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## RECONSTRUCTING RELATIONSHIPS IN THE CLASSROOM: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC TALE OF LEARNING

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### ABSTRACT

*This autoethnography considers the role of human relationships in the educational process. Approaching learning as a transformational process rooted in human experience and interaction, I explore the central role of emotion in learning relationships. Through an analysis of a learnable moment experienced in a relational communication course on language, I theorize new ways of "doing" learning relationships.*

I'm trying to learn how to live, to have the speaking-to extend beyond the moment's word, to act so as to change the unjust circumstances that keep us from being able to speak to each other; I'm trying to get a little closer to the longed-for but unrealized world, where we each are able to live, but not trying to make someone less than us, not by someone else's blood or pain: yes, that's what I'm trying to do with my living now. Pratt (1984), "Identity: Skin Blood Heart," p. 13.

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### SENIOR YEAR: 1980–1981

I move through my final year at Smith College with an incurable case of senioritis. My first “real” boyfriend, Andy, lives in Chicago. When we aren’t traversing the country on weekend visits, we talk on the phone, lost in some hormonal fantasy. I share an apartment with five Smith women, and we spend our days smoking, drinking, eating, watching television, and just hanging out. School lingers in the background of daily life.

So in the late fall of 1980, when my major advisor, Professor H, informs me I need a course called the “History of Anthropological Theory” to graduate, his words hang in the air between us like a mushroom cloud.

I offer no response so he repeats himself. “The course isn’t being offered this spring and you can’t graduate without it,” he says.

Two words seep into my brain: “*Can’t graduate.*”

Immediately, panic constricts my breathing and my eyes fly wide open in sheer terror. “What?” I rub my sweaty palms up and down my blue jean-covered thighs. “So what do I do? I *have* to graduate,” I plead.

“Well,” he says, painfully articulating the words, “I suppose we could do a tutorial to fulfill the requirement.” He doesn’t even try to smile.

“Ok,” I mutter.

As expected, the tutorial is horrendous. Every week I read some wretched book I can’t begin to fathom, and then panic in anticipation of my three-hour meeting with Professor H. Gregory Bateson, Bronislaw Malinowski, Claude Levi-Strauss, Ruth Benedict – the ideas these anthropological icons discuss seem so far removed from my life. I sit for endless hours in Professor H’s cavernous, musty office, silently listening to him recite the overwhelmingly dull history of anthropological theory, frozen in this inept student self, feeling dumber with each passing week. I have no insightful comments to offer, no answers to his probing questions. My papers are horribly written. I have nightmares about failing.

This is not what a tutorial is supposed to be. There is no easy rapport, no give and take of ideas, and no mentoring relationship. There is just this ceaseless feeling of failure.

Finally, with graduation only 4 weeks away, thinking I have almost made it, I hear the dreadful words: “What are you going to write your final paper about?”

*We never discussed a final paper.*

More tongue-tied than usual, I struggle to form words: “Final paper?” I squeak.

Professor H glares at me, shakes his head, and repeats himself with emphasis: “Yes, your *final paper.*”

If he didn’t see me as the dumbest person on the planet before, he certainly does now.

My future flashes in a cranial slide show: senior week, graduation, moving to Chicago to live with Andy. There is no final paper in sight. Then in a moment of sheer anger or desperation or just plain old fear, my brain begins to twist, to plan, to plot. Eyebrows raised and eyes shifting from side to side, I lean toward Professor H, just slightly. “If I *don’t* write this paper,” I say as gently as possible, trying to summon whatever feminine wiles I possess, “will I still pass the course?”

This time he doesn’t hide his disgust. “Yes,” he whines, “you will pass.”

“Ok. Then I don’t want to write a final paper. Thank you.”

These are the last words we exchange.

Not until I begin my doctoral work in communication do I realize how much I would have loved those readings if only I could have gotten past that morass of emotion making it impossible for Professor H and me to be fully present to one another. I suspect both of us were angry about having to suffer this trial by anthropological theory every week because the damn course wasn’t being offered, but neither of us said a word. I suspect both of us were afraid I wasn’t smart enough to be successful, but neither of us said a word. I suspect both of us were frustrated because I was not the ideal academic protégé, but neither of us said a word.

Professor H and I never talked about what went on between us during those weekly three-hour torture sessions. We never really engaged one another beyond the surface considerations of anthropological theory. We never really developed a deep and satisfying learning relationship. We were too busy following the canonical story of learning with its archaic rules about relationships and emotion.

### FEBRUARY 2005

My life has been spent in pursuit of learning. After graduating at the top of my boarding school class, I earned a B.A. in anthropology from Smith College, two Master’s degrees: one in cinema studies from New York University (NYU) and another in secondary social science education from the University of South Florida (USF), and a Ph.D. in communication from USF. During my doctoral program, I began teaching relational communication to undergraduates, both in conventional classrooms and in a learning community. In 1998, doctorate in hand, I was hired as an assistant

professor by the University of New Hampshire at Manchester and have been teaching relational communication here ever since.

So I am I guess you can say, a "professional learner." In my daily life, both as a relational communication teacher and researcher, learning is central to my endeavors. I consider myself to be a lifelong learner and hope to foster that quality in my students.

I use the term "professional" because both my training and my experience in education make me if not quite an expert, then certainly knowledgeable and practiced in the art of learning, most notably learning about relational communication. I use the term "learner" because although I have spent many hours in the classroom cast, by traditional academic culture, in the seemingly separate roles of student and teacher, my experience across these roles falls more inclusively under the heading of learner. In addition, my ongoing autoethnographic research about identity and emotion is rooted in an insatiable desire to learn more about human communication.

Theorizing myself as a learner, I am on more equal footing with my students. This is especially true in the relational communication classroom where the subject matter makes us all experts about our own personal stories. Contrary to the canonical story of learning, with its teacher-above-student hierarchy, I have come to believe that I have as much to learn from my students as they have to learn from me, and from one another. Following Paulo Freire, I believe:

the teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself [sic] taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow. (Freire, 1970, p. 80)

After all, we seek the same end: improving our lives and the world in which we live. In this way, learning becomes what McNamee and Gergen (1999, p. 13) would call the "coordinated actions" of participants in a process of "conjoint relations."

In this autoethnography, I utilize emotional introspection (Ellis, 1991) to craft and share stories of my lived emotional experience as a professional learner. In addition, I layer (Ronai, 1995) these personal accounts of my learning experiences with analytical discussions of pedagogical theory and practice. In particular, I focus on the ways in which the social construction of emotion (Gergen, 1999) in educational settings has informed – and sometimes deformed – my learning and the learning of others, and offer some suggestions for how we might more productively reconstruct emotion in our pedagogical relational practices. In sum, I hope to reconstruct the canonical story of learning in higher education.

