

## **Counter-Cultural Autobiography: Reconsidering the transforming power of social-stories**

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### **Introduction**

Almost 25 years ago Mary C. Boys was already reflecting both on the “inextricable” bound between “the telling of stories and educating religiously” and the power of biography and autobiography for such educating. Biography and autobiography, she said, “invite us to enter into the mystery of another’s struggle to make meaning and, therefore, are, in John Dunne’s phrase, sources of ‘inexhaustible intelligibility’” (Boys 1982, 99). Although without discussion, she even recognized that biography and autobiography “*may be* significant modes of educating for justice [emphasis mine]” (100) Nevertheless, in religious education we have used and continue to use biography and autobiography mostly as a pedagogical tool to help others and ourselves “to acquire skills” and “to make meaning” rather than “to seek justice.”

In this paper I advocate an approach to autobiography that could serve as a pedagogical tool for educating for justice. I first discuss the need in religious education to move from the practice of autobiography as self-life story to the practice of autobiography as social-life story. Then I offer some conceptual considerations to frame my understanding of what I am calling “countercultural autobiography. The paper hopes to generate a conversation about the pedagogical dimensions countercultural autobiography may involve and the challenges it may face for its implementation.

### **I. Reconsidering the power of autobiography: from self-life story to social-life story.**

The “may be” of biography and autobiography as significant modes of educating for justice is still waiting to become an “are” in our practice as religious educators. In this section I offer examples of three approaches to autobiography that seem to be now dominant in the practice of religious education, especially with adults. I call them educational, existential and cultural. I will argue two of these approaches do not take into consideration the realm of social life and the third one falls short from explicitly promoting the realization of justice and the direct questioning of social inequalities. Therefore I will make the case for a counter-cultural approach to autobiography that could enable us to embrace more directly the concern for social justice in our theory and practice of religious education.

First, within the general theory and practice of adult education is clear that biography and autobiography centers on epistemological and clinical concerns. In this *educational* approach, autobiography is mostly done by the students and used by the educator as a teaching resource. On the one hand, the educator uses it as a tool to help learners to become subjects of their own learning (autobiography as a self-directed activity) and to become aware of what they already know and the ways they become to know. Pierre Dominicé, an expert on the use of autobiography affirms “[a]dults can learn how to learn more effectively by reflecting on their

experiences as actors in different contexts... In particular they may see how past experience shapes their relation to knowledge.” (2000, 9) On the other hand, autobiography is being used to help learners make sense of and get through personal life experiences. Again, Dominicé states:

Modern life carries mental demands that oblige adults to work on self-guidance and self-knowledge... As we educators discover more about adult’s lives and ways of learning, the resulting dialogue can enrich our knowledge of ways to help adults guide their lives, including ways to empower them to guide their own learning. (12)

Second, we are already familiar with theories of teaching and learning strongly autobiographical in nature. The best-known example I can offer here is probably Parker Palmer’s argument that the identity and integrity of the teacher is essential for good teaching. He uses stories, of others and himself, for “stories are the best way to portray realities of this sort,” that is, of identity and integrity. (Palmer 1998, 14) With him we move from the realm of the students to the realm of the teachers, the religious educator. I call his approach to autobiography *existential* for, as he says:

Listening to the inner teacher also offers an answer to one of the most basic questions teachers face: How can I develop the *authority* to teach, the capacity to stand my ground in the midst of the complex forces of both classroom and my own life? (32)

Palmer’s exploration of the inner life of teachers is not simply for their own sake but for sake of the whole educational enterprise. By starting with the self-that-teaches, he hopes it is possible to bring educational reform. But the reform he proposes seems to be confined to the slow and gradual growth of a movement that could “go public” and “may eventually have social and political impact.”(168) With all his good intentions, Palmer is betrayed in his analysis of institutional and social change by his white middle-class location. Gradualism is something one can afford if one is already part of the dominant culture, which gives systemic advantages to those who belong to that culture. Only then one can have the option of deciding when and where “to join in the movement.”

