

Rooted *in* the Mountainscape

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Abstract

The European Society for Research on the Education of Adults provides a network of research groups, including the network working with Life History and Biography. Yearly conferences offer a creative and collaborative space that produces manuscripts within specified frameworks of investigation. Themes such as lifescapes, mountainscapes, and timescapes served as inspiration for essays presented at the 2023 conference in Trondheim, Norway. Monthly online Zoom meetings and blogs explored innovative ways of connecting and networking, culminating in a transformational learning pilgrimage. The following essay presents an autoethnographic account, describing a learning community in the Swiss Alps. This ski tribe learns in an Alpine environment, interconnected with the mountainscape. The transformative process of lifelong learning is illustrated by linking narrative phases of expression. First, participants shared their essays. Then, they came together in workshops, engaging in collaborative writing exercises where a group co-authored a poem that emerged from participants' collaborative writing pieces. In this creative space, phases of experiential learning complemented the concept of diffraction, increasing future forming potentiality. This autoethnographic account recounts how narrative coherence increased throughout phases of narrative inquiry. Autoethnographic explorations transformed into a learning pilgrimage, which further evolved into a spiritual journey akin to an odyssey.

Keywords

autoethnography, learning communities, learning pilgrimage, diffraction, transformative learning

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Introduction

Participating in the ESREA Life History and Biography network over the years has provided a fertile environment where stories can flourish. The conferences offer a reflective space in which storytelling plants seeds for wisdom to grow. This essay explores the processes of belonging and meaning-making through narrative practices. Lifescapes, mountainscapes, and timescapes are terms that frame windows, opening up new perspectives and paradigms that shape emerging landscapes of meaning. Furthermore, lifescaping gives shape to our lifeworld and lifespace. Lifescape can be understood as the intersection of an individual's agency with social norms, socio-economic circumstances, health, and behaviors throughout the lifespan.¹ However, lifescaping can also be understood as an activity similar to landscaping or gardening, where social design is used to cultivate meaningful lives with care. "Lifescaping is the act of creatively moving, living, and shaping the discourse and community environment by people. Lifescaping is the changing and adapting perspective that emerges from participation in reflective thought, engaged conversations, and the elegance of actions" (Lewis, 2016, p. 3). Exploring lifescapes takes us on a journey where we can pursue various pathways. Notably, lifescaping practices can be employed to enhance relational wellness in communities. This essay connects phases of becomingness through interconnected narrative practices, showcasing generativity.

Narrative methods can be employed to enhance lifescaping practices, allowing us to open our lives to different ways of being with ourselves and relating to others, shaping reality. "All I want to say for the moment is that narrative, including fictional narrative, gives shape to things in the real world and often bestows on them a title to reality" (Brunner, 2002, p. 8). My autoethnographic practice has allowed me to better understand how storytelling impacts our life's course. The discourses we choose to engage with shape our life paths, offering a narrative map that helps us navigate. Autoethnography is increasingly acknowledged as a qualitative research method that links personal experiences to broader societal issues. "Yet narrative research is not the only hermeneutic practice of inquiry devoted to social understanding; for example, psychologists have become increasingly interested in autoethnography, a form of inquiry in which the individual researcher describes his or her personal experience in a way that connects it to larger social or political issues" (Gergen, Josselson,

¹ Definition of lifescape. Accessed April 26, 2023. Lifescape definition from Collins. <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/submission/145/Lifescape> January 11, 2023.

& Freeman, 2015, p. 4). Autoethnographic practice galvanizes identities in motion while illustrating the terrain of becomingness through narrative inquiry.

Using the lens of landscapes of practice (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2015) provides a perspective for exploring learning communities and how they shape scholarship. An autoethnographic approach is used in this essay to illustrate how narrative methods can be employed to document a learning community in the Swiss Alps. In this context, the ESREA Life History and Biography network provides a platform for a narrative process of experiential learning activities that culminated in a learning pilgrimage to Trondheim, Norway. The metaphor of the Scandinavian pilgrimage to Nidaros Cathedral serves as a guiding theme about interconnectedness and heritage. When scholarship pathways intersect, connections within the research community are strengthened, providing a creative space for collaborative writing that transforms into a poem. The process began with personal essays that were presented at the conference, reflecting the conference theme. Encounters with other participants in small groups led to the creation of co-written works that were presented to the larger group during the conference. Finally, the concept of diffraction provides a framework for understanding how stories intersect and diverge in a future-forming process. This essay maps the narrative process of creating an identity structure that spans between individual and communal experiences. It begins with an autoethnographic account that intertwines with the emergent, creative process experienced during the conference.