From a social constructionist perspective, I understand emotion "not as a feature of our biological make-up, a constitutional urge that drives our actions, but as a component of cultural life" (Gergen, 1999, p. 109). Emotions are culturally constituted social performances or ways of being with others, reflected in and constructed through historically grounded "vocabularies of action" (*ibid.*, p. 109) that offer evaluations of particular aspects of social interaction. In this way, emotions function as guidelines for cultural life. Following Hochschild (1983), I want to expose the "feeling rules" that typically accompany us when we enter educational interactions, and the implications those rules have for teaching and learning. My goal is to illuminate the ways in which our culturally constructed emotional responses reflect a particular "culture of learning," a canonical story of learning grounded in beliefs, attitudes, and values about what learning relationships should be and by extension should *not* be (Bruner, 1996).

My inquiry is guided by three key questions: What is the canonical story of learning and learning relationships that dominates higher education? What are the emotion rules attendants to this canonical story? How we might revise the canonical story of learning to enhance the quality of our educational experiences?

Though I focus on learning about relational communication in higher education, I include experiences that range across disciplinary contexts and grade levels. As you witness my story (Boler, 1999), I hope you will be encouraged to critically examine your own emotional experiences with learning, your own learning relationships, and in doing so help me to create a more holistic conversation about how to successfully reform the ways we *do* learning together.

## OCTOBER 2004

I teach and conduct research in relational communication. As an interdisciplinary area of inquiry, relational communication defies simple categorization. In my work, I draw on theoretical and methodological resources from a vast array of disciplines – most notably psychology, sociology, anthropology, education, history, English, and art – in an effort to understand and improve upon the ways in which we communicate with one another in our intimate relationships, family relationships, workplace interactions, community relationships, and global exchanges. At the center of my efforts is the belief that communication is our most significant human endeavor. As I tell my students: "The *way* we talk about the world *matters*."

Why is relational communication such a vital area of concern in the study of human experience? The answer to that question is as simple as it is complex. Human beings are by nature storytellers (Fisher, 1986). We create, maintain, repair, and transform our personal and social realities (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) through the stories that we co-construct with others across a broad range of social, economic, political, and cultural contexts (Bruner, 1990; Coles, 1989). From this perspective, relational communication plays a seminal role in the production and transformation of our personal identities, our close relationships, our social institutions, and our global community.

Central to this way of thinking about communication is the concept of change. As a teacher and researcher in relational communication, I believe my "primary challenge" is to help others learn how to successfully participate in the diverse "range of conversations" we experience on a daily basis in our complex and dynamic world, to be open to true engagement and connection with others (Gergen, 1995, p. 34). In narrative terms, this means understanding that through these conversations we author the stories we inhabit (Crites, 1986), and thus through these conversations we have the capacity to reframe or reinterpret the meaning of our experiences, rewriting old stories in new and more satisfying ways (Parry, 1991). In sum, this action-oriented approach to learning necessarily begins and ends with human interaction, and takes as its goal the equitable and just transformation of our relationships, our stories, our lives (Bruner, 1996; Freire, 1970; Gergen, 1995; Hooks, 1994; Mezirow, 2000).

### FALL 1975

I am a 13-year-old high school sophomore, one of twelve students in my Algebra I course nervously anticipating a mid-term exam. Arriving in the classroom as I have done countless times before, I sit at my desk in the back of the room, next to the windows overlooking the crumbling tennis courts and towering pine trees. Coach begins to hand out exams.

"Coach," as her name suggests, is a short, stocky woman with a booming voice, commanding presence, and tough demeanor. *You don't mess with Coach.* As Dean of Women at The Grier School, my small, all-girls boarding school nestled in the Allegheny Mountains of central Pennsylvania, Coach is the embodiment of discipline, both academic and social. She is also the best math teacher I have ever had. I love being in her class, feeling safe in the logical, unemotional world of equations and proofs, and she rewards my efforts with perfect grades.

But today's exam is different. Like always, I know the material inside and out, but for some mysterious reason, as soon as the exam appears on my desk, I choke with panic. I read the instructions: "Solve the following equations for X" but the problems blur on the page. My pencil begins to waver, slipping through my sweaty fingers. My arms begin to shake and then my whole body freezes. I sit like a statue for a moment, hoping the sensations will pass, and then expand my chest with a deep cleansing breath. I glance at the clock above the blackboard. Five minutes have already passed. I am already running out of time.

*Tick. Tick. Tick.*

I look at the questions on the page again. They take a familiar form, and I *know* I know how to answer them. But for some reason, my mind is completely blank; vacant, that is, except for the growing panic. I take more deep breaths. My stomach churns toward my throat.

*You are such an idiot!* The voice in my head screams.

With the force of sheer terror, my hand shoots into the air. Coach comes over and leans on my desk. "I *can't* do this!" I whisper to her. "My mind is completely blank. Completely blank!" I look up at her, the blue of my eyes consumed by dilated pupils, pleading for help. "I know the answers, but...." My words drown in the bile rising from my stomach. I am convinced Coach will tell me to keep trying. I hold my breath.

Instead, Coach responds with an uncharacteristic sweetness. "Don't worry, Barbie," she says. "I *know* you know this material. Go back to your room and try to relax. You can take the exam another time. Ok?"

Racing back to my room, through the maze of long hallways and winding stairs, I worry I am losing my mind. I don't understand I am having my first panic attack, a flat out assault of fear on my defenseless brain. A week later, back to my calm and confident self, I ace the exam.

Coach and I never talk about my first learning panic attack. And it is years before I realize how life in boarding school afforded me options for emotional expression and understanding that might not have been available to me in a public school in a teacher-student relationship.

### SUMMER 1993

In my late twenties, I decide to become a teacher, to spend my life in the realm of intellectual inquiry, learning and helping others to enhance their knowledge of the world.

At first, I try teaching at the secondary level. I enroll in the University of South Florida's secondary social science education program, and simultaneously begin substitute teaching for the Hillsborough County Public Schools in Tampa. I spend most of my 2 years as a substitute, teaching at Madison Junior High School, an inner city school filled primarily with lower income and ethnically diverse students and burnt-out teachers.

I love the kids. They speak their minds and keep me on my toes. But the day-to-dayness of substituting proves quite stressful so I abandon the classroom for a graduate assistantship in the county's Testing and Evaluation office. Again, I am disappointed. The bureaucracy is overwhelming, the work tedious, and as a result of extended periods of sitting at a desk, I suffer severe back pain. Ultimately, my contract is not renewed.

