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A Meaningful Academic Life: Improvised, Amusing, Unsettling

Abstract

In this essay, originally presented to an audience of colleagues, students, and university faculty, I briefly review the meanings I ascribe to my experience of nearly half a century as a university faculty member. I emphasize the improvisational quality of professorial life, the amusing characters I was able to observe and with whom I often worked, and several unsettling and agitating dimensions of university life that I experienced along the way. Inspired by the challenge of educating the whole person, mind and heart, and passionate about the moral, emotional, and literary urgency of the human sciences, I plan to continue to focus on self-clarifying, evocative, and potentially transforming stories.

Keywords: evocative autoethnography, memory work, compassionate teaching, transforming stories, Arthur P. Bochner

Znaczące życie akademickie: zaimprowizowane, zabawne, zdestabilizowane

Abstrakt

Prezentowany esej, w którym Profesor Arthur Bochner dokonał krótkiego przeglądu znaczeń nadawanych trwającemu prawie pół wieku doświadczeniu pracy na uczelni, został zaprezentowany audytorium złożonemu z koleżanek i kolegów, studentów oraz naukowców z uniwersytetu. Podkreślono w nim improwizację obecną w akademickim życiu zawodowym, przywołano anegdoty o ważnych postaciach, które Profesor miał okazję obserwować i z którymi często pracował. Wskazano również na często destabilizujące, a prawie zawsze poruszające wymiary życia uniwersyteckiego, których doświadczył, krocząc po uniwersyteckiej drodze. Zainspirowany przez wyzwania stojące przed całościową edukacją osoby, umysłu i serca, jak również pełen

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pasji w odniesieniu do etycznych, emocjonalnych i literackich potrzeb nauk humanistycznych, Profesor przedstawia plan dalszych badań nad samowyjaśniającymi, ewokacyjnymi i potencjalnie transformującymi opowieściami.

Słowa kluczowe: autoetnografia ewokacyjna, praca pamięci, nauczanie współczujące, opowieści transformujące, Arthur P. Bochner.

Thank you for inviting me to speak today on the occasion of my retirement as a university professor. I welcome this opportunity to provide a sense of an ending to this chapter of my life. My academic life has not always been happy, but it has been meaningful. Hence my title, *A Meaningful Academic Life: Improvised, Amusing, Unsettling*. I landed on these words through a process of free association. You might find other words or terms more appropriate to your experiences in university life as Carolyn [Ellis] did. These are mine.

"Improvised" came to mind because I entered university life in the United States at a time, the late 1960s, and in a discipline, communication studies, that afforded a great deal of latitude for improvisation. Communication studies provided numerous opportunities for me to make it up as I went along, to break many of the rules about how and what to teach, write, mentor, and research. By today's standards for mentoring, I would likely have been considered under-socialized. Eventually, when Carolyn [Ellis] and I found each other in 1990 (cf. Ellis in this volume), we took advantage of the situation in which we were immersed (Bochner 2014) by creating our own idiosyncratic curriculum in what I call "The School of Life"—the art of loving; authenticity and sincerity; communicating emotions; grief and loss, embodied storytelling, writing lives and autoethnography. Our curriculum was original, novel, and idiosyncratic. We were passionate to deliver these courses and blessed to be surrounded by colleagues who endorsed and supported what we were doing.

I experienced communication studies as the least myopic and most open of all the human sciences. In what other discipline could I have achieved the status of distinguished professor and NCA (National Communication Association) distinguished scholar for publishing articles titled *Forming Warm Ideas* (Bochner 1981); *The Coercive Grip of Neutrality* (Bochner 1993); *Love Survives* (Bochner 2002); *Vulnerable Medicine* (Bochner 2009); *Suffering Happiness* (Bochner 2012a); and *Bird on the Wire* (Bochner 2012b).

In retrospect, I think of my life as a professor as **"Amusing"** because, as David Lodge's novels (cf. e.g. 1975; 1984; 1988) reveal, when you look closely at the characters roaming the halls of universities and don't take these creatures as seriously as they take themselves (or we ourselves), you can find them quite entertaining to be around. Over the years, I've witnessed many of these characters: the wishy-washy ones; the thin-skinned; the pushy, vain, and egotistical; the oddballs and eccentrics; the overly ambitious as well as, sad to say, those merely

going through the motions. It's useful to poke fun at ourselves and we academics don't do it often enough—at least not out in the open. But we must advance cautiously, because there is a dark side to the professor's comedic persona, whether absent-minded or self-indulged. I doubt that anyone ever gets through an entire academic life without suffering through episodes of humiliation.

