Persistence Like a Mother: Nursing the Narrative toward Doctoral Completion in English Education—A Poetic Autoethnography

Krista S. Mallo

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Persistence Like a Mother: Nursing the Narrative toward Doctoral Completion in English Education—A Poetic Autoethnography

by

Krista S. Mallo

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Curriculum and Instruction with a concentration in English Education
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Date of Approval:
November 4, 2020

Keywords: EE DocMama, Motherscholar, Pragmatist Feminism, Autonomous Learner

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DEDICATION

This project is wholly dedicated to my incredible children, the fantastic five, without whom I would have no concept of what it means to have persistence like a mother. First, Dominic, who first made me a mother and daily challenges my belief that any limits in life even exist. For Faith, who inspires me to be the mom she sees in me already, even when it seems impossible. For Angela, whose smile and enthusiasm for life paint the horizon more beautiful just for her being in my world. For Christopher and Brooklyn, both of whom lay soundly across my heart many nights through the nursing hours as we worked through the narrative of Mommy’s doctoral program.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I could not have accomplished this work without the love, support, and encouragement from the love of my life, Chad. It cannot be easy living with an absent-minded professor. You put up with my crazy schedule, my crazy dreams, and all my other crazies, and you still love me like crazy.

And Mom, who did not get a chance to see me walk across the stage because of the pandemic, but instead, together we had the honor of ushering Dad across to his next stage. I can still clearly hear his smiling blue eyes calling me Doc.

My advisor, my encourager, and my guide, Dr. Pat Jones-- you took a chance on me from the very beginning, and I am so thankful that you did so, along with Dr. Michael Sherry, whose countenance has been level-headed at every turn of the way. You are a rock of peace in rough waters. Dr. Jenni Wolgemuth-- you inspire me more than you will ever know, and for your last minute change of heart, willingness to give your time and energy to support me I will be forever grateful. Along with Dr. Mandie Dunn, who came into my life at just the right moment for just the right purpose and made me realize the value of my project was so much bigger than myself. Finally, and above all else, to God be the glory, in the name of Christ Jesus. You called me to this, and You brought me through this. All glory and honor are yours now and forever.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TABLE OF CONTENTS</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER ONE  CONCEPTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coming to Terms</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Education doctoral program</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EE DocMama</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother/ mothering/ motherhood.</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nursing</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistence</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poetic autoethnography</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rationale and Purpose</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Assumptions</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Framework</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER TWO  EXPECTING—OR LEARNING FROM OTHERS</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Did We Get Here?—The Exposition</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Something Wasn’t Right—The Rising Action</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Turning Point—The Climax</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working Things Out and Moving Forward—The Falling Action</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life at the Intersection—Denouement</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER THREE  HOW THE STORY UNFOLDS</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overview of the Study—Plot Summary</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Method of Analysis</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voices and Personas</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethics, Diversity and Positionality</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Evidence</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potential Limitations</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER FOUR: DEVELOPMENTAL MILESTONES</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White House Letter Postmarked November 15, 2001</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beacon of Freedom</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Hurricane Lane</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survival Song</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Out of Tune ......................................................................................... 46
Second Year of Grad School ................................................................. 48
Planning the Perfect Year .................................................................. 50
October 2003 ....................................................................................... 51
Pregnant Pause ................................................................................. 52
New Heights ....................................................................................... 55
Routine Mothering ........................................................................... 57
Vicarious Trauma .............................................................................. 58
Dream Job Turned Nightmare ............................................................ 60
Shameless Interview ........................................................................ 61
Irony .................................................................................................... 62
Distinguished Scholar ....................................................................... 63
Banquet Night .................................................................................... 64
Halfway Point ..................................................................................... 67
Permanent Adjunct ........................................................................... 69
6pm Exchange ................................................................................... 70
Fast Forward Rewind ........................................................................ 70
That Time When I Schooled the Teachers ......................................... 72
Kylene to My Rescue ........................................................................ 73
Snapshot ............................................................................................. 73
Apple Plates ....................................................................................... 74
Gypsy Dishes ..................................................................................... 75
Bildungsroman .................................................................................... 76
Collision .............................................................................................. 78
Residual Wreckage ............................................................................. 78
Grad Grad ........................................................................................... 79
Wisdom from Above .......................................................................... 81
Psalm 127 Scars ................................................................................ 81
Called to Chaos .................................................................................. 82
Pack-N-Play ....................................................................................... 84
Mother to Mother .............................................................................. 84
The Narrative of Nursing ................................................................... 85
Bookstacks on Deerberry ................................................................... 86
Goodnight Lunar Friend .................................................................... 87
Clear the Stacks ................................................................................ 88
The English Teacher Sees ................................................................. 90
A Mother Knows .............................................................................. 90
A Doctoral Student Feels .................................................................. 91

CHAPTER FIVE: EE DOCMAMA SPEAKS OF HERSELF ................................................................. 92
The Heart of the EE DocMama ............................................................ 92
The Poetic Power of Persistence: Like a Mother ......................... 93

EPILOGUE: THE NARRATIVE UNLATCHED ........................................................................ 97

REFERENCES .................................................................................. 100
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. “Letter from the President.” ................................................................. 39
Figure 2. “Encouragement from a Professor.” .................................................. 44
Figure 3. “Lesson Plans.” .................................................................................. 49
Figure 4. “Yearbook from Fivay High School 2012.” ........................................ 54
Figure 5. “Termination Letter.” ......................................................................... 59
Figure 6. “Distinguished Scholar Award.” .......................................................... 63
Figure 7. “Adjunct ID Badge.” .......................................................................... 68
Figure 8. “Syllabus from a Teacher Education Course.” .................................... 71
Figure 9. “Apple Plates.” .................................................................................. 74
Figure 10. “Car Crash.” .................................................................................... 77
Figure 11. “Bible.” ............................................................................................ 80
Figure 12. “Pack N Play.” ................................................................................ 83
Figure 13. “Bookstacks.” ................................................................................ 86
Figure 14. “Baby’s Hand in Mine.” ................................................................... 89
ABSTRACT

In this poetic autoethnography, exploration of the feeling and the experience of developing persistence as an English Education doctoral student mother is expressed through analysis of artifacts gathered over a 20-year period inclusive of the years of graduate study, becoming and remaining an English teacher and professor, while paralleling the mothering years. A metaphorical parallel is established between breastfeeding and completing the doctoral degree, thus the phrase "nursing the narrative." Expression is storied through poetry in the voices of the persona of the English teacher, the mother, the doctoral student, and the intersectionality of the roles of each as the EE DocMama, which is the English Education Doctoral Student Mother.
CHAPTER ONE
CONCEPTION

Background

When I came into the English Education doctoral degree program, I was very apprehensive. I had seen cinematic and literary versions of the stereotypical graduate school professor enough times in my life to know two things: 1) I did not want to be in his class and 2) I did not want to be like him. Even as I write these words on the page, pausing to type carefully hi-s, I acknowledge that I had to exercise a bit of cognitive dissonance. Afterall, I had been an English teacher at various levels for nearly 14 years by this time, and in that time, I could probably count the number of men who had been my colleagues in my own discipline on one hand. I suppose there was some juxtaposition in my mind of the professors who I had in my joint program English literature courses during my Master's program. Most of them had been men.

When I did a brief stint as an adjunct instructor in the University’s First-Year Composition program, run by the English department in the College of Arts & Sciences, my boss, the program director, was a man. While I realize that my own personal background of having been harassed both in workplaces and in classrooms over the years has given me a strong initial distrust of some men, I think what I was actually apprehensive about was not about the maleness of the potential leaders of my program, but that it was really more about how different from myself I imagined they would be.

My experience since beginning this program in 2014 has been one of many disturbances. There have been factors within my coursework that have pushed me to my intellectual limits, and
there have been moments of life (the birth of my sweet baby girl) and death (of my father) just happening in their designated times, in the whirlwind of this world, not pausing to consider how I might feel about it at all. And I can say with all honesty, that regardless of how much I have been stretched to my absolute limits in this journey, nothing I have actually experienced in real life has ever lived up to the imagined fear that I held so tightly during the initial semesters of the program.

I had imagined the plump, white-haired (though mostly balding), bombastic man shoving a mile-high pile of books at my face atop my desk and demanding that I ought to read the sophomoric-naiveté right out of myself, telling me that my papers were decently written though desperately unoriginal . . . As it turns out, in all my 72 credit hours of the program, I only had one professor who was even within arm’s reach of that gentleman. I had two classes with him.

Then he retired. Then I celebrated on behalf of all the female Christian grad students who would ever go through that department from then on forward. He had been an atheist, and he thought it would be good of me to be one as well, which I am not—which he seemed to harp on every chance he could—anyway, he was not in the English Education department, so I will save the remains of that story for another day (or perhaps a future publication).

In the case of Professor White Hair, it wasn’t so much his attitude about my spiritual beliefs or the way he assumed we could all read at the speed of light (27 novels in 8 weeks is no exaggeration!) that bothered me; it was simply that he was so different from me. As a professor to my own students, I dare them to read deeply, soaking up every word, every em-dash, every comma, and lingering from one word to the next before daring to move on—our words are not disposable, I remind them. I encourage them to connect the words on a page to the words in their hearts and, lingering, let those words last like life lived without them would be worthless. So,
when I had to sit through one class with Professor White Hair at the start of my program, I thought, “well, it’s just one class,” until the second class came around a year later.

Had there been a third class required with that professor, I would not have taken it. That would have been one of those pivotal moments in life where the choice has no going back. But I say with certainty, I could not have taken a third class with him. . . he was just too different from me. But what came of my time in those classes with Professor White Hair was an everlasting symbolic representation of myself in relation to the Academe.

I was 35 years old.

Academe must have been at least 70.

I was a mother.

I do not know whether Academe was a grandfather.

I was a wife.

I do not know whether Academe had a wife,

But I knew how he treated women,

So, I felt sorry for her if she did exist.

I had a baby.

He made me cry like one. . .

And throughout my time spent in the presence of the Academe, I learned to cut through the alabaster of historical difference to make my own way forward, persisting like a single drop of a river cutting a canyon into the map of the roughest terrain.

Coming to Terms

The following are terms that I will use throughout my study. I provide this list as a point of reference and for clarification.
English Education doctoral program.

This refers to my doctoral degree program at the University of South Florida. The full name of the program is Curriculum & Instruction, emphasis in English Education. For smoother syntax, I choose to use the shortened name, which also focuses on the emphasis of the degree program. While I am writing from a personal perspective, I also suggest that “English Education” may also refer to any of many closely named doctoral programs in other institutions, which may include Secondary Teacher Education, Literacy Education, Language Arts Education, etc.

EE DocMama.

This is a woman who is a mother and a student at any stage of an English Education doctoral program. The EE is an appendage that I have added to the “DocMama” used by CohenMiller in her (2014) dissertation. She uses “DocMama” as the label for a student who became a mother for the first time at any point during her doctoral program of study. In later work (2018), CohenMiller expands her studies to include motherscholars, although the same participants were included in the study, albeit at a different position within their scholarly careers. She speaks of motherscholars as being mothers who are professors of any rank or who engaged in post-doctoral work in the academe. For my study, EE DocMama refers to a woman who has been mothering or begins to mother at any point during her English Education doctoral program of study.

Mother/ mothering/ motherhood.

These are verbs. Mother is an activity that does not conclude. For the purpose of this study, there is not a sense of “being a mother,” rather, the participant is “doing motherhood” or she is “mothering,” or she will “mother” all through the days and nights. There is no separation
of mothering from the person doing the active role of mothering. This is a constant, perpetual state of doing rather than being.

**Nursing.**

When I use this term, I am referring to the act of breastfeeding a baby or young child. I am not referring to the medical practice of nursing, although I may also use the term to refer to a slow-moving process of accomplishing or completing a task, as in the case of *nursing the narrative.*

**Persistence.**

This is the psychological habit of mind that pushes a student forward towards completion of a degree program despite the difficulties faced along the way. This is like resilience and grit, but it is also different from each of these. Martin and Marsh (2009) explain thoroughly the history of the usage of the term *resilience,* and they discuss how this term is applied to significant and long-term challenges faced by a learner, such as a learning disability or sustained economic disadvantage. Grit, however, is defined as “passion and perseverance for long-term goals” (Clark & Malecki, 2019), and includes perseverance and consistency of interests. Howard and Crayne (2019) notably clarify the ways that persistence differs from grit. Whereas grit involves the passion to continue moving forward, and resilience involves the ability to continue moving forward, persistence refers to the psychological fortitude to not only continue moving forward toward the goal but also the desire to move forward despite the obstacles presented. Persistence allows us to see the achievement of the ultimate goal as having potential benefit that outweighs the risk involved with the potential obstacles along the way.
Poetic autoethnography.

This is the methodology I will employ for my study. I am the main character of this narrative, and I will be conducting an analysis of artifacts from my career as an English teacher/professor/doctoral student mother. The artifacts will be narratively analyzed from a pragmatist feminist perspective and then poetically storied from the persona of myself as one who mothers in order to narrate the development of my persistence in parallel through motherhood and doctoral study.

Rationale and Purpose

The purpose of this study is to build compassion, empathy, and understanding of the experience of being an EE DocMama. I want to show what it feels like to mother through the doctoral journey. I want to show what it feels like to take this journey while mothering. The feelings are all-encompassing—100% times two. The development of my persistence in my doctoral program has mirrored my experience as a mother, and I hope to demonstrate what this feels like using narrative poetry, situated within the social construct of the academe. The story is mine completely, but I will use the multiple voices of my various roles to demonstrate the intersectionality that exists within the experience of an EE DocMama. Multiple voices will reside within a single, intersecting story.

