

# Reflections on the Impact of Privilege, Marginalization, and Story on My Social Work Practice, Research, and Pedagogy

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**Abstract:** Through this personal narrative, I reflect on pivotal personal, educational, and professional experiences to understand their influence on who I am and who I am becoming as a social work educator. I describe growing up in a context of privilege and, later, coming to experience marginalization in my adulthood. I recount my path to teaching, my motivations, and the outcomes of my pursuit of a doctorate in social work (DSW). I investigate the place of privilege, marginalization, story, and witness in my development as a social worker and social work educator. I articulate how these ideas matter to teaching and learning, to the classroom environment, and to my evolving pedagogy.

**Keywords:** personal narrative, privilege, marginalization, story, teaching, social work educator, teaching philosophy, pedagogy

## Making Sense of Mysteries

I wanted to be grown  
up late with them  
but the youngest are sent  
up and away, banished.

Disjointed stories of adult lives bubble up stairway banisters  
and conversations are muffled under ice clinking drinks  
while truths and children  
drift further and further away.

Desperation fills my lungs  
I grasp at air to catch my breath,  
to catch up, but I choke  
on the thick smoke of their silence.

As an adult I rise up  
heavy with the soot of their secrets  
still wanting the mysteries of them  
to dissolve.

My growing up was a smooth ride in a homogenous world and marked by imperceptible difference. In a small Midwestern town, although only 15 miles from a larger city, I couldn't have been further away from the diversity of people living so nearby. Steeped in a childhood of privilege—white, middle/upper middle class, able-bodied—I had everything I needed and more. It wouldn't be until college that I would begin to understand the realities and impact of unearned privilege described by McIntosh (1988) in her seminal essay on the subject. I am the youngest of seven children—five boys, two girls—and was raised by parents who owned their own business.

By the time I came along, I was a clear beneficiary of their success and enjoyed the sense of pride and experience of belonging that came with this large Italian/Irish Catholic family. We enjoyed annual family winter vacations to Florida, summers at the lake, and always had something or someone to celebrate with dinner parties and presents. My parents paid for my college education, my first car, and everything in between. All that the world held for me unfolded easily; nothing stood in the way of my dreams.

In addition to growing up in privilege, I also grew up in a family of silence and in a religious and cultural context in which my own not-yet-understood differences would soon become problematic and become my secret.

*It is 1976 and I'm ten years old. My brother has taken me to a local community festival and I am excited to use a ticket to meet with a real fortuneteller. The fortuneteller takes my hand to read my palm. I'm listening to her forecast my future, "You will grow up to fall in love and marry a beautiful woman." She is saying more, but I am too upset to hear it. So embarrassed and trying diligently not to cry, I slink out of the fortune teller's tent in tears for being mistaken (again), I assumed, for a boy.*

As a child, I spent summer days riding my bike around town, playing football with the neighborhood boys, going fishing with my brothers, climbing oak trees to the top, driving go-carts and playing in tree-houses built by my brothers, catching frogs, and being regularly mistaken for a boy. I was a tomboy. I didn't fit the gender expression and role expectations of the world, and especially, of my mother. I heard constant messages about what was lady-like, what clothes were acceptable for a girl, and how to fix my hair appropriately. There was an undercurrent to the messages about gender expression, of course. But I knew not to ask. This was the one way in which I experienced "difference" and the world's response to it. Years later, I would wonder if I had met a real fortune teller.

If I were to create a visual depiction of my family (McGoldrick, 2011), it would reveal several generational cutoffs, each set within a sea of silence. In the two generations before me, a man who was my grandfather and a woman who was my aunt disappeared into their own lives far away. No explanation. No story. Don't ask. And later, don't tell. My grandfather left his family when his oldest child, my mother, was seven. My aunt, my mother's sister, left her small town in 1959 in her mid-20s and never looked back, never returned. Throughout my childhood, their disappearances were mysteries to me. The reasons for their departures, their stories, were clearly off limits. I remember finding photos and asking my dad, "Who is this?" He would respond quietly, "That's your Grandpa," or "That's your mom's sister, but don't ask mom about them." I didn't ask, "Why did they leave? Where did they go?" It was clear from his responses that I was not to know about these ghosts. I was profoundly affected by this silencing of their stories, especially as I began to understand, more clearly, my own.

