



## Reconstruction: Meltdown in the Midst of Beauty

by Will Parnell

### Abstract

*Watching a dramatic musical television episode reminded me of my own meltdown and reconstruction during the collection of my dissertation research. This stir of memory led me to write down my story. Seeking meaning in the experience of the studio teacher in an early childhood school, I co-participated in events that led me through a dramatic and transformative experience that deepened my awareness and understanding of what it means to teach and learn in the wondrous space of the atelier, otherwise called the early childhood studio. We engaged in the meaning making process of our studio endeavours through keeping field notes and a journal, informally interviewing and engaging in collaboration sessions with the studio teachers, and reviewing the dissertation manuscript for authenticity. Through active listening and engagement, I collided with predicament. I learnt that the only way to move through the crisis-point is to 'keep on living'. In the end, I came to a new sense of how to live and work in an early childhood studio and I also came to understand that life eats entropy. My experience in the studio became about the beauty of courage, time, and deep listening, as examined through the experiences of fear of the new and of my reconstruction into something more.*

### Recounting a Tale Tailored to Experience

Most people may not be 'into' television and may never even have heard of an old television show called *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. In sitting down to entertain myself one weekend I found myself profoundly interested in the message of the Whedon's (2001) "Once More, With Feeling" episode. It reminded me of an article I was planning to write about my experience of reconstructing myself through a meltdown in the midst of a beautiful place; the atelier (the early childhood studio). In this experience, I mindfully laboured to understand the role of the studio teacher in early childhood education through an internal crisis-point and subsequent reconstruction of my own teacher-researcher identity. All the while, I allowed myself to continue to live through the experiences constructed around me. This is similar to Buffy's story in this episode, so I connected back to

my own experiences through watching her episode unfold.

The vampire slayer story was no ordinary episode, but instead was presented as a musical. In the previous season, Buffy died and was brought back to life in this season by her magical friends who could not bear their super-heroine's loss. At the beginning of this episode Buffy is wandering and depressed and singing 'just going through the motions'. Her friends then realize that the sporadic singing scenes are contagious and caused by a big, bad demon. Buffy thinks that she is going to face the demon alone and sings a song about 'just going through the motions'. She also tells the crowd that she cannot die or be killed because, as she declares in somber melody, "Hey, I've died twice!" As the scene unfolds, the demon helps Buffy release her secret to her friends, who act as back-up singers. Buffy declares that they

pulled her out of heaven, where she was in bliss. She now feels that she does not care or carry with her the spark of desire to go on living. She therefore takes the demon's challenge and tries to save her sister, who is held hostage by the demon and waiting to go with him to hell as his demon-bride.

Buffy then challenges the demon and announces that if she can kill or beat him he must let her sister go. She begins to sing and dance, more feverously and starts to burn from the inside. She looks over at her friends and tells them they yanked her out of heaven. She sings: "I think I was in heaven. There was no fear. There was no doubt, until I was pulled out...of heaven! So give me something to sing about". Her friends are horrified by what they had done. Buffy seems more and more determined to kill herself because she feels that she has nothing to live for.

Just as her dancing body begins to smoke and almost burn, Buffy's secret lover and bad-boy-vampire-with-a-soul jumps in and stops her dancing. He poignantly sings to her, "Life's not a song. Life isn't bliss. Life is just this: It's living. You'll get along; the pain that you feel you only can heal by living. You have to go on living." Buffy is stunned at the startling choice made for her by her lover's public display, which teaches her to save herself. As the scene ends, Buffy's sister reminds us all, "The hardest thing in this world is to live in it."

### ***Narcissism or Is It?***

In relation to participant-based experiential research, Van Manen's (1990) words ring out, "There will be many temptations to get side-tracked or to wander aimlessly and indulge in wishy-washy speculations, to settle for preconceived opinions and conceptions, to become enchanted with narcissistic reflections or self-indulgent preoccupations" (p. 33). This statement worried me as I found myself falling further into the deep hole of my own undoing during my phenomenologically-based research data collection. My uncertainty felt insurmountable until I forced myself to reveal these internal doubts to a fellow research participant and to begin the struggle of listening, changing and growing. I had to be reminded to "keep on living."

My initial research question was: When the studio teachers and the researcher engage in the atelier teaching-learning phenomenon, what do we experience? It is indeed a tall task to reveal such a phenomenon as one is living in its midst. The dissertation that resulted from this question was about 240 pages long. For the purposes of this paper, I have examined the first three episodes that resulted in my meltdown as they relate to what I was experiencing in the studios. Literature relating to the studio teacher

and phenomenology are woven throughout this research re-visit. The methods I used to collect data included field notes, a researcher-participant journal, and video recordings and audio recordings of events. I also informally interviewed the studio teachers in collaboration sessions regarding their view of the experiences in our shared studio engagements.