The main purpose of my study will be to weave a world of wonders, sweeping you, my reader, completely into my experience, exposing the extensive and excessively painful persistence it has taken to bring me through to doctoral completion. I invite you to come alongside me, to wipe your eyes when you see that I was filled with anguish. I invite you to wholeheartedly bellyache laugh when you see the humor in my awkward anxiety.
It is indeed a lofty goal, but when I reach the end of this road, I want you to feel as though you just drove a million miles to an orange-violet streaked sunset on the western horizon awash with the sands of time.

Significance

In 2003, Safarik, Wolgemuth, and Kees conducted a meta-analysis which concluded that not enough had been done to equip graduate students for the study of women’s issues in higher education. Though their study had looked at scholarship produced in the decade 1990-2000, and another 20 years have passed since then, not enough has changed. Some scholars, like Jane Edwards (2017) help us understand that documenting the “insidiousness of sexism in higher education” is the “antidote to the pain and internalized suffering induced by silence” (Ahmed, 2015 qtd. in Edwards, 2017, p. 632).

Yet, there are women like me who experience the sexism of higher education in seemingly odd ways—the way my heart nearly leapt from my chest the night I was up for my annual review . . .

I presented last because I could not find my voice. It was stuck smack dab in the center of my pregnant gut. No one knew my secret yet, but, as part of the review, I was supposed to discuss my upcoming year and the research agenda I was hoping to make headway on. How could I even think about research for the upcoming year when I was not even convinced in my own head that I would return to my studies once the baby was born? I say this was a moment that I experienced sexism because whatever the academe was like up until that evening, all I knew was that graduate study was hostile to pregnant women. I say it was odd because the actual reaction I received from my peers and my professors was overwhelmingly congratulatory. Could they have known just how greatly the odds were stacked against me ever completing my doctoral
degree? So, while I heard them say, “Congratulations,” what I felt them say was “Oh bummer! You’ll never finish!”--and I believed that they would not want me back after the baby was born.

When Mandie Dunn (2019) executed the interviews of English teachers for her dissertation, she recalls being “completely wrecked . . . rendered unable to move . . . [knowing] that their experiences matter because of the way [she] felt about them” (p. 152). Her invocation at the end of her study to listen to the stories of the grieving English teachers aligns well with the significance of my study. The story I will tell will matter, in part, because of the way others will feel about it. You, my reader, give meaning to my story by acknowledging that such a story has been written. This story is my life, the development of my sense of persistence through to completion of my doctoral degree in English Education, which metaphorically mirrors the inescapable mothering role I also play in this journey.

When Michael Sherry (2019) “[offered] to English educators, teachers, and students an approach to countenancing these problems as an often-ignored first step toward activism,” he was referencing issues that are “large-scale, systemic problems related to the environment [that] often seem too big and too daunting to face” (pp. 404-405). While he writes in reference to ecological, environmental and sustainability problems, speaking about such things as forest fires, hurricanes, landfills and global warming, his prophetic conclusion applies not only within but also as well as beyond the bounds of his article:

Reading these words, I remember that, like the aspen tree, I am not alone, but part of a vast network of readers, writers, and teachers. A society of English educators. A member of the human community. A part of the more-than-human world. We are all connected. We are all part of the same story. It is a story that remains to be written. This is how it begins. (Sherry, 2019, p. 412)
Sherry’s image of us as English teachers being naturally connected to the global human community, with the extension of that image then collapsing us as a single humanity into a book of stories, makes me question the nature of my own chapter. Here it is—my story will be written as a single chapter in this greater story. While Sherry is not explicitly discussing large-scale, systemic problems outside of the ecological focus of his article, such as racism, sexism, or ableism, his words ring true for these areas as well. His call to story our experiences is but one of several contemporary illustrations of the need to dig deeper in the ways that we interact with English teachers, graduate students, and faculty at all levels related to English Education.

Another example is the article by Driscoll et al. (2020) which cites multiple articles and studies confirming the high burnout rate among faculty and graduate students in the humanities, including composition studies. They indicate:

[The fact that] graduate students in the popular press regularly describe their experiences as traumatic and miserable raises serious ethical and social justice challenges, challenges that are present for those of us teaching in doctoral programs, for those of us advising students to enter graduate study, for those of us currently engaged in graduate study, and for long-term futures of every person entering this profession. (Driscoll et al., 2020, p. 455)

While their work does much to examine potential solutions through the avenue of self-care to the problem of burnout, it falls short in clearly depicting the depth and breadth of this burnout problem. While they argue that self-care as professional practice “creates space for us to stop normalizing burnout and academic guilt and to start building a culture where we cultivate spaces to do the best labor that we are capable of doing” (Driscoll et al., 2020, p. 476), they fall short in illuminating the problem itself. It is one thing to hear about a problem of burnout, but it
is quite another to see it with one’s own eyes, to experience it within one’s own mind, and to feel it within one’s own central human core.

Grumet (1988) began the work of bringing the private lives of women teachers to the view of the public eye in her phenomenological study. Though her work attempts to push curriculum and teaching away from masculine conceptions of theory, and her own work falls short of humanizing the mother in teaching in the exact way that she calls for it to do so:

The experiences of family life, of bearing, delivering, and nurturing children, were absent from this discourse. Silent too was the language of the body, the world we know through our fingertips, the world we carry on weightbearing joints, the world we hear in sudden hums and giggles. Many of us turned away from the generalizations and methods of social science as we sought a method and a language to draw these worlds into curriculum theory. We turned to literature, to theater, to history to recover specificity and contradiction, evidence that education was a human project that we all actively sustain. For, if the world we give our children is different from the one we envisioned for them, then we need to discover the moments when we, weary, distracted, and conflicted, gave in, let the curtain fall back across the window, and settled for a little less light. (1988, p. xv)

And 32 years later, we have continued to settle for less and less light. Evidence of this is seen even now as Driscoll et al. (2020) discuss “the hushed experiences so many of us hold from our own graduate experiences” (p. 455); nothing has quite turned our delicate balance upside-down in the way that the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted us in the year 2020. In a March 2020 article in The Chronicle of Higher Education, Supiano begins to reveal pieces of this previously hidden crisis—the trauma of living the academic life, which is compounded by the stress of
being a mother—when she illustrates the aspects of personal or family life that we used to be able to shut our professional lives out from, as well as the aspects of our professional or doctoral lives that previously did not infringe upon home lives. While these stories are likely to become more commonly available in various forms of popular cultural writings, such as blogs, newspapers, personal websites, etc., because the global crisis of the pandemic has opened an eye of curiosity, there are those of us who have been navigating the fringes of personal and professional crisis for an extended period of time already—those years of mothering children that we have spent floundering through graduate school, doctoral studies, and transitioning into, existing within and remaining committed to the world of post-secondary education as professors. But these stories have been primarily “hushed experiences” (Driscoll et al., 2020, p. 455). No more hushing—it is time to tell the story now.

This dissertation is my story. It is the cry of the mother, the shout of the academic, the exclamation of the English Educator, the validation of my life as an EE DocMama who has straddled the ever-so-fine line between academic failure and success minute-by-minute, day-by-day, semester-by-semester, all the while mothering five children, navigating their lives, nourishing their hearts, their souls, and their bodies. Each child of mine became a successful case of extended breastfeeding, well beyond their first birthdays. This experience I have had in nurturing these children through the nursing years has become a metaphor for the completion of my doctoral program.

As the nursing years with each of my babies would indeed come to an end, that end only signified the beginning of the next stage of development, one in which the child would become more independent. Similarly, the end of my doctoral program signifies the beginning of the next stage of development in my academic career, one in which I become independent of my own
professors, but also the stage when I will have the undoubted and continued privilege of raising up the next generation of English Educators who follow me.

As a mother, I will always tell my children of the times when they were babies. I will pour my stories into their lives, that they may learn from my mistakes, grow from my success, and know me at the deepest possible personal level. It is the stories of my past that will connect me to the rest of their lives. Likewise, it is my story here, at the completion of my doctoral program, that will connect me with the rest of the lives of the English Education academe.

**Theoretical Assumptions**

There are several assumptions I make as I conduct my research. First, I assume that there is no competition between myself and other moms. As a Christian, homeschooling mother of several children spread over a wide range of ages (ages 16, 14, 12, 6 and 2 as I write this), I have been exposed often to various elements of the “Mommy Wars” (Hays, 1996; Abetz & Moore, 2018), and I rarely ever feel like I belong entirely to any set or type of mother. In groups of other homeschooling mothers, I am judged negatively for not being a stay-at-home mother. In groups of working mothers, I am judged negatively for not sending my children to the best schools in the area. I believe I was raised, either consciously or subconsciously, to think that intensive mothering was the best way to parent, while simultaneously being raised to believe that children would be a burden in my adult life, that I could accomplish many great things as long as I did not have children. I was raised with a generation of girls who were taught that women could become better at just about everything than men, but we were raised by women who idealized a June Cleaver lifestyle. I acknowledge that the generation of mothers to which I belong are confused and divergent as to best practices in parenting. For my study, I do not attempt to make any assumption that the choices I have made and continue to make for myself as a mother are the
best choices for anyone other than myself. I write to explore, explain, and examine the entanglement of my own experiences in the context of the social construct of the academe. The experiences I endure are unique to my position as a mother of several children, as a professor at a small, private college, as an extended breastfeeding mother, and as an English teacher, professor, teacher-educator, and doctoral student. As such, I ask my readers to agree with me that my story does not represent any average mother doctoral student in an English Education program.

Second, I assume that mothering does indeed have a significant impact on the doctoral student motherscholar. Each of us, as doctoral students, face individual circumstances and challenges which directly impact our studies. Mothering, however, impacts the process of obtaining a doctoral degree in ways that other challenges do not. For example, we might all face financial challenges associated with earning an advanced degree. For the one who mothers, however, that financial challenge is compounded by the guilt of spending precious dollars on her own education rather than on something of more immediate value to her children. As another example, consider the time factor. While many doctoral students, particularly in the field of education (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012, p. 199) take an extended period of time to complete the degree, this challenge is compounded for the mother who again feels constant guilt about missing fleeting moments of her child’s milestones in order to attend classes or write papers. This assumption does not negate the challenges faced by men, fathers, or any other subgroup of doctoral students; it simply seeks to point directly to the challenges faced by doctoral student mothers.

Additionally, I make several assumptions about persistence. For example, I assume that doctoral persistence is a desired trait, and that it ultimately contributes not only to the individual student’s overall psycho-social-emotional well-being, but also that institutions of higher learning
benefit from the individual’s sense of persistence. When doctoral students persist through to the completion of their programs, they can contribute to the body of knowledge, adding diverse voices to the academe, and further advancing study of many important fields. Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw cite multiple sources indicating that “approximately one out of every two doctoral students [fail] to achieve their goal of earning a terminal degree in their field” (2012, p. 215). Further, Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw posit that by “understanding what doctoral students experience in the process and what measures they took to persist, future students may be better prepared for the challenges and setbacks they may experience” (2012, p. 215). While I agree with this assumption, I seek to further add that we can only understand the experience when we can understand what the experience feels like. While persistence may be measured for quantification or studied for various logical characteristics, my assumption is that persistence is most effectively understood as the gut-punching, throat-clogging, heart-pounding, hand-sweating, nightmare-inducing visceral experience that it actually represents for the doctoral student who must develop it in order to survive the program.

Finally, I assume that scholars in the field of English Education ought to be actively working toward converging the human sciences with the human arts in the ways that we study and practice in our field. Indeed, while English Education fits squarely in the realm of social sciences through its connection to the institution of the classroom, it also rests outside of the classroom in the richness of our culture, our heritage, with all of its beauty, scars, travesties, and its linguistic nuances. While it is necessary to understand our place in our society, as well as our role in working to develop well-educated citizens for our nation, we must also carry the burden of perpetuating the cultural aspect of educating our students through the study of literature and language. English Education represents a perfect marriage of human science and human art, with
English as the literary and linguistic arts and Education as the sociological connectivity to peers and contemporary events. Scholars in our field who work with pre-service teachers additionally bare a significant burden in representing the ways in which we will choose to teach our teachers how to carry forth the torch of knowledge and expression via the English Education avenue.

**Theoretical Framework**

It is with these referenced assumptions in mind that I have selected the pragmatist feminist theoretical framework and narrative poetic autoethnography as the methodology for my study. The pragmatist feminist framework places the relevance of this study in the practical context. What we study in order to know ought to be something that will have some benefit. I am particularly interested in how we can add value to the experience of future English Education doctoral student mothers. Historically, mothers are seen as other in the academe, and English Education, ironic as it may be, is no exception. The pragmatist element allows us to explore the everyday implications of our study in very practical ways. This is not a study of theory, not a study of thinking, but rather a study of doing and accomplishing. The feminist element of the study centers around giving voice to the typically voiceless.

Whipps and Lake (2017) summarize the philosophy of pragmatist feminism succinctly. They explain that “we must include particular and individual experiences in a pluralistic discussion of multiple realities, and that all parties involved in an issue also be involved in the problem-solving process” (p. 7). As my study unfolds, I postulate that to include “all parties” in the process of accurately depicting the development of persistence of an EE DocMama, each role she plays—mother, doctoral student, teacher—must have a voice in the conversation. Pragmatist feminism holds to an effort to “radically change oppressive political and social structures” (p. 7). For my study, the social structure we see as potentially needing radical change is that of the
academe, which oppresses those of us who dare to identify as mothers. In terms of epistemology, pragmatist feminism “suggests [that] knowing unfolds in relationships enacted through our physical embodiment and the social environment; knowing should thus incorporate ‘multiple marginalized perspectives’” (Whipps & Lake, 2017, p. 9). In this vein, my study includes multiple perspectives, appearing as differing personas as speakers of the poetry. The perspectives include 1) the voice of the English teacher, 2) the voice of the doctoral student, 3) the voice of the mother, and 4) the voice of an autonomous learner—persistence—as the EE DocMama. The physical embodiment of these voices exists as the intersection of perspectives. One goal of the pragmatist-feminist philosophical framework is to bring “action and theory together in egalitarian practice” (Whipps & Lake, 2017, p. 15). Indeed, my study hopes to bring light to the life of an EE DocMama, so that theory and practice may be reconceptualized through a perspective which “[advocates] for a rethinking of the patriarchal assumptions at the base of our academic traditions” (Whipps & Lake, 2017, p. 11).

