

CREATIVE TRANSCENDENCE: MEMOIR WRITING FOR TRANSFORMATION AND EMPOWERMENT

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ABSTRACT: Inspired by the researcher's experiences as a memoir writer, this qualitative narrative inquiry research study examined the transformative and empowering dynamics of writing a memoir in connection with transcendent/pivotal experiences. The study was informed by Maslow's theory of creativity and metamotivation. The five participants were esteemed writers with at least one full-length memoir. The study offered a comprehensive profile of each participant showing the relevance of writing as a transpersonal practice. Data collection included memoir excerpts, interviews, lectures, and observations. Data analysis was done using thematic analysis. The findings contribute to the ongoing knowledge of writing as a transpersonal practice. The results illustrate the transformative and empowering dynamics of writing a full-length memoir. The writing experience offered the participants a chance to review their lives, find resolution and redemption, find inner peace, and establish the clarity of mind to move forward in their lives.

KEYWORDS: memoir, transformative writing, empowerment, creative transcendence, transcendent experiences, Abraham Maslow, B- (being) creativity, D- (deficiency) creativity, metamotivation.

When I was 10 years old, my grandmother committed suicide in the room next to mine. More than four decades later, after my first cancer diagnosis, I realized what a transformative event that had been. This awareness set me on a path to discover the reason my grandmother took her life and resulted in two published memoirs, *Regina's Closet: Finding My Grandmother's Secret Journal* and *Healing With Words: A Writer's Cancer Journey* that helped me understand, grow, and become empowered. This study examined the transcendent or pivotal experiences that inspire memoir writing for transformation and empowerment in esteemed writers. Many memoir writers choose this genre as a way to find or reclaim their voice, share a family secret, or tell a story. The act or experience of writing brings a sense of awareness, a transformed identity, and a deeper understanding of the individual writer's place in the world (Krippner, 2002; Yagelski, 2009).

In his discussion of creativity, Csikszentmihalyi (1996) said, "The real work begins when the emotion or idea that sprang from the uncharted regions of the psyche is held up to the light of reason ... it is here that craft comes into play" (p. 263). The decision to write a memoir is dependent upon both intrinsic and extrinsic factors that are illuminated by pivotal or transcendent experiences. The intrinsic factors may relate to the individual's emotions, and the extrinsic factors may pertain to what occurs in his or her world. Writing about certain

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experiences helps provide an understanding of one's unique self, as well as one's relationship with others and the world-at-large.

Maslow's (1971) theory of motivation informed this study in that in writing a memoir an individual might be motivated by higher means or higher truths. "They are dedicated people, devoted to some task 'outside themselves,' some vocation, or duty, or beloved job" (Maslow, 1971, p. 291). This metamotivation may be connected to a calling, daimon, mission, or life purpose or what inspires the self-actualized individual. This metamotivation may be connected to what Maslow calls B- (being) creativity or creativity that arises from being motivated by a higher level of growth. The other type of creativity coined by Maslow is called D- (deficiency) creativity and is a type of creativity that arises from an individual needing to fill a gap due to an unmet primary need or the need for affirmation, acceptance and/or love.

In lieu of presenting a problem, this study presented an opportunity to examine the transcendent or pivotal experiences that encourage individuals to choose memoir writing to transform, grow, and become empowered. The transcendent event may be seen as a unique experience that can confirm or affirm an individual's identity. The purpose of this study was to examine and interpret the transformative dynamics of writing a memoir as elicited by transcendent or pivotal experiences, or transformation and empowerment, resulting in an interpretation of the experience. A transcendent experience is defined as an experience that goes beyond the ordinary. Additionally, this study aimed to contribute to the field of knowledge in this area by facilitating another level of processing after an individual has written a memoir.

Compelling memoirs that express profound emotions and utilize embodied writing may become powerful tools for transformation, as both the writer and the reader become more aware, reflective, connected, and inquisitive about the transcendent experience or pivotal experience that inspired the writing of the memoir. In most cases, an individual writes a memoir because of a burning need to share one's story or as a way to figure something out in one's life, and in some cases, to bring a voice to a family secret or event. Pennebaker (1993, 1997a, 1997b) has conducted numerous studies on the therapeutic power of writing. He found that when using expressive writing or journaling about upsetting experiences, that narratives might not have been initially coherent, but with ongoing writing, the narratives became even more coherent (Pennebaker, 1993). This is indicative of the transformative and empowering qualities of engaging a larger writing project such as a memoir. However, as far as I have learned from my research  there seems to be a minimal amount of empirical literature supporting the transformative and empowering dynamics of memoir writing that is inspired by pivotal or transcendent experiences.

METHOD

The research method used for this study was narrative inquiry. The data were gathered via spoken and written communication with the participants, who

shared the transformative dynamics elicited by pivotal and transcendent experiences that inspired them to write a memoir. This method allowed for the in-depth study of lived experiences by describing, clarifying, and bringing awareness to a lived experience, while providing a deeper understanding of individuals and their truths in a way that objective or quantitative studies cannot so easily achieve. As the researcher, I read and listened to each participant's story and was attentive to any resonance that offered a universal truth (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Freeman, 2007; Hinton, 2012; Polkinghorne, 2005).