Working at the secondary level teaches me many things about public schools. I learn the story of classroom overcrowding, outdated and biased textbooks, detailed curriculum standards that hinder teachers' abilities to actually *help* students learn how to think for themselves. But most important, I learn that my intellect will not be satisfied with teaching at the secondary level; I need the challenges offered by higher education. So after completing my M.A. in education, I decide to pursue my Ph.D. in communication so that I can teach at the college level.

I think I am headed for a career of the mind.

*I couldn't be more wrong.*

Throughout my M.A. coursework in education, no one ever mentions the central role emotion plays in learning. No one. There is some attention given to how to reduce faculty burn-out and a lot of time spent considering styles of discipline for troubled students. We discuss negative emotion – such as anger and even rage – as something to be evicted from the classroom and positive emotion – such as exhilaration and fervor – as something to be channeled into calmer, more intellectually facilitative emotions like excitement and curiosity, but we never really talk about the ways in which learning is by nature an emotional pursuit, for students *and* teachers. No one suggests that intellect is intimately tied to emotion (let alone to physicality and spirituality), that we have to make space for all kinds of aspects of the self and of relationship in the classroom if we are to successfully promote learning. No one suggests that there are certain unspoken feeling rules for classroom interaction, a canonical story of learning that might actually be critiqued and transformed to enhance learning relationships. And no one dares to suggest that these feeling rules might somehow be tied to ethnicity, class, gender, age, or any number of other social standpoints. In short, there is little discussion of the *whole* learner in the relational system we call learning.

## DECEMBER 2004

Learning cannot be systematized and replicated like a mathematical formula. While we have a tendency to try to reduce learning to "information processing," where "finite, coded, unambiguous information about the world is inscribed, sorted, stored, collated, retrieved, and generally managed by a computational device" (Bruner, 1996, p. 1), the ambiguous and emergent nature of knowledge defies such formal and systematic categorization. Instead, learning is more usefully viewed as a "cultural process" of interpretation, an ongoing *collaborative* effort to make sense of the ever-changing physical and social realities created and inhabited by human beings. In other words, paraphrasing communication theorist Sheila McNamee (2003), I suggest we theorize learning as a relational practice, a "conversation" among teachers and students.

What does it mean to say that learning is conversation? To begin, we must first consider that learning is the result of our pedagogical efforts to obtain this entity called knowledge. Knowledge is, from a social constructionist perspective, a body of information, a collection of concepts and theories, of stories (Bochner, 1994), which experts agree are meaningful in helping to describe, explain, and even control (some aspect of) the world. These concepts and theories develop and change over time as the experts conduct and share research in an effort to refine their ideas. In other words, knowledge and more specifically the meanings that constitute knowledge, are the product of social interchange and consensus, of discourse emerging as McNamee (2003, p. 2) says "in the joint activities of persons in relationship." We might even go so far as to suggest that knowledge itself *is* a conversation that keeps growing and changing as new ideas are introduced and critiqued, and experts come and go. So, from a constructionist perspective, knowledge becomes something radically different from the canonical notion of knowledge as an essential, stable, and unchanging entity given to students by teachers.

So if knowledge is the result of ongoing conversation, shouldn't we conceptualize learning in the same way? In other words, if knowledge is a collection of discursively constructed meanings, what better way to explore that conversation than by fully participating in it? In this way, knowing is conversing, so learning should be too – both for experts and students. In fact, I might even suggest that knowledge and learning is the same thing.

I make this point about learning as conversation because I believe utilizing the metaphor of conversation requires us to acknowledge the *central role of emotion talk* in learning. Historically, emotion talk has been

notably absent from the canonical narrative of learning. Sure, we encourage our students to get excited about learning and we tell them to ask questions when they are confused, but we tend to construct these emotions in very unemotional ways. We want to see students exhibit intellectual curiosity and enthusiasm, and we want to know when they are confused; but we seem to want to move quickly past the realm of feelings – as well as bodies and spirits – on our way to what is considered to be the real space of learning: the mind.<sup>1</sup> There is little room for discussion of relentless zeal, deep-seated hostility or anger, and even sexual passion in our classrooms (Hooks, 1994). Throughout our educational careers, we learn to check these so-called debilitating emotions at the classroom door.

But it is this emotion talk, I believe, that lies at the core of learning relationships and we must be willing to embrace emotion talk in all of its manifestations if we are to truly transform our selves and others through learning. As researchers who study learning and teachers who utilize that pedagogical scholarship in (and out of) the classroom, we are woefully inept at recognizing and harnessing the power emotion talk has in the learning process (Ingleton, 1999; Schutz & DeCuir, 2002). And as a result, we limit our capacity for the kind of holistic engagement that would enhance our learning relationships, and by extension our social worlds.

### JANUARY 2004

Thirty years ago, looking at that Algebra I exam through my 13-year-old eyes, I was paralyzed with fear and angry with myself for being so afraid. And it wouldn't be the last time. Through high school, college, and graduate school, my personal experience reflected the intimate relationship between uneasiness, anxiety, fear, anger, *and* learning; but I worked hard to keep those disquieting and debilitating emotions at a safe distance from my academic pursuits, and out of my personal learning story. I believed they came from my perfectionist self, from feelings of helplessness and inadequacy in the face of new learning challenges I desperately needed to master. I was afraid my teachers would not like or respect me, that other students would be smarter than me, that someone would finally figure out I was an imposter, an idiot hiding behind this well-crafted facade of intelligence and creativity. And I knew I was not alone in these feelings (Salzberger, Williams, & Osborne, 1983).

But even equipped with this self-knowledge and some useful strategies for silencing that frightened voice in my head; uneasiness, anxiety, fear, and

anger followed me all the way through my Ph.D. program and into my life as an assistant professor of Communication Arts seeking tenure. Basically, I internalized the traditional emotion rules attendant to the canonical story of learning and used both surface and deep acting (Hochschild, 1983) to hide my feelings from other students, my teachers, my colleagues, and my self.

Then in the spring semester of 2002, while teaching a course in language at UNH-Manchester, I had an experience that completely changed my thinking about the relationship between emotion and learning; an experience that showed me how uneasiness, anxiety, fear, and even anger could actually strengthen our capacity for growth and transformation; an experience that proved to me emotion and intellect (and physicality and spirituality) are intimately bound together in our relationships, our life stories (Andersen & Guerrero, 1998; Goleman, 1995), and thus in learning. This experience prompted me to challenge the canonical story of learning, to reconstruct the feeling rules for learning that now guide my relationships with my students and my self.