Suzy and Marsha, the two studio teachers and long term colleagues and friends, also engaged me in collaboration session that specifically set out to re-visit and better reveal the episodes of our encounters. I audio recorded all of these collaboration events. I used Van Manen's (1990) ideas about the "knots in the web of experiences" (p. 90) to analyse the data. The complete data is available in Parnell (2005). In this paper I tie these experiences and the meaning we construed through them to a major conclusion about the belief that life eats entropy.

### **Episode Experiences as Results**

*"My job is to make the beauty all around us  
with the children"*

*–Atelierista Suzy, Helen Gordon Child  
Development Center*

The first stages of development in our of studio encounters "are more like knots in the webs of our experiences, around which certain lived experiences are spun and thus lived through as meaningful wholes" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 90). We found meaningful wholes in our atelier lived-experiences that included many journeys and happenings causing the research team (the two studio teachers and myself as a researcher participant) to pause, reflect on, and move ahead toward our own meaning in the encounters.

In order to begin our journey together into these knotted webs, in this article I clearly and strongly use my voice, my emotion, and my experiences in the first three episodes, which form the crux of this article. I found an important step into understanding the studio teachers' role by first walking through my disequilibrium and internal crisis to come to better understand the encounters in the studio. The reader is urged to take my voice as a starting point into this work of lived experiences and meaning as a studio participant-researcher.

The eventual descriptions and understandings of the studio teachers' experiences could not have happened without the disequilibrium I faced and illustrated in the first three episodes. My experience walked hand-in-hand with and was inseparable from the research question. It is a knot in the web that binds to the other knots, revealed in the results.

As a participant in the research study I battled with how much of my voice should intermingle with the experiences put forth by the studio teachers in this work. I belaboured the point, but eventually came to a resolution in the process that I comfortably fit in the midst of the studio experience from a participant perspective. “Researchers are integrally and actively involved as instruments in the data collection, data analysis and report processes. They attempt to make sense of human phenomena in terms of the meanings that the research participants attach to it” (Hoffman, 2004, p. 17).

I realised that my viewpoint was as critical to the studio experiences and stories as Marsha and Suzy’s right to be heard. I also had a right to be heard as a participant through my journal narratives and my reflexive reliving of the experiences as I wrote them. This conundrum of the “me” perspective was part of the crisis-point that I faced as I was conducting the data gathering and analysis during the research process.

The question that echoed in my mind as I sat in this research experience was, “Isn’t research supposed to be about something outside of the researcher; existential and exposed through the onlooker?” I soon discovered that phenomenologists, existentialists and others theorists have challenged this position. Sartre (1958) suggests that the observer peeping through the keyhole who is caught by the onlooker creates an internal construction of the meaning in the experience. The internal construction of shame, excitement, or other feelings the peeper experiences as he/she realises that he/she is being watched (caught in an act) is the dilemma or the crisis-point of the phenomenological research perspective. This is a perspective I adopted in the studio experiences. “But all of a sudden, I hear footsteps in the hall. Someone is looking at me. What does this mean?” (Sartre, 1958, p. 260).

In the end we shall see what internal constructions these experiences bring to us through the following narrative and figures. The first experience begins with a story of listening on the opening day of data gathering with Marsha.

### *The Value of Intentional Listening*

We are nervous. The first encounter in the studio brings many emotions for Marsha and me. We both seem to buzz around busily preparing for our first research experience together and with a group of children. Marsha explains, “I’ve seen the children interested in nests as one of the families have brought in a bird’s nest and story to share with the classroom community. This has piqued our teaching team’s interest to study birds through the arts.” It is with the

graphic mediums that we are planning our expedition, a medium best suited to the atelier where children can engage more specifically with media and in specified small groups around a subject such as nests. Marsha tells me that she plans to have the children start by working on making their own nests out of many materials, including paper and black fine-tip markers for drawing and representing their idea of a nest, and twigs, mud, and other supplies for a live rendition of a bird’s nest.

I turn my attention to the video camera and think, “you novice! What are you doing?” I’m preparing to audio tape children’s permission to work with them, video tape the children at work on our first day, and then watch Marsha engage in her teaching-learning experiences. I am also planning to jot down notes as we go along. This first experience feels exhilarating and tiring all at once. I notice that Marsha seems to be moving quickly and I take a deep breath, look out the window, and watch the heavy rain pour down. I can hear it tap, tap, tap outside the beautiful windows decorated with long, thin, and twirling twigs atop the curtain rods. I think that this place - the atelier - is our nest for the next twelve weeks. I am snapped back to the present moment as I notice that the children are noticing me looking out the windows.

