

Counsellor Development and Spiritual Growth through Journaling

Frank Seth

Abstract

Autoethnography can be described as a combination of autobiography and ethnography. The story of how my life has been transformed during my own exploration of a life that seemed purposeless, and my subsequent training as a counsellor, is reflected upon, analysed and interpreted as a spiritual autoethnography. I have likened the development to that of a tree, my life-tree. While the first few years of growth seemed slow, this growth burgeoned with my deepening self-awareness after I began training as a Lifeline telephone counsellor. Then I cut loose from the security and financial support of my job, completing a psychology degree full-time and moving on to postgraduate study in counselling. Although initially I just wanted to do what was right for me personally, in retrospect I discern a spiritual sap flowing through the tree. Since I began journaling, my sense of meaninglessness has evaporated. Who and where I am right now seems exactly right.

Keywords: autoethnography, spirituality, journaling, anti-violence

The story of how my life has been transformed—from an uninspiring career in information technology (IT) to a calling I love, counselling—has been the focus of a spiritual autoethnography in which I have reflected on, analysed, and interpreted aspects of this process. Autoethnography can be described as a combination of autobiography and ethnography. I have likened this process of change and growth to that of a tree, my life-tree. This narrative follows the development of that tree, from the way in which the soil was prepared for it and its germination, to the growth of the main stem, allowing it to stand on its own by untying it from its support. Some of its branches are then described. This account examines the experiences that informed my decisions and motivated my subsequent actions as I gradually allowed my intuitions to steer my

personal development to its current state—almost totally in line with how I aim to be.

When combining the autobiographical with the ethnographical, as Klinker and Todd (2007) suggest, the narrative could be construed as a form of retrospective spiritual, rather than cultural, autoethnography. In ethnography, anthropological researchers share the cultural experience of their subjects. Autoethnography, states Chang (2008), “transcends mere narration of self to engage in cultural analysis and interpretation” (p. 43). While Chang (p. 56) sees autoethnography as a method of understanding “self and its connection to other,” the insight I have gained is discovering self in connection with a spiritual Other. My goal has been to identify the greater spiritual understanding that permeates my autobiographical experience. I am hopeful that this examination of the process I call my life-tree may transform me further, and that this self-transformation will manifest in the ways in which I work with clients. In-depth discussions and critiques, as well as reviews of the literature, on the emerging practice of autoethnography as a research method can be found in Anderson (2006), Chang (2008), Spry (2001) and Tolich (2010).

Methodology and source material

The seed of my personal growth journey was sown some eight years ago while I was reading Cameron (1992) and began journaling, including writing what Cameron refers to as the “morning pages.” Initially, what I have written here came solely from my memory. However, in order to corroborate my recollection I sifted through my early morning pages, consisting of 15 handwritten journals (80-page B5 exercise books), plus over 200 single-spaced pages of word-processing. I looked for texts that referred to, seemed to back up, expand on or perhaps contradict, what I had remembered. I read all entries from the first two books and thereafter, to keep it manageable, every tenth entry of the remainder. So, while what came from my memory may be regarded largely as autobiographical, perhaps mythical, this searching through the material actually written at the time was autoethnographical.

The first morning pages, written on loose sheets beginning in mid-2004, have not come to light. The earliest, undated, extant journals began during the latter half of 2004. Some entries seemed simply to start mid-sentence with no way of telling what came before. Other entries seemed to hang mid-sentence at the end of a page. The text could be incomplete or ungrammatical. Certain events and experiences were referred to that allowed me to establish approximate dates. Initially I wrote much of my journaling by hand on arrival at work in the mornings. Then, when colleagues

expressed curiosity about it, for nearly two years (2006, 2007), I wrote largely on the computer, at about 500 words per entry. This looked more work-related than handwriting, which continued whenever I was not at work.

During the years when I was studying psychology part-time (2005 to 2008), my journal focus was mainly on the mundane, revolving around issues such as study, home and my IT work, in line with Cameron's (1992) recommended stream-of-consciousness writing. However, there was a strong seam throughout that contained the ore I mined to provide evidence that journaling nourished the tree as it sprouted from vague, doubt-ridden musings to the development of my current role as counsellor and agent of change. Throughout, it often commenced with the articulation of my goals, and continued references to reinforcing and refining my goals and affirmations were noticeable. For example, from May 2006:

While I was walking from the station to home yesterday, I was thinking about my goals and directions, trying to refocus on what I am doing the psychology degree for. I started thinking about the wish to reduce violence in people and something like graffiti triggered me to think that it is more than just violence.

