

A Narrative Re-Searching for the Practical Identity as a Teacher: Lear's Approach

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This paper aims to explore and appropriate Lear's exploration of the Crow Chief Plenty Coups's stories methodologically in re-search for my practical identity as a teacher. In contrast with the epistemological concerns of narrative inquiry as a methodology in the field of education, Lear's approach anchors more on axiological discussions that allow me to reclaim the ethical grounds of teaching and hence integrate the virtues to form a more educationally defensible identity as a teacher. Lear shows us the search for meaning involves a "thick-thin-thick" approach. Thinning and thickening processes do not follow a linear model: they can be recursive and intertwined.

Keywords: narrative inquiry, practical identity, Jonathan Lear, "thick-thin-thick" process, ethical claims

MY STORY

It was a very warm day in mid-May 2011, a few weeks away from Gaokao (College Entrance Examination in China). In the large assembly hall, our school held its annual event: Gaokao Oath Meeting. It was held to pledge mass efforts for higher achievement in Gaokao. I felt my heartbeat accelerated when I gave a talk as a teacher representative: "Dear colleagues and students, Good morning! I am very honored to represent all the teachers to congratulate you on your effort and courage to come to a decisive moment of your life..." I continued enthusiastically to share stories that I had observed and experienced: stories of my devoted colleagues who went to classes despite their illness and sacrificed their family time to offer students with free tutorials at school; stories of competent teachers who managed to raise their class average scores greatly compared with the previous two mock exams; stories of my diligent students who sacrificed their sleep time and became so dedicated to their study. I then gave my advice on the efficient and effective ways of study during the last few weeks before Gaokao as well as my suggestions on university application skills that could increase the success rate of admission. Finally, I gave my best wishes to all the students to be successful in Gaokao and get into their dream universities: "Do your best, my dear students! One more mark in Gaokao means that you surpass thousands of other students and be a bit closer to your victory!". This was a remark that had been reverberating in the school hall for many years before my talk.

I found that students were fully pumped by my words in the oath meeting and my school principal came to congratulate me about my successful speech delivery afterwards: "We really need more teachers like you who aim clearly at the target, do not complain and make sure their students could succeed." I thought I should have been content with myself, as I was elected as a "teacher representative". However, secretly, I was not: not at all. I felt something shadowy with these highlights. The enthusiasm and anxiety towards Gaokao seemed to be in a morbid state, and I, as a teacher, still fueled it in my passionate speech and my

devoted and successful teaching for higher marks, which was considered as the “marking” stones for a teacher in China. I did not, as my principal observed, complain about anything in my speech. However, I complained to myself, all the time, about my lack of words to complain. Intuitively, I found something wrong and something missing from my teaching. While I appraised my colleagues who gave extra tutorials to their students, I felt their students might deserve some outdoor time after a long day of study and my colleagues need some more leisure time; I advised on how to gain better marks as a teacher, but at the same time, I was more troubled by seeing my students wear tired and anxious looks even if they gained better marks; I offered strategies of applying for their dream universities, while I was simultaneously challenged by the questions of “what if they failed” and “even if they could succeed, so what?”; I asked my students to be focused on their study; however, I was deeply concerned when I heard the news that a parent killed a pond of frogs before Gaokao to make sure his child could be “more focused”. I thought helping my students to win the Gaokao battle was my mission; still, I was saddened by its casualties: some students might succeed, yet many would fail in the Gaokao battle. As for those who “succeeded”, they celebrated the finish of Gaokao by having a feast of tearing the textbooks and exercise books. As for those who failed, a boy jumped out of the window of a twenty-storey apartment on the second day of Gaokao even before he learned about his marks. The fear of failure was monstrous enough to destroy him.

Since I was a young girl peeking into my mother’s classroom backdoor window, I have always hoped to become a teacher. When I became a teacher years later, I was always puzzled about what was counted as a teacher, a good teacher. Despite the “official” successful stories, stories about teachers’ care, dedication and courage, that I shared at the assembly hall a decade ago, I gradually felt their tension with the more “intimate” stories I lived, encountered, felt as a teacher on a daily basis. I found something missing, inadequate or even wrong in understanding the teacher’s care as spending extra hours in helping students to gain better marks, dedication to their teaching as going to work despite being ill, courage in teaching as feeling accountable for students’ failures. I ask what the care, dedication, courage, and many other virtues of teachers could mean otherwise and possibly involve. As teachers, we are often busy dealing with one thing after another to achieve our goals. We prefer to reside in the “official” and often safer stories of teaching than grapple with the difficult moments of feeling not right or lacking in words. Re-entering the stories from my own vantage points, backgrounds and locations in the world (Greene, 1978), I hope to understand better about being a teacher, a good teacher: what claims being a teacher makes on me? I aspire to search for significance in my teaching. I hope to attend to my little unsettling stories in quest of what counts as a good teacher. Through an ethical lens, I would commit myself to a process of understanding and deepening the practical identity of a teacher. A practical identity, for Lear (2006, 2011), is a role or amalgam of roles built on defensible excellences and ideals, a conception of teaching “under which you value yourself, a description under which you find your life to be worth living and your actions to be worth undertaking” (Korsgaard, 1992, p.83). I attend to my teaching stories not merely to make truth claims that might reveal “what being a teacher is like”, but to re-seek significance and make ethical claims about “what being a teacher ought to be like”. The search for my practical identity as a teacher is to understand teacher virtues anew and hence integrate the virtues to form a more coherent and more educationally defensible identity.