### APRIL 2002

My stomach knots in anticipation of the annual class visit made by my chair, Gary Goldstein. The Ativan I ingested an hour ago helps to calm my anxiety, but my stomach continues to tighten, my breathing to labor, my heart to pound. I take another slug of Diet Coke, mistakenly believing more caffeine will not erase the calming affects of my medication. Pacing the classroom floor, I review my class notes, pausing momentarily to look out the open window (with its clearly posted "Do Not Open" sign flapping in the wind) at the beautiful spring day and the water of the Merrimack River rushing to the sea. Students trickle in and I hand them quizzes.

A few minutes later Gary walks through the door and finds a seat at the back of the room.

Gary is the Chair of the Natural and Social Sciences Division at UNH-Manchester where I am in my third full-time year as an assistant professor of Communication Arts. The two college divisions (the other is the Humanities Division) were created, to mimic the departments our commuter campus is too small to have, in large part to create a system for conducting teaching evaluations.

This is the third time Gary has visited one of my classes. A psychologist in his 50's, he maintains the demeanor of the hippie we are all convinced he

used to be. Gary is a genuine and caring man, the most non-intimidating person I know. In the past, he has raved about my teaching, especially about my ability to get students involved in discussions. In fact, even Gary gets involved in our conversations during his class visits and I anticipate no exception today.

So I really shouldn't be so nervous.

But this is my first semester back from a year's medical leave for major depression and I am eager to reestablish my teaching reputation. I feel strong, but still vulnerable. My performance anxiety is much higher than usual.

*But I'm not supposed to talk about that.*

After the students finish their quizzes, I introduce Gary to the class. "For those of you who do not know him, this is Dr. Gary Goldstein from the psychology program. He is my boss, and today he is here to evaluate my teaching. So be nice to him!"

I stand behind a podium poached from a classroom down the hall. This is the only time I have used a podium all semester, hell, probably all year.

"Today we are continuing our discussion of Emily Martin's book *The Woman in the Body* (1987)," I say, loosening my white-knuckle grip on the podium only long enough to flip through my notes. I deliver a brief interactive lecture summarizing Martin's critique of the social construction of women's reproductive health by mainstream medical culture.

I look out at the 24 students in my class, the majority of whom are female, in their early twenties, and eager to discuss new ideas. When I ask a question, there is no shortage of hands waving in the air.

But over the course of the semester a small clique has formed on the left side of the room. I am having difficulty reading their sporadic contributions to class discussions, their subterranean talk, and their silences. I keep trying to engage them, making eye contact, smiling, and asking them pointed questions, but my efforts continue to fall short. I worry they aren't learning; I worry their behavior will negatively affect my evaluation; I worry they don't like me. The right side of the room feels open to the ideas we have discussed, engaged, friendly.

"Martin argues," I explain, "that women lack an image of body wholeness. She claims this arises, at least in part, from the *medicalization* of the body, the construction of the body and its processes in medical discourse. What metaphor does Martin argue is generally used by the medical community to characterize childbirth?"

Hands wave in the air and I call on the ever-eager Carol to answer.

"Production," she says.

"Yes. Good. And how does that metaphor apply to the participants in the birthing process?" I continue to look at Carol.

She's right with me. "The doctor is the manager who directs the birth process, the baby is the product, and the woman is merely the worker carrying out the manager's orders."

I smile. "Right again! So she is secondary to both the doctor and the baby; she's not really in control; the doctor is perceived as doing all the work." As the momentum of the discussion builds, I step out from behind the podium. "And what are the implications of that metaphor? How does it affect birthing women?"

Brows furrow across the room. I pause. *Wait*, I tell myself. *Wait some more*. But no one raises a hand. "Ok." I continue. "Martin says the production metaphor that dominates medical discourse about women's reproductive lives creates a situation where women feel fragmented, alienated from their own bodies and in the case of c-sections, from their own children."

I pause to let the class process what I have just said. "Any questions?" The room is silent. "So we're all on the same page?" I pause again. Heads nod. "Good. Let's put our understanding of Martin's ideas to a test. We are going to become Emily Martin by watching a clip from a PBS video entitled *Intimate Universe: The Human Body* (Dale, 1999) and critically exploring the language – both spoken and visual – the narrator uses to describe conception, gestation, and birth."

For a half an hour we watch the video and I pause periodically to ask questions to stimulate discussion. Almost everyone in the room offers an insightful observation, and almost everyone is appalled by the description of the woman's body being "at war" with the "foreign" implanting embryo.

Toward the end of the video, during the childbirth sequence, one of the male students from the left-side-of-the-room group, Peter, walks out without comment. All eyes follow him to the door. His departure doesn't surprise me; Peter's physical absence merely mimics the mental absence he has displayed throughout the semester. I haven't been able to reach him.

I wonder how Gary will interpret Peter's departure.

I check Gary's response, relieved that he appears happily engaged in the conversation. Soon it is apparent that he can't keep quiet any longer. His hand rises.

My heart races a bit faster. "Gary?" I say. *Oh God, what is he going to say?* I force a smile. Every eye in the room rests on Gary.

"I want to be clear about something here," he says in his distinct NY accent. "Martin is not *completely* discounting the value of medical science is she?"

Eyes shift, focusing on me. Students are eager for my response to this senior faculty member, my boss. Rarely (and sadly) are they privy to this kind of intellectual exchange between professors.

I am so thankful to have an answer; I can't hold back my smile. "Of course not! But she is saying we really should consider that how we talk about these medical procedures and patients' bodies matters because words are not just words, they also inform our actions." I pause for effect, ready to repeat the course mantra. "*How we talk about the world matters.*"

Gary nods.

*Whew!*

After the video clip ends and the discussion winds down, we find ourselves at break time.

"Great analysis!" I tell my students. "When we return, we will be discussing the birth stories you got from your interviews. See you back here in ten minutes."

As students leave the classroom, I expel enough air to float a hot air balloon. I am almost surprised that Gary doesn't get swept away when he comes over to compliment me. "Great class, as always," he says. "I hope you didn't mind my participating."

I laugh. "I have come to expect it, Gary. And you asked an important question. Thank you."

He smiles. "I wish I could stay for more, but I can't. I'll have a written evaluation for you soon. Thanks," he says on his way out the door.

I take a deep cleansing breath. *You did it*, I tell myself, *and maybe even did a good job.*

During the break, I return the podium to its home classroom. The students return fifteen minutes later.

