

## The Eleventh Hour

### Abstract

*A doctoral student autobiographically reflects on the challenges of writing the last chapter of her dissertation. She becomes motivated to finish after playing the piano in an impromptu musical performance with high school students. On a deeper level, writing becomes a powerful way for her to reflect on the aesthetic and intellectual underpinnings of her inner life as a writer, musician and teacher-educator. In the end, autobiography creates a pedagogical context that enables her to move forward with her research.*

*Heavy rain at my window  
The leaves blow eastward  
Temples of my head pulsate  
Hands tremble  
A flood of memories  
Tears appear  
I turn my head  
Arch my back  
An eagle lifts me  
To another cloud.*

Today I will finish my story. A theoretically implausible notion as I do not like to bid farewell, close drawers or tighten jar lids. From *ab ovo*, I wondered how I would end graduate school. And my dissertation. A long story that uses arts-based inquiry to disseminate my research. I write eight stories that tell the inherent conflicts of professional musicians becoming music educators. I share challenges to their identities and write an autobiographical reflection of my journey. Now that I have to close my storied dissertation, I will celebrate my subjects, myself and this *magnum opus*. Celebration mixed with interrogation.

The beginning was simple. Novelty and pure chance at the heart of writing a dissertation. A series of ideas that defined the permanent thesis. The larger-than-life task. A great weight of sociological and personal issues surrounding the struggle. But personal academic initiative is key. Though my supervisor, colleagues, and family are helpful, the responsibility of the dissertation resides with me. And its completion. They do not live my life. My constraints. The ups and downs of doldrums, breakthroughs, setbacks. The library

searches and fieldwork. The unusual evening hours. Sacrificing time with friends and family. Precious time with my daughter. The last thing on my mind after a dysfunctional day is to spend a couple of hours on dissertation work. And the weekend-dissertation-writer concept failed me. The *sine qua non* of Saturdays and Sundays is joyful recharging time for the week.

I need advice about how to move past psychological feelings. Boredom, isolation, enthusiasm, frustration, and moments of euphoria take hold. There needs to be a workshop on how to handle the emotional upheaval. Supervisors and committees must understand that emotional crises are huge setbacks. That the dissertation is a significant emotional component. That enthusiasm can diminish from overambitious estimates of what can be accomplished. The time constraints. Monotony. Anxiety.

Supervisors and committees want evidence of the bread-and-butter work. The structural analysis, fragmented chapter-by-chapter status. Research that addresses the ‘so what’ factor. Commendable attention to unfold the piece of work. Total immersion to show dedication. Drive to complete. Taking care of business. To endure their irreconcilable demands. Resolve their contradictory statements about details. They want seriousness to endorse the research in academia. After all, the *tour de force* comes from the day of the viva with faculty and student reviews from the grueling three-hour oral exam.

I walk a tightrope. Dare not be sentimental about being ABD. The all-but-dissertation blues can yield a loss of perspective. Writing the dissertation is by far a high-risk occupation. It can disrupt relationships as I exceed daily writing time when things hum in my mind. The work depends on the intellectual and emotional disposition of the writer. So much at stake when closing the dissertation.

It is difficult to write. Hard to think of words. To generate momentum. But I peel off a thin transparent foil which brings signs of a former life. I peel it off the walls, floors, tiles. Luckily, one more chapter to go; the conclusion. But it is hard to write these things.

To finish it off. To put my child to rest. In the past months, I have noticed my body becoming tired, the dry rustle of skin forming on my fingers. I want to hold on. Not say goodbye. But closure is about something deeper. I must acknowledge I have arrived at the final stage of graduate school. Though the truly grand moment of a doctoral program is the actual graduation, I am ambivalent. I have been a professional student for ten years. What next? No stage is more challenging than closure. One door closes.

Nothing is more frightening than the unknown. From the time graduate studies began, there have been life changes: the terrorist attacks of 9-11-01, a death in the family, separation, and the war in Iraq.

A dense fog hovers outside my window. Whiteness shines by my side. End my story today. This is the unraveling up of a plot in a story, a denouement, a final revelation or solution. This could go on and on.