Rather than silencing the English Education doctoral student mother in the realm of her experience, this study gives her the place to shout, to exclaim, to exalt,

to alternate between roles and rules

and rest between breaths

as she carries her babies and studies simultaneously,

as she wakes and watches, and seeks, and soothes herself,

in the dark of night as she nurses the child and the dissertation.

At once.
CHAPTER TWO
EXPECTING—OR LEARNING FROM OTHERS

How Did We Get Here?—The Exposition

As the whole world hurries up to slow down, I sit here in my spacious faculty office in
perfect silence, questioning every life choice I have made up to this point. As I write, Florida
Governor Ron DeSantis speaks to his panicked citizens about the course of action we will take to
combat COVID-19, my children happily play locked-down in the safety of our suburban home,
while my husband adjusts to the newly-mandated work from home teaching arrangement in
which he never imagined he would find himself. I work in my office, on campus, at the tiny
private college where I have been employed for the past seven school years. Two days from now,
my students will-- hopefully-- return to classes, albeit remotely, but return they surely will. And,
while I attempt in earnest to work through the task of dissertation completion, my focus is
fleeting. This pandemic we are all facing should pose only minimal problems for most people
who catch the virus. The news stories are telling us that the very elderly and the
immunocompromised are the ones at highest risk, mainly folks who have pre-existing conditions.
So, I should be fine. My husband should be fine. Three of our children should be fine. But . . . we
have five children. And I have a dissertation to write. -- Oh, the irony in my topic of study! I
write about persistence, which “enables the individual to sustain the effort and perseverance
necessary to remain focused on the achievement of a goal, despite obstacles, distractions, and
competing goals” (Derrick, 2003, p. 12).
I think back to where I was seven years ago, trying earnestly to gain acceptance into this program. My GRE scores were not fantastic, and they were outdated, since I had completed my Master's degree 12 years prior. So, I retook the GRE, submitted my scores, and waited for a response. The program chair called me in for an interview. She wanted to meet me and see exactly what kind of person could score near perfect on the verbal section and near perfectly zero on the math section. I was seeking admission to the doctoral program in English Education at the University of South Florida, and I recall being asked to identify my potential research agenda.

My actual agenda at the time was simply to keep my job. I had been hired the previous year as an Instructor of English at a private college that had fewer than 200 students, and transitioning from an interim to a permanent position meant that I was required to pursue a Ph.D. Having many years of experience teaching high school Language Arts and college Freshman Composition courses as an adjunct, but not much serious research experience, I was not at a complete loss for ideas-- one compelling contemporary issue that truly intrigued me at the time-- As Smith (2019) explains, “Florida gambled big in 2013 when the state adopted a law eliminating placement exams and remedial college courses and gave recent high school graduates the option to take college-level introductory math and English courses.” Just as I had articulated in my doctoral application interview, I spent the next several years focusing my research attention on various angles of study on the implications of the legislative change related to mandatory remediation.

**Something Wasn’t Right—The Rising Action**

Through my analysis of the impact of remediation elimination at my institution, I came to develop a very successful and comprehensive academic mentoring program for our at-risk students. I had spent extensive periods of time focused on learning as much as I could about the
histories of several problems related to the field of English Education. Such areas of study led me through areas of not only composition theory but also the andragogical principles of autonomous learning, the development of personal cognitive and psychological habits that contribute to the gaining of new knowledge and skills. Through my studies, I discovered insights related to out of class support as a possible way of improving the probability of success for first-year college composition students (Boswell, 2004; Brothen & Wambach, 2012; Faulkner, 2013; Hern, 2012; Zorn 2013). Additionally, I came to understand the development of learner autonomy, especially in terms of persistence, which is strongly tied to resourcefulness, as a necessity for academic success (Ponton, Derrick & Carr, 2005). I had gotten off to a fantastic running start in my program, indeed. However, when a series of tumultuous events began to take place in my personal life beginning in the third year of my part-time doctoral program and continuing through the following three years, I struggled to persist in my studies.

In the face of my personal challenges, I could barely muster the desire to continue with my coursework. This attitude continued deep within my soul for many months, with only a small glimmer of hope that kept me moving forward in my studies: in my first qualitative research methods course, I was introduced to the idea of narrative inquiry. After a period of academic depression, I was enlivened by a sense of wonderment at the idea that storytelling, which had long been a personal hobby, and favored pedagogical method, of mine, could somehow morph into a dissertation project. During such a time as this, what I needed most simply could not be found. I needed other women-- specifically mother women doctoral scholars-- to tell me their stories of success, their victory stories. I needed to see mother women doctoral scholars as a resource for myself, as a light in the dark tunnel, as a beacon of hope to show me the way to completion. I just needed to know that other mothers had already done what I was trying to
finish. But when I looked around at those women I knew who held doctoral degrees, I found none in a similar position as me: there were those who had never married, never had children; there were those who had one child and waited until later in life to attempt graduate school once the child was “old enough;” there were those who were divorced; those who were single; those who were mothers yet refused to discuss personal lives in the academic setting, and there were none quite like me: married, mother of five-- toddlers and teens and everything in-betweens-- teaching undergraduate college courses full-time and desperately pursuing the doctoral degree. What I needed in my own academic life was someone to come alongside me and show me the way; I needed a mentor. During the days that I felt I had run headfirst into an academic brick wall, what I needed more than anything was an intentionally developmental relationship between myself as the protege and “a more experienced person [whose] aim [would be] to support [my] professional development and socialization” through the doctoral program through to completion (Hernandez, Bloodhart & Barnes, et al, 2017).

A Turning Point—The Climax

Where I landed in the journey was not where I set out to land. I had planned to make fantastic observations and discoveries related to the teaching of Freshman Composition. Instead, I drew conclusions that situated the importance of learning composition skills above the importance of teaching composition skills. I examined from multiple viewpoints the history of composition theory, the acquisition of composition skills, and the application of academic composition skills in the larger schema of undergraduate academic endeavors. Through all of this, I came to a place of understanding that the results of the interactions between professors and students are mainly determined by the factors of learner autonomy and the development of autonomous learning environments (Hogan, 2012). But I came to this understanding
approximately halfway through my doctoral coursework, and I no longer felt any need to pursue a study of the implications of the end of mandatory remediation. What I had not anticipated, however, was that in searching for answers about freshman composition learners, I would begin to learn what it would take for myself to successfully complete the doctoral program. What I discovered in myself holds true with Derrick’s (2003) assertion that the “skills and behaviors needed for success require competence in areas that reside in the psychological dimensions of the learner” — the psychological dimensions of the learner, that is, the habits of mind of the learner. Personalized, this would mean that my ultimate success in a doctoral program of study would need to be anchored in my own traits of autonomous learning, though support of a mentor, whose primary function would be to bolster my sense of persistence would have been exceedingly helpful.

As I reflect over the years of coursework, I wonder what I could possibly contribute to this field. In my struggle to simply survive most days of balancing motherhood with academic and professional demands, I wonder how impactful it may have been to have seen stories, narratives, along the way, all along the way, from the very start of the program-- of mother women scholars who had already successfully attained their doctoral goals. And I realize that there is absolute truth in what Davis (2010) says about the nature of a mentorship not necessarily impacting the graduate program enrollment; it certainly would have been key for “completion of the degree itself.” It is here that I understand where my research agenda must go from this point forth-- in belief that there will be other mother women scholars who will follow behind me who will need to hear stories like mine and see the evidence of my completion in order to believe in themselves, to bolster their self-efficacy, to enhance their sense of persistence, to simply “provide proof that the journey can be made” (Daloz, 1999, p. 207 qtd. in Davis, 2010). Thus, I
arrive at the sense of purpose to which I have been called through this journey, and that is to articulate the hard-won, persistence producing, narrative of completion of the doctoral degree in English Education.

This sense of purpose came more clearly into focus as I began to investigate the pragmatist feminist philosophical stance. I found that my personal philosophical leanings fit best under the feminist umbrella, as it is here that we work to give voice to the voiceless. We tell the stories that have yet remained untold. It was here that I discovered Scot Danforth’s (2006) point about Rorty’s pragmatism, that we need not focus on epistemic goals in order to embrace a philosophical stance that improves the living conditions within the community. And it was here that I felt the strongest connection to the feminist theoretical framework. This connection was further galvanized when I came across Brown’s (2019) article discussing misogyny within institutions of higher education, “which can make women question whether they are being valued for their work, and whether they belong in the academy.” Though the study is not focused primarily on the academe, Fuller (2018) also finds a high level of wage discrimination against mothers, placing mothers at a disadvantage within several sectors of the job market. The study additionally “underscores the importance of organizational characteristics in shaping mothers’ disadvantage” (Fuller, 2018, p. 1464). That disadvantage plays out in multiple arenas for mothers who are also pursuing doctoral degrees. Just as Guyotte (2018), in recalling the days of nursing a newborn, narrates here, there remains an impossibility of being fully in one zone (motherhood) or another (academia):

It was during this time that I began to see the roles that were once more clearly demarcated in my life become effectively blurred. It was messy, best described by Braidotti (2011b) when she discusses the feminist subject as a nomad, inhabiting multiple
time zones. I was multiple subjects in multiple time zones—coexisting in simultaneity—as I navigated the spaces of becoming-mother, becoming-Ph.D.

This image evokes thoughts of my own experiences in nursing newborns. I realize that as I put forth this following truth of my experience, that there will be readers who rather viscerally feel angst or disgust at this image-- but I say this as well-- my zones cannot be understood without full acknowledgment of this particular aspect of my mother experience: In sum, I have spent nearly ten years nursing my children. Breast. Feeding. Suckling. Nourishing. Nursing newborns. Nursing toddlers. Just as I have spent countless hours between periods of not enough sleep nursing my offspring, working to write the stories of their little lives in the darkest hours even through the darkest days, I have also spent countless hours between periods of not enough sleep living breathing existing persisting through the narrative of my doctoral journey.

**Working Things Out and Moving Forward—The Falling Action**

I have persisted through the narrative, understanding that like a newborn, persistence may be borne of the mother, but a whole lot of support is needed for successful care. The development of persistence relates to the development of resourcefulness when self-efficacy is a given. Essentially, autonomous learners become persistent as they also become resourceful, when they believe that they can be successful and effective. In essence, "Strong efficacy beliefs influence not only activity choice but also the degree to which goals are pursued in spite of the presence of obstacles" (Bandura, 1997 qtd. in Ponton, Derrick & Carr, 2005). A causal path is explained by which a learner anticipates future rewards, prioritizes learning over nonlearning, chooses learning over nonlearning, solves problems that interfere with learning, and conclusively develops persistence (Ponton, Derrick & Carr, 2005). As I learned about this causal path in my own studies, I sought to lead my own students down the same path. What I discovered was that I
began a resource to my students, who were primarily undergraduates on academic probation, to whom I had been assigned as a mentor. In my position as an academic mentor, I worked to build the students’ sense of persistence. Persistence begets persistence, and likewise as I worked to help my students become master problem solvers, I too developed a stronger sense of problem-solving persistence along the way.

Essentially, I became a more autonomous learner. Thanasoulas (2005) defines autonomous learning, explores various situations where the term autonomous learning has been applied, and provides a summary of the theoretical framework applicable. He explains that autonomy is not a product but rather a process of learning. Autonomous learning, he explains, is a movement away from teacher-control towards learner-control. It is not a system of "teacher-less learning," but rather a process whereby the teacher serves instead of as a purveyor of knowledge rather as a "counsellor and manager of resources." Thanasoulas briefly speaks to the cognitive and metacognitive activities that may be used in this process, and he concludes with reiterating the role of the teacher as one "who will adapt resources, materials, and methods to the learners' needs and even abandon all this if need be." Ultimately, learners work toward "becoming aware of, and identifying, one's strategies, needs, and goals as a learner, and having the opportunity to reconsider and refashion approaches and procedures for optimal learning” (Thanasoulas, 2000). As I worked hard at becoming a more effective mentor, I actually became a more effective learner, and I sincerely believe that the single greatest factor impacting my efficacy as a learner is that of persistence--a persistence nursed to health through the darkest hours of the days between periods of not enough sleep.
Life at the Intersection—Denouement

Just as mothers do not leave their motherhood at the threshold of the house when they leave home, autonomous learners do not leave their learning at the threshold of the academic door when they leave campus. In fact, autonomous learners find, and often seek, opportunity to learn in multiple divisions or categories of their lives. For myself, at 40 years of age, there have been three main divisions of my adult life that are easily categorized: motherhood, academia, and professoriate. In each of these areas, I have sought to learn all that I can so that I could be effective and successful. First, in my life as a mother, problems arise nearly every day that challenge my sense of persistence. Whether it be a sibling squabble that requires a mother’s touch to settle, or a meal prepared for seven guests coming to dinner with little notice, there is not a day that goes by where some problem does not need solving.

