Our Quest: How We Negotiate our Multiple Selves on a Daily Basis

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Abstract

Professional women face many changes and challenges in their lives. This article contains the personal narratives of four women who have carried on conversations to reflect upon their transformation from graduate students to educators. In the process, they relate adult learning theories to their own life experiences in order to gain a better understanding of the multiple "selves" that have developed in their lives. They found strength and encouragement in dialoguing with one another about their experiences and hope that by sharing they can offer the same to others who also feel split and conflicted in their multiplicities.

Introduction

This piece originated as a conversation among a few colleagues about our transformation from graduate students to educators. Our original goal was a presentation at the Mountain Plains Adult Education Association conference in Salt Lake City, Utah. We did manage to present in Salt Lake, and we even held a round table session in Denver at the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education Conference, but our conversations and our focus have gradually changed. What began as an idea to talk about how we have transformed our perspectives as students to

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perspectives as educators has necessarily become an ongoing conversation about the numerous dimensions of our lives that we were dealing with and how our need to perform in so many dimensions concurrently has changed how we see ourselves and essentially who we are. We are/were all simultaneously performing the roles of graduate student, parent, educator, and worker amongst the many other roles we have always played. Being new to so many of these roles has made our quest particularly challenging, and we all recognize and freely admit that we have had to renegotiate, reprioritize, rearrange, and shuffle many dimensions of our lives and who we are to make it to where we are today. What started off as an idea among two colleagues has grown to a group conversation of four colleagues sharing their experiences with one another. This paper is written by one mommy who has earned the title of doctor and is now teaching online, a doctoral candidate/university instructor mommy, an association president/graduate student/full-time adult educator mommy, and a doctoral student/working single mommy.

We have long been deliberating our personal transformations from student to educator along our paths of higher education. In sharing our personal experience stories with one another, we have discovered multidimensional worlds of family, teaching, and studies and have explored these in relation to our transitions as well as some theoretical interpretations based on transformative learning theory and multiple selves. This paper weaves bits and pieces of narrative (Bloom, 2002) collected between colleagues, all of whom have been sharing the pressure cooker of graduate studies in education. In light of Richardson and St. Pierre's (2005) outlined method of writing as data collection, thought, and analysis, we chose journaling and letter writing (Rossiter, 2005) as the means for us to think through our experiences and the personal changes we have undergone throughout our academic journey. We have chosen Mezirow's (1991, 2000) transformative learning theory and multiples selves (Plimmer & Schmidt, 2007; Rossiter, 2007) and identity (Blumer, 1986; Mead, 1934; Meltzer et al., 1975; Reynolds, 1990) as general theoretical underpinnings for making sense of our personal stories. Our research experience and process has been one that we might call "organic," consisting of writing and narrating at opportune moments throughout the day and night; meeting as a group in offices decked out with playpens and toddlers running amok; and late night attempts at meeting after the babies are in bed. We offer some personal reflections on our academic sojourn and how our lives have been changed by it, and how these shifts have contributed to our development as

"students" and "educators" and to our multiplicities.

As each woman's story has taken on its own flavor and each of us has a different educational background, we have chosen not to elaborate here on an overarching framework to analyze our stories. Instead, we have decided to allow each other the space to weave our own theoretical understandings into our personal stories, and we will highlight some commonalities and implications in the discussion at the end.

Liz's Story

I returned to my graduate studies after a year of deferment and an international move from Stuttgart back to my home state. My son was 10 months old, and I was determined to start studying again even if I could only manage to go part-time, squatted in front of an online class with a babe on my lap. Four years later, I am a doctoral candidate, I have a second child and a third on the way, and I ask myself on a regular basis why I press on. I am often so critical of this path, I feel split, and I find myself reflecting on my purpose more than once a day.

On one hand, I have chosen the path of doctoral studies and research as a path of "growing myself up" (Richardson, 2005). On the other hand, I believe continuing my education has been a fixed and dominant idea in my life, and I cannot help but continue on--it is simply a part of who I am. For me, my academic work is like refracting my experiences, life, and gathered information through the lenses of literature, international studies, education, sociology, and anything that I can get my hands on in order to get a better grasp of how to make some sense of my own complicated worlds. In effect, I think the process is more about making sense of my selves (Stewart, 2008) than it is about making sense of the world.