Two months ago, I wrote the last chapter, but it felt inadequate, unresolved. Teaching and supervising student teachers completing their practicum distracted me. I decided to hide the chapter away. I traveled from school to school and observed musicians teaching music to adolescents. At a professional development day, a school advisor asked if I had finished my dissertation. She was fascinated by my topic since she was a professional vocalist and music educator. I told her I was having trouble writing the last chapter. "I hate open-ended stories," she said. "Give the readers closure."

Give myself closure, as well. I revisit my ending. Closure seems so final. But a conceptual exploration of endings might teach me something new. I peruse again what a reviewer wrote about an article my supervisor and I had published: "My reading of it leaves me wondering more about what the authors want to teach me as audience." I want my story to teach but there are different ways to teach understanding. There is experiential, academic and poetic or fictional knowledge.

*I wonder  
how to hear  
in the marrow of bones  
through the claps of fists  
between the gaps in bodies  
depths of wounds  
the closure of stories  
a thousand times  
I wonder.*

I take a shower and drive to hear a year-end music concert. It is cold for a concert in May. My bones shake in the chilly air. An audience of parents, teachers, siblings and relatives attend the closing event. There are young musicians everywhere. One performer has personality that is alive and vibrant and ready for closure. A performer on stage displays conflict, for his (her) character is larger than life. Keep your eyes on them. They become heroes when there is resolution.

A senior band is featured. They will perform two tunes: *Pevensey Castle* and *The Phantom of the Opera*. Suddenly, I am asked to play the synthesizer bass part since a student is away. First, I hesitate, but within a second I ask for the music. The part is a piece of cake. When I play the piano, I am a musician. I will shift gears at this concert while the conductor guides me. The music can shape unknown forces; no matter what notes I play, I know that music can heighten my awareness. I will become the music of scales soaring with freedom and closure.

There is release and redemption in the air. I hear the rippling squawk of reeds, buzzes from the brass and tentative taps from the timpanist. Conductors strut with self-assurance. A female conductor dons a flamboyant floral dress while another has her haute coiffure in a bun, the ribbon matching her dark blazer. Performance is in the air. There is posturing in the room as conductors position their stands with baton in hand. A spotlight illuminates them.

Fumbling, some students struggle to assemble their instruments. A saxophone player catches his shirt under one of his keys. A young girl pulls her hair into a ponytail,

while a freckle-faced boy drops his music folder onto the floor. He bends to pick up his clarinet case and his glasses fall off his face. Voices echo in the gymnasium like the Doppler sound of cars speeding through a tunnel. I sit at the keyboard while beats of footsteps continue to descend. Uniforms outline the different schools.

I position myself on the bench and slowly inhale. The moldy smell of paint distracts me from the music. At the eleventh hour, I am reborn. My sole persona exists in performance. I learn how to be a musician again. The conductor reminds the group about repeats and assures me he will cue me in. The mass of tunes seems easy. But his conducting will demand I perform with finesse.

I taste the pork chop from dinner as my fingers sit on the keys. A chill up my neck reminds me I am alive. The wound closes deep inside. My arms do not hurt and my muscles are fine. If there is pain, I will remain. My fingers shake under the keyboard. Musician rituals. Primp and preen ten fingers. They are ready. Wait for the downbeat.

*Black and white sounds*

*flow from my fingers*

*awaken my energy.*

*Breaths from my chest*

*a flicker of depth*

*from unknown places;*

*I reemerge*

*humble and alive.*

*Serendipitous closure*

*forces me to thrive.*

I drive home and write as if I were possessed. An encore to shed light on the heroic feeling. Being a musician has taught me to end with courage. It is a huge task to make sense of the last ten years. The creation of a dissertation is a mysterious process. It has not been easy. I cannot say how many times I have been approached by others asking when I will finish.

Now that I see the finish line, I hear a collective sigh of relief from my family. Graduate school has matured me emotionally and intellectually. Now I have come to the last chapter. All is over and complete. Add the musical touches and call it a rhapsody. I recall ending the first chapter. There was an aria in the air. Rumors flew I would have a standing ovation. A great deal of responsibility to close. At first, it seemed overwhelming but each time I closed a chapter, I began anew. That is what closure can do. I will end my last chapter so I can perform more music. Today I will finish my story. I will wistfully turn my back on this decade without saying goodbye, but not before closing a drawer and tightening the last jar lid.