In elementary school, being a tomboy was relatively innocuous, and almost functional, but by middle school the rules changed. At age 13 and in the seventh grade, I was not like the other girls. I did not belong to the new club that seemed to be forming, where an interest in boys, make-up, and looking a particular feminine way were all parts of the secret password, the ticket

for admission to this new club. I felt my place and sense of belonging in the world shifting, but beyond feeling different from others, I could not find words to name it. By high school, this feeling of being different, somehow, only grew more intense. I had no words yet to understand the underlying heterosexism and homophobia saturating the culture. I just knew that, “One of these things is not like the other, and it is me.”

As I entered high school, the evolving cultural conversation was about something called AIDS.

*It is 1981 and I am in 10th grade. As I walk into my second-hour Spanish class, I overhear two classmates talking, “Did you see the new choir teacher? What a fag! He better stay away from me!” I freeze. They are still talking and laughing, but I am too nervous to hear much more. What if others find out that my difference is like that of the new choir teacher? Students are ruthless. Suddenly, difference is dangerous.*

Simmering gossip, conversations, and words like “gay,” “fag,” and “AIDS” became part of my school day. It was an isolating time, and again, I found myself further swallowed in silence for the secret that was mine. At home, I remember reading something in the Catholic newspaper to which my parents subscribed. In reference to gay people and concerns about AIDS, it referred to the nature of gay people as “intrinsically disordered.” Again, I knew not to ask. All the while, privilege was a silent partner in my life and I was blind to it. It was invisible to me. I didn't have words to name aspects of my difference rooted in gender and sexuality. Living in such a homogeneous small town, I didn't have much exposure to difference and I didn't have opportunities to think about how class privilege, white privilege, sexual orientation, marginalization, oppression, or intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) held any meaning for me.

In my Catholic upbringing, my parents conveyed one of their deeply held values, “You must always care about those who are less fortunate than you.” This didn't seem an unreasonable or challenging idea. To do my part, each Sunday morning at 8 o'clock mass, I proudly put my envelope into the collection plate. As a senior in high school, I initiated a food drive to benefit a local social service agency for a National Honor Society project requirement. I organized a week of events focused on educating others about hunger in our community. My high school was located in a newly developing suburb of relative wealth, and I thought we could generate a substantial amount of donations. I welcomed a speaker from my church, who gave a lecture on the issue of hunger in the United States, and the director of a local food drive to bring to life the needs in and near our own community and to educate students about how we might make a difference on this issue. I was horrified by the statistics and upset by the reality that people living so near our school might be hungry. I was equally horrified and upset that an overwhelming number of my peers seemed indifferent. Try as I might, I couldn't seem to engage them in my food shelf idea. Although it was not a complete failure, only a small amount of food was collected for the drive. I was left disappointed and angry, but more importantly, I was beginning to wake up to the ideas and experiences of privilege and class.

### **Waking Up and Coming Out: Story as Survival**

As the public discourse about gays and lesbians in the early- and mid-1980s increased, it was

most frequently and directly linked to the health crisis of AIDS. All negative. Fear. Whispers. Secrets. In 1984 the silence in the broader culture regarding gays and lesbians was deafening, and it troubled me.