This narrative exploration is driven by mediatorship, an interconnected framework and continuum where narrative processes can unfold. Mediatorship provides a relational space in which individual narrative processes connect to collaborative explorations and co-creations, strengthening narrative connectivity. This essay demonstrates how autoethnography promotes wholeness, reinforcing interconnectedness within the relational matrix of life history. The different phases of the essay present “autoethnographicity”, engaging readers in the process of world-making.

The Promise of Autoethnography

My autoethnographic journey has convinced me of the transformative potential inherent in narrative methods. I believe that narrative means can be used for therapeutic purposes (White & Epston, 1990), as well as for generating self-transformation. My autoethnographic work has greatly contributed to my personal development. Through my book, *‘Homing In: An Adopted Child’s Story Mandala of Connecting,*

Reunion, and Belonging’, as well as my website and monthly blogs, I have created a creative space in which I have utilized narrative practice to transform my sense of belonging.² “Narrative inquiry is an approach to the study of human lives conceived as a way of honoring lived experience as a source of important knowledge and understanding” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 17). Autoethnographic writing can explore and honor lived experience, connecting human lives through scholarship. This essay shares the story of our Swiss ski tribe and how the Swiss Ski School in La Tzoumaz has created a learning community for teaching snow sports.³ I begin by describing the relational entanglements that bond communities and root them in their natural environments, shaping the activities that they practice together and transforming identity. In the second phase, I present how my essay was incorporated into the group’s narrative process. I show diffraction in action during a collective writing workshop that took place on a learning pilgrimage.⁴

Living in a ski resort in the Swiss Alps allows me to experience life from the perspective of the mountaintop, appreciating the changing seasons and the beauty of the mountain landscape that has influenced my adult life. The term “mountainscape” is inspired by the concept of lifescape, highlighting the significance of the mountain landscape where various connections have shaped my becomingness.

“As I climbed up the face of the mountain toward the summit and my life goal, I needed to assure myself, like a mountain climber. The goal, the summit, was out sight—and there was only the path and the immediate scenery of larch trees, pasturelands, and wildflowers. But I could sense that my life history and life trajectory were mapped out over a rough mountain terrain, binding me to mountainscapes that were triggering my becomingness” (Riva, 2020, p. 83).

My autoethnographic *oeuvre* expresses how the process of becoming is connected to our natural environment. In my case, the mountainscape has been a significant influence on my lifework. The anthropology of becoming emphasizes that we are all unfinished. We use brush strokes to paint within the outlines of our self-portraits and landscape paintings, which are first sketched before filling in the

² Homing In website. Accessed April 23, 2023. <https://www.susanmossmannrivawrites.com>

³ Mountainscape: Learning to Ski in the Swiss Alps. Accessed November 18, 2023. <https://cupola.no/2023/03/03/mountainscape-learning-to-ski-in-the-swiss-alps/>

⁴ Diffraction. Accessed November 18, 2023. <https://www.susanmossmannrivawrites.com/blog/diffraction>

composition with vivid colors and more defined forms. In this creative process, artistic intention transforms our landscapes of meaning. Our narratives use words as vessels of transportation, tracing and mapping the pathways of our becomingness. Narrative practice can enhance lifescaping, providing a method that facilitates the process of becoming. In this way, our lifescape becomes the *oeuvre*. “So the painting seems unfinished, and this transfixing unfinishedness—the worlds on edge and the open-endedness of people’s becoming—is the very stuff of art” (Biehl & Locke, 2017, p. 9). I refer to my autoethnographic *oeuvre* as a story mandala. Interweaving story threads into an expansive creative space has allowed me to experience a sense of completeness.

In the scenery of my landscape painting, you can see that I enjoy hiking and skiing and spend most of my time outdoors in a life-giving relationship with my bioregion. I thrive in this mountainscape. The mountain timescape offers seasons that directly influence my physical activities and our family’s work at the Swiss Ski School in La Tzoumaz, Switzerland. Our chalet is surrounded by pastures in summer and ski slopes in winter. Our family’s becomingness unfolds within this seasonal Alpine timescape.

Our neighbors come from many different countries. Not only are we part of a Swiss community, but we also belong to what I refer to as “an international ski tribe”. Skiing is a unifying activity for the families that have chosen our shared Alpine lifestyle. “As the ski school underscores the importance of learning skills and having fun, a new form of community has emerged” (Riva, 2009, p. 272). The international community to which we belong has shaped our social relations through a form of intercultural “commoning” or community-building (Watkins, Lipsitz, & Bradshaw, 2019). The Alpine lifestyle is rooted in mountain activities that distinguish our community’s activities and tourism from those of other bioregions.