Likewise, as a student, I have encountered numerous academic obstacles, especially in my quantitative analysis courses. If ever there were going to be specific courses that would have led to the early derailment of my doctoral journey, it would have been those Statistics courses! And yet, somehow, I was able to pull through them with passing grades. Once those courses were behind me, I would forever have a reference point by which to declare, “If I could get through THAT, then I can get through ANYTHING!” While those courses may have been very damaging to my personal sense of academic pride, they did indeed boost my ability to persist through difficulties. Finally, in the professoriate, which is the place where I feel most honored and blessed to be using my talents to positively impact the lives of others, indeed there are also challenges on a regular basis. Some of these are rather simple tasks, ranging from an overabundance of poorly written essays in need of grading to oddly timed fire-drills, while other challenges are historically systemic.
It is at the intersection of these divisions where I find myself most vulnerable in three distinct roles—mother, scholar, professor—yet only one autonomous learner. At so many crossroads, I have faced temptation to end the journey, turn back, look away, call it a dead end and never look back. Choosing a single path with a more direct route would have been so much easier, perhaps only two of the three would have fared as well, saving one for another day. Be a mother and a professor, or be a mother and a student, but the combination in which I find myself is thrice complex, for now. Yet, it is the foundation I have built for myself in the realm of learner autonomy, and more specifically, persistence, borne of resourcefulness, which pushes me each time to seek the assistance— not answers, but rather support— to keep moving forward toward the goal of completion of my doctoral journey. It is this doctoral life’s journey, borne of resourcefulness, nursed by persistence, that I now narrate in order that other mother women scholars might hear the story and envision themselves in the protagonist’s role.

My children are ages 16, 14, 12, 6, and 2 as I write, three girls, two boys. I have also miscarried twice. To date, I have spent nearly ten years of my life breastfeeding, five of which have coincided with my doctoral years. We are a homeschooling family, and we go to church on Sundays, most Wednesdays, and lots of other days throughout the year as well. We are followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, and we seek to honor Him in our work, in our studies, and in our home. We fall short, however, and sometimes we yell, curse, cry, and throw tantrums. We also forgive quickly, love deeply, and move forward. I drive a minivan which claims to seat eight, but I do not think the manufacturer accounted for teenagers. Or toddlers. And since we have both, car rides can be a tight squeeze. When I look at the faces of my beautiful offspring, I see myself. And that is not just because we all have brown hair and giant chocolate chip brown eyes. I see myself in their faces because they show me who I am and teach me who I want to be. I want to
be the mom who finishes what she starts, the mom who does the hard things and claims victory at the other end of impossible. But when they look at me, she is the mom they already see.

I can absolutely relate to Eisenbach’s (2013) narrative of her personal doctoral journey in which motherhood significantly altered the terrain. As she depicts her “Lunch Date with Perspective,” I long to join in on the conversation. I imagine sitting there with Brooke and Tiffany, our sweet babies snuggled in our laps or at our breasts, as mine would likely be, sipping our grande non-fat lattes and exposing our doctoral mother scholar professor guilt to one another. And then adding perspective for each other so that we might get back to the demands of all we have put on ourselves shortly thereafter. I have had the husband conversations and the “‘Thanks, Mom. I needed to hear that’” discussions that are so easily accessible in Eisenbach’s (2013) work. When I look around for connections to make or conversations to join, however, I do not easily find them. My work schedule, along with the time management tasks necessary for accomplishing anything related to my studies, coupled with the necessary never-ending medical appointments that keep my family healthy, leaves little time for socializing or networking with other EE DocMamas.

In studies for my philosophy and qualitative research courses, thankfully, I became acquainted with the work of Carolyn Ellis. Her (2005) depiction of her response to the sudden death of her brother resonated with me and the sudden loss of my father in the third year of my doctoral program. Then, as I read her (2011) analogy of jumping on and off the train as an illustration of the scholarly life, I felt reassurance in the decision I had made more than once to step back out of my doctoral studies to relieve some of the ongoing pressure of this life I have chosen for myself, knowing that while my personal experience has been unique, I am not alone in the challenges this lifestyle brings. Even through these readings and imaginings, the lessons
learned through nursing babies hold true—some days will be easier than others. Some days will hold tears of pain, and still some days there will be tears of joy and accomplishment. And still, each day will settle into night, and as darkness falls, the duties of motherhood do not end; the duties of academia do not end. As the babies sleep, the mother awaits the cry, studies the texts, writes the page, puts off sleep a while longer, and eventually drifts off still holding everything close to the heart, inhaling the life breath of the milk drunk babe.

Few researchers have begun looking for delineations of the conditions ripe for leading women doctoral students, like myself, to persist through to degree completion. One example is the study by Rockinson-Szapkiw, Spaulding, and Lunde (2017) which indicates that the “primary avenue by which a woman begins envisioning of herself as a motherscholar or womanscholar, developing a picture of her identity as a scholar intersecting with other multiple identities and core self” (p. 59) is an intentional relationship with “‘strong female faculty,’ who the woman student sees … [as] successful at balancing the multiple identities” (p. 59). However, these relationships do not always exist. Where does she turn when no mentor can be found? She begins to read, to study, and to come to know what other scholars have already known—That, if it is a relationship that is the key to persistence (potentially because relationships foster a sense of resourcefulness), then reading, and knowing, and studying simply will not get her there—she must also feel what the other scholars feel, love what they love, fear what they fear, envision what they envision, embrace what they embrace, and believe what they believe. She needs to hear from people like Carolyn Ellis, who admits to feeling “passionate about describing and communicating the ‘lived through’ experience of life, with all its sorrows, joys, disappointments, satisfactions, and losses” (Bochner and Ellis, 2016, p. 30). In short, she- we- I- need the voices of mother women scholars to help us persist in our studies as we reconcile our role as mother with
our roles as professors and doctoral students. Even as recently as February 2020, Driscoll, Leigh and Zamin wrote about the lack of mentoring and perceived lack of work-life balance that doctoral students witnessed in the faculty with whom they worked (p. 454). Their article mentions “the hushed experiences so many of us hold from our own graduate experiences” (p. 455), as if we have been keeping some dirty little secret in shame. The time has come that we must be willing to mentor the next generation of faculty and graduate students by sharing our stories, our narratives, the poetry of our lives.

Through my daily mothering challenges, there is no secret to hide. In my family, we struggle sometimes with even basic things, like getting laundry done or dinner made. But we do not leave ourselves in our mess. We find a way to push through, put the pieces back together, and move forward in healthy ways whenever possible. We take long walks, play with the dogs, ride horses, jump on trampolines, swim, bike, play games, paint pictures, and we nap. Sometimes, we just need to nap.

It is certainly a timely truth that “doctoral students indicated that they would like to hear more from faculty about challenges faculty directly faced and how to overcome them” (Driscoll, Leigh & Zamin, 2020, p. 471). Those of us who handle motherhood alongside the demands of the academe face challenges that are unique to our choices. Doctoral students need to hear these stories; the narratives must be written.

The narrative, the poetic autoethnography, that follows is the story of the once upon a time English teacher who became a mother who loved her students and her children and wanted to know best how to teach them best. So, she finished graduate school so that she could continue to teach her students well and love her children well. It took her a long, long time to reach the end of her journey. But just like nursing babies makes them grow in teensiest little bits day by
day, she could not see her studies growing until the one day when she looked out in front of her and saw that they were all grown up now and beginning new journeys of their own.
CHAPTER THREE
HOW THE STORY UNFOLDS

Overview of the Study—Plot Summary

Tedlock (2013b) discusses a form of qualitative inquiry that combines narrative with ethnography. She describes the researchers studying a culture as coming to a point eventually “understanding that one cannot simply impose one’s worldview on others” (p. 237). The ethnographer must either “occupy or conquer the third space” that is outside of her worldview, or she must change through a process of becoming. Tedlock says that “Becoming refers to a process of ongoing transformation based on multiple dynamic interactions of the type one experiences during an extended sojourn abroad” (2013b, p. 237). When I think about her point, I understand that as qualitative researchers of a culture, we can either study from outside the bounds, from inside the bounds but maintaining our own worldview outside of the study, or we become what we are studying. Through this process, we might develop a double consciousness. The idea of double consciousness, though explained by experiences of people of color in relation to whiteness, can also apply to “the social world around us, [in which] we produce our own reality through speech acts that combine language and gesture” (Tedlock, 2013b, p. 238). As I conceptualize the study of my development of persistence through my doctoral program, I think in terms of who I was, who I am, who I became and who I am yet to become. But I see these also as questions of identity, so I want to be clear that my goal is not to examine identity in relation to the roles I play as a mother, English teacher, teacher-educator or doctoral student. Rather, I distinguished these roles as individual personas in a single story and then conflated these roles into one central character, the EE DocMama, ultimately, presenting her complete narrative.
Tedlock (2013b) writes, “Narrative is a fundamental means of imposing order on otherwise random and disconnected events and experiences” (p. 242). Events that take place in my life are just events until I tie them together along a narrative line to shape them and give them meaning. Like many novels, short stories, or dramatic works, the narrative is likely to contain multiple plots, multiple conflicts, multiple characters, etc. As I choose to tell the story, however, I get to author the narrative that translates experience into meaning. Tedlock adds to this discussion the following clarification about creative non-fiction as well:

Creative non-fiction, like narrative ethnography, is factually accurate, and written with attention to literary style: However, the story is polyphonic with the author’s voice and those of other people woven together. In creative non-fiction, the story is told using scenes rather than exposition and, as in narrative ethnography, the author-as-character is either the central figure or the central consciousness, or both. The type of artful emotional documentary discourse has emerged as a powerful literary genre infused with the rhetoric, metaphors, and other tropes that are commonly used in lyrical poetry and in narrative fiction. Its sheer literariness distinguishes it from narrative ethnography.

(2013b, p. 244)

The point of divergence between the creative non-fiction and the narrative ethnography resides in the use of or the lack of use of citations in favor of deep reflection. I posit that the deep reflection and highly emotive qualities of creative non-fiction can be woven together to create a deeply emotional narrative with all the elements of a work of literature and all the epistemic elements of ethnography.

In other words, autoethnography emerges as the appropriate form of qualitative research. Tedlock (2013a) explains that working in the “mixed form of qualitative research . . .
autoethnography . . . requires the orchestration of various writing strategies—personal narrative, poetic inquiry, lyric essay, ethnodrama and analysis” (p. 358). Not only is the research itself a mixed form by way of combining socio-cultural analytic practices with literary practices, but also the presentation of the analysis or the findings may also be mixed. The central element to this form, however, is the narrator, protagonist, character, researcher—this is what Tedlock describes as “the knower and the known are intricately linked, the narrative positioning of the self within the body is a key element in this new endeavor” (2013a, p. 358). For my study, this person, the knower and the known as a singular entity, is myself. Carolyn Ellis articulates best the reason I have chosen autoethnography as the ideal method for this dissertation study:

Autoethnography requires that we observe ourselves observing, that we interrogate what we think and believe, and that we challenge our own assumptions, asking over and over if we have penetrated as many layers of our own defenses, fears, and insecurities as our project requires. It asks that we rethink and revise our own lives, making conscious decisions about who and how we want to be. And in the process, it seeks a story that is hopeful, where authors ultimately write themselves as survivors of the story they are living.” (2013, p. 10)

I say Ellis articulates my desire best because her point of writing myself as the survivor of the story I am living is part of my goal. My story centers around the development of persistence. There are likely multiple ways I could tell the story. I could focus on the professional challenges I have overcome in my various workplaces. Or I could tell even about a personal health crisis that I have pushed through. But the narrative that gets to be told is the one I choose. This is my story. I get to choose my character, my elements of plot, my imagery, my figurative language, and my method of survival.
Method of Analysis

Where will I begin? Giorgio advises the beautiful simplicity in the answer to this question, “You may ask: How do we begin to write autoethnography? To which I reply: By closing our eyes and remembering” (2013, p. 407). And that is exactly what I have done. My story begins at the start of my career as an English teacher. It is not that the story begins with the start of my career; it is just that I began graduate school the same year, and since the focus of this inquiry is the development of persistence leading to the doctoral degree, it is appropriate to begin at the beginning of my graduate studies, which coincides with my first year of teaching high school English. Additionally, I was married at the end of my first year of teaching, so I would say that the start of my journey into motherhood began the same year. Since the development of persistence through motherhood mirrors the development of persistence in my doctoral program, it is appropriate to begin at the beginning of my motherhood as well. I was in my second year of high school teaching when I began teaching at a community college part-time. It was not until much later that I began teaching at a private college full-time, with the subsequent year being the initiation of my doctoral program.

Voices and Personas

I write in the first-person narrative with a voice that exaggerates in both sound and tone to indicate a reverberation of emotion from the inside, from the heart, from the gut, agonizing the interior of the skull, like a bludgeoning behind the eye-sockets and down the throat to the very core of myself and my reader.

I write in three voices that ultimately become one.

Unified but divided. Divided but entwined.

Embodied but always conflicted.
Four voices in parallel, potentially parting,
Always performing,
Frequently failing—I

*I* as English Teacher/ Professor
*I* as Mother
*I* as Doctoral Student
*I* as EE DocMama.

**Ethics, Diversity and Positionality**

I am the only protagonist in this narrative. Autoethnography presents a challenge, I am aware, in remaining transparently vulnerable while maintaining the anonymity of other characters or players in the study. To overcome these difficulties, my analysis focuses on my own emotional, psychological, and internalized reactions to each situation under scrutiny. I write as a white, cisgender, heterosexual, middle-class American citizen. I am the second person in my family to obtain a college degree and the first to earn any graduate degree. This study is being completed during a time of the Covid-19 global pandemic, and I have been minimally impacted both educationally and economically by this global crisis. I speak and write from a place of acknowledged privilege. Amidst the pandemic crisis, my nation is also embroiled in an up-tick of riots, protests, and social media upheaval related to the Black Lives Matter movement, which is often poised in opposition to the Back the Blue (pro-cop) movement. I have former students who have become friends of mine who are people of color and some of whom call me Mom. I worry for them when I hear that they will be participating in the marches around the Tampa Bay area. But I am proud of them for doing so. I also have family members and several close friends who are police officers. I worry for them when they go to work these days. But I am proud of them
for doing so. There are so many stories I could choose to tell, but my focus for this study is primarily on the development of persistence through the doctoral program in English Education. As an autoethnographer, I do not have to separate myself from the social and cultural crises taking place around me, but I choose the manner in which I get to tell the story.