My third and final example is Ann Wimberly’s use of biography and autobiography within the dynamics of relationships characteristic of family and community of the Afro-American community. Her approach to biography and autobiography is *cultural*, that is, “referring to a terrain of meanings and significations associated with specific communit[y] or identity[y]” (McGinley 2004, 33) and to the particular past and present history of that community. She takes us from the settings of academy to the informal settings of home and church. Resembling Thomas Groome’s share praxis scheme (1980, 207-208) she aims at a Christian Education that can “help lay the ground for liberation and vocation” and “foster hope” (Wimberly 2005, 2). As she says,

The key point here is that we learn and mature as persons, and grasp meanings of liberation and our vocation or purpose in life in caring, face-to-face human relationships in family and community. Caring relationships refer to person’s affirmation of one another, availability and internationality in story-sharing, and show concern for one another’s well-being in the throes of life’s sojourn. As part of the community, the church

is the extended family and must give attention to these relationships. The task of Christian education in our churches is to create opportunities that help to ground persons in these relationships. (2)

Aware of the history of racial discrimination the Afro-American community has suffered and still suffers in this country, Ann Wimberly is much more explicit in her understanding of the possibility of “story-linking” for educating for justice, for “liberation and liberating wisdom.” (5). Her location as part of that group enables her to mention some of the unjust realities against it in the larger society and to see the need for material, sociopolitical and communal liberation. (9-11). But, her actual use of biographies (e.g. stories from the Afro-American heritage) and autobiography (e.g. people’s everyday stories) concentrates in the ethical, psychosocial, and educational liberation. Her main concern is to explore the self, relationships and events, and life meanings of individuals, families and communities. The socio-economic and cultural structures that maintain injustice to her group, although occasionally named, keep unchallenged and therefore untouched.

Hence, if biography and autobiography **are** to become significant modes of educating for justice another approach is necessary. It should be an approach that puts people’s stories in the context of the social realities in which people interact, realities marked by differentials of racial, economic and cultural power. Such approach I want to propose in the following section under the name of “countercultural autobiography.”

## **II. Counter-Cultural Autobiography: Some conceptual considerations.**

Autobiographies, contrary to biographies, are not complete life stories. Following Dugan McGinley who sees them as “moments of life enacted textually” (McGinley 2004, 30), I define autobiography as an *interpretative reading of the self during or after particular moments of life*. As the autobiographies of Catholic gay people studied by McGinley, they can take the form of an essay, article, chapter or novel. But they can be as short as poem or song. They can be “textually” expressed not only in writing but also in oral and/or visual form (e.g. story-telling, documentaries and movies). Having in mind these brief statements of “what” autobiography is and “how” it is expressed, I discuss next my understanding of countercultural autobiography using as a conceptual framework what Janet V. Gunn calls the constituting and interrelated moments of autobiography. They are impulse, perspective and response.

The **impulse** in autobiography is that what causes the effort “to confront the problem of temporality... to make sense of experience” (Gunn 1982, 12). The impulse for epistemological, clinical and existential approaches to autobiography focuses on “a search for the authentic self” (Dominicé and Palmer), and the impulse for communal autobiography focuses on preservation of cultural heritage and resistance to dominant culture (Wimberly). But the impulse for counter-cultural autobiography focuses on social justice in and transformation of the socio-cultural context it refers to. Countercultural autobiography does not exclude the presence nor the results of those other impulses, but its impulse, or rather its telos, transcends the individual and the group to put us in a larger collective/human story, what Jerry Stone calls “canonical story” (Stone 1995, 262-263) and Thomas Groome calls “the Christian Story and its Vision” (25).

In other words, the impulse of countercultural autobiography is both the inequities of the social order we live in and the desire towards its transformation (Kelly 1997, 9).

The second moment of autobiography is **perspective**, namely, the place from which the interpretative reading of the self is done. In Gunn's words, the perspective moment in autobiography "involves a certain mode of self-placing in relation to the autobiographer's past and from a particular standpoint in his or her present" (16). It witnesses "to the autobiographer's particular involvement in the world, a landing rather than a hovering." (17). This moment makes clear that autobiography in general, and countercultural autobiography in particular, is not an interpretative reading of past experiences but mainly an interpretative reading of the self within his or her present context. Here the cultural approach to autobiography, as exemplified by Wimberly, shares with the countercultural approach an explicit awareness of the autobiographer's socio-cultural location within a broader socio-cultural and economic system. But most important, they share an interpretative reading of self and selves that have suffered and continue to suffer socio-economic and cultural oppression as well as racial/ethnic discrimination within society's dominant culture. Thus, for countercultural autobiography the central perspective of "the interpretive reading" is the perspective of those who in one way or another experience injustice and discrimination because how they are seeing by a dominant group in a particular society.