A seed is germinated

At the time this story begins, I felt that my life was just an existence—a meaningless, unsatisfying existence. My children were grown and independent. Domestic life was pleasant, often enjoyable, yet essentially without aim or purpose. I had little interest in my career except as a means to pay the bills. Then I read a book, *The Artist's Way*, that I believe caused my life to change when I began to practise its recommendation to write several pages of flow-of-consciousness daily (Cameron, 1992). These “morning pages”—my journal—germinated a seed in me, a new life-tree seed, in soil that had been, I now realise, enriched by previous influences. I characterise it as a tree rather than, say, a journey, because it seemed initially a parallel growth, separate from my “old” life. The tree I now live may never have grown without the daily journaling that began as I first worked my way through Cameron's book. Reading it aroused my curiosity and I approached the journaling as an activity that it would do no harm to try.

The first reference to my goal appeared in my journaling on a loose sheet inside the first exercise book in 2004, beneath repetitive lines of affirmations about my IT work abilities: “what are the rest of my life goals—next best right thing. Reduce violence, using proven human behaviour methods.” It then started quickly to develop energy as

a reality in my life a few entries later: “I think I need to finish the BSc,” and then, “psych is a science paper anyway so that would probably work.” While it was not obvious to me early on, I now perceive a spiritual sap flowing through the tree in my journaling—for example, in the tenth entry: “basically, it’s mind (or spirit, soul) over matter.”

Cameron’s (1992) book has a clear, underlying spiritual theme. In fact, it was only as I began this narrative that I became aware of the book’s subtitle—*A spiritual path to higher creativity* (emphasis added). Cameron grounded her writing in the context of her Christian beliefs, yet made no demand that the reader share those beliefs. This gifted me with the freedom to accept her method while setting aside the religious aspects I resisted, yet remaining open to the spiritual. Even though the flow-of-consciousness writing seemed very much like self-discovery work and inward turning, I also became aware of “Other,” perhaps in the sense that Eliason, Samide, Williams, and Lepore (2010) used when they wrote about “the search for meaning, self, and other” (p. 88), and when they cited Buber’s statement that “there can be no I without Thou” (p. 89). I exist internally in dynamic interaction with what is external to me.

As a teenager I had rejected Catholicism because of what I perceived to be the inconsistency between Christ’s teachings and the behaviour I observed among those who professed to follow those teachings. I am reminded of a statement attributed to Mahatma Gandhi: “I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.” I had rejected the religion of the Christians. However, a deep respect for the teachings of Christ remained within me. But I was not prepared to accept this way as the only way, distrusting how his message may have been constructed over the centuries.

Enriching the soil

On reflection, I have become aware of what can be construed as a series of “nudges” before I started reading Cameron (1992). By the early 1990s, I had become dissatisfied with reading fiction and started focusing more on self-help books, including Gordon’s writing (1970) on parent effectiveness training (PET). His methods, particularly active listening, which is closely aligned to person-centred counselling, resonated with me and I tried applying them to my relationships with my children. My success rate was not encouraging, and while I still suspected that my “answer” lay somewhere in this line of thought, I put any further application in the too-hard basket. It would be over 15 years before my attention was drawn to the original ideas of Gordon’s colleague, Carl Rogers, whose ideas now underpin my counselling practice.

Another early influence was a little publication by Joe Karbo (1973), *The Lazy Man's Way to Riches*, which I found on the bookshelf of a holiday bach in about 1997. Karbo wrote about the practice of “super-suggestion”—placing a specific, time-delimited order with one’s subconscious. This whole concept, of a powerful subconscious that is capable of delivering what one requests, was entirely new to me. Though I never noticed at the time, this now seems a way of linking to the spiritual. While I never saw the booklet again, I was so impressed at the time that I made and retained notes. Getting rich was not what appealed, but the idea of enlisting the subconscious to achieve a goal intrigued me. I had never really considered the existence of a subconscious before, much less its power. The first words in my very first 2004 journal entry referred to Karbo, “...I did with JK’s ideas.” This remains tantalising as it seems to be completing a sentence whose beginning is lost.

When I started writing my morning pages, I had worked in IT for 15 years. I had no passion for it, finding the focus on ever-changing computer hardware and software quite unfulfilling. However, I enjoyed the “support” aspect, helping people find solutions to technical problems. Yet I found even that to be insufficient. But why not continue with it and cruise through life, using work to gather possessions for a comfortable future? I had no idea what else I could, or wanted to, do that would be more satisfying than IT. At least, I could see no career that was practicable or feasible. So I continued to focus on training to further my IT career. Yet, I always held back from committing myself to real advancement in the field. What rapidly emerged from my journaling was that I wanted to do something that in some way satisfied my core. I would be highly dissatisfied if, at the end of my life, I looked back and saw a passionless life working in IT. As I continued to journal, my aimless personal compass rapidly began to find its North. I came to the realisation that what I really wanted to do was to play a part in reducing violence in the world, writing on page 8, “Was defining the idea of the major goal in my head this morning in the train. So basically the idea is to help reduce violence by using methods proven by research to be valid human-behaviour modifiers.” The idea inspired and energised me; it brought me to life.