**The Evidence**

For evidence of my progression through the development of persistence, I have presented artifacts in reference to the setting for each part of the story. I then provided a poetic analysis of the artifacts from each setting. I define settings as the places of employment, the homes I have lived in, and the university where I have studied. I used places of employment because these are the physical settings where my work as an English teacher and professor has been completed, and they represent my public, professional persona. I used the homes I have lived in during the same period as settings because they represent my private, personal persona. Finally, I used the university where I have studied because it represents my academe persona. In total, there were eight workplaces, five homes, and one university—14 settings in sum. For my project, I have provided poetic analyses of artifacts, which include emails, photographs, awards, syllabi, a yearbook, and others which have been collected over the course of my career, between the years 2001 and 2020. In addition to representing each setting, I multiplied the number of settings by the number of personified voices that I used, which is three to equate to a total of 42 individual poems of analysis. In addition to the poetic analyses of the artifacts themselves, I have narrated the overall plot of persistence development in the voice of the EE DocMama for the final chapter of this project. Conclusively, I used the comparison of nursing babies to the experience of doctoral completion for the EE DocMama as the connecting metaphor between the poetic and narrative personas.
Potential Limitations

As the design of this study is autoethnography, it is limited in scope to my personal experiences. Though I have written in a way that illuminates certain problems within the social constructs of the settings, this study is not intended to be generalizable. It is primarily intended to build compassion and empathy for those who work with EE DocMamas in a professional or academic capacity. It is secondarily intended to provide hope for the EE DocMama who may be struggling to complete her program of study. This study is my story. All who engage with my story become part of my story, and it is my deepest desire that all who engage with my story will walk away having been deeply affected in a way that makes a positive impact in the way that we live and interact with one another in the realms of higher education, qualitative inquiry, and English Education.
CHAPTER FOUR:
DEVELOPMENTAL MILESTONES

This chapter presents the artifacts that I have chosen to represent the development of my sense of persistence over the course of my teaching career thus far (the years 2001 to 2020), which coincides with my graduate level education, including my masters and doctoral programs, both of which were in English Education. The 14 artifacts were chosen carefully, under considerable personal scrutiny, and they are representative of a variety of types of experiences. The artifacts are indicated as photos in this project, but the photos are captioned to describe what each one is exactly. Each artifact precedes three poems of analysis. The poems are presented systematically in order of three personas. The first poem after each artifact is written from the perspective of myself as an English teacher/professor. The second poem after each artifact is written from the perspective of mothering. The third poem after each artifact is written in the perspective of myself as the doctoral student. Chapter Five of this project then presents the narrative of the conflation of these three personas into one singular character: the EE DocMama.
Figure 1. “Letter from the President.”
This is a letter that was received from President George W. Bush in response to letters that my 9th and 10th grade Language Arts students wrote and mailed after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. This year was my first year working as an English teacher, and I was employed at Manatee High School in Bradenton, Florida.

**White House Letter Postmarked November 15, 2001**

The August year began swiftly juxtaposing my recent accomplishments

With my forever inadequacies.

As an English teacher hired without a teaching degree—
Maybe that Education major would have trained me for handling live viewings of
unthinkable terrorist attacks--

I respond the way my own English teachers taught me.

It was middle school back then and we were all scrunchie-tied red-white-and-blue stars-
and-stripes tee-shirt wearing followers of the gospel of Lee Greenwood.

When our English teachers had us write letters to Mr. President,

We all signed sincerely,

    Proud to be an American,

    (fill your name in the blank)

Because we were still just learning,

So we filled in the blank.

And on 9/11 when the towers collapsed, childhood ceased to exist, as the audible
collective inhalation of our singular last breath of innocence exploded from within our chest
walls and left a blank to be filled,

    I just did the first thing I could think,

    Following the example from so many years ago:

    Dear Mr. President,

    Please . . .

    Sincerely,

    (fill in the blank)

After 9/11 our school held a funeral

    For one of our students murdered
By one of our other students.

Both were our students, our classmates, our collective, wide-eyed salty-teared fear of speaking out to save our last breath of innocence and playground fights from childhood no longer meant bloody noses

But rather

Abandoned stained hard hot concrete parking lots dotted with eyes that never blinked, All saw nothing as if there were no longer any correct answer. No multiple choice. Even true false was lose lose.

After 9/11

Our school had hurricane season

With flooded streets

Devastating our town

Closing our school

Stranding our busses and businesses and burying our books and babies and our bodies in rebuilding and bathing our once upon a time beautiful beaches in foreign sands for days and days until the sun returned and our blue skies nearly brought us back to normal.

After 9/11

So much curriculum was put off till later

So much time was spent bubbling who cares anyway wrong answers.

I somehow convinced myself that grad-school majoring in Education would train me better for my 2\textsuperscript{nd} year next year.

After 9/11, by the time
I walked the crowded lonely halls where a master's educated professional could help me use a laminator to enshrine the mass-produced card-stocked gold-seal embossed, personally, cursive, ink-addressed ever since middle school anticipated response from Mr. President,

All I truly needed was an answer to

(fill in the blank)

**Beacon of Freedom**

That year was the year I spent planning the details of my happily-ever-after.

Even the most devastating circumstances were filtered through my champagne colored glasses of something borrowed, something blue.

My drive home was an hour every day,

And even though I probably should have been more mindful of the traffic and stop signs

Instead I would find myself deep in thought.

--Thoughts about Shakespeare and paragraph structure on the morning commute--

--Thoughts about diamonds and flowers and sleeping in snuggled up on rainy days—

In the afternoons,

But those three words that hitchhiked every so often, returning like the vagabond first here then there and never really settling anywhere

“beacon of freedom”—Dubya's words filtered through my dreams:

A lighthouse in the storm,

Oasis in the desert,

Clearing in the jungle,

Sanctuary from chaos—mother to her children.

Beyond highway exits and glowing tail lights and wedding plans,
Would I ever become that beacon of freedom: bearing, birthing, nightly nursing, daily
doting, always hoping, endlessly loving?

1 Hurricane Lane

I look back now to where the journey began. I want to say it goes back to the start of me
in 1979, but if I would go that far,

Wouldn't it really be with the start of Mom—1945?

Why not Dad—1941?

And trace it all the way through the generations all the way to Genesis?

But the wise profs on my committee advise that I must draw the line somewhere—

A project must begin somewhere, not necessarily at the beginning--

In medias res—

Somehow, I must agree after adjusting to the alternatives suggested by all the voices in
my head—all my own voice—depending on the day—

I agree to pinpoint the exact location Where the story began,

All else is preface:

Page 1. 1 Hurricane Lane.
Thanks for writing with your warm and fuzzy words. Most kind and much appreciated.

You asked, “Why in the world did they pick me to do that presentation?” Consider this statement as a possibly suitable reply:

“If the only birds allowed to sing were the ones with the *best* songs, it would be a very quiet forest.”

Our profession – and the teachers working in it – survives because of the rich diversity of the songs that teachers sing. And they learn from hearing the songs of other colleagues, such as yours.

Don’t stop singing, Krista. And don’t stop taking singing lessons at these professional conferences, either.

Much love,

---

**Figure 2. “Encouragement from a Professor.”**

In 2002, I had been invited to present at the Florida Council Teachers of English state conference on the topic of “World Literature for Adolescents At Risk.” My presentation was originally produced as a class project for a masters level methods course, and I was proud of my work until I learned how far out of my league many of the other conference presenters were. After the conference, I received this email from one of my professors.
Survival Song

My second year of teaching English Language Arts brought me
To a new school, new district, new kids,
Old trouble.
The kids were in the Academic Improvement Program (AIP).

Some teachers who should have retired sooner laughed too loudly as long as
parents couldn’t hear them as they planned what to do the next week

_HaHa! Should we let the apes (AIPs) out of their cages?!_

Ha.    Ha.

But I saw young minds with potential to learn and grow and thrive
With a drive to overcome and breakthrough
And they knew they had to—
To survive.

_10th_ grade

Cannot        read

They're too tough to reach,

Don’t even try to teach--

They won’t let you lead.

_HaHa! Think you’re gonna try?_

_Fine.

_(Just don’t let them see you cry!)_

District says world literature is required.

Give it a try since you’ve got no fear-
I was too young, naïve, too new to accept defeat already even before the start of the year.

So, I tried.

And it worked.

World Literature for Adolescents at Risk.

And then I told the others.

And then I told many others.

At a conference. In a presentation.

It was my first conference presentation. I had thought it would be no big deal, like a district professional development for in-service points, check it off, move on with your day kind of no big deal.

Then I checked in to the hotel and started reading the agenda for the weekend.

I found my name listed as a breakout session presenter.

Then I saw the other names,

**GIANT** names. Award winners. Discipline leaders. Majestic eagles.


And when I got back to my own little windowless classroom on Monday morning,

Which was the only place I had internet and email access back then,

I needed to know— “Why in the world did they pick me to do that presentation?!”

**Out of Tune**

Shortly after receiving the advice to liken myself to a singing forest bird,

Something went terribly wrong inside my body.

Weird thumb pain when I awoke one morning became agonizing knee pain before 3rd period.

When the last bell rang, I skipped out on car loop duty—
Fatigue had set in and fiercely, completely overtook me. I slept, head down on my teacher desk, til 6pm.

Then drove home, total body joint pain radiating now with every inch by inch move. I slept when I got home Tuesday night. Til Thursday morning. I don’t remember seeing the first doctor or the second. But the third one sent me to a neurologist who ran some tests and then decided that I needed medication.

But one other test first. Wait a couple days. We will call you, they said, and tell you when to start taking the pills and then you should be good as new right quick.

When they finally called, I was driving home early having only been capable of teaching half a day, and I was pretty sure I was going to get fired.

I was expecting a call to tell me that my prescription was ready.

I nearly drove off the road in panic when they told me I was pregnant.

For seven weeks, I battled this mysterious illness and balanced the idea of being so so sick with the idea of being so so pregnant.

It was a roller coaster. I hate roller coasters.

If I could have been a bird then, I’d have flown oh so far to build my nest wherever life makes sense and mysterious illnesses do not exist simultaneously with unplanned pregnancies in second years of careers and grad school.

Mono was ruled out. Lupus was ruled out.

Eventually, the pain subsided, my energy returned, and I got better.

The final specialist interpreted new test results.

Fifths disease. Rarely severe but when it is—may cause miscarriage.

It did.
Second Year of Grad School

At 22, it felt strange to be called someone’s colleague.

I was caught between worlds.

In my classroom that year, my own students often looked older than I did.

In my masters classes, I was one of the youngest,

But the other youngish students were usually getting together for drinks or hooking up together after class. I was always headed home, always grading papers, always prepping lessons.

I could tell that my classmates became great friends over the years they were in grad school by the way they knew each other’s names and laughed at jokes I could not even detect; inside jokes I was outside of--

Second year of grad school for me was a period when my main goal was to arrive early enough to get the center front row seat

So I wouldn’t have to engage with anyone other than my professor,

--like sitting at the edge of a forest gazing out to see the sensational setting solar symphony beyond rolling hills—

captivated by that display of hue overlapping hue of painted wisdom—

That's how I sat so eager to feast on the finest this university had to offer;

I’d devour the lectures and belch out the questions, ending evenings fully satiated and held over til the next course.

As I pondered Prof’s point about learning and hearing the songs of my colleagues, I sat bewildered for a while,

--As if my favorite diner exchanged my party of one reservation
for an all we could eat together buffet—

More like a mystery dinner theater—

But I didn’t have a clue.

Figure 3. “Lesson Plans.”
This is a set of lesson plans that I submitted during the fall semester of my third year of teaching. The actual artifact is the entire semester’s worth of plans, although pictured here is only a sample of two pages from the set.
Planning the Perfect Year

I moved again, but I did it right this time,

Found a job 2 miles from my house,

*must remember to hide the tampons when I shop.*

This year marks the first year I am no longer “temporary.”

Certification requirements complete ✔

Teach collegebound upperclassmen ✔

Work in an established high SES area ✔

Documenting lesson plans in the fall semester of 2003-04—

Really just going through the motions.

Students here arrive clean, well-dressed, healthy, well-nourished, prepared for academic success.

My actual plan every single day is to simply not ruin them.

I have seniors at an A school,

which is kind of like holding on to the ball with 2 minutes left in the 4\textsuperscript{th} quarter

when you’re up by 6—

Pretty sure I was hired here because I was a safe option to replace the last person after she was fired for inappropriate relations,

But the admin here knows my family going at least 15 years back—

They see me as not capable of damaging anyone prior to graduation—

Not as someone who might be any good at teaching anyone anything—

Here’s the plan:
Lay low; everyone gets an A; we all go home happy.

But my principal requires lesson plans be turned in –

But look, these are handwritten, and I have the photocopies, which means I gave her loose-leaf notebook paper pages with handwritten notes—

No standards listed or aligned,

Probably missing days,

Not even sure I used ink.

October 2003

I should have bought stock in First Response—with a level of

Insanity that I am sure someone somewhere can totally relate to;

Morning by morning for many—too many—months,

I try not to splash,

    Hold at just the right angle,

    For no more than exactly three complete seconds,

    Lay it flat on the counter while I

    Brush my teeth

    Wash my face

    Fold

    Unfold

    Refold

    Hang the towel on the bar—listen, check, timer, nope, not yet.

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Ok
Inhale

Check it.

. . .

Lines?

Honey! Come quick!

Tired Grumble sleepy grumble. . . what?

How many lines do you see?

Two.

Two?

Yes, two. There's only two. I’m going back to bed.

Honey! There’s two!

