

## PERFORMING IN THE AFTERNOON: NARRATIVE IDENTITY AND AGEING

### PRELUDE

*Thoroughly unprepared, we take the step into the afternoon of life; worse still, we take this step with the false assumption that our truths and ideals will serve us as hitherto. But we cannot live the afternoon of life according to the programme of life's morning; for what was great in the morning will be little at evening, and what in the morning was true will at evening become a lie. (Jung)*

As an academic who has just turned sixty, well into Jung's afternoon, I'm immersed in the performance of ageing. This essay weaves together personal experience, professional research, and philosophical theory, through a phenomenological narrative approach, to explore changes in identity accompanying ageing. As part of the baby boomer bump entering their sixties, my generation was the first in which a full professional career for educated women was the norm rather than the exception. How this surging wave of elders will affect society, whether it will swamp or sustain it, is of growing academic, community, and individual concern. As we face the possibility of up to thirty years of life beyond full-time work, we enter into unknown territory. It is timely to re-examine assumed paradigms about ageing and the way it is enacted or performed.

Philosophically, this essay integrates theoretical approaches to identity and ageing that share a phenomenological understanding of lived experience. Such understanding views reality as socially constructed, experience as inherently meaningful, and identity as fluid, relational, and in flux over time. In particular I draw on phenomenologist Paul Ricoeur's framework of narrative identity, Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist notion of authenticity, Rollo May's existential take on creative courage, Mary and Ken Gergen's socially constructed approach to positive ageing, and Paul John Eakin's notion of autobiography, or self narration, as story performance.

The consideration of performance in this essay is multi-layered. Significant criticism has been made of performativity, the neo-liberal context of contemporary professional (and academic) work, that focuses on measurable outcomes of performance in terms of numbers, targets, and products (Ball). Such a focus discounts less easily measured aspects of work, such as meaning, caring, and integrity. In an increasingly performative working world, where busyness can define ability in businesses, researchers report growing levels of stress and disillusionment amongst staff (Pocock, Williams, & Skinner). Such busyness is often perceived as linked to meaningless administrative trivia that diverts time and effort away from what

really matters in the eyes of professionals (Coffield & Edward). In the 'caring' professions, which have been the focus of my research, what really matters is 'making a difference' to the lives of students, patients, or clients the professionals care about. Such critique has been part of my research over the past decade into the growth, authenticity, and wellbeing of people through their working lives (Webster-Wright).

In addition, performance in this essay is considered in a literary, philosophical sense as the storying involved in identity construction, as well as in a literal, embodied sense through the description of my involvement in a dance project with other mature-aged women. Ironically, I am moving from a philosophical focus on authenticity in other people's working lives, towards a concern about living authentically in my own post-working life. In that serendipitous manner, which often surprises and subverts planned outcomes, the focus of the dance project is on the notion of 'Artifice'. Artifice is an antonym of authenticity. In this evolving dance performance these two ideas are linked through the influence of Pina Bausch's work on our dance teacher's approach (Goldberg). Wendy McPhee, our dance teacher, is inviting us to consider how we are seen by the world and how we would like to be seen. With an artist's insight, a dancer's experience, and a radical philosophical take on gender, she is weaving our explorations into a co-constructed choreographic performance involving music, dance, voice, and other media.

Finally, as I move towards the end of my academic career, my writing is shifting from academic research articles to creative non-fiction, life writing, and memoir. I am aware, as Eakin notes, that in every written act, but increasingly as I place myself within my writing, I am composing a performance rather than documenting facts. To describe the process of moving from the rigorous constraints and ordering of research and philosophy, towards creative considerations of storying and performance, I have adapted an analogy from Daniel Albright (19). He contrasts the disciplines of psychology and literature. In my version, 'philosophy is a garden, story is a wilderness'.

