malawian autobiographies, and continued to read a few more upon returning from the field. I found the Malawian autobiographies that I read as part of the process of developing my research proposal exceptionally exciting and inspiring. It became clear to me how as Malawians, the dictatorial imposition of official histories during Malawi’s 30 years of one party rule had deprived us of a much richer and fuller heritage of how the Malawi nation, and Malawi’s Pan-African identity, came into being. Seeing how personal narratives combined individual insights with national aspirations for independence from British colonialism led me to see the power of autobiographical narrative as a methodological tool, as research data, and as a contribution toward educational policy in peace building (Barash & Webel, 2002).

Realizing how this tool had not been well investigated in Malawian education, I began to think of the challenges and opportunities posed by autobiography in educational practice. I started looking around for studies that explored the intersection between autobiography and teaching, and my search started off with a researcher who was in fact one of my own professors at Michigan State University, Susan Florio-Ruane. I drew inspiration and motivation from Florio-Ruane’s (2001) study of pre-service teachers who formed a book club and read autobiographies.
Called the Future Teacher Autobiography Club, the prospective teachers read, met and discussed autobiographies for a six month period, during which time they dug into several conversations about many issues surrounding culture and their identities as students, teachers, members of a race, gender, various ethnic groups, and citizens. More inspiration for my approach to the study also came from my experiences in the Michigan State University’s chapter of the National Writing Project, the Red Cedar Writing Project, to which I was kindly invited by the director, Dr. Janet Swenson. My participation in the 2002 summer invitational came at a crucial time when I was putting together ideas and resources for my proposal. Both ideas, a teachers’ autobiography club, and the summer invitational writing institute, became important parts of the methodology for the eventual study I did with Malawian teachers.

I read Henry Masauko Chipembere’s 2001 autobiography, *Hero of the Nation: The Autobiography of Henry Masauko Chipembere*, published posthumously, and Kanyama Chiume’s *The Autobiography of Kanyama Chiume*, published in 1982. Reading the two autobiographies took my thinking in new directions regarding the role that education played in preparing Chipembere and Chiume to contribute towards the emancipation of their country and the continent of Africa from colonialism. Both Chipembere and Chiume were in their twenties when the struggle for Malawi’s independence gathered momentum in the mid-1950s. They had just returned from universities—Chipembere from Fort Hare University in South Africa, and Chiume from Makerere College in Uganda. They became actively involved in the movement for independence. Both of them became very close to Dr. Banda, first corresponding with him through letters while he was in Ghana and in Britain. They convinced Dr. Banda that he was the person best placed and best suited to lead the people of Nyasaland, as Malawi was then known, into independence.

Dr. Banda returned to Malawi in 1958, spearheaded the independence movement, and Malawi became independent on July 6, 1964. Within three months, Dr. Banda’s first cabinet underwent a crisis, and many of those who had helped establish the new nation of Malawi, including Chipembere and Chiume, resigned and were forced into exile. What followed thereafter was a thirty-year period about which much has been studied and written. Chipembere’s and Chiume’s autobiographies are two of the most important narratives written about how Malawi’s dictatorship started. Reading the two books, I developed a new sense of connectedness to and affection for my country, leading to a feeling of self-empowerment in understanding not only how one major period of my own life was shaped, but also how that period remained unanalyzed, and its tensions unexplicated. I included chapter excerpts of these two autobiographies on the reading list of the writing workshop I used as part of the methodology for the project. Out of the twenty-one teachers who accepted the invitation to participate in my study, the eight who wrote their own autobiographies took their cue from Chipembere and Chiume, and wrote some of the most illuminating stories that I encountered in the course of the study.
In addition to the autobiographies of Chipembere and Chiume, I also included the second chapter of Paulo Freire’s (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* on the reading list. Freire’s contributions to the study were twofold. First, his admonitions against a banking education had pedagogical implications for how to teach in a way that freed the creativity and imagination of students. Second, his discussion on how a critical pedagogy can educate an oppressed people about their oppression, and mobilize them for community projects of liberation offered a pertinent definition of what the teachers agreed was a peace education approach to curriculum and pedagogy. Subsequently, Freire’s notion of *praxis* as action and reflection informed the thematic framework of my study, as a culmination of the process of constituting uMunthu as a peace epistemology, through peace-themed curricula and pedagogy.