**Pregnant Pause**

Lesson plans were always due on Monday for the previous week.

Plan the week ahead of time,

But tell us later what your plan was . . .

* nudge nudge wink wink . . . definitely don’t throw them together over the weekend after barely surviving by the seat of your pants for the past 5 days*

Also on Monday, I would make the hour-long commute for grad school—this was another class someone probably should have told me about BEFORE giving me hundreds of kids over whose permanent academic records I would have eternal influence.

Measurement & Evaluation

7pm to 9:40pm
Drive home

Grade papers

Get some sleep *not much*

Next day, clock in

7am

Figure out what I’m teaching today.

I remember fully comprehending the significance of this class, especially as testing and accountability were now widely impacting districts, schools, families, and futures.

There were relentlessly thought-provoking, life-changing, education-impacting PowerPoint presentations every week,

And the professor was a truly gifted lecturer

And I always sat front and center,

Which is exactly where I found myself, as I wiped the drool from the side of my face, at

9:47pm

the night before those two pink lines appeared.
This is the yearbook from my second year of teaching Language Arts at Fivay High School in Hudson, Florida. This was the school’s first actual graduating class of seniors, as it was a brand new school, and the school’s mascot is the Falcons.
New Heights

My second year at the district’s newest high school began with an emergency surgery during planning week—My physical pain during recovery helped to ease and overshadow the emotional ache left over from the grief of burying one of our most influential colleagues late last year and prevented me from fully fathoming Coach’s stage 4 diagnosis recently announced—That year, most of us were still part of the inaugural faculty from the year before, *10 years later only a handful of the originals remain*

Unlike my previous school, this one hired me to hopefully make an actual impact, I think Mainly to get more kids to graduation than prison.

They were a tough bunch—many were technically homeless but pridefully “stayin’ with sum’ un”

Most parentless or parenting their own moms, wondering if they’d ever meet the dads.

Jenny arrived one day so high she couldn’t remember her name.

Evan reminded her and promised to help her get home.

Evan joked with his buddies about what else he might make her forget. I called Corporal

instead of letting Evan have his way.

Jenny

left on an ambulance from my classroom and never came back.

For this class of twenty twelve, Guidance and I had a bulletin board with sticky notes, Names on green stickies for students on track to graduate on time,
Yellow for those a little behind

Red for—oh Lord, help us ALL figure out how to reach the Red Stickies.

By November, green was barely seen, few and far between—January, red everywhere, as if Christmas crises vomited on our bulletin board;

When April came around, we hardly knew one day from the next exactly which day we were on, which day, long days, extra classes, tutor sessions, exam retakes; last bell at 1:50,

I was lucky to leave by dinnertime—

By mid-May, most names had moved to the green stickies, even Dee. She might not make it the ceremony, though; it would depend on when the contractions would start—but even Sarah—she,

She showed up one Thursday soaking wet from walking to school in the rain.

Mom was put in jail the night before (picked up at the corner of 52 & 19 for solicitation), so no one could drive Sarah to school—This was her last chance.

We dried her off, got her food, borrowed some dry shoes in her size, and signed her in for one more last-minute last-chance exam. . . held our breath and prayed for a miracle

Kevin came to say his research project (role of dads in raising children) made him realize that he couldn’t just walk away—his baby and the momma needed him—so

He came to say he ain’t droppin’ out, just not gonna be at graduation cuz he can’t make up so many credits, but

it’s gonna be OK cuz he already done passed the GED and got a job; thanks, he
says, for forcing him to finally get his head on straight—but, oh by the way, Missus, since he hadn’t withdrawn yet, they let him cast his vote before he’s gone—with the other seniors—that vote was the only way they could all say thank you at the same time—

To win that vote meant you were the teacher they wanted calling their names, beckoning them across the stage leaving behind the past they denied the defining of themselves and into the future they could confidently finally forge their way through—

It meant yours was the smile they wanted to see, yours was the embrace they wanted to hug in that perfect moment—

It meant you were the one who inspired them to reach new heights.

And as I called their names one by one that early summer evening, quietly, I thanked them each for teaching me how to help a falcon fly.

**Routine Mothering**

Drop-off at 6:30am

One in 2nd grade, one in kindergarten, one in daycare, all with extended “care.”

Pick-up at 6:30pm

Rush dinner

Walk dogs

Bathe kids

Nope, no, no pajamas—

You all know the drill: sleep in school clothes on school nights

Pee first for goodness sakes, then put your clothes on!
Hair in braids, girls,

Yes, Sweet One, I know you like it down; I promise, you can keep it down on the weekends,

No time to brush it before school. That’s the routine.

Until the baby gets sick again and again and again
Fever, cough, pink eye, strep, asthma, pneumonia.
Medicine every day, twice a day; packets, pills, inhalers.

Eat. Sleep. Repeat.

**Vicarious Trauma**

Like drowning in a barrel tossed in waves that ebb and flow with gradually increasing intensity—suffocation

Pulse increasing, throbbing in my throat,
Pupils dilated—blinding me in the classroom’s fluorescent light

Nausea
Vomit in the breakroom between 3rd and 4th period

Stomach cramps

As if knives invade my heart, lungs, colon and eyelids

In microscopic puncture wounds

Today and tomorrow and yesterday
And I know it’s coming again,
Along with the uncontrollable crying.

If this is what a Master’s degree qualified me for, I must wonder whether a Ph.D. might cure this compassion fatigue?
Figure 5. “Termination Letter.”
This is the letter I received upon being fired from my job as a Curriculum Writer with Florida Virtual School. I had been told that the job was being eliminated due to budget concerns, but I had also recently announced that I was expecting my fourth child in the following September. This termination was effective about 10 weeks before my baby was due.
Dream Job Turned Nightmare

It was a shot in the dark that I even got the interview.

They wanted a teacher who could write,

A writer who could teach,

And since my experience included both, I was exactly what they needed.

It was exactly what I needed.

When I got the call to resign from the classroom that had been pulling me away from everything I truly loved *especially my own remaining shred of sanity*.

I said yes, of course.

I spent the entire school year mastering my new craft, bound up, entwined, enraptured in this new position.

It was the dream job I never knew I needed til I had it—working

From home

No classroom management

No bells

No missed planning periods

No hallway brawls

Top of the line technology provided

With 24-hour helpdesk support

Professional meetings with colleagues who valued my opinion and my expertise,

An actual goal-oriented team,
Each one of us doing exactly what we loved.

We had a timeline to follow. We stayed on track. We completed

The project, piloted the course, celebrated our success, and received outstanding accolades from every level of the organization—like fantasy—a career dream come true.

When someone from the senior office called me the day after the official release date, I expected to hear more kudos.

Instead, it was me—I was being released.

Sorry.

Controversial legislation.

Immediate budget cuts.

Right, you’re the first. There’s going to be others.

Your company email and file access are already turned off, shut down, cut off. Don’t try to tell anyone it’s coming. They don’t need to know until they need to know.

Sorry. Can’t

Answer any questions.

You’ll get a letter. It will tell you everything you need to know.

Shameless Interview

When it’s the second week of August

and three weeks till your due date for the fourth baby

and you’ve spent the past two months watching your baby belly expand at a rate correlative to the rate at which you’ve received rejection letters from vacant but re-advertised jobs that you’re more than qualified for
and the elevator is out when you arrive for yet another *maybe 18th* interview,

so you had to take the stairs up to the executive office,

Yes, you do have the nerve to tell the President of the College that he will need to wait a minute while you catch your breath,

And yes, I do realize this is a permanent position,

And yes, I do realize there’s adults here who don’t want faculty’s babies in their classes,

And NO, sir, I will not accept one-eighth my previous salary,

And yes, I will need some time off when the baby comes, and

Yes, I understand you have other applicants

And, no,

This is not my first rodeo.

Yes, I can start on Monday. Just let me catch my breath.

*I am not really sure what day today is,

*but I am sure I can start on Monday.*

*Unless . . .*

**Irony**

A year after receiving a termination letter,

Two temporary semester-long contracts in between,

A new future promised,

Contingent upon the pursuit

of

a

terminal degree
Figure 6. “Distinguished Scholar Award.”
In May of 2016, I was presented with the Distinguished Scholar Award from Trinity College of Florida. My mother and father were present at the banquet where I was presented with the award. This photo is presented with permission by RoseAnn Schoettle (left) on behalf of herself and Daniel F. Schoettle, Sr. (right), who passed away October 3, 2016.

Distinguished Scholar

Annually, a faculty member is named as the college’s “Distinguished Scholar.”

That year, the Admissions department brought us students who were eager to learn,

The Registrar built a perfectly balanced schedule, with not too many very early mornings and no single day more overloaded than the others;

Even the cafeteria prepared the best meals we had ever seen.

There were no hurricanes,
No droughts,
No wildfires,
No pandemic,
And we had a well-established electronic, digital learning management software program to calculate our grades, so we didn’t even have to do the math ourselves.
That year, I taught my 8 classes—4 in the fall, 4 in the spring—with no new preps, and I ran a buzzing tutoring center, like the queen bee, alongside my assistant and her diligent drones—well-qualified and fully committed peer tutors.
That year, 100% of my assigned mentees got off academic probation.
That year, the sun and the moon and the stars lined up just perfectly and shone all their glory
Mistakenly upon me.

**Banquet Night**

The annual banquet, officially a fundraiser,
Unofficially, it’s the one night when Mommy gets to dress up, bring her handsome husband, and go
Have a fancy catered dinner with all her friends and students and colleagues, while
Being enraptured by the God-given speaking talents of famous people—like Ravi Zacharias and Will Graham—who she would never otherwise get to meet.
It is the hands-down best work event you would never want to miss.
--to the point that every year when we made arrangements for the conditions of work for our nanny, Banquet Night was part of the package deal: Monday through Thursday 8am-5pm, plus our anniversary, Valentine’s Day, and Banquet Night.
Banquet Night was a little different this time.

I was called to the stage for a few brief moments to be surprised with an honor,

Awarded

Distinguished

But I had nearly missed my cue.

My parents were my guests—

We had two extra tickets, and I needed Mom and Dad to hear the whole, holy Gospel from someone other than myself—they

Loved fancy-shmancy, so they obliged—but

Moments earlier, Dad had wandered.

It was already later than sunset, so I was nervous that maybe he would forget the way back to the hall, and I went to look for him and to bring him back.

Just as we sat back at the table, the awards began.

As I walked up to the podium,

I looked out past the blinding stage lights:

My husband, so proud—grinning from ear to ear,

Beside my mom, who was never surprised by anything I have ever done—and

Dad—his blue eyes shining brighter than the stage lights,

He stood for me—a singular, powerful ovation,

   Reached out his right hand forward and didn’t quite shout, “That’s me daughter!”

In that instant, I was gone,

Mindfully returned to 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th grade—all my growing up years—

Newspaper photos, award ceremonies, spelling bees, writing contests, special
guest speaking events,

Daddy-Daughter dances—

ey every chance he got,

He was always telling every passerby, “That's me daughter!”

I’d chuckle in the way that every dreamy-eyed storybook little girl loves her daddy,

—and I’d say—

“That’s me Pop!”

—And that night—that photo-op moment would become the last time I would hear Dad’s proud, audible caption.

By the time the next Banquet Night would come around, I would say once more, “That’s me Pop!” as I braced myself against the hull of the tiny motorboat that carried us out not so far from shore,

Holding Mom’s hand tightly in my left hand,

Scattering charred, fragmented remnants—ashes—to ashes—

As I reached my right hand forward in a final,

singular,

ovation.
**Halfway Point**

When

I hit the halfway

point in my doctoral program, I

had climbed the mountain, made the hard

journey uphill, just started to face new characters

and understand my context, But most of the tension was

yet to come, and I had finally started to become comfortable with

myself, and my studies, and my role in teaching and learning and studying.

Exposition cleared the way for new adventures. The problem, the conflict, was

just recently being introduced. I honestly expected that the summit of the mountain, at its peak,

was foreshadowing all to come, although I knew better, and I knew I shouldn’t; The future,

I thought—that this was where I would remain: all circumstances resolved nicely,

playing out in the easy breezy, simple, noble, carefree manner, totally status

quo. Silly me, why at that point I could not see what became

vividly clear the further away from that point in time I

Was hurled by force of nature closer to today—that

moment was not a plateau with expansive

room to grow. Indeed, halfway

through, head-on, I hit the

Climax.
Figure 7. “Adjunct ID Badge.”
This is the ID badge for my second job, which is as an Adjunct Instructor of Composition. I was employed as a temporary employee at this job for 14 years, from 2002-2016. I resigned in 2016 after my father passed away, and my doctoral classes became too demanding for me to keep up with a second job. As of the date of my writing this, I have recently been re-employed back in the same position.
Permanent Adjunct

Such history . . .

If there were a contender in this story that might fight for all the rights to Page 1,

This would be it . . .

Junior year of high school, I dual enrolled,

2\textsuperscript{nd} week of classes, I met my love-ever-after,

Three years later, a contract came my way: “Come teach for us.”

It was part-time, temporary—for 14 years—adjunct work, hooked on the side;

Funny thing, though: it’s the one place I have always been—from

First college student experience to first college teaching experience,

I did leave twice along the way—once to seek the next degree --once to grieve and to heal—

Like the childhood home where family still lives,

Like going home \textit{between} holidays,

Here, there’s permission to breathe—it’s ok to be who I have always been,

Just not full-time,

Not permanent,

And contingent on enrollment,

here, side hustle,

where teaching,

Like a tattoo,

Becomes a part of you.
6pm Exchange

Back in the day

When the kids were yay high off the ground,

Keeping schedules was a tightrope act,

Sometimes there was a safety net.

Like the rules of rush hour traffic, everyone just keeps moving;

All the ground we cover is completely a blur.

Mommy brought them from the north;

Daddy met us in the parking lot,

Coming up from the south.