In narrative inquiry, the participants recall the lived experience and, with the researcher, coproduce it. In this way, the researcher's interview questions are as important as the participant's responses. In creating the interview questions, the researcher becomes an integral and visible part of the research and results. Even after the published memoirs were read, an open-ended dialogue occurred between each participant and me, an exchange that offered deeper and richer insights into the transformative dynamics of writing a memoir. Narrative inquiry lends itself to the use of a more creative literary style of writing. My personal interest in narrative provided the opportunity to interview peer memoir writers. There was a merging of the data while corroborating the analysis of my own story with that of the participants' stories. The narratives were crafted from the data by the use of reflexive, participatory, and aesthetic processes. The interviews and published memoirs provided indirect evidence regarding the research topic (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Leavy, 2009; Polkinghorne, 2005).

The main research questions addressed in this study were: What are the transformative dynamics of writing a memoir elicited by a pivotal or transcendent experience? What are the pivotal or transcendent experiences that inspire memoir writing for transformation and empowerment in esteemed writers? What is the impact of the pivotal or transcendent experiences in terms of an individual's life theme? How are those experiences representative of Maslow's theory of metamotivation, B- (being) creativity and D- (deficiency) creativity?

The philosophical assumption of this study primarily entailed the transpersonal paradigm and also incorporated certain aspects of the constructivist view. The purpose of the transpersonal paradigm or approach to research was to expand, enrich, integrate, unify, awaken, enlighten, transcend, and transform both the researcher and the participant. In this paradigm, the researcher's qualities and sensibilities played a critical role in all the phases of research. In fact, my role as the researcher was emphasized in the transpersonal paradigm, particularly since I already had familiarity with the area of study and was part of the measuring instrument. In addressing the transpersonal paradigm, emphasis was placed on the researcher's and participants' personal knowledge gained through intuition, direct knowing, empathy, and other paranormal means. The study, therefore, explored and honored the utilization of alternate modes of knowing.

Narratives are especially important in the transpersonal paradigm because they form the core of “nuances of our personal identities” (Braud & Anderson, 1998, p. 23). In the act of sharing these nuances, a story is told, a past is remembered, and insights are formed as a way to cast a light on a lived experience. By sharing narratives the participants became more aware of their pivotal or transcendent experience. Thus, as Braud & Anderson stated, “a more fully enriched spiritual awareness seems not only possible but more probable” (p. 24).

Another pertinent aspect of the transpersonal paradigm is the importance of interconnectedness—the acknowledgment of shared multiple realities that were accomplished through dialogue and an exchange of information between the researcher and participants. Thus, the relationship becomes interactive, a quality of relationship that will further emphasize the equal terrain on which both participant and researcher stand (Braud & Anderson, 1998).

With the transpersonal paradigm, this researcher studied the various transcendent experiences that inspired individuals to write memoir to transform and become empowered at the center of this process. As a researcher, I concur with Braud and Anderson (1998), who believe that, although a large part of our knowledge is received through sense data validated by others, other forms of knowing also offer an opportunity to gain knowledge.

The constructivist worldview complements the transpersonal paradigm because, for data collection, it uses methods such as observations, interviews, and document reviews, which included the reading of the participants’ published memoirs. The goal of this worldview is for individuals to understand the world in which we live. The assumption here is that the researcher and participant would recall, collect, examine, and interpret data, and would then socially construct conclusions explicit in the narratives: “The constructivist therefore opts for a more personal, interactive mode of data collection” (Mertens, 2005, p. 15).

After collection via interviews, reading the memoirs, and lectures, the data were connected to a broad spectrum of theoretical frameworks. This was one way to interpret and analyze the data. Each story was analyzed individually for particular elements; then similarities, differences, and common themes were identified (Murray, 2011).

Participants

The five participants were chosen via purposeful sampling, thus providing a rich blend of information, “with the objective of yielding insight and understanding of the phenomenon under investigation” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 104). The participants had all written a memoir that referenced them having had a pivotal or transcendent experience that moved them to write either one or two memoirs. The experience of writing the memoir should have been transformative and empowering to the participant. In order to initiate this purposeful selection, I read a selection of memoirs from both emerging and esteemed (well-published author with at least one published book) writers.

At the onset of this study, as a researcher, I identified potential participants by gathering names from published memoir reviews, such as in *Publisher's Weekly*, *Poets and Writers*, *Salon*, and *The Sunday New York Times Book Review*. E-mails were also sent to literary colleagues for suggestions of writers who had written a memoir that dealt with the subject of loss—whether referencing the loss of a loved one, health, or status. The intention was not to study loss, but loss was used as a participant criterion as a way to narrow down the number of potential memoirs to be studied; otherwise the list of possible memoirs would have been too extensive.

The potential participant list began with nearly 34 memoirists. Utilizing the process of elimination, the list was narrowed down to 25 participants and finally to five participants. Then, I read each memoir (some participants had written two memoirs) to ensure their pertinence to the study. When the preferred memoirs were chosen, e-mails were sent advising the memoirist of the nature and essence of the research study, and what it would involve for him or her. For example, the participants were advised that they would be interviewed three times via phone or Skype over a 3-month period, at mutually agreeable times.

The final participant profile included (a) age range between 35 and 75; (b) three females and two males; (c) two out of the five participants had written two memoirs; (d) all participants were esteemed writers; (e) all participants had transcendent or pivotal experiences that led them to write a memoir; and (f) at least four participants acknowledged that they were transformed and empowered by writing a memoir.

