

## **Autobiography and Curriculum : Its Theory and Application to Religious Education in a Millennial Era**

How might the implementation of autobiography enhance the curriculum in a religious education setting? This paper explores notions of autobiography that are advocated by both secular and religious educators. Research shows the discomfort that current day millennials have towards meta-narratives or the certainty of any absolute claims of truth. (Hookway, p. 100) It is my contention that a sound starting point for uncovering the breadth of the Christian social justice tradition is one's individual encounter with his/her story through autobiography. Service-learning is a productive context for one to examine one's own biography in the face of apparent injustice, then through reflection and analysis appreciate one's story in a larger context and tradition. Teaching and learning are always contextual. The pages ahead first focus on some salient descriptive characteristics of millennial age people as a cultural context appropriate for autobiography. The discussion then turns to understanding the insights about autobiography as proposed by Pinar, Grumet, Macdonald and Noddings and by religious educators Heinz Straub and Susanna Hookway. In the last section, practical connections are made between these scholarly insights and their implementation through service-learning. Excerpts from student journals are utilized as well to support the thesis.

### **Characteristics of Millennials**

It is an irony that in the touch of one's fingertips, one can travel to the far ends of the earth yet never venture outside one's physical comfort zone. For the millennial era, those born between 1980 and 1999, that reality is not so far from the truth. Some critical qualities of millennials shape the context by which they engage in religious education

learning. First, the bombardment of images feeds the appetite of millennials. This generation is raised on electronic media and instant access of music. Truth is not first deduced from deduction, prayer, or critical analysis; what is on the surface is preferred to what lies within. (Hookway, p. 101) Such an approach to reality serves to exacerbate what religious educator Susanna Hookway calls “the decentred self,” which is not grounded in a religious or philosophical tradition but scattered by the random nature of technological infusion. Following closely to this flood of images is a second dimension of the millennial world – that is, its rootedness in consumerism. So many images create so many options. Millennials are inundated with choices to make. If they want to buy a bicycle, they can go from Ebay to Craig’s list to any store catalogue in a matter of minutes. If they want to understand a world crisis, they can flip from BBC to CNN to Fox and receive distinctly different perspectives and interpretations. Which one “to buy?” is the dilemma of the current day consumer of information. For the middle class and above, the current world has made purchasing a form of being.

A third reality that is buoyed by technology and consumerism is this notion of a ‘world without boundaries.’ (Schmotzer, p. 66) Millennials have been raised to understand cross-cultural diversity not so much as a nicety but as a necessity. Exposure to the world through technology has unleashed a hunger to see and to experience the diversity of the world. High value is placed on tolerance of others and openness to different perspectives. But in the realm of inter-religious dialogue, educators call into question the capacity for meaningful interaction. Why? In order to engage in conversation, one has to speak with some limited authority from the “meta-narrative” that has helped to form one’s self-awareness. A lack of familiarity with such narratives is a

common denominator of this era. It becomes difficult to speak with any depth if one is not conversant with one's own vocabulary of religion. Conversations then can easily become vacuous.

Technology, consumerism, and diversity then are three of the pillars that support the millennials' understanding of the complexity of the world. University chaplain, Jim Schmotzer, sees a fourth pillar equally foundational to the contemporary young adult world. This era has been taught that they can do *any* thing and *many* things at once. Raised by parents who program their childrens' lives with activities upon activities, millennials emerge with the optimistic sense that they can do and be anything they want to be. This positive outlook, however, can often mask an internal sense of stress and pressure due to too many demands. Formed in a culture of doers, millennials have perfected the art of multi-tasking but often neglect their inner needs for healthy reflection and equanimity. Schmotzer suggests that the heavy emphasis on action and accomplishment has thus had a mixed impact on the contemporary age. The high percentage of young adults taking prescription drugs for anxiety, panic attacks, and sleep disorders speaks to the ill effects of an upbringing that has pushed and pushed.