Consider the story I have often told new graduate students in order to demystify academic publishing. I had been waiting anxiously to receive the reviews to the first article I ever submitted to an academic journal. Finally, the letter appeared in my university mailbox. Walking into my office, I nervously opened the envelope from the editor of "The Quarterly Journal of Speech", Robert Scott. A small creased piece of paper about the size of what you find when you crack open a fortune cookie dropped to the floor. I bent over, picked it up, and read: "In my eight years as an Associate editor for this journal, this is the worst submission I have read. It should be thrown immediately in the trash and forever forgotten." Mortified and shaken, I placed the snippet back into the envelope with the letter and tossed it in my desk drawer. About a month later, I mustered the courage to reopen the envelope and discovered a second piece of paper folded into the editor's letter and read: "This is the best essay I have had the privilege of reviewing during my term as an Associate editor at QJS. Don't change a word. Publish it as is." Professor Scott, for his part, had the last word. "I don't agree with either," he informed me. Please cut 25 pages and send it back."

It is not unusual for university faculty to feel agitated, hassled, and worn down by experiences like that one, by the audit culture of the neo-liberal university, by the uncertainty built into the tenure and promotion process, and by the pervasive competitive individualism that dominates university life. Truth be told, I was never really able to relax into an academic life. That's why I call academic life **"Unsettling."** The outcome often is gratifying and enjoyable, but getting there can be rough and tumbling. We should acknowledge the privileged lives we live as professors, but at the same time we shouldn't ignore the obligations, pressures, conflicts and insecurities that accompany these privileges. As a son of working class Jewish parents, a mother deprived of higher education, and an immigrant father damaged by immersion in the Eastern European anti-Semitism of the early twentieth century, I never felt comfortable among elite intellectuals. But my narrative inheritance (Goodall 2005) did serve as a good motivator. I had something to prove. Still, I don't consider myself an exception or an anomaly. Faculty life has increasingly become an unsettling life. Faculty members are rarely, if ever, encouraged to relax, unwind, slow down, or let go. Quite the contrary, we are advised to work faster, publish more, produce greater student credit hours, take on additional students, get more grants, build an international reputation, a longer vita, and higher citation counts. The bar keeps rising.

The narrative arc of university life centers on "the life of the mind," encouraging us to largely ignore our inner lives, our emotional, existential, and

spiritual lives, and those of our students. Taken to an extreme, as sometimes happens, we become talking heads ignoring everything below the neck. What a pity! Shouldn't education involve something more than congregations of disembodied minds mastering skills and ingesting information? Shouldn't we feel obliged to introduce students to their hearts? Shouldn't we get in touch with ours? As Jane Tompkins (1996) observed on the occasion of her early retirement from Duke University, "I wish that the college I bound my identity over to … had set mercy and compassion before me as idols, instead of Athena's cold brow" (ibidem: 220). A university without compassion cannot prepare students adequately for the lives they are likely to live.

That's what Carolyn Ellis and I have tried to do these last twenty five years. We have attempted to give standing and legitimacy to a different kind of knowledge, one grounded in compassion, love, understanding, and inspiration, one that validates and tries to cope with the turmoil, self-doubts, grief, and fear that many students experience. We took for granted that a self-respecting, authentic communication curriculum must refuse to ignore the emotional lives of students.

The University of South Florida has been generous to me in every conceivable way. They kept their promises to me when they recruited me largely to provide leadership for the development of a PhD program. Thank you Greg O'Brien and Gerry Miesels. They gave me excellent financial support, study leaves, sabbaticals, a light course load, freedom to teach what I wanted and believed in, and resources to nurture it. They respected, honored, supported, trusted and believed in me. Thank you Roland Richmond, Eric Eisenberg, Ralph Wilcox, Dwayne Smith. I greatly benefited from my associations with colleagues in the Department of Communication during the foundational period in which we were a small department of eight working to fulfill a common purpose. Those were thrilling times and I remain grateful to the hard work of Ken Cissna, Carol Jablonski, Barney Downs, Ray Schneider, Tom Porter and Marsha Vanderford for trusting my image of a niche PhD program that would offer something unavailable elsewhere in our field—an interpretive, humanistic, qualitative, and ethnographic one. And I could not in good conscience leave out the important work of my office manager during my eight years as department chair, Sharon Smith, and the capable and hard-working staff that included Sue Viens, Kathy Newman and, later on, Keysha Williams.

I never considered my life as a communication professor 'a job' or even a 'career.' Despite the pressures, I was having too much fun most of the time to think of what I was doing as work. Communication studies allows, even encourages, instructors to stretch students' minds by making them rub against the taken-for-granted, instilling doubt, decentering cultural stories, deconstructing normative frames of meaning, and offering counter narratives; and to try to reach their hearts by giving students permission to write and tell personal stories of trauma and suffering that have been silenced and can become a source of healing in their lives.

Through dialogue people who have regarded each other as adversaries or opponents are given an opening for constructive engagement of their differences.

