

FACULTY SELF-REFLECTION AND STUDY ABROAD: AN EXPRESSIVE APPROACH TO AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

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Numerous differences exist between faculty and their social work students that sometimes create misunderstandings during study-abroad experiences. Faculty engaged in study-abroad programs must develop means of developing an understanding not only of their students' reactions to cross-cultural and international events, but of their own. One valuable means of helping faculty come to grips with their own thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes is through creative and reflective writing. This narrative details a type of reflective process that faculty can utilize to enhance their own international and cross-cultural teaching. It serves as an autoethnographic account of one teacher's journey, while demonstrating a self-reflective method that faculty engaged in study-abroad experiences can use themselves or with their students.

Introduction

Social work faculty who take students on international educational programs may be in a special position to witness students' personal and professional development. Through travel and study-abroad, students are immersed in social conditions that they are normally not able to experience (Johnson, 1996) and must learn to respond to these conditions in a self-reflective manner (Lindsey, 2005). Faculty accompanying students on these programs encourage students to engage and be challenged by cultural differences and cross-cultural encounters. Removed from their own cultural context, students' normal defenses are often less rigid; if engaged well, students can become more sensitive to different cultures (Black & Duhon, 2006). Not only do students learn more about others, but study-abroad programs afford them the opportunity to learn about their own sense of self and identity (Dolby, 2004). Students are helped to explore and understand how to use one of the most important social work tools: their own professional use of self (Goldstein, 1990; Ringel, 2003; Schon, 1983).

Along with this openness comes vulnerability. Engaging with differences and norms that challenge their own beliefs often elicits strong feelings including guilt, fear, sadness, and anger. While social work faculty who take students on study-abroad courses must not place themselves in the role of

clinicians, they are still responsible for helping students explore, express, and come to terms with challenges that students encounter. Faculty do provide support, comfort, caring, validation, and personal-growth opportunities; this educational process is far more psychoeducational than didactic (Bowman, 1987).

This is not an easy role for faculty. As much as faculty may hope to understand the experience of their students, numerous differences exist between faculty and their social work students that sometimes create misunderstandings. In a very real sense, students and faculty are often as different from each other as both groups are from the people they come across during study-abroad courses. For instance, students and faculty are typically one or more generations apart, have different experiences as helpers, and often come from different ethnic or racial backgrounds.

The development of empathy demands work for students and faculty alike. Faculty engaged in study-abroad programs must develop mechanisms for developing an understanding not only of their students' reactions to cross-cultural and international events but of their own. One valuable means of helping faculty come to grips with their own thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes is through creative and reflective writing. Poetic and narrative reflections can help faculty understand their own biases and may help

them become more sensitive to the issues that students struggle with. Further, faculty who become comfortable using creative writing and reflective exercises themselves may be better able to utilize these approaches with their students (Furman, 2003/2004). A previous article has explored the value of engaging students in reflective writing exercises during study-abroad courses (Furman, Coyne, & Negi, in press).

This article serves as an example of one type of reflective process that faculty can utilize to enhance their own teaching in study-abroad and other social work courses. It serves as an autoethnographic account of one teacher's journey, while demonstrating a self-reflective method. This paper presents two sets of data: 1) poems written from journal notes taken while the author lived in Central America; and 2) narrative reflections based upon reading these poems. I engaged in this process as a means of helping me understand how my current views and beliefs may impact my ability to understand young travelers and learners. In this instance, the traveler was I, as a twenty-one-year-old volunteering and studying Spanish for ten months in Guatemala and Nicaragua. The process of writing narrative reflections allowed me to further understand my own cultural and personal biases and lenses and add additional layers and levels of meaning, thereby creating multilayered, longitudinal data. The poetry and narratives, therefore, serve as self-reflective methods, data, and data analyses. The goal of this process was to demonstrate how the use of narrative reflections can facilitate faculty self-reflection in regard to international experiences and to show this process through autoethnographic methods.