Marrying a Swiss mountain man has had a significant impact on my life. My husband, Angelo Riva, served as the Director of the Swiss Ski School in La Tzoumaz from 1986 until 2023. Through his work, he cultivated a vibrant learning community that welcomed families from all over Switzerland and Europe who shared a passion for skiing. The children not only learned to ski but also had the opportunity to eventually become instructors within the ski school, embracing the values of lifelong learning rather than focusing solely on competition. By participating in the ski school’s classes and programs over the years, young skiers became fully integrated into the Alpine community. “Legitimate peripheral participation describes

the ways in which novices in a community of practice learn through participation in its practices as they move on a trajectory toward full participation” (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2015, p. 43). In this unique context, learning takes place in a mountainscape and a winterscape, where relational connections are formed through snow sports. The ski school is a learning organization that provides skiing and snowboarding lessons and offers ski race training for those interested in participating in ski competitions. The *Multiglisse* program provides eight days of ski instruction per year for children and adolescents aged 5-16 to learn how to ski and snowboard. At the age of 16, adolescents can train as apprentice ski instructors, eventually allowing them to teach their own ski school class. This transition is marked by a change in the color of their ski school jackets. The apprentices wear green jackets, but when they become instructors, they wear red jackets.

Through Angelo’s leadership, the Riva family’s legacy lives on in the relationships that were formed through skiing. The Swiss Ski School in La Tzoumaz has brought skiers from around the world together. This educational institution not only taught skiers but also united families—enabling them to share the joy of skiing on the slopes of the 4-Valley ski resort.

My husband was a member of the Swiss Ski Team and competed in Europa Cup ski races. He was also part of the Swiss Demonstration Team and represented them in an international competition in Japan. Demonstration teams ski down the mountain to music, following a choreographed pattern where skiers intersect at high speeds. Angelo has been able to share his expertise and passion with his clients and the ski school instructors over the years. Our sons have also been part of the La Tzoumaz Ski School’s demonstration team, qualifying for the national championships twice. They have proudly continued the tradition.

From Kinship To Earthship

Our family’s story shows how strong relational bonds are formed, providing the foundation for a good life. Together, we have raised our five children in the Swiss Alps. I am originally from Nebraska, USA, and my husband is from the French-speaking part of Switzerland. As a result, our children hold both Swiss and American nationalities. The landscapes of Nebraska are composed of the Great Plains’ grasslands and wide-open spaces.

“The seeds planted in my youth by the leaders in my hometown have given me the strength to endure in a foreign land. A symbolic statue adorns the top of the Ne-

braska State Capitol Building, one of the eleven architectural wonders of the world. On top of the dome is a sower, sowing seeds. Those seeds took hold in my heart and flowered in another land” (Riva, 2020, p. 80).

Our children have benefited from a unique blend of cultures, languages, and natural landscapes. Angelo and I first met when I was a summer exchange student in Switzerland with Youth For Understanding, after graduating from high school in 1981. The French-speaking Swiss Alps were my top choice for living abroad during my interview with the program representatives. The Alpine mountainscape seemed to be beckoning me to come and explore the blossoming meadows, where cows wearing cowbells create a distinctive soundscape in the summer months. I had always loved the Rocky Mountains and our family’s ski vacations in Colorado. I was so set on studying in the mountains that I only applied to the University of Colorado in Boulder. My love for the mountains and my choices for university studies dovetailed, taking me to different mountainscapes.

After my husband left the Swiss Ski Team, he came to Nebraska to learn English in preparation for the Swiss Professor of Skiing Certification. I helped him find an English language program for foreigners who were getting ready for the TOEFL exam at the University of Nebraska Omaha. We dated and hosted each other for over five years before getting engaged. I then found Angelo a job at the Winter Park Ski School for the winter season of 1985-1986. He was able to work for three months on a Fiancé Visa while I finished my bachelor’s degree in International Relations at the University of Colorado in Boulder, which was not far from the Winter Park Ski Resort. We got married on March 15, 1986, in Omaha, Nebraska.

After the winter ski season in Colorado, Angelo was hired to teach skiing at Coronet Peak in Queenstown, New Zealand. After the 1986 ski season, he returned to Switzerland to live on the mountainside near the village where he grew up. His grandparents were from Isérables, a mountain village with pasturelands that became a ski resort in the 1970s. Angelo was chosen to become the director of the ski school in La Tzoumaz, a place where his grandfather’s cattle used to graze. The cattle would move up and down the mountainside in a traditional agricultural system known as transhumance. For generations, his family’s livelihood was linked to agricultural practices adapted to the steep mountain terrain. It was only after World War II that tourism developed in the region (Huntford, 2008, p. 375). His parents worked in tourism and construction as the economy grew to accommodate new forms of employment.

