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## Finding My Way to Me: Coming Out and Becoming Enough

Deryka C. Nairne

*For years, I have been on a journey of self-discovery. I have a history of self-deprecation, as well as a lack of believing in being worthy of being truly loved. I have suffered, and I have triumphed on this journey. Brown's (2010) TEDTalk surrounding shame and vulnerability spoke directly to my heart. This essay will contain those who have words that help me heal. It will focus on how I have or have not made strides to create my own meaning. The content will come from my core. It will encompass the transition and rollercoaster that is my journey to becoming "enough." I will focus on my background, the story of my mother and I, discovering the possibility of being "enough", and where I am today. Examining these components and briefly considering theories by Rutbellen Josselson will illuminate who I am and why I am. I say all of this to illuminate the drive behind this scholarly personal narrative. This is my truth.*

*For the love of herself, she acknowledged her worth. And the world was richer for her.*

-- Charlotte Tall Mountain, *For the Love of the World*

To know who you are is beautiful. To be able to articulate your values, morals, and place in the world is truly powerful. I did not hold that power for a long time. I denied myself that beautiful process of self-discovery until this past year. Through it, I have learned something every person should know: I am enough.

### Why Scholarly Personal Narrative?

I chose to use scholarly personal narrative writing as I believe it is the best way to express my story. I knew I wanted this essay to be a true reflection of me. The most effective way to do this is through this style of written expression. In *Liberating Scholarly Writing*, Robert Nash (2004) states:

You are a scholar if you can capture the narrative quality of your human experience in language that inspires others. You are a scholar if you can present your story in such a way that, in some important senses, it rings true to human life. (pp. 45-46)

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*Deryka received her B.A. in psychology from Hood College and is now a second-year HESA masters student at the University of Vermont. She works in the Department of Residential Life as an Assistant Residence Director. She is passionate about creating connections through storytelling, engaging in authentic dialogue, and supporting college students holistically.*

Scholarly personal narrative gives individuals the ability to generalize an aspect of their life in order to serve both oneself and others. This writing style invites both the writer and reader into a sacred and shared space. A space where the writer can share a piece of themselves in which the reader finds connection in the story. That is what I wish to construct with this essay.

### **Who is This For?**

First and foremost, my audience is myself, Deryka. Too long have I not honored her beautiful person. This story is for you, Deryka. It is your time to discover those parts of yourself you have kept hidden. Connect now with your past, present, and future and heal those emotional scars – for you.

My audience is also the “you” inside the reader. You, who have suffered and felt unworthy. You, who in your darkest moments forget your beauty and power. I want you to hear my message: I hear you. You are more than enough. Know you are worthy.

This essay is also meant to serve others in the field of student affairs. I know I am not alone in this battle. I know so many individuals, both professionals and students, have to deal with pain in the coming out process. It is my hope that writing this will lend strength to those who may need to know they are not alone. This is for the student who may be *coming out*. This is for the professional who needs to help students in the coming out process. This is for anyone and everyone who need the words of others for hope and for healing.

### **My Invitation to You**

I am afraid to speak my truth. I am afraid to reveal moments that happened in privacy. I fear those who do not know my story will judge me. However, I cannot let that fear stop me. I must have courage. I deserve to fully and vulnerably expose myself to the world.

I invite you into my story, into this piece of me. As Mary Oliver (2004) so eloquently stated, “Tell me about your despair and I will tell you mine” (p. 14). I am important. This is my life, and I am the author of it. I have neglected Deryka and stripped her of her voice. I denied her the chance to tell her story and hindered her growth. No more.

### **Losing the Idea of Enough**

My history of not being “enough” is multifaceted. It stems from past unfaithful partners and a separation from my mother. I think back, when was the first time

I forgot my worth? The first thing that comes to mind is my first partner. Teenage love soon turned to heartache... fidelity to infidelity. "It must be me," was a constant thought. Fifteen year-old Deryka blamed herself.

The next part of my story is difficult as I rarely reveal this part of me. The infidelity awakened an ugly part of my person. I stopped looking in the mirror for I hated what I saw. Over time, I began to scratch at my skin. I recall coming home from school and bursting into tears. I would spend the afternoon crying and scratching until someone came home. I would tell myself everything bad in my life was a result of my own action or inaction. I don't believe I ever wanted to die. I just wanted to hurt the object of my hatred, me. I eventually began to move past the pain. I transformed the painful energy into other things. This pain and baggage carried into all of my future relationships. It permeated other areas of my life, too.

