

# Personal Narrative of Narratives: Writing to Understand the Art of Narrative Essay

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**Abstract:** I, a graduate assistant for *Reflections*, write a personal narrative about my experience reading the archives of the journal's published narratives. Given the task of looking for good narrative examples, starting with the most recent issue and reading my way back, I identify narratives that speak to me. Still parsing out the difference between narrative and exposition, I write in narrative style about the narratives and my reflections on them. In the process, I share my experience grappling with feelings of incompetency, inadequacy, frustration, and fear, along with my own growing understanding of the nature of narrative. In writing about this collection of narrative gems, found in *Reflections* between 2014–2018, the hope was to help prospective authors create their own way of merging their clinical experience with the narrative world.

**Keywords:** narrative, personal, professional, student, *Reflections*, vulnerable, tender exchange

## Introduction

In my short time working at *Reflections*, I have had the opportunity to understand the heart of what we do—to sincerely know the person who sits in the professional's chair, to see that person's humanity and the experiences that guide them through our field. Here, at *Reflections*, we want to hear the stories of the working professional's inner life: What did it feel like to take in the difficult news your client brought to the session that day? How do you feel when you go home? What is the story your own body told in moments of deep interaction? How do you navigate from client to client, from session to session? Often times as clinicians we feel a need to avoid our feelings. The joke here in the office is "remember to keep a box of tissues nearby." However, what if the deepest treasure lies in the emotional connection our work provides? Rather than shying away from our emotions, perhaps, we can be willing to reveal and examine them—do the very thing we ask of our clients. At *Reflections*, we want to see the person behind the professional mask. Here, we ask you to tell us how you are human.

After reading the selected manuscripts (see below), I could not stop thinking about them. I carried them home in the confines of my mind to mull over. It has been inspiring and extremely humbling for me to read these written confessions of growth, sorrow, camaraderie, hurt, vulnerability, and personal triumph. As a master's student, I have been in the field for only a short time. These manuscripts have shown me things I rarely learn in the classroom. They have given me guidance and the answers to questions I did not know how to ask.

I hope your reflection on these narratives inspires you as well. Writing in narrative form is not our norm. As clinicians, we are taught to write matter-of-fact statements of what happened without feeling or speculation and then press *save to the client's file*. There is a reason and purpose for this, but that is not what we want here; that is not the purpose of *Reflections*. Here, we ask you to bring us into the office, share with us the tender exchange, walk us through the

moments when you get into your car to head home, and tell us what it brought up for you—of course, while keeping your clients’ information anonymous and only sharing as much as you wish. The question I have for you is this: How deeply are you willing to let the rest of us in?

Beginning my graduate assistantship at *Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping*, I truly struggled to understand narrative writing. Wanting to learn more, I began to read each manuscript published, starting with the current issue and reading my way back through time. I hoped to better understand what narrative writing really is. After making a list of my personal favorites, I began what I considered the daunting task of writing one myself. My thought was to write a personal narrative of the author’s narrative and my reflections on it, and to embody this writing style in my current position as a helping professional.

**[A Night to Remember: An Autoethnographic Window into Facilitating a \*Dinner and Stories\* Event for Healthcare Workers](#) – Susan Breiddal**

In the narrative “A Night to Remember: An Autoethnographic Window into Facilitating a *Dinner and Stories* Event for Healthcare Workers,” Breiddal (2018), a health care counselor, experiences firsthand the beauty, awe, and sorrow accompanied with end of life care. In our culture, there is an inevitable but strangely taboo facet of life, namely many individuals’ great efforts to avoid acknowledging death. At some point, we all will face it, whether it be the loss of a loved one or the end of life for ourselves.

Brainstorming ways to create communal self-care for fellow palliative care workers, Breiddal decided to invite other health care professionals, across all disciplines of work, to her house in hopes of creating a supportive environment. The main objective of this event was to create a group of helping professionals who work in palliative care, in an attempt to prevent burnout and create support through the commonality of their work.

This manuscript reminded me of the essence of what we, here at *Reflections*, want to envelop: community, commonality, and support: “I am inviting everyone to move away from the mask of professionalism and toward a more personal way of being” (Breiddal, 2018, p. 57). Another moment in the manuscript I enjoyed is where Breiddal (2018) brings me right into the room:

At that moment, I catch the slightly sweet aroma of garlic, mushrooms, and cheese that is drifting in from the kitchen. It smells so good! I’ve asked the participants to let me know ahead of time what they like, and I’ve custom-made the dinner based on their responses. I think they are really going to enjoy the meal, so I’m excited. (p. 59)

In this delicious moment I can almost smell the food; I feel as if I am sitting at the table, my mouth watering, on the edge of my seat with anticipation of what the evening will bring. I also love how I know exactly what the author is thinking and feeling, giving me both visual and emotional narrative stimulation while I read.

“A Night to Remember” reminded me of the importance of being vulnerable with other practitioners. This example of professional community support reminded me that on the dark

days—when I am feeling empty and drained—I am not alone. All I need to do is create connection with others who are doing the same. We must all remember—while trudging the road of life—that its unexpected bumps and detours can be challenging. However, if we find true and meaningful connection with others, we will find the resources we need to make it through. It is so powerful to know we are not alone.