To a storyteller or narrative inquirer, philosophy looks stale, contrived, categorised, and impossibly neat. To a philosopher's analytical eye, narratives seem untamed, with wild leaps of imaginative and unstable constructions. Neither is completely true. Philosophical insights can enrich story, narrative tropes may innovatively shape philosophical expression. I hope to combine these approaches in this essay.

#### ACT ONE: PERFORMING IN PROFESSIONAL LIFE

Who I am at this stage of my life and career is entangled in where I've been. My academic life began in science where my sharp mind directed me, ignoring the whisperings of my heart to follow the path of language. I studied biochemistry but read de Beauvoir and Sartre. It was 1968; revolution was in the air. Tenured for life as an academic in my mid-twenties, I left to travel the overland trail through Asia five years later. My convoluted professional path, between academia, community, and government work, led through changing disciplinary fields, from health science through education and finally into philosophy and

arts. My research focus was similarly transformed, from quantitative to qualitative, ending in phenomenological and narrative inquiry. My professional life is ending where it began, back in academia.

With a range of experiences over a forty year career, I'm acutely aware of the perils of performativity in academic, organisational, and business contexts, and the drain such a focus can place on people's ability to bring wholehearted commitment to their work. Over time, professional 'burnout' and illness may result (Dollard, Winefield, & Winefield). Parker Palmer, an educator and researcher, describes the value of teaching from the heart; having the courage to integrate who you are with what you do. He argues that not only is your teaching better, but that by sustaining yourself and the community around you, your work becomes sustainable over time. Palmer's integrative approach speaks to me, but life constraints have meant that it's only as I move beyond full-time work that I'm developing coherence between different aspects of my life.

I describe my career as horizontal rather than vertical, more bouldering between different walls than climbing the ladder of success against one chosen wall. There were more chances of stumbling, but less distance to fall; fewer dizzying heights reached, but a rich and diverse landscape explored. In turning sixty, I'm mindful of changes ahead and ambivalent about negotiating some of those. I am moving into semi-retirement (an unsatisfactory word) to savour life and relationships and have time to create and write in areas I'm passionate about. In doing so, I'm aware of a process of integration as I make sense of past experiences. I'm weaving the threads of my personal, professional, and philosophical lives together to construct some coherent story of my life. In negotiating my past, I'm exploring a direction for my future, composing a story with a future worth living.

#### ACT TWO: PERFORMING IDENTITY

In reflecting on my changing identity, not only as a professional but also as an older woman, I draw on phenomenological insights from Ricoeur and Sartre. The ever-changing construction of our identity is shaped by the choices we make and embodied through the self-narration of our lives. Ricoeur's notion of 'narrative identity' holds in tension a postmodern conception of self as amorphous, nebulous, and in constant flux, and a realist notion of self as having a fixed core identity. From this perspective, the self is relational and interdependent, in that it is socially constituted through our interactions with others and with the culture of our society. It is because of our embodied nature and our memories over time, that we maintain core continuity within our changing identity, so that our 'sense of self' is fluid yet coherent. This coherence, an awareness that 'this is me', is glimpsed, and continually reshaped, through stories we tell ourselves and share with each other every day.

Ricoeur (1913-2005), a French philosopher, became one of most revered philosophers of the twentieth century. He was a war orphan from World War I and a prisoner of war for five years in World War II. Ricoeur wove some of the most important themes of philosophy into a coherent synthesis, clustered around questions about the meaning of life; namely,

who am I and how should I best live? He combined phenomenological description with hermeneutic interpretation, influenced by German philosophers, Heidegger and Gadamer, in the post war period. Ricoeur made a substantial contribution to our understanding of self, through narrative, metaphor, and language, as well as to the fields of social justice and moral philosophy.