My academic travels have been long and varied. I have studied German literature, social movements and globalization, revolutionary theory, and now education, cognition, and learning theory. So, in a sense, I have multiple academic selves that I am trying to fit under the hat of a PhD in education. But this is only one multiplicity that identifies me. I am also the mother of two children (a great deal of schooling in and of itself), I am a full-time graduate student, and I am a university instructor. One could term this juggling, or switching hats, or wearing several sets of clothing all at the same time.

Some recent literature in adult education refers to "multiple selves" (Plimmer & Schmidt, 2007; Rossiter, 2007). Multiple selves and multiple

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identities are theorized from a number of different perspectives. These have been described as the number of different roles we play in a day… mother, wife, teacher, student, and so on. Some think of these roles in a more dramaturgical sense (Bakhtin, 1981)--that we possess a number of short-take selves throughout the day--where you play a certain person when you bump into Bob at the gas station, then the "good" parent when picking your child up from the daycare, and then the "good neighbor" when you pull up in the driveway and see the lady next door. I suppose we can think of these as small role plays that come and go throughout the day. However, I do not think of this so much as mere roles and performances we put together--I think of these moments as opportunities where we can reveal different aspects or dimensions of our social identities (Jones & McEwen, 2002). At this point, the idea that we have core selves, or the "I" that is private, and the multiple outer social identities, or the "me's" (Blumer, 1986; Mead, 1934; Meltzer et al., 1975; Reynolds, 1990) that are public (Worthman, 2004), seems to make the most sense to me, and this helps me better understand how I have changed over the course of my doctoral studies. I run from role to role throughout the day with no time to transition from toddler mommy to college instructor to graduate student. I juggle all of these simultaneously, and all parts of me are present throughout the day even though I might feel split and torn at times.

Let me talk a little bit about what I mean by my "selves" in the plural sense. As I have gone through the program in adult education, transformative learning theory has been attractive to me, and I thoroughly understand the humanistic influences on learning theories in the field. However, something about these have never felt quite right in helping me make sense of my own learning experiences. Most of our adult learning theories tell us that we are autonomous, rational human beings who use learning as a means to pretty predictable ends in our lives--we are self-directed, we want our learning to relate to our lives, and we are "bounded, masterful, and individuated" beings who are the locus of control in manipulating the world around us to our own personal ends (Clark & Dirkx, 2000). Somehow, I guess after having learned the core adult education learning theories throughout this doctoral program, I thought that these approaches would lead me to better finding and defining my "authentic self." However, my doctoral studies have not felt this way--if anything, I am further away from defining the "true me" than I ever have been. Instead of despairing, I have begun to realize that perhaps these assumptions, that the self (my self) as a self-directed, unitary, individuated, authentic,

autonomous being who can get to where I need to go through rational thought, logic, and reason is not a very good reflection of what is happening in my life. I have begun to question the underlying assumptions being made here. Yes, theory tells us that social context is important (all constructionist thought), and some theories are beginning to truly emphasize the role of social context in our learning and self development (for example, Jarvis, 2006). Even back in 2000, Clark and Dirkx among others were suggesting that we question the idea of unitary selves. Feminist theory has been suggesting non-unitary identities for some time, and multiple selves theories are coming back to help us understand this in the adult learning context.

When I reflect on my own experiences, this multiple selves perspective feels better, fits better, and is a more accurate description of the process I have been undergoing for the past 4 years. I feel very fragmented, conflicted, and challenged as though I have to reorganize many of the dimensions of my identity in order to make my life work. As I have been reading through these ideas, they help me make sense of not only my academic learning but also of the changes I have undergone personally as I navigate this doctoral course. I literally can sense that I am in a process of transforming from student to educator. I can see how my perspectives are merging, diverging, developing, being abandoned, or being integrated into what I already think. I have become conscious of this, and it changes who I am. My learning and my identity are inextricably linked; I can feel that intensely.