*It is 1984 and I am 18 years old. I have arrived at a Catholic women's college for my freshman year of college. I am studying music on a voice scholarship, singing a lot, and enjoying our renowned choral director. But oddly, by the start of the second semester, and without fanfare or a word, he was gone. A new choir director took his place, but no one offered an explanation. Quickly rumored, and much later confirmed, his departure was due to illness. AIDS.*

Here was the pattern again, secrets and silence, exemplified in the disappearance of this choral director from the college. New place. Same rules. By the time I arrived at college, I arrived with my own secret, with fear, and with a word to name my earlier feelings of difference. Lesbian. I was terrified someone would find out. I did not have the courage to enter into the conversation with anyone about understanding my lesbian identity. The primary context I had to understand myself was limited. Privilege. Catholicism. Secrets. I don't remember how, but somehow I found my way to the counseling center on campus. I spent two years grappling in the privacy of my own head about being a lesbian. My desperate internal mantra was, "This cannot be who I am." It would take until my junior year before I could utter the words to my therapist, when I finally found the courage to tell her about my new relationship with a woman. During this year I met my first partner and began to take steps toward wholeness. I found a safe place in therapy for my stories. I was finding my way. For my entire college career, I kept my secrets from my family and most everyone else, but her office became a haven and place for me to learn about the necessity and power of shining a light on all that had been hidden. I was finding my voice, and a place of safety and belonging as it related to my differences.

In my senior social work field placement, while I worried about where I belonged and where I would or would not be welcomed if people knew who I was, I learned about the power of group work in social work practice. My internship supervisor's skills and commitment to group work were evident, his belief in the value of group process contagious, and his effective modeling of group work encouraging. He used the group as a vehicle to hold a space in which everyone could belong. Girls groups. Boys groups. Friendship/social skills groups for students who had trouble making friends. Groups for children who had an incarcerated parent. Grief groups for kids who had suffered loss. Groups for students who were relegated to the social margins, picked on, or struggling for one reason or another. Some children told stories of the secrets in their homes, of alcohol, of neglect, of loss, of poverty, and sometimes of violence. I witnessed the power of groups in action. Groups became a safe place where stories could be told and the burden of secrets set down. A place where we could foster connections and a sense of belonging for children and where healthy relationships thrived. It wasn't long before I found my way to such a place, both as a facilitator and as a client.

This same field placement provided me with another opportunity to wake up. My field placement was in an elementary school in the city, with many students receiving free or reduced lunch and growing up in families living in poverty. It took no time at all for one child, without

apology, to mirror back to me what I was projecting to her. “She’s rich!” she proclaimed to her third-grade classmates. Responding to the gold necklaces and rings I was wearing, this child announced my socioeconomic status, different from hers, and as she saw it. I was startled as I realized what my jewelry symbolized here and what messages I was sending. I felt dumb for being so oblivious to how these children might perceive me. I wondered about my place in the world of social work. My previously limited context for understanding ideas of privilege and class began to crack open, to shift.

*It is 1988. I am 22 years old and have graduated from college. I have my first job as a community social worker, and I have a car, a partner, an apartment, and a community of friends to whom I am out. I am a part of the GLBT community. In all of these ways, I belong. At my first appointment, I tell all of this to my new lesbian therapist. Inquiring about my coming out process, she asks, “Are you planning to come out to your family?” I gasp, “No, and never! I can never, and will never, come out to my family. There’s no way. Not now, not ever.”*

She listened politely and supportively as I stated the anticipated costs of coming out to my family. She encouraged me to join the lesbian support group she facilitated. With immense trepidation, I did. I listened to how others were navigating the coming-out process with their families. I expressed my fears about doing the same. I experienced the much-needed sense of belonging, emotional safety, and new friendships—the same experiences I had just witnessed for the children in my internship. Within this group, and with my therapist, I found spaces and built a community in which I could set down the secret and be open and honest about my lesbian identity. I experienced the positive power of telling my story and the hopeful experience of being the recipient of compassionate witness. From this position of being a client in therapy and in the group, I began to fully understand the centrality and power of story for myself. Later, I would understand the power of story from the position of a practitioner.