Ricoeur holds a special place for me amongst phenomenologists whose work has influenced mine. He wrote his three volume magnum opus, *Time and Narrative*, when he was aged in his seventies and entering semi-retirement from fifteen years at the University of Chicago. He left French academia after the 1968 student riots, where he was derided as “an old clown”. Sartre, who was eight years older, became a leading light in these protests, claiming that now, “imagination was in power” (Bourges, Sartre, & Cohn-Bendit). As I entered university in Australia as an undergraduate in 1968, and marched at protest meetings, I was aware of Sartre and influenced by his existentialist writings on authenticity. I’d never heard of Ricoeur. In the 1970s and 1980s, in contrast to his French peers such as Foucault and Derrida, Ricoeur developed a way of dealing with postmodern fragmentation and disillusionment whilst avoiding modernist objectivism. His narrative theory provides a framework for understanding how we make meaning as human beings. Ricoeur returned to France as a respected intellectual and continued writing and reframing his philosophy until he died there, aged in his nineties. His life as well as his philosophy offers a model of continuing evolution and integration of identity with ageing.

In offering narrative as a framework for meaning, Ricoeur argues that narrative rather than philosophical inquiry provides strategies and structures for understanding how we construct a changing yet coherent sense of self. He argues that self knowledge is always an interpretation and that such interpretation draws on literary and historical narratives, myth, fact, and fiction in our search for internal coherence. Ricoeur (73) notes that the “epistemological status of autobiography” confirms this conception. The field of autobiographical and self-narrated studies draw heavily on narrative identity, although not always ascribed to Ricoeur. Eakin, for example, describes how we live autobiographically through the stories we share in life. The stories we hear from others and read in books contribute to the storying of our own lives (Harnett). “This making, this mapping of our lives in time, I like to think, helps us keep track of who we are” (Eakin 170). Through narrative, our evolving story, our identity, can be constructed, enacted, and performed.

#### INTERLUDE: AUTHENTICITY

Authenticity is a notion that has fascinated me since my teens and that I’ve explored later in my career as a phenomenologist. The consideration of authenticity in how lives are lived is most closely examined in the field of existential phenomenological philosophy (Carmen). Existentialism can be distinguished from other philosophy by its “passionate concern with questions that arise from life ... and the firm belief that to be serious, a philosophy has to be lived” (Kaufmann 5).

The traditional notion of authenticity revolves around self interest, in the sense of 'being true to yourself' or aligning values with actions. There is value in this notion. In contemporary consumer culture, authenticity has become devalued to the glib 'doing your own thing'. An existential notion of authenticity is broader and stems from the core understanding that, as humans, we are irrevocably intertwined with others in the world. Phenomenologist Martin Heidegger described this essential feature of our 'being' human as 'being-in-the-world'.

Existentially, authenticity is about accepting responsibility for our lives. Our ultimate dilemma as human beings is that life is finite—we all die one day. We are thrown into existence; born into situations over which we have no choice. As human beings, however, we have freedom of choice—not in determining our circumstances and biological blueprints—but in making decisions about how we respond and act within our world. Indeed Sartre maintains, as human beings, we are 'condemned to freedom'. Authenticity means recognising that the shaping of our lives, through our choices, words, and actions, is ultimately our own responsibility. Who we become is determined by how we live our daily lives.

From an existentialist perspective being authentic requires an awareness of our social context. Being authentic involves facing up to situations, by weighing up possibilities within an understanding of our social responsibilities. Considering situations with the bigger picture in mind allows people to choose ways of reacting that are aligned with an understanding of what that person and their culture consider of value. Furthermore, existential authenticity involves not only standing back to consider situations but also standing up for what matters. Taking a stand means following through insights with resolute action, focusing on what is "truly worth pursuing" (Guignon 130).

I've written about authenticity as an academic, but living an authentic life is not about spouting abstract words. Authenticity involves consideration of what matters in life, but more particularly, what each of us can do to act in the world in a way that honours our values, skills, and passions, and contributes something worthwhile. It's something many of us seek, but has a particular urgency for those of us who are older and feel our mortality.