We proceed to digitally record children’s yes and no answers to participation in this research study once the families have given permission for their children to participate. Three of the twelve children answer no and go back to join their friends in other activities. We then begin our first session in small groups with the nine who joined our expedition. From this point forward, except for Marsha and Suzy, the other names used in this article are pseudonyms as required by the Human Subjects Review Committee.

Marsha asks the children to talk with their neighbors about what they know about nests. She then turns away from the children to get materials ready. I can tell she is listening closely to the conversations she cannot see. She slightly turns her body toward a group and interjects, “tell your neighbor how you know that.” I keep watching with baited breath and I think, “This experience is something to get used to, this level of listening feels foreign to me.” I’m an observer, listener, one-hundred percent paying attention to this field of learning. Marsha is in the same position. I ask myself, “What is next?” and “How can I listen to all of this at once?” I feel overwhelmed by the task I’ve given myself. I doubt my ability to persevere.

In contrast, in the first studio experience with Suzy I feel a bit more at ease. I think this is due to the fact that we team-taught together for five years although this was fifteen years ago. I get my camcorder ready

and Suzy brings the children into the studio. We have four children in this group and, according to Suzy this feels “a bit more intimate”. All four say yes to the research participation and we launch into a story reading experience. After a short story on houses and where people live, Suzy guides us to a table to work on building houses.

The children begin by making stairs and levels to their houses. They put beds on each level and talk with one another about their ideas. “My house has three levels and my bed is at the top,” says Maggie (see figure 1).



**Figure 1:** *House with many levels*

Merna and Susan look over and start making levels for their houses. Merna says, “My bed is at the top with a window.” She explores this idea of beds for a while and then begins to add people to the beds. Merna also draws her house for Suzy, which includes a door and a small round part near the peak of her roof and right next to her bed. Suzy asks, “Is this your window in your bedroom?” Merna doesn’t respond but keeps drawing. Suzy shares with me, “I’m struggling to understand Merna’s representation, as well as the others’ thinking and work.” I agree with her. I share, “I’ve begun to ask a lot of questions and the children have become non-responsive to me.” Suzy says, “I am just patiently listening for their rhythms and today their rhythm says ‘let’s go!’” She suggests we move to the light table for a Popsicle stick house-making activity as she declares that she sees “restlessness in the children.”

Within thirty minutes in Suzy’s studio, Suzy and I appear exhausted as the 3-year-old children bounce from area to area. “Suzy, can we draw our houses?” says Maggie. Thomas follows behind. She says, “Yes,” they wildly draw for only a few minutes (see figure 2), and then they ask for another activity.



**Figure 2:** *Pens in action*

I think to myself: “Is today a predictor of the sum of our experiences with these children?” After the children have gone from the atelier, Suzy suggests that we “help focus their energy to see where this will lead us.” She appears optimistic and hopeful that “time and keen listening will reveal our path.” I gain a sense of confidence as I sit in absolute wonder at Suzy’s natural ability to sooth my nervous energy. Suzy reminds me “You have to do a tremendous amount of listening. They’ll come around to the languages in the studio. Listen for *their* truth, Will. It will come.”

In my journal I write:

“Will it come? I feel so unsure and a sense of such dread of not knowing what to say, when to jump in, when to step back, when to let go and when to engage them further ... I was a teacher for ten-years! How can I not know these basics? Why does this all feel so new to me? Maybe I’m just out of sorts with the intimate details?”

As I turn inward on my experiences, I forget to look outside of myself and engage as the “researcher.” I ask myself over and over as I re-write and re-visit this episode, “Am I being too much of a participant? Can I be too much of one?”

### ***Meltdown in the Midst of Beauty***

Holistically, week two seems more relaxed than week one. Suzy and Marsha both appear more at ease with my presence in each of their atelier spaces. They each smile and greet me with, “Are you ready?” I have also decided not to add to our stress by video-recording the events. Clicking in to the right gears seems to be the best metaphor to explain the week’s experience and yet there is something looming in the back of my mind; something that is almost disturbing at an unconscious level. I cannot seem to put words to this unrest yet. I’m taking pictures and writing down what children say. I’m watching the documenters document the children’s work (see figure 3).



**Figure 3:** *Documenting the documentors*

I am acting as a researcher participant the best I can. And, I am enjoying most of my moments in each atelier, but my questions and actions do not satisfactorily elicit responses from the children and my interactions with them seem artificial.