Action, accomplishment, images, and acquisitions companion millennials as they grow into maturity in a stress-filled "world of the many." How might educators bring students of this era into a centered focus? How might educators create environments of learning which foster depth and awareness of a grounded self in the context of a larger world? As a 1970's reaction to the goal-oriented and development focus in education, curricular thinkers began to promote the use of autobiography in curricula. In the

contemporary era this same method employed in the educational context may indeed have merit.

### **Understanding Autobiography**

In his 1975 work, *Curriculum Theory: The Reconceptualists*, William Pinar introduces new ways to look at curriculum as distinct from the operative thinking of the 1950-70's timeframe. Moving away from a "how to" approach to education, thinkers such as Pinar, Macdonald, and Huebner cautioned against the practical lure of "quick fixes" in teaching and learning (Pinar, p. 214) An over-emphasis on scientific method in teaching neglects the creative and mystical dimensions of this enterprise. In this context, autobiography counters a reliance on observable data and strict methods of proof and procedure. When design, sequence and evaluation define the curricular landscape, the inner world is easily over-looked.

Pinar has a method for autobiography involving four distinct movements:

- 1) regressive
- 2) progressive
- 3) analytical
- 4) synthetical.

In the first step, free association allows one to get in touch with a whole host of random memories associated with a subject introduced. Any number of themes could serve to illicit floods of memories such as "coming to America," significant losses, accomplishments, shifting relationships. In this first step, the autobiographer simply allows memory to take over and lead one from one anecdote to the next. In the second movement, a progressive one, the autobiographer is instructed to dream of one's future without the limit of time, money, discrimination and injustice. The second movement celebrates imagination and potentiality. In the third movement, the past is in dialogue with the future and the present with both. The autobiographer explores how the totality of time is interconnected in memories, dreams

and current reality. Finally, in the synthetical step one draws together from the continuity of time a sense of meaning in the present.

From this standpoint of a person in history, with one's past unfolding into one's future, the autobiographer situates the act of learning in the context of his/her story. This stance allows for genuine authenticity in the learning enterprise. Rather than information added on as an appendage to memory, the learning process becomes a creative and integrative one. This method of autobiography stands in stark contrast to the "banking" theory of education, so thoroughly critiqued by Freire (Hookway, p. 103). In *Understanding Curriculum*, Pinar illustrates how Madeleine Grumet takes the notion of autobiography one step further in her articulation of "currere." Having its roots in psychoanalysis, currere involves a delving into the manifest and latent meanings of unconsciousness and consciousness. The purpose of "currere" is to liberate the individual from the dominant language and associations of school and culture. The implication here is that genuine learning involves peeling off the layers of the external world to arrive eventually at an inner truth, free from public language. (Pinar, p. 520) Grumet describes "currere" as "a reflexive cycle in which thought bends back upon itself and thus recovers its volition." The "how" of "currere" remains unclear to me but it would seem to me that the teacher, or certainly the curriculum planner, here must have considerable training in psychology and therapy.

This notion of "currere" raises a critique of the "solipsistic" nature of autobiography. To what extent can autobiography create a conflict between one person's truth versus another person's story? Each individual is the authority of his/her story. Even if someone can dispute the facts of the story, the autobiographer still remains the

expert when revealing how one experience shapes the next and how the sum of experiences affects the person in the present. This subject of “currere” raises an important question about the purpose of autobiography in the first place. If autobiography is utilized in curriculum as an end in itself, it can certainly be subject to the “solipsistic” critique. In other words, its curricular purpose would serve to guarantee meaning for the individual as an isolated entity in the world. But autobiography need not be so individualistic. Autobiography can certainly be a means by which one can understand one’s place in the world in relationship to peers, community, and those of diverse communities. The autobiography of a recluse may indeed remain the hidden story of a sole individual. Autobiographies shared in curricular purposes can be windows by which one can understand one’s “assumptive world” in relationship to the perspectives of others. As such they can be portals to a deeper appreciation of diversity, of class, of privilege, and of injustice.