### ACT THREE: PERFORMING AGEING

There are unspoken paradigms that underlie the perception of ageing in contemporary society. The key metaphor has been of decline and deficit, hence the alarm about dealing with a boom in the ageing population. Yet research from the past decade into healthy ageing confounds such assumptions. In Western society, significant proportions of older people are living in good health for decades beyond sixty. They may be dealing with a range of chronic health problems, but wellbeing is related to a number of factors beyond physical health, such as attitude, engagement, and relationships (Marinelli & Plummer). Researchers are arguing that we rethink the deficit assumptions and move from a focus on pathology to one of possibilities in ageing—for the benefit of both the ageing person and their ability to contribute to society. In response to the 'problem' of ageing, governments focus on delaying retirement. But does this mean that people keep doing what they've always done at work? Do

you work till you drop—or maybe spend the kids' inheritance on a pleasure purge instead? Are there other possibilities that subvert the assumed work/leisure dichotomy?

'Creating the New Old' is the name of the European flagship celebration for 2012, the EU Year of Active Aging. Held in Dublin, it brought together researchers and practitioners from arts, health, cultural studies, social policy, neuroscience, environmental science, and education to re-imagine creative possibilities for an ageing population. In the USA, 'Encore' is an organisation with the slogan of "Passion, Purpose and a Paycheck" (Freedman). This idea, that older people have much to contribute from their years of experience as their own responsibilities lessen, has grown like wildfire. Philanthropists contribute to 'Encore' to fund fellowships, awards, and start up grants for older people who have the imagination and skills to create change in their lives, in ways that contribute to solving problems in the world.

Research has demonstrated that creative opportunities for active engagement with people and meaningful activities can enhance life after sixty. Gene Cohen, a psychiatric gerontologist, has led a decade long study at the National Centre for Creative Ageing in the USA. Researchers in that centre found that engagement in creative arts programs led to significant improvements in objective measures of health and subjective measures of wellbeing. New neural connections, stronger muscle fibres, and the development of new skills can continue into the nineties. In fact, the brain's ability to synthesise complex information—perhaps develop wisdom—is enhanced with age (Cozolino).

These researchers, and others, argue that ageing offers its own developmental possibilities for creative personal growth. Mary and Ken Gergen's research into what they call 'positive ageing' stresses the socially constructed nature of ageing and implicit paradigms by which people judge their lives. A process of life review may reveal these assumptions. Either an individual guided-reflection or a structured group-process, life review has been demonstrated as beneficial for people undergoing significant transitions in life, such as retirement, being widowed, or facing serious illness (Freeman). William Randall draws on 'Positive Ageing and Life Review' research to describe how ageing lives can be re-storied in creative, imaginative ways that hold the future open. Although death is accepted as inevitable, he describes a 'poetic' version of a continuing life story as one that is still being performed. Randall argues that a "good strong story" is needed as much, or more, than a "good strong body" to deal with the challenges of later life (174). Such a story requires a multidimensional narrative with depth and subtlety. He alludes to the importance of spirituality, as do most of these researchers, not with reference to religion per se, but to finding meaning in one's life story (Marston).

One particular challenge of ageing that confronts our identity is coming to terms with a changing body. Women, in particular, cannot sidestep these changes because of the definitive nature of menopause. A permanent cessation of the bodily function that marks us as women refuses to be ignored. Sexuality and body image need to be renegotiated. Elizabeth Grosz (3) stresses that the "the body has remained a conceptual blind spot in both mainstream Western philosophical thought and contemporary feminist theory." Women are either

objectified as sexual or disembodied—especially as they grow older. Older women tend to become invisible.

There is a disjuncture between feminist studies and research into women's health, with the former focusing on ways in which women's bodies are objectified or ignored, and the latter on medicalising women's bodies (Kuhlmann & Babitsch). Few researchers consider the realities of the lived body on women's identity and wellbeing, particularly in ageing, with the exceptions of feminist phenomenological researchers such as Grosz. Throughout professional working lives, bodies are ignored (Scott). Women go to extraordinary lengths to perform their work whilst minimising the messy impact of menstruation, pregnancy, breastfeeding, and menopause. It's always business (busyness) as usual. In the past decade, this focus on disregarding the body and maintaining performance has led to the problem, in both sexes, of 'presenteeism': going to work while sick. Presenteeism is emerging to be as much of a problem as absenteeism (Schultz & Edington).