In adult education, a common theory and theme of discussion is transformative learning (Mezirow , 1991, 2000). I think this kind of learning, or the shift in our perspectives and how we understand the world, coincides well with the shifts that occur within our multiple selves/identities. In essence, transformative learning is identity work. For me, my doctoral studies and the past 3 years have been nothing short of transformative. I have "grown myself up" as an academic, as a teacher, as a parent, as a friend, as a colleague, as a professional, and deep inside as a person. I have experienced an arduous and intensive shift in epistemological views, have shifted in methodological views, have shifted my teaching philosophy, and have changed a number of my views of the world. This has been nothing short of exhausting, but I think I would have been terribly disappointed had I not experienced these changes through my advanced studies. Even if I had joined the program with the purely pragmatic goals of letters behind my name and career positioning, the only

constant in today's world is change, and I think change is unavoidable. The important question is, "Has the change been meaningful?" For me, these changes have been epic, and my multiplicities have been shifted, reorganized, and reprioritized. I no longer see myself as just another graduate student. I have grown and my identities as an educator and scholar have dawned. I am not the same Liz who moved here from Stuttgart.

So as I think about the past 4 years and about the intersections of the various dimensions of who I am, I am certain that I have transformed. I have leaned on colleagues and friends whose experiences mirror my own, and I have looked up to others who have "made it" and have become "Doctor Mommy." As I continue to merge these roles on a daily basis, I am more conscious of the fact that I am a whole person with many dimensions and that I must move forward as a whole person in all of my roles. For me, as a woman, this might mean that my trajectory from graduate student to professional might not be as straight and predictable as it should be, and I might not be able to conform myself to the expectations that others might have of me. Yet, I know I will have to write my own rules and create a new space that will harbor the new me. I have learned that instead of feeling split and conflicted, that I can feel empowered as I renegotiate the intersections of my identity and transform both myself and my surroundings in order to accommodate my unique multiplicities.

Leann's Story

I have prepared this story on several different occasions and have found that each time what I need to say and my understanding of the various dimensions of my life have both deepened and shifted. Thus, any attempt to give a definitive version is futile. Consequently, what I present here is a snapshot of my understanding of myself at this point in time.

The intersection of several theoretical constructs explains the ongoing journey I am taking in relation to my life dimensions and their effect on shaping who I am. These constructs include transformational theory, possible selves, generational theory, and multiple selves. I began teaching in a university faculty position at the age of 24. At that time I had a master's degree but no intentions of pursing a Ph.D. After several years in this position, I realized that teaching at the post-secondary level was what I wanted to pursue as a career. The stories of many people would continue from this point on with a linear path and include the completion of a doctorate, acquiring a tenure-track position, and working toward tenure.

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Yet, my story does not follow this route.

After deciding that I wanted to continue working in higher education, I was a full-time doctoral student for one year. At the end of this year, my first child was born. This event is typical of Mezirow's (1991, 2000) description of a transformational experience, and the reality of my situation was no different from that explained by Mezirow. My son's birth began a qualitative shift in my thinking and views of both the world and myself. I could no longer have singular and personally focused goals, nor did I any longer want them.

The experience of the birth of my first child and the resulting transformation led to my being able to more clearly identify an image of who I wanted to be rather than only who I should be according to the accepted role of an educator seeking a doctoral degree. I began to create an image of who I could be and the journey I could take in trying to become that person. This is what Rossiter (2007), Plimmer and Schmidt (2007), and others have called possible selves. Possible selves are our ideal, ought, and desired selves. They provide "a means of evaluating and giving meaning to events in the present" (p. 64). After my son was born, I almost immediately realized that I could not dedicate myself to a career that required a 50 or 60 hour work week in order to reach tenure. I also just as quickly realized that taking this route post-graduation was what academe expected of me. Everything made this clear to me from my doctoral faculty members to any publication I read. Yet, the events of my present showed me a different and less typical, non-linear path to lead me to my possible selves.

My possible selves have also been influenced by generational theory. Being born in 1977, I am generally perceived to be a member of "Generation X." A common attribute of this generation is that we seek balance, freedom, and autonomy in our lives and careers (Fogg, 2008). As Stokes and Wyn (2007) argue, transition in this younger generation is not linear and "rather than focus on outcomes alone, transition should be seen as a process of identity development" (p. 495). These descriptions help in part to explain the possible selves and the route to achieving those possible selves on which I currently find myself. I completed my PhD in 2008 and was offered two tenure-track positions. However, my ideal, ought, and desired possible selves would not allow me to accept this linear and traditional academic route. I chose instead to work as an adjunct faculty member in distance education. I am able to stay home with my son but still able to stay active and current in my field. I continue to write and research but not under the auspices of a particular institution or job title.