As the second half of the class begins, I sit on the table at the front of the room, my typical pose for class discussions. I am relieved, thankful, and emotionally spent. "Thank you all for being so smart," I tell my students. "Gary was very impressed with you. You did a great job!"

Suddenly a hand shoots up from the right side of the room, second row. I make eye contact with Mary and nod my head. Mary's words fly at me with ferocity that seems to come out of the blue. "Why are we always *man-bashing*? And why are we ripping on medicine?"

For a moment, I am not sure what Mary just said. I just stare at her, stunned by both her extreme anger and her accusations. I see other heads

nod. After what feels like forever, the meaning of Mary's words finally sinks in. I try to respond without appearing defensive. But I can't help but take her criticism personally. My emotions take over. Panic sets in. My brain fogs.

I am caught off-guard.

You see, I work extremely hard framing gender discussions so as not to "man-bash." That's all I can think about. I've done my best not to man-bash and I'm getting called for it anyway!

"I'm sorry you think we are man-bashing," I reply. "That is not my intention, nor is it Martin's. Let me try to explain what we are doing." I hesitate as tears begin to invade my eyes. I blink them away. I need to remain calm, to show no weakness or fear, to follow the rules.

Another student, Sarah, comes to my rescue, attempting to explain that our critique of medical practices is warranted. "I know this women who was given a c-section without her consent. She...."

Mary cuts Sarah off before she can finish her sentence. "That doesn't matter," she says, her voice still venomous. I see Sarah shrink into herself.

But before I can respond to Mary's comments or her disrespectful interruption and dismissal of Sarah, another student chimes in: "And why aren't we studying more about gender and the media?"

I try to regain my composure, to breathe. "We are studying the media to a degree, today's video, for example, but this isn't a media course. This is a course about relational communication."

The tears are getting bigger, coming faster, refusing to be squelched. I wipe them away with a quick brush of my hand, hoping no one will notice. I watch my credibility fly toward the open window.

Another hand shoots up, a hand attached to one of my best students, Anne. "Why are we emphasizing gender so much? If I take Gender in the fall, will we be covering the same material?"

"No. I.... The gender course..." I can't finish my sentence. I feel a student rebellion forming, a rebellion that I take to be a reflection of my dismal failure as a teacher. All eyes are on me and I am seconds away from bursting into tears. "I'm sorry, but I can't talk about this anymore today. We will revisit these issues next week. I am sorry, but I have to go."

I grab my papers and books, and flee. My credibility is moving in the opposite direction, right out the open window. There is still a half hour of class time left, but I can't go on.

Eyes to the ground, tears pouring down my cheeks, I race downstairs. Safe in my office, I let the tears come. Someone knocks on the door but I can't answer. I worry that I broke out of my role as an even-tempered professor. I worry that I damaged my credibility. I worry that my



emotional response is out of line with the situation. I worry that I have failed my self and my students by letting our emotions get out of control.

*How did this happen? What did I do or not do to upset and alienate these students? What do I do now?*

I think of ways to stop their anger, not of ways to embrace it and build on it.

By the time class is formally over at 4 p.m., I am composed enough to come out of hiding. I have never been more thankful for the small physical plant of our college; the safety of my car is just outside the back door.

I spend the next few days simultaneously berating myself for losing my cool in front of my students and thinking about ways to turn the situation around to our mutual benefit. Apologetic emails arrive from students, including Mary, worried about my emotional response.

## APRIL 2002

Early in the next week, I am sitting in Gary's office, seeking his counsel.

"Here's what I suspect happened," I explain. "I think your presence as an evaluator of my teaching, especially one who asked a question which the students might have interpreted as being critical of the perspective under consideration, prompted the students to offer their own evaluations. And I had been so nervous and then so relieved, I couldn't handle the barrage of critical comments. I made the mistake of taking their criticisms personally. I was hurt so I cried and ran away, like a little kid. And now I have to go back in there in 2 days and facilitate a conversation about what occurred. What should I do?"

"Well," Gary pauses to choose his words carefully, "I have to ask. Do you think your reaction had anything to do with your depression?"

I react without thought. "No. I think this would've happened anyway, even with my depression. My depression is not really an issue anymore." As soon as the words leave my mouth, I know they might be a lie. The major depression that had sent me away on medical leave for a year is much improved, but still lingers in these first few months back at school. I have no way of knowing the role it might have played in this situation. So I give Gary the *safe* answer, the answer I need to believe is true. The *real* answer – if there is one – we'll never know.

"Don't worry," Gary assures me. "It's not that bad. What are you thinking of doing?"

I explain *my plan*.

"Sounds good to me," he says. "You're turning what could have been a bad experience into a teachable moment."

*A learnable moment, I think to myself, for all of us.*

## APRIL 2002

When I walk into class 2 days later, armored in my most professional skirt-and-jacket-wear, I appear fully composed but feel unsteady, embarrassed, and just plain scared. Was my emotional display last week too much for students to handle? After all, professors aren't supposed to cry, let alone run out of the room. Did I irreparably destroy my relationship with some of my students? Is my credibility gone for good?

I come armed with *my plan*.

*My plan* is simple: I ask students to list two things they like about the course and two things they would like to change about the course, including recommendations for how to create positive change, and exit the room for a half hour to let them talk openly to one another in small groups. Then I return to facilitate a class discussion. This plan, I think, will open up a dialog about what we are studying and how we are studying it.

I am open to suggestions and to change, I tell myself. I can handle any emotion that comes my way, even the anger I felt last week. I try to think about the anger as a good sign, a sign that I am getting to the students, challenging their beliefs, engaging them. I promise myself to be open to a more holistic level of engagement with my students.

I am ready. The wall clock reads 1:00.

"Good afternoon," I say, glancing from face to face, trying to make eye contact with everyone in the room. My lips vibrate a smile. My voice quivers. I clear my throat. "I am sorry for breaking down and running out on you last week," I tell them, inhaling a deep breath. "I found myself so overwhelmed by emotion, I couldn't speak. I apologize for leaving."

The students are shifting uncomfortably in their seats. Some smile. Most faces contort with confusion. There is no script for this particular classroom moment.

I continue in my best professor tone, even paced, authoritative, and above all rational. "Today, I want to spend the first part of the class working through some of the concerns you expressed last week. Is that okay with all of you?"

Heads nod.

"Okay, then here's *the plan*."

## JUNE 2005

The subject of relational communication requires me to invite personal experience into the classroom, both my own experience and the experience of my students. It's the nature, so to speak, of the beast.