### **Remembering the Forgotten Flood – Priscilla Allen & Amy Wright**

In the narrative “Remembering the Forgotten Flood,” Allen and Wright (2018) bring the reader into the heartbreaking aftermath experienced by those living in Louisiana during the thousand-year flood. Amy, a doctoral student, shares an account of the emotional energy, anxiety, and depression following the flood. She began a three-month journey to rebuild her house with her partner, only to discover there were no available contractors to repair the rest of the house. While Amy’s story tells of a long but successful repair, another individual was not so lucky. Alan—a single man accompanied by his three dogs and painting houses for a living—describes his struggle with homelessness and tough choices for his canine companions:

I stayed there with my dogs, and I helped them paint their outside kitchen. Out of the blue, after the work was done, they asked me to leave. I’ve been staying with Lilly ever since. Two of my dogs have been staying with other people, and I don’t think I’ll get them back. My house is still gutted and I am still homeless. (Allen & Wright, 2018, p. 11)

This manuscript reminded me of my experiences as a BSW student interning at an agency that provided residential housing for individuals who were homeless. Many times, I would encounter clients who had fallen victim to circumstances outside of their control, leaving them in a situation with nowhere to call home.

### **Men and Miscarriage: An Insider’s Story from the Outside – Jeremy Brown**

Often when discussing miscarriage, one can find many articles and self-help books for women to aid them in their experience. Brown’s (2018) narrative “Men and Miscarriage: An Insider’s Story from the Outside” tells this from a different perspective: the grieving father. Brown narrates how he grieved his wife’s miscarriage, from the moment he heard the news his wife was pregnant, to watching other women in his family grow life inside of them while he grieved the one he and his wife had lost. There was always a silent stream of words never leaving his lips. When I read, “It was painfully clear that family, friends, and even health care providers didn’t know how to respond to a man’s pain from miscarriage” (Brown, 2018, p. 27), I realized this man was bravely pouring his heart out to show helping professionals a huge gap in practice. I felt guilty, as a woman, knowing this person was courageously willing to show his pain in hopes others would make a greater effort in supporting men during the miscarriage of their children. This is an excellent example of narrative by walking the reader through the parts of miscarriage where our helping practice turns a blind eye.

### **Disclosure in Teaching: Using Personal Mental Health Experiences to Facilitate Teaching and Learning – Rosalyn Denise Campbell**

Disclosure in teaching can create the space for students to come forward about their own personal experiences. It allows new social workers to see how their professors show up in practice as humans with struggles too. Campbell's (2018) narrative, "Disclosure in Teaching: Using Personal Mental Health Experiences to Facilitate Teaching and Learning in Clinical Social Work Practice," illustrates this:

"When I attempted suicide..." I had said it. I did not mean to say it, but there it was. I was standing in the classroom responding to a student who struggled to understand despair that fueled a client's suicidality, and I had said it. I had just disclosed to my students that I had attempted suicide. (p. 44)

While reading this I noticed myself holding my breath, waiting for the next moment. Personally, as a social worker who provides education for middle school and high school students, I felt the moment of dread when I have said something I wished not to say. I appreciated this moment of deep vulnerability in the story. This is what it means to be human in front of your class and own it. This was not a section of course-required reading explaining how self-disclosure can be helpful under the right circumstances, but a personal display of someone bringing their whole self, their life into their classroom.

### **What's Your Number? An Example of Micro and Macro Practice in the Era of Police Accountability – Jandel Crutchfield**

Crutchfield (2018) reminds us of the "summer of hate, 2016" in the narrative "What's Your Number? An Example of Micro and Macro Practice in the Era of Police Accountability," re-shining the light on the horrific incidents where many unarmed Black Americans were being gunned down by police officers and no one was claiming any responsibility. Crutchfield (2018) begins to tell us how this affected life at home:

As a Black American citizen and a social worker, I could only think of Ida B. Wells and the despair she must have felt at the stubbornness of society to acknowledge and address lynching of Blacks. I knew I wouldn't launch an international campaign like she did, but the least I could do was speak out. (p. 35)

This had me look back on my reaction to these gruesome killings. I remembered feeling compelled as a White American to find ways I could use my privilege to elevate others' voices. Later on, Crutchfield and a friend Tony decided to take action within their community. During the planning Tony remarks, "Even if only five people show up, it's worth it!" (Crutchfield, 2018, p. 36). I went home that day still thinking about what I can do in my own community. How can I create an impact in my everyday living? This manuscript reminded me it is about making the effort, rather than feeling defeated by multitudes of disaster and never showing up.

**Streams to Ocean: Bridging the Micro/Macro Divide – Heather G. Howard**

In the narrative “Streams to Ocean: Bridging the Micro/Macro Divide,” Howard (2018) recounts:

This past year has been a new chapter in my life, full of bittersweet transition. I have a wonderful husband, father, and three beautiful sons, the oldest of whom left for college last year. However, it was the first year the two most important women in my life were absent from me. My daughter began her first year of college, and my loving mother’s long battle with chronic illness finally ceased when she passed away. (p. 65)

When reading about social work practice, the moments of personal disclosure always make me pause, go back to read again, and get settled into the story. I find it intriguing to hear about the “outside life” of helping professionals. I wanted to know, “What’s the secret to showing up for clients while showing up for ourselves?” The illustration and personal connection in the very first sentence is what drew me in. It reminded me of my own experience of bittersweet transition my junior year of college. I was 25 years old, new to Cleveland State University (CSU), and struggling with deep loss unlike anything I had ever known in my young adult life. Remembering the overwhelming gratitude of my acceptance into CSU’s Social Work program, while each morning struggling with crippling emptiness of grief, I felt a connection with Howard’s words on the page. I could relate to the human experience I was reading, and it made me want to know more.