**‘I AM, BECAUSE WE ARE’**

That this work would end up with uMunthu as its intellectual framework was not apparent during my early months of field work. I thought of my research question as dealing with how to use creative writing as a way of approaching the primary school curriculum and its pedagogy. A peace education perspective arose from the infusion of historical and contemporary problems of violence and conflict in Malawi in the curriculum.

On Saturday, April 17, 2004, two months into my field work, the Catholic Diocese of Zomba ordained a new bishop, Rt. Rev. Fr. Thomas Msusa, to take the place of Rt. Rev. Bishop Allan Chamgwera who had retired. I went to witness the auspicious event at the grounds of the historic Zomba Catholic Secondary School. In his speech, Bishop Msusa, who had left Nankhunda Seminary just months before I set foot there in 1988, spoke of the problems Malawi was facing, and how we needed to “become as one,” his guiding biblical verse from his seminary days. “The African worldview is about living as one family, belonging to God,” he said. “We say ‘I am because we are’, or in Chichewa *kali kokha nkanyama, tili aviri ntiwanthu*.” The raw, literal translation is that an animal of the bush is on its own, but human beings have community. Community is the essence of being human. In his reflections on how he experienced the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), *No Future Without Forgiveness*, Archbishop Tutu (1999) explains *Ubuntu* as the philosophical essence that propelled the TRC. In the book the former Anglican archbishop offers a list of examples where Ubuntu was the driving philosophy for many southern African countries that chose forgiveness over retaliation against white minority regimes upon attaining independence. Included on the list are Zimbabwe, Kenya and Namibia.

Bishop Msusa’s reference to *uMunthu* in his speech that Saturday afternoon would become a turning point in my search for an intellectual framework for the study. That search would later lead me to the scholarship on uMunthu, written by Malawians, Zimbabweans, South Africans, and other scholars elsewhere. In my search, I took a closer look at John Mbiti, the late Kenyan philosopher of African religion, who turned French philosopher Descartes’ dictum “I think, therefore I am” on its head to demonstrate the African philosophy of being, “You are,
therefore I am.” My introduction to the Cartesian dictum had come from Joe Kincheloe’s 1993 discussion of individualism and the postmodern deconstruction of scientific rationality and its Enlightenment ideals. Alongside Malawian philosophers and theologians Harvey Sindima and Augustine Musopole, I found it eye opening to read critical pedagogues such as Kincheloe pointing out how the Cartesian dictum forms the basis of neoliberal individualism and the Western worldview.

But Bishop Msusa’s reference also brought back to my mind Jason Carter, grandson of the former US president Jimmy Carter, who spent two years in South Africa as a peace corps volunteer in the late 90s. On his return, Carter (2002) wrote a book in which he narrated his experiences in South Africa. I was struck by an interview with National Public Radio in 2002 in which Carter offered that the African worldview of ‘Ubuntu’ was an important philosophy that Americans could do well to learn from Africans.

I was walking to church on the morning of April 18, 2004, when it occurred to me that I had stumbled upon a concept that had the potential to tie together the many pieces of inquiry I was engaged in through the study. Here I saw two projects merging into one: the dissertation research study, and my own ongoing epistemological study. We had ended our first week in the writing workshop with the participating teachers, during which time we had grappled with the question of what peace education looked like in a Malawian classroom. Could what we were doing in the workshop, and in the larger context of the entire study, be usefully termed ‘uMunthu education’? Could it be broad enough to incorporate peace education? If so, how would a teacher go about it in a Malawian primary school classroom? How would this unraveling of uMunthu in the journey so far affect the autobiographical writing I had used as part of the methodology for the study?

‘INTELLIGENCE IS ONE THING, UMUNTHU ANOTHER’

As I read the teachers’ autobiographical narratives resulting from the writing workshops, I began to see aspects of Malawi’s history reflected in the lives the teachers had lived while growing up. I also saw the contemporary aspects of Malawian society in their teaching lives at that moment in time. I began to wonder to what extent the particular aspects of Malawi’s recent history of dictatorship and contemporary life could provide insights into how a peace curriculum and pedagogy might look like in a Malawian classroom. Not all of the narratives discussed uMunthu, but those that did saw it as a part of the analysis in understanding what lay at the root of Malawi’s contemporary problems of structural violence and injustice. Even for those that did not, my later analysis of the narratives grappled with the question of how the absence of uMunthu could be seen as part of the context in which physical and structural violence was a part of daily life for the teachers, both as young people growing up, and as practicing teachers.

