



## Poetry and Narrative as Qualitative Data: Explorations into Existential Theory

by Richard Furman

### Abstract

*This article explores existential principles through autoethnographic poetry and narrative reflections. The use of poetry and narrative as tools in qualitative research is explored. Poetry and narratives are shown to be valuable tools for presenting people's lived experiences of complex existential principles and processes. The use of poetry and narrative in this research is positioned within the traditions of expressive arts and postmodern research methods.*

### Introduction

The principles most important to existential psychotherapy are difficult to explore through the traditional lenses and methods of logical positivism. In-depth, qualitative methodologies that present people's lived experiences have become a valuable means of exploring existentialism (Moustakas, 1994). As existentially oriented therapies evolve, new methods of inquiry have been developed that demonstrate how existential themes emerge within the context of people's lives. The purpose of this paper is to contribute to this growing body of work through an exploration of autobiographical poems and narrative reflections as vehicles of inquiry into existentialism. Informed by a growing body of literature on expressive arts research and inquiry (Eisner, 1981, 1991; Finley & Knowles, 1995), poetry has been utilized by many postmodern researchers (Brearley, 2000; Gee, 1991; Richardson, 1992, 1994).

In this article, I discuss poetry and narrative as vehicles of social inquiry, and describe how they are appropriate tools for exploring existential themes. This is followed by short descriptions of several key principles in existentially oriented practice. In each section, one or two poems are presented that explore

how I have grappled with each theme. Along with each poem, I present two narrative reflections that contextualize, explore, or expand each poem. As I shall discuss later in this article, the narrative reflections simultaneously function as data and data analysis. This methodology has been utilized in previous studies to explore complex psychosocial processes such as coming to terms with a father's cancer (Furman, 2004a), the death of a companion animal (Furman, 2006) and depression (Gallardo & Furman, in review). Finally, implications of this type of work are explored as they apply to therapy itself, as well as to therapists' own growth and development.

### Poetry and Narratives as Inquiry

In her often quoted assertion, Hirshfield (1997) notes that poetry has the capacity to clarify and magnify existence. Poetry may be thought of as the emotional microchip, in that it may serve as a compact repository for emotionally charged experiences. Poet James Smith observed that poetry is the "distillation of the essence of being" (personal communication, 2003). At its best, poetry honours the subjective experience of the individual, and presents it in a manner that is "metaphorically generalizable" (Stein, 2004). The notion of metaphoric generalizability is

not the same as it is in the traditional sense of the term, but instead it refers to the relationship between the author of a poem and his/her audience. A poem that expresses an author's emotional "truth" can elicit a powerful empathic reaction in its reader. The reader recognizes him or herself in the poem, and learns to view him or herself in a novel way. The relationship between the poem and the experience of the reader can be understood through Bakhtin's (1982) concept of multivoicedness: meaning resides neither in the speaker nor the receiver, but is created through the interaction between the two.

In this way, poetry is an excellent tool for exploring existential themes. Existentialists posit that individual human emotions are by nature subjective and highly idiosyncratic (Krill, 1978); each of us experiences anxiety, dread, joy and other key emotions in our own way (Jourard, 1968). Our life context and histories, and the meanings we ascribe to them, are complex and varied. They are not easily studied through research methods that seek clear and tidy reductionistic categories.

Poetry is not based upon linear cause and effect logic; a poem does not need to "make sense". In this manner, the poem may be a particularly valuable means of exploring emotions (Mazza, 1999). Through the use of metaphor, the poem allows for interplay between the external and internal worlds of the person that are often complex, contradictory, and even dialectical (Harrower, 1972).

Further, through the device of imagery, a poem can convey the essence of an emotion by evoking images which often transcend the schism between the experience of an emotion and its expression in language. For instance, in a poem about a close friend, I describe her depression as her "Auburn void". In another poem, I refer to my own depression as "a two hundred pound rodent squatting on my chest". Such metaphors and images more accurately depict the quality or tone of an emotion than does a score on a standardized test. Important in existential practice, the poem allows for an assessment of the *meaning* of depression in a person's life, and not merely the intensity or strength of the mood (May, 1979). It is through an in-depth exploration of the meaning of clients' feelings and experiences that they are helped to make sense of their feelings as they relate to their needs, dreams and values.