**Animals as Agents to Inform the Intersection of Micro and Macro Practice –  
Maureen MacNamara**

MacNamara (2018) begins her manuscript, “Animals as Agents to Inform the Intersection of Micro and Macro Practice,” by telling the reader what it was like growing up as a child with disabilities. Unable to participate in activities, usually because others cast her out, she found companionship in animals, who provided encouragement and support. Before entering social work, MacNamara was a high school vocational instructor and had been given the opportunity to combine the two things she loved most: animals and education. She illustrates her observation of touching interactions between the students and their animal companions and their impression on her. This is one of my favorites:

As Jim became more frustrated he began to handle the colt roughly, jerking on the halter and shaking his fist. Rather than let them hurt each other, I offered to help. Jim glared down at me from his 6-foot-tall frame and said, “You think you can do this, you’re too short.” I agreed that I was short, but I bet him I could get the horse to put his head down. The boy laughed and handed me the clippers. With gentleness and soft reassuring words I enticed the horse to lower his head and I quickly trimmed his mane. The boy was astonished but wanted to recover his pride. “Well,” he blurted, “that’s a girlie way to do it.” I smiled and explained that not everything needed to be a battle. I told him that if he wanted this horse to go fast on the track, then he had to get the horse to work with him, not against him. (MacNamara, 2018, p. 90)

This recollection, like several others in the manuscript, let me see how we can model behavior for our clients. The story of Jim goes on to show his progress. Jim becomes the leader for the other students, modeling how to interact with the animals. I appreciated the insight into the “behind the scenes” moments. The narrative expressed times when MacNamara had an opportunity in a particular moment to make a lasting impression, which allowed her students to grow. I enjoyed reading the recollection of the growth MacNamara saw in her students.

**Herd to Horse: A Focus from Macro to Micro, Lessons from the Nokota® Horse – Christine Carapico McGowan**

In the narrative “Herd to Horse: A Focus from Macro to Micro, Lessons from the Nokota® Horse,” McGowan (2018) tells of a heartwarming change for two children brought by their interaction with the horses. She begins by walking you through recollections of Timmy (p. 99–100), a shy and socially awkward child outcast by his peers. Timmy is a natural with animal connection; McGowan (2018) narrates this strength when saying, “Timmy began to laugh and laugh. The horses literally were following him around in play” (p. 100). In this description, I can imagine myself watching the interaction between Timmy and the horses. I wanted to know more. I wanted to see how this would play out down the road for Timmy at school. Reading through the narrative I could see the beginning, middle, and end in this client scenario. It had me walking away thinking, “What ways can I think outside the conventional box when encouraging client strengths?”

**Reflections on Social Work, Social History, and Practice Experience: “It Ain’t the Same if You’re Poor” – Alice Skirtz**

In her manuscript “Reflections on Social Work, Social History, and Practice Experience: ‘It Ain’t the Same if You’re Poor,’” Skirtz (2018) recounts several interactions with clients who left a profound impact on her. As a social worker new to the field, I found these exchanges between Skirtz and the client to be beautiful, tender moments. For example, Skirtz (2018) tells about a young mother “who walked nearly two miles to [her] office wearing a cotton dress, a thin sweater covered by a denim jacket, and flip-flop sandals protecting her from the 30-degree snowy weather” (p. 131). This put me right in the office with the two of them. The dialogue ends with, “Tears rolled down her cheeks when she revealed she had left her infant in the care of a neighbor she barely knew to protect him from the bitter weather” (Skirtz, 2018, p. 131), emotionally pulling on my heartstrings.

I spend my time in school discussing theories and intervention application, but what my lectures do not discuss is how the stories our clients tell affect us. Many times, we are trying to help our clients in a broken system which allows us little room to really help the situation. It reminded me of a time during my BSW when I was asked to attend a client’s staffing at Child and Family Services. I remember my client hearing the heartbreaking news she would not have a chance for custody of her oldest child as she protectively cradled her swollen belly, encasing her unborn child in her hands, while silent tears rolled down her cheeks. I was unprepared for how I would react to this. Struggling to understand all of the acronyms used and watching my client crumble, I did my best to keep up with the conversation. Never in school had there been a lecture about



*this*. As I have learned through reading these narratives, we learn from other helping professionals' personal experiences. When the staffing concluded, another social worker in the room pulled me aside afterwards to share her experience. These are the gems of other people's experience I hold near and dear to my heart.

Another example of excellent narrative is when Skirtz (2018) revisits a client's comment about jail, "You know Miz [Author], at jail they have three meals every day... yes ma'am every day." In all of his 19 years, he had rarely had three meals every day" (p. 131). This reminded me of moments when in session with a client, I think to myself, "What am I really doing to help this person?" These are just a few examples of why I choose to add this piece to this narrative list. Skirtz did an excellent job of illustrating real life heartfelt moments she encountered in her practice.