The first participant to consent to the study was Kim Stafford, the son of the esteemed poet William Stafford, who had also written a memoir about his brother's suicide. The second participant to agree was Mark Matousek, who had written two memoirs. The third participant was Monica Wesolowska, who almost immediately agreed to participate in the study. The fourth participant to respond was Alexandra Styron, the daughter of the writer William Styron. The fifth agreeing to participate was Maxine Hong Kingston. Note: All participants chosen for this study opted out of remaining anonymous and gave permission for their names to be published.

Thus, all the memoirs chosen for this study were written by well-published or esteemed writers. Purely by coincidence, all five participants were also teachers of either creative or transformative writing. Admittedly, these memoirists were chosen because their memoirs were the most compelling and well-written contemporary memoirs.

Procedure

Personalized letters were e-mailed to each participant describing the research project as a narrative qualitative study examining the pivotal or transcendent experiences that led each individual to undertake the project of writing a memoir. In the initial letter to each participant, the transpersonal term of

transcendent experiences was explained, and it was mentioned again on the Informed Consent form. This study employed integral research skills with intention setting, while using mindfulness techniques for both the researcher and participant. The participants were offered the opportunity to share any other alternate states of knowing, such as lectures, journal entries, or any other forms of creative expression.

Two interviews were conducted with each participant. Although a great deal of information and answers to the research questions  easily obtained by reading the participants' memoirs, the interviews validated and allowed for a deeper connection between the researcher and the participants.

Prior to the first interview with each participant, this researcher read each memoir twice. Research questions were customized to each memoirist, although left open-ended so that the discussion could be guided by each participant. To ground and calm the participant, each interview began with a breathing exercise, followed by a 5-minute guided meditation.

The first interview began with an orientation, stating intention and rationale for the study, and sharing the length and focus of the discussion (Mishler, 1999). Each participant was informed of my deep interest in his or her memoir, while also sharing my own transcendent experiences and the transformative dynamics of my memoir writing. The second interview was a continuation of the first, and ended by asking if the participant had anything to add, comment on, or share.

The details and contents of the interviews were based on a combination of two interviewing approaches: McAdams' (1997) Life Story Interview, which is a guided autobiography method wherein the individual constructs the life story, identifying pivotal experiences in his or her life; and the Self-Defining Memory Task developed by Singer and Moffitt (1991), wherein self-defining emotional memories are linked together by a theme in the individual's life (Winston, 2011). These elicited emotional memories are "affectively charged, repetitive, and linked to other similar memories. They are also connected to an important theme of enduring concern in a person's life story" (Winston, 2011, p. 120).

This new interview method, which I called Transcendent Experiences and Life Themes, included making the following inquiries: the presence of peak experiences, nadir (low) experiences, pivotal experiences, exceptional human experiences, aha moments, and the role that writing continues to play in the participant's life. The participant was then asked about the impact of these events on his or her personal transformation and sense of empowerment.

Prior to the first interview, each participant received via e-mail an Informed Consent to participate in the study. For the purpose of data treatment, the participants had the option to remain anonymous, but none of them chose to do so. The interviews were semi-structured.

Ethical considerations involved the minimization of the risks and the enhancement of the benefits to all the participants. Because the criteria for participant selection entailed having written a published memoir, the ethical considerations regarding confidentiality were minimal.

To minimize the issue of researcher bias, I shared and reflected about my connection with the subject of research and my own experience with pivotal and transcendent experiences that led to the writing of my two memoirs, *Regina's Closet: Finding Her Grandmother's Secret Journal* and *Healing With Words: A Writer's Cancer Journey*. Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) suggested that the researcher keep a journal of subjective perspectives and biases to be recorded during the research process; I did regular journaling during, before, and after the actual data collection. While writing up the data, I contacted a couple of the participants for clarification on specific information.

To ensure accuracy and efficiency of data collection, the triangulation method was used, wherein multiple analytical processes are used to create a greater understanding of the meaning of research. The primary methods of data collection were through interviews, reading of and reviewing the participants' memoirs, and researcher's observation (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). Interviews were conducted via live meetings, taped phone interviews, and Skype.

Numerous validity measures were also utilized. First, to address credibility (internal validity), peer debriefing was used. For that process, the findings were presented to other memoir writers who were not involved in this study. The nature and findings of the study were also discussed with a colleague not writing a memoir, but who works in an academic environment and teaches writing at the college level. Those consulted were impressed by the study's results and asked helpful questions that illuminated some of the study's major reliability issues. Second, transferability (external validity) was used, wherein rich and poignant descriptions of the research findings were shared. The more details presented in the study, the more trustworthy and reliable the narrative appeared.

The reflexive voice, as described by Hertz (1997), allows for this deep conversation with the self by incorporating the individual's body, mind, and spirit in the writing process. In fact, sometimes during the writing process, the individual utilizes *trance writing*, a transpersonal technique whereby the body takes over and the writer becomes entranced and involved in reliving the experience. This involvement may result in transformation for the memoirist (Anderson, 2001; Ellis, 2004; Goodall, 2000; Haynes, 2011).