Fast Forward Rewind

With no more coursework to complete,

Thought the timing might be right—return

To adjunct,

There’s a pandemic, after all, and a need for faculty,

Teaching in-seat.

My sweet littles (not-so-littles) all miss Mommy,

*Did I do the right thing? Shouldn’t I be working less?

What am I missing out on at home?*

But the plumbing broke,

Yikes! Came home one day and the cabinets were soaked!

*That's gonna be expensive!* 

Broken sinks need repair, less studying means more work;
More work means less time with the family
To play and laugh and joke; gotta do what I gotta do, just to earn an extra dime—
My own graduation is near,
Somehow still overcome with fear;
It's a balancing act:
Get to the finished line, defense after defense; jump two steps forward, fall two steps back.
Ph.D. then what comes next? A little more of the same,
Like a fast forward,
Rewind.

Figure 8. “Syllabus from a Teacher Education Course.”
In the Fall of 2018, I was hired to teach as an adjunct at the University of South Florida, in the College of Education. I taught only one course in which the topic of study was Teaching Reading in the Language Arts Classroom.
That Time When I Schooled the Teachers

Once (so far), I was invited, offered,

To teach some future English teachers.

They were so young, yes talented, but so young—undergrads

In junior/senior classes but most in their actual first year at the university,

Thanks to high school CLEP, AP, dual enrollment, GPAs near 5.0.

Two real moments stand out, I can still see the shock in their eyes:

One. 40 to 50 percent of your students will NOT be reading on grade level when you meet them.

Two. Teaching English requires public speaking ability.

End of course evals showed they did not appreciate the heads’ up when I told them:

Johnny cannot read all that text on your lesson slides;

Susie will fall asleep when you read all that text to her;

Step away from the computer screen;

Engage your students;

Speak up;

Make eye contact;

Show confidence!

Try again. And again. And again.

Good gravy! You’re getting worse at this.

Maybe, change your major.
**Kylene to My Rescue**

The required textbook for the class introduced Kylene to the group—but

They thought it was old, must be outdated—no way,

Kids can’t read—they’d say.

*Lord, how are they so blind? I pray you help them see!*  

I picture their moms, much like me,

Doing a great job, choosing the best education, schools, curriculum, tutors,

...got them to reach their dreams come true magma cum laude,

But when my own best intentions still couldn’t make a big enough dent,

This momma heart,

With all my momma love,

At the dining room table,

On the sofa, couch, chair,

Before trying to pull out my own hair,

Help! Quick! Call Kylene to my rescue!

**Snapshot**

Brief capture, quick shot, bad lighting—a

Single moment in time.

Zoom in, get closer—look, there—that's it.


Finally.

Found my focus.
In my first year of teaching, I was given a full service-for-eight set of these dishes. Today, only a few pieces of the set remain.

Apple Plates

In my first year,

It took me a while to identify as an English teacher.

My students trained me and taught me how to teach, though—and by Christmastime,

Apple gifts had flooded my desk: paper weights, wall décor, and more.
My family was proud of me, and my career choice,
Showered me with teacher-themed gifts that year—over the
Years, I am not sure where it went,
By and by,
The remains, like skeletons,
Five dinner plates.

Gypsy Dishes

Heavy plates carry
Heavy meals carry
Heavy memories carry
Heavy burdens
Lighter now.

It began as a service for eight,
For oh so long, we all used those plates and ate—
But so often, one would break,
Seemed like so much at stake,
Though looking back, it’s not like they were symbols of some matriarch
Who knew how to cook--
Just memories of where I, you, we, together, have been.
Those apple plates, gypsy dishes, like skeletons, remain,
In the closet
The only piece of living history we still carry, family,
House to house
To house

From where we were to where we will be—dine

At my table,

Join in,

My living history.

**Bildungsroman**

There is nothing of value in the set,

Most of it has gone—cracked, chipped, splintered away,

Not even featured in old photo albums.

So, scratch that, ball it up, throw the wad away,

Revise the story,

Delete the plates,

No symbolism, no irony,

There's no lesson plan, unit study, grading rubric, research project,

Not even a bell curve,

P-value, t-score, or any multiple regression analyses that could extract the null hypothesis

Right off the top of that etched and scraped and cracked and bruised, barely hanging onto survival

Apple plate.

But this is Narrative.

Wash it. Dry it. Place it back in its reserved shelf-space, like a novel on a bookshelf,

Coming of age.
In April 2005, my husband, my first child, myself, and our dog were involved in a collision on I-95 in South Carolina, at 4:00am. Our vehicle was traveling at 75 miles per hour, and we were hit front behind, knocked off the roadway, down an embankment, and we rolled over at least three times before landing upside down. I sustained permanent injuries to my back, neck, and legs. Our dog died. The baby was uninjured, and my husband sustained minor injuries. This occurred about three weeks prior to my graduation from my masters degree program.
Collision

75 miles per hour

Hit from behind, tossed, like popcorn,

Off the highway, down an embankment—

Three occupants and a yorkie.

One broken wrist,

One permanent back injury,

One beloved yorkie never recovered from the scene.

Backseat, strapped in, Baby. Completely safe.

--glass fragments pulled from my nostrils for days, pale thigh skin turned deep, red blood purple,

From the seatbelt that, when unlatched,

Fumbled me to the roof, which was below me,

Worlds shattered,

Upside down.

Residual Wreckage

The same year that Carrie Underwood vocalized her Jesus plea,

My own baby slept in the backseat, like her song said,

Awakened by a flipping crash—I'm still

Not sure how we three survived and didn’t all burn to ash—an instant

Changes everything—and what it seems to leave unchanged, still alters how it’s seen.

It was dark that night, no highway lights

Anywhere to be seen,
Til out of nowhere,

Ninety miles an hour,

Lights in the rearview, too fast! Too close!

God, how I wish it were a dream—but

It still haunts me—complete nightmare—

Late nights, sound asleep, my eyes wide open, sudden waking, hearth pounding, throat closing, chest crushing, gasping—I jump, out the bed, out the room, down the hall, all the halls,

Baby girl?

Little boy?

Middle girl?

Older girl?

Oldest boy?

--all breathing, all sleeping, all unscathed—ground my feet, solid ground.


Grad Grad

Dear Graduate Student,

I hope your path will be as smooth as mine began. I hope you will chase your dreams, and I hope your dreams will be easy to catch, like netting a butterfly.

Not like me—not like chronic illness

Miscarriage

Childbirth

Car crash

But when you reach that stage, and cross that stage, I hope you will know—even those I
hope you will get there the easier way—you are great company,

Other grads who have gone before you—if you ever doubt, between here and there, between now and then,

Just think of the wreckage I dug through;

If I could do it,

You could too.

Figure 11. “Bible.”
In the spring of 2007, I was on the brink of divorce from my husband. Through the experience of seeking help for my marriage, I came to know Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior.
Wisdom from Above

The years I spent living in the
Foray house brought the most significant changes in
The way I see the world—through those years,
I was Teacher.

But
My eyes viewed students
In a new light,
Not simply malleable brains,
Yearning minds,
Sweaty teens who really should do more homework—
No, not that view,
New eyes, new heart, new mind,
No longer just students—now a
God-given ministry of mine.

Psalm 127 Scars

Children are a blessing and a heritage--
Even though it does not always feel that way,
Like on the way to work, when you stop to drop off at daycare and end up with vomit on your skirt and in your shoe and since it’s too late to call for a sub, you aren’t quite sure what to do-

And the promise, Beloved, is that you will be given rest,
Even though it does not always feel that way,
Like when you lectured, quizzed, and faculty-meeting-ed all day and you’re finally home and just want to sleep but the baby needs to nurse, and he’s cutting teeth—

Surely the fruit of the womb is a reward

Even though it does not always feel that way,

Like when the surgical site becomes infected and rotting flesh burns you from the outside inward as the raw flesh recovery lasts longer than it ought to because this is your third caesarean and sometimes these things just happen.

Like arrows in the hand of a warrior—birthing scars build the faith of the mother, whose house the LORD builds.

Called to Chaos

After ten years of Bible study,

With the fourth child on the way,

After having been laid off from one job and

Placed on two contingency contracts from another,

*they say there’s no motherhood penalty in the academe*

I knew through my study, my circumstances, and the wise counsel I sought

I had been called to continue my education,

Like Moses called to speak, though stutter,

and Jonah, called to care for those he feared and hated,

And Paul, with an irremovable, ever-present thorn in his side—

I knew that following the Calvary Road would put me in some type of chaos I would have never chosen on my own—but the LORD so loved me, that He gave His only begotten
son—and I

Was called into doctoral study,

Called into chaos—like a path cut through the teeming sea in order to escape more certain danger.

---

Figure 12. “Pack N Play.”
By the time my fifth child was born, there was no room in our house for a crib for the baby. This play yard was given to me from a friend who no longer needed it, and my baby often slept and played in it, but I kept it in the dining room because there was no space for it anywhere else.
Pack-N-Play

When I see this photo,

A rush of memories floods my mind—it was only used when I was at work—busy

Teaching other people’s kids,

Busy building maternal guilt that overgrows ever-present,

This was the naptime, playtime, make-lunch-time, the place the babysitter used for resting,

Lay sweet baby, play sweet baby—

When I was home from school,

After longest days of teaching subjects, and verbs, and comma splices, paragraph structural, and college success skills *barely succeeding at this myself*--it wasn’t the pack-n-play that I would use—my own bed was used for baby-rest with a snuggle—but

More than anything else, this moment captures the beginning of the blurring of the lines—like a pack-n-play is a space for playing OR sleeping,

A home is a place for working OR family—add studying, and grading papers, nonstop—suddenly, everything becomes one, eternally blurred.

Mother to Mother

When my baby boy was born,

There were a few things we still needed, like a pack-n-play,

And there was another mother whose fourth child had already outgrown theirs, so

She passed hers on to me.

As with pack-n-plays and other baby contraptions, mothers do for others, pass along tips and tricks and trade secrets,
So, we can use our funny struggles, to help each other avoid the frustrating struggles in the heat of the moment.

She told me about the zipper that pulls the wrong way,
The floor bracket that always looks upside down—but it’s not—and
She said the color doesn’t matter, since I like pink, and Baby Boy really won’t care, and she showed me the ropes.

In teaching, there’s lots of moms, and we share the tips and tricks and secrets as others have passed them,

We pay it forward,

Mother to mother.

The Narrative of Nursing

Once upon a time, *16 years ago*

When number 1 was born, I had no idea how to nurse a baby, no idea how to hold, how to burp, how to keep him from choking on his own spit-up.

So, I checked out every book on breastfeeding that the local library had on its shelf.

After about a year, I supposed I had earned an associate degree, fast-tracked.

In the following two years,

I leveled up, twice—twice the practice, developed patience—maybe got a B.A. in nourishing babies from my body—It was six years

Before I would go back to that kind of learning, and I became a Master of the Art of Breastfeeding. Later, when I was called to doctoral chaos, the story continued, precious fifth Child—sought the comfort of a suckle to soothe her sobbing—nearing

Three years; today, we are still nursing that narrative.
Figure 13. “Bookstacks.”
As I near the end of my doctoral studies, there are stacks of books all over my house. The house where I live as I am writing this project does not have bookshelves built in any of the rooms like my previous house did.

**Bookstacks on Deerberry**

When I moved into the Deerberry house, the littlest had just learned to crawl,

One up from her had not yet learned to ride a bike,

Miss in the middle was still leery of reading, passionate for painting,
Number two was becoming my right hand, number one fan, quite rapidly,
And the oldest, at a mere 14 years old, had already finished his first year of college.
The old house had built-in bookshelves. Not Deerberry.
Instead, there are bookstacks everywhere.
Stacks of books to read to the baby,
More to read to the littles and the middles,
Most for teaching undergrads, and myself—how to be better . . .
Students, writers, teachers, learners—a community of learners, supported by endless stacks of books,
Like routes,
There's so many to choose—this one for a while, turn page after page,
Til the end leads to the next,
Or turn over the page and find a new way—options and choices,
Unsure where to go next,
Find a corner, pick a stack, weave between here and now and there and where—go Beyond the moment into the next, escape from reality,
Making me a better learner,
Better teacher.

**Goodnight Lunar Friend**
The favorite bedtime story happens on repeat, must be read several times—imagine
Having a stack of books, all the same story—
There are days when being a mother feels like that—wake up,
Follow the routine, go to bed, sleep *a little*—do it all again—
Those days are the best,
When everything is predictable,
No one gets hurt or gushes blood from a split lip,
No one has a finger severed at an amusement park,
No one needs the ER for an asthma attack or an emergency surgery,
So, I completely understand when the sweeties just want to hear the story one more time,
please. Mommy, tell me again, play it again, read me a story, so
I can have a goodnight, lunar friend.

Clear the Stacks

It’s not that I won’t read again, or study, or write, or accumulate more stacks,
It's just that—I mean—I guess I probably shouldn’t say so out loud,
Especially since I am not there yet, and still a few people may say I cannot get there just yet—but
I will take that risk and say it now—once that hood, the degree—once it's mine,
Once I get to that point,
I will need to clear the stacks, Clean the desk,
And the dining room table,
Why stop there?-- Even the stacks in the restroom—clear them all away!
Right now, this close to closing the deal, defending the big deal, the whole she-bang,
these bookstacks haunt every inch of my house, my office, my car, my bed, all the rooms, top to bottom, like a checkerboard pattern across every inch of my life, inside my head, coating my brain,
So, when the day is done, yeah, I’m gonna clear the board, and the bookstacks.
Take a break from the trauma, vacation from this life,

Gotta recover.

Take a break, like a necessary calm after a storm,

Then come back, rebuild, reach out, and provide refuge
for the next generation.