**Schools Fall Short: Lack of Therapeutic Continuum of Care in Public Schools** –  
**Katherine De Vito**

Schools have implemented counseling and behavioral skill programs for students. In the narrative "Schools Fall Short: Lack of Therapeutic Continuum of Care in Public Schools," De Vito (2018) tells a story of one student, Kyle, who needed great help. Kyle's plight was a lack of connection from either of his parents. He lived with his guardians, who were his biological grandparents. Struggling with wanting a strong adult attachment and his peers taunting him in school, Kyle ended up in a situation which led him to in-school counseling services with the school social worker, Katherine. Describing the end of their first session, in which Kyle explained the reason behind a fight with another student, De Vito (2018) reflects, "Those words sent chills down my spine as Kyle promptly got up, turned around, and left my office" (p. 5), she continues to follow the journey of Kyle and his progress through counseling. Each time, she recounts fine details from the session:

Kyle would come into my office, sit down in the chair with his head hanging down between his legs, in complete silence. I felt like I was doing nothing, but that is how the attachment bond began to grow. (De Vito, 2018, p. 8)

Thoughts like these have run through my head. I felt myself exhale a breath I did not know I was holding. Her words took me back to moments with clients when I have watched them walk out of the room thinking to myself, "How have I even helped?" It took me back to the beginning of my internship, when I went over the results of an HIV test with a client. As the session drew to a close, I was scraping my mind for something I had missed, feeling as though they might leave no better than how they walked in. This narrative reminded me that sometimes moments with a client are just that: moments of connection. We are not superheroes; we are humans helping the world through connections and practical coping skills. This earnest account walks the reader through the journey of a social worker with her client and how sometimes there can be joyful and distressing unexpected turns along the way.

**Reflections on the Impact of Privilege, Marginalization, and Story on My Social Work Practice, Research, and Pedagogy – Mary Elizabeth Tinucci**

In Tinucci's (2018) narrative "Reflections on the Impact of Privilege, Marginalization, and Story on My Social Work Practice, Research, and Pedagogy," she intertwines self-discovery of being a student, experiences of being new to the field, and the beginnings of being an educator. This manuscript tells the transition from one role to another with a deep vulnerability I admire and wish to one day have. Tinucci (2018) begins by showing the reader her experiences growing up: "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'" (p.77). Then she later writes, "It was clear from his responses that I was not to know about these ghosts" (p. 77). When reading interactions like these, I am pulled into the author's personal story. The social worker in me wants to hear more, wants to get deeper into the person's experiences.

Next Tinucci (2018) reflects on her first job as a school social worker: "The first day on the job in the school system, I was terrified. What are the rules here?" (p. 82). This brings up for me a million questions I want to ask all of my professors. For example, there are moments in class when I wonder how my professors felt on their first day of their first job as a social worker. I want to know how others balance this work when it touches close to their personal lives. The thing I enjoyed most about this manuscript was Tinucci's courage to tell the story of her inner thoughts while in practice. I reflected on my personal development when reading how Tinucci brought her triumphs to guide her through her new teaching career. In her own words, "As I wrote this personal narrative, it became evident how and why stories matter and why story is an essential element of my pedagogy" (Tinucci, 2018, p. 88). Reading other social workers' experiences helps me sort through my own.

**Second Chances – Dirk H. de Jong**

Any room can be turned into a classroom; it just takes a passionate teacher and willing students. This is the message Dirk H. de Jong (2018) presents in his manuscript, "Second Chances," about teaching in a prison. Describing the setting, de Jong (2018) reflects:

The room in which I will teach is hot. There is no air conditioning. Two big fans, spinning at top speed, whir a noisy welcome. Unlike my well-equipped college classroom, there is no computer console or pull-down screen to show my tidy PowerPoint slides. The available whiteboard appears to have seen better days. The inmates file in. Mostly, they are men of color. (p. 90)

Throughout this narrative, there are moments like these where the author reflects back on the feelings in the room. Several times, he describes the intimate interactions between classmates, and this captures the emotional energy emitted during the class. Short but sweet, I think "Second Chances" is an excellent example of narrative of personal social work practice.



### **Ink vs. Bytes: The Delicate Balance I Tried to Maintain in a Library – Fatima Taha**

Being a librarian, what all does that entail? Taha (2018) explains there are many roles encompassed in the title *librarian* in her narrative “Ink vs. Bytes: The Delicate Balance I Tried to Maintain in a Library.” As a social worker, I can relate. Taha further explains that her position at the library is to connect the worlds of paper and technological resources. Many times there are patrons walking into the library, feeling overwhelmed about a task they need help achieving. Taha explains she has an almost sixth sense and is able to tune into their unspoken needs and emotions. I reflected on my own interactions with clients at work and realized I, too, naturally tune into the words unspoken. Taha (2018) describes an interaction with a patron:

Early on Monday morning as snow fell quietly out of the large glass windows lining the non-fiction area of the library in which I worked, a gentleman walked confidently up the stairs and onto the second floor. He was immaculately dressed in a suit and fit the stereotypical image of a powerful businessman. Of course, to me, his attire did not matter: I mention it here only to make a point. As he turned toward our bank of computers, he faltered ever so slightly, his hand reaching up to touch his temple. Sensing his momentary discomfort, I calmly but quickly walked over to see if I could assist this new patron... (p. 37)

I loved the imagery used here. I could imagine myself standing in my favorite library, watching the snowfall outside. I began to reflect on times when speaking with someone, even family or friends, and watching the discomfort told through their body language. This passage reminded me how we are more in tune with others than we realize when we also “listen” to them with our eyes. I hope you choose to continue reading the rest of the manuscript, for it is filled with many more eloquently told, tender moments between Taha and the library patrons.