For compelling readability, embodied, reflective, and reflexive writing was employed. Third, a test of dependability (reliability) was utilized. This is the place where the methods overlap, addressing credibility and employing triangulation, stepwise replication, and inquiry audit. My self-reflections were shared regarding the narrative with the hope that my insights would resonate and move the readers. Fourth, confirmability (objectivity) was also addressed and, when possible, extended time was spent with each participant either in

person, via Skype, or on the phone. During the data collection stage, I maintained a reflexive journal. Fifth, member checking was utilized. After the interviews were transcribed and the data analyzed, additional communication was arranged with each participant, as a way to allow him or her to review the document for accuracy.

RESULTS

Based on the four research questions, the following findings result 

Transcendent or Pivotal Experiences that Inspired Memoir Writing for Transformation and Empowerment in all the Participants.

For Stafford, the pivotal moment for writing his memoir was his older brother Bret's suicide at the age of 40. He had never written about his brother, but realized that over the years much of the dialogue and narrative he had written in his journals were connected to or in the voice of his brother. Therefore, his brother's suicide was his inspiration to write his memoir, *100 Tricks Every Boy Can Do*. As he emphasized "painful acts like suicide, and mysterious life dimensions like depression, tend to call forth both indelible memories and a velvet cloak of silence" (Stafford, 2012, p. 194). The moment of the final decision to begin writing his memoir occurred when Stafford's son transitioned into adolescence, and Stafford began to wonder about the circumstances surrounding his brother's suicide. Stafford wanted to be aware of the secrets, silences, and the predisposition for depression in his family, as all those factors could have an impact on his only son.

Memoirist Matousek (1996) claimed that his inspiration for writing his first memoir, *Sex Death Enlightenment*, stemmed from his transcendent experience of the realization that his life as a busy writer for a large New York magazine was taking a psychological toll on him. He felt a deep desire and need to slow down his life from the fast track. It was as if a voice inside him gave him this message. What this meant for Matousek was the need for a mystical and spiritual exploration. It was during his personal mystical and spiritual exploration that he found himself transforming. By writing *Sex Death Enlightenment*, he wanted to share with the universe the details and evolution of his transformation.

Matousek's (2000) impetus for writing his second memoir, *The Boy He Left Behind*, originated from the pivotal or transcendent moment of when his father abandoned Matousek's family when he was 4 years old, leaving him to live with three sisters and his mother—essentially a house of women who silenced him. The real impact of that moment arrived when his father returned years later and unsuccessfully tried to kidnap him.

Wesolowska's (2013) transcendent moment arrived when she gave birth to Silvan, who clearly would not survive too long after birth. Just after his birth,

Wesolowska began keeping a journal sharing her experience. Already a writer, it was clear this loss would lead her to write the story of Silvan's life, and that this would both help heal her and empower her realization that if you love someone you need to let them go—thus her inspiration to write *Holding Silvan* .

Styron (2011) was a little different than the other memoirists because although she had written a novel, her primary profession was as an actor. As the only one in her family who had inherited the literary gene, she felt compelled to share her father's story. In addition to being inspired to study, write, and share her father's life story and what growing up in the same house with him was like, she was also driven by grander motivations of exploring the human heart and psyche; thus the title, *Reading My Father* .

Kingston's (1975) transcendent experiences or inspiration for writing her two memoirs were not necessarily from one clearly identifiable moment, but stemmed from her reflection about what had historically happened within her family. *The Woman Warrior* was inspired by the ghosts of her Chinese past, particularly her aunt's suicide after being ostracized from the community for having an illegitimate child. The fact that her aunt was born and forgotten from the family grated on Kingston's psyche for many years. While her mother wanted her to communicate stories with the world, Kingston was told to hold on to the secret about her aunt's suicide. Kingston wrote *The Woman Warrior* as a way to explore this duality. Kingston's impetus for writing *The Fifth Book of Peace* was the Berkeley fire causing the burning of her 200-page book manuscript. Kingston believes that through stories we find reconciliation with our past.

The Transformative Dynamics of Writing a Memoir

Stafford indicated that writing his memoir transformed him in the sense that it helped him come to new understandings about his brother's suicide. It also reunited him with his brother in a way that made him feel younger because he was reliving their childhood experiences together. At the same time, the writing inspired him to dig deeper into understanding his own life. The writing forced him to pose questions and encouraged him to tell stories. Most importantly, Stafford realized that relationships do not end with death; they go on forever, and sometimes they can even become magnified after someone has died.

Matousek was immediately transformed and relieved from the pain of his past when he began writing. Growing up as the only boy amongst three sisters, Matousek never felt as if his voice was heard. Writing his memoirs gave him a voice. While writing *The Boy He Left Behind* , Matousek came to the realization that as a child without a father living at home he felt as if a part of him was missing, but in writing his memoir he understood that that there was no reason to feel that way. Thus, writing dissipated his feelings and helped him feel more real in his own skin than he had ever felt before.

Wesolowska wrote *Holding Silvan* with a deep sense of flow and urgency, and this alone was transformative. Writing about her experience with Silvan's

short life and untimely death helped her look at life in a much larger context, especially since she wrote it after she had birthed two other sons. Writing also helped to keep Silvan alive in her mind and in her heart. Completing the memoir brought closure to his life and birth. The writing transformed her and helped her move into the next phase of her life of raising two healthy boys.

Styron felt transformed while writing her memoir because the writing process gave her confidence in her story, which she was telling about her father. She also found that while writing, undesirable memories of her past that had been swept away were brought to the forefront. Styron realized that rather than being a form of transformation, retelling her father's stories was a way to manage her false sense of intimacy with him, in that she held onto satisfying snippets of information as a mirror into his life.

