

# *De-schooling as Rootedness: Transfiguration Through Expressive Writing*

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Received Sept 2021

Accepted for publication Oct 2021

Published Nov 2021

## **Abstract**

I seek to understand how do students react when they are given agency, their voice acclaim, their experiences within an academic tongue? The genesis of this article is the metaphor of a phoenix who keeps swallowing me and birthing me a more illuminated whole, is subjugated to a similar destiny.

Keywords: hybrid, contemplative teaching practices, unknown, grief, transformation

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I believe that the benefits of expressive writing are copious and beyond the confines of academic critics and rebels. Emerson (1983) speaks to this sentiment by saying “If we touch the imagination, we serve them [students], they never forget it (pp. 429-430). Inspired by this quote, I mused: Creating art is a peculiar process. Jarring to the natural process of procreation, where a mother gives birth to a child, the creation of art involves the artist and his mural continuously devouring and reproducing each other. The artist births a phoenix, and the phoenix swallows the artist and soon enough births another artist -- this one a little stranger, a little more mysterious. Something has changed. Did the artist always have wings? Just before one can resolve what has changed, the artist swallows the phoenix and emerges a profound mystical entity defying all rules of linearity and rationality. In my mind, (1983) Emerson smiled and replied with a palpable sense of love sweetening his words:

Respect the child, respect him to the end, but also respect yourself. Be the companion of his thought, the friend of his friendship, the lover of his virtue.... keep his nature and arm it with knowledge in the very direction in which it points (p. 430).

The genesis of this article is the metaphor of a phoenix who keeps swallowing me and birthing me a more illuminated whole, is subjugated to a similar destiny. The appeal of artistic creativity lies in its maverick ethos. An entity so abstract, it cannot be silenced for it does not need a tongue to speak. Neither can it be contained nor conformed. Instead of living a life of shame due to its absolute eccentricity, it

savors the crown and announces its own eminence. I find myself a worshipper, albeit I have never been summoned to be one. Intuitively I knew from a very young age that it is art which saves you from your own extinction. It is art which descends every night from the moon and whispers the sacred celestial laws of the universe while you lie dead in your own blood. Similar to other kingdoms, there are some who will pledge their allegiance to the majesty and then there are some who will rebel, ploy antics for the King’s downfall. In my academic journey, I met one such rebel who taught creative writing. An odd profession for one who could not fathom the beauty, the magnificence of his Highness. Tragic, just like all good love stories. They could not see that art was boundless, existing in more forms than humans could ever count. Perhaps the rumors are true then, that it never really belonged to this world as we know it. The rebel wanted safety, familiarity, obedience, dogmatism. But creativity, a manifestation of art, is a winged creature who does not bow to anyone. The rebel, the professor, should know that. But they didn’t. Perhaps they had a spell on their eyes for they could not see how beautiful this creature was. “That is not creative writing!” the rebel professor screamed as they ostracized the soaring creature. But the creature did not seem to mind, she continued to revel in her magnanimity. She knew she had to travel far, far away from oblivion. And search for the one who could see, see her idiosyncrasy, and not be appalled. Find the one who would fall in love with her wilderness and find her madness the only sanity in the world. Winterson (2011) states, “Creativity.....isn’t the thing that drives us mad; it is the capacity in us that tries to save us from madness” (p. 42). Conceding with a similar sentiment, the creature flew and flew in search for accreditation.

The rebel in my story is an immensely prolific and sought-after creative writing professor. Their feedback on one of my creative stories entailed, and I quote verbatim, “a little too silly to work, I fear”. What they considered “a little too silly to work” was in fact my real life. It was working just fine for me, I thought. And so, I decided to travel far, far away from oblivion. If creativity and imagination can be ruthlessly shunned in a creative writing class, what chance of survival did it have in the rest of the academic world? And so, I pondered.

Student agency, imagination, authenticity, curiosity, voice, creativity, etc. are all powerful, romantic, utopian, evocative words which leave a lingering sensation on the tongue replicating that of the aftertaste of something bittersweet like Tamarind on a mid-summer’s eve. You want more but you don’t want more. Its risqué taste, however intoxicating, makes you hesitant, somewhat resistant. William Deresiewicz (2014) provides a poignant critique of higher education to explain this dilemma. He writes:

The system manufactures students who are smart and talented and driven, yes, but also anxious, timid, and lost, with little intellectual curiosity and a stunted sense of purpose: trapped in a bubble of privilege, heading meekly in the same direction, great at what they’re doing but with no idea why they’re doing it. (p. 3)