A METHODOLOGICAL EXPLORATION

More than simple chronologies of events, stories lay claim to significance by providing powerful structures. On the one hand, to tell a story narratively is to organize and create an end subjectively for a series of events. As Leggo (2019) suggests, narrative inquiry is “an ongoing process of understanding how we invest space and chronology with significance... and stories [are composed to] explain and account for our lived experiences. [In that sense], we transpose space into place, and objective time into subjective time” (p. 92). On the other hand, cultural and social schemes select, assemble and argue for certain stories that instantiate certain ideals – or violations of these ideals. Stories organize concrete particulars in light of (or in tension with) existing generals and help us understand our lives. MacIntyre (1981) encourages a narrative conception of human identity in the pursuit of purposes and ends; he explains that stories are

narratives of significance that we use to make sense of our lives. Indeed, he contends that human beings are storytelling agents and that we live our lives as narrative quests. Carr and Harrison (2015) suggest that: “stories provide knowledge and insight of highest human importance – because, without them, we cannot as human agents understand ourselves” (p. 49). I understand agents as those who are actively partaking in their own stories – not merely interpreting the stories but also inviting the stories to change themselves so that they act differently in and about the world. Restless and intimate stories of teachers may help us find the meanings that we often miss. Britzman (2003) aptly captures the importance of the little stories in teaching as pointing to “where the materials for theory were made from autobiography, memory, and a renewed consideration of the educational archive” (p. 17). Excesses or what exceeds the explicability of the current frameworks, such as the confusion and uncertainty that I could not explain well in my teaching, may gesture towards renewed ideals and hence help me imagine more possibilities to understand teaching. We could see the possibilities that “our educational narratives have the audacity to enjoy their own margins” (Phelan, 2011, p. 216) and also push our own boundaries.

A Critique of Narrative Inquiry as a Methodology

Narrative inquiry, as one of the heavily used research methodologies in teaching and teacher education in recent years (Li, Li & Mu, 2016), is primarily concerned with producing epistemological knowledge, particularly “personal practical knowledge” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1986; Connelly, Clandinin & He, 1997). Narrative inquiry is a dynamic approach to uncover, analyze, mingle stories and take risks to change ourselves as we relive in stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Clandinin (2013) points out four stages in the methodology of narrative inquiry, including living, telling, retelling and reliving. When we retell our stories, we “inquire into them... move beyond regarding stories as fixed entities and begin to retell our stories” (p. 34). This adds a dynamic layer to not merely ask people to live and tell their stories – stories that are sequentially recorded and analyzed by researchers, rather it is a “more difficult, time consuming, intensive, and yet, more profound method... about life and living” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 478). As we retell the lived and told stories, it might be a start of reliving our stories: “We restory ourselves and perhaps begin to shift the institution, social and cultural narratives in which we are embedded” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 34). Practical knowledge of the teachers is “imbued with all the experiences that make up a person’s being. Its meaning is derived from, and understood in terms of, a person’s experiential history, both professional and personal” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 68). It is “developed and expressed on the professional knowledge landscape” (Connelly et al., 1997, p. 665) and includes components of “rules, principles, personal philosophy, metaphor, cycles, and rhythms and narrative unity” (Connelly et al., 1997, p. 670).

With its epistemological emphasis on producing professional knowledge, narrative inquiry as a methodology lacks in interrogating the claims to the significance or what counts as the good. Bell (2002) observes the epistemological underpinnings of narrative inquiry and suggests at the outset of his paper: “Narrative inquiry rests on the epistemological assumption that we as human beings make sense of random experience by the imposition of story structures” (p. 207). He continues to suggest that the analytical element of narrative inquiry to “get at information” (p. 209), aiming at producing epistemological knowledge. He explains “in its fullest sense, narrative inquiry requires going beyond the use of narrative as rhetorical structure, that is, simply telling stories, to an analytic examination of the underlying insights and assumptions that the story illustrates” (p. 208). Pavlenko (2002) also acknowledges the co-constructed nature of narratives from combined efforts to have the “analyses of the data” and notes in the footnote that “narrative inquiry is usually understood to be an ethnographic approach to eliciting understandings” (pp. 213-214). The ethnographic approach focuses on the study of people in their own environment through the use of observation and face-to-face interviewing methods and hence may fall short of more radical reflections from “outside the environment”. In general, narrative inquiry is primarily targeted at developing personal practical knowledge (Connelly et al., 1997), which resides in the epistemological realm to find out what being a teacher is like. Narrative inquiry as a methodology still lacks in ethical considerations and rarely raises questions about *what counts as good*.

I understand that any effort to understand education must include both normative and empirical considerations. We need to determine both what we ought to do and how human beings actually learn to

understand and act. Hence, a comprehensive approach to education is needed to integrate both epistemological and axiological concerns, that is, attend to both “is” and “ought” questions. Arguing for the importance of the interwoven “is” and “ought” concerns in teaching, Noddings (2010) explains, “I do not go to naturalistic extremes and argue that things *should* be as they *are*, but I do argue that any normative ethic that ignores ‘how things are’ is unlikely to be taken seriously” (p. 11). Egan (2002) also criticizes that the recommendations for classroom practices implied by empirical research usually advance definitions of the concept under investigation, leaving the normative question insufficiently examined. Unfortunately, at many times, the “ought” question or what we should do is often taken for granted and rarely raised in the methodology of narrative inquiry.