According to two of the teachers in the study, Nduluzi and Pinde, the problems of exploitation and injustice that teachers were working against in
Malawi were problems brought about as a result of the breakdown of uMunthu in Malawian society. Thus one way of addressing the problems was through the promotion of the concept of uMunthu. As Pinde observed, uMunthu was something that both the home and the school needed to emphasize in order to prepare young people for a future in which problems of structural violence and social injustice would be minimized. As I read the scholarship on uMunthu, I was struck by how much Pinde’s and Nduluzi’s explications resonated with that of the theologians and religious philosophers, especially Harvey Sindima. According to Sindima (1995), uMunthu stands for “basic values of human life, or that which gives human life meaning” (p. 175).

The dynamism of uMunthu is grounded in the moral agency characteristic of being a full human, giving people the recognition that “they can be agents of change when given a chance or when recognized as persons. To be recognized as a person is to have self-respect, or to realize self-determination” (p. 175).

In his narratives, Nduluzi recounted a particular incident that occurred during a curriculum development workshop session. As he recounted the event, I could visualize the incident and the setting in which it took place. It was a place I was familiar with, with tall windows that opened to let in the cool dry wind of April. When you were in that room the sound of the Domasi River could clearly be heard coursing down its way to Lake Chirwa. If you stood up and looked outside through the tall windows, you could see the tall blue gum trees standing erect along the grassy banks of the fresh water river.

In Nduluzi’s narrative, a group made up of curriculum specialists, teacher educators, education administrators and one primary classroom teacher was meeting in the Humanities Laboratory of the National Curriculum Center. They sat around tables that had been rearranged to form a large, square-shaped working area. The group was working on the scope and sequence for a unit on literacy around the home. They decided to use fictional stories that conveyed messages about health and nutrition, as a way of integrating various disciplines into language and literacy. On one particular story, the consensus was that Malawian students needed to learn about the three dietary groups of food needed for a balanced nutrition. Nduluzi raised his hand and said he had an observation to make. He had recently read in a science journal that nutritionists were now suggesting that rather than the conventional understanding that there were three dietary groups of food, there were in fact six. He went on to list them. There was a silence in the room before one of the members in the group raised an objection to Nduluzi’s suggestion. Nduluzi was asked to provide a credible source for his information, and according to his narrative, he did. Before very long everyone else in the group refused to accommodate Nduluzi’s suggestion. They said they were not aware of these changes in the scientific community, and therefore, they did not trust the suggestion. Someone pointed out that Nduluzi was a “mere” primary school teacher, how could he know such details? Another one wondered, slyly, when Nduluzi was going to go to university and study for a first degree. “He is uneducated, yet he wants to dominate,” was another remark.
Nduluzi’s autobiographical narrative recounts the ways in which he had to endure put-downs and demeaning attitudes by his superiors in the education system. In most cases he was the only primary school teacher in groups of experts mostly boasting university degrees and high government offices. The attitude of many of the experts was that they deserved to be considered experts by virtue of their higher education. People like Nduluzi, mere primary school teachers without any university degrees, did not know much, and therefore did not deserve to be included in such important activities. Nduluzi wrote about having had to persevere against an onslaught of ridicule and disdain. But his narratives also celebrated the encouragement and positive attitudes of some of his superiors, who recognized his hard work, and promoted his endeavors.

