



My Life So Far: **A “Work” in Progress**

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I've been dreading this paper. I'm so close to graduating and getting out of UMass Boston that I'm tired of writing papers. As an English Major, I have written more than I can count, but never one about myself. As the due date for this first draft got closer and I still did not have a topic, I began to worry. Now I know that I am in fact the topic, but I have had a difficult time deciding what it is exactly about myself that would be the focus of this paper.

As I read Diane Bjorklund's *Interpreting the Self: Two Hundred Years of American Biography* (1998), I wondered to myself if I would try to prove her wrong and nullify her suggested application of Goffman's analysis of **impression management** by not trying "to persuade readers that I am, in some crucial way, an admirable person" (17). This is in fact harder in practice than in theory. After all, when one relates the story of one's life to others, the natural tendency is to, as Bjorklund says, "strategically present the self" (17). While I have no definitive strategy as I write this, I have consciously focused on certain aspects of my life and completely disregarded others; the reason behind this selective process of story-telling is to hone in on the focal point of this autobiography, rather than a strategic

presentation of the self aimed at making the best impression on the reader. However, considering my **autobiography as a social situation**, I do strive to be honest, modest, and hopefully interesting.

Then we watched *Good Will Hunting* in class. I've seen the movie a number of times and consider it one of my favorites. As a native of the Boston area, its portrayal of life here in Boston as a young man in search of himself speaks to me on a very basic level. As I watched the movie, I thought about the first time I saw it in 1997 and where I was physically, emotionally, and psychologically and where I am now in 2004. At that time, I was twenty-five years old, touring the world with different rock bands, working as a roadie, fixing guitars and setting up and breaking down the stage and seeing the world through the windows of a tour bus. Since then, much has changed in my life. I'm now thirty-two and have been happily married for a year and a half, living in Quincy after many years away, finishing up my career as a student at UMass Boston and planning the next phase of my life.

There's a scene in *Good Will Hunting* when Sean asks Will, "what are you passionate about? What do you really wanna do? I ask you a very simple question and you can't give me a straight answer, because you don't know." As I thought about this, I realized that I have the same problem. Although I consider myself a happy person, in fact I am happier now than I have ever been, I still struggle with this very simple question, what do I want to do with my life. In the course of this paper, I plan on taking a closer look at the stages of my life, the past, present and future and considering the changing goals, perspectives and choices I've made in the hopes of coming closer to the ultimate goal of answering this very simple question.

THE PAST

Rather than going all the way back to early childhood, I am going to begin this research with my years in high school. Like most teenagers, I had a difficult time in high school, suffering from feelings of alienation and inadequacy. My high school was predominantly full of students with a middle or upper-middle class upbringing and although I was no different in this regard, I struggled to fit in socially. I find my situation similar to the adolescent girls described in Melissa Milkie's article on "Media Images on Black and White Girls' Self-Concepts," (Cahill, 2004, pg. 59). Although I did not subscribe to the ideals praised by the media, I feel that my inability to fit in, though not entirely because of these ideals, was a result of the popularity and preponderance of these media images which I, consequently, did not encompass. I was an Honors student with long hair who hung out with the "druggies" and not Alex P. Keaton from the popular television show, *Family Ties*. This was not my classification, but my peers'. However, according to Erik Erikson, this may just be a result of my inability to create a new **ego identity**, "a feeling for who one is and one's place in the larger social order" (Grain 281). In truth, I'm not sure I even knew who I was at the time; I just knew I didn't fit in with the "**in group**," which is the primary means of identification for the adolescent in Erikson's **Eight Stages of Life**. Perhaps it was this inability to fit in with the "in crowd" that led the younger me to do the exact opposite: to align myself with those that felt like an outsider—, just as I did. There was little or no judgment meted out within my group of friends; instead we chose to see ourselves as our own enclave within the teenage world we lived in. This was a less painful alternative to wondering why we didn't fit in.

Reflecting on my life as an adolescent

and my plight as an outsider from an adult perspective, I'm reminded of UMass Boston student, Chris DaPonte's paper entitled, "Will I Marry Her?" (2003/4). In it, she discusses the concept of **phenomenology**, "approaching the world from a stranger's point of view with no presumptions" (21). Considering the huge changes one goes through from adolescence to adulthood, aren't I in fact an adult stranger to my adolescent self, approaching my adolescent world from an adult's point of view. From this perspective and at this safe distance, it's much easier to consider one's life as an adolescent with a different and less personal interpretation.