Lear’s Approach to Significance: “Thick-Thin-Thick”

In stories, I not only hope to learn what is like, but also what is good and what is bad, what is revealed and what is hidden in their jagged edges. My research is about re-searching for the practical identity of a teacher, a problem involving ethical, not merely empirical inquiries. I am then drawn to Lear’s book *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (2006). Lear’s approach to investigating the Crow Chief Plenty Coups’ stories allows me to get to my ethical concerns. Lear’s book (2006) describes how Plenty Coups, the last great chief of the Crow, attempted to lead the Crow out of the abyss of cultural devastation at the end of the 19th century. Plenty Coups re-formed his practical identity as a chief by reconstructing virtues and ideals for the Crow people. The book begins: “After this, nothing happened” (Lear, 2006, p. 2). Plenty Coups explained: “When the buffalo went away, the hearts of my people fell to the ground, and they could not lift them up again” (p. 3). Medicine woman Pretty Shield added: “I am trying to live a life that I do not understand” (p. 56 & p. 61) and Two Leggings elaborated: “Nothing happened after that. We just lived. There were no more war parties, no capturing of horses from the Piegan and the Sioux, no buffalo to hunt. There is nothing more to tell” (p. 56). The radically altered circumstances – the disappearance of the buffalo, being confined to the reservation, and the ban on warfare among tribes – rendered the traditional ideal Crow life impossible. Lear’s response is not anthropological research; instead, he explains:

I am not primarily concerned with what actually happened to the Crow tribe or to any other group. I am concerned rather with the field of possibilities in which all human endeavours gain meaning. This is basically an ethical enquiry into how one should live in relation to a peculiar human possibility. (p. 7)

Lear (2006) admits that his interpretation of the Crow experience is “bleak” (p. 50), and he doesn’t pretend to say what happened to the Crow, or claim to know what Plenty Coups meant by his utterance. He aims instead “to work out in a radical but plausible way what it would be for [Plenty Coups] to have been saying something true” (p. 50) and explains that cultural devastation “is a possibility that marks us as human” (p. 9). Lear wants to know: “How ought we to live with it?” (p. 9) – Can there still be hope in the face of the collapse of a culture? I read Plenty Coups’s story through Lear’s major question and concern: how could we claim renewed meanings and significance?

In *Radical Hope*, Lear describes how the Crow people renewed their own practical identity when they were confined to the reserve. There was no viable cultural framework available to the Crow in the late 19th century. Though much less consequential, my curiosity is whether I could find a more defensible practical identity as a teacher when the current managerial framework of teaching seems to be inadequate. While the problem for Plenty Coups is the mismatch between the warrior way of life and the circumstances of being confined into reserves, mine is a mismatch and inconsistency in my experiences of teaching “successfully” yet still feeling confused and something missing. Unfortunately, I felt myself failing my students every day: I was inadequate to respond to their worries; I targeted at my goals of promoting scores for the sake of helping students, but they, as each unique human being, seemed to disappear into my skillful teaching. As a successful teacher, I then safely hid the vulnerable feelings that were troubling me and instead chose to tell grand stories about marvellous successes and impressive sacrifices. Gradually, I find my puzzles, confusion, uncertainties, and wonders calling my closer attention. They, in contrast with the successful

highlights in my teaching, may seem disconnected, random and unintelligible as if “nothing happened” (Lear, 2006, p. 2), that is, nothing significant or meaningful happened. However disparate and random my feelings might seem, there remains an unsettling moreness in small stories. I accumulate stories that point to meaning and attempt to adapt Lear’s approach to attending to the moreness – something that goes beyond the definition of teaching within the current predominant frameworks. I aim to discover and address the excesses in my stories, that is, the particulars in teaching that could be discovered, reshaped and point to the new significance of an educational experience. Lear describes how Plenty Coups seeks to construct a viable Crow way of life – and the requisite ideals for that life – by creating dialogue between the traditional Crow and the 19th-century Western ethical-political framework in the United States. Following Lear’s lead, I aim to construct a more robust practical identity of a teacher.

Plenty Coups’s search for meaning involved mainly a “thick-thin-thick” approach, which could be considered as the generating passage. He aimed at re-searching for the good and worthwhile life for the Crow by first identifying some virtues (particularly courage) that were integral to the nomadic ideal of Crow people. He then re-listened and attended to the particulars in a new context as they were forced to the reserves. He hoped to see anew the previously irrelevant particulars (thick-thin process). He used the faculty of imagination, characteristic of enigmatic dreams and poetry, to generate possibilities for actions that were consistent with renewed ideals for the Crow. He created a middle ground between cultural ideals, between past and present, to reshape and thicken the new excellences and social roles to suggest new practical identities congruent with a good and worthwhile Crow life in changed circumstances (thin-thick process). To elaborate, Lear shows how Plenty Coups uses the story to understand his original practical identity and then reconceives that identity when it loses viability by identifying the virtues integral to his original practical identity in order to examine or thin the key considerations to find a “middle ground” so that the requisite virtues might be reimagined or thickened. Drawing on Lear’s analysis of Coup’s approach, I reshape and recreate my new practical identity more consistent with leading a good and worthwhile life, a more educationally defensible practical identity as a teacher. This “thick-thin-thick” approach is a spiral and dynamic process which not only allows unpacking the significance embedded in stories and hence points to the renewed virtues and ideals. This, resembling the devastating but transforming moment Plenty Coups encountered, requires us to be both attached to stories and attuned to the particulars (“How ought we to live with it?”), but at the same time detached from them (“After this, nothing happened”) to defamiliarize us with the stories enough to enable the possibilities of understanding and acting differently. The hard looks at and second thoughts about the particulars with openness may alter the prisms and allow us to (re)see, (re)approach, (re)shape and (re)organize the particulars. This could be a risky, yet worth taking approach. It is a transcending and at the same time embedded process: being attentive to our stories, particularly the private, intimate stories that are often not recorded officially. I hope to linger in and expand the conversational space between the particular and frameworks in constant search of the good by going beyond the secure boundaries of defined stories. As Pinar (2004) describes, a conversation is “a passage from here to there and elsewhere, but it is not ‘here’ or ‘there’ or ‘elsewhere,’ but in the conjunctive spaces in-between” (p. 159).