Nduluzi’s comments on uMunthu addressed specific abuses directed at him by his superiors, especially during his participation in the curriculum development workshops he was a part of. He wrote about his views being subjected to scrutiny and ridicule with specific reference to his not possessing a university degree. Nduluzi pointed out that it was the absence of uMunthu ethics from which sprang the abuse he was subjected to by fellow educators who held senior ranks and higher educational qualifications, and looked down upon primary school teachers.

uMunthu is an act of doing something for anybody as you would want anybody to DO the same for you. Usually the uMunthu act has self-giving and a total equalization of somebody’s being, by way of valuing and looking at somebody as a human being. It does not emphasize who this person is, who is this, kodí akuchita ngati ndani... Akufuna akhale ngati ndani ameneyi... Kodí kmwana kameneka [who does he think he is... this little child]. uMunthu is self-realized in very few people. Many do not have uMunthu qualities. Usually those practicing this mentality do not themselves realize that when somebody’s being is realized and valued, that particular person reaches his or her full potential.

Pinde was another teacher who also provided a direct perspective on uMunthu and its place in the peace education curriculum and in the school system. Pinde was unable to undertake the autobiographical writing exercise, so instead of producing a piece of writing, we conducted an autobiographical interview in her classroom. Pinde pointed out that the injustice visited upon Malawian teachers stemmed from the lack of appreciation for the humanity of other human beings. When one is able to appreciate and respect others, one is said to have uMunthu, she told me. Pinde spent a considerable amount of time giving examples of what uMunthu was, and pointed out that it needed a combination of cultural upbringing and educational opportunity for one to develop uMunthu. Many of the education officials at the district, division and ministry of education headquarters levels were better educated than most teachers. Yet there were those in their midst that had not developed uMunthu, she pointed out. These officials did not regard teachers as people worthy of dignity and deserving of opportunities. Pinde’s own words are worth reproducing at length:

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Ethical responsibility is not the responsibility of the school alone. ‘uMunthu’ starts at home. uMunthu is when you can do things that make other people say you are a human being; you have certain characteristics that make you a human being—to listen to what other people say, to associate with other people—elements like those are what make a human being. And there are times when uMunthu disappears. And one becomes a thug. And these forces can have nothing to do with education. A person can be highly educated, but have no uMunthu . . . So this uMunthu, as a teacher you can do your best, but the environment at home can cause uMunthu to disappear. . . Education is one thing, uMunthu is another. Intelligence is one thing, uMunthu another.

While the other participants did not directly address uMunthu in their autobiographical narratives, they wrote about their lives growing up and becoming teachers. They wrote about a societal context that begged explanations for the causes of the violence, conflict, inequality and injustice that were a part of their day to day lives. Their narratives revisited images of what schooling looked like under the dictatorship. They wrote about the types of physical violence they experienced, and participated in, with peers, during play, and in boarding school. They described the socio-economic conditions in which they grew up. In some cases they nearly dropped out of school because their parents could not afford the tuition fees, and wealthy relatives refused to help out of envy. They wrote about gender relations and the victimization some of them experienced as girls. To bring their narratives to their lives today, they described the conditions they worked in as teachers, analyzing the hierarchies of exploitation, inequality, class and social injustice.

Schooling Under a Dictatorship

These teachers were young and in school when Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda was life president of Malawi. Dr. Banda ruled Malawi from 1964 to 1994. There is a considerable amount of disagreement about Dr. Banda’s rule, with many Malawians holding him as the visionary father and founder of the Malawi nation who built a strong foundation for the country. There are as many Malawians who argue that Dr. Banda’s dictatorial rule suppressed freedoms that were necessary for the development of the country. These argue that Dr. Banda’s rule did not prepare Malawi for the benefit of the majority of the population. For these teachers, going to school during the dictatorship meant having to deal with a specific set of challenges, some of them peculiar to the dictatorship, others peculiar to Malawi’s status as a newly independent, Third World country caught in the geopolitics of the Cold War.

The political nature of schooling under Dr. Banda’s dictatorship and its effects on social justice and human security was aptly illustrated in the autobiographical narrative provided by Wembayi, a teacher in his late forties. In the year 1972, eight years after Malawi’s independence and one year after Dr. Banda was declared state president for life, Wembayi was expelled from school, and banned from attending any school in the country. He was a standard 8 pupil at the time. What happened was
that his seat in the class was directly below the portrait of the president, Dr. Kamuzu Banda. One morning the classroom opened to the discovery that somebody had desecrated the portrait by painting it and adorning it with sunglasses. “All the blame came to me. Because I was young, I was not arrested.” However the school’s administration was not prepared to close the case without somebody being punished, regardless of the absence of evidence. Wembayi wrote that he was “suspended from school for good.” He stayed home for two years, and then an idea came to him. He changed all his names and re-enrolled in a school some fifteen miles away where no one knew him. He did well and was selected to attend a respected national secondary school.