From my brief exposure to Karbo’s (1973) ideas, I already dimly appreciated that part of the equation was energy and that energy could be leveraged. To reach a destination, one can walk or one can engage more powerful forces such as a pedal, motor, or jet. My problem was no longer a lack of destination. I needed a way to get there. I was also, and still am to a much lesser extent, limited by a core personal belief that I do not deserve great success; success is meant for others, whom I can envy and

judge as lucky or greedy. At least that is how my “little voice,” what Cameron (1992) calls my “censor,” justified it.

Stem growth

My work hours at the time were flexible enough to allow me to resurrect an uncompleted degree in computer science and convert my major to psychology. The degree took me four years, mainly part-time, to complete. During this period, I continued to journal and use self-affirmations such as “I excel at helping young people turn from violence to constructive problem solving.” I suspect that the way writers use “affirmations” may be as euphemisms for “prayer.” As “chance” would have it, the year I completed the degree I also saw an advertisement in the local paper calling for volunteers to train as telephone counsellors for Lifeline. I felt immediately drawn to this and leapt at the chance. I journaled, “the advert for Lifeline volunteers in the local paper has preoccupied my mind a lot since I saw it.” I had previously vaguely wondered how one got into things like that. Whereas before journaling I could well have let the opportunity slide by, I now felt confident enough to grasp it.

The training involved much challenging but exhilarating self-awareness work, which revealed unresolved issues from my past, revolving around anger and grief—for example, anger at corporal punishment by my father and my teachers; grief at the death of my baby daughter over 20 years previously and that of my friend five years prior to that, not to mention the death of my mother. This personal work also encouraged me to start dismantling the protective wall I had built around my shy, vulnerable self. I remember that the wall was under construction by the time I was 10 years of age, and even today I have not fully explored what I was protecting myself from. In the group training, I felt safe enough to talk about thoughts and feelings I had previously kept strictly to myself. This simple statement belies the enormous growth spurt that my tree was undergoing.

While I still perceived it as personal growth rather than spiritual, I started to turn outward, peeling off some of the layers of chain mail that I was now becoming more aware of. I wrote, “I normally have my fortress walls raised so that I’m not exposed to anything that can hurt me.” Viewing things from my present perspective, I suspect that as long as I remained introspective and inward facing I would simply have stayed blind to the spiritual possibilities. These musings only started to emerge when I began to read books in preparation for a course in Spirituality and Counselling (e.g., Yalom, 1980) that Philip Culbertson taught at the University of Auckland in 2010. My intent

in taking the paper was to become better prepared to accept my clients' spirituality and religion without judgement. It amazes me that the "client" aspect has become secondary to my own personal spiritual growth. Yet my spiritual growth has enabled me to connect more deeply with clients.

Untying the supporting stake

In the second semester of 2008, I stepped out of the financial security of my IT employment to focus on completing my degree full-time. I hoped to get work in the violence-prevention field and to continue my education with part-time postgraduate study. Following the successful completion of my degree, my optimism that I would relatively easily find work in line with my antiviolence goal was doused by the reality of the Auckland job market. Additionally, none of the university's offerings in post-graduate psychology study appealed. If I think spiritually, I can easily accept that I was being steered beyond psychology. In my previous IT role at the university, I had worked with the counselling lecturers. I had felt a strong attraction to their way of being but could not work out what this meant or even what counselling meant. Again, shyness and low self-esteem prevented me making the effort to find out. However, after my Lifeline training, this was less of a mystery to me and in the end I applied only for the counselling programme. I felt and still feel welcomed, accepted, and warmed there.

Interestingly, the following text from my journal of 27 July 2006 is evidence that the profession of counselling was already attracting me, even though that decision was still in the future.

I will become a great counsellor, therapist or whatever you call it and be good at helping people channel the energy that goes into their violence into much more positive and mentally healthy ways of achieving what they want. I believe that it is largely a matter of reprogramming them so that they use their brain to solve problems rather than automatically reaching for the old standby of violence and aggression. I will be very good at helping people learn self-respect and gain self-esteem. My own self-esteem is getting better every day.