I sought escape from my feelings of alienation and inadequacy and found it in music and literature. I had a voracious appetite for books and Heavy Metal music. I soon learned how to play the guitar and spent every waking moment practicing in the hopes of one day becoming a rock star like my heroes in bands like Led Zeppelin, Aerosmith, and Black Sabbath. This was my childhood goal and dream: to become a rock star and travel the world, enjoying all the spoils that came along with "making it."

When it came time to apply for colleges, although my heart wasn't in it, I applied to a couple of schools with strong journalism programs to appease my mother. I was accepted into all three of my (her) choices and offered full scholarships to two of them. This presented a dilemma; I was eighteen years old and all I wanted to do was play clubs with my band, hopefully building a growing following and eventually coming to the attention of a record label who would soon sign us and voila, World Domination! After a heart to heart discussion with my mother in which she told me to follow my heart and know that this opportunity (full scholarship to the college of my choice) may not be available when and if, I decide to utilize it.

So, I followed my heart and deferred

for a year, working at a friend's restaurant during the day and practicing and performing with my band. The year came and went and I chose to forego higher education, that is until the Gulf War; with all sorts of rumors of a draft floating around, I enrolled in classes at Northeastern University to safeguard any designs Uncle Sam had on me. Academically I did very well at Northeastern, maintaining a good G.P.A. for the two semesters I was there, but my heart wasn't in it. All I really wanted to do was play in my band.

I left school after two semesters to fully concentrate on my band, but alas, it was not meant to be. The band broke up. I was devastated; for three years that band was everything to me and I was positive that we were going to be the "next big thing." I sank into a deep depression, reflecting on the promise my band had represented to me and the futility of ever putting my faith into others again.

I had considered my band-mates my family, in much the same way that Nancy Naples describes in her article, "A Personal Story of Doing Family" (Cahill, 2004, pg. 204). Although I often speak of my family (my mother in particular) and their positive influence on me, there have been times when the distance between us both geographically and emotionally has made it necessary for me to "*do family*" in my own way, creating a "chosen family" out of friends, bandmates, and co-workers—particularly on the road where living and working together creates a pseudo-nuclear family unit anyway. While reading Nancy Naples' article, *Good Will Hunting* came to mind; Will creates his own family in much the same way that Naples does, though in the case of Will his friends become his family not only because of the closeness that they share, but also because of his lack of a real family. There have been times in my life when it has been easier to "do family" my own way than to deal with the sometimes painful divide that has existed be-

tween myself and my real family at certain times in my life. When I read the following quote from Naples' article, I can both identify with the feelings described and celebrate the fact that this time is behind me; "I understood even more deeply that the precious intimate friendships I had constructed over the years were truer expressions of 'real' family than my biological family ever had been" (211).

It was at this time that I realized that I had lost my identity; for three years I had been the guitarist in Abby Normal (silly name, I know) and now I was nobody. It took a long time for me to get over this. After a couple of failed attempts at forming new bands, I reluctantly gave up on my dreams of becoming a rock star. Music continued to be an integral part of my life, but I was no longer a participant: just a spectator.

As I flailed about and tried to re-invent myself and find my identity after so many years of identifying myself with my band, I turned to my older sister, Julie's new boyfriend, Kevin, who is now my brother-in-law. I have a tough time imagining myself getting through some of the tougher times in my life without Kevin: I don't know how I did it before I knew him. Bjorklund describes (1998) the importance of others in our lives, particularly "in terms of their part in the autobiographer's mental or moral development—as mentors, as catalysts who triggered the process of self-culture, or as inspirational examples" (82). Kevin served both as a catalyst and an inspiration to me, helping me see that things weren't as bad as they seemed and that the seeds of change were within me, provided I took the time to find and cultivate them. Kevin's not the only mentor in my short life, but he continues to be the most influential and steadfast. He's not afraid to tell me when he feels I'm screwing up or conversely, to offer congratulations on a job well done.

During this time, I worked as a painter:

to some a mindless occupation, but not working with my boss. He encouraged me to read P. D. Ouspensky's *In Search of the Miraculous* (1949), which is where I first learned of Gurdjieff's concepts of **essence** (which was explained to me as the true potential of a man) and **ordinary waking state**. My boss spoke to me in his strong Austrian accent of mankind as being asleep and unaware of the vast possibilities untapped within him. He drew circles on napkins illustrating the three physical, intellectual, and emotional **centers** within us. At the time, I was twenty years old and put down *In Search of the Miraculous* before I was finished. Although I agreed with the concept of man as a sleeping wealth of opportunity, I could not get past some of the headier passages contained within its pages. I'm older now and the concepts make more sense; perhaps it's time to give Ouspensky another try.