The “Torturing Profession”: Life as Teachers

Several of the teachers wrote and talked of being treated with disregard and disrespect by superiors in the schools, the community and in the government. They wrote about being denied deserved promotions, being denied good housing, and not being consulted on important decisions affecting their lives. They also talked of being denied opportunities for further education, and of being passed over for foreign study tours that usually go with attractive allowances paid for by the government. The teachers’ descriptions of these issues are vivid and detailed. The tone deployed in interviews, discussions, and in the narratives shows how strongly and passionately the teachers feel about their grievances, and how, in their view, nobody is listening.

According to Sakina, the Teaching Service Commission of Malawi stipulates that if a teacher has gone for eight years without undergoing an interview for promotion, they should be awarded a promotion. Sakina wrote of how it took fourteen years before she could receive her first promotion, and another seven before the second promotion came. “Such things in my life have been very painful,” she wrote. She added: “The profession which indeed is teaching became a torture,” alluding to a saying common amongst Malawian teachers that the teaching profession should really be renamed the “torturing profession.”

In addition to discussing teachers’ lives and analyzing their autobiographical narratives, I also participated in their lesson planning preparations, and observed some of them teaching in their classes. Two particular lessons stood out for how they addressed the question of teaching a given primary school lesson from a peace and social justice education perspective. In one lesson, the textbook required the teacher to teach students how to fill out a bank deposit form, while in the other the textbook required students to be taught how to use the mathematical concept of ratio. In preparing to teach both lessons, the teachers struggled with the problem of how to bring peace and social justice education perspectives into the lessons. In the bank deposit form lesson, the teachers invited the students to discuss the larger implications of banking operations in Malawi. The recent privatization and sale of a government owned bank to a foreign company had led to retrenchment of workers. This had repercussions on the extended families that depended on the workers. In the ratio lesson, the teacher led the students in a discussion on the ratio
between boys and girls in the school, and the gender contexts that presented particular problems to female pupils. The relevance of these particular lessons to uMunthu lies in the broader ideals of the importance of appreciating the humanity of others, rather than in sacrificing people’s wellbeing for the sake of the bottom line.4

TOWARD AN AFRICAN CONCEPT OF PEACE: UMUNTHU AND THE HUMAN COMMUNITY

Four years after the field work, I can not claim to have answered the questions I set out to investigate. However it became more obvious that there was something about the concept and definition of who a human being is in Malawian and Southern African ways of being, that required more theoretical reflection and investigation, especially in the school system. The autobiographical narratives written by the teachers reflected that need, as did the discussions with students on how theories and skills propagated in curriculum content needed to relate to people’s daily lives in a real and meaningful way.

As the study progressed, I became eager to find more applications of uMunthu to the autobiographical narratives produced by the teachers, and to curriculum and pedagogy in peace education. I felt that I needed to dig deeper into what the introduction of uMunthu perspectives meant for the trajectory of the study. To do that, I undertook further literature review studies of the available, relevant scholarship on uMunthu. I ended up selecting four Malawian studies done on the concept of uMunthu, three of them in theology, and one of them in political science. I selected these four to enable a discussion of what an African peace epistemology might look like, and how it might inform curriculum and pedagogy.

The first study I looked at was Rev. Dr. Harvey Sindima’s 1995 work, *Africa’s Agenda: The Legacy of Liberalism and Colonialism in the Crisis of African Values*. I had discovered Rev. Dr. Sindima’s work before leaving for the field. I was aware of Sindima’s rigorous analysis of uMunthu in the philosophy of African culture and religions, but at this early point of the project I was more interested in Sindima’s historical dissection of Western liberalism and its role in the disruption of Africa’s indigenous systems. In Sindima’s words, *Africa’s Agenda* “examines the impact of liberalism on African thought and values which resulted in a serious identity crisis” for Africans. Sindima’s argument is that an agenda for Africa’s recovery lies in the “recapture of traditional values” and the opening of “possibilities for a deeper understanding of self and society” (p. xiv).