In Suzy's studio, I ask Susan to describe her house to me. We talk about the levels in her house, but her responses seem contrived and designed only to please me as a teacher. I say, "How many levels does your house have?" Susan shrugs and answers, "I don't know... an upstairs and a downstairs." Uninterested, she turns away from me to continue playing with the little people she's made for the house and beds. I feel dumb and dissatisfied as I continue to try and make meaningful conversation which goes nowhere. Suzy asks Thomas to tell her about his house and prompts him, "Remember, I want you to make this house like your real house." Thomas talks about his pretend bunk bed he's made from a bunch of corks. "It feels squishy and soft," he says.

As Thomas talks, I write in my journal, "Listen" about 15 times. I remember thinking that if I say "listen" over and over it should come true through my consciousness and I will listen. My preoccupations take me outside of the experience and I worry more and more that I will never understand how to engage with the children in the studio.

During the same week in Marsha's studio, I notice that some children have connected to Marsha for help on their work. She has children engage in drawing their bird's nest again this week before they begin to create a life-like nest from sticks, mud, brown paper, and feathers (see figure 4).



**Figure 4:** *Making nests*

Marsha queries, "What can you do with a pencil that is better than a pen?" Lauren suggests, "You can be very, very detailed." This conversation excites Marsha and me. We give each other a glance as if to say we approve of this line of questioning. Marsha continues, "Shall we draw together?" Lauren jumps in, "Are we going to make the nests on one big paper or our own?" Marsha suggests, "On one big paper, yes, I want you to work together" (see figure 5).



**Figure 5:** *Children drawing together*

Their conversation carries on as I jump in and help the children. I find a real bird's nest from a display area in the room and show this to the children. I ask them to touch the mud and feel the twigs. Again, I am hit with a large amount of disinterest. I think that maybe they do not trust me yet or maybe I do not trust them, trust their capabilities? I just cannot figure out why I encounter "shut down" when I try to engage with the children. I tell Marsha, "I feel like a fraud in the studio." My thinking spirals downward as I begin to believe that I have no idea of what I am doing with children.

I try claiming my right to ignorance in the studio after Loris Malaguzzi's concept of "declaration of ignorance" (Spaggiari, 2004, p. 1)." As Spiaggiare (personal communication, 2 March 2003) suggested in an introductory speech at the Reggio Emilia Study Tour:

We had a declaration of ignorance ... the only thing we knew was that we didn't know! We took a modest and humble attitude. Maybe this is what helped us lay out the right questions. The wise man is not he who knows the answers, but he who asks the right questions. The right questions generate answers and research. The right questions are not a sign of ignorance, but a compass to set us off in the right direction.

At the time this task seemed disparaging and disheartening to me.

I generally think of myself as a person who is good at what I do, an expert in my field. I hold an attitude of confidence, but that was absent in these moments. I became so upset and consumed with worry that I visited Suzy as a confidant and longtime friend and I find myself crying and confused. I tell her that:

Here I am a doctoral student and I feel like a fraud ... like no one in Reggio Emilia (a place I revere and have visited on many occasions) would hire me to work with children because I don't know how to work with them in this way! It just seems so hard to understand what to do or say with these children in the studio.

My meltdown feels profound and as I go to bed that evening, I pull the covers over my head and tear up again, feeling overwhelmed by my inability to teach in this studio way. I wonder if this experience will ever leave me and if I will ever feel confident and less fragmented, more whole and integrated.

### *Light at the end of Week Two's Tunnel*

During her first interview Suzy suggests, "I see my job is to make the beauty all around us with to the children." What an incredible statement! It is also so true for the atelierista. As I act as a studio participant with the children, it makes me think about our experience and how I am trying to force the intervals of events into something I want instead of letting the phenomenon unfold and happen naturally. This does not feel beautiful. I tell Suzy "I have been so frustrated ... what do you think has been my goal in these studio experiences? I think I'm too controlling? How do you go about experiencing studio teaching?" Suzy looks at me lovingly and says, "You *know* what you are doing Will, just breathe! Relax and breathe. Yes, you are a little *too* controlling and you just need to relearn how to '*be*' with the children. Just *be* with them. *Just live life with them!*" I decide it is time to follow the leader. I firmly resolve to watch Marsha and Suzy's lead and follow how they work. I believe that in this listening and mindful way I can come to understand the studio experience more deeply. The focus has to be shifted onto Marsha, Suzy, and their work with children and off my feelings of fear, which allow false evidence to appear real.