### **Therapy—Marking One Year**

For the 52nd time I climb the 48 steps  
to hoped-for epiphanies and her office  
in the noisy city, always arriving early  
so as to not miss a minute of her listening.

What is the sound of understanding and  
how many tears have fallen here?  
What happens to those with no one,  
no place to hold their stories?

Out these 3rd story windows, blue gray  
clouds hang on every word, heavy with rain  
and anticipation, hope. The sky holds all of this  
and more, while both bare witness, and listen in.

*It is 1989 and I'm 23 years old. Just one year after proclaiming I could never come out to my family, I gather my courage and let the proverbial cat out of the bag. "Dear family member...",* I write, composing coming-out letters to my parents and each of my siblings and in-laws.

The responses of my family members ranged from silence and a refusal to speak to me ever again (four siblings), to rage and telling me I was not welcome at their home or near their children (two siblings), to more silence and refusing to speak to me and hanging up on me mid-way through a phone conversation (my dad), to expressing anger and regret, "Had I known sooner, I would have taken you to a psychologist" (my mom). Grasping at straws, hoping for compassion, I said, "Mom, if someone finds out, I might lose my job or my apartment." And with no hesitation she said, "You will have to accept those consequences as they come." This very short phone call launched a stalemate, resulting in no further discussion between us for a year. But after several invitations along the way, my parents finally agreed to come to one therapy appointment with me. When the therapist asked my mother if I could come home for Christmas (without my partner) my mother stated quickly and plainly, "If she comes home for Christmas, none of my other kids will come. So no. She cannot come home." That fast, what I feared most, happened. Rejection. No discussion. I lost my place. A few months later, a letter arrived from my parish priest. "Your sister and brother in-law have requested that you be removed as the Godmother of your niece." My place was eliminated, a sacrament erased.

### **Used to Be**

I used to be among them, afraid and silent walking  
daily with weighty secrets, heavy in my pockets.

I used to wonder how long they'd hold,  
those pockets, the fabric of silence and lies.

One day they broke free  
spilling hard truths  
but now I'm free.

I was left with the grief of immense loss and a choice. I could jump from the nearest bridge for my grief or be a rage-filled lesbian for the rest of my life for this injustice. The struggle was to find my way to a third choice. The telling of my story became synonymous with this choice, with survival. Over and over again in my mind I replayed the experience of being turned away. I told and retold the story—to my therapist, my partner, my friends—and each provided essential witness to my grief. Telling my story resulted in self-understanding, self-acceptance, connection, support, and a sense of belonging.

### **Speaking Up and Speaking Out: Making a Difference Through Story**

*It is 1991, and after three years working at the community agency, I have landed a school social work job in the public schools. It is the first day of my new job and I am reporting*

*to work at a junior high school in the city. I am greeted by a 7th grade African American girl who is clearly expecting the new staff member. "Hey, bulldagger!" she shouts. I freeze. My heart races. "You ain't the new social worker, are you?" Bulldagger. I have never heard this word, but I know immediately what she means.*

The first day on the job in the school system, I was terrified. What were the rules here? At my previous and first job at the community agency, significant weight loss due to the stress of coming out to my family during that time made flying under the radar challenging. My supervisor and colleagues could tell something was wrong and cautiously and graciously inquired. I felt safe enough with them to be honest. I came out and they were very supportive. But here in the schools, could I lose my job if they found out I was a lesbian? Gratefully, my external calm (heart racing on the inside) and authentic response turned the tide quickly with this student. "Yeah, I know. I look like a boy, right? A lot of people mistake me for a boy. That's all right. My name is Mary. What's yours?" The student quickly softened and returned to the kinder vibe of a 7th grade teenager. She seemed ready for fight and surprised by my response, likely expecting some sort of authoritative blow-back as a result of her name-calling. Instead, she simply pointed me in the direction of my new office in the special education program.