Autoethnographic Poetry and Narrative as Inquiry

Autoethnography has been defined in various ways. Behar (1996) posits that autoethnography attempts "to map an intermediate space we can't quite define yet, a borderland between passion and intellect, analysis and subjectivity, ethnography and autobiography, art and life" (p. 174). Pelias (2003) asserts that autoethnography "lets you

use yourself to see culture" (p. 372). For the purpose of this study, autoethnography is the exploration of the self as a vehicle for understanding important cultural and psychosocial realities.

Autoethnography has several advantages over other types of qualitative research. First, it allows for the gathering of data about issues which are often difficult to explore, such as personal impressions about lived experiences and social processes (Philaretou & Allen, 2006.) It allows for exploring sensitive emotional content about subjects which are private or taboo (Gelles, 1978; Ronai, 1992), for instance in this study personal responses to cultural differences. While relatively new to social work and social work education, many researchers have begun to recognize the need for data that presents highly subjective, personal experiences. In her seminal article, Heineman (1981) asserted that social workers need research paradigms and methods that allow us delve into personal impressions and lived experiences. She and other researchers have noted that positivistic, quantitative methods are valuable for validating and testing social programs, yet are limited in their ability to sensitize social workers to the realities of an individual's personal and social life (Arnd-Caddigan & Pozzuto, 2006; Furman, 2006a; Heineman, 1981; Kondrat, 1992).

As with autoethnography, expressive and creative arts have become increasingly important in qualitative research as a method of presenting highly personal and subjective data. Eisner (1995) notes that research and art often share the same aim, helping to transform human experience into a form that reveals its most salient aspects. Willis (2002) describes research of this nature as expressive, contrasted to analytical research. Expressive researchers seek to expand and contextualize data while analytical researchers seek to reduce data. Expressive researchers value the subjective experience of each individual and situation. Paradox, discrepancies, and conflicts are viewed as part of the richness of human life and are actively encouraged in expressive studies. Intuition, emotional sensitivity, and subjectivity are viewed as important tools of the expressive researcher. Expressive

researchers are both artists and scientists; clear distinctions between the two are seen as arbitrary.

Numerous studies have used poetry and narrative in the exploration of social phenomenon. Furman (2004a) used the writing of prose poems to explore his own experiences of male friendships. Concerned with the embodiment of cultural norms regarding male relationships, these poems are autoethnographic in nature. Moving from poetry alone to poetry in conjunction with narrative, Furman (2006b) utilized a similar method to the one used in this current research in his exploration of the death of his companion animal. Starting with poetry written prior to the death of his dog, he writes narratives that illuminate, expand, and contextualize the meaning of this dog's life and death. A similar methodology was used in his study of his experiences coping with his father's cancer (Furman, 2004b). Shapiro (2004) notes that in so doing, the author became an archeologist into his own experience.

Butler-Kisber (2002) asserts that poetry is the perfect medium for capturing the fullness of complex, emotionally laden experiences. Characterized by compression of words, metaphor, imagery, and symbolism, poetry has the capacity of meeting many of the representational needs of qualitative research. Through the use of poetry and other forms of expressive writing in research, the research seeks to "grasp an objective [rather than] to analyze and subdue it. It attempts to hold it in consciousness, to allow its reality and texture to become etched on the mind" (Willis, 2002, p.4).

Oiler (1983) used poetry to explore the experiences of nurses and their professional development. Powerfully describing poetry, she claims that the...

...art form itself gives the expression a structure, calling on experience on its own terms. Images and symbols in poetry speak to us about experience. Since it is vision that gives us the best understanding of experience, the words used in

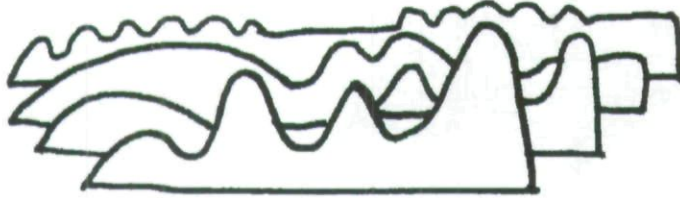
poetry to express reality give us a clearer image than the precise language of science (p.81).