The difference between these two approaches resides in that in countercultural autobiography the focus of attention is given not to the subjects suffering social injustice and discrimination but to the social dynamics that keep such reality of injustice and discrimination. Ursula Kelly's understanding of autobiography as a form "critical literacy" helps to clarify this difference when she says,

A notion of autobiography as readings of selves positioned within a larger textuality insists that this larger textuality be interrogated for ways in which we read and are (culturally) read to, for the ways in which we have learned to look and the ways in which we are looked at... Such an approach to autobiography *decenters* the subject, focusing attention, instead, on how the subject is constituted within a dynamics of power across a wide array of textual and discursive practices. (Kelly 1997, 66-67)

Thus, in countercultural autobiography the angle of perspective invites to the envisioning of and striving for a different future, not just for the self of the autobiographer or the autobiographer's group but for all people involved in the matrix of human relations in a particular social context. For perspective "allows us to appreciate the dimension of futurity in the depth of lived experience" (Gunn 1982, 18). Here is where the interrelation of impulse and perspective takes hold, for the encompassing impulse of countercultural autobiography for religious Christian education is the Christian Vision of God's reign of peace and justice on earth.

The third and final moment of **response** invites reflection about who does the interpretative reading in countercultural autobiography and what is "the reader's relation to the autobiographical text" (Gunn 1982, 13). From a literary perspective and interest, experts have discussed the theoretical issues (e.g. ethical and philosophical) of such relationship between the

autobiographical text, the autobiographer and between the autobiographical text and other “outside” readers (see Gunn, Kelly and McGinley, already quoted in this paper). My approach to this moment of response is “praxical,” that is, related to kind of reflection and action expected from the intended reader of a countercultural autobiography.

In the educational, existential, and cultural approaches to autobiography the intended reader is usually the autobiographer herself or himself because autobiography is seeing mainly as a “wonderfully proactive method of exploring the self” and a means for “conscious identity construction.” (McGinley, 30) Other selves/readers will be informed, and maybe formed, by having access to “a subjective perspective by the author on the author.” (40). For countercultural autobiography the intended reader and their expected connection with the autobiographical text are different and also depend on the socio-cultural location of the autobiographer and the group he or she is representing. The intended readers are those who daily “look at them” from a dominant position, whether they are conscious or unconscious of that position. Consequently, the expected connection is one of “praxical empathy,” by which I mean a critical awareness of the oppressive institutional and social inequalities that call for change and transformation for the well being of all. This praxical empathy is a kind of “sensing the network of social relationships that support or bind the other.” (Kim omi 1982, 16) An explanatory example is in place here. For instance, the intended readers for a counter-cultural autobiography by a racial/ethnic minority in this country would be primarily white, middle-class Americans. The expected connection will be one that allows for the honest analysis of and dialogue about the history of white supremacy in this country and how it continues to put other racial/ethnic groups in socio-economic and cultural disadvantage in this society. Such analysis and dialogue could be conducive to institutional and social actions to improve the rights and conditions of minority groups at all levels of society in this country.

Countercultural autobiography is in itself the risk-taking action and public response of the countercultural autobiographer, vis-à-vis an unjust and discriminatory situation within his or her daily context of social interaction. This autobiographer’s interpretative reading of the particular moments of his or her social life is a reading that although expressed in singular reflects a much broader reality. That is why the countercultural autobiographer is not simply telling his or her story but the story of a people. Thus, in countercultural autobiography what is common in the experience of a group is expressed in the particular story of a person and what is particular in the experience of a person reflects the experience of a group. In a way, the response of the counter-cultural autobiographer is an invitation to the dominant others to enter the world of the dominated and let themselves be read by and through the perspectives and experiences of the latter. Such response goes beyond a desire for self-realization or cultural survival to one of justice and total well being for all.

I close this section with a provisional definition of counter-cultural autobiography that emerges from all this reflection. Counter-cultural autobiography is *the interpretative reading of particular moments of the social life of a person that identifies himself or herself with a particular socio-cultural group, used as a way to voice unjust and oppressive realities they suffered within institutional and societal contexts, and with the ultimate goal of promoting full social inclusion and social justice within and among co-existing diverse human communities.*

## Conclusion

There is no need to persuade professionals and practitioners of religious education that from small countryside towns to small and large cities we are living in a world increasingly multicultural, multi-ethnic, multi-religious. There is no need to persuade professionals and practitioners of religious education that within the dominant white culture in North America coexistence of such diverse populations has become not only more complex but also increasingly more conflictive. There is no need to persuade professionals and practitioners of religious education that in church, public and private institutions, communities and society at large there are still many “isms” (e.g. racism, ethnocentrism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, ableism, etc.) that alienate, discriminate and oppressed persons and whole communities. However, it seems that more persuasion is needed for religious educators in seminaries, as well as religious practitioners in faith communities, to truly embrace countercultural autobiographies as mode of educating children, youth and adults “to seek justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our God.” Let us reconsider the transforming power of the social stories of the oppressed peoples of the world to achieve those goals.

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