Certainly, the centrality of personal experience to learning about relational communication is obvious. What isn't obvious is that the connection between personal experience and learning runs even deeper than my particular subject matter might suggest. To positively transform human interaction in any realm of inquiry (be it sociological, anthropological, political, economic, biological, etc.), we must challenge learners to develop new ways of thinking about themselves and others, new ways of narrating the world that allow positive transformation to occur, whatever the particular subject matter might be.

On a fundamental level and across academic disciplines of inquiry, the methodological centrality of personal experience to learning is supported by research on brain neurology. Neurologists who study the process of learning suggest that what we call knowledge is actually a collection of neural pathways formed as a result of personal experience (Ackerman, 2004; LeDoux, 1996; Zull, 2002). In other words, as we move through the world and engage with others, our brains create networks of neurons that encode or hardwire experience for easy reference when we confront similar situations in the future. However, if past experience doesn't serve present realities, the brain then builds new pathways on the foundation of the old ones. As Ackerman (2004, p. 85) notes, "whenever we learn something, the brain mints new [neural] connections or enlivens old ones." Interestingly, this neural knowledge exists in our brains in narrative or story form. So if we conceptualize learning as a way to successfully cope with new experiences, to "make new and different things possible" (Bochner, 1994, p. 29), then we must begin with existing neural pathways of knowledge with our own personal experiences, our own stories.

Experience is also central to more philosophical considerations of learning. As I invite experience into the classroom, I am inspired by a variety of educators who theorize learning as a transformative act, an interactive process that engages the whole learner in "sustainable dialogue" (McNamee & Gergen, 1999) to create positive change in social relations.

In *Experience and Education* (1938), John Dewey used the concept of experience to lay the foundation for the transformational approach to educational pedagogy so prevalent today. Dewey argued for a more *progressive* approach to education, an experiential model where students do

not passively receive pre-existing knowledge through lectures and textbooks created by "elders," and useful for life in the future. Instead, students become active and engaged learners who experience, create, and use knowledge through interactive participation in learning experiences with others in the present. Through these learning experiences, Dewey argued, students acquire the capacity for freedom of expression and individuality, as well as the ability to directly respond to the dynamic challenges of their immediate (and future) circumstances. For Dewey, learning is a lived, relational experience rooted in and responsive to the everyday lives of learners, and designed to develop the unique capacities of each learner. As Dewey (1938, p. 7) said, "there is an intimate and necessary relationship between the processes of actual experience and education."

Like Dewey, Paulo Freire rooted his transformative *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) in experience. In addition, Freire called upon educators to use collaboration and dialog to help students become "revolutionaries" who utilize simultaneous action and reflection – what he called "praxis" – to transform oppressive social relationships. In other words, Freire theorized learning as a political act. "The object of dialogical-libertarian action," Freire (*ibid.*, p. 174) wrote "is not to 'dislodge' the oppressed from a mythological reality in order to 'bind' them to another reality. On the contrary," he continued, "the object of dialogical action is to make it possible for the oppressed, by perceiving their adhesion, to opt to transform an unjust reality."

More recent pedagogical theorists continue to support an experiential approach to education and emphasize the equitable and socially just transformation of social relationships as the critical goal of learning. Drawing on the political pedagogy of Paulo Freire, feminist theorist Bell Hooks (1994) describes ideal feminist educational practice as "holistic," "empowering," "transgressive," and "transformative," engaging learners in the promotion of their own well-being and the well-being of others. This creation of well-being occurs, Hooks (*ibid.*, p. 15) maintains, through the development and application of "knowledge about how to live in the world." Hooks envisions the classroom as a place of "possibility." "In that field of possibility," Hooks (*ibid.*, p. 207) writes, "we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress."

Like Hooks, eminent educational theorist Jack Mezirow (2000) describes experiential transformation as central to pedagogical practice. Mezirow (*ibid.*, p. 16) asks learners to explore their "frames of reference" for making

meaning of experience, "the structure of assumptions and expectations through which we filter sense impressions." He divides these world-views into two parts: (1) a "habit of mind" – a set of assumptions that serve as filters for attributing meaning to experience; and (2) resulting "points of view" that suggest particular forms of action. Mezirow concludes:

Central to the goal of adult education in democratic societies is the process of helping learners become more aware of the context of their problematic understandings and beliefs, more critically reflective on their assumptions and those of others, more fully and freely engaged in discourse, and more effective in taking action on their reflective judgments. (*ibid.*, 31)

Similarly, English professor Jane Tompkins, reflecting on her life-long teaching career in higher education, describes the role of experience and transformation in education in very pragmatic and human terms.

A holistic approach to education would recognize that a person must learn how to be with other people, how to love, how to take criticism, how to grieve, how to have fun, as well as how to add and subtract, multiply and divide. It would not leave out of the account people who are begotten, born, and die. It would address the need for purpose and for connectedness to one another and ourselves; it would not leave us alone to wander the world armed with plenty of knowledge but lacking the skills to handle things that are coming up in our lives. (Tompkins, 1996, p. ixie)

All of these theorists, as well as a variety of others (including Mary Field Belenky, Stephen D. Brookfield, Eliot Eisner, Maxine Greene, Robert Kegan, and Parker Palmer) use experience as the foundation for their ideas about best practices in transformational education. They emphasize three *interconnected human capacities* vital to the pedagogical pursuit of positive and equitable transformation: (1) the development of self-awareness – or reflexivity; (2) the growth of our understanding of others – or empathy; and (3) the ability to act in conjunction with others to create positive change – or conjoint action. Through the development of these capacities, a pedagogy of transformation helps learners to enlarge their "capacity to cope with complicated contingencies of lived interpersonal experience" (Bochner, 1994, p. 7).

Of course, the self is central to any pedagogical theorizing about transformation. As a social constructionist, I see the "self" as a relational construct, intimately tied to the "other" through communication (Gergen, 1995). One can only understand the "self" in relation to the "other"; and one can only understand the "other" in relation to the "self." As a result, the pursuit of self-awareness and the development of empathy go hand-in-hand, and manifest themselves through collaborative action. Additionally,

both the self and other are tied to the intellect and emotion, and to physicality and spirituality. Historically, the canonical story of learning has embraced only the intellect, leaving little or no room for the heart, the body, the spirit, or for the central role of relationship in learning. But the depth and breadth of learning I am speaking of here requires *not just* intellectual *but also* emotional, and even physical and spiritual engagement, whatever the academic discipline might be.

Unfortunately, for many teachers and students this is a frightening prospect (Nikitina, 2003). As Mezirow (2000, pp. 6–7) says: "Transformative learning, especially when it involves subjective reframing, is often an intensely threatening emotional experience in which we have to become aware of...the assumptions undergirding our ideas and those supporting our emotional responses to the need to change." A frightening prospect indeed, but one, I would argue, well worth pursuing if we hope to create a more equitable and just world.