This leads to the final theoretical construct that ties together the other three previously described. Multiple selves theory (Jones & McEwen, 2002; Rossiter, 2007) is the culmination of what began with a transition, that led to an image of my possible selves, and which was driven by attributes found within members of my generation. Each and every day I operate within a world containing multiple people named Leann. I wake up and spend the morning playing with my son and caring for his needs. During his afternoon nap and on the weekends, I turn to teaching my online courses and catching up on writing and research. Recently, I have added a necessary afternoon nap because I am 8 months pregnant with my second child. When my husband arrives home in the evening, I am a wife, spending necessary time nurturing our relationship. The multiple roles I inhabit can change almost instantaneously, and I have to be prepared to move from wiping a nose to answering a question about a course assignment to listening to a story about my husband's work colleague.

In much of the literature on multiple selves, the necessity of one person playing so many different roles is seen in a negative light or even as a barrier to personal development (Fairchild, 2003). Home (1998) cites three dimensions of strain found in women with multiple selves. These include role conflict, role overload, and role contagion. Yet, I have found that I am actively and purposely trying to cultivate my multiple selves in order to create my possible selves. I embrace the opportunity to have and to be multiple selves despite the difficulties encountered. It would be easy to attribute this to the early feminism view that women can "have it all." However, it is not that I want to do everything, but rather that I am happy with the various roles I play. I understand and embrace that each is a part of who I am. From the point when I first began teaching, I knew I wanted to be involved in higher education. In addition, I made the decision to be a mother but also made the decision that I did not become a mother so someone else could raise my children. This does not mean that integrating and balancing my various selves is an easy task, but I try everyday to do so. Each of my selves and my image of my future possible selves change and develop who I am. These multiple selves also continue to change, as they already have since we began this research, with a new baby now on the way. My possible selves will also change from the image I have today, but these overall constructs remain those that guide how I see myself and who I am.

It has been an interesting project to work with colleagues in focusing on and researching our own lives. Rossiter (2007) mentions that our

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possible selves may be influenced by group membership and that seems to be the case for me through conducting this research and by sharing our stories with others. The work we are undertaking provides an apt metaphor for what I am currently trying to accomplish in my life. This is that I can focus on myself, but by doing so I can also contribute to a greater academic goal by examining and understanding the lives of those people who call themselves "Doctor Mommy."

Aimee's Story

When I applied for the doctoral program in Adult Learning and Technology, I had just completed my master's degree in Communication and Journalism. Before beginning my master's degree, I had spent nearly 2 years in China and had my fair share of travel adventures before moving to Asia. During my initial graduate experience, I was single and living solo. I excelled in my courses and finished my thesis in less than 6 months. I was proud to have won the Donaughy Award for best annual departmental thesis. I was teaching two sections of Public Speaking 1010 on campus, and I had nothing but free time to dedicate to the pursuit of my graduate studies and teaching. According to Perlmutter (2008), a common misperception of life in academia by the general public "is one of leisure and banter interspersed with a few hours of off-the-cuff teaching" (p. 1). During this phase of my life, or what I aptly call the "me" phase, I may have been perceived as the above stereotype. Did I mention I taught yoga twice a week as a hobby? During my free time I was perfecting my skills at allowing my social butterfly wings to flutter. The roles in my life during this time and each self were conveniently departmentalized within one another.

During the same week I was accepted into the Ph.D. program, I found out that I was going to be a mother. I felt like the luckiest person in the world! Following a whirlwind romance, I felt fortunate knowing that my life's path was falling perfectly into place. Yet as we all know, life can be full of surprises and changes are all too natural. I had my daughter during the first semester of my Ph.D. program, and I was attending classes full-time. At the end of the same semester, I discovered the life's path that I had once thought lay ahead was about to change. Suddenly, I became a single parent with a three month-old baby. My world instantly turned upside down and inside out. As I began taking on new roles and forming new selves, and the amount (and my innate sense) of responsibility for succeeding at these

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roles suddenly seemed an insurmountable challenge. I was now a "single mother," and being primary custodial parent meant the parenting responsibility was now entirely mine.