I soon moved to Brooklyn, New York, following a soon-to-be ex-girlfriend who dumped me shortly after our arrival in the big city. At this time, my goals were very basic: work enough to feed myself, pay my rent and go to bars. However, sensing a need for a change, my mother (a powerful force in my life as you may have noticed), suggested I try my hand at college again, so I enrolled at New School for Social Research in the West Village and attended classes at night while working at a record store on the Upper West Side during the day.

I took an Introduction to Philosophy course, reading more Nietzsche than ever before, as well as a course called Introduction to Eastern Thought. Here I learned of the various religions of the East and became very interested in Tibetan Buddhism. However, I do not intend to write this as a **self as morality** play, as Bjorklund calls it, illustrating how Buddhism saved my wretched soul and acknowledging my "sinful nature and the necessity for change" (Bjorklund 62). Sin is a word sel-

dom seen in Buddhist texts; there are right and wrong acts, but sins? I was raised Catholic and even attended Catholic elementary school for a time, but I always had a tough time believing that the old man dressed in purple robes, standing in front of the altar and scaring myself and my fellow churchgoers into submission was really a representative of any God that I knew. Perhaps this autobiography would indeed be a self as morality play, had I embraced Catholicism and seen myself through the eyes of a sinful Catholic in need of change?

Tibetan Buddhism was different. Its Four Noble Truths define the very nature of human existence as a state of suffering and illustrates the path to freedom which comes with this recognition and deep meditation and study. While some consider this a bleak outlook, this could not be further from the truth. This can also be applied to the words of Morrie Schwartz when he asks himself (or the bird on his shoulder), "is this the day I'm going to die? Am I ready?" This is a common concept in Buddhism. In Tibetan Buddhism I saw the key to deliverance from the pain and confusion in my life; I studied in earnest, with varying degrees of success. New York City is not the easiest place to practice "loving-kindness" and cultivate compassion. Furthermore, considering that this class focuses so much on the concept of **self** and whether we are in fact different selves at different times, a central tenet of Tibetan Buddhism is that the self does not exist, as evidenced by this quote from *The Sun of Wisdom*, a commentary on the classic Tibetan Buddhist text, *Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*; "Once we determine that there is no self, it necessarily follows that there is nothing belonging to the self" (Gyamtso 115).

Considering that we've been talking about the self for the past semester, how is it possible that the self does not exist? This is perhaps the most difficult of Buddhist concepts I have attempted to understand. As I interpret it, we are constantly chang-

ing. There is no unchanging self. From moment to moment, day to day, and year to year, our self is constantly adapting in response to outside influence and stimuli; therefore, to say that we are of one self is a fallacy. This concept is in accordance with Gurdjieff's model of the self, as evidenced in this quote by Kathleen Speeth, writing about Gurdjieff's teaching; "human psychological structure and function are better explained by looking at behavior in terms of many 'I's' rather than one, a concept of self more akin to the Buddhist view than to Western psychological thought" (Speeth 32).

When I was watching *Awakenings* in class, a quote struck me as pertinent to this issue of the self as described in Tibetan Buddhism. Regarding the possibility that the mental faculties of the patients afflicted with encephalitic fever have been destroyed, their loved ones refuse to believe it. When asked why this is so hard for them to believe, the doctor states, "because the alternative is unthinkable." Perhaps this is why people find it so difficult to understand the Buddhist concept of the self, or the lack of existence thereof; because the alternative is unthinkable.

By 1997, I had been in Brooklyn for three and a half years and had tried my hand at every level of the music business: retail, distribution, and sales. I decided to cut my losses and return to Massachusetts to reconsider my options. As I pondered my current situation with a friend over a couple of beers at my apartment in Brooklyn, he told me of an interview with the author of a book called *Cliff Walk* that he'd heard recently on National Public Radio. He recommended that I pick the book up; I did, but we'll talk more about that later as it played a prominent role in a later period of my life.

I was back in Boston for a little over two months, working three jobs: a manufacturing job during the day and alternating between a pizza shop and a liquor store

at night. I was twenty-five years old, single and lonely with absolutely no plans for the future when the phone rang. My good friend, Dylan, had just joined a band signed to a major label and was soon leaving for a tour of North America. I got in the van with Dylan and the rest of his band-mates and traveled with them for two years, watching them sell over 3 million copies of their debut album. When they returned home to work on a new album, I got a job with another band, repeating this process for five years, during which I worked for over a dozen bands and toured North America, Europe and Australia extensively.