In his seminal work on post-positivistic qualitative research, Denzin (1997) encourages the use of alternative forms of data representation as a means of evoking emotional and empathic responses in research consumers. While a poem usually starts with one person's experience, it attempts to move beyond the "N" of one to the "N" of many.

Methodology

Each day for two weeks, I read each of the poems presented and wrote narrative reflections about them. The narratives serve the dual purpose of data and data analysis. They are data in the sense that they provide an additional layer regarding my understanding of the subject, an understanding that is more distanced and reflexive. The narratives were written with an eye towards analysis; I attempt to explore the cultural and personal themes embedded in the poetry and provide insights based upon my perspective as an "insider" into the poetry and an "outsider" regarding the social context in which they were written. Post-modern researchers respect the value of writing itself as a method of inquiry (Richardson, 1992). Through reflective writing, we are able to add additional layers of meaning to text. Data analysis from this tradition is meant to expand, not constrict, meanings.

A selection of narratives is presented in their original form, save for the most basic editing. I want to present them in their most raw form possible to allow readers to have as close access to my actual thought processes as possible. The narratives that are presented are the ones that are most autoethnographically rich, those that best explore the relationships between self and culture and add an additional layer of meaning to the poetry. The original poems were written over the course of several years, during the late 1980s and early 1990s. The poems are presented in plain text, the reflections are in italics.



Poems and Narrative Reflections

The Border

When you cross that mile stretch
of brown sterile earth
lifeless save for yucca and anorexic dogs

when your mind flips between visions
of Mayan mystical gurus
that might heal your sickest seeds
and the desolation that shifts under your feet
the desolation of everything you left behind

between photographs of the death squad
disappeared
black bars over cigarette burnt eyes
and eternal volcanic cones
reaching towards a point of pureness
that doesn't seem to exist below

and each step brings you further
from what you imagined was you
and closer to what you prayed wasn't

your passport clutched
like a life vest to your chest
your shots, visas, travelers checks
don't prepare you
for confronting emptiness
as you approach the hill

towards the border
Mexican blues becoming Guatemalan vapor

the dirt covers your shoes
your shoes are your heart
you clutch your travelers checks
it doesn't seem to help

As with many of these poems, my naivete and youth are clear to me. In this poem, I grapple more with the relationship between Guatemala's history and myself than to the

people that it actually impacts. It is important to remember how self-absorbed young people can be, and how important it is for faculty to be patient and understanding. This seems to be a developmentally common theme: international exploration as a means of understanding self and identity. The border and its shifting rules and regulations, with its quality of being neither here nor there, becomes metaphorical for the movement into young adulthood.

* * *

El Tule

Hitched ride in half packed hippy van
shoved between stoned lip pierced teen,
and bags of woven wonders to be hawked.
Through dusty roads green north Guatemala,
across machine gun guarded border,
kid soldiers with eyes of black flashed wide
for Yaqui smiles passing innocent and free.
We cross the border into Mexico,
suspicious brown hands explore with care.
Tired from months of travel we seek
el Notre fast. Stop by roadside stands
for grilled meat tacos and local sugar filled
fruit punch, a few words and wondering
stares.

Night falls to find myself driving
young hippy girl her hair and breast
soft against my shoulder asleep,
fighting off tired eyes to stay alive,
fighting off the lust of her form to stay fit.
The morning breaks like a found lost
memento,
breakfast of beans tortillas and rice, spicy
pepper
sauce in southern Oaxaca market, piles of
peppers and mangos,
big city bustle as eat in awe.
The owner asks if we have seen *El Tule*,
the world's largest tree. The words sting
echo call to
some place unknown. A wanting place
needing of some sense. *El Tule* surely would
so teach.