It is for these reasons that social scientists have begun to utilize the research poem as a means of data reduction and presentation. For instance, Richardson (1993) utilized poems in the presentation of data about unwed mothers. She compressed thick

narratives about research participants' lives into lyrical poems that powerfully presented their "lived experiences". In a similar manner, Poindexter (2002) utilized the research poem as a means of exploring the relationship between people infected with HIV and their caretakers. Langer and Furman (2004) also utilized the poem as a means of exploring issues related to Native American identity, with their methodology oriented towards eliciting three types of data: the presentation of traditional qualitative data in narrative form; a research poem utilizing the exact words taken from the subject's narrative; and interpretive poems written by the researchers which expressed their analysis of the original data. This method was found useful for expressing the subjective experience of the researchers in the data analysis process. By presenting their developing perceptions about the data and their own biases and judgments, the researchers sought to create transparency, thus leading to an increased sense of trustworthiness.

Chan (2003) utilized poetry as a means of inquiry into, and study of, her emotions and life context as a doctoral student. Her work holds two distinct yet complementary purposes, as inquiry and as self-therapy. Her poetry simultaneously is a document of consciousness and of the process of working towards the creation of meaning and health.

It would be fair for the reader to ask about the epistemological assumptions implied by, and the limits of, utilizing autobiographical poems as data. Those schooled in the tradition of logical positivism might wonder about the quality of such studies. Positivists often note that even traditional qualitative studies are unscientific and biased, and are not the proper method for studying important social and behavioural phenomena (Morgan & Drury, 2004). To what degree are such studies valid and reliable? Are assumptions and interpretations gleaned from autobiographical poems generalizable?

The answer is that they are probably not. Yet not all research must have as its ultimate goal the generation of knowledge that is generalizable. Phenomenological research seeks knowledge which accurately and faithfully reflects processes and experiences of complex social phenomena (Swingewood, 1991). Case studies explore in-depth experiences and meanings of individual subjects for the purpose of uncovering meaningful patterns that are not susceptible to being reduced to numerical form (Stake, 1994). Such methods are congruent with the needs of practitioners, who develop practice wisdom and skills based upon an intuitive synthesis of personal, empirical and theoretical knowledge

(Goldstein, 1990). Richardson (2001) suggests five potential criteria to assess a monograph: substantive contribution, aesthetic merit, reflexivity, impact, and expression of reality. The author encourages the reader to assess the merits of the present inquiry in terms of these criteria.

### Methodology

The method employed in the study presented here has been previously utilized in other autoethnographic studies conducted by the author (Furman, 2004b & 2006). As Shapiro noted (2004), the method is useful in enabling one to be an archeologist of one's own experience. What this implies is that, through writing narrative reflections about my own poems, and in exploring how the poems present my lived experiences of existential themes, I simultaneously present additional layers of data, and present narrative analyses of the poems. The poems presented here were selected from a body of work written over a twenty-year period. Each poem was chosen for its relationship to the existential themes explored.

Each day, over a period of two weeks, I read the poems and wrote narrative reflections. While I was free to write whatever came to mind, I attempted to focus on the specific existential theme explored. Given that the poems themselves were autoethnographic in nature, I attempted to contextualize my personal insights into broader cultural issues. This method follows from the postmodern tradition that views writing itself as a method of inquiry (Richardson, 1992).

Narratives are presented in their original form, save for the most basic editing. I want to present them in the rawest form possible to allow readers to have as close access as possible to my actual thought processes. I chose approximately one third of the narratives that I wrote, selecting those that best explore and/or amplify the meaning of the poems.

### Existential Issues Explored

The issues which are considered to be core to existentially oriented therapy depend upon various factors, including the discipline of the therapist and the significant issues of his or her time. In this section, I will explore several key existential issues including death, meaning and identity, nothingness, dread, and what I refer to as existential resolve. A brief discussion as to how each of these issues fits into existential practice precedes the presentation of the poetry and narratives.