Not everything that finishes becomes

The End

Figure 14. “Baby’s Hand in Mine.”
This is a photo of my daughter's hand in my hand. She sits in my lap as I attempt to make a final
review of my dissertation proposal. I had been typing until she entered my office crying, begging
to sit on my lap. It is impossible for me to type on my computer while holding a 27-pound
toddler, but I can hold her hand while I flip printed pages.
The English Teacher Sees

Five tiny fingers set inside the palm of the elder
Reminded of a papa's waltz
And a popular statue of a girl in the hand of God;
Something so small held in place by something so large
Though all she feels is the warmth of a touch.
The English teacher sees the depth of the image, sees the wrinkles of the baby fat fingers inside the wrinkles of the folds of time, those hands that held her since before she met the world;
In black and white, the metaphor is clear—
Yesterday's dreams are now so near.
Listen closely, class, and you will see all that I can hear.
My hand in hers; her hand in mine;
Verse by verse; line by line.

A Mother Knows

That it has been too many days with
Not enough time in mama's lap;
That it is not so easy being fragile and little in the great big world with
Not enough height to reach all the hugs;
That it takes a wailing screaming eardrum piercing cry with
Not enough breath;
That it hurts to be alone with
Not enough time in mama's lap;
When all you really need in life is to
just sit and be held;
Handled with Care.

**A Doctoral Student Feels**

My child's hand inside my own as if it were the most precious gold and diamonds on the planet
My daughter's pulse, echoing my own
My soft, sweet skin, held gently in hers,
like a wrapper on a grape,
The sweetness contained within; so frail; so much potential;
But cannot be contained; cannot be left to fester like a raisin;
Cannot indulge,
The weight of the world, crushed into the juice;
Still sweet, yet transformed;
Something new, never going back.
Missed moments
of
My daughter's pulse, echoing my own.
Like if I blink, she'd already be grown.
CHAPTER FIVE:
EE DOCMAMA SPEAKS OF HERSELF

The Heart of the EE DocMama

Bound up beyond the basic brilliance
Fingers finely fiddling with features
Happily holding her hand
Intuitively inching inside
Like little lizards—
Mothering massively and minutely
At once
Only
Precious particular pieces of
Quiet
Resistance reside ready to
Step and steep and stage the
Tracks and trails and trips
Under
wondrous willows with
Zeal; zealous for you,
my child, my baby,
my pages of my life-blood—
my dissertation.
The Poetic Power of Persistence: Like a Mother

There is a convergence, an intersectionality, where the roles of English Teacher/Professor, Mother, and Doctoral Student mesh together into one inseparable expression of this lifestyle. English Education similarly exists at an intersection: it is like other secondary education programs (mathematics, social studies, science, etc.), but our discipline is distinguished from other secondary education programs by the content of what we study. Our field is also similar to English, but we are distinguished in the manner in which we study our content, which is often for the purpose of learning best not only the rich content of the written, spoken, and otherwise expressed language and its literature, but more specifically, how best to learn, teach, and teach others how best to learn and teach the language and its literature.

As an EE DocMama, I have been able to bring in the literary aspect of culture and life, and teach life lessons to students, often to myself along the way. Mothering changes the way I experience the working life as an English educator, especially in how I balance my time, as well as not only in the placement of my guilt at never doing enough for the kids, but also of never doing enough for my students, my academic department or even the institutions where I have been employed. As a doctoral student, I have felt pressure to seek certain types of academic opportunities, to publish, to engage socially as well as professionally with peers who are seeking my ideas only as a competitor rather than a colleague. But there are aspects of my experience that can only best be understood in context of the separate roles conflated into one, one related, but different role—as a mother, doctoral student in English Education, and as a teacher/professor—the combined roles become one: EE DocMama. This EE DocMama has experienced struggles, obstacles, major challenges, in each of her roles. She has seen her classmates in the same doctoral program fall off the academic train before reaching the destination, as well as
having also seen her fellow teachers leave the classroom when the pressure to perform became too exhausting or too challenging.

But my experience in this life as an EE DocMama has not been drastically different from what I have witnessed in my peers. How then, can I explain, rationalize, justify, sort this out—I am nearing the finish line, while so many others have fallen away from their personal, professional, and academic goals? I can only surmise and posit hypotheses about the many possible explanations as to why the others fell away. What I have been most interested in here, however, is why, with so many odds stacked against myself along the way, why have I made it through the journey? I can express this in only one way: I see myself as the EE DocMama, which brings my role as mother, teacher/professor, and doctoral student together into one characterization of myself. In each of these distinct roles, I work with different strengths and weaknesses.

As a teacher, cultural, historical, and societal events have impacted my work, and I have witnessed the power of persistence in students who were living on the edge of poverty, often in drug addicted or homeless families, with education providing the only way out. As a mother, I have witnessed the power of persistence in raising healthy children through my own personal, embodied sacrifice in the choice of breastfeeding, with its constant demand on my body, both in wake and sleep. And as a doctoral student, I have witnessed the power of persistence in just managing to complete my coursework, despite the impact of various traumatic events, including a serious car crash, several surgeries, multiple diagnoses of my own chronic medical conditions, the sudden death of my father, the diagnosis and management of my children’s chronic medical conditions and the ongoing negotiation of time management, when there truly never is enough time for all that needs to be done. Over the years of my program, my GPA dropped multiple
times, placing me on and off of academic probation in a very seesaw manner— and yet, I have also seen the grace and mercy of professors who had been in my place and saw the opportunity to influence me, reminding me that persistence would be the key to my success. So, this project required me to provide evidence of the development of the sense of persistence that brought me all the way through, nursing this narrative, with evidence and analysis. The artifacts included in the project serve to illustrate the journey through the development of the sense of persistence that kept me moving forward, albeit with often long breaks along the way as needed.

Through this exercise of poetic analysis of the artifacts that reflect and symbolize the lengthy maternal, career, and academic history that I bring into this project, I have been torn in pieces by the memories, completely, emotionally shaken by my own past. I have come to see that I have pushed through some difficulties in a steadfast manner without ever giving myself the time and space to fully heal. I have come to see that I carry within myself, in my mind, and in my body, the scars and deep wounds of not only the physical pains that I have experienced, but also the mental, emotional and spiritual battles that I have endured. Through this project, I have been overwhelmed not only by the challenges that I had pushed into the depths of my memories, but also by the strengths that I have discovered in myself, that I often have been tempted to forget that I possess within myself, desiring often instead to abandon the journey for the easier route of resignation.

In searching out and choosing the artifacts to include for this dissertation project, I not only had to choose which artifacts to include, but also which ones to exclude. There was a process of eliminating some of the possibilities. In the end, I cannot fully offer up a disclosure of all the reasons that certain artifacts were excluded. I can only vaguely overview some of them: the many “gluten free” food packages in my refrigerator representing my diagnosis of Celiac
disease in the second year of my doctoral program, the pill bottles in my kitchen cabinet representing multiple ongoing medical conditions, the enormous specialty body-pillow on my bed representing the excruciating spinal arthritis that plagues me daily, the mountains of laundry throughout my house, indicative of the lack of executive function ability that my household lives with, or even the excessive student loan bills representing the financial impact of this journey.

This was a process that brought both exceeding joy and devastation, often in the same afternoon. The artifacts that ultimately made the cut came at the cost of trailing down memory lane, at the cost of forcing my own past to confront my present and my future. This finalized project is ultimately the final artifact. This dissertation bears witness to the result of persistence, borne of resourcefulness, and nursed to completion through narrative, poetic autoethnography.

Through the act of completing the writing for this poetic autoethnography, I had intended to create the project in a way that would evoke emotion in my reader. Evoke emotion, I planned, in order to build compassion, empathy and understanding of the experience of an EE DocMama. What I had not planned on was the magnitude of the emotional impact completion of this project would have on myself. An unintended consequence of this project that came into play for myself as the EE DocMama is that, like Arthur Bochner (2014) has said, “Now I know that what I want to do is make people feel stuff; continue my quest to put into circulation self-clarifying and transforming stories” (p. 305).
EPILOGUE: 
THE NARRATIVE UNLATCHED

Seven years of sticky notes in my books, stacks of books filled with stacks of stickies,
Like snapshots in words,
Zoom in, zoom out, never fitting,
Always making sense, whenever you hover outside,
Breathe deep,
Dig,
Look in—no photo now—just words, twenty-three thousand of them will do,
See and feel and be and do and become and live and love and
Die to self with me--
See the future of possibility with poetry, autoethnography,
Lines and verses, stanzas, form, inform, reform and freedom—
But what about those times, when all goes blank?
Search the fars and the wides and find that voice, her voice, but there’s more than one.
Multivocal: you, I, me, she, her, us—they, we converge in one voice:
EE DocMama.
Clip the news, flip the script, narrate from the outside-in, inside-out,
Like a fetus in the womb, growing to who she will become,
who she already is and has always been;
Autoethnographic verse—and I ask, how does it feel, what does it mean, what is the
experience, of being entrenched in the exhausting, exasperating, exhilarating depth,
Writing so hard that sanguine purity seeps out from her heart and through her eyes and overflows from her veins straight onto the pages,

Such searing, piercing, internal, external, eternal pain,

the tragedies and traumas she has endured--

EE DocMama.

This is her name,

my name, our name, someday perhaps, our fame—but take me back to the day when the towers fell, and I too, inside fell, from height to worm, no time, no space, could ever prepare me to see a ninth-graders face, then asking me,

Why would anyone do that?

Take me back to the day that I heard a student had been murdered by another, with over a hundred silent witnesses, not a single one gave a name on the way to the fight, and not a single one would vouch for the sight they saw—nothing, no one saw nothing, though city cameras put you all at the scene--

To be the teacher who suddenly saw the depth of all society’s depravity instantly, unnaturally, juxtaposed with all society’s innocence, and to desperately desire to push the kids back onto the right side of that history, to be the teacher who starts down a path that leads to a stepping stone we call the master’s degree,

That holds us only until we can admit it was never enough--

To be the mom with constant bodily demands for taking care of the newborn, fragile, ugly-cry beautiful, baby who is rarely ever satisfied, until she sleeps just long enough for my thoughts to race and race and forbid to settle until she stirs, on repeat, rerun, overturn, overrun, why does it not just cease—
To handle the guilt that never enough is never enough, that good enough is nowhere close, where hitting the target still cannot, will not—ever—come close to the bullseye--

Then ask yourself, why is it that you dare not present yourself as a character in her story, and not seek to understand her experience; and dare not to say her name; obnoxiously, from the sideline, taunting and teasing, and torturing, while daring to push her to dream;

You see her climb-- why not toss the grappling hook to climb the mountain alongside her—

Truth reveals when you peer over the cliff with her, stand, hand-in-hand; back up, deep breathe it all in with her—hear the call to chaos with her, fill her lungs with the taste of victory from all kinds of defeat--yet, witness her—pull her back, let your hand slip, as she runs, and leaps, from the top of the mountainside—beyond her limits, beyond your own expectations, witness her—watch—She soars, propelled from a strength source buried in her gut, like none has seen, but they who dare to bear witness—

Feel the beat of your own heart in your own throat, dare to take her hand in yours, dear reader, become the pages where her story and yours collide—dare to converge—

Because, eventually,

We all converge.
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APPENDIX A: IRB EXEMPTION

Re: Exemption
Larsen, Gina <glarsen@usf.edu>
Thu 7/23/2020 4:52 PM
To: Mallo, Krista <kmallo@usf.edu>

Hi Krista,

Thank you for the additional information. Autoethnography is a bit different than other forms of qualitative research due to the narrative and personal component of the research. In these narrative methods, in which the investigator and participant are one and the same, the investigator reports on their own experiences and perspectives. In this form of narrative reporting, the investigator is not considered a research participant and IRB approval is not required. You can still call this project research, it’s just not considered “human subjects research” per the federal regulations.

You do not need to submit any type of application to the USF IRB for this type of project.

Thank you,

Gina Larsen

USF IRB Manager - Social Behavioral

From: Mallo, Krista <kmallo@usf.edu>
Sent: Thursday, July 23, 2020 11:21 AM
To: RSCH ARC <RSCH-arc@usf.edu>
Subject: Exemption

Hello,
I am currently writing my dissertation for the Ph.D. in Curriculum & Instruction, emphasis in English Education. My study is an autoethnography, and I am the only participant. I believe this study is exempt from IRB review, but I’m not sure how to document the exemption or how to request it. Can you please provide some guidance?

Thank you,
Krista Mallo
APPENDIX B: PERMISSION FOR USE FOR FIGURE 2

Jeffrey Norman Golub

Dr. Golub- I am selecting artifacts to use in my autoethnography dissertation project and would like to know if I may have your permission to include an email you wrote to me back in 2002. I am attaching a photo of a printout. It’s in an old email inbox that I no longer use. I was able to print it but not forward the original.

Re: PCE Conference

Thanks for writing with your news and notes. About food and music appreciation.

You asked, “Why do the students like to do that?”

We are all very eclectic.

Our profession – and the teachers working in it – survive because of the rich diversity of the songs that teachers sing. And they grow from hearing the songs of other colleagues, such as you.

Don’t stop singing, Krista. And don’t stop taking singing lessons at those professional conferences, either.

Much love,

Jeff G.

Krista, thanks for writing with your news and notes about your latest doings and thinkings. Of course it’s fine for you to use the email note I sent you years ago. Wow! I didn’t remember what I had said, but it really sounds pretty good. I still like it and believe in it. Please keep in touch and send me updates on how your project is progressing. I’m interested and I care. My email now is...

And my cell phone is...

Call anytime. My best wishes, Jeff G.
APPENDIX C: PERMISSION FOR USE FOR FIGURE 6

Oct. 22, 2020

To whom it may concern:

Krista Malle has my written permission to use this photograph in her dissertation project.

[Signature]

[Name: Barb Ann. B. Schaeffer]