So when I step into a relational communication classroom, I can't ignore the depth and breadth of the roles played by emotion rules in our learning relationships. I can't help but see the traditional feeling rules of the canonical story of learning as limiting and potentially damaging to those relationships. But it wasn't until I read Megan Boler's *Feeling Power* (1999) that I really understood how fully I need to embrace the wide range of positive and negative emotions emerging in classroom interactions, to reframe the canonical narrative of learning and the construction of relationships and emotion within that narrative.

Like the pedagogical theorists mentioned above, Boler (*ibid.*, xviii) conceptualizes education as an experiential process of "critical inquiry and transformation, both of the self and the culture" where we "envision future horizons of possibilities and who we want to become. She continues:

Education aims in part to help us understand our values and priorities, how we have come to believe what we do, and how we can define ethical ways of living with others. Emotions function in part as moral and ethical evaluations; they give us information about what we care about and why. (*ibid.*, xviii)

From this perspective, emotions become guides in the learning process, signaling both the comfortable safety of treasured beliefs as well as the fear, anger, and distress that come with questioning and challenging them. When we engage in this "pedagogy of discomfort," Boler (*ibid.*, p. 176) says, we invite "defensive anger, fear of change, and fears of losing our personal and cultural identities" into our learning relationships, and should welcome those emotions, not try to shut them down. If we can do this, if we embrace

discomfort, we can open ourselves up, students and teachers alike, to the possibility of seeing the world from a multiplicity of perspectives; we can open ourselves up to more ethical and productive kinds of learning relationships; and we can learn to “inhabit a morally ambiguous self” ready to embrace a wealth of others (*ibid.*, p. 182). In this way, Boler’s pedagogy of discomfort helps us to see the ways in which the canonical story of learning – with its attendant feeling rules – reinscribes existing relations of power leaving little, if any, space for equitable and just social transformation.

### OCTOBER 2003

As I think back on the conversation *the plan* created for my language class, I am struck by two thoughts: I did the right thing and I did the wrong thing.

The right thing was to acknowledge what happened and try to address it in a non-threatening way. I offered students the opportunity to air their grievances and I offered myself an opportunity to respond in a calmer, thoughtful manner. I tried to expand the limits of our relationships and create a more holistic level of engagement.

Of course, none of my students dared bring up “man-bashing.” I suspect they were silenced by my reaction from the week before – because the canonical narrative of learning makes no room for this kind of emotional display by a teacher or student, because they didn’t want to possibly risk their grades by bringing up the issue again, because they know me and care about my emotional well-being, and because their very belief systems and thus selves were at stake.

I was afraid too. I wasn’t sure I could handle their criticism; I couldn’t trust myself not to cry all over again. And I didn’t know if I was ready to risk the comfort of the canonical story of learning, with its attendant teacher–student hierarchy, I had worked so hard to construct and sustain since my return from the medical leave.

Students told me how much they liked the course, my teaching methods, and our discussions, reestablishing, I believe, the more traditional hierarchy we had challenged the week before. We addressed some of their concerns, speaking about the ways in which the language course differs from the gender course, why gender was an appropriate topic to discuss in a course about language, and how much of the current research on language was sparked by feminist inquiry. We spoke about restructuring quizzes with more open-ended short answer questions, taking more frequent breaks and other marginally important topics.

*But we didn’t talk about man-bashing.*

Which leads to what I did wrong?

I let us play it safe. I steered the conversation away from the anger and extreme frustration that surfaced the week before. I didn’t push students or myself to share our negative feelings again, to go to the place where their anger toward and rejection of feminism resides – and where my anger at their anger about feminism lives, manifesting itself as tears of frustration because when they attack feminism, they are attacking feminists – like me.

I stopped us from changing the feeling rules of the canonical story of learning and more fully engaging one another.

We didn’t go back to that uncomfortable emotional space because I didn’t let us. I was too damn scared – and I think my students didn’t feel comfortable enough to lead the way, again. Perhaps the greatest fears a teacher faces are fear of criticism, fear of hostility, and fear of losing control – all of which can be summed up by an overarching fear of a more equitable and substantive relationship with students. I suspect students share the same fears.

I hope I will react differently if a similar situation ever arises again. But I don’t know. Fear, uneasiness, and anger might kick in my flight response again, my brain responding automatically, bypassing all cognitive processing. I might not even have a choice.

I might not have a choice, that is, unless I learn how to let emotion create learning instead of shutting it down, *unless* I reconstruct the feeling rules for learning, making space for all kinds of emotions in the classroom, including fear, uneasiness, and anger, *unless* I embrace “a pedagogy of discomfort” (Boler, 1999), a new narrative of learning that will invite both my students and myself into deeper and more challenging learning relationships.

If I had let discomfort and anger stay that day, I wouldn’t have needed *the plan*. If I had reacted more calmly to the accusation of man-bashing, to the highly charged emotional place feminism occupies in the classroom, to the emotional lives of my students and myself, we might have learned something more – about language, about feminism, but more importantly about our selves, about others, about our relationships, about our lives.

And if I had let discomfort and anger stay that day I would have learned something I didn’t learn until I read the last page of Mary’s final exam. Mary, you’ll recall, had raised the man-bashing issue in the first place.

Barbara-

I just wanted to thank you for this class. I know at points I didn’t see where this was going and was frustrated. I am so grateful for having been able to see this class through. The ideas of power, transformation and the miracle question have meant so much to me. I didn’t realize, at least consciously realize, I had this ability to change my situation and

life. I didn't think I could be anything but the personality, live the reality I've always led (which has included an unhealthy romantic relationship). So thank you. Thank you for helping me to learn this. I usually learn the info I need, take my final and move on, soon forgetting what I had learned. What you've taught me I will carry with me the rest of my life. I cannot tell you how much I appreciate you teaching. Thank you.

When I read those four words – “an unhealthy romantic relationship” – I finally understood why Mary had gotten so angry. She was in an abusive relationship, a fact that she later confirmed in conversation with me. So all the talk about feminism, about patriarchy, about sexual inequality had hit home for Mary, right in the part of her self she didn't want to see, or to show others. And she needed to hit back.

I wish I hadn't gotten in her way; I wish I had made room for her feelings in the classroom that day. Who knows where that conversation might have taken her, taken us?

We'll never know.