Another source was Gerard Chigona, whose master’s thesis, titled *uMunthu Theology: Path of Integral Human Liberation Rooted in Jesus of Nazareth*, was published as a book in 2002. Chigona’s study aimed to provide a local context for a theological interpretation of Jesus Christ, observing that “any neglect and sidelining of the African cultural heritage in doing theology is a neglect and negation of oneself in history” (p. 14). Chigona’s study presents a model of Malawian life based on uMunthu, embedded within it an “inbuilt critical analysis at both [the] individual and social level” in which individuals and communities can measure themselves
For Chigona, uMunthu provides a basis for education that involves the head, the hands, and also the heart.

A third source was the Association of Theological Institutions in Southern and Central Africa (ATISCA) Bulletin, a journal of African theology. The journal’s edition was a compilation of papers presented at a 1996 conference, held in Swaziland. Rev. Dr. Musopole had been the keynote speaker, and I soon learned that Rev. Dr. Musopole had written a master’s degree thesis on the topic of uMunthu theology. I later learned that he had in fact continued this focus into his doctoral research, which he had published as a book, *Being Human in Africa: Toward an African Christian Anthropology*.

Musopole’s (1996) study pursues the question of “How does African Christianity define and understand African peoples in a way that is humanizing, and, how can that view influence the shaping [of] a humane life for the African people in the totality of their existence?” (p. 1). In answering that question, Musopole analyzes the theological and philosophical work of John Mbiti (1969). In Musopole’s words, Mbiti adopts a dynamic view of African humanity that “takes into account the changes that have affected and continue to affect African humanity as a result of western Christianity, imperialism, colonialism, modernity and capitalism” (p. 12). While Musopole finds “serious flaws” and inadequacies with Mbiti’s concept of time in African thought, he sees Mbiti’s dictum “I am because we are, and since we are, therefore, I am” as “an excellent summary of what it means to be human in Africa” (p. 13).

Although most of the available literature on uMunthu in Malawi arose from theological and religious studies perspectives, some of it adopts a political studies perspective. In “Can African feet divorce Western shoes? The case of ‘uBuntu’ and democratic good governance in Malawi,” Richard Tambulasi and Harvey Kayuni (2005) use the concept of uMunthu to evaluate Malawi’s first two governments since independence in 1964. They analyze the thirty-year dictatorship under Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda, and the multiparty government led by Dr. Bakili Muluzi from 1994 to 2004. Tambulasi and Kayuni conclude that based on the common understanding of what uMunthu entails, the thirty years of dictatorship failed to live up to the ideals of uMunthu. In that regard, the ten years under Bakili Muluzi and the United Democratic Front did start out as governance with uMunthu ideals but soon deviated by doing away with principles of good governance and democracy.

One thing I found significant in the theological studies by Musopole, Sindima and Chigona was that they interrogate liberal Christianity and its dehumanizing effect on Africans, without, as Chigona puts it, attempting to romanticize Malawi’s religious heritage. In being able to use the concept of uMunthu in discussing theology, colonialism, history and politics, the authors make a remarkable contribution that marks a turning point in locating intellectual sources for uMunthu as an element of African epistemology in Malawian scholarship.

Although none of the studies use the Malawi education system as their central context, Musopole’s study addresses the individualism of modern education, brought to Malawi as missionary education, as being responsible for the suppression
of uMunthu as the basis for educating young people. Musopole makes mention of an autobiographical motivation for the origins of his inquiry, starting when he was made principal of one of Malawi’s earliest schools, Robert Laws Secondary School. Musopole’s experiences as principal caused him to reflect on how the influence of the British school system remained unchanged even after Malawi’s independence, with no effort, as Musopole (1996) puts it, to “radically indigenize the educational philosophy” (p. 13). Musopole, therefore, wondered what was being left out of the education system by divorcing Malawian education from Malawian values. Musopole’s perspective on uMunthu boldly describes the atrocities committed by the dictatorship as part of the context in which the values of humanness were not considered as part of daily life in Malawi. He further points out that humanness was missing, as evidenced by the politics of oppression, fear and harassment that characterized the dictatorship. He states,