Relational bonds were formed through international encounters in mountainous regions around the world. Our family's story illustrates how mountainscapes have shaped our lives and professional activities. The ski school is a learning community that utilizes the ski slopes as an outdoor classroom to teach people of all ages, in multiple languages, how to ski or snowboard. Our family's passion for skiing has motivated our children to compete and become certified ski instructors. Our son Nils has worked closely with my husband as co-director in charge of technical training, while our other sons have also coached the demonstration team.

I also taught skiing when our children were young. I continue to ski around three days each week, balancing work and pleasure. I often ski with my children and grandchildren. We meet for lunch on the mountain at one of the restaurants on the slopes and ski down the mountain together, enjoying the scent of pine trees and the incredible view of the Alpine mountains that connect Italy, France, and Switzerland. The presence of mountains enables me to connect with my family through engaging in outdoor activities, while also providing me with a unique perspective on the world. From the top of the mountain, I can see the view of Alpine summits that connect countries.

Our chalet is filled with family every weekend who come home to ski. They all live close enough to drive up the mountain for the weekend. Living in the Alpine landscape that offers outdoor activities throughout the seasons is one of my greatest joys. My heart sings when I can take advantage of the hiking paths and ski slopes within a region that has an infrastructure to accommodate tourists from around the world. Living in the heart of the 4-Valley region allows us to take advantage of the many hiking trails and winter snow sports without having to travel. It is our way of life.

My husband and I have been able to pass on our knowledge to our children in different ways. I have come to perceive how skiing has reinforced our relational interconnectedness. Our whole family shares our passion for skiing and instructing. Dr. Daniel Siegel is a professor of psychiatry who explains the reality of interconnection and the integration of identity as "Me plus We = MWe" (Siegel, 2020, p. 496). The creation of new words allows us to see interconnectedness in language. Who we are is shaped by our interconnected relationships, including the experiences that we have in our families and in our larger culture and our experience of being "all-one" with nature (Siegel, 2020, p. 497). Relational linkages including our family connections and our relationship with nature fashion us. By creating new words to symbolically represent our interconnectedness and how we collectively come to understand the world, we transform our perceptions.

Giving recognition to our relational nature highlights the integral role that our relationships play in shaping our identity (Gergen, 2009). New words allow us to share new concepts in collaborative conversations. Living *in/on* Earthship is a vision that came to me while writing *Homing In*. It conceptualizes how we are transitioning towards a new way of living in relationship with Earth. Autoethnographic practice allowed me to move from analyzing family relationships based on kinship to envisioning a new way of relating on a planetary level.

“My family’s kinship is configured within the sheltering walls of our mountain chalet. It is a local place of coming together. This kinship is anchored in our way of life, loving, and caring. On a global level, we experience a form of Earthship as a human family coming together, held within the loving embrace of Mother Earth. How we live in relation to our natural environment, now that we have a better understanding of Anthropocene, is the defining question of our time. We are transforming the face of the earth. To live in Earthship will require all humans to question their earth-human relations, developing new lifestyle practices that will not harm our natural environment and ecological systems” (Riva, 2020, p. 331).

Our children have developed important skills through their relationship with the mountainscape. Though our three sons have been part of the demonstration team, which allowed them to participate in national competitions, all our children are certified to teach skiing. Our family members are Alpine caretakers, responsible for taking care of the people, buildings, and mountain landscape. This Alpine stewardship is an example of ‘intergenerativity’ or intergenerational transmission that we have modeled as parents. When Angelo and I chose to become a couple, we brought together two very different identities that have been reinforced over the years through shared activities in the mountains. “The unfolding of integration that may emerge in our identity and in our collective lives has the promise to help bring more compassion and kindness into our shared world. With our collective efforts, bringing an integrated identity and the reality of our interconnection within this compressed and simple symbol of mutuality, MWe, it may be possible to synergistically shift the course of cultural evolution in a wise and timely way” (Siegel, 2020, p. 500). Angelo and I have raised our children in a ski tribe in the Alps where our life’s work is conveyed through an emerging understanding of interconnectivity that is symbolized in $M + We = MWe$. MWe share an integrated identity, rooted in the mountainscape.

Mediatorship

Autoethnographic practice connects me to living wisdom, providing directionality and a quest orientation. Autoethnography has also allowed me to develop a conceptual framework that informs my lifework. An important concept that emerged from my writing is mediatorship. “The concept of mediatorship emerged from my autoethnographic practice as an engaged and embodied form of mediating that enhances connectivity. Mediatorship can be understood as the function or position of a mediator, and a vessel of connectivity that contains an integrated framework of mediation practices” (Riva, 2022, p. 257). The autoethnographic process was experienced as a form of mediatorship that connected me to living wisdom. Living wisdom guided my resolution process as well as my becomingness. Through autoethnography, I was able to engage in conflict resolution, spanning from the intrapersonal to the societal level, which allowed me to transform my identity (Riva, 2023, p. 4). In this way, autoethnography is a practice that generates transformational space.