Both Pinar and Noddings emphasize the collaborative nature of autobiographical work. Through structured autobiographical dialogue, one can understand oneself in a “chorus,” as a member of a larger community of people. (Pinar, p. 523) Noddings suggests that through such realization, one can see oneself as rooted in a “caring community.” Dorothy Day’s autobiographical work, *The Long Loneliness*, captures this sense. Day concludes that the answer to the long loneliness suffered by so many is participation in a community of love and support. For Day, the Catholic Worker provided that community for her. Noddings points out, however, that the use of autobiography may not always result in a community of care but sometime an environment of dissent. When autobiography serves as a catalyst for venting and anger,

it can create a combustible environment devoid of respect and listening. (Noddings, p. 104-05) Issues of class, race, and gender can foster intense feelings and serve to divide people, not build community. The use of autobiography in curriculum calls for careful, structured processes. The teacher must establish firm guidelines so that the sacredness of one's individual story may be revered and preserved.

These risks of autobiography introduce a debate about the political nature of autobiography. In 1973, at a University of Rochester Curriculum Theory Conference, James Macdonald critiques the "developmental" models of curriculum that are governed by strict goals and objectives observable by human behavior. (Pinar, p. 216) In this paper, he referred to autobiography as the "romantic" perspective. While extolling its benefits, he also acknowledges that the use of autobiography may serve simply to maintain the status quo by focusing too much on individual experience. At the same time, the practice of liberation theological models has shown that the collective sharing of individual stories may produce a common voice, one united in a dream of freedom from oppression. When those voices gathered in churches throughout Montgomery, Alabama in 1955, they formed a common chorus that gave birth to the Civil Rights Movement. When individual voices joined together to form Basic Ecclesial Communities in Latin America, there was born a common vision and commitment to social change. Macdonald is right to point out the potential danger of political isolation produced by autobiography but history has shown that it need not produce that result.

Politics aside - Macdonald, Pinar, Grumet and Noddings approach the issue of autobiography from their perspectives as secular educators. How might religious educators contribute to this discussion? Heinz Streib readily admits that there is an

ambivalence towards the topic of biography and autobiography in the area of religious education. In one sense, it is commonplace to point out that a nexus of relationships defines peoples' lives. I am a son, a husband, a brother, a father, an uncle, a nephew, a godfather, a teacher, a student, a boss, an employee, a citizen, and a parishioner. And the list could go on. These relationships have factual natures and for each one I can tell clear and detailed stories that describe the character and multi-dimensions of these personal interactions. What is less clear is the exact connection between these autobiographical accounts and my faith, and even more, between my stories and the *evolving* nature of my faith. In other words the relationship between personal autobiography and faith development is fuzzy.

Coming from the perspective of religious education as teaching people "to be" religious, Streib says that autobiography can be examined from four different perspectives. (Streib, p. 44) Each perspective addresses the question of who really "writes" our biographies? The first is the "hermeneutical perspective." From this standpoint, one focuses on diverse cultural "texts" that shape a human story. From my own life, I could say accurately that in secondary education and college, I was educated by Benedictine monks in their "cultural" context; my roles as husband and father have radically shaped my present reality; my affiliation with the Roman Catholic Church has formed my vision of the world. Each of these components of my life provides a hermeneutical context that helps to write my biography. A second perspective on autobiography posits that I, as a subject, am the agent of my own evolution and maturation as a person of faith. I decided to go to the Benedictine high school instead of the Jesuit one or public school. I chose marriage and children, not the single or celibate



life. I chose to move to New York. Et cetera. A third strand of this multi-perspective model is the psychoanalytical one. From this angle, I would emphasize the unconscious dimensions of my evolving faith development. Perhaps it was my need for approval that led me to the Benedictine school. Was there a component of nurturing that I needed and received in some of my formative Roman Catholic communities? These are autobiographical realizations and questions that could be raised through psychoanalytic therapy. Finally, Streib discusses the structural-development dimension of autobiography. Here the thought of James Fowler is referenced considerably. Fowler connects the religious developmental process with the cognitive developmental theories of, among others, Piaget. The assumption here is that there are operational processes afoot in human development which, in a sense, help “to program” one’s faith.