The roadie lifestyle suited me perfectly. As a kid, I'd always wanted to be a rock star; now I was working with them, tuning and re-wiring their guitars, seeing what really happens behind the scenes. When I began my career as a guitar tech, I knew little more than how to change the strings on a guitar and how to turn on the amp. I soon took a crash course on the finer points of electronics repair and luthier skills. Around the house as a child, I'd never wanted to learn how to fix things; I saw my father as a Mr. Fix-It and wanted nothing to do with him or his hobbies. But now, I was learning on my own, taking pride in my work and excelling. I soon graduated from the Minor Leagues to the Major Leagues of the music world, working gigs in huge arenas in front of sold-out crowds and making more money than I possibly knew what to do with.

THE PRESENT

At some point during my time as a roadie, I picked up a copy of *Tuesdays with Morrie* (Albom, 1997); I was deeply affected by it. It reminded me of the lack of intimacy in my life.

While I was experiencing what Erikson describes as **isolation**, or "the opposite pole" of intimacy, I felt I was ready for intimacy. For years I had been traveling

around the world with no one apart from close friends and family to share it with: that would change. Back home on break from touring, I ran into an acquaintance from high school I'd lost touch with. We went into Charlestown to meet up with another former classmate, my future wife.

Her name is Gabrielle. We spent the night drinking at the Warren Tavern, getting to know each other and discovering that we had a lot in common: enough to make me jokingly propose to her that night. We saw each other a couple of times and I went back on the road, but I soon discovered I'd left my heart in Boston. This was a time of soul-searching. For the first time since I gave up my dreams of superstardom, I knew what I wanted. I wanted to marry Gabrielle and if that meant getting off the road, then so be it.

I began formulating a plan. Gabrielle explicitly told me that she didn't want me to get off the road for her, so I lied and told her it was for me. In a sense, I wasn't lying. I was absolutely positive that we were meant to be together and knew that I'd be unable to convince her of this from my cellphone on tour. Dating a guy who'd spent the better part of the last five years exploring the seedy underbelly of the world of Rock 'n Roll was risky business. I needed to take charge of my life, straighten out, and re-enter the real world.

I got off the road and enrolled in classes at UMass Boston with no goal other than getting my Bachelor's degree and got a job working with a local carpenter building small residential additions and remodeling work, something I knew absolutely nothing about. Going from the "A" list of roadies to the guy that picks up scraps on the job-site wasn't easy, but in order to achieve my goal, to be with Gabrielle, I knew I had to do it. Oddly enough, the book, *Cliff Walk: A Memoir of a Job Lost and a Life Found* (1997), by Don J. Snyder—which I'd read when I'd first returned to Boston—dealt with a similar situation. Snyder had been an English

professor at Colgate University when he lost his job and was unable to find another one in his chosen field, education. At the time, he was 41 and married with three children. After a long and fruitless search for a job as an English professor, Snyder found himself working as a laborer on a construction site, picking up lumber scraps. While my decision to retire early from my career as a roadie was entirely voluntary and I did not have the pressures of family, I was in the same position as Snyder, starting a new career midstream in life and starting at the bottom of the pecking order.

In order to make myself feel better about my job, I created fancy names for the menial tasks I performed as part of my job. Rather than telling people that I picked up scraps on construction sites, I invented fancy names for my job like "lumber relocation technician" and "debris maintenance engineer." It might seem silly, but it took the edge off of a trying situation at the time. In much the same way that the mental hospital patients in Erving Goffman's article, "The Moral Career of a Mental Patient," construct new *social realities* to justify and explain their current situation, so did I (Cahill 363). While I did not tell "*sad tales*" or "*success stories*," I was nevertheless, using words to reframe my reality in a way that made my present (as the lackey whose job it is to pick up lumber scraps) more palatable to myself, particularly in light of my recent past as a successful guitar tech.

Cliff Walk details Snyder's rise from a "lumber relocation technician" to a self-employed handyman, able to make enough money to provide a comfortable life for his family. I've re-read this book a number of times and taken comfort in Snyder's expulsion from the world of academia and his personal triumph in the blue-collar world of construction.

It's been three years since I got off the road. The courtship wasn't easy, but Gabrielle and I have now been married for a year and a half. In the words of Morrie

Schwartz, “love always wins.” I’m now in my last semester at UMass Boston and have graduated to the very technical world of finish carpentry at work and yet, I still don’t know what I really want to do.