Kingston admitted to having been transformed by retelling the stories of her past. She also enjoyed examining and exploring unknown territories. She felt as if she had had a lost childhood and by writing about it, she was able to understand her past and move forward. During the writing process Kingston had many animal visions that shed light on her life. In addition, she realized that the lost manuscript of *The Fifth Book of Peace* had also burnt many years ago in China, and she pondered the coincidence of these two events.

The Impact of the Pivotal Transcendent Experience on an Individual's Life Theme

Stafford's life theme has always been Kuleana, or the freedom to tell stories and the importance of communication. When he realized that he could tell the story of his brother's life and suicide, he experienced a certain amount of freedom. Writing *100 Tricks Every Boy Can Do* encouraged him to pose even more questions about his brother's life and ultimate suicide. He began questioning the effect his parents had on his brother's demise. He also wondered how he might be a better father than his father may have been to his brother and honor the importance of transparency and open communication.

Like Stafford, Matousek's life theme has greatly revolved around posing questions and seeking answers. Matousek also acknowledged that the themes in both his memoirs focused on his deep sense of spiritual hunger. Along with this came a sense of wonderment about how to deal with this hunger in the most productive and effective manner. He came to the realization that survivors are seekers.

Wesolowska had always been a journal keeper, so pulling together the story of Silvan's life was in line with her life theme as a creative writer. Wesolowska, Stafford, and Matousek are believers in transparency, and this clearly was illustrated in all of their writing. Wesolowska also acknowledged the beauty inherent to all of life's stages—birth, dying, and death.

Writing *Reading My Father* reminded Styron of her genetic predisposition to depression and madness. She also understood her deep psychic connection with her father and their mutual sense of humor that she tried to incorporate into the narrative of her book. Another theme in Styron's life has been the presence of some sort of intrinsic or extrinsic drama inherent in her family's everyday existence.

The Role of Maslow's Theory of Metamotivation in Connection with B-Creativity and D-Creativity

Sometimes there is a blurring of the boundaries between both B- and D-creativity, especially when discussing writers born of famous writers, such as Stafford and Styron. They may very well have been born with the creative gene and the propensity to express themselves on the page, but perhaps they did not feel it possible until the time was right, such as when faced with a transcendent or pivotal moment. In Stafford's case, it was the death of his brother and for Styron, the death of her father, both powerful turning points in their lives. Even though the decision to write their memoirs did not necessarily occur immediately following the experience, the idea might have been stirring in their minds.

Although both Stafford and Styron were already writers when their transcendent experiences occurred, it might be assumed that their creativity was in the B-creativity realm, but transcended to the D-creativity realm. In other words, they both used their skills as writers to help themselves deal with and find peace with their losses; thus, the idea of writing a memoir was connected to what Maslow defined as D-creativity.

Matousek is very inspired by higher forces and aspirations. In sharing his own personal journey and transformation with the universe, he felt as if he was working for the higher good. In this way, he is metamotivated; his work may have originated from D-creativity and the belief that he needed to share his story because of the loss of his father. During the writing process, this D-creativity led to B-creativity because the more he wrote, the more he realized how dependent his existence was on sharing his story with the universe.

As a writing instructor, Wesolowska has been a huge inspiration for emerging and accomplished writers. She believes in transformation and healing through words. Although she did begin writing in her journal during childhood, it is unclear whether she began writing out of D-creativity or a desire to write and share her words. Like many writers, she may be one who oscillates back and forth between these realms.

Kingston was metamotivated in the sense that she wanted to share the stories of her Chinese culture. She began writing from a D-creativity perspective and ended up writing from a B-creativity perspective, in that once she started writing and sharing her messages, she realized that the written word was an integral part of who she was and that she was writing for a higher purpose: to share her story with the universe.

Clearly, these findings bring forth similarities amongst the five participants and their stories. For example, the theme of secrecy runs through all their stories, which felt uncomfortable to them. All five participants preferred following the path of transparency as a way to transformation and empowerment. There seems to be a predicament between secrecy and reconciliation in these emotionally charged families where conflicting messages were relayed, especially to the offspring. Perhaps these writers chose to write memoir as a form of reconciliation of the tenuous conditions of their childhoods and/or their individual lived experiences.

DISCUSSION

This qualitative narrative study gathered data from five published writers—three women and two men, all ranging between the ages of 45 and 75, who had written a full-length memoir inspired by a pivotal or transcendent experience. The chosen memoirs were connected in some way to loss, although the focus of the memoir was not specifically about loss. Merely by coincidence, all five participants were creative writing instructors.

When the participants were asked to look back on the transcendent experience that served as inspiration for writing the memoir, all were able to identify the experiences that ultimately became the memoir's focus. Stafford was inspired by his brother's suicide and wanting to be aware of the secrets and silences within his family; Matousek was inspired by his father abandoning him when he was 4 years old; Wesolowska was inspired by the loss of her son; Styron was inspired by wanting to examine the large picture of her relationship with her father; and Kingston was inspired by her aunt's hidden suicide and the ghosts of her Chinese past.