### **The Shared Experience – Kathy Zappitello**

In the manuscript “The Shared Experience,” Zappitello (2018) introduces the reader to the uplifting compilation of a small library, the staff, and its motivated director trying to make a difference in their community. As a social worker, I know there are innumerable resources each community has to offer, and the public library is one of my favorites. Zappitello recalls trying to identify both individual and community needs while creating ways to meet those with the resources a library on a limited budget has. Not only was money tight for the library, but also for the local food pantry. Resourcefully, the library staff developed a policy to collect non-perishable foods in exchange for personal over-due library fines. This creative solution was an asset for the community and a saving grace for a mother in need on a Friday night. My favorite narrative moment of this situation is Zappitello’s (2018) response to her co-worker, “After the family was out the door, my co-worker turned to me and said, ‘I’m so glad you were still here to make that decision.’ And I replied, ‘What decision? Doing the right thing is always the solution’” (p. 54). It reminded me of the moments when we must make a decision, and, sometimes, there is no one around to consult. What does one do? The answers may not always be as clear as this situation, but I need to hear of the uplifting stories for my own motivation to stay ignited.

In another situation, Zappitello tells of a more complex dilemma. During a free community activity for children to engage in a latest-and-greatest crafting trend, a co-worker complained of the adults using the limited materials for themselves. I too agreed with her co-worker's point of view. This was until I read Zappitello's (2018) inner dialogue about the situation:

It was in that exact moment that I knew that everything we were doing [placing importance on social mores rather than empathy] was wrong. My stomach dropped and the room morphed from light and festive to dark and gloomy. It was like something out of a movie. My staff member continued to complain and blather on about "those people" who had ruined her event, but to me, she became almost a blurry blob moving in slow-mo while my mind raced to formulate a plan. (p. 56)

Reading her physical and emotional response brought me right into the moment. It became clear where my views of situations fall short. The humble unveiling of the author's thoughts proved to be a great learning tool for me.

### **The Business of Libraries – Abby O'Neill**

Raised in a family of social workers with a career as a librarian, O'Neill (2018) writes about how she sees these two worlds working together in the narrative, "The Business of Libraries." As a social worker, I know two of the best community resources are churches and libraries, so naturally this correlation made complete sense. Unfortunately, O'Neill's fellow librarians did not always recognize the connection of their library being a valuable resource. One of my favorite excerpts is when O'Neill (2018) describes a specific interaction where she offered a new perspective to help problem solve:

The instructor and the class seemed to laugh and dismiss my suggestions, "We're not social workers here, and if you think we should be, you're in the wrong business." I'm used to that sort of negative response; yet, I know that even after the origin of the planted seed is long forgotten, the naysaying will fade and some or all of the idea will sprout. (p. 58)

The reality is that at some point in every person's life our ideas will be dismissed. It was helpful to read O'Neill's professional perspective on interacting with others when that happens.

### **Reflections on the Election of Donald Trump: Uninspired and Inspired Responses from a Social Work Faculty – Jeffrey Dale Thompson**

Right from the beginning, Jeffrey Dale Thompson (2018) starts with excellent narration of his recount of the presidential election in 2016 and the events leading up to it:

A small Methodist Church in a "Red state" hosted the voting in my precinct. An official led me to my machine, explained the controls, and backed away only slightly. He remained uncomfortably close. Was he attempting to ensure I voted the party line? (p. 20)

This is a great way to set the scene, even without giving too much detail. I felt as if I was

standing at the voting machine. I could feel the apprehensive feeling, as if I too were being watched. Giving just enough details to invite the reader into the moment was a fantastic way to draw me in. This is a theme of Thompson's writing as he continues to recount what happened that gloomy November.

**Disaster after Disaster: Unexpected Thousand-Year Floods and Presidential Elections – Priscilla D. Allen and Jennifer L. Scott**

Between the natural disasters, floods and hurricanes, and the great political divide post the 2016 presidential election, Louisiana took a hard hit. Priscilla Allen and Jennifer Scott (2018) highlight the fact that many times these events are plastered over the news for a week or two, only to be forgotten about while the individuals affected are left to pick up the pieces. One of my favorite lines is the opening of dialogue from Dr. Richelle Allen, a psychotherapist, "On the morning of November 8th, it was a challenge to be a therapist and listen for meaning while my own internal echo shouted: 'Not my president!'" (Allen & Scott, 2018, p. 55). This took me back to that morning when I heard the results of the election, remembering feeling both numb and sick with dread and despair, dragging myself to work. I too mentally disowned the man now elected to run the country. I found solace in reading the echo of my own thoughts regarding the last election and seeing how each practitioner worked through this.