We communication professors believe that participatory democracy is worth pursuing, that freedom of expression must be protected, that hate speech that degrades individuals should be condemned, and that an intentional mistruth —a lie—should not be elevated to the position of an acceptable campaign strategy or a presidential persona. In communication, we acknowledge that some of the best teaching is vulnerable teaching and some of the best research is research that breaks your heart (Behar 1996). We recognize that the people we are trying to reach through our teaching and research don't just want answers to the question, "How can I know?" They also want to know how they should live. We helped them see and understand that the ways people talk and listen and relate to each other can make a difference in their lives.

But individually and collectively, we do not always practice what we preach. In *Living the Ethnographic Life*, anthropologist Dan Rose (1990) bemoans the failure of academics to understand themselves as living within a subculture within university life, a subsystem of a larger system as well as the culture of disciplinary and professional life. Insofar as we do not talk about this in profoundly self-critical ways, our lack of awareness is both disturbing and ironic. Though we are taught to be analytical and critical, we rarely turn our acumen as critics on ourselves, our departmental, disciplinary, and ritual practices; the received traditions we inherit; our modes of socialization and so on. What do we fear?

As university faculty, you know in your hearts what needs to be done—how to treat colleagues ethically, humanely, and compassionately. Do it! We all lose when we make enemies of our colleagues. Surely, no communication department should be afraid and resistant to communicating.

As for me, well, I've always had an urge to break boundaries. Fitting in has never felt easy. Not in childhood, not in adolescence, not even in the university. The one place I have felt comfortable is in the classroom where I often thrived on a capacity to use personal stories to paint my life into their picture because of the tacit knowledge I shared, particularly with working class students, which connected their lived experiences to mine. It was always the students who served as my inspiration. There is no substitute for what I experienced in the classroom—its energizing passion; the light bulbs going on; getting through; lost in ideas and feelings; a laboratory for rehearsing some of life's dramas. What a joy it has been to work so closely with so many amazing PhD students over so many years and to watch them continue to grow and flourish in their own voice and lives, academic, personal, and otherwise.

In my published books, stories and essays, I've tried to open a space for others to write with soul. I've tried to get across the point that humans are flawed, messy, and complicated beings who live with contradictions, have ideas and emotions,

think and think about thinking, and struggle with vexing questions. My stories show that we humans, myself included, frequently don't know what we're doing; that we sometimes feel vulnerable; bare our souls; keep secrets; feel ashamed, afraid, humiliated, betrayed, and heartbroken. And sometimes we're downright hilarious. We disappoint people and they frustrate us.

Recently, I've worried that some graduate students are told not to write about these things, that people won't appreciate that kind of writing about those kinds of experiences. They are not scientific; they don't meet community standards. They'll think you're a nonconformist, refusing to adjust, not playing the game, not fitting in. Maybe they'll tell you to take a time out and that you're starting to sound like a threat to the discipline or the program. *'What will they do to me,'* you wonder. Send me into exile. Deny me tenure? Can writing like that get me sent away? Ultimately, each of us must decide for ourselves what kind of life we want to live. Just because someone gives you advise doesn't mean you are obligated to accept it. Few things are more important than inspiration (Bochner 2012c).

Boundaries abound. Objectivity/subjectivity; rigor/imagination; science/art; facts/meanings; nonfiction/fiction. You can replace the concrete details of sensual, emotional, bodily experience with distancing typologies and abstractions that remove events from the actions of particular human beings struggling to cope with contingencies of lived life, but you don't have to. LeGuin (1989: 151) explains this compulsion for distancing abstractions: "People crave objectivity because to be subjective is to be a body, vulnerable, violable."

The luckiest day of my life was the twist of fate that brought Carolyn Ellis into my life. I can't begin to express how much fun the two of us had choreographing our dance of theory and story that ultimately evolved into the paradigm of autoethnography and narrative inquiry as we became immersed in each other's souls. The theory part was straightforward and rather Rortyian: That knowledge should be understood as the practices we acquire to cope with reality rather than the procedures we use to get an accurate picture of it (Rorty 1979).

Now Carolyn and I enter a new chapter of our lives, retirement, a coming toward the end and looking back on the beginning together, the two of us, living as we do, as all people do, in the middle. "What are your plans?" friends ask. Their question reminds me that moments before he died Tolstoy was said to have remarked "I don't know what I'm supposed to do."

What I want to do, what I find meaningful, is making people feel stuff, continuing my quest to put into circulation self-clarifying, evocative, and transforming stories; and keep alive the conversation in the human sciences about what can make life good. What more can any of us do than "fashion something—an object or ourselves—and drop it into the confusion, make an offering of it, so to speak, to the life force" (Becker 1973: 285). I don't know if that's what I'm supposed to do, but it does feel like the right thing to do.

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