Accordingly, I hope to use Lear’s approach to examine my own teaching stories to determine thick virtues, such as dedication or care; thin those virtues to find a middle ground; and reimagine the virtues in order to create a new – and more ethically defensible – practical identity of a good teacher. In light of Plenty Coups’s approach as described by Lear, I am humbled and attentive, in light of the chickadee’s virtue to appreciate the moments of not understanding and not having answers. I attend to small events and the unsettling stories and prepare to be addressed by the excesses and tensions in my stories, dwelling with the difficulties and imagining new possibilities about a future beyond my immediate grasp. I allow myself to stand on the edge of an abyss between past and present, between self and others, between East and West, and embrace a future life in teaching not yet known. What I hope to explore is a richer practical identity of a teacher beyond the managerial discourse I am most familiar with as a teacher. I hope to explore stories that do not have much (if any) meaning within the existing dominant framework, attend to the excesses in these stories and explore alternate, “not yet” (Pinar, 1998) actions that could be further weaved into a

renewed practical identity. Indeed, my aim is not to “answer” my questions, but to create a richer dialogue about what counts as a good teacher starting from my own questions and stories.

Identifying Thick Virtues

“Nothing happened” (Lear, 2006, p. 2) for the Crow in the absence of an available conceptual world through which events could be organized or shaped in stories. Lear explains that “the issue is that the Crow have lost the concepts with which they would construct a narrative” (p. 32). After their culture collapsed, Plenty Coups, Pretty Shield and Two Leggings continued to exist, but there was no possibility of organizing their actions consistent with an authentic Crow story. Lear suggests “every event in Crow life – even cooking a meal – gained its significance within the larger framework of Crow meaning” (p. 40). Meals could be cooked, but they could no longer be counted as “cooking-of-a-meal-so-that-those-who-ate-it-would-be-healthy-to-hunt-and-fight” (p. 40) when hunting and fighting became impossible. With a ban on intertribal warfare and the disappearance of buffalo, the Crow no longer had the resources necessary to construct an original good Crow life. It is Plenty Coups’ choice of thinning the virtues integral to their old identity as a Crow. He challenged the fundamental assumptions that were merely legitimate in the tribal warfare way of life.

Lear argues that in exercising his leadership Plenty Coups aimed to re-search for good and worthwhile lives again for the Crow by identifying the Crow virtues or excellences associated with traditional social roles. Lear (2006) suggests that there is “a certain plasticity deeply embedded in a culture’s thick conception of courage” (p. 65) and in the normal course of events, a courageous Crow warrior would draw upon his tradition and culture to determine what he could do in order to continue to tell his Crow story. Courage was an equivalent term for bravery in battles – typically associated with the act of counting coups. Counting coups could be regarded as a manifestation of courage in intertribal warfare: one hit one’s enemy with a coup-stick before harming him and forced the recognition of boundaries from the enemy. It strikes the “mean between the defect of wishfully thinking that one has boundaries when one is unwilling or unable to defend them and the excess of slaughtering one’s enemies so quickly that one does not obtain from them recognition of anything” (p. 18).

Accordingly, there are certain thick normative claims for being teachers within the current schooling system. At the Gaokao Oath Meeting, I confirmed a story about education as a managerial and competitive transaction where teachers upgraded students’ marks to win the battle. Ideals within these discourses are consistent with measuring success by elevated test scores initially and ultimately by the preparation and placement of suitable human resources for the job market. Consequently, teachers are expected to develop and exercise competencies such as effectiveness, efficiency, accountability and productivity, all consistent with preparing their students for the next steps of schooling (measured by standardized tests) and then the workplace. These are then considered as teachers’ virtues. Within such a regime, a thick understanding of a teacher’s care for her students could be the teacher’s giving extra tutoring to her students in order to help them succeed in their examinations; a thick understanding of a teacher’s wisdom could be the teacher’s mastery of the subject knowledge, teaching skills and classroom management; a thick understanding of a teacher’s perseverance could be the teacher still teaching even when she was sick because she was afraid that her class’ academic performance would fall behind schedule; a thick understanding of a teacher’s pride could be measured by the test results of the students. However, all these seemed to “fall woefully short” (Curlin, 2016, p. 74) of the defensible practical identity of a good teacher. My confusion and wonder prompted me to be more aware and possibly have “a second thought”.

Identifying and suspending the current thick ideals and virtues of successful teaching helped create room for alternate excellences to emerge. When I felt uneasy, troubled and uncertain, I paid attention to something wrong about or something missing from the densely identified virtues. With my confusion and uneasiness, I kept a distance from the current thick excellences and ideals in order to witness them and possibly thin them out. This means that I was not totally submerged in or defined by them so that I could be more aware. For Plenty Coups, it is about being aware that the Crow virtues which had been defined in the warfare context (e.g. courage) had to be transformed with the paradigm shifting; while for me as a teacher, it is about being aware that a teacher’s virtues have the possibility and even urgency to be

reimagined. Current thick excellences, such as dedication, care, perseverance, and pride within a managerial framework, are to be challenged, suspended, questioned and thereby thinned when we ask the fundamental questions of for what purposes we teach – for scores? jobs? skills? successes? – to inquire whether something meaningful is missing, distorted or wrong.