Streib’s analysis of Fowler’s thought helps to uncover various dimensions of autobiography. In focusing on the story of Mary from *Stories of Faith*, Streib points to both positive features and shortcomings in Fowler’s use of autobiography. In Fowler there is an interplay between personal story, social interaction, and Christian faith. (Streib, p. 45) Through the method of an interview, Fowler engages Mary in a discussion of the predominant images and issues of her faith journey. Streib points to the hermeneutic and psychoanalytic dimensions of Fowler’s commentary especially in relation to Mary’s own conversion process. He suggests that her faith conversion journey will be complete if she comes to terms with themes and contexts in her childhood and young adult years. But Streib also critiques what he describes as an over-emphasis on a foreign, objective process intrinsic to Fowler’s thought. The commitment to a “stage analysis” of faith development restricts central role of subjectivity in autobiography.

(Streib, p. 47) In stronger terms, the subjective agent is co-opted by an objective theory. According to Streib, Fowler seems to be fitting the pieces of Mary's life into a preconceived "jigsaw puzzle" of "stages." Streib calls for a more creative and person-focused use of autobiography.

With this critique in mind, I turn now to a discussion of my own use of autobiography and the ways this theoretical overview above might shape my future implementation of this mode of learning. Let me note first that this discussion of autobiography in curriculum began by acknowledging the shift in the early 1970's away from scientific and behaviorist theorists as the predominant voices in the field. The ideas of Pinar, Grumet, Macdonald, and Noddings have all helped to elucidate this complex notion of autobiography. A further thought of Macdonald provides a valuable springboard for the next section on implementation. In commenting on the rapid increase of technology in curriculum, Macdonald says, "humanity will eventually transcend technology by turning inward." (Pinar, p. 219) That remark provides a focus for one of the primary purposes I see in utilizing autobiography in an era in which outward images and superficiality can often dominate discourse.

### **Implementation of Autobiography in the Context of Service-Learning**

I teach an undergraduate course entitled, "Theology of Christian Service." The 25-30 students enrolled explore the theological meanings of service from three distinct perspectives: the vantage point of contemporary practitioners of service (Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King, Sr. Helen Prejean); a Scriptural overview of social justice concluding with a New Testament christological perspective aided by the work of Markus Borg; a contemporary theology of service through Michael Himes' reformulation

of Augustinian theology; and an overview of Catholic Social Teaching utilizing the scholarship of Thomas Massaro. The students are engaged in fourteen hours of hands-on service work, five of which are completed as a total class experience of sharing clothes and food with Manhattan's street homeless through the Midnight Run. In addition to direct acts of charity, the students complete justice/advocacy group projects that culminate in class presentations which teach components of the Catholic Social Teaching heritage and educate about the many advocacy opportunities related to specific areas of the CST tradition (environmental issues, death penalty lobbying, head-start funding, for example).

The autobiographical element of the course takes form in a journal assignment that accompanies the 14-hour hands-on service work. As the students are reading Day, Prejean, and King they are asked to "dialogue" with these practitioners while participating in service work. The journal assignment poses to the students several questions about their "assumptive worlds:" 1) How is what they have assumed to be true and good challenged by what they experience? 2) Through their service experiences how have they had "contrast experiences?" 3) With whom do they relate the most and the least (Day, King, Prejean) as they engage in this service work? The journals are discussed in the classroom context, to the extent that students wish to share.

Selections from recently completed journals manifest some of the inherent tensions and questions in autobiography. To what extent do they promote a solipsistic perspective? How might they invite critical awareness of the wider, inter-related narratives that are part of their lives? How are they mirrors to the inner world? How are they windows to the wider community? Which types of "texts" do they engage –

hermeneutical, psychoanalytical, subjective, objective? How might these autobiographical selections be beneficial to the millennial consciousness?