Belonging has always been a challenge for me, but I find comfort in my connection with the Alpine environment, where I truly feel at home. In the past, I have made contributions by working for Valais’ social action department, the police force, and the University of Applied Sciences of Western Switzerland. Currently, I am employed at Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska, where I teach online, enabling me to connect with others through “glovircal” landscapes. I even coined the term “glovircal” to describe this unique combination of the global and the local connected through virtual landscapes.⁵ My sense of belonging has been transformed by mediating technologies that allow me to connect with students and colleagues from around the world while living on the mountaintop. The lived experience of mediatorship, through my autoethnographic practice and international relationships, has connected me to an enduring form of wisdom that has transformed my sense of belonging.

Autoethnography is a method that can be applied to lifescaping. Autoethnographic practice is a form of lifescaping that cultivates the creative process of becoming, which shapeshifts our life experience. Social constructionist approaches have transformed the research paradigm from mirroring to world-making (Gergen, 2015). I find narrative practice to be a method for future formation that increases

⁵ Glovircal definition. Accessed April 27, 2021. https://www.sagw.ch/fileadmin/redaktion_seg-sse/Jahrestagungen/2021/SSEMeeting2021_fullprogram.pdf

narrative coherency and activates the inner compass and quest orientation, guiding me towards a hopeful future.

Autoethnography provides directionality, developing a form of guidance that directs my footsteps and configures relational unfolding. Through linkedness, my definition of mediation, I have transformed bonds of kinship, developed fellowship through scholarship, and become more consciously aware of my relationship with the natural environment. Linkedness is a connecting force that is *in between*, linking me in different forms of relational mediations (Riva, 2009).

In this way, I co-create within my relational matrix, shaping our shared experience through storytelling that enhances our conscious awareness and strengthens the bonds of kinship that connect us. Our family's life in the Swiss Alps demonstrates how our interconnectedness shapes our collective identity and deepens our connection to the mountain landscape through our shared activities, such as skiing and hiking. These activities have guided our family's growth and development. Through autoethnography, I have discovered how the homing mechanism, which enables adoptees to locate their birth parents, activates the inner compass. The concept of quest orientation further supports this understanding.

“Quest orientation is characterized by a tendency to journey in life: to search for answers to meaningful personal decisions and big existential questions; to perceive doubt as positive; with fresh eyes, and then using new experience to fuel change. In quest, we open ourselves to the messages from life, take seriously this discovery, and then actively use learning to shape our decisions and actions—our personal operating manual” (Miller, 2021, p. 170). Miller's work explains how narrative methods can develop our spiritual core, making us more resilient and providing directionality. “As a society, we can cultivate our collective spirituality, knowing that it is real and important” (Miller, 2015, p. 348). “Narrative inquiry, in this context, develops the ability to quest, which in turn fosters narrative integration in the brain. When the meaning-making process is reinforced, a sense of wholeness and well-being is experienced. We can reach for lifelong thriving through generative narrative practices that increase our narrative coherency” (Siegel, 2020). Narrative coherence can be engendered through autoethnographic practice.

Through questing and autoethnographic practice, my understanding of belonging transitioned from kinship to living *in/on* Earthship. I started to perceive how the Earth holds us together in a loving embrace. The mountain peaks define my horizon and ground me as I move through the different phases of my life, connecting with

the seasonal beauty of the mountainscape. As I emerge from my autoethnographic practice, the *Holy Grail Way* has become a metaphor for the pathway that guides us through our narratives of conflict and illness.

“The Holy Grail was revealed to me as the rail or rail-Way forward and a vessel or container for our quests. Our illnesses as well as our conflicts present an intrinsic potential for our becomingness. We are invited to understand them as metaphors. Illness narratives as well as conflict narratives open space as we speak and write of our sufferings. These story containers hold transformational potentialities. The *viriditas* or greenness of our narratives is brought to fruition through the reflexive process. Newfound meaning resides in the hollow of our wounds, where a roadmap is hidden, indicating as well as informing the Holy Grail-Way” (Riva, 2020, p. 427).

The mountainscape provides a terrain where I not only reflexively walk through the Alpine landscape, noticing the changing seasons of my life, but find pathways that allow me to keep walking on, traversing across “la haute route” to discover other valleys. “When a famous Zen Master was asked the meaning and nature of absolute reality, he only replied: ‘Walk on’.” (Wilber, 1996, p. 306). The quest for meaning and leading purposeful lives moves us to keep walking, searching for the good life while enjoying the scenery offered to us in each phase of the expedition.