Re-Listening to the Particulars (Thinning Process)

With the abrupt transition to life in reserves, Crow stories about courage were disrupted, discarded and hence lost their significance – a thick understanding of courage became impossible. Stories became fragmented – a Crow warrior would no longer tell an original Crow story in the absence of a viable cultural scheme; however, the possibility of no longer understanding could also contribute to the thinning of Crow virtues in order to re-understand them. According to Misgeld and Jardine (1989), “I must live with the practical possibility of becoming speechless; to understand, I must live with the possibility of no longer understanding” (p. 268). Plenty Coups played the “doubting game” (Elbow, 1973) in the thinning process: He asked: “What is wrong?” “What is missing?” “What is not enough?” to generate new possibilities.

In contrast, Sitting Bull, the last chief of the Sioux Nation, chose to hold onto the thick concept of courage as defined within the warrior ideal. Both Plenty Coups and Sitting Bull saw the ghosts of the buffalo. For Plenty Coups, the vision signified that the buffalo were going away forever, while for Sitting Bull and his Sioux followers, the dream meant that the buffalo were coming back. In consequence, Sitting Bull insisted that the Ghost Dance would continue: “Participants would dance into a frenzy and continue until they dropped of exhaustion; they wore ghost shirts that would protect them from bullets; they abandoned all other activities in order to bring about this cataclysm” (Lear, 2006, p. 149). Rather than holding onto the thick version of courage like Sitting Bull, Plenty Coups was able to thin out the concept of courage for its renewal. Being human inevitably involves risk, so courage as the capacity to “live well with the risks that inevitably attend human existence” (p. 121) remains an essential human virtue, but it has to undergo a transformation. In particular, there has to be a thinning out of what has been a thick concept. Plenty Coups had to come to understand courage beyond counting coups. He had to draw on his own inner resources to “broaden his understanding of what courage might be . . . [in order to] face circumstances courageously that the older thick conception never envisaged” (p. 65).

In response to his quest, Plenty Coups was told in a dream that to survive he must follow the example of the chickadee; a bird that learned from others, but exactly what he needed to learn was left unclear. The chickadee was a good listener: “Nothing escapes his ears, which he has sharpened by constant use” (Lear, 2006, p. 80) and through listening, Plenty Coups was able to detect the excesses in the Crow stories and uncover new significance. Plenty Coups also had a dream of listening to a man-person who provided a vision of a new world, radically different from the one Plenty Coups was used to. The man-person seemed to be “one of Plenty Coups’s internalized others” (p. 89). Lear elaborates:

This was a creature in Plenty Coups’s imaginative world who commanded authority for him and who gave him advice. It was a voice and vision he respected. And the Man taught openness to and acceptance of the destruction of young Plenty Coups’s familiar world. (pp. 89–90)

Plenty Coups not merely recognized and appreciated the genuine wisdom of others; he listened to his own as well. Ultimately, he listened and re-listened to the particulars: what particulars that had been hidden were then noticed; and how particulars could be reshaped under the new circumstances were then reimagined. The meals used to be cooked as praise and recognition for the courage of the warriors; however, with the unavailability of the warfare, the particularities in meal cooking had the potential to be recognized and reorganized to redefine courage. Those who cooked and enjoyed the meals had the courage to live their new way of life and made meaning. The virtue of courage was transformed from cooking for warriors to kill the enemies in warfare to cooking each meal carefully and hopefully in the face of cultural devastation. Cooking meals could be re-seen as a way to show love towards their family members, as creating a gathering place for people to communicate their feelings and thoughts, as an artistic and creative process to

be enjoyed. He re-listened to others as well as himself with openness to detect the previously hidden particulars and the renewed meanings embedded in them. Rather than cling tightly to the previous Crow ideal, Plenty Coups lingered in the liminal undecided space and listened carefully to the calling of the particular “[hoping] something good will come of it” (p. 82).

The stories from my teaching were not research data to be analyzed and generalized from, but events with texture and particularity that might point to the significance and might lead to a better understanding of the excellences and ideals involved in being a good teacher. My encounters with particular students or dwelling in the particular moments seemed to constantly make demand upon me to re-listen to them, which involves openness and closer attention. I render myself vulnerable and receptive, and ready to be addressed or educated by the particulars, the particular people and the particular moments, so that I could hear them differently. Following the chickadee, I hope to hear anew my virtues as a teacher after holding a bit longer to my feelings of confusion and insufficiency after I gave a successful talk about “successful” stories in the oath meeting. I would hear the neglected or taken-for-granted particulars – like my ephemeral feelings, and the students’ complaints and quietness. The confused feelings are not something to be conquered by certainty and control. Rather, they could lead to my ethical awareness about what is good; the complaint of a student may not be merely a sign of “more efforts needed” but might be heard as a chance to have an open conversation; the silence could also be heard as a message or a reminder which conveys something to me as a teacher. I manage to cultivate more awareness and sensitivity in my dedication to teaching. Like Plenty Coups who allowed himself to be disoriented in his dreams, I would de-familiarize myself from the familiar. I would refuse the temptation to coincide with what it appeared to me and what was expected from me, and would search for a thinner, but more coherent, understanding of a good teacher. I would be able to have a second thought about what is good in reshaping the particulars, which could extend the parameters delimited by the successful stories. Indeed, I understand education is not a grand theory for us to master and then apply, but a never-ending quest for us to witness and reflect upon our own lives, our own unsettling little stories, in relationship with other people in order to live well and with the possibility to transcend our “reality”. Just as Plenty Coups re-listened to a Crow meal to redefine and enrich the Crow virtue of courage, I attend to a smile, a frown, and eye contact in my teaching stories to generate new meanings in them.