I was surprised and a bit disconcerted to take on my new self as a single mother in society. After all, this was not what I had planned. I had a new role that is not necessarily looked at as positive by more traditional members of society. Haleman (2004) states, "Negative images of single motherhood abound and single mothers are blamed for social ills ranging from growing inner-city crime rates and drug use to nothing less than the domestic demise of the American family" (p. 769). Although this may be a more macabre view of single mothers that is certainly not shared by most of society, either way I now had a new, challenging role that added a new self to my role repertoire. I immediately felt determined to not allow myself to be labeled as a "single mother" but rather as a "successful single mother." I reassured myself that it would be a short journey to success as I was a 32 year-old graduate student who had already fulfilled most of her life's personal, academic, and travel goals. I would soon discover that regardless of my educational advantages, I had an absolute challenge ahead of me raising a child alone that would test and reshape every fiber of my self.

Along with my newly formed mother/self, a strong sense of motivation to succeed set in and still remains intact, along with fatigue. For the first time in my life, a deep sense of fear replaced what was once an unshakeable sense of confidence in thinking I would have an idea of my life's course. My short-lived illusion of picket fences was soon replaced by wondering how I was going to pay rent on my own amongst numerous other financial responsibilities that accompany raising a child. Not only did I now need to be successful at my graduate studies, but also my daughter's future depended on it. Impending financial pressures can be a cause of considerable stress for single mothers, and feelings of not being an efficient financial earner can raise a perceived sense of inadequacy as a parent (Gerrard & Roberts, 2006). I now had a new self as being the primary earner of my small household. Fulfilling my role of earner (and a continued future earner), I pursued my graduate studies with vigor. I have thus far finished all of my Ph.D. coursework with the exception of two courses and my dissertation. I have also completed the M.A. in Adult Learning and Technology along my academic journey to increase my earning power and employability to gain more financial stability while finishing the remainder of my Ph.D.

Completing the majority of my course work was not an easy task. My former self who was considered an overachiever was rapidly transformed by my struggle to meet deadlines and the typical demands of a Ph.D. program. As part of my graduate assistantship, I became Technology Coordinator for the College of Education. This was a highly demanding job that required me to be on campus 20 hours per week. I knew I would be overextending myself by taking the job, but it was a wonderful opportunity to learn instructional technology. Since it paid more than my former graduate stipend, I jumped at the opportunity to earn more income. Not being able to afford full-time day care nor being able to find an open spot for my daughter at any daycare in town, I had an in-home sitter watch my daughter while I was on campus. When I returned home, I spent time caring for my daughter. I completed my graduate work while she was asleep; that led to many late nights, which expectedly required waking up to care for my daughter throughout the night. During times when my daughter was sick and feverish for days on end or up all night teething I became exhausted. Needless to say, I no longer taught yoga twice a week and barely made it to the gym. My former self who was dedicated to self-care through exercise was soon a distant memory.

I was completely overwhelmed by the demands of motherhood, my graduate studies, and my job. My social life had all but disappeared as any of my free time was dedicated to catching up on my studies, enjoying time with my daughter, and perhaps indulging in a nap. My health began to deteriorate, but I still felt I was keeping my head above water as I was able to complete my courses successfully. Still on a fast track to completing my Ph.D. program, I decided to take my general exams in as timely a manner as possible, and I failed them miserably. This was my first graduate academic failure, and I was devastated. Any sense of academic self-esteem I had managed to cling onto up to that point was shaken to the core. I quickly realized that due to the new selves in my life pulling me in multiple directions, I would have to reconcile these selves, or I would succumb to fatigue or worse--failure. I was hit with the realization that perhaps trying to do it all was not worth the cost of sacrificing myself in the process.

To best describe my transition of selves defined by my new role of becoming a parent, Mezirow (2000), offers the following as an underpinning of the beginning process of transformative learning: "As there are no fixed truths or totally definitive knowledge, and because circumstances change, the human condition may be best understood as a continuous effort to negotiate contested meanings" (p. 3). I cannot

emphasize enough the appropriate application of transformative learning theory in understanding the process of self addition and transition. As we take on new roles and ultimately selves, we strive to understand, organize, and balance our selves. Mezirow reinforces this point: "A defining condition of being human is our urgent need to understand and order the meaning of our experience, to integrate it with what we know to avoid the threat of chaos" (p. 3). In an attempt to better understand and integrate my new mother/self, I began to think about my former selves that once encompassed me as a whole. I missed certain dimensions of my former self that no longer had an allowable time slot in my hectic schedule.