St. Hildegard von Bingen used the term *viriditas* to describe the greening power or life-force that she observed in nature. She lived in Germany, and her writings about pre-modern medicine have inspired Traditional European Medicine. *Viriditas* was used as a metaphor in her texts written in the early medieval period. “It stood for greenness as a metaphor for positive spiritual action—integrity, truth, penance, abstinence” (Sweet, 2006, p. 137). I have discovered that narrative practice is a source of generative, life-giving energy, similar to the medicinal flowers that bloom in the Alpine meadows surrounding our chalet during the summer months. These Alpine flowers provide seed-force for fostering generative ways of relating and healing.

One of the complex aspects of my search for belonging has been being part of an international ski community. Skiing with family and fellow community members has been my way of experiencing mutual support and participating in the creation of a shared space, where people can regain their sense of wholeness while engaging in snow sports. “Amid and in opposition to violence and injustice, it is necessary for people to join together to create communities where justice and peace on a small, local scale are possible” (Watkins, Lipsitz, & Bradshaw, 2019, p. 304). Together, MWe have participated in a community of resistance, engaging in joyful and playful

interactions as we have made La Tzoumaz, our ski resort, our home. Mountain habitats are vulnerable to climate change and economic hardship. A sustainable Alpine way of life will need to be supported as we replace and modernize infrastructure, such as lifts and snow-making machines, in response to demographic and ecological changes. “This affects the delicate balance of the mountain world” (Huntford, 2008, p. 387). Belonging in our Alpine environment requires continual adaptation.

Belonging to a community or tribe reinforces a deep sense of membership. By honoring our relationships, we become more aware of the life challenges faced by others and embrace global challenges together. For instance, in our ski tribe, we emphasize the importance of assisting someone when they fall or become injured, demonstrating a sense of responsibility. We also share clothing and equipment with other members and organize social events on the slopes. Moreover, we generously share our expertise, teaching others so that they can master the skills we have acquired.

Within the word ‘compassion’ is the etymological root word ‘compass’. Possibly, our inner compass allows us to home *in* on our heart, where loving compassion is enkindled. This allows for an authentic way of walking with others and connecting to their suffering.⁶

“Notice the similarity between the word compass and the word compassion. They share an etymological root. The earliest use of the word compass does not, of course, refer to the modern hiking compass as we know it. The word is first used to refer to the mathematical compass, that simple two-pronged device that many of us remember using in grade school to measure the distance between two points and to draw arcs and circles. A compass, then, is used to determine the relationship between two points. The related word compassion is about honoring the relationship between two people or between one group and another, and remembering those who suffer. It is about making the connection between the heart of my being and the heart of yours, and following that connection...even when we are filled with doubts as to whether we are moving in the right direction”⁷ (Newell, 2014, p. 17).

⁶ Riva blog on Compassion-In-Action. Accessed November 18, 2023. <https://www.susanmossmanrivawrites.com/blog/compassion-in-action>

⁷ “The Rebirthing of God” by John Philip Newell, A Book Excerpt On Compassion. Accessed April 23, 2023. <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/26855/the-rebirthing-of-god>

Compassion reconnects us in relationships that are enhanced through narrative practices that increase our awareness of word formation, thinking, and metaphor. This collective writing space has been used to explore the themes that are close to my heart, showcasing another example of MWe. Narrative inquiry recalls and reconnects, resulting in spiraling forms of narrative convergence. As my life's work has flourished, I can now gaze upon fields of narrative practice and appreciate the creative spaces that have fostered meaningful connections and healing conversations. I am not only a professor, but I am also a part of a Swiss ski community that is committed to skiing, playing, and learning in our Alpine mountainscape. We have accompanied and welcomed skiers and families for several decades, providing services and caring for tourists. MWe are Alpine caretakers.

Autoethnography is a transformative and generative practice that has opened a passageway through these landscapes of meaning that I have traversed and explored. Living wisdom or mediatorship has guided my pathway, connecting me to my inner compass and providing directionality. By participating in the ESREA Life History and Biography Network, I hope that our collective quest will reinforce our interconnectedness and provide inspiration that will serve to guide us as we “walk on” with a heightened sense of belonging. Within this creative space, I have envisioned the *Transformagram Pedagogy* that has been integrated into my online courses (Riva, 2021, 2023). Scholarship networks have enhanced my creative process and provided opportunities for envisioning transformative learning pedagogies that incorporate narrative methods.