### **Mom and Me**

My relationship with my mother is vital to my narrative. We were always close. When she hurt, I hurt. Once, I had a deeply embedded belief that my responsibility was to protect my mother and her well-being even if it meant damaging myself. She believes that homosexuality is wrong because of Christian doctrine. I fell in love with a woman in college. When I realized our relationship was more than a passing fling, I knew I could never tell my mother. I constantly lied. Many times, the words would bubble up in my throat only to be choked down by fear. I was on a pedestal in my mother's eyes. Once my siblings "messed up" in their own ways, the last remaining light was me. I couldn't deviate from the path my parents projected for me. I was supposed to be the lighthouse in the fog, guiding my family back to the shore of pride. Then the worst night of my life happened. It scarred me—forever.

My mother would agree with my queer friends' unsupportive parents. My friends were told demons inhabited their psyche and soul. I couldn't hold it in any longer. Would she think of me like that, too? I began to cry. She probed and wondered why I began crying. I stayed silent. I later explained my beliefs. She pushed back. For once, I did the same. "The bible says homosexuality is a sin," she said. "It says a lot of things are sins, Mom," I countered. Her eyes went wide with disbelief. She glared at me and asked if I was in a relationship with a woman. After a long pause, I uttered, "yes." She charged inside and barked for me to follow. My inner dialogue screamed. "No, no, no! Not yet." I wasn't ready for it. It wasn't time for her to know yet.

I followed her inside, afraid. My mother was filled with a rage I had never seen before. She went to our kitchen. Slammed a cabinet. Paced back and forth. My father came to see what was going on. I could only blurt out the words, "I have

a girlfriend!” He only had a moment to register what I said before my mother attempted to storm out of the house. He wouldn’t let her. “JUST LET ME GO!” she screamed. I ran up to my room. I was shocked. Pained. My father entered the room. I sobbed and apologized, “I’m sorry I couldn’t be the perfect daughter. I tried but I can’t be that person. I like girls even though I tried not to. I’m sorry but I do.” Then he hugged me. His hug stilled the storm inside and made me feel a little calmer and loved.

This is how I came out to my family. It was pruned out of my hands, stolen and twisted into something ugly.

### **Neither Here nor There**

I have been navigating this difficult limbo for the last few years. My mother became depressed as a result of our situation. She developed anxiety. My choices affected her in a way that would make an outsider think we were one. I contemplated personally reenacting the story of the Prodigal Son and thought about running back into the folds of my church and family, repenting.

My true self and voice remained buried. I covered its grave with a fake smile. I cultivated a figurative armor to protect myself. When asked if I was okay, the armor would answer. “I’m good, just tired.” It became my mantra. I was always good, just tired. But how could I even consider happiness when my mother could barely function as a result of my happiness?

### **The Beginning of the Real Journey**

In July of 2013, I began training for Residential Life at The University of Vermont. I found the freedom I had been searching for but not the peace I yearned. It was interrupted with constant questions about my new surroundings. I knew I loved it, but I wondered: “Am I good enough?”

We later watched Brene Brown’s (2010) TEDTalk on vulnerability. The idea of vulnerability terrified me. Show all of me? Impossible. The video began, and I told myself I would listen. My figurative armor prepared to protect me. But I was mesmerized immediately. Brown’s (2010) words pierced my armor and, in turn, my heart. I felt exposed listening to her. I realized the shame and feelings of worthlessness I felt. At the end of the video, she revealed the words that would shape the rest of my life. Painted simply across her upper chest were three words and nine letters: I am enough. I told myself that I would get the words as a tattoo when I fully believed it for myself.

### **Finding and Truly Becoming Enough**

The next part of my narrative took a lot of work. The times I gave myself love felt foreign. It was a new territory I was navigating but I was not alone. I was surrounded by love and community. Amazing individuals supported me through the toughest year of my life. They challenged me when I felt inadequate. Most importantly, they let me be just who I needed to be, everyday. Though this journey has been my own, I owe those individuals my life. If you're reading this, from the very core of my being, thank you.

I finally reached a point where I wanted to truly accept myself. I told myself that others' actions and viewpoints are not because of me. My fault in these experiences had been my own inability to see I am worth more than the pain others inflict on me. I began to feel lighter. Happier, somehow.

I now have the courage I craved after hearing Brown speak. According to Brown, the original definition of courage stems from the Latin word *cor*, meaning "heart"—and the original definition was to tell the story of who you are with your whole heart (2010). This essay is a perfect example of my newfound courage. My story deserves to be heard and that realization may be the most liberating feeling in the world.

I am by no means near the end of my journey. It will take a lifetime of constant self-work to continue loving myself. When the darkness sets in and I find myself stumbling, I will remember my worth and find the light that beckons me home, to myself.

### **The Multiple Pathways**

Theorist Ruthellen Josselson (as cited in Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010) once sought to understand the internal and developmental roots of identity formation in women. She describes different pathways one can take to form their identity. I believe I have stumbled down these pathways at several points in my journey.