With renewed energy and enthusiasm I persist and actively engage in listening to the studio rhythms and how Marsha and Suzy work. From the first set of interviews I find out so much more about what the studio experience is like for Marsha and Suzy. They divulge truly personal information about their work in the program and this act makes them vulnerable in the research reporting of their experiences. Living between the visions of the studio teachers (shared in the collaboration sessions) and their daily work

(researcher participant experiences), I begin to move more deeply into making meaning out of this studio teaching-learning phenomenon.

### *Complexity in Simplicity: An Ending Brings on a New Beginning*

These simple experiences created such angst and triggered a reconstruction of a different meaning in the understanding of experiences. The description of these episodes demonstrates my response to the experiences. I doubt whether the reintegration of my sensibilities was smooth and ever-lasting and it is possible that another phenomenological research-based experience would show more about how I manage phenomenologically-based experiences through the act of remembering to live in life, as both Buffy's vampire boyfriend and my co-participant reminded me.

### *Life Eats Entropy*

I recently listened to an old cassette tape about the future of humanity as described by Barbara Marx-Hubbard (1997), author of *Revelations* and 1984 candidate for vice president of the United States of America. Her interpretation of life is that it eats entropy (the random disorder and deterioration) we sometimes encounter. In her 1997 speech on conscious evolution she twice states in her microphone that "life eats entropy," (Hubbard, 1997, Cassette Tape, side A). Something in this statement seemed profoundly interesting in relation to my crisis-point in the studios with Marsha and Suzy. I encountered random disorder time and again in this research study and I watched it turn into experiences full of meaning. With this thought in mind, I searched out my copy of the book, *A Simpler Way*, by Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers (1996). I opened it directly to the page on the complexity of order in life, where the word emergence is significant. This book feels similar to Marx-Hubbard's (1997) statement that life eats entropy, although it is framed around order or the emergence of life.

Emergence is a common phenomenon found everywhere in life. Social insects are a particularly stunning example. The tower-building termites of Africa and Australia accomplish little when they act alone; they dig only lowly piles of dirt. But as they attract other termites to their vicinity, a collective forms. As a group, they become builders of immense towers. (p. 68)

Marsha, Suzy and I wish for the studio to become the heart and hearth of the school and a place where the work occurs in relationship with others as a group study. This group work creates order and more

complexity in our researching experiences, but also carries with it the struggle for meaning and the complexity of identity reconstruction and intense listening. In the end, the life of our project (“you have to keep on living”) has devoured the random disorder, deterioration and entropy.

Although I started my studio experiences confused and lost, I finally came through them by way of beauty, time, and deep listening and by the experience itself organising into higher order. Life ate entropy in my personal journey of studio involvement and coming to meaning-making in the studio. This simple concept of life eating entropy serves as a way of reformulating all of our muddled human experiences that are part of living in the mess of disequilibrium.

We made meaning by organising with one another around a subject matter; the experiences in the studios. We found this problem of the crisis point in making meaning of our experiences and sought

solutions and desired to watch life eat entropy. My experience in the studio became about the beauty of courage, time and deep listening. I examined the experiences of fear of the new and of my own reconstruction into something more.

Palmer’s (1998) idea in *The Courage to Teach* of sitting at the round table as a co-learner studying a subject together (studio teaching experiences) is vital to our work as we look back over and make sense and meaning of our experiences. We constructed meaning together and we developed a capacity to listen and understand the subject and each other more profoundly. We may fall into crisis with the identity and role of the studio and its teachers, but we are listening deeply and finding the emergence of the participants’ meaning in the life of the school.

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### About the Author



Professor Will Parnell is an Assistant Professor in Education and is the Pedagogical Director of the early childhood schools ([www.cdfs.pdx.edu](http://www.cdfs.pdx.edu)) at Portland State University. He also coordinates the Master’s specialization in early childhood education for the Graduate School of Education’s Curriculum and Instruction Department.

Will currently serves on the Portland Children’s Council of Oregon, the Reconceptualising Early Childhood Education program committee. He is also a School Board member at a local charter school (The Emerson School) and at a private elementary school (A Renaissance School of Arts and Sciences).

Will finished his doctorate in education at PSU in 2005, and has since been researching the experiences and meaning of the Reggio-inspired studio and children’s creative expression and representational work. Will’s specialty areas are making meaning of studio teaching experiences, researching environments, designs, and cultural equity in early education, as well as documenting young children’s learning, and facilitating teacher narratives.

Will has been in the early education field since 1986 and has a wide background in teaching and leadership, including work in places such as lab schools, parent cooperatives, and public school settings. Serving as a consultant, he has started several schools for young children and has also been engaged with the design of children’s indoor and outdoor spaces with local architects. Will’s passion for learning spaces can be seen through his work in the all the program he touches.

E-mail address: [parnellw@pdx.edu](mailto:parnellw@pdx.edu)

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