*It is my second day working as a school social worker and I find myself in another part of the school where I crossed paths with an 8th grade boy. "What are you doing here?" he exclaimed. Again, I freeze. My heart races.*

For the preceding few months I had been volunteering at a community center in the city facilitating a support group for GLBT youth. This boy was a member of the support group, and the last place we expected to see each other was school. "I work here now, and I'm as surprised as you are!" His next words said it all. "Please don't tell anyone!" Of course, I reassured him I would keep his business confidential, but the truth is we were both afraid of being found out. Within six months, I came out to a few colleagues and learned there was a newly instituted non-discrimination policy in the school district that included sexual orientation as a protected class. This offered some relief, and set my professional life in a new direction.

My negative coming-out experience in my family occurred simultaneously to my early and developing professional life. While I was working diligently to make sense of my experience of privilege, my identity as a lesbian woman, and the rejection and exclusion from my family, I was building an identity as a young social work professional. I was grappling with how my personal and professional experiences and identities intersected. Gratefully, after my family's rejection, I turned my grief and anger toward activism, and consequently, my story of coming out became central to my professional and personal paths. My lesbian identity and painful coming-out experience fueled my activism and sharpened the focus of my social work practice. In the telling and re-telling of my story, professional opportunities emerged. I wanted to support those GLBT youth who were facing the same fears I had about coming out. I had been volunteering at a community agency co-facilitating a support group for GLBT youth, and I was glad to be able to hold space for youth in the same way space had been held for me. I was happy to be a professional creating a place for youth to tell their stories.

With a developing sense of self-confidence, it was becoming clear to me that I wanted to do more than volunteer on behalf of GLBT youth. I wanted to create a school-based program that would attend to the needs of GLBT youth and adults. Friends said, “Just keep volunteering, you’ll never be able to get paid to work with GLBT youth in the schools. You’ll never be able to be out as a school social worker.” Here is where my privilege ran deep. It seemed to me that I shouldn’t have to give up my newly increased salary in the school system because I wanted to work with gay kids. Gay and lesbian youth were here. And so were gay and lesbian staff members. All of us were afraid. Having to give up my better public school salary because I wanted to work with gay kids seemed unfair, so I began to create what I would consider my dream job. I began investigating how I could design a school-based program in my school district to serve the needs of GLBT youth and adults.

I researched whether any school districts across the country were serving the needs of GLBT youth. The answer was “yes,” but the list was short: San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Cambridge, Massachusetts. Each program had emotional support and dropout prevention missions at their core. To create a program proposal for our own district, I drew from their basic structure and program design. With the help of several friends and colleagues, we created a model that held safe staff training, safe school climates, and support groups as primary components of the program. My supervisor was supportive of me and of my idea and guided me to key stakeholders in the district to whom I could pitch my ideas.

By the spring of 1994, telling my personal story was central to my professional life. I found myself telling my story to the district superintendent and to directors of nursing, guidance and counseling, and social work as a way to educate key power brokers about GLBT issues. It was the telling of my story that opened hearts and doors and was integral to my success in creating a new school-based program serving the needs of GLBT youth and adults in our school district. Telling my story ultimately made space for the stories of GLBT youth and provided witness, along with a sense of belonging, connection, and support for their self-understanding and self-acceptance. With the intention to make the world a better place for GLBT youth and their families, I successfully initiated and developed a school-based program serving GLBT youth in a large urban school district. For the next five years, when asked what I did for work, I would tease, “I am a professional lesbian, getting paid to tell my story and create safe space and support for GLBT youth and adults.”

### **Standing Up in Front: The Place of Story in the Classroom**

As a result of my work in the public schools, I was invited to a college campus to share my personal and professional stories to undergraduate students in social work. As a guest speaker, I shared my experiences of activism and program development, and described my role as a social worker engaged in a social change effort. I was also asked to share my personal stories of growing up and coming out, how I made sense of my dichotomous experiences of marginalization and privilege, and how they were juxtaposed in my life. I had something to offer by way of walking in two worlds, and for me, these personal and professional stories are inextricably linked.