Only two hours north, barely off our path,
we head in silence towards visions of *El Tule*

that grip the mind like spiked cleats on grass.
We arrive, met by peddlers of key chains,
mugs, ashtrays.
My bowels forbid exit, my feet override.
Pass more venders, soda pop, hot dogs,
hamburgers.
Littered ground like after new years parade.
In front, *El Tule* surrounded by chain linked
fence,
carved in graffiti, lovers' names immortal.
Photographers snap Polaroid's for tourist
who barely look
into the huge twisted branches, or the lonely
magnificent girth untouched
protected from those who seek to conquer,
who will
ride to the next star on their map,
capture a photo and continue on equally
untouched.

This poem that can be looked at in many ways. It clearly is written from the perspective of an outsider who expects something metaphysical. It is a disappointment when my own internal expectations of the mystical are unmet. In this poem, I seem to judge others who do not seek this type of mystical experience, but who have commoditized the tree. As I stated in another poem, this is an easy perspective for someone who has privilege and power, who can leave this situation anytime they want. To the venders, the context represents their work, their survival. Our relationships are fiscal in nature; there is nothing metaphysical possible, perhaps.

* * *

Lying in Wait

I sit on this bench, filth,
outside the hotel, more filth
rent by the night, if I am paid.
Wait for men to want, not me,
but the skin, the flesh, the folds
they lie into, but do not touch,
my eyes to the ceiling and
mind other places. My body open,
things they never will force out, mine.
I will lie there and wait. They will finish.

They will dress quickly, our eyes will not meet.

They think about their wives,
or wonder about my health. I will wash.
I will scrub many times. I read in a magazine,
that if one touches you, their cells stay with you for years. No matter, I will scrape with rough soap and rinse. They will be gone, almost.

But not from my mind. Memories last longer than sweet first kisses

I can hardly remember.

But for now, I will wait, and worse if they do not come, do not tell me what they want, do not pay me for what will sadden us both. Worse to sit here painted, starched to the bench,
hours pass the bones ache and muscles sore.

The boredom, is nearly as bad as the act. Here comes one now. Asks me to use my mouth.

I will promise him this, but will only use my hand.

He may hit me, he may not. This one looks timid.

He will be scared of my distant gaze and wide-eyed smile, teeth.

He will leave quickly, like most of the rest.

He will not hit me. Christmas, only five months away.

I never spoke to this person. How can I get inside her head? What does it mean to write this poem? I am not a woman, I am not a prostitute; I have no experiences that can approximate this. What I draw upon is my history of social work. What I draw upon is my sense of the emotional issues involved, based upon my work. I have had people respond strongly to this poem, that it is "beautiful" and "evocative." But, is it "accurate"? Does it even matter? I find myself asking questions here as a way of pointing out the limits of the work. Perhaps this is one of the most valuable parts of writing responsive narratives such as this.

* * *

I read this poem and I think of an article that I read in the *Chronicle for Higher Education* recently. The short account discussed study abroad, and looked at the ethical challenges of taking people to foreign countries to view the lives of the poor. The article argued that faculty who bring students on trips such as this must help students move from a place of emotional overwhelmedness and pity, to action. Easier said than done, I think. Looking back, I was able to understand the pain of others on an emotional level, but how does this help in terms of action? In social work, of course, it is valuable to build one's capacity for empathy, for working individually with people. But I am not sure if such experiences help with more systematic type of change.

* * *

Mummies

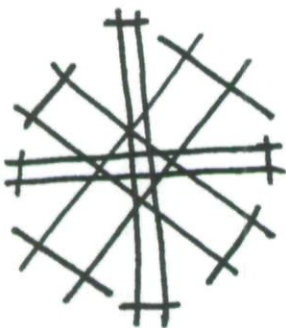
The museum is behind the hill, from where they
pulled the dead that now rest not so gently,
or sold in image
in trinkets and toys to be treasure chest lost
or in delectable

syrupey brown sugar candies, texture like
cobwebs,
molded into delicious mummies,
sombros, wrapped in serapes, the colors of
the

Mexican flag. Covered in plastic, gripped in
pleading hands,
the hawkers fight for our attention, dismiss
each other
nearly come to blows for the dollars few.