Imagining New Possibilities (Thickening Process)

The Crow drew upon their own inner resources – and especially the faculty of imagination characteristic of dreams and poetry – to expand their original understanding of roles, excellences and practical identities consistent with a flourishing Crow life. They were able to tell stories in light of a good life that the older conception of a good Crow life never envisaged.

Crow Dreams. Dreams, for the Crow, were rich in meaning and could reveal what was hidden from the ordinary conscious life; at the same time, dreams remained enigmatic because they conveyed messages from the spiritual world that were not fully intelligible. Dreams were used to “struggle with the intelligibility of events that lay at the horizon of their ability to understand” (Lear, 2006, p. 68), extending reality and anticipating a future they did not yet know how to think about. For the Crow, “the visions one had in a dream could provide access to the order of the world beyond anything available to ordinary conscious understanding” (p. 66).

As a youth, Plenty Coups had a dream that predicted the end of a way of life: “If their way of life was coming to an end, if a huge storm was coming, the dream itself gave them reason to think that there was much about what was going to happen that they did not yet understand” (Lear, 2006, p. 75). Because of uncertainty about what was going to happen, Lear suggests, Plenty Coups’s dream was a manifestation of anxiety characteristic of “enigmatic unclarity” (p. 76) and “would be an appropriate response of people who were sensitive to the idea that they were living at the horizons of their world” (p. 76). I believe the dream vision both connected the Crow with their narrative past and afforded them the imaginative opportunity to search for possible alternatives to redefine their cultural scheme in a dramatically changing context. Dreams offered the Crow a particular form of hope. The dream “didn’t predict any particular event, but the change of the world order” (p. 69) and gave the tribe “imaginative tools with which to endure a conceptual onslaught” (p. 79). Through his dream and his fidelity to it, Plenty Coups was able to “transform the

destruction of a telos to a teleological suspension of the ethical” (p. 146), bearing witness to the end of a traditional way of life and allowing him to reconceive a Crow telos.

As a teacher, I always wonder and imagine - dream about - what I could do otherwise in my teaching and, ultimately, about who I am as a teacher. I struggle with the intelligibility of my teaching on the edge of my everyday teaching horizons. The dream vision helped connect my lived narratives of teaching with possible alternative frameworks. I follow Plenty Coups’s practice of using enigmatic dreams to imagine possible actions and envision something meaningful in a future that I am yet to understand.

Crow Poetry. Planting a coup stick may seem to have lost its intelligibility when the warrior life disappeared, but that did not mean that nothing could ever count as counting coups again. Lear embraces the role of a new Crow poet, “one who could take up the Crow past and – rather than use it for nostalgia and ersatz mimesis – project it into vibrant new ways for the Crow to live and to be” (Lear, 2006, p. 51). Lear observes “the possibility for such a poet is precisely the possibility for the creation of a new field of possibilities” (p. 51). When Plenty Coups buried his coup-stick at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Washington, he did not disavow Crow traditions, but he aimed to “clear the ground for a rebirth” (p. 51). Crow poets tried to create or re-invent, not to destroy their traditions – rather than entombing the past, Plenty Coups reactivated the past, brought it to the present and illuminated a future. As a poet, Plenty Coups was able to take a valued traditional and spiritual icon and put it to new use to confront new challenges; he offered the Crow a way of going forward by drawing upon the past “in vibrant ways” (p. 154).

In my (re)partaking the little stories, in the spirit of a Crow poet, I try to act anew. My students’ studying long hours and finally being admitted to the top universities could be questioned whether it is to reproduce the fantastic school myths; a sick teacher still going to work in order to make sure that her class would not fall behind could be re-examined beyond the accountability trap; my successful talk at the oath meeting could be re-seen as a puppet show in which I was manipulated by the institutional demands. After questioning and challenging the taken-for-granted, with a poetic touch, I re-see my care for my student in throwing a jacket over his shoulder as he fell asleep in my class; I re-see my dedication to teaching in my trying hard to remember each student’s name before stepping into the classroom for the first lesson; I re-see my courage in taking my students to a spring outdoor trip even if my school is not in favour of it because of safety concerns; I re-see my frustrations as opportunities to think and act differently rather than merely negative feelings to be hidden or dismissed quickly. Re-seeing the particulars with chickadee’s wings’ of imagination helps me think and act differently. The hardened managerial and technological frameworks are to be shaken and softened by the uncertainty and vulnerability of a teacher. I hope to loosen my grasp about what is prescribed or required for my teaching in a constant quest of what is good and what is desirable.

Thickening the Virtues

Given that the Crow “had no larger framework of significance into which (events) could fit” (Lear, 2006, p. 41), stories lost viability and meanings and there were no more stories to be told. With the depletion of the warfare framework, Lear asks “Among the warriors, is there a warrior?” (p. 44) when the responsibilities of a warrior were indeterminate; he asks, “Among the chiefs, is there a chief?” (p. 45) when it became unclear what a chief was supposed to do; he asks “Among the squaws, is there a squaw?” (p. 46) when the basic patterns of upbringing were threatened. Finally, he asks “Among the Crow, is there a Crow?” (p. 46) when the roles and excellences necessary for an original and authentic Crow story became unachievable.