The first sign of the success of the pedagogy of discomfort is, quite simply, the ability to recognize what it is that one doesn't want to know, and how one developed emotional investments to protect oneself from this knowing. This process may require facing the “tragic loss” inherent to educational inquiry; facing demons and a precarious sense of self. But in doing so one gains a new sense of interconnection with others. Ideally, a pedagogy of discomfort represents an engaged and mutual exchange, a historicized exploration of emotional investments. Through education we invite one another to risk “living at the edge of our skin,” where we find the greatest hope of revisioning ourselves. (Boler, 1999, p. 200)

## FIRST DAY OF CLASS: SPRING 2005

Thirty students fill the seven neatly arranged rows of desks, populating the back rows first, and slowly moving forward, toward me, not quite sure if I am friend or foe. I pace in front of the chalkboard, while reviewing my class notes and making visual assessments of the students. They seem to get younger with each semester, a reflection of my increasing age as well as the decreasing age of the average student attending UNH-Manchester.

The room is alive with history. The red brick walls were raised in 1880, to house the machine shop for the textile mills of the Amoskeag Manufacturing Company, and in 1999 became a full-time home to the university. So much has changed in 120 years; what was once a space for the physical labor of textile production is now a space for intellectual inquiry and development, pursuits that seem so vastly different. Still, one thread weaves

throughout the history of this building – the thread of hard work and pursuit of the American Dream.

More students arrive. A young man sits in the front row. The heat kicks on, sending rumbling waves of noise downward from the wide plank wooden ceilings 12 ft above. I wonder how many of these students would rather be snowboarding.

I write the course number and my name on the pristine first-day-of-the-semester chalkboard. Dressed in my breezy professional-wear, flowing floral skirt, lilac blouse, pantyhose, and black heels, I continue pacing until 1 o'clock arrives.

“Hi!” I say, smiling as I lean on the teacher's desk at the front of the room. “This is CMN 457, Introduction to Interpersonal Communication, and my name is Barbara Jago.” My voice echoes around the room, words fluttering out of my mouth in steady, well-rehearsed flight. Thankfully, the students don't seem to notice my nervousness, a feeling of insecurity, panic, and even outright fear that hits me each time I step foot in the classroom, especially on first days. With my hands clutching the desk edge, I shift my weight from one hip to the other, from one hand to the other. I smile, scanning the room to make eye contact with as many students as possible.

*Are they nervous too? Insecure? Excited?*

Air escapes my body in an audible sigh hanging in the lofty space above us. “You are going to *love* this class!” I state with confidence, a comment that is part hopeful self-fulfilling prophecy and part historical fact.

Each time I say this, I believe it a bit more. I have been teaching this introductory interpersonal communication course for about 7 years, in graduate school at the University of South Florida and now at UNH-Manchester, for a total of 13 times. Students respond positively to the course in part because the material is compelling but also, I have come to allow myself to believe, because of the way I teach.

“I won't spend much time lecturing at you. I hate to lecture, and I hate to be lectured at. Instead, we spend most of our time together in conversation. I think we all learn better when we begin with our own experience, using it as a foundation for discussing theories and concepts. And I think that is especially true for a course that explores relational communication. So please remember this is your class, and I am counting on each one of you to make it great! Ok?”

A few heads nod.

“Ok?” I repeat, slightly louder.

About ten students respond with a quiet “Yes.”

Now I am almost screaming “OK?”

"YES!" Almost everyone in the room is shouting, and laughing a bit uneasily. We have just broken our first rule about traditional classroom etiquette – no yelling.

*Gottcha!*

"You can expect that by the end of the semester, you will know more about yourself and have learned how to more successfully cross that great divide between yourself and others. In many ways, this course is about the development of awareness of self and empathy for others, which, I think you will come to understand, are interrelated communicative phenomena grounded in morality and ethical interaction."

I continue my monologue. "Contrary to what you might think, I am not an expert on relational communication." Scanning faces, I see traces of confusion in furrowed brows and squinting eyes. Professors aren't supposed to admit to vulnerability, to any shade of ignorance, and my admission thwarts student expectations, especially the expectations of the majority who are first generation college students. Another rule is broken. Students find themselves in increasingly unfamiliar territory. "I might have read a lot, and done some research and writing," I continue, "but I certainly don't know everything there is to know about relationships. No one does."

I pause for effect.

"Like me, each of you has also done a lot of research on relationships; each of you has been actively engaged in the process of interpersonal communication theory-building your entire life. You have done this every day as you negotiate your own relationships with family, friends, co-workers, and lovers." I eek out a nervous smile and scan the room again, acknowledging the boundary I have just crossed between the intellectual world of academia and the embodied world of sexuality. I have to be careful entering this emotional sensitive, highly personal territory. Younger students tend to squirm at the mention of sex and I don't want to alienate anyone who might not have a great deal of experience in the romance department. But I refuse to keep quiet about a central issue in our study of relationships, even if it makes some students uncomfortable. There goes another rule.

"This semester we will use what you have already learned from your own experience to join the ongoing scholarly conversation about relational communication. I think you will be surprised by what you already know, and I hope, enlightened by what others have to say, including the people seated in the desks around you."

I pause again for emphasis. "I must warn you, though. This class deals with so many issues that are highly personal and emotionally sensitive. We consider all kinds of close relationships, including family relationships, friendships, and sexual relationships, and we talk about the challenges posed to those relationships by poverty, addiction, eating disorders, and domestic violence, to name just a few. So you have to come to class prepared intellectually and emotionally to go to some difficult places; you have to come to class willing to take good care of your own minds and hearts as well as the minds and hearts of those seated around you, including me. Ok?"

A few students nod.

"I don't expect you to believe what I believe about relationships. But I do expect you to get to know your own beliefs, to be able to explain why you believe as you do, and to be open to witnessing the experiences and perspectives of others, even if their beliefs seem completely foreign. Ok?"

More heads nod.

"Most important, I expect you to come to class with an open heart, to come to class fully present and willing to embrace the possibility of positive transformation, in your self, in your relationships, and in the world, even when every fiber of your being seems to be resisting. And I hope we will be able to talk with one another about how we are feeling as we move through this process. Feel free to speak out in class, in my office, through email—just so long as you let me know how you are responding to the work we are doing, even if you think your response won't make me happy. Trust me, I want to know—even if you are feeling angry and pissed off at me. I want to know. You probably won't hurt my feelings—and if you do, I will let you know. Trust me."

More students are nodding now, even laughing.

"Think of this as an alternative classroom reality, where the normal rules about learning and learning relationships don't apply."

I smile, while making eye contact with every person in the room.

"Having said that, let me remind you: You really are going to *love* this class."

## NOTE

1. And we ignore the ways in which the "mind" is itself a social construction (Mead, 1934).

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