Transformative Pilgrimage Learning

Learning pilgrimages, like the Trondheim, Norway conference, hold within their potential the power to transform—especially when pilgrimage is understood as a transformative process.⁸ Storytelling can inspire pathfinders who embark upon the hero's journey. “The goal is to create a feeling of commonness, presence, belonging, motivation, knowledge sharing, and to create solutions to life's issues” (Inglese, 2018, pp. 355-356). Upon our return from the pilgrimage, we feel compelled to share the blessing. Creating narrative maps empowers others to navigate their own journeys.

⁸ St. Olav Ways, The Pilgrim Paths to Trondheim. Accessed April 29, 2023. <https://pilegrimsleden.no/en>

“The field of Lifelong Learning and Adult Education is not just about what happens in classrooms. Most transformative learning experiences happen while we are living our lives, not while we are in classrooms. My experiences of TPL have given me the courage to take what I have learned from trying to intentionally live my life as a pilgrimage in the past decade and to bring some of those learnings into the classroom, or at the bedside as a chaplain, or to nonformal education settings. Many of these experiences have been about love and death, and the intermingling of the two, though these are topics that have been little dealt with in transformative learning, but have been so present in our narratives above” (Tisdell & Swartz, 2022, p. 209).

By attending conferences and engaging with other participants, transformative learning experiences emerge from personal experiences. Having played a role in the final stages of organizing the conference meeting, I have now embarked on a pilgrimage to Trondheim, exploring the St. Olav Ways. The legend of St. Olav attracted countless pilgrims who traveled to the Nidaros Cathedral in Trondheim, where St. Olav’s remains are interred. These journeys fostered profound cultural and religious exchanges, contributing to the formation of a shared European identity.⁹ This network of routes through Scandinavia serves as a symbol for the ESREA network, which also plays an important role in the construction of a European identity. Not only did I travel to Trondheim to participate in the conference, but I also went there as a pilgrim to visit the Nidaros Cathedral and attend the pilgrim mass. In this way, my transformative learning pilgrimage was also a spiritual journey.

Learning occurs through interconnected processes that can be scaffolded insightfully. During the conference in Trondheim, we engaged in collaborative practices, such as writing and performing. I particularly enjoyed participating in a collaborative writing experience. We received instructions to write a text within thirty minutes. I wrote a text and then shared it with a designated group. Each of us read our writing aloud to one another and worked together to create a collaborative artifact. We had approximately an hour to produce something that emerged from our individual writings. The first presentation focused on an Englishman’s hat. The second group member presented an indigenous drum from Chile. The third presentation, given by a Norwegian, was about a water bottle. Following the presentations, our group decided to write a collaborative poem.

⁹ “Cultural Route of the Council of Europe” St. Olav Ways. Accessed May 12, 2023. <https://cupola.no/esrea-lhbn-2023/>

Here is a short essay that I wrote:

Viriditas: Greening, Generative, and Life-Giving Power

Generative practices, like writing, can take us on a journey where the inner and outer landscapes meet in synchronicity. This coming together creates a space for diffraction, which gives rise to new forms. This future-forming process draws from the energetic potential held, or encapsulated, in symbolic objects that touch us. An agentic object can take us on new pathways.

The cross that I wore to the conference in Trondheim, Norway is a silver replica from a sacred stone altar that is in the church at the Abbey in Romainmôtier, Switzerland. This form can be understood as an aesthetic and spiritual entanglement emerging from the historic link to Celtic crosses found in this Cluniac priory.

The cross symbolizes sacred space-time in jewelry. This interconnectedness includes the landscape, the timescape, as well as the dimension of lifescaping. My life's journey, walking this sacred path, is paved by writing that acts like breadcrumbs, marking the way. The words that fall to the ground have taken me to the heart sphere. Here, in the center of my chest, the cross touches my skin, awakening my inner compass through compassion: compass and passion.

I have worn it to mark St. Olav Ways and the Nidaros Cathedral in Trondheim.

Here is the poem that we wrote together:

The feel of the hat upon my head—I say,
 This is me, who I am,
 And also my (?) people, their breath, their rhythm,
 The touch of water, how weightlessly it carries me home,
 Floating with the stream of life,
 Connecting me to my heart and the inner compass that guides this journey onwards,
 A creative pathway: The Pilgrims Way-St. Olav's "Leia"

This experiential and collaborative learning experience illustrates how people configure self-organizing systems through relational encounters that can co-construct meaning-making processes in emergent forms. During the collaborative writing workshop, our writing became a form of diffraction, bringing together entangled threads and flows in an assemblage. Transformation happens through multiple encounters and emergent multiplicities. Movement and flow interconnect historical and cultural contexts in space-time, carrying away previous forms in a fluid change process.