The desire was there, burning feverishly in the furnace of my own being, to step out of the line and take the alternative direction, the path of defiance and magnificence. But the rebel professor watched over with their “violent aversion to risk” (Deresiewicz, 2014, p. 22). They made sure the line was orderly, disciplined and linear. One transgression, one stroke of creativity and you were denounced as imprudent, silly, the foolish one. I had a choice. I could take the tragic accolade and get back in line to conform. Become a mere reflection of the student behind and in front. Become a shadow of who I could be. Clip my wings and struggle to walk feebly on the ground. But my soul had far too many dreams to accept a death so unceremonious it could not even be turned into a children’s tale. So, I transgressed, I indulged in delinquency to attend creatively to all my relations, all of creation in order “to remain fully human” (Deresiewicz, 2014, p. 79). I left the course in search for the one who would not call this madness sheer abhorrent madness. Someone who would let the heart speak outlandish feral languages and not fear its recounting, its retelling of mystifying stories. Someone who would not use their stature to silence the heart in the name of the mind, who would not divide that which does not understand separation. Someone who bore the courage to part the sea between the academic and the personal so the two, who share the same womb, can conflate. Someone who would recognize that one does not

need to die for the other to flourish. Someone who can advocate their coexistence. Emerson (1983) speaks to this:

I believe that our own experience instructs us that the secret of Education lies in respecting the pupil. It is not for you to choose what he shall know, what he shall do. It is chosen and foreordained, and he only holds the key to his own secret. By your tampering and thwarting and too much governing he may be hindered from his end and kept out of his own. (p. 430)

As serendipity would have it, I found myself drawn to Dr Jack Miller’s course *The Holistic Curriculum* during my graduate school journey. It soon became clear that the winged creature would not be rebuked here. However, the imminent transformation felt fraught. Initially I struggled. So acclimated to veiling, the revelation of the true self seemed chaotic, felonious. The shedding of what was no longer needed seemed baffling, the works of a trickster. Something didn’t seem right. The words were given the power they longed for, desired for so long. To scream and dance under the moonlight and reveal themselves in all their entirety. However, the words were conditioned far too long to doubt their worthiness. They deemed themselves incongruent with such power. The words I wrote seemed plain, simple, lacking other worldly wisdom, hence betraying my original thought, and keeping me deprived of tapping into my own power. Sometimes the writing longed for clutter, superfluous vocabulary to garnish and adorn my unembellished words to mask them. Sometimes the writing even longed for the previous comfort of imitation to not risk making a fool of itself again. Slowly, however, with continuous guidance and reassurance by the “good enough teacher” (Allen, 2002), the writing transcended into an independent entity acting free from the bounds of my own insecurities. A force, an essence, an institution, a whole so splendid, so scintillating it bewitched its own creator. Something inexplicable secures students, Allen (2002) claims, against the precariousness of their play. This something inexplicable, for me, is a multi-faceted, polyphonic entity called Love: the intention from which expressive writing emerges. It is love which nurtures the stories of the soul and prays for their flourishing. Love is not only needed to create these stories but also to receive them. Hooks (2003) writes:

Love in the classroom prepares teachers and students to open our minds and hearts. It is the foundation on which every learning community can be created....Love will always move us away from domination in all its forms. Love will always challenge and change us. This is the heart of the matter. (p. 137)

Thus, the language of love, the dialect of the heart, deployed by expressive writing is one which is created and heard only by a lover. This kind of language is always radical and infused with possibility and hope (Leggo, 2018). Emerson (1983) explains this expressive language of love:

If a child happens to show that he knows any fact about astronomy, or plants, or birds, or rocks, or history, that interests him and you, hush all the classes and encourage him to tell it so that all may hear. Then you have made your schoolroom like the world .... but if the boy stops you in your speech, cries out that you are wrong and sets you right, hug him! (p. 437)

This hug is the spring of love from which expressive writing transpires and returns to dwell for an eternity. This love is amorphous and manifests in many shapes and forms. For Lopate (1975), a poet, writer and teacher, this meant teaching writing to stimulate students' creative voices by avoiding gimmicks and techniques. His love for his students compelled him to wonder if there was a way to guide student writing that had no compulsory ending and connects students "with processes and flows that were ongoing, infinite.....take the voyage into openness and to discover the poem in the act of writing it" (as cited in Miller, 2000, p. 85). To shift the focus from the product to the expansive process, in my humble opinion, is a form of love. Allowing students not to focus on theorizing a divine truth which is simply not ready to be born yet are the rituals of a beloved. By bringing intuitively grasped truths into conscious expression, students' expressive souls get nourished and satiated. This then evinces the presence of *En-* a mysterious and deep connection between two persons, your inner and outer Selves