As a guest speaker, I had confidence and great intuitive clarity about the power and value of sharing my personal and professional stories in this context, but did not yet have the pedagogical language to articulate my rationale about its function in teaching. I enjoyed the chance to be in a conversation with undergraduate social work students. I talked with students about how my professional life was shaped both by my growing up in privilege and by being rejected by my family. I shared with them how as a result of watching my parents build their own business during my childhood, I created a professional life that mirrored that confidence in possibilities. I was steeped in their entrepreneurial spirit. For most of my 24 years in a public school system, I stood left of center and a bit outside of the traditional boundaries of what is typically seen as school social work. I designed and implemented new programs, thus creating unique roles and employment positions for myself. I discussed with students how, operating from this place, my privilege demanded a place in the schools. I also explained how, juxtaposed with growing up in a family of privilege, my painful experience with family rejection and exclusion fed my commitment to create safe spaces for GLBT youth in schools.

*It is 2003 and I see on my caller ID that the Dean of Social Work, from the same college where I have been a guest speaker, is calling. "Hi Mary, I am calling to ask you if you would like to come teach in our department as an adjunct faculty member?"*

I held both an undergraduate and master's degree in social work and 15 years of social work practice, but I was baffled at this invitation. I didn't see myself as a scholar, an academic, or a teacher. I am certain the phrase "social work educator" was not a part of my awareness, lexicon, or identity. I was a social worker. I was a field supervisor. I was a guest speaker. I understood how and why I would tell my personal and professional stories as a guest, but didn't teaching require something else, something more than stories? Didn't it require more education and more training as a teacher? Though I was nervous and uncertain, I answered, "Yes!"

I found adjunct teaching to be like my professional role in the schools: non-traditional and holding a lot of autonomy. In my classroom, and in relationship to the academic environment, I functioned with free, although somewhat disconnected, agency. As a beginning adjunct faculty member, I received no instruction or preparation for teaching. I was welcomed, provided with an existing syllabus from which to work, and supported, indirectly. The door to the department was always open for my questions, and social work faculty members were accessible when needed. But I was not overtly taught to teach in the same deliberate way I was taught to be a social worker.

For months prior to teaching my first course, I poured over the two textbooks trying to soak up the facts, trying to become a content expert. I held an underlying belief that good teachers were content experts who could disseminate information through lecture, review the course readings directly for students, use PowerPoint slides, and present objective truths related to the subject matter. I did not have language then for what I understand now as paradigms of teaching and learning. I believed that a more positivist pedagogical stance made one an effective teacher. While I always understood the place, value, and power of story, storytelling, and witness in my personal development, social work practice, and guest speaking opportunities, once I became an adjunct faculty member teaching classes of my own, I devalued their place in the classroom.

The first course I taught was an undergraduate macro practice course, General Methods for Social Action. Once I found myself at the front of the class, I did what was intuitive. I relied on stories to teach important concepts. Although it seemed my approach was working, I didn't know why, and I lacked confidence in the value of my approach to use stories as a teaching tool. I continued telling stories, but without language to name it, I kept this teaching strategy to myself. I minimized what I would later recognize as my constructivist leanings, and devalued my intuition and understanding of story and conversation as legitimate and central to my teaching methods.

It was not until my recent pursuit of a doctorate in social work that I gave any consideration to my identity as a teacher, or social work educator, or to why I teach the way I teach. I had no idea how to articulate any of what I simply knew intuitively. I didn't know there were words for such things.