### Death and Dread

In discussing the work of Martin Heidegger, van Deurzen-Smith (1997, p. 36) states:

In spite of the ineluctable anxiety that is triggered by the potential loss of all we care for, we nevertheless tend to take the essentials of life for granted.

The spectre of death is simultaneously the source of existential anxiety and a potential source of energy, creativity and vitality (Frankl, 1959). Attempts to deny death are found in a variety of symptoms such as compulsive behaviour, substance abuse and depression (Krill, 1969). Facing death leads to anxiety. The pain of this anxiety is difficult to bear, and demands a deep sense of courage to face. But, in confronting the reality of death deeply and personally, one may come to appreciate the finite nature of the life we are given. Facing death, each day can become an urgent quest towards self discovery and revelation. Giving in to fear and anxiety leads to escapist behaviours of even the most benign (yet insidious) sort, such as watching television for hours a day. The following poems document the process of confronting death and all that it entails. Dread occurs when the reality of death is present, yet is feared deeply as one avoids the call of death: to live each day as fully as possible.

### Speaking with Death on Wednesday

Nothing  
 that should not  
 peer at its centre  
 laugh  
 even  
 when cancer devours  
 the IRS levies  
 the mind whispers  
 brutal acts  
 the hands  
 contemplate obeying  
 I examine my hands  
 tan ridged scars  
 crossing blue green veins  
 and look at death  
 with challenging glance  
 across my aging face  
 spit in the eye of time  
 bark at beckoning winds.  
 I will wait for you  
 in this rooted space.

*This poem speaks to me of how trivial so much of what we worry about really is when juxtaposed with death. At times, it is hard to know exactly what to do with this insight. Do I not worry about trivial things and focus only on what is important? How possible would this really be, without driving myself crazy? Also, how often can we really face death and not be paralysed? Like much of life, the answer seems to be in finding balance, finding a way to be aware of the spectre of my own death, using it for my benefit, and in being able to not be overcome by fear. Sometimes, I think about the death of others more easily than I do about my own. Sometimes my friend Gil comes to mind, dead over two years; sometimes I use his death as motivation. Motivation to do what? To create a life for myself, to live to the fullest.*

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*Today I felt very clearly the relationship between death and anxiety. Thinking about this poem, and death, I began to feel a great sense of fear. The whole day I have felt ill at ease, nervous, almost desperate to do things, to make things right. The choice at times seems between being oblivious to the realities of our existence, or a nervous tension.*

#### Awaken and Save

Eyes drench nothingness  
    deep through  
the throws of the bowel.  
    Awaken to this:  
    Your children dead.  
    Dogs gone.  
Wife a long shot ghost of the heart.  
You, only aware of the sand and silt  
filling your mouth, maybe the feel  
    of bugs feasting.  
Who has time for television?  
    Those lost to false hopes  
of eternal salvation, baby fools  
    suckling the breast of sorrow.  
Let me just taste the breath of wind  
    the lonely howl of time.  
TV guide and fresh bodies be damned.  
    All pulled off the air by  
the final network's final end.

(Furman, 2003)

*I read this poem several times and find multiple meanings to it. On one level, it seems to be a battle between resignation and hope. On another level, it is another call to be motivated by death, by the finite quality of our lives.*

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*It took me longer to write what feels like a meaningful reflection for this poem. I had to actually lie down and visualize myself dead, in a box, with no contact with those I love. I was helped by attempting to feel the distance I actually experience in relation to those*

*who have long been dead. Our relationship to death in the West is based upon detachment and fear. We are taught to deny death, to do whatever it takes to avoid it, and certainly to avoid thinking about it. Yet, death can be the ultimate motivator. Existential thought posits that, only when we have a constant awareness of our own death, can we truly be live. How true this feels to me, yet so exhausting.*