Upon completing my semesters of full-time coursework, I methodically decided to reassess my selves and try to find a sense of harmony between them. I realized that this would likely dash my hopes of completing my Ph.D. in a 4-year period and that faculty may see me as a future member of the 90% of American doctoral students who never complete their dissertation. No matter the perceptions that could ensue for my having to reformulate the attainment of my Ph.D., I needed to reprioritize my life's selves even if it meant I was not going to continue down the path of a traditional Ph.D. career/tenure track.

I first reflected upon the dimensions of my former self that I no longer had in my new mother/self. I asked myself what I miss the most and I knew that I could better balance my new mother/self by reintegrating my love of yoga and exercise and by being more social. Now that my daughter is two-and-a-half-years old, she loves going to school and I do not feel the separation pains of leaving an infant in another's care. We are excited for her to go to school, and she screams with delight when we pull up to her daycare. Knowing my daughter is safe at her daycare, I go to the gym and practice yoga regularly again. I now even substitute teach some yoga classes. Another aspect of my former self long neglected was my social life. I now make sure that I go to lunch more and enjoy more time with friends. Most importantly, I also make sure that I get a little more sleep. I will sometimes sneak home and grab a nap while my daughter is safe at daycare. Ultimately, I decided to take a break from retaking my general exams and diving into my dissertation. In the meantime, I decided upon finishing the M.A. in Adult Learning and Technology (which was a part-time, online effort), and I am now searching for a career that can allow me to indulge my earner self. I fully embrace and accept my selves as self/mother, earner, and graduate student. I also feel much less stress when I allow more time for my yoga, gym and social selves. In contrast to my pre-motherhood "me"

phase, the integration of my new selves has expanded.

In conclusion, I am now quite comfortable and settled into my role as a single mother. Each day I wake up thankful for all that I have. As I watch my daughter grow into her own little independent person, I feel lucky to be able to be the person in her life responsible for raising her. Before motherhood, I never thought about my selves because I only needed to think about myself. It took the academic failure of my exams and my extreme fatigue to realize that I simply cannot do it all. I must prioritize and allow my multiple selves to exist in co-harmony with one another. By reintegrating aspects of my former self into my new mother/self by allowing my former selves a chance to coexist with my new mother/self, I am able to balance the roles and demands of each in more harmony. Although I cannot do it all, I now focus on what I need to do and strive to just do the best I can. That is all I can ask of my selves to do.

Kelsee's Story

I have been sitting here debating what I want to share about myself with others and realize it is rarely about me! I am a wife, mother, daughter, teacher, student, colleague, co-worker, and friend, and rarely do I focus on my personal needs of enrichment. I do not usually have time for critical reflection as I am too busy with my other roles. To reflect on this personal function as its own single entity is complex, ever changing, and sometimes painful. However, the work I have completed thus far toward a master's degree has shed some light on who I am and what I want to accomplish.

I grew up knowing that I was going to college as there was no other option. So, I went to college. I found my soul mate and got married, got a job, bought a house, had a baby, and wondered if this was all there was to life. I was not focused on myself and satisfying a need to define who I am without the external perspectives of others. It seems like everything I have done has been for the "team" in whatever aspect that may represent.

I have been teaching adult basic education/GED at a community college for nearly 9 years and feel that I have found my purpose in life--to help others. As an undergraduate in psychology, a friend and mentor tried to persuade me to change my major to education as he felt that was where I belonged. For some reason, I would not listen. Now, after 15 years, I know that he was right! So, here I am as an educator and finding myself a student again.

I was scared to death to consider a graduate degree for the fear of

failing or stopping out without achieving a goal. However, when one of my supervisors approached me and encouraged me to explore graduate programs for the "good of the team," I thought maybe it was worth checking into. I enrolled in the adult education graduate program only 2 short years ago, yet I have found a lifetime worth of confidence and a direction and purpose that I so longed for in my 20s. My short-term goal right now is a master's degree because I would more than likely write myself out of my current job with a doctorate. I have no desire to change my current position, so long term goals are just that for now--very long term!

I just completed the term of President with the Mountain Plains Adult Education Association (MPAEA) Board of Directors. Many people ask me how I do it. Do what? Play all the roles in my daily life? Maybe it is my personality; as an extrovert, I thrive on connecting with others. Maybe it is my honed organizational skills. Maybe it is my drive. Intrinsically, I put more pressure on myself than any other person or program ever could. I know I cannot do all, but I can sure try. I have learned to keep projects manageable and prioritize on a needed basis. McClusky's s concept of the Power Load Margin (Main, 1979) says that people will succeed when they have more control or power over their situation than the load or pressure that is put on them. I find my strength from sharing with others. Whether it is the stories of the individual GED students who sit in the classroom everyday, my colleagues on professional boards, co-workers, classmates, or family, I find a purpose. I find who I am. I would not be in this position without the support of a wonderful, loving husband and of colleagues who are brutally honest with me.