Plenty Coups demonstrated the rare achievement of making sense of his life again in the face of cultural devastation and made efforts to construct his practical identity. In childhood, he aspired to become a great Crow chief and applied himself to acquiring the excellences to make his dreams come true. In early manhood, for example, he became a great hunter and warrior by mastering and exercising the requisite virtues and skills, including tracking games and demonstrating physical courage on the battlefield. Later, when the Crow culture had been taken away and it became unclear what a chief was supposed to do, Plenty Coups struggled to define the paradigms of a Crow chief with its renewed stories. Plenty Coups searched for and shaped himself in the never-ending story of a Crow chief in different circumstances. A Crow subject involves “constituting oneself as a certain sort of person – namely, one who embodies the ideals” (p. 42)

by fulfilling the requisite roles in an exemplary manner. It is “a steadfast commitment stretching over much of one’s life to organize one’s life in relation to ideals” (p. 43).

Much of *Radical Hope* examines Plenty Coups’s leadership of the Crow in pursuit of a new, yet still authentic, Crow life. Cultural demise prompted the Crow to draw wisdom from their original warrior life in order to create ideals consistent with a good and worthwhile Crow life in radically changed circumstances. In contrast to Sitting Bull and his Sioux followers’ wish-fulfilling way of preserving the traditional way of life, Plenty Coups engaged with the new reality and provided the requisite political-ethical-epistemological-educational leadership to generate a new cultural ideal and framework consistent with the remaining Crow, allowing for new possibilities to act: to (re)tell Crow stories with significance and (re)form the practical identity for the Crow.

To make virtues thick again is not simply borrowing the thick concepts of another culture; otherwise, one might experience “a radical discontinuity with one’s past” and “experience a rip in the fabric of one’s self” (Lear, 2006, p. 65). For the Crow, the thickening process involved “drawing upon their own traditions in novel ways in the face of novel challenges” (p. 65–66). When Plenty Coups encouraged Crow youths to go to white men’s schools, he idealized neither the white men nor his own tribe. He intended that the young should learn not just the white people’s successful skills and values, but also their failures and prejudices. Plenty Coups suggested: “With all his powers, the white man is not wise. He is smart but not wise” (p. 139) and he was no easier on his own tribe: “You who once were brave have turned into pigs . . . Stop mourning the old days, they are gone with the buffalo . . . clean out your dirty lodges and go to work!” (p. 139–140)

Thickening the virtues involves moving from an “excluded middle” to finding a middle ground that would allow for reconceiving Crow virtues and roles and integrating them into new practical identities congruent with new conceptions of a flourishing Crow life. Prior to being confined in the reservation in the 1880s, the Crow had an understanding of what was counted as a flourishing life that was largely defined by successes in hunting and war. In battle, for example, everyone in the tribe knew that “either our warriors will be able to plant their coup-sticks or they will fail” (Lear, 2006, p. 25). Lear calls this “the law of excluded middle” (p. 25). For the Crow, all the possibilities were exhausted in the success or failure in warfare; however, when the Crow were moved to the reserves, they ran out of living possibilities defined by their nomadic way of life. Their “gamble with necessity” (p. 26) – that one would continue to be able to judge success or failure in their familiar terms – was under pressure and the law of excluded middle became problematic. Beginning with their initial encounter with white people, the Crow tried to find a middle ground: for example, the Crow adopted Larocque, a French-Canadian trader, who brought them axes and knives, into the tribe. To recover the middle ground, Richard White writes (1999):

The middle ground is the place in between: in between cultures, peoples, and in between empires and the non-state world of villages. . . . On the middle ground diverse peoples adjust their differences through what amounts to a process of creative, and often expedient, misunderstandings . . . [and] from these misunderstandings arise new meanings and through them new practices – the shared meanings and practices of the middle ground. (p. x)

While Plenty Coups chose to thicken Crow virtues in a search for a middle ground, Sitting Bull chose to hold onto original Sioux virtues (Lear, 2006, p. 105–106). Sitting Bull insisted that Sioux leaders would never cooperate with the American government, an effort that he characterized as surrendering and sacrificing loyalty to their original life. He “used a dream-vision to short-circuit reality rather than to engage with it” (p. 150) by, for example, refusing to admit the buffalo had disappeared. He fuelled the Ghost Dance in a wishful way to “avoid the real life demands that confront one in the every day” (p. 152). Sitting Bull’s approach led to a disaster. In contrast, Plenty Coups had the moral and political courage to acknowledge the destruction of the original ways of living a good Crow life and led his tribe toward a middle ground, that is, he was able to redefine some of the traditional warrior ideals in a new context, an effort perhaps best exemplified by laying down his coup-stick and his headdress at the dedication ceremony for the unknown soldier. Plenty Coups explained:

For the Indians of America, I call upon the Great Spirit of the Red men with gesture and tribal tongue: That the dead should not have died in vain; That war might end; That peace be purchased by the blood of Red Men and White. (p. 153)

The Crow stopped performing their Sun Dance in 1875 and when it was re-introduced in 1941, they had to learn the steps of the Shoshone version and the dance was then organized around heartfelt requests, including, for example, that a young girl survived a heart operation (Lear, 2006). Crow courage had shifted from exhibiting bravery in a battle to protecting the fruits of peace and Crow rituals had changed from praying for revenge to praying for the recovery of a sick child.