I have come to believe that I am not the only dreamer in academia who yearns for creativity, risk taking, silly playfulness with fragmented academic words and the consequential intuitive authentic expression. Winnicott (1971) reminds us that play, a creative experience, involves disconcerting risk. Play, he tells us, is a perilous adventure because it sits "on the theoretical line between the subjective and that which is objectively perceived" (p.50). However, there are many who embark on this arduous journey. Carl Leggo (2018), a poet, teacher and researcher in the academy sought to honor imagination, heart and intellect in order to give curricular and pedagogical attention to the significance of critical creativity in education. He tended to his academic writing using an amalgamation of prose and poetry full of resonances, gaps, incongruities, discordances, fragments and sparks. His capacious poetic academic writing carries a distinct essence. The aesthetic of his work lies in his fearless creative playfulness with words which weave poetry, personal recollections, reflections and quotations from other

scholars. The appeal lies in the intimacy, the familiarity, the relatability, the vulnerability, the inevitable inconsistencies, the human characteristics he ascribes to academic diction. His academic voice and his poetic expressive voice synergistically honored his commitment to his vocation of pursuing both a creative and a critical discourse outside of disciplinary boundaries. According to Leggo (2018), the decisions we make regarding the presentation, the language of expressive writing and about telling our own stories shape and inform our understanding of not only lived experiences but also "living experiences" (p.72). In juxtaposition to the linear and logical structure of conventional academic writing, the performative diction, which is ever evolving, and the structure Leggo usually deployed, meandered and wandered, ruminated and cogitated, explored and invited. He writes:

I engage in testimony, in witness, in presenting prose and poetry that are enthused by an educator's delight in the creative playfulness of words. I agree with hooks (2003) that "the struggle to transform education" is a struggle "to find a new language of spirit" (p. 183). For me, that new language is expressed in poetry. I am reminded of James Hillman's (1999) wisdom that "the aesthetic imagination is the primary mode of knowing the cosmos, and aesthetic language the most fitting way to formulate the world" (p. 184). I am always seeking to sing in language that is aesthetic. (p.73)

Sprung out of originality and imagination, this aesthetic language is not a dead, lifeless entity. Instead, it is animated, vibrant, full of exotic colors and very much alive. Every word is harmoniously connected to the other, fully dedicated to the success of the entire discursive ensemble. Emerson (1983) explains the magic of such animated writing- "The joy of our childhood in hearing beautiful stories from some skillful aunt who loves to tell them, must be repeated in youth" (p. 432). Allen's (2002) work sings a similar entrancing song. For Allen, expressive writing exhibited through personal narratives, links the inner and outer worlds of students, the personal and academic worlds. He writes:

Many students use the potential space provided by the narrative to make connections between things that without these links seem to conflict and split their attention. Students use this space to grow personally and academically, and the growth comes partly by bridging the artificial gap between the personal and the academic. The skills they gain through rigorous work in the personal narrative transfer to more traditional academic writing because the Self experiences the division between the personal and the academic as artificial and imposed. The transfer of skills is not a transfer but a linkage that integrates the self and yields

confidence. An unfortunate side effect of the split between the personal and the academic is that students fail to see that their own lives can be sources of knowledge. Their work with personal narrative brings them to recognize their lives as places where meaning may be found. (p.160).

The questions I seek to explore for further research follow suit. I seek to understand how do students react when they are given agency, their voice acclaim, their experiences within an academic tongue? What happens when we merge the academic and personal voice? What happens when knowledge is not seen as an elusive entity “over there”, external from the totality of our being, rather is viewed as an intuitive intrinsic spring of abundant sanctity? What happens when we take an inside out approach to creating meaning where personal stories act as prophetic guides? Will it be a moment of grave upheaval? Will the students struggle to find worth in their own words? Will the neo-powerful words betray their master? Will there be disparity in the outcome? Which student/s will struggle more? Or will the students emerge a more fortified whole? The risks lie therein either way. If these two voices engage in an altercation, there will be chaos. If these voices find themselves agreeable but are discredited and rendered unreliable in academia, there will be chaos. This conundrum is one which needs to be pondered over for future research. However, according to Allen (2002) not all is lost if the latter chaos transpires. He delineates that expressive writing has the potential to reach beyond the illusionary barricades of the academy. He writes,

The validation and recognition achieved through publishing in the community beyond the university amplifies the sense of connection and personal empowerment. Few traditional academic essays can reach an audience outside the academy.....The play of the personal narrative leads students into the life of the cultures they live in. They become makers as well as students of culture (p.159).

Many of his students, he claims, went on to publish their expressive writing pieces in magazines, newspapers and literary journals. The oyster, which is outside the walls of the academy, Allen (2002) tells us, will publish, read and laud visceral writing which is authentic, expressive and intuitive. Therefore, the benefits of expressive writing are copious and beyond the confines of academic critics and rebels. Emerson (1983) speaks to this sentiment by saying “If we touch the imagination, we serve them [students], they never forget it (pp.429-430).

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## Acknowledgement

Sunnya Khan is an independent scholar in holistic education.