These vendors soon, buried in the fields
where the mummies grow.
If they rot ever so gently, the perfect one out
of twenty,
they will rest in glass cases naked to photo
snapping masses.

Six mummies for 30 pesos, the best mummy



candy in town. The Chinaman, the doctor,
for free the fat baby and the pregnant
women.

Mummy skull bottle openers,
a mug that reads: I am dying for a drink and
a women.
fetus skull t-shirt, the name of the town
underneath.

What of the souls of the dead, we ask.
What do we care of souls, they laugh hard,
what good are souls when it is food and
drink we need?

Maslow was right. It is far easier to be
concerned with spiritual and existential truths
when your belly is full. This is why, in some
ways, the generalist perspective is so valuable
in social work; it recognizes that people have
multiple needs that are resolved on multiple
levels. So many of us want to see problems
clinically, personally; this is just the way many
of us were brought up. Even when I adopt a
clinical frame that is transformational, inclusive,
it still often neglects the larger social issues.
Yet, I also find myself dissatisfied with believing
that the poor and disempowered cannot be
helped to face the most central existential
issues.

* * *

This passage reminds me of the multitude
of ethical dilemmas that social workers
working in an international context face. In
fact, it is not merely international context, but
when social workers are working with those
who are culturally different, and especially with
those who are members of traditionally
oppressed groups.

* * *

We Supply the Dead

"They supply the weapons,
we supply the dead."
Salvadorian archbishop Rivera y Damas

Rusty crow bars pry
marble smooth tires

recycling rubber each time
to the less fortunate,

but still more so
than some.

The death squads hold our hands
and walk us across the road

to freedom. Lack of beans do not bother
the rotting lips of traitors

and the less stomachs to be fed
the less angry mouths to scream.

Summers have become peaceful
here in the hillsides.

I read this and I experience pangs of guilt. I have spent the morning in my office poring over files, writing memos. Important, yes, but vital? Am I making a difference? These are good feelings for me to experience from time to time, a reality check as the years pass by. Guilt is also a strong feeling that students experience when they are in international contexts, when they see and feel the lives of those less fortunate than themselves. Guilt is a feeling that seems to demand almost immediate attention; we feel it, and then we want to immediately spring into action (or defensively push it away). Perhaps it is important to allow ourselves to engage the feeling for a bit longer than usual, to question it, to ask ourselves what it is connected to, and what we wish to do about it.

* * *

Teguchigalpa, Honduras

Is a bus cutting through the night,
rumble and exhaust spent and disregarded,

graffiti painted wall pleading and begging
and raging
for Gringos to leave with their assassins and
AIDS,

secluded airfield for cocaine and *Contras*
for slaving import and murdering exports,

Comeaguela sex tour drunken madness for
Marine advisors
the smell from the river and markets
squabble shooting desperation,

dollar sign whore or a skinny dog limbless in
the gutter squalor,
an abused child that wants no more,

the hopeless screams in the night echoed
through walls in homeless hotels
and a stabbing that goes bad for both and a
desert mirage flesh smelling.

Kafka without angst, Hemmingway with
simple lines,
ice cream cone fallen to dirt with a bitter
cherry dripping,

a deaf god in the face of desperate
supplication,
a banana child with failure to thrive in
bondingless distance,
a scream of vocal cords cut, wavering
through moonless night.

I wonder how much I have been true to
the feelings I felt when writing this poem?
Perhaps what is important is that they helped
me become the person I am today, and
hopefully I am able to make some impact.

* * *

There is so much context for students to
learn, in order to understand social problems,
and how they are played out on the individual
level.