A powerful new branch of the tree developed recently as I listened to a popular song on the car radio that started me thinking about love—not romantic love, but love of my fellow human beings, agape, love of creation and of each individual person, Rogerian unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1957), that allows counselling to work through me so that I do not get in the way. This seems a conscious emotion that had never been

so clear before. This love seems a wholly inclusive thing, yet paradoxically, exclusive. Experiencing it seems to exclude or cancel out negative emotions such as resentment, hate, anger, or blame. Being outward facing, it also seems to take the focus from oneself, precluding selfishness or even distress or unhappiness. While I was driving, thinking about love, I became aware that I did not have my usual negative feelings toward the slow traffic in front of me. This line of thought also had a biblical ring to it, so I found St Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 13:4-8b that expressed a similar idea:

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way, it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth; it bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. (New Interpreter's Study Bible, 2003)

There have been times during the development of the tree when I have experienced euphoric feelings like those in the previous paragraph, and these feelings have occasionally been tempered by my little voice warning me against such dangerous behaviour. For example, in July 2010 I wrote, "I hear the little voice trying to rebuild the walls, the barrier, to protect me, telling me I'm fooling myself." These days I am more often aware of and able to discuss such feelings openly with others, something I would undoubtedly have resisted as too risky before I started journaling.

As the tree developed I began to see myself as somehow connected to the higher power, maybe a spark or extension of it. During this growth, I seemed at times to be in a cycle of constant self-learning, self-discovery, self-examination, and self-analysis, as Chang (2008) might say. Sometimes, such as during classes, seminars, discussions, reading, or assignment research, development felt rapid on many fronts, like wild spring growth. This could be followed by unexpected insights and joy suggestive of gorgeous summer flowers crowning the growing tips of previously gained knowledge. At other times, growth felt hopelessly slow and unattainable, as exciting ideas failed to be supported by evidence—buds withering and dropping in the gathering chill of autumn. There were also times, such as the long summer breaks between semesters, when the tree seemed dormant, as in a winter. In February 2006 I journaled, "still a very flat mood. Have not really felt negative, just not at all positive, confident." Then I continued with my "old" life, and yet, knowing that a spring would follow, I was never dissatisfied. But I was eager to get on with it.

As I consider this "old" life, it seems that in some sense the tree took root and grew almost separate from, or parallel to, the life I was living and continue to live. Perhaps,

like the epiphytic tree the northern rata, the new stem is imperceptibly absorbing and integrating the old life, until there may come a time when the old life will scarcely exist at all except as a frame over which the new one has grown. I have no regrets about that old life, however; it was simply an earlier stage of my development. Perhaps it is, to use a different metaphor, just the larval stage before the emergence of the butterfly. On the other hand, perhaps I deliberately keep them separate, as I notice still that I rarely discuss the deeper, spiritual aspects of my tree with people from the old life.

Branches

An unexpected new branch of increasing importance for me since I started this narrative is that I am now actively exploring my spirituality. Prior to this, I was passively hoping that spirituality would just come to me. I am realising that everything I want I need to reach out for; I cannot depend on it coming to me. Despite my ever-alert inner critic, I believe now that, while I have the free will to ignore or even deny it, I am spiritual and will be much better for examining my spirituality, working with it. Though I may at times explore false leads, there is no reason to fear this, to fear being “sucked in,” as long as I use the power of my intellect combined with my intuition to examine critically, yet with an open mind, what has come to me. I will learn from it. I have also worked in the field that my early journaling revealed to me as I counselled young people, often damaged by misguided parental actions, and am a change agent who assists them to discover their own power to control their lives. I feel an intense satisfaction and joy that I am fulfilling my purpose, that journaling is a channel to something deep within me, yet at the same time infinitely greater than me, that the seedling germinated back then is already a strong multi-branched tree with its potential for growth limited only by myself. My belief in this also continues to grow.

Another branch grew from a combination of reading Gordon’s (1970) *Parent Effectiveness Training* and my computer science studies. This actually preceded my journaling by some 15 years but was also placed in my too-hard basket. The combination had suggested to me another metaphor, that children are programmed from birth by their significant caregivers. Our hardware requires software to run it. Much of our programming is determined by the ways we experience our parents behaving from the time we are born. It is coded using the graphical user interface (GUI) of life. If the software becomes defective, we will not operate optimally. When parents resort to abusive physical and emotional discipline, the children learn that those methods are appropriate ways to resolve conflicts and will also take on board that it is normal for

those in power to use violence. The child believes the parent can do no wrong, so it must be the child who has done wrong, who is bad. The corrupt code (e.g., irrational, limiting beliefs) seems to be absorbed by the child with little or no effort. I wondered whether this could be overwritten in the same manner. If the original human program becomes corrupt, leading to aggressive behaviour, replacing the dysfunctional code with a constructive code might fix the problem. As with an infected computer (or a physical body), unless the infection is major and capable of bringing down the system, it just impairs function, leading to dysfunctional behaviour. An incorrect program might continue to run until replaced by a correct one.