### **Social Work Doctoral Student: Coming Out as a Constructivist Educator**

“No, and never!” This had been my emphatic and consistent response when asked if, or when, I would pursue my Ph.D. in social work. Pursuing a Ph.D. was absolutely not my plan. Since graduating with my BSW in 1988, and completing my MSW in 1997, I was engaged and enjoying my career as a social worker in the public schools and grateful to be done with my graduate education. By 2003, I felt content and lucky to add teaching as an adjunct social work faculty into my professional life. But plans change. In the spring of 2014, I learned about a newly developing clinical doctoral program in social work: a DSW program. I learned about the degree itself, with which I was unfamiliar. The university representative described the focus of the curriculum as “education as practice,” with a focus on teaching, scholarship, service, and leadership in social work education. Something clicked. I was surprised by the clarity that rose within me; I immediately knew I would apply. I often wondered who I could be as a teacher if teaching in higher education was my full-time career. This was my chance to pursue an education that would support the growth and development of my teaching practice and my identity as a social work educator.

My doctoral journey forced the realization that, although I had been teaching for more than 10 years, I didn't even know what I didn't know. In a course on pedagogy in social work education, my primary assignment was to articulate my teaching philosophy and my epistemology, my worldview as a teacher. I was stumped. In a course on theoretical perspectives in social work, my primary assignment was to identify my theoretical orientation to teaching and to create a practice model for teaching in social work education. Again, I couldn't answer. In a mixed-methods research course, I discovered my affinity for narrative inquiry and, subsequently, navigated a debate about whether such a postmodern research method held any validity in social work. Through each of these courses, I discovered language for my teaching philosophy and realized the central place, function, and power story holds in my research interests and teaching practices.

My doctoral journey provided an opportunity to further develop my identity as a social work educator and as a social work researcher. In the three courses noted above, I was provided

guidance, structured assignments, and key tools from my professors. I was introduced to new ideas and offered a language with which to understand my pedagogy, including: epistemology, ontology, and paradigms of teaching and learning (Graham, 1997; Rigoni, 2002); teaching philosophies in social work education (Owens, Miller, & Grise-Owens, 2014); theory deconstruction and theoretical perspectives (Forte, 2014); the value of lived experiences of professors (Hooks, 1994); and reflective practice and practitioner research (Brookfield, 1995; Schon, 1987). As importantly, I was directed to my memories and a reflexive process. Where have I come from? What were influential personal experiences on my path thus far? Who were key figures in my educational and professional experiences? How have any of these shaped my teaching practices? What research methods might I employ to investigate these ideas? And why does any of this matter in the roles and responsibilities I have as a social work educator? This doctoral journal helped me link my existing knowledge rooted in my lived-experience and social position with scholarship on pedagogy, paradigms of teaching and learning, and reflective practice.

As a doctoral student, I found myself in the margins again; or at least, I was left grappling with two perspectives of a polarized debate I didn't realize existed: a strong push for more science-based, evidence-based practice, and positivist research methods, and a devaluing of postmodernism in social work. I unwittingly found myself navigating this debate as I discovered my affinity for postmodern teaching practices and postmodern research methods like narrative inquiry (Reissman & Quinney, 2005), autoethnography (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2010), scholarly personal narrative (Nash & Viray, 2013), and self-study research (Loughran, 2004).

During my doctoral program, I received my first hard copy of the *Journal of Social Work Education* and opened it, serendipitously, to the article entitled, "Postmodernism: A Dead End in Social Work Epistemology" (Caputo, Epstein, Stoesz, & Thyer, 2015). The title states these authors' thesis succinctly. They would likely take issue with my belief in story as legitimate pedagogy and my interest in narrative inquiry as a legitimate research method. Instead, they would contend I am contributing to the demise and "demotion of the profession's adherence to logic of science as the optimal method for determining the efficacy of practice" (Caputo et al., p. 643). Gratefully, and coincidentally, in the same week that I read this article, I also read the foreword to Brene Brown's recent book, *Rising Strong* (2015), where she makes the opposite argument about the value of story in social work practice and research. Brown states, "And today I proudly call myself a researcher-storyteller because I believe the most useful knowledge about human behavior is based on people's lived experiences" (p. xiii). Brown's quote offered me clarity about my own place in the debate.