Reflecting this movement from solipsistic isolation to broader awareness of injustice, Mia writes, “As a child growing up, I always associated poverty with any country besides the United States. I assumed that every resident in America lived a similar lifestyle to mine. I learned otherwise, and will never forget the lesson.” Further commenting on her assumptive world, Mia states, “I am used to having a house provided me by my parents, never to think what I would do without one.” A budding musician with his own band, Matt shares his encounter with a homeless person, also musically inclined, “I know how it is to be a striving and hungry musician all too well. His struggles came from trying to record and shop his music around to record labels and sell to people on the street.” And Cesar saw in the homeless poor the lives of his loved ones, “I see these people and most are old and the first thing that came to my mind was my grandparents. I picture them being those homeless people and I felt such a pain inside that this exists in these modern times.” Cesar’s strong feelings on this subject were intensified in this remark, “I have seen first hand how people live in other countries and how hard life is to just get food for everyday. Things never change and in part the government is at fault.”

Nel Noddings’ cautionary remarks on autobiography are particularly apropos in light of the revelations of Mia and Cesar. They clearly come from distinctly different economic class backgrounds. Mia reflects the worldview of many from the middle class who through their personal reflection on service come to terms with their privileged background. In Cesar’s autobiographical remarks, there was an escalating anger and

pessimism throughout the journal. In his service work, Cesar was confronted with the poverty of his own family and his own sense of powerlessness. While the autobiographical journal assignment was certainly a productive context to express these personal insights, the classroom setting could prove to be problematic especially if either or both parties became hostile or defensive. Some professors might thrive on such conflict as a creative tension for learning but the potential for divisiveness is also there.

Utilizing Pinar's insights on autobiography, it is clear that this assignment activated a regressive process for the students. The reflection on their own assumptive worlds forced the students to recall their upbringings and the values imbued upon them. If I were to pursue Pinar's methodologies further, I would pose questions of a progressive and analytic nature. Such probing might affect a more thorough grounding of the students in the totality of time. I also believe that Streib's multi-faceted portrayal of autobiography provides a helpful lens by which I can examine its implementation. Streib points to the interplay between the subjective and hermeneutic dimensions of autobiography. For my course assignment, this manifests itself as the students discuss their own lives in the context of hands-on service work. In other words, their autobiographical revelations were prompted and provoked by the planned interactions they experienced. Another hermeneutical context were the autobiographies they read and with whom they were asked "to converse." In reflecting on her tutoring work in the context of King's commitment to justice, Liz writes, "there is still prejudice going on in our world and I feel that the kids I tutored will have to encounter it at some point." Further on, she reflects on her own sense of Christology by commenting, "I feel that I have interpreted my Christology as a low one because I have sought to help people who

were suffering.” The Christian theological categories of Christology then became for the students another hermeneutical context. Do these many and diverse hermeneutical contexts overshadow the subjective component of autobiography? This is a tension that challenges me to assess this assignment.

Finally, I wish to return to Macdonald’s comments as a way to address the millennial dimension of this assignment. In the 1970’s he seemed to foreshadow how technology may indeed hide people from their inner lives. As I have implemented this teaching methodology for the past five years, I have been increasingly struck by the resistance many students have for self-reflection. Cindy Kissel-Ito has highlighted Pinar’s claim that in the initial regressive phase “autobiography asks us to slow down.” (Kissel-Ito, p. 1) For this current generation, adept at multi-tasking, this is a significant challenge, even a threat to identity. In giving the autobiographical assignment, I received continuous questions and challenges concerning the length and content. Receiving numerous incomplete and skeletal journals has become the norm in the past few years. It would be unfounded to suggest that this is only a problem of millennials. At the same time, I believe that my experience parallels the research showing two characteristics of this era: the lack of familiarity with religious traditions and the surface dimensions of millennials. With this study of autobiography, I plan to develop this assignment further and utilize especially the processes advocated by both Pinar and Streib. Kissel-Ito studies thoroughly the four steps of Pinar and offers valuable insights in applying this methodology in the religious education context.

## Conclusion

This paper has undertaken a formidable task in weaving together connections between autobiography, millennial literature, and service-learning. To respect the breadth of each area, much more could be written and examined. It has been the contention of this paper to analyze both the positive features and potential pitfalls of this notion of autobiography. Then, given this study, it has been helpful to explore ways to apply the literature on autobiography to my application of it in a service-learning context intended for current college undergraduates. From this study I remain convinced that the practice of autobiography in this day and age can provide opportunities for religious educators to promote study, analysis, and practical application to peoples' lives.

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