As I reflected upon the aim of traditional Malawian education, I realized again that traditional education was centered around the concept of humanness. Humanness is that essential character defined by our culture as the sum of what makes a person essentially human. I also realized that the western type of education, as received and practiced in Malawi at least, placed less emphasis on humanness in its curricular content and focussed on intellectual knowledge for its own sake (p. 2)

From the four Malawian studies on uMunthu described above, as well as other studies from other parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, I was able to discern how African conceptions of the human being locate personhood in a community of other persons. I have since found it instructive to use uMunthu as part of the analysis of problems of violence and conflict that have unraveled in parts of Africa, including current and recent examples in South Africa, Kenya, Zimbabwe, the Congo and Sudan, among others. I found it quite intriguing that one could recast the Cartesian dictum “I think therefore I am” into an African perspective, turning the very idea of personhood from an individualist gaze into a communal one. Musopole points out that Mbiti’s I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am “makes an excellent summary of what it means to be human in Africa” (p. 13). What did all this imply? If one was human in relation to other human beings, why was it a significant notion? How could we achieve, as the Zimbabwean philosopher M. B. Ramose (1996) implored, the restoration of the humanness of our existence, constituting a fundamental step in envisioning a world peace that encompassed our relations as individuals in a community, as well as with nature?

That uMunthu could usefully be termed an epistemology became part of the answer provided by the Malawian philosophers of theology, including Musopole, Sindima, and Chigona. In their scholarship I sought confirmation of the hypothesis that part of the problems contemporary Africans were having to deal with today were a result of a lost dignity and identity, a racialized dehumanization brought about by the historical encounter between Africa and Europe. Europe brought to Africa a theology that claimed to be based on equality, yet in practice dehumanized Africans. Musopole’s (1996) argument went to the heart of the matter:
It is false theology to claim that all people are made in the image of God and then live to oppress a whole people just because they were created black or women or because they did not discover and manufacture both guns and gunpowder in time to conquer and dominate. (p. 175)

As I would also learn from another African peace scholar, Hizkias Assefa (1996), the period of colonization and imperialism especially in Africa changed the endogenous dynamics of defining ‘progress’ and ‘modernity,’ so that most African societies ended up being in an intractable difficulty. According to Assefa,

They have given up much of what they were, but are unable to attain what they aspire to. No doubt this frustration will be a constant source of disruption, conflict and disillusionment at both the individual and societal levels. (p. 65)

I read Assefa’s essay in 2004, whilst still in the field. I found Assefa’s explanation quite perceptive in diagnosing the root causes of the problems of conflict and violence in Africa, and of global injustice in the larger international system. It was a diagnosis that begged a prescription. According to the teachers I worked with, uMunthu provided a part of that prescription. None of this is meant to argue that all of Africa’s problems have external causes, nor that African people do not dehumanize one another. Africans are as human as any other people, with all the virtues and vices that come with being human. However being an African in the world also means having to deal with a particular history of the world that has affected Africa in a specific way, thereby calling for specific analyses.

An important part of the answer therefore focused on how an Africa-centered concept of ‘peace education’ needed to allow for a historically-rooted inquiry into the contexts of contemporary problems Malawians and many other sub-Saharan Africans face today. With problems of poverty, violent conflict, exploitation, and even the spread of HIV/AIDS and other dangerous diseases, the stories the teachers told pointed to the alienation of the majority of Africans in the production of knowledge from the day to day running of their societies. This is a consequence of the perpetuation of governance structures put in place during colonial times, and maintained by a neo-liberal paradigm.

The stories also portrayed a picture in which the lives of teachers could be seen in various contexts, dealing with problems implicated in the erosion of the ideals of uMunthu. The teachers portrayed their lives in contexts that were personal, political, economic and historical. As reflections of the teachers’ understanding of their world, the autobiographical narratives produced by the teachers add to the emergent scholarship on uMunthu and contribute to the beginnings of a development of an African peace epistemology framework.