#### Meaning and identity

Meaning, and a person's ability to construct a meaningful life, lies at the heart of existential thought (Bugental, 1978). People are thought to possess the capacity for creating meaning and fulfilment even within the most dire social contexts. According to Sartre (1965), life has no inherent meaning and purpose other than what we ascribe to it through the process of being. Essentially, man/woman was born alone, and will ultimately die alone; each individual must come to terms with developing his or her own personal mission and purpose. Mullan (1992) observed that, at the core of existentialism, is men/women's "quest for a reason for existing without recourse to religion or outside authority". Existential novels such as Camus's (1942) *The Stranger* and Sartre's (1938/1949) *Nausea*, each written as an intimate, first person account, highlight the centrality of the conscious, self creating individual. Both highlight the importance of choice, meaning and responsibility. These poems reflect the process of coming to understand the ways in which I ascribe meaning to my own life.

#### Creepers

Misnamed indelicate plodding,  
but with the right pair of jeans,  
    my feet grin fungal-smiles,  
they remember for me.  
    The knobby rubber sole  
that squealed even on carpet,  
    the clumsy metal buckle  
I fumbled with when fleeing  
faces on the brink can barely recall  
    the edge of dorm-room beds,  
an eighteen-year-old boy  
    pretending he was a man,  
wrestling crusted dishes ramen dignified with shallots,  
    and the Infinity avoided like statistics,  
and lips like whispering hammers on girls ready for love.  
    And now I forgot most of the details,  
jeans faded from dancing thighs and sun,  
    clunky crimson zapatos courage.

*As I read this poem, I think about the complex relationship between personal identity construction and the social roles and masks that we wear. I watch my teenaged daughter now. She wears her clothes as a uniform to fit in with her peers, but she has a style all her own, a way about her that is all hers. This is the dance of creating meaning in life, perhaps. We find ways of making life personally meaningful within the constraints of social expectations. At least, that is the way it appears to me now, forty-one years old, married with children. Each day I balance my own sense of destiny, my own desires, with my responsibility to others. I am not sure whether this is congruent with many existential authors, who often stress the tension between society and the individual. Yet, I feel this tension myself, I feel the pull of what the external world wants me to do and be. It is perhaps for this reason that I feel so invested in articles such as this, that attempt to bring my whole self into the academic endeavour.*

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*To the existentialist, identity is largely about allowing yourself to be who you are, in spite of the social pressures. This contradicts what I said above, to some degree. Sure, social responsibility is important, but existentialism pushes us to ask ourselves "At what cost?" This is on my mind tonight; tonight my wife and I went out to dinner with some new acquaintances. They are nice, good and kind people. In the restaurant, they were very loud, and drank a great deal. I felt uncomfortable with people looking at our table; it was clear they were bothering others. It was difficult to be social and cordial and still honour my own needs and wants, my own values. I excused myself early, and went home. Now, sitting here typing this, I feel at home with myself for the first time in hours. Part of me wishes I were easy in such social situations, that I could "go with the flow" and have fun. Yet, the older I get, the more I need my quiet, my solitude, and prefer less social contact in groups. I knew beforehand that I needed my time alone, but did not honour this. And what does this have to do with the poem? Perhaps not a great deal, other than that reading it before I wrote this passage reminded me of the importance of not only understanding who you are, but of being true to it.*

### Nothingness or the Void

In many ways related to death, the notion of nothingness, or the existential void, is important. The void is the experience when one is profoundly aware of the deep silence and emptiness of the existence of the universe that is often faced during meditation practices. For many, coming face to face with this emptiness creates the experience of dread (discussed in an earlier section); from which they quickly run. It is facing and coming to terms with the void that

allows us to be free; if we can face the void, we can face death, and ultimately life. It is from this void that true creativity can arise.

### But One Time in Ten

I hold the void  
but one time in ten,  
pretend the roll of the dice  
will never stop.

The last touch of my child.  
The emperor falls again.  
The armies, faded.  
The dogs, past.

Burning of ice, freezing of fire  
the rules of being reverse.  
All you hold in worry  
and pretend to fear.

