# CONFRONTING THE QUESTION OF SOLIPSISM
## PERSONAL ESSAY AS A FORM OF SCHOLARLY WRITING

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"I wonder," says my friend and academic mentor, Noreen, "would I read this if I didn't know you? I wonder about the risks of solipsism and whether writing from personal experience risks naiveté. Why would someone want to read it?"

The "this" was a compilation of personal essays I had written about resistance to authentic engagement in learning. Drawing upon 50-plus years of experience as a learner, teacher, and itinerant curriculum worker, I had interwoven personal anecdotes with theoretical literature to explore the multiple dilemmas associated with resistance and engagement. Much of my thinking about the topic had been nurtured through decades of conversations with Noreen. So, her response gave me pause. What message was she trying to convey?

Was she obliquely suggesting that my writing lacked sufficient conceptual merit to be made public? Or worse, was she saying it was just plain boring? Was she puzzled by what audience I had in mind for this mix of the experiential and theoretical? Perhaps she was wondering where such writing could be published, because it definitely would not meet the review criteria of many refereed academic journals or publishing companies, nor did it seem suited for the general public. Where did this odd little duck of writing fit in?

In thinking about Noreen's critique, I was reminded of James Moffett's (1983) explanation of the structure of discourse as having three elements—a speaker (writer), a listener (reader), and a subject. He goes on to offer a detailed analysis of how various forms of discourse are shaped by the distance between speaker and listener as well as by the level of abstract representation of the subject. In terms of distance, Moffett posits a continuum from interior dialogue occurring within the speaker to shared dialogue with a small group of known listeners to a general, unknown audience. He lays out a similar continuum regarding abstraction from concrete experience to the highly symbolic language of mathematics and science.

Within the continuum of distance, the question of whether some unknown audience would want to read my writing was less relevant to me than the question, "Did you, Noreen, want to read it—not as a favor based on our friendship, but because you found it compelling in both substance and style?" Yet, in sharing my writing with Noreen, I shifted from Moffett's notion of "intrapersonal communication" to "interpersonal conversation." I was, consciously or not, calling upon her to serve as a proxy for some general, unknown audience. In that capacity, it is entirely reasonable for Noreen to think not only of her own response to my writing but also how that writing might be judged by a broader community of educational scholars. As a teacher, Noreen takes very seriously her responsibility to help students develop their ideas so that they meet criteria of scholarly respectability. This, however, presents a conundrum. Within scholarly communities, long-standing traditions define what counts as knowledge and the format in which knowledge is shared. Because the genre of personal essay does not conform to traditional scientific criteria, Noreen's questions of naiveté and solipsism go to the heart of judging the merits of such writing.

This brings to mind a recent experience during a course I was taking about iconic music albums. The second class focused on the work of Bob Dylan, who was awarded the 2016 Nobel prize in literature. Quite frankly, I've never been able to relate to Dylan's nasal, almost atonal style

of singing, and so never bothered to listen carefully to his lyrics. With great enthusiasm, the course instructor pointed out the richness of Dylan's cultural imagery, the subtlety of his commentary on social conditions, and his genius in adapting and blending various music genres. Gradually it dawned on me that I knew so little about music in general and Dylan's genre in particular that I had dismissed his work out-of-hand. However, just because I don't like the way Bob Dylan sounds doesn't mean he wrote bad music. If I want to critique the quality of Dylan's music, then I must have sufficient knowledge of the art form to offer an informed opinion. So, too, must those who are in the position of judging the scholarly quality of personal essays. What hallmarks distinguish good scholarly personal essays from naïve, solipsistic rambling?

Although the concept of solipsism has a weighty philosophical meaning, in common parlance it connotes a quality of self-centeredness or self-absorption. Returning to Moffett's discursive elements of "speaker, listener, and subject," solipsistic conversation tends to be one-sided as the speaker prattles on about the trivialities of their life. The written equivalent would be a tedious account of some life experience filled with details of interest only to the author. Too often, the only purpose such writing seems to serve is self-promotion or an airing of grievances. In short, the writing lacks educative intent—either for the author or a broader unknown audience.