I believe this metaphor provided fertile soil in which my tree was able to germinate. Once my journaling compass aimed me toward psychology, I started learning about behaviourism, and operant and classical conditioning, and I saw the parallels with computer programming. This is one of the major platforms on which cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) (e.g., Beck, 1976) is based, and it remained my focus as I progressed toward the completion of my degree. I have come to see it also from a transcendent angle: at birth we have the program that the original equipment manufacturer (evolution, the higher power) supplies us with “out of the box.” Nevertheless, if this is a “divine” program then the fact that it is so vulnerable to corruption still troubles me and remains a challenge for my current level of spiritual understanding. It seems a perilous way to be made. More recently, I am beginning to suspect that this type of “rapid programming” may be fundamentally different from “normal” gradual learning and may involve different processing or different areas of the brain. When a strong emotion, such as shock or fear, is linked to traumatic parental behaviour, a stress response is evoked that can lead to enduring effects on the brain (Glaser, 2000). Cognitive dissonance may force the insecure child to align his (or her) assessment of himself with the “truth” that his parent cannot be wrong, so he must be wrong or, even worse, bad (Festinger, 1957). Thus a limiting core belief is programmed.

Later, I was exposed to Jung’s collective unconscious and Rogers’ unconditional positive regard (UPR), and these resonated with me much more than CBT. This remains another incompletely resolved dilemma for me, as CBT is based on logical, observable behaviour while Jung’s ideas and Rogers’ focus on UPR and the therapeutic relationship can definitely be construed as spiritual. CBT is widely accepted and seems to work, but leaves me fairly cold, while the theories of Jung and Rogers excite me. I have recently started delving into Jung’s (1963) works but base much of my current practice on Rogerian counselling. Other methods that seem also to work at a

subconscious, if not spiritual, level and attract me as being capable of rapidly replacing defective code are hypnosis, neurolinguistic programming (NLP) and energy psychology. In some ways, they seem on the fringes of “scientifically” accepted therapies. But then, how does science explain the placebo effect? Belief, or faith, plays a crucial role here, tapping into forces I know little about but am starting to explore.

Even though no “scientific” evidence of spirituality seems ever to have manifested itself to me, perhaps because of my own lack of faith and my little critic, I strive to remain open to it and proceed as if it were fact, albeit with caution. In some ways, just being aware of the wonder of the amazing beauty surrounding me comes close to being convincing proof for me. Another unscientific strategy I use is to deliberately see the world as the result of random evolutionary happenstance. Somehow this casts a pall over everything and I struggle to find meaning. Conversely, when I proceed as if a guiding force *does* exist, I experience a sense of excitement that brightens and colours my existence. I know which perspective I prefer.

Knowing how healing this experience can be, I often work to get clients to experience it for themselves. For over two years now, I have enjoyed the experience and challenge of counselling young people. I have no doubt that such work, or something better, will figure strongly in my future. That this has come to pass suggests to me that thought is powerful indeed, perhaps pure creative energy. I suspect that this energy comes either from a higher power external to me, or from deep within me, which suggests that I am part of or linked to the higher power. Journaling allowed the thought to surface from the deep.

Conclusion

This “archaeological” narrative has explored the ways in which journaling has played a crucial role in changing my life from one that held little meaning several years ago to its current state where I am passionate and excited about what I am doing and aiming to achieve. It has considered the influences, both earlier and more recent, that have played a part in bringing about this change, and how the process, which I have called my life-tree, has gradually come to be entwined with a sense of spirituality that remained concealed from my consciousness for many years. In the form of a spiritual autoethnography, the discussion has attempted to analyse and interpret both the journaling and the events and influences that preceded and have resulted from it. Whenever I consider my new tree, I feel excitement and anticipation. I suspect that it would be very different had Cameron’s (1992) book not been placed in my path so

synchronously. Many influences, not all of which are touched on in this narrative, have brought me to the exciting place where I now find myself. My morning pages have been, and will continue to be, a key influence.

A tension between autobiography and ethnography, between subjective and objective, permeates this narrative. This remains unresolved. However, I am hopeful that I have been able to convey a sense of how instrumental journaling has been in leading me to counselling and spirituality. The tree is a manifestation of what has flowed through my hands onto the pages I have written.

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