Though marriage can be hard work, Gabrielle and I are a perfect fit. Sure we fight, but what couple doesn’t? We communicate extremely well and work out our problems as they arise. While reading Carol Gilligan’s, “Letter to Readers, 1993,” from *In a Different Voice*, the section on relationships and communication caused me to ponder my own relationship with my wife. In the following passage, Gilligan describes the inherent differences between men and women in relationships; “The differences between women and men which I describe center on a tendency for women and men to make different relational errors—for men to think that if they know themselves, they will also know women, and for women to think that if only they know others, they will come to know themselves” (Muus, x). The result of these gender-specific perspectives is a “relationship around a silence that is maintained by men’s not knowing their disconnection from women and women’s not knowing their disconnection from themselves” (Muus, xx). This pitfall is one I hope to avoid in my own marriage, by maintaining and building on my awareness that such a disconnection is possible and by maintaining an open dialogue with Gabrielle regarding our own often different perspectives.

Both of us lived full lives before we began dating and were confident and “secure with our identities,” a prerequisite for true **intimacy** (Grain 283). What do I do after I graduate though? I’m now married and we’d like to have children soon. According to Erikson, at this point we will be entering the stage of **generativity**, the stage during which children are created (Grain 284). Is finish carpentry what I really want to do? Is this the answer to that very simple question Sean asks Will in *Good Will Hunting*? Last

year I entered the undergraduate Teacher’s Certification program at UMB, but soon realized that teaching was not for me. Now I’m entertaining the idea of going to law school or getting my Master’s in Clinical Social Work, but the fact of the matter is, although I’m happier than I’ve ever been and have the love and support of the most amazing woman I’ve ever met, I’m still not 100% sure what I really want to do. I’ve always been introspective by nature and now, as I sit down to write about myself and my life, I wonder in terms of the **Gurdjieff’s carriage, horse, driver, passenger, model**. Who has been in charge? Is it my emotions as symbolized by the horse or is it my intellect as symbolized by the driver?

THE FUTURE?

In writing this paper, I’ve attempted to come to terms with my life from an objective rather than subjective standpoint in order to better understand my past and present in the hopes of re-defining my future. The answer to the question, “what do I really want to do,” while not written in stone, has become clearer to me as I wrote this paper and as events in my life unfolded over the past month.

Today is my last day as a full-time student at UMass Boston. It has been a long and difficult journey as I struggled to succeed in the three different areas of my life: the student, the carpenter, and the husband. I am confident that I have no desire to throw myself back into the world of academia anytime soon and enjoy my job as a carpenter, particularly as a finish carpenter. However, in the past three months, it has become painfully apparent to me that while I enjoy the work that I do, it is necessary to find a new company to work for.

In October, I asked my boss for a raise. He replied that he needed to think about it. It is now December and his response to my request for a raise has resulted in an *Ap-*

prentice-esque series of tasks (*a la* the popular Donald Trump television show), the completion of which will be judged by my boss, who will then deem whether or not I am worthy of a raise. Obviously, it is time to move on. While co-workers are granted raises upon request, my boss would rather see me jump through hoops to achieve the same end. I have been unhappy at this job for quite a while, as a result of inner power struggles and a less than professional work ethic on the part of my boss. Upon completion of this semester, I intend to find work with another company, while taking night classes to take the General Contractor's License test. Once I pass this test, I will be free to continue my career as a self-employed finish carpenter, which I now realize, is the ultimate job for me.

But work is not the only thing I have focused on in this paper. In addition, I've looked at the other aspects of my life: specifically, my role as a husband and as a practicing Buddhist. My wife and I have had to put many of our goals aside while I pursue my Bachelor's degree, namely the buying of our first house and having children. When the final week in January rolls around and I am not attending classes here at UMass, I will be well on my way to making these dreams a reality. Gabrielle has been incredibly supportive throughout my career as an adult student and my first priority is to show her just how much that support means to me. With homework, tests and papers out of the way, I can just concentrate on being the best husband I can possibly be.

Part of being the best husband I can be involves my getting back into Buddhism. I used to meditate on a daily basis: once in the morning after I woke up and once in the evening after the day was done. I intend to make a solemn dedication to practicing mindfulness, along with daily meditation, and the studying of Buddhist texts as a part of my daily life from here on out. Buddhism has always given me a clearer perspective

on myself, my life, and the world around me, causing me to both look inside myself and the world around me without the selfish "I" of the ego in my way.

So, there you have it: my life (past, present, and future) in a nutshell.

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