In discussing the genre of non-fiction, life-writing, noted memoirist Patti Miller (2007) explains:

> The personal essay is a genre closely related to memoir in that it often includes the writer's personal memories, but it is quite distinct in that memories are not included for their own sake, but at the service of an idea. Personal essays explore ideas and use a variety of elements—facts, imagination, humour and memories—to enhance that exploration. (p. 13)

The focus on exploring ideas is the safeguard against solipsistic self-absorption. Writing itself becomes a form of inquiry, for as E. M. Forster (1927) relates in *Aspects of the Novel*, "How do I know what I think until I see what I say?" (p. 152). One hallmark of scholarly personal essays is making this thinking process visible. As essayist Phillip Lopate (2013) contends:

> In the best nonfiction, it seems to me, you're always made aware that you are being engaged with a supple mind at work. The story line or plot in nonfiction consists of the twists and turns of a thought process working itself out. This is certainly true for the essay … which follows an organizing principle that can be summarized as "tracking the consciousness of the author." (p. 6)

Lopate's allusion to "a thought process working itself out" brings me back to the issue of naiveté. The starting point for a personal essay is an account of a puzzling or troubling experience. Through the writing, the author portrays how they have struggled to make meaning of the experience. Of course, someone reading through the lens of scientific writing might think,

> For heaven's sake, there is a tremendous body of literature about this topic. Why don't you just read that? In fact, if you're going to write about this subject—if you're purporting to study it—you're obliged to begin with a review of literature. It is naïve to write as though you are the first or only person who has encountered or thought about this troubling situation.

Unquestionably, literature contributes to the scholarship of personal essays, but it serves a different purpose. Rather than a preliminary framing of an inquiry's significance, it is an integral part of the inquiry—part of the twists and turns of the author's thought process. The intent of the writing is to illuminate the author's efforts to make sense of their experience. As Miller (2007) puts it:

> What is it like for anyone to be in the world? This is the vast and private knowledge that each one of us has—and the great mystery. No one else can really know what it is like for you to be here on this planet. Others could conceivably know everything that has happened to you, your entire history, but they still could not know how you experience being here. For me, this is the starting point for autobiographical writing and reading: a desire to express how one experiences the mystery and the journey of existing—its shape, its texture, its atmosphere—*and a consuming curiosity to know how other people experience it*. (p. 10, emphasis added)

Consuming curiosity is a key sensibility the essayist brings to the writing—a desire to wrestle troubling ambiguities into clarity, to examine "what am I thinking and why." The essayist has an obligation to portray that struggle with sufficient verisimilitude that listeners/readers, too, become curious about the struggle and its outcome. Jerome Bruner (1986) in explicating narrative as a way of knowing, describes verisimilitude as a rendering of experience with sufficient fidelity to be recognizable as "true to conceivable experience" (p. 52). In a personal essay, the conceivable experience is both the precipitating trouble and the author's struggle to understand it. If the writing itself offers only thin generalities or cursory interpretations, then the essay offers little evidence of serious curiosity. In short, the banality of thought makes it just plan boring.

This brings me full circle to Noreen's concern, "Who would be interested in this sort of intimate look into the inner workings of the author's mind? What contribution can such personal struggles make to the discourses of education?" In considering these questions, I'm drawn to William Schubert's (2023) view that:

> All educators need to ponder matters that pertain to curriculum because they matter so much. This especially includes teachers. Too often teachers are omitted from the curriculum equation and are overshadowed on deciding curriculum matters by school or district leaders, policymakers, and evaluators or testing specialists. To leave teachers behind is akin to leaving the Prince of Denmark out of Hamlet! (p. 14)

Schubert goes on to say:

> Teachers are positioned to address scholarly ideas and constructs in complex situations because they engage directly with the ongoing transformations of practice—its spontaneity, flow, continuing reposition, imposition, and situational nuance. (p. 14)

Although Schubert's primary focus is on teachers and curriculum, I extend his ideas to any professional working in the complicated contexts of education. It is one thing to study the world of practice as an "objective" outsider. Studies of this sort yield what Donald Schon (1983) characterized as "rational technical knowledge." In his now classic explication of the importance of reflection in professional practice, Schon (1983) observes:

> Increasingly we have become aware of the importance to actual practice of phenomena—complexity, uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and value-conflict—which do not fit the model of Technical Rationality… .
>
> From the perspective of Technical Rationality, professional practice is a process of *problem solving*. Problems of choice or decision are solved through the selection from available means, of the one best suited to established ends. But with this emphasis on problem solving, we ignore problem *setting*, the process by which we define the decision to be made, the ends to be achieved, the means which may be chosen … . In order to convert a problematic situation to a problem, a practitioner must do a certain kind of work. He [sic] must make sense of an uncertain situation that initially makes no sense. (pp. 39–40)

Writing scholarly personal essays offers a mode of inquiry through which educational practitioners can do just the type of intellectual work that Schon is describing. And, in doing so, they can offer important insights into the nuances of educational matters. When studied from afar, nuances are obscured, and policies that seem like a good idea in the abstract can lead to unintended and counterproductive outcomes. Through scholarly personal essays, thoughtful practitioners can navigate the discursive distances described by Moffett. Introspection can move toward metacognitive reflection, private struggles can shed light on public issues, and idiosyncratic situations can yield theory—theory crafted not in the highly symbolic language of mathematics and science, but in compelling conceptions of professional wisdom.

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