Like the tears wasted.  
Moments neglected as  
chamomile in the cracks  
of city sidewalks.

The possibilities,  
the sleeping lives you  
cannot remember,  
but only to hold the void.

*This poem could easily have been placed in the section about death. In fact, it occurs to me that each of the poems could be placed in other sections; there is so much crossover in existential themes - they are so intertwined. This poem speaks about loss, and the relationship between nothingness and loss. One of the things that is hard, at times, about writing narrative responses is that sometimes it feels like a poem says it all, or works on a level that is more metaphorical than logical. That is what I experience reading this poem now. It works on an emotional level, for me; it makes me want to accept the things I have, appreciate the connections between myself and others, and also accept how tenuous life really is. I am very privileged, and very lucky.*

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*I sit in silence reading this poem, for this is the only way to appreciate nothingness.*

### Holding the Void

*inspired by the statue of the same name,  
by Alberto Giacometti*

The name of the sculpture,  
nature of the life we all lead.

At minimum, he was honest, in bronze  
faceless and nameless, incandescent glowing alone.

They do not gaze for too long,  
must not face that break between his fingers cupped,  
  
the expanse of invisible, a field of giants  
to be crossed with iron webbed feet drunken,  
  
a tower to be scaled in gripless gale and ice,  
a map to be read ragged and stained, the marked spot  
vanished.  
  
I stare at the abyss, long to pry bronze hands apart,  
wrench in between, the connections attached,  
  
melded to knowing seer, into that void.  
Perhaps it is time to close your hands.

(Furman, 2002)

*One of the hardest things for me about family life is the lack of quiet. To me, silence is that space where I can get in touch with the void, with the splendour of the planet. This poem speaks to me about that vast nothingness that exists when we are alone, when there is nothing to do, nowhere to go. It is the emptiness that you find when there is no cell phone, no e-mail, no work. Just this morning, I was talking to my daughter about how her generation has become so dependent on technology for their own happiness; I hope they find ways of encountering the void so that they do not fear it so.*

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*I used to walk in nature so much more than I do now. I once believed G\*d lived in the woods, that G\*d was the silence that existed between the trees, between my breath and the sky.*

### Poems of Existential Resolve

That existentialism is often considered a dark philosophy is a reflection of where it starts (death, dread, for example), not where it ends. We start with death, and end with life. The ultimate purpose of grappling with death, nothingness and dread is that to do so means to face life and live authentically. To seek, to know, and live out one's own special meaning is to develop a deep sense of satisfaction with life, and to learn to live fully in the moment of the unfolding drama that is our existence. The following poems are those that express movement beyond struggle to resolve. It is understood that struggling with existential issues is a lifetime process, not an event to be "worked through" in the classical Freudian sense of the word. However, there are moments when having bravely encountered life on life's terms leads to an inner sense of satisfaction and wholeness. These poems reflect varying degrees and aspects of such sentiments.

### Like We Do

She tells you of her theories  
of the moths

sinister reproductive cycles,  
how they flatten out and  
  
hide in the windowsills  
in her bras  
inside the mattresses.  
Wants to know

where they go  
when they prepare to die?  
Wonders if she will  
need to vacuum corpses.

Or will they slowly decay  
hidden on the oriental rug  
or in our sweaters and boots.  
She chatters to be close

will come back soon  
more questions  
theories  
something essential about

the structure of existence,  
or the moths, wonders if  
they make love hard  
like we do,

slither flat against each other  
desperate taking hold of the nights,  
before they will die,  
like we do too.

*The lives of moths seem so simplistic, mindless, determined. Maybe I merely fail to understand their world, but it is hard to know. Yet, there is a simple elegance that comes from having your purpose predetermined. Choice is painful, the process of creating meaning and moving towards it, day in and day out, is painful. The struggle of knowing, also, that, in the end, all that mattered was this very struggle. The value was in the way we lived our lives, the way we loved, the manner in which we treated others, the manner in which we created our lives. Slick, my ten pound dog, is resting on a blanket on the couch next to my chair. He rests easily, he seems deeply at peace. How long can humans truly be at peace? Is it our nature, when we have this internal desire to live so fully? Complex lot we are, creatures with complex cognition.*

### **It Was Meant To Be**

The hail falling hits the May earth hard. We laugh at the absurdity of such cold in spring. We refuse to submit with t-shirts, girls with tummies naked. It is like this.