**Our Solidarity was the Solution—Looking back on 2017: Rising and Resisting for Two Decades in NYC – Benjamin Heim Shepard**

Shepard's (2018) manuscript is an action-packed, firsthand account of his experience as a social activist. He is getting out there to be heard. I almost do not want to tell too much for fear I will spoil the surprise, but I gleefully enjoyed reading his account of attending Donald Trump's inauguration. Shepard (2018) describes the moments leading up to his play-by-play narration of the event:

Tickets were easy to come by. Few wanted to actually attend. By 6:45 am we'd made our way past security. We'd have to stand there for five hours before the magic moment when we'd seek to disrupt the inauguration, without getting found out first. I kept blowing the cover. (p. 79)

I felt like I was in the front row of this encounter. I feel as though I have great insight into Shepard's thoughts even before he begins the dialogue. I chose this manuscript both for the verbatim rendition of the moments at the event and the fact that I have not read much about activism.

**Between Then and Now: My Coming, Being, and Staying in Urban/Rural Canada – Bharati Sethi**

Sethi (2017) describes the experiences and struggles of immigrating to Canada and fighting for her citizenship for years. From day one to present day, Sethi walks the reader through how being a visible minority impacts interactions and everyday activities. I think the best example is to start

with the beginning of Sethi's (2017) manuscript:

I hugged my oversized "made in Nepal" coat tighter as I made my way to a local restaurant in a mid-sized urban-rural region of Southwest Ontario. My feet were so cold that I could barely feel them through the "made in Nepal" shoes, seeped in icy wet slush. My body still remembers the warmth of my first winter jacket and winter shoes bought from a local thrift store. I slept in them for the first night of purchase, sweating in my heated bachelor apartment. As I made my way to the restaurant, the shopkeeper looked at my young thin brown body with distrust. I clung tightly to dollar bills; my shoes torn and dirty and my oversized jacket covering my petite frame. Oh! Those harsh and lonely seven years as a foreign worker. My precarious immigration status marginalized me repeatedly. I was trapped. (p. 42)

This manuscript had a profound impact on me as I came to the realization, once again, how little I know. It made my heart sink to read again someone sharing their experience, doing the emotional labor for other white, natural-born citizens to get a small glimpse of understanding. I am both awed and honored by the willingness Sethi had to reach into her past, retelling traumatic experiences for others to read. Please, take the time to read this manuscript. It certainly has opened my mind to the ignored pressures and unrealistic obstacles that immigrants face.

**Supervisor and Intern Reflections on a Year of Research: Why It Worked –  
Erica Goldblatt Hyatt and Brandon D. Good**

Brandon D. Good, a student feeling claustrophobic at a small college in the small town he grew up in, was new to Erica Goldblatt Hyatt's class. This new student also came with a warning from other teachers as a challenging student who would continue asking professors questions for a satisfactory rationale. Dismissing her colleagues, Hyatt chose to see what was behind these fervent questions and discovered a student hungry for more. Good came to her office expressing a want for more than what the college's psychology program had to offer. Hyatt offered him the opportunity to work as an intern on a research project. During the preliminary meetings, Good and Hyatt verbally discussed expectations and apprehensions. Here is one example of narrative from Good and Hyatt's (2017) exchange:

"Will we be meeting a lot to talk about my progress and what I'm finding?" he asked. His eyebrows furrowed into a familiar scrunch. The subtext of this expression, to me, read as follows: I might need extra help. Usually so confident in his academic abilities, Brandon appeared nervous. I wanted to challenge him but not push him too far. (p. 68)

This manuscript reminded me of interactions I have had, in both my personal and professional life, with people who both intimidated and challenged me. It reminded me how keeping an open mind allowed to me hear what others were really saying. Each time I have put aside my prejudices, fears, and insecurities, I have created opportunities for others to show me who they really are. Many times, I look back over my life and see times I would have robbed myself of an experience I hold near to my heart. This requires me to be willing to let go of my expectations and allow life to unfold. This is often the case when I have been wary and guarded

of someone, and by letting them in I have begun to see another side of them I would have otherwise missed.

As a student I related with Good's frustration, which we all experience during academic growth. For me, as a closet perfectionist, learning new things is uncomfortable. I want to do everything right the first time. Through my academic career, I have learned not knowing is more admirable than the pretentious facade I can hide behind of "having it all together." I won't always have the answers to a situation or have the perfect thing to say, but if I can show my clients I am willing to admit when I am wrong and learn from those mistakes, I can model the behavior others have shown me. What a great reminder that adequate supervision and staying the course can bring about amazing results.

### **Death of a Student: Dealing with Competing Interests – Jodi Constantine Brown**

Sometimes in life, we have one vision for the future, and life takes us on a different route. This was the case for Jodi Constantine Brown, who started her career as a social worker conducting program evaluations and found herself in an academic administrative role. While in her administrative role, Brown met Amanda, a student preparing a project for her Capstone class. Brown (2017) reminisces about their first meeting:

My first glimpse of her occurred as she walked through my office door in September 2013. A riotous mass of untamed brown curls floated above her petite frame, her brown eyes sparkled, and she had a quick smile. She was so tiny she seemed to float when she walked, and she looked so young that it was difficult at first to imagine her as the mother of two young children. (p. 39)

I am drawn to the writing, which requires me to use my imagination. After spending many hours as a graduate student reading dry textbooks, my interest is piqued when the author notes enough details that I feel as if I am there.