* * *

Alone



What do you do but beg?
 Abandoned beneath the doorway,
 face like the moon, beaten, alone?
 The pastel colonial elegance.
 The sway of lovely ignoring skirts.
 The blistering sting. The shrapnel cuts. We
 are all alone.

We are all alone. This poem attempts to look at poverty from an existential perspective, looking to the commonality of all experience. Two divergent trains of thought come to mind. One, how true it is that we are all really alone, and how deeply powerful this realization can be. That through this realization we can really push ourselves toward connection, given the sameness of existential dilemmas for all of us. This person in the doorway and I struggle with the same problems of being. We both must contend with the notion of aloneness, with dread, with the fact that we will die. On the other hand, my power and privilege make us so very different, our contexts so very different, our possibilities so very different. My power is the power to choose to leave that situation, to go to my warm hotel room, return to my home, my office, sit in front of a computer and reflect upon this poem.

* * *

Nicaragua Libre

Remember sleeping on a wooden plank
 they called a bed
 each morning stiffer than death

my days in *Nicaragua Libre*
 wandering the countryside
 more hope than I ever dared have
 more dreams than ever allowed

And it was good, quiet enough
 to hear my heart
 being just past twenty alone
 sad but so alive so desperate
 to find something real.

Holding other's triumphs so close
 that I forgot they were not mine
 singing songs I barely understood

borrowing heroes for the heat
 the blistering swollen head
 walking miles under revolution's sky
 in truck rumbles on potholed roads
 soldiers passing me as I marched from
 town to town they waved
 sang danced shouted triumphs

they seemed so much
 younger, or maybe older
 than I.

And at night when the parrots sang
 teasing me with olive goddesses
 igniting my world aflame
 it seemed eternal
 time stood still

for us to laugh
 in the face of never
 to cry from merely
 looking into the wind.

This poem is a good reminder of what it feels like to be twenty one, idealistic, and confronting a new country, a new world. I remember lying alone in my bare hotel rooms, fantasizing and scheming about how to be involved in their revolution, how to be of service. I remember oftentimes feeling extremely excited and overwhelmed, so utterly hopeful, yet so utterly unaware of what to do. I think this is often how students feel when they travel abroad. It is also how I feel when I travel abroad, still, after twenty years.

* * *

It has been a year and a half since I have been back to Nicaragua, since I missed last year's course. I feel sad and unworthy, that somehow I have let down my friends. So easy for me, to choose to go down or not. For them, they are locked in, stuck, with so few options. Social work faculty in Nicaragua make \$300 a month, and they pay more for gas than I do. I move through each day: student advising, articles to revise, grants to write, classes, family. So little time for those that are not here.

Yes, perhaps globalization has made the world smaller, but I feel very far away.

* * *

84 Days

84 days
from hell to hell
from death squads'
black hand neverness

to liberty's branding cattle prods
blue suits and steel
safeguard the indelible line
between us and them

between our separate
forms of misery

84 days
form Huehuetenango

its streets of indigenous brightness
the markets of peppers screaming
campesinos working Shangra-La
emerald hillsides of coffee

to Los Angeles
pools filled with rocky dreams
air thick enough
to roller skate on
shattered hopes
stuffed into working sacks of denial

84 days
to walk they said
across the frontier
of the disappeared
greening genitals
stuffed into mouths
that could not confess
fast enough by roadside's rotting heat

across the Sierra Madres
where Guatemalan bones
turn to Mexican earth

to Tijuana's human coyote
rivers polluted death
children with no arms

drinking in next generation's
children with no arms
or worse

it took you five days
and with your plastic freedom
six hours back

now in front of silicon
wondering how
you will rationalize this one

This is the poem that I read when I want someone to most feel the distance, the disparities, the paradoxes between our privileged western lives and those of people in the developing world. It is perhaps the poem that I have written that is hardest to write a narrative in response to, as it is the one that feels most complete to me, yet most tragic. The phrase "plastic freedom" rings in my ear. North Americans complain (and rightfully so) about our debt, but what so many would give to be able to have credit, or merely to feel like you have enough to be able to stay in your homeland, to live where your family has been for generations. This also brings me to the current immigration debate, and how many North Americans seems to think that migration is an easy option, that those who come are somehow too lazy to make it on their own in their own country.