Through my DSW journey, I found explanations and language that helped me articulate my teaching philosophy and pedagogy that had been, until now, only intuitive. As a result of looking back on my life experiences and writing this narrative, my constructivist philosophy of teaching and learning and my pedagogical choices became more conscious and explicit. As a doctoral student, and as a social work educator, it has been extremely helpful to find language for my intuitive use of story as pedagogy. This process bolstered my understanding about how and why I teach as I do, and increased my confidence as a postmodern constructivist social work educator.

## **Conclusion**

*“If you ask me what I came into this life to do, I will tell you: I came to live out loud.”  
~ Emile Zola*

As a result of writing this personal narrative, the place, power, and function of story in my development became evident. By remembering significant life experiences that shaped and continue to shape who I am, I was able to bear witness to my life and make meaning, again, of the stories themselves. Most importantly, writing this piece helped me discern how the telling of these stories matters - to me, my work as a social work educator, my students, and others who might be considering similar questions about teaching, constructivism, or the use of story and narrative inquiry in social work education. Throughout my life, telling my stories allowed me to make sense of my class and race privilege, marginalization, and lesbian identity. Telling my stories allowed me to break silences, survive rejection, and heal. Telling my stories allowed me to create a place and sense of belonging for myself and for others.

I agree with Elbaz-Luwisch (2001) when she says, “Telling our stories is indeed a matter of survival: only by telling and listening, storying, and restorying can we begin the process of constructing a common world” (p. 145). In the classroom, I use stories to construct such a world—one that can hold space for the many and diverse stories of my students and myself, and support us in discovering all the things we have in common, embracing all the ways in which we are different, and building a bridge between theoretical concepts and real-world social work practice.

For so many reasons, I tell my story in the classroom. My personal story opens the door for students to share their stories and to foster honest conversation and authentic relationships in the classroom. Telling my story breaks taboos, sets a tone, and creates an environment for learning that is profound and personal. I share my story because, as Elbaz-Luwisch (2001) suggests, “storytelling can be a way of admitting the other into one's world and thus of neutralizing the otherness and strangeness” (p. 134). GLBT students in the classroom benefit from seeing an out lesbian faculty member. For other students, it sparks an open conversation about difference. Through openness and conversation, we all gain from the collected stories and collective and shared wisdom in the classroom.

I believe a class of students is a group and teaching is group work. In both cases, I attend to the beginning, middle, and end stages of development, and I foster connections and a sense of belonging. Telling my story in the classroom sets the stage for a level of authenticity, genuineness, and safety for discussion and learning. I make space for stories of my lived experiences and for those of my students, and I link these stories to key social work concepts. Through conversation, we make connections between the textbook readings and our real-life and practice experiences. Sharing my coming-out story, for example, offers one way for us to enter into a discussion about working with GLBT clients, understanding identity development and stages of the coming-out process, and recognizing the potential issues of grief and loss too often associated with coming out.

My professional story opens the conversation about systems change work, activism, macro practice, justice, and group work. My stories make space for students to consider and understand their own social locations, their understandings of difference and bias, and their experiences of privilege and marginalization. My personal stories open a conversation about what it means for social workers to do their emotional work, and they foster critical self-awareness and self-reflection in practice. We talk about what it means to wake up to the disparities we hope to change in our world. Telling my story offers a chance to talk about the place of self-disclosure in social work.

As I wrote this personal narrative, it became evident how and why stories matter and why story is an essential element of my pedagogy. Ultimately, making space in the classroom for mine and for students' stories allows students to think about how they will, one day, be the ones to listen, hear, and bear witness to the stories of their clients—and know how and why this matters.

### **What Matters?**

And does it matter, really?

This.

just one story.

or that it occurred at all?

Or is it that I've unfolded it

in just this one way

to reveal

what matters

most.

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