Brown (2017) tells of the developing student-teacher relationship as they met to discuss Amanda's research. As they continued to meet, Brown began to notice the anxiety in Amanda's comments and suspected some of this was due to changing cohorts. Leaving the safety net of her peers in the program, Amanda now would continue her MSW journey with a new unknown set of classmates, and this time online. Amanda was also a person who was working through life challenges outside of school. The growing workload and family commitments began to weigh on her. Brown (2017) recalls moments when Amanda confided in her:

In between talking about her schoolwork and her research project, Amanda would tell me about her young children and talk about the difficulty of balancing school and family. Her entire face lit up when she talked about her children, and it was clear that the love she had for them was that of a doting mom, but she was pulled in many different directions. (p. 40)

As I mentioned before, in life, we never know what is going to happen next. Brown then tells of the moment she learned of Amanda's death by suicide:



I had an empty pit in my stomach, and the disbelief I felt as I sat in her office listening to Matt froze me. I didn't know what to say. I couldn't think clearly, and I found myself in a momentary place of denial, wishing it would all go away while at the same time hoping that someone had their information wrong and Amanda would breeze through the door in the next few hours. (p. 42)

As I read her words, I was transported back to that dark day in December of 2015 when I learned of a close friend's suicide. As I read Brown's (2017) words, I could relate to the bodily sensations she experienced in those first moments of knowing. I remembered how some days I would wistfully steal a look at my phone to see if she had called for our daily check-in, even though I knew in the bottom of my heart she was gone. I remember playing the unrelenting, treacherous game of what-if: what-if I had called her that evening, what-if I had told her how important she was that day, what-if I had better recognized the signs, what-if...then things would have been different.

As we must with challenging times in life, Brown (2017) tells how she trudged on through her grief. There were times when she encountered conflicting feelings of professional responsibility and personal grief. Following my friend's death, my outlook on life changed. My new perspective impacted my everyday interactions. My grief challenged me to examine how I interacted with people, and how I communicated in my interpersonal relationships began to change. For example: I began to listen to friends more while I talked less, I told people I appreciated them even if I thought they already knew, I started checking in with people outside my immediate social network when I noticed changes, and I became more compassionate for the little things weighing down my friends. Just as Brown explains, after some time I began to see how this event could positively influence change in my work. To summarize my reflection of Brown's powerful and vulnerable narrative, I leave you with something I once heard: We may grieve alone, but we can heal together.

### **That Which Cannot be Remedied Must be Endured – Michael Babcock**

Michael Babcock (2017) writes about his travels to Juárez, Mexico, where he worked as a medical social worker in an outreach clinic. The clinic was housed in a fire station, where each year hundreds of families who did not have access to affordable, specialty healthcare came in search of help for their children. Babcock writes about his experience in the role of medical social worker. Many times, this meant he was assigned the job of informing the families their child could not be treated. Here is captured one heartbreaking moment when Babcock (2017) had to deliver the news:

The parents looked at me with questioning, anxious eyes, hoping the pronouncement meant good news. Surely these doctors could do something for their daughter. Surely the trip had not been made in vain. Surely there was a cure for the mysterious monster that ravaged her spastic body. Sadly, certainly, there was not. (p. 16)

This manuscript piqued my interest for a couple of reasons. First, it continues to amaze me how many avenues one can explore as a social worker. This profession continues to show me how



limitless the possibilities really are. Second, I know I want to have only good news for my clients. As a social worker, I want to find the solution no one has found for my clients, but the reality is sometimes in life there is just bad news. I was reminded how in these moments sometimes our job is to hold space for someone and ride out the emotions with them. This short and fantastic manuscript is a wonderful example of narrative writing.

### **Coming of Age as an LGBTQ Social Work Educator: Reflections on a Personal and Professional Journey – Trevor G. Gates**

This manuscript reminds me of the saying “Wherever you go, there you are.” Trevor G. Gates (2017) writes a narrative examining how his personal and professional identities intersect in the classroom. Inviting the reader into a reflection, he recalls the experiences of growing up in a conservative family. Struggling with negative religious opinions on homosexuality, daily taunts and bullying from peers, and coming to terms with his own sexual identity in a homophobic community, Gates dreamed of escaping this suffocating environment for a more inclusive one. Gates (2017) reveals his attraction to the social work profession: “In some ways, responding to homophobia was what interested me in social work education and advocacy. It was both a personal and professional journey” (p. 8). We all have our life experiences that lead us to a helping profession, and many times this can be a motivating force to keep the passion for our work alive when we feel like we have no energy left to give. My entry to social work, and my ever burning passionate flame, is my recovery. Getting sober changed everything in my life, and I found purpose and fulfillment in social work that resonated with my new way of life. This is the internal motivator that keeps me going, feeding the fire of passion in my work. This has been, for me, a personal and professional journey. I also appreciated the rest of Gate’s manuscript, as it is full of magnificent, rich narrative from his experiences teaching in higher education.