When the participants were asked about the transformative dynamics of writing a memoir, Stafford had three offerings. He admitted that writing helped him come to a new understanding about his brother's suicide; it also inspired him to dig deeper into his own life, while coming to the realization that relationships do not end with death. Matousek found that writing gave him the voice he never had as a child; he also realized that even though his father abandoned him, a piece of him was not missing, as he had thought for so many years. Wesolowska found that writing helped her see her son, Silvan, in the larger context of her life, and that writing also brought her a sense of closure to Silvan's life so that she could move into the next phase of her own life. Styron found that writing her memoir gave her confidence in the story she set out to write, and that when writing, her memories became even clearer. Kingston admitted to having been transformed by retelling the stories of her past, and also by examining unknown territories. She also felt that by retelling the stories she was able to reclaim her lost childhood.

When the participants were asked about the role of the transcendent experience and their life theme, Stafford admitted that his passion for writing was connected to his love of Kuleana, or the freedom to tell stories. He also acknowledged that the secret surrounding his brother's suicide simply needed

to be told. Matousek admitted that his life theme had always revolved around posing questions, in addition to his eternal spiritual hunger. Writing both his memoirs served as a continuation of these themes. Wesolowska had always believed in honesty and transparency, and telling Silvan's story allowed her to maintain this desire. Also, as an individual who likes making connections, writing allowed Wesolowska to make connections to the losses of her past. Kingston and Wesolowska are both women who enjoy storytelling, so memoir writing was an integral and important element of their life themes. Wesolowska admitted that once she made the decision to begin the memoir, she experienced a sense of flow with her words, as if they originated from a very deep place.

All five participants were similar in their desire for transparency and revealing secrets. They all conceded that secrets made them feel uncomfortable and ill at ease. For each one, the resolution came forth when the secrets were exposed, which ultimately led to transformation and empowerment. There was clearly a relationship between secrecy and reconciliation in all 5 participants, and writing the memoir was a way to find resolution in regard to the transcendent experience.

In addition to these findings, five common themes emerged from the data:

1. The five participants expressed a deep need to write a memoir, feeling as if they were the only one able to share this story that needed to be told. It was as if each one was called to write the story. In other words, writing and sharing the story was something they had to get out of their systems.
2. All the participants identified themselves as curious and inquisitive individuals who yearned for knowing and understanding the lived transcendent experience.
3. All participants had implicitly or explicitly confessed that one of the reasons they made the decision to write a memoir was the desire to figure something out, whether it was an unanswered question or the truth about a situation.
4. By writing the memoir(s), all five participants suggested that they could finally let go of the story. During or after writing the memoir, all the participants alluded to the fact that writing was a way to come to terms with or resolution about the pivotal or transcendent experience. In doing so, they each attained spiritual and/or personal strength through transformation and a sense of empowerment.
5. All participants concluded that in researching and writing the memoir, they were offered the opportunity to make connections with others who shared valuable information. This sense of interconnectedness brought a deep sense of comfort and a sense of fulfillment. All the participants viewed making vital connections as one of the many positive aspects of memoir writing.

RESULTS IN RELATION TO THE LITERATURE REVIEW

Stories unite us; therefore, the purpose of narrative is to express and share stories. "Autobiographic narrative teaches you how to express what you've experienced,

what you feel, what you remember, what you understand, who you are, what you believe and why, in a way that someone else would relish reading” (Rainer, 1997, p. 8). The narratives developed by this study clearly illustrate that narrative writing, especially as seen in the writing of a full-length memoir, can help individuals move forward and become transformed and empowered during and after the writing process. Mishara (1995) claimed that narrating difficult experiences through the written word is an act of self-transcendence, and one way for an individual to embody an experience and help to organize it in the context of his or her life. Numerous books and papers have been written on the healing power of writing in general, particularly journaling, but not much has been written on the transformative role of writing a full-length memoir. This study offers to place the transformational power of memoir writing within the existing literature.

The best memoirs have been written by those who have allowed enough distance between the transcendent experience and the writing of their memoirs. This distance provides a much appreciated additional perspective. According to Freeman (1993), when an individual rewrites an experience, especially in the form of a memoir, it offers the opportunity to give a new meaning to a lived experience by understanding it with the present-day lens. As May (1975) identified, the insights offered by looking backward on a life “emerge not chiefly because they are ‘rationally true’ or even helpful, but because they have a certain form, the form that is beautiful because it completes an incomplete Gestalt” (p. 68).

Many writers believe that memoir cannot be properly written until middle age, when there is not only enough distance from the story to be written, but also the wisdom of the adult perspective and prophecy. In her book, *Your Life as Story*, Rainer (1997) admitted that she did not even feel the impulse to write a memoir until she was 40. The distance, Freeman (2007) claimed, most often allows the experience to come across more coherently on the page. Freeman (2010) added this about hindsight: “Even when I least expect it, a new experience or piece of information may come along that will utterly and completely transform my understanding of the past and the story I tell about it” (p. 85).

The fact that all the participants were inquisitive and had a passion for posing questions might suggest a personality trait inherent to writers. In discussing the creative genius, Hale (1995) stated that the writer is able to combine the intellectual sophistication of years of learning coupled with the wonder and curiosity of a child who is unafraid to pose questions. Posing questions is inherent to wanting to understand these lived experiences. In the discussion of the memoirists wanting to figure something out in their lives, Frank (1995) wisely stated that “the postmodern memoirist writes to discover what other selves were operating, unseen, in a story that is the writer’s own, but that writer is several selves” (p. 70). This figuring out and understanding informs the transformative and empowment aspects of writing a memoir.