In her exploration of identity crises and expansion upon James Marcia's ego identity statuses, Josselson's theory of identity, development, and women sought "to explain why some women resolve their identity crisis while others avoid creating identity or fail to move beyond the crisis" (Evans, 2010, p. 55). When I reflect, I believe I was what Josselson termed "daughters of the crisis" when I first began to deviate from my mother's path. In moratorium, individuals actively question parental values in order to form their identity (Evans et al., 2010, p. 53). I have actively questioned the beliefs of my mother for four years now. Upon first

learning of other legitimate ways of being, I was pulled into a tailspin. I now embrace this knowing.

As implied earlier, my mother has always regarded me as her “favorite” child. Josselson (as cited in Evans et al., 2010) suggests, “women on this pathway indicated that they have overprotective mothers who indulged and overvalued them” (p. 57). There is no doubt in my mind my mother and I fall into this category. I constantly felt torn “between doing what [I wanted] versus meeting [my] mother’s expectations” (p. 57).

As I am still navigating finding my own person, “I find myself having daydreams of doing wonderful things in the future, and I spend time testing the waters in search of a pathway suitable for my life” (p. 57). Through trial and error, I am still seeking out what I truly want my life and identity to be. In hindsight, I know I would not be close to the person I am today without the hardship. It all prompted me to reflect and ask myself, “Who is it I truly want to be in this life?”

### **For Professionals in the Field**

When a student enters a college campus, they carry a story with them. In that story, there is likely pain, hope, triumph, failure, and a whole mix of other emotions. Whatever it may be, let them tell their story. Nash (2004) illustrates the importance of this sharing. It is in the mutual sharing and listening of our personal stories we make the deepest connections with those we are serving. Student affairs professionals--listen to the story of the student leader you meet with weekly. Share your story with them and show you are more than staff and they are more than student. Transcend the invisible boundaries which hinder connection between supervisor and supervisee.

Finding my own voice is the crux of my story and helping students find their voice is a critical takeaway from it. Students may experience dissonance as they navigate the new transition into college. College is a student’s time to shape who they want to be with less influence from their guardians. For some, this is an easy task. For others? Not so much. Giving them the necessary support is important. Utilize the multiple resources around campus such as identity centers, mental health services, wellness centers, and others. It is also important to note that going to these centers are acts of vulnerability. These acts may push students out of their comfort zone. Each time we encourage our students to step outside of their comfort zone, it is as if they are walking on an invisible tightrope. With each step they take, student affairs professionals need to ensure there is a net waiting to catch them. Through challenge and support, professionals can provide a ladder to help them climb to the top again. The power to help the students transform their lives lies within the hands of the professional and that is not a job that one

should take lightly. We have the resources to provide an avenue the students can navigate during their collegiate journey. It is imperative that we provide challenge and support accordingly. Ultimately, yes, the first step off of the platform and onto the tightrope is theirs. It is then our job to help them across once we see them taking that initiative.

### The End – The Voice

I will close this chapter of my journey with this: I found the “me” I have always wanted to find. I found my voice. Whenever I take the time to sit and reflect for awhile, I go to my happy place. It is a place I visited in my dreams once, and I revisit it as a sanctuary. It re-energizes me and reminds me of how beautiful it is to just be. The last time I went to this place, I was alone. Or so it seemed. As I was walking around, I heard the most beautiful sound, a voice I never heard before. I needed to know who or what it was.

Who are you?

*The truest you there is.*

Where have you been?

*With you, but, hidden. Buried. You pushed me down a lot, you know.*

Where do you live?

*Currently? Here, in your happy place. Where do I desire to live? Your reality.*

What's your life been like?

*Competitive. There were a lot of other voices around. Why didn't you let me come out?*

I didn't even know you were missing. I thought I knew you – I thought I had heard you.

*That wasn't me, love. That was mom. That was church. Everyone else in your life. But it wasn't me. And, in turn, it wasn't you.*

I wish I knew that earlier. How can I find you? How can I keep hearing you outside of this place?

*Close your eyes. Remember how it feels to be. That's it. Simply be. Then remember what I sound like. Tell yourself over and over again how important I am. How beautiful I sound.*

*Do this until I emerge, triumphant.*

Finding your self-worth and loving yourself is the hardest and best act one can do. It lends to wholeness and survival. It influences self-love and happiness. It shapes many facets of the individual, and humans tend to forget about that critical component of life: their own worthiness. My struggles have shown me the level of resiliency and self-acceptance I have crafted for myself. I will continue to navigate this life and though I may stumble, turning away from the light shining inside myself, I know I will not wander long due to one simple yet powerful fact: I am enough.



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