Social Science methods offer qualitative approaches that utilize autoethnographic and biographic techniques to capture the creative evolution that bridges the individual and societal realms. Through active listening, which fosters embodied connections, we engage in entangled encounters and bear witness to each other's stories. This form of inquiry engenders becomingness—diffraction in action—through emergent conversations. Bronwyn Davies' book was a reference for our collaborative writing practice, 'Entanglement In The World's Becoming And The Doing Of New Materialist Inquiry'.

The concept of diffraction allows us to understand becoming as an emergent process that can take place through conversations. In an interview with Davies, she explains, "The connection the encounter creates is embodied. The desire to be known is intense. The gift of the other's trust in you, to know them, to hear them, is an extraordinary gift" (Masschelein & Roah, 2018, p. 268). She concludes the interview by saying that much of her work has been about reterritorializing distrust and oppressive forms of power. "So many of our life's situations are saturated with them, and my life work has been to search for ways of doing human life differently" (Masschelein & Roah, 2018, p. 268). Davies' research utilizes collective biography to reveal power relations, uncovering them through qualitative methods.

I have been drawn to biographical methods because of their ability to bring to light power relations. Autoethnography also gives voice to those who are often not heard, including marginalized voices within the polyphony. Autoethnographic methods are imbued with what Denzin refers to as "a performance pedagogy of radical democratic hope" (Denzin, 2014, p. 80). The members of the ESREA Life History and Biography Network are dedicated to adult learning because it is a pillar of democracy. The qualitative research methods that are employed expose relationships and emotions. "*Social* life is messy, uncertain, and emotional. If our desire is to research *social* life, then we must embrace a research method that, to the best of its/our ability, acknowledges and accommodates mess and chaos, uncertainty and emotion" (Adams, Jones, & Ellis, 2015, p. 9). Autoethnography has allowed me to explore the mess and chaos, as well as the emotions of my *social* life. Both my autoethnographic *oeuvre* and scholarship have opened up space for healing conversations that offer guidance through the maze.

In adult education, people's stories matter. Autoethnographic methods strive for social justice and aim to improve life. "Autoethnographic stories are artistic and analytic demonstrations of how we come to know, name, and interpret personal and

cultural experience” (Adams, Jones, & Ellis, 2015, p. 1). Recognition of the crucial importance of qualitative methods that interpret personal and cultural experience is essential. The ESREA Trondheim conference provided a space for meaningful encounters and conversations, ‘Exploring Belonging and Meaning: Lifescapes-Landscapes-Timescapes’¹⁰ provided a looking glass for homing *in* to emerging themes in life history. This emphasis allowed “homescapes” to come into view.

Our monthly Zoom meetings allowed us to experience the conference year-round, fostering relationships and understanding through presentations that reached their peak during the actual conference. The conference blog posts further reinforced this process by showcasing evolving themes that ultimately became a conference book. Additionally, an opening workshop provided an opportunity for participants to share their essays and receive feedback. As part of a unique group ritual throughout the entire conference, we read ‘Momo’ by Michael Ende, a well-known anarchist text. Sitting in a circle, network members listened attentively, just as children do when hearing captivating stories. This activity greatly influenced the overall atmosphere of the conference, which also incorporated performance art.

Conclusion

The ESREA Life History and Biography conference in Trondheim provided a transformative learning experience that exemplifies the importance of research networks that can reshape higher education by coming together, talking together, and writing together. Life history and biography come alive through our shared stories that reinforce relational resilience, building narrative coherence for learning in difficult times. Coming together after COVID-19 allowed our research group to continue our collaboration in Norway, where Scandinavian pathways have traditionally converged through pilgrimage, forming a cultural heritage that can be passed on.

The experiential learning environment cultivated in Trondheim, Norway provided a creative space to explore lifescapes, landscapes, and timescapes. This essay has demonstrated how belonging and meaning are socially embedded in sensual ways of being, such as skiing on the mountainscape and engaging in scholarship at conference venues. I have reflected on how the mountain landscape has transformed our family’s sense of identity, with the generative power of embodied narra-

¹⁰ ESREA Life History and Biography Network, Trondheim 2023. Accessed November 16, 2023. <https://cupola.no/esrea-lhbn-2023/>

tive practice. I have also recounted how participating in a research network has facilitated transformative learning journeys. Within this narrative framework, stories intertwine and diverge, shaping future research. Our scholarship has taken us on a transformative journey, akin to an odyssey.

I will end with a poem inspired by a previous ESREA Life History and Biography Network conference workshop:

Walkthrough

In moments of epiphany, I see synchronicity

In your face, I see God

Be merciful, together embracing shared suffering

Be with me, let's imagine together; flourishing landscapes of love

Walking through the door of mercy

(Riva, 2020, p. 419)

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