The deep questioning of the self in trying to understand the transcendent experience leads to deep conversation with the self, which was reflected in the participants’ writing.

Another factor to consider is the connection between the desire to be creative and the desire to share that creativity, whether it is memoir writing, poetry, or art. This desire to share is connected to Maslow's metamotivation and an individual's desire to do something for humanity or the collective. In other words, the transformational pull may be as much social as individual. When metamotivated by higher means, the writer's motive is to do something for the good of the collective, and sharing the stories of pivotal or transcendent experiences does just that. By witnessing and sharing stories, both the writer and the reader attain benefits. As DasGupta and Hurst (2007) suggested, without sharing the stories, the participant's life experiences would have remained private. In the event of suffering or illness, the individual might have suffered alone. Therefore, the act of sharing can be transformative and empowering. In fact, Maslow (1970) suggested that those who are self-actualized are those who experience situations in the best way, are the most compassionate, and play a large role in informing and reforming others. In this sense, the self-actualization characteristic of memoir writers can be understood as metamotivation to affect the collective; memoir does this by informing, transforming, and empowering both the memoirist and the reader.

The participants in this study appeared metamotivated, indicating that they were already self-actualized, or the type of individuals who made the most of their potential and intellect. This motivation by higher means was indicative of a desire to solve unknown problems or find answers to unanswered questions. Maslow's (1962/2011) description of self-actualizers adds depth to this understanding; he described such individuals as "relatively unfrightened by the unknown, the mysterious, the puzzling, and often are positively attracted by it, i.e., selectively put it out to puzzle over, to meditate on and to be absorbed with" (p. 108). This lack of fear transcends the relationship with themselves and their relationships with others. Having no fear meant that the participants were unafraid of their own behavior, emotions, or thoughts, and more than most, they were self-accepting of themselves and others.

The sense of spiritual growth or transformation leads to the transpersonal relevance of the research, in the sense that this deep need to write memoir is framed as self-actualization within Maslow's understanding of human potential. The concept of self-actualization supports the achievement of human potential as a way to well-being and a sense of harmony. Clearly, both self-actualization and creativity, as demonstrated through the writing of memoir, are connected to psychological well-being and interdependent upon each other. Sometimes, in fact, it might be difficult to ascertain which preceded the other—is the creative individual self-actualized or is the self-actualized individual creative? Runco, Ebersole, and Mraz (1997) suggested that, in fact, both self-actualization and creativity may lead to even a third variable, such as the ability to cope and adapt, and that both creativity and self-actualization are multifaceted and dependent upon other variables. However, in either case, both creativity and self-actualization affect the ability of an individual to achieve his or her human potential, which thus explains the transpersonal relevance of this study.

TRANSPERSONAL RELEVANCE

Lajoie and Shapiro (1992) defined transpersonal psychology as “the study of humanity’s highest potential, and with the recognition, understanding, and realization of unitive, spiritual, and transcendent states of consciousness” (p. 91). Creative expression may be considered a transcendent state, and in general, fosters a healthy balance between the mind, body, and spirit. This study is transpersonal from its utility for an individual in achieving the highest potential or becoming metamotivated through the writing process.

Writing as a transpersonal practice has been well established; other researchers, such as Dufrechou (2002) and Netzer (2008), used the practice with themselves and the participants in their studies, incorporating embodied writing in their descriptions. In my particular study, the embodied writing and descriptions came directly from the published memoirs being studied. Memoir writing as a creative expression is useful as a transpersonal practice because it increases self-awareness, promotes healing, is transformative, and elicits feelings of empowerment. Memoir writing can incorporate transpersonal methods such as reflective, reflexive, and embodied writing. By incorporating the technique of embodied writing, the transcendent experience gets embodied and nourished by its presence in and of the world in which we live.

Anderson and Braud (2011), in their discussion of embodied writing, highlighted the idea that our experiences are relayed from the inside to the outside; by using words and vivid images as a vehicle, the memoirist invites sympathetic resonance in the readers. In this way, the readers feel the pulse of the story being told, as if they are reliving details of the experience, emotions, and feelings with the writer. In other words, the reader is invited to be present with the memoirist in the experience. Each writer does this in his or her own creative way, which is why each writer has his or her own distinctive voice when describing a lived experience.

The most compelling writers slow down and look for resonance within their own body as they try to relive an experience and all its nuances. This technique is particularly relevant in memoir writing when the memoirist is often called upon to recall an event that might have happened many years earlier. Consequently, the use of embodied writing is a vital way to “bring the story home” to both the reader and the writer and becomes one way for the memoirist to portray his or her lived experience in and to the world.

The participants in this study reported that they were all pleased about their decision to write a memoir, and found that they greatly benefited from the experience. Writing about the transcendent experience offered another way of knowing and understanding their lived experience and provided another path leading them to transformation and empowerment.

In addition to achieving personal transformation and empowerment, memoir writing and sharing stories is also an endeavor for the collective and a way to assist in cultural education to initiate change. The writing and reading of

memoirs encourages self-reflection and acceptance of the self and others. Sharing stories through the process of memoir writing helps foster a sense of interconnectedness, and breaks down barriers that might have divided cultures in the past. Human stories bring us together, which fosters and encourages compassion and understanding of one another as individuals and as a culture.