* * *

Discussion

As previously mentioned, this narrative served two purposes: to present poetry and narratives as an autoethnographic study, and to demonstrate a method of self-reflection that faculty can utilize when teaching international social work courses. While many faculty may not have their own poems to serve as prompts for self reflection, faculty can utilize this method in response to student writings or may choose to write multiple levels of self reflective narratives. That is, they can write narratives of their own experiences during study-abroad courses and retrospectively write response narratives as a means of self-reflection and inquiry. This method may also be used by

faculty in response to their own classroom teaching, thereby allowing faculty to develop insight into the relationship between their teaching objectives and their own professional use of self.

In a future study, I hope to work with students on co-constructed narratives about our experiences with study-abroad. In such a study, students and faculty would be encouraged to explore their own lived experiences and meanings about the events they experience. Taken a step further, students can be encouraged to be full participants in the construction of the study, making such an inquiry congruent with action-oriented approaches to qualitative design (James, 1999).

Readers of autoethnographic accounts such as this are encouraged to view these data as personal and subjective. The purpose is not to present generalizable truths, but to present multiple levels of one teacher's journey over the course of two decades engaging in experiences abroad. The aim of work such as this is to stimulate understanding, empathy, and analysis. That is, poetry seeks to be what has been termed metaphorically, generalizability (Stein, 2004). Not generalizable in the statistical sense of the word, but generalizable in that it helps stimulate an empathic understanding in the readers; they are able to locate themselves in the poem. When there is discordance between their perceived and lived experiences they are able to transcend the poem and create that which is their own. The author of this article encourages the reader to write his/her own self-reflective narratives in response to this work, thereby continuing this inquiry as a co-constructed collaboration of a community of social work scholars, teachers, and practitioners.

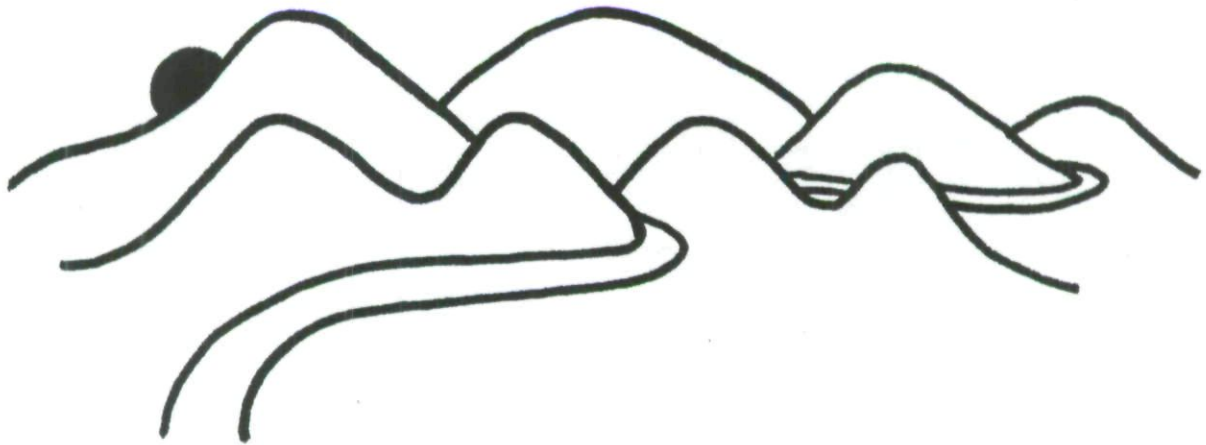
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