On many challenging days, I think about a book with a compilation of autobiographies of adult educators (see Miller, 2008, pp. 39-41). This book, *North American Adult Educators: Phyllis M. Cunningham Archive of Quintessential Autobiographies for the Twenty-first Century* (Armstrong, Nabb, & Czech, 2007), helps me relate to other professionals and drives me in a direction of who I wish to become as an adult educator. It helps me envision a possible self. This book and its contents drive to the heart the reason for pursuing a career in such a wonderful and rewarding field. The authors are influencing the future direction of this field not only on a local but global level and I certainly hope that I can continue their work. They help me develop a vision.

Paulo Freire says, "One of the best ways for us to work as human beings is not only to know that we are uncompleted beings but to *assume*

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the uncompleteness" (Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 11). What a profound and humanistic approach to life! Understanding such a thought helps me to be uninhibited in sharing and listening to ideas and beliefs from others around me. At work, I learn just as much from my students as they do from me. I also learn at home from my children. My 4-year old daughter said the other day in regard to fog, "It's not logical for the clouds to be below the mountaintop." This made me stop and think. Her perspective is just as it should be, and it belongs to her. My role is to nurture and cherish our time together.

My job in the classroom is to nurture the educational needs of my students. As a graduate student, I have read about transformational learning and have always thought of my GED students. Rossiter (2007) explains the components of the transformational process as:

> (1) Recognition of a need for change in one's life, perspectives, or circumstances; (2) critical reflection on individual or societal assumptions; (3) communication and connection with others who have a similar life experience; (4) exploration of what course of action is possible and desirable; and (5) enacting the new learning as an individual or through social action. (p. 88)

I see myself being described here, but I do not think I have consciously recognized certain changes in my life or the impact they would bring to me as a person. For example, when I was voted in by the membership of MPAEA to serve as their President Elect, I was honored and thrilled. I started building connections and relationships in hopes of gathering strength and ideas for further promotion of the organization. In my studies, I try to connect with others in hopes of gaining insight not only into the material but also into the daily struggles we all find as students. This effort of dialoguing "Our Quest" has become quite healing for me as an individual. I realize I am not alone in raising kids, doing laundry, teaching adults, or writing papers. I am another woman who is striving to better the lives of those around me by enlightening myself.

Through my research as a graduate student, I have transformed the person I was into someone who still has many roles to play on a daily basis but can also critically reflect on the person she is inside. I have found my niche within my graduate studies and my career. I realize that because of my professional experience in the classroom, my learning at this point in my life is so much more meaningful to me. I am able to read about theories and then see their practicalities in the classroom; this seems to bring my life full circle.

Even though my story is somewhat different from that of the others in our group, I find a sense of relief in knowing that I am not alone in the stress and pressure that I feel on a daily basis. At home, I feel completely overwhelmed with everything I need or want to accomplish. At work, I feel alone in my personal endeavors and ambitions as though they are something that is not proper to share with my colleagues. I sometimes feel a disconnect between the world of academia and the world of work, yet dialoguing with other students who are also educators helps me pull the details together and enables me to step back and see the bigger picture again.

In conclusion, I have not changed who I am; instead, I have just added another layer to me. I am still the wife who does laundry, the mom who hands out band-aids, the adult educator who understands and teaches tricks for fractions, and the student who analyzes theories and their applicability. I have just learned to more smoothly take off one hat and put another one on.

Conclusion

Much of who we are and of what we do is externally defined. We have an inner self who we can nurture, but our reality is that we have many socially defined selves that pull us in many directions on a daily basis. Many of these social dimensions are divergent and often conflicting, causing us to feel stressed out and often causing us to wonder who we are. Feminist nonunitary theories suggest that women are particularly sensitive to the multiplicity of roles in their lives. It was our purpose here to share a piece of our own personal narratives and the understandings of our multiple selves we have developed over the past couple of years. We have found strength and encouragement in dialoguing with one another about our experiences and hope that by sharing we can offer the same to others who also feel split and conflicted in their multiplicities.

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