### **Cold: A Meditation on Loss – Sarah Morton**

Sarah Morton’s (2015) reflection is a deep and chilling account of a client she worked with. Her client, Rosie, was trapped in a life of substance abuse and intimate partner violence. She worked hard to overcome the struggle of leaving the life she knew, only to find herself struggling in a new unknown way of life that seemed foreign to her. Rosie, pregnant with her second child, wanted nothing more than to keep this baby and get her son back. Describing a house visit, Morton (2015) writes with such rich description, I felt as if I was in the room with her:

You know, Rosie says, I am going to keep this one whatever they say. I don’t care what you call it, what the hell happened. See, she says, her arm wrapped over her belly, I can feel him quickening. Rosie holds her mug of tea in her other hand. The tea is cold now, little pools of dark scum on the top, clinging to the edges of the cup. But god, she says, that house is cold, so fucking cold, she tells me. (p. 7)

This unsettling manuscript is deeply captivating. After reading this, I was left speechless.

**Eros, Thanatos, and Ares: Counseling Soldiers about Love and Death in a Combat or Hostile Fire Environment – Cathleen A. Lewandowski**

Cathleen Lewandowski (2014) tells of an experience I will never know. She recounts being deployed to serve as the Social Work Officer at a camp's combat stress unit. Most times only seeing a soldier once, it was imperative that Lewandowski always remembered the main goal of the session: to help emotionally support the soldiers while in deployment, depending on their needs presented in that very moment. Many times, Lewandowski (2014) expressed the thoughts we have with clients, which are never said aloud, such as:

When presented with these situations, I wanted to say, "I am here in Iraq, same as you, and have no clue about what your wife/girlfriend is feeling or thinking about your relationship." But I put that aside, and decided that my main objective, in keeping with preserving the fighting force, was to provide whatever assurance I could that things would work out, that he should listen and be supportive as much as he was able from half-way across the world. (p. 39)

Another example of this introspective self-dialogue is:

I suggested that her confession was an indication she still wanted to be with him. I questioned her timing, but kept these thoughts to myself. I offered that he could tell her that he still wanted to be with her; that they could work it out. (p. 39)

There are many more examples of personal narrative of situations with the soldier, which I deeply appreciated. Being able to "peer" into another social worker's inner dialogue was an indispensable teaching moment which was both helpful and intriguing. One creative and captivating way Lewandowski (2014) decided to relay client interactions without breaking any confidentiality was to group common session topics in relatable, popular songs. I thought this was a fantastic way to exemplify the use of popular music and culture as a coping strategy used by both the soldiers and Lewandowski herself. Education through something we all love, music! The rest of Lewandowski's manuscript evokes raw emotion from the reader through many personal stories of her experience on deployment.

### **Conclusion**

I have so boldly asked for you, the authors, to be vulnerable with us. Write to *Reflections* about the times when your innermost self was screaming to be heard. Write about where you found the crossroads between personal and professional. I have asked you to remove the professional mask so that others can see the personal you. This is why here I have done the same.

As I sit at my desk, gazing out over the busy street, feeling the slight chill of winter from the window close by, I reflect on my journey here at *Reflections*. I am amazed. I have come so far in my professional growth, and I realize I have accomplished this by sitting through the profuse and bitter feelings of discomfort when learning something new. A discomfort so strong it makes me ache and fidget; the frustration at not being good at something despite knowing I have never

done it before. I have learned patience with others, but patience with myself is a virtue I struggle to master.

On my first day at *Reflections* I was presented with the task of understanding the difference between narrative and expository writing. I felt the sinking feeling of panic set in as I thought, “Writing is not my strong suit, as my English courses were the subjects I have most dreaded in my academic career.” As a student, I have struggled with disruptive, doubtful inner dialogue swirling around in my mind through each and every paper. Yet, on the outside, I pasted on a smile and set to the task. It seemed the more I read about the difference between narrative and expository text, the less I understood. I thought, “You are overthinking this—just set to the task you love most, reading.”

As I read, it became clear the manuscripts I enjoyed the most were filled with vivid imagery, deep reflection, personal emotion, and rich dialogue (either with the self or between author and client). I found comfort and comradery in my connection with the authors as they unveiled their innermost thoughts, and I began to see that I am not so unique in my professional struggles. Questions like “How will I work through my ‘first day at a new job’ nerves?” and “What if I am left speechless when a client presents a situation I do not know how to handle?” or “Am I the only person who feels so many moments of self-doubt and unreadiness?” and “How do others handle life on life’s terms when at work?” swirled in my head. I continued to read, and these myriad insecurities were quelled. I began to see how I am not alone as a helping professional, always questioning the quality of my work. We are all just ordinary people trying to help one another while muddling our own way through life.

I then began the second and personally most daunting task: the writing. I have a friend who says, “There is unexplainable magic that happens when you set pen to paper,” and so I did just that. I took a deep breath and began to write, unfiltered, about what I had read. I expressed—possibly only a perceived notion—that I am not often asked to write my opinions in school. I am usually required to write research papers or practice case notes.

So I prompted myself to express my apprehension without explicitly saying “I fear what I have to say is wrong.” I wanted to see if I could write my way through the fear and frustration. This task required me to be vulnerable with the reader. I was terrified and yet with the support of others, and some personal introspection, I have tried to accomplish this. Now, I have come to realize that maybe my greatest strengths are the ones I have been most afraid to develop, and sometimes all I need is a nudge from others to help me walk through the fear. Here is my truth; this is who I am behind my own professional mask. I hope one of these manuscripts resonates with you and inspires you to share as well.

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