We surrender to the infinite way like a child takes to medicine.

Rebelling choking struggling the inevitability lost to the madness of will. Over a beer, we fret over the details, marvel at the wonders. Taxes, baseball, stiffening joints, time, the young bodies that will spoil as sure as sharp cheese in the sun, the minds that will ruin with redundancy, the fall of cherished idols.

We open our mouths, catch the sky one time in every ten.

This is the way it was meant to be.

*It may not be very meaningful to say, but I miss the snow. There is something powerful about winter weather, something cleansing to the soul. Perhaps it is that you are powerless to it, like the will of the world, and that your choice is to be resolute, to transcend, to overcome. Winter teaches you to push, to push on, spring will soon bring fresh hope; you just have to be present for it.*

### **Conclusion**

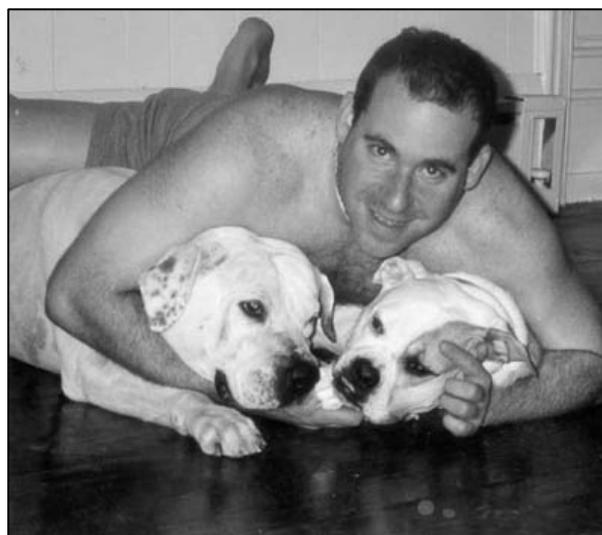
Mullan (1992) contends that the existential therapist's development as a clinician is predicated on his or her own ability to have faced dread, meaninglessness and other existential dilemmas. It is thus important that

therapists find ways to face these issues for themselves. In existentially oriented practice, the therapist must cope with the intensity that comes from engaging people about powerful existential concerns. As such, self exploration into existential themes is essential for the therapist. The writing of poetry and narrative reflections is one way of developing awareness about these issues.

In the work presented above, the process of self-reflection occurred on several levels. The poetry served as an initial exploration of the related themes. Reading the poems years after they were written forced me to reflect upon what the poems mean to me now, and what they meant to me when they were written. I was compelled to explore how I had changed in my relationship to these key concepts, how I have changed as a professional helper, and as a person. Writing the narrative reflections allowed me to continue this process; I have come to appreciate my own growth and change.

It is the hope of this author that readers who are interested in existential therapy may attempt to utilize poetry, narrative, or other creative means as a way of engaging in self-reflection. This can be done through creating poems or other works of art that focus on therapists' own experiences, or those of their clients. Those readers who are new to reflective forms of writing or expression, may wish to write narrative responses to the poems and narratives that have been presented here.

### **About the Author**



Rich Furman, MSW, PhD, is associate professor and coordinator of the Master's degree programme in Social Work at the University of North Carolina in Charlotte, USA. Dr Furman has published widely, including over eighty articles and chapters focusing on social work practice with transnational Latino populations and the role of the arts and humanities in social work practice, education and research. He has also produced a number of books, ranging from *Practical Tips for Publishing Scholarly Articles: Writing and Publishing in the Helping Professions* (Lyceum Books) and a collection of poetry, *Compañero* (Main Street Rag), to *Navigating Human Services* (2nd edition, with Margaret Gibelman, Lyceum Books).

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