This was one of the most important things I learned from the study, something that in hindsight appeared rather obvious and not that complicated: peace derived from uMunthu, the humanness and dignity of a person. This was where a four-thematic framework of my study emerged: 1) Autobiography, 2) uMunthu, 3) Peace curriculum and pedagogy, and 4) Peace praxis. The autobiographical narratives produced by the teachers captured Malawi’s history and contemporary society, and helped contextualize Malawi’s problems in the terms of structural violence. In this way, an organic
definition of uMunthu, the second theme, emerged from the autobiographical narratives. The erosion of uMunthu in contemporary Malawian life defines the contexts of the problems the teachers reported encountering, a reflection of problems facing the larger Malawian society. This contextualization led to the third theme in the African peace epistemology framework, providing content for a curriculum that exposes problems of structural violence, and emphasizes a peace and social justice education approach. The peace curriculum enables a pedagogical imperative, another arm of the third theme. At the pedagogical level, the framework becomes a guide to action and reflection, praxis in Freirean terms, for social transformation by teachers, students, and the community.

TOWARD A NEW UMUNTHU CONSCIOUSNESS

As I finish this chapter in July, 2008, there has been a trail of violent conflict in Kenya, Zimbabwe, and now in South Africa. In Kenya and Zimbabwe the violence has been related to presidential elections in those two countries, while in South Africa the violence has been perpetrated by groups of poor South Africans against poor immigrants, mostly from Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Malawi, and also from other parts of East and West Africa. More violence has already claimed thousands of lives in Sudan, and millions in the Congo. One thing I have learned from this entire process of studying contexts of violence is how not to be content with the surface appearance of the violence, without asking probing questions about underlying causes, and the structures of the power relations in which the root causes lie. Knowing that conflict and violence thrive in situations in which fellow human beings are dehumanized, stripped of their uMunthu and their lives regarded as dispensable, we see how root causes lie in complex structures that straddle global, historical, political, social, cultural and economic relations.

While it would be naïve to promise that an educational paradigm based on uMunthu would solve all problems of conflict and violence, it is also obvious to peace educators that its absence in curriculum and pedagogy makes it harder for education to be relevant to the understanding and solving of those problems.

This is what happened in the Malawi in which I grew up, where heroes and heroines of the independence struggle such as Kanyama Chiume, Masauko Chipembere, Rose Chibambo, Orton and Vera Chirwa, and many others, were declared enemies of the state, and the majority of the country had no way of learning the suppressed truth. The political transformation that Malawi underwent in the early 1990s offered a new opportunity for a new political consciousness based on uMunthu, as argued by Tambulasi and Kayuni (2005). There being no deliberate effort to make uMunthu the center of educational policy, political practice and community ethic, the old problems of conflict and violence were merely replaced by new forms of competition, suffering and intolerance. But there is little use in acknowledging all that has gone horribly wrong, and then stopping there. The question is how to use our knowledge of what has gone wrong, and how it happened, to build new programs.
On May 8, 2008, I was fortunate enough to listen to Mandivamba Rukuni, a long time professor of agricultural economics in Zimbabwe. Professor Rukuni talked about how our future lies in relearning the strengths of our ancestors and the heritage they built based on the ideals of uMunthu. I read Professor Rukuni’s (2007) book, *Being African: Rediscovering the Traditional Unhu-Ubuntu-Botho Pathways of Being Human*, and found in it ideas that I had been developing in my own work since 2004.

Like the other books discussed in this chapter, Professor Rukuni’s book contributes to the inquiry into uMunthu as an important part of the search for an African identity that restores dignity and hope to people long oppressed and marginalized by an unjust global order. The teachers in the story narrated above offer some of the ways in which the endeavor can be approached. While not promising any panacea to Malawi’s, Africa’s and the world’s contemporary problems, these teachers have at least attempted to show what is possible when autobiographical narratives are at the center of educational efforts to try and make curriculum and pedagogy relevant to the day to day lives of students, teachers and their communities. Since embarking upon this study, the bigger lesson for me has been how to shift from the preoccupation with the gloomy analysis of how bad things are in Africa, to asking how to use Africa’s own heritage and diverse knowledges, which include uMunthu epistemology, in creating new social, cultural, economic and educational policies and programs that restore hope and optimism, and build a stronger foundation for the future.

**NOTES**

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2. Life President was a title bestowed Dr. Banda, making him president of Malawi for as long as he lived. He stepped down in 1994 after losing an election, the first one in 30 years.

3. Where relevant, names of people, places and institutions have been changed to protect the identity of participants in the study.


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