Plenty Coups responded to his times by facing the loss of meaning in a cultural catastrophe. He suspended the original thick Crow understandings of courage by acknowledging the impossible act of planting coup-sticks again, but still found room to act courageously in radically different circumstances. With the transforming virtue of courage – beginning with a thick notion of courage, thinning it out and then thickening its meanings in a new context – Plenty Coups was able to live a good Crow life with integrity.

My experience of being schooled in both China and Canada might contribute to my search for the middle ground. The middle ground does not imply meeting somewhere in between. I understand that Plenty Coups' middle ground is to draw on his own tradition and reinvent them in a new context: to reactivate the past in the present (Pinar, 2013). Plenty Coups's middle ground is also about paying close attention to the particular and integrating new imaginations and possibilities to reinterpret and reshape particular experiences. I am looking for possibilities to (re)organize the renewed teachers' actions and (re)construct deeper and more adequate ideals to generate my new practical identity as a teacher.

My parents grew up in China in the 1960s during the great proletarian Cultural Revolution and experienced a highly authoritarian political regime. Born in the 1980s, I grew up in a society going through rapid economic development and marketization. My elder son, born in 2008 in China, moved to Canada when he was two years old, and my second son, eight years younger than his brother, was born and raised in Canada. My parents who do not speak English at all help babysit them a lot. Intergenerational and intercultural conversations are happening in my family every day. As a teacher, I experienced difficult moments in my encounters with my students when I taught at a high school in Beijing China; as a daughter, I observed my mother as a teacher; as a student, I had conversations with my teachers and witnessed their practices in both China and Canada; as a mother, I am being questioned and challenged by Marvin, my elder son, who is being schooled in Canada. Ironically, after Marvin returned from school each day, I often asked him: "How was your school day? Was it good?" Now, I realize this raises question about what counts as good. Little unsettling teaching stories rooted in diverse historical, political and cultural backgrounds from very different wisdom traditions can help me to continue to thicken understandings about teaching. I hope my attempts at creating hermeneutic dialogues can help me not only link the particulars in my stories with the general frameworks but also generate possibilities of creating new – and perhaps better – notions and ideals of teaching. Judging among different schemata still must assume (at least provisionally) the validity and totality of the frameworks; however, no ethical framework (or story) can be comprehensive: surpluses always remain. I do not aim to exhaust the possible meanings in my stories or provide any immediate or perfect solutions to the difficulties, but with radical hope, I hope that my explorations extend and deepen the dialogues about teaching, as a human being who participate "in a shared reality" (Greene, 1978, p. 55).

I see possibilities of thickening my teacher virtues: my dedication as sharing my favourite novel with a student who read a novel in math class, my courage as telling the school principal how I really felt about my "successful" speech, my genuineness as sharing of the frustrations and confusion with my students and colleagues, my creativity as making sense of my life between different cultures and generations. I re-interpret my different roles as a teacher, a mother, and a daughter, all of which could be weaved towards a renewed practical identity of a teacher in more intimate and genuine ways. Thickening the virtues is not about measuring or objectifying people with uniform prescribed standards, but acknowledging each person's uniqueness and every context's particularity with openness, care and respect. What needs to be noted is that the thickening process must always leave room for a thinning process to take place at the same

time. I engage myself in the ongoing conversations with others and with myself about how each of us thinks about what counts as good, just as Plenty Coups had to revise the original framework of a Crow life to reconstitute himself as a Crow chief. I allow my own practical identity as a teacher to be reshaped and reformed in each new possible action. I allow myself to yield to the particular moments with a second thought to become a better teacher.

CONCLUSION

Following Lear, I am not trying to search for the empirical truth, but rather to claim significance and make discernment. I am reminded of Lear's utterance, "ultimately, [my project] is concerned with ought rather than is" (2006, p. 9). There is no quick recipe for answers, yet I hope to adopt Plenty Coups's thick-thin-thick approach to pursue teachers' practical identities with humility and openness. Understanding teaching as making constant quests to (re)form teachers' practical identities undoubtedly has significant implications for teaching and teacher education today.

Primarily, teachers' stories would be noted to solicit meanings or make claims on significance rather than be analyzed to produce data. Paying closer attention to the stories we encounter as teachers would allow us to notice the particulars we used to neglect and hence reshape them to generate renewed actions. We form our own practical identities as teachers in interrogating our stories, recreating and reliving them. A teacher's practical identity means much more than prescribed duties or roles. It embodies the teaching ideals (re)formed by each of our actions in pursuit of what is good and worthwhile. This is a never-ending ethical task. As teachers, we are encouraged not only to share our stories, vulnerable, intimate and confusing stories of teaching, with others who are probably faced with similar challenges, but also to keep a distance from our own stories, interrogate them to distinguish the good from the bad in our continued ethical quests. We are together in our uniqueness and live a shared reality. In this shared reality, we will find meanings that are embedded in and simultaneously transcend our own stories to generate more possible actions.

Reading Radical Hope methodologically, I hope to go beyond the "here" of the stories and the "there" of constructing a fixed practical identity of a teacher. I aspire to dwell in their dynamic tension among the intertwined and recursive thinning and thickening processes by searching for the excess in stories and being detached from and re-attached to the stories that generate new possible actions and ideals. I am exploring the dynamics in-between while having a glimpse of the glowing light of the good as a teacher.

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