RESEARCHER REFLECTIONS

Much of the joy in doing the work for this study originated from my own personal interest in memoir writing. My passion for the subject emanated during my interviews, as an immediate connection was established with the participants. The sense of interconnectedness was apparent during all my interactions with the participants; I believe this was comforting for the participants and eased the potential strains on a researcher–participant relationship.

I realized that research can be transformative for both the researcher and the participant. Anderson and Braud (2011) mentioned that implicit in the transformative vision is the idea that research can be transformative on many levels, including individual, communal, and global. On an individual level, the participants were encouraged to reflect on their writing process and identify transformative elements that occurred during the writing process and our discussions. As a researcher, I was transformed by the cooperation and enthusiasm of the chosen participants, and also by some of the salient data that emerged from this study. On a communal level, interesting material emerged during the discussion between the participants and researcher regarding the process of memoir writing, which in turn encouraged the participants to think about how to communicate and teach the transformative properties of writing with their students. From a global standpoint, changes and transformation occur as a result of the ripple effect—first individual, then communal, and then global.

The use of qualitative method of narrative inquiry was a good fit for the subject being examined. This method allowed the most transparency of storytelling, but at the same time provided an open forum for the participants to share their stories. I realized this method of inquiry was consistent with my own passion for storytelling and memoir writing as a way to impact readers, by offering the possibility of transforming readers rather than attempting to prove anything in particular.

In reflecting on the process of memoir writing throughout this study, another factor repeatedly struck me: how long it took each memoirist to complete the memoir and the sense of flow during the process. The more I understood the process described by my participants, the more my focus shifted toward the positive pull they were experiencing as memoir increased their sense of wholeness, rather than repairing a wound. I believe the words *transformation* and *empowerment* are more positive, and lend themselves to deeper discussion of self-actualization and metamotivation.

Transformation and empowerment seemed to occur as a result of a lapse of time between the transcendent experience and the memoir writing. This time lapse seemed to allow enough time for reflection and contemplation. This distance from the transcendent experience and the self-understanding and reflection that came from writing the memoir is what led to transformation and a sense of empowerment. The participants were offered the time to reflect and identify the significance of the transcendent experience in their life, and how it affected their life theme. It was evident from the results of my study that individuals may be unaware of the impact of a transcendent experience at the time of its occurrence; only distance from it can help the person identify its impact. For example, the ramifications of finding my grandmother dead in her bed did not become apparent until 40 years after the event. Although the suicide was not connected to my cancer diagnosis, when diagnosed with cancer I wondered if that was why my grandmother committed suicide so I began studying her life; however, it was not apparent that she committed suicide because of a cancer diagnosis. Nevertheless, the investigation led to my reflection and analysis of the effect of her suicide on my life. As a practical matter, this suggests that those of us feeling called to write memoirs may allow ourselves time to let the stories emerge as part of our lived process.

OVERALL FINDINGS

The primary goal of this study was to identify the healing, transformative, and empowering dynamics of an esteemed writer writing a full-length memoir inspired by a pivotal or transcendent experience. The study and interviews were sparked by the main research question: What are the transformative dynamics of writing a memoir elicited by a pivotal or transcendent experience? The subquestions were (a) What are the pivotal or transcendent experiences that inspire memoir writing for transformation and empowerment in esteemed writers? (b) What is the impact of the pivotal or transcendent experiences in terms of an individual's life theme? (c) How are those experiences representative of Maslow's theory of metamotivation, B- (being) creativity and D- (deficiency) creativity? The theoretical framework used was narrative research that served to create a sense of meaning and significance to the transcendent experiences. The philosophical assumptions used in this study were transpersonal and constructionist, a large universal theme that included observations, interviews, and socially constructed conclusions. The other important element of information was the idea that restorying or retelling stories can be transformative and empowering.

The data revealed that creative expression, such as memoir writing, when used as a transpersonal practice, encourages self-reflection, increased awareness, insight, discernment, compassion, and mindfulness when using writing techniques such as embodied writing and reflexivity. For the participants, these practices all led to a deeper understanding of the meaning of the transcendent experience and the role it played in their lives. Also, the restorying of a lived experience helped cast light on issues that might not have been illuminated had the participants not decided to write a memoir.

The findings suggest that the participants were both transformed and empowered by the experience and process of writing a full-length memoir. In some cases, the writers began writing with one mission or reason in mind. During the writing process, however, they found that the memoir took a different path, leading the focus or reason for writing in a different direction. As a result, the memoirists connected with deeper reflections or illuminations about the experience and its role in the larger context of their lives, individually and in the universal perspective. This change in direction during the writing process also illustrates the role of creative flow in memoir writing. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) stated that the desire for answers is the drive that aids in the creative flow. Furthermore, in working with flow, there is a greater tendency for the writer to choose the path inherent to his or her life theme that could lead to the development of his or her full human potential and self-actualization as a way to navigate from D- (deficiency) creativity to B- (being) creativity. This confluence all leads to psychological well-being and harmony, which results in transformation and a sense of empowerment.

Writing about their lived experiences was a way for the participants to bring meaning into their lives, as well as make sense of the pivotal or transcendent experiences connected to loss. Furthermore, writing a memoir provided the opportunity for these memoirists to review their lives in the context of the lived transcendent experience restorying it from their present-day perspective. This experience and process resulted in feelings of resolution, and the ability to comfortably move forward into the next phase of life and/or onto other projects. A sense of inner peace was identified, which in and of itself was transformative and empowering.

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