I've thought about the issues raised in this essay through the last years of my working life. After years of working with others, I was acutely aware of the stresses many people were under, especially working mothers. Immersed in work and family, some almost drowned. Over the past decade, I consciously tried to embrace a more sustainable way of working that nourished my wellbeing while also producing outcomes. Becoming a mindfulness practitioner was useful for me in dealing with a busy academic workplace and I began a mindfulness group at the university. But as my body aged and chronic health conditions kicked in, I found working full-time and being well were incompatible. European siestas were looking increasingly enticing. With the sense of change that comes with menopause, there was a profound awareness that there is less time left than has been lived so far.

What to do? Do I cross the threshold to retirement or descend into the half world of semi-retirement? Entering this scenario of ageing performance are the unexamined whisperings of the heart, unexplored passions, and the sense of—is it too late? In busy professional lives, where and when can these haunting dreams come to life? Following the example of my teenage children, I took a 'Gap Year' as a gift to myself when I turned sixty. I calmed the nagging inner voice that named this act as self-indulgence by reminding myself that I had lived in a responsible and caring manner for sixty years and been an extremely conscientious professional for forty years. As my alter ego, Anni Webster, rather than Dr Ann Webster-Wright, I began a blog called "AuthenticWebs". The blog gave me the opportunity to write about philosophical issues in everyday life, beyond the academic stage. It provided a space and opportunity to explore the journey of ageing for myself, reevaluate assumptions, and hear about experiences of others. I was looking to develop a more mindful, authentic way of working and living beyond sixty that integrated my professional, philosophical, and personal passions, experiences, and skills.

#### ACT FOUR: PERFORMING DANCE

In this past gap year, I maintained some academic connections, while focusing on exploring

new pathways. I undertook my own life review as part of a research project. I took time to be well and savour life and friendships. I explored past dreams and hopes. Jung describes listening for the summons of the soul, the small inner voice of our psyche, that is often drowned out in the torrential busyness of a committed professional life (Hollis 9). Many women of my age—the baby boomers at the vanguard of change in women’s lives—lost a sense of themselves in a focus on work and family.

Soon after turning sixty, I heard about dance classes specifically choreographed for mature-aged women. You didn’t have to be experienced—just enthusiastic. My heart stopped whispering and began to shout. Dreams of dancing filled my childhood as pictures of ballerinas cluttered my walls. In a large family there was no time for indulgences such as lessons. But when a school friend and her grandmother took me to see Margot Fonteyn and Rudolph Nureyev dance *Giselle* in 1964, I was entranced. Surprising myself at my insistence, I finally convinced my mother to send me to lessons. Of course, beginning lessons at twelve was too late. I realise now that even had I begun earlier, my knock-kneed stumpy legs may have prevented my emergence as a ballerina. After a year’s lessons and one glorious outing in a concert, dressed in a blue tutu with peacock feathers, teetering in the back row of the Valse from *Coppelia*, my career ended.

I kept dancing though. In the late 1960s and 1970s, I was a party queen – always first to start when the music got going and last to drop. Later on, while raising a family and building a career, I indulged in the vicarious pleasure of watching my daughter’s delight with dance. I still danced whenever music was played. A jukebox was the centrepiece of my sixtieth birthday party. But my main experience of dance was through watching others, until six months ago when I joined the dance group. Now, even though I’m back at work, every week I feel the joy of being totally immersed in my body and the music, my worries and concerns drifting away. These few hours suspend me in an eternity that stretches my body, sharpens my mind, and soothes my soul.

We dance together, women of all shapes and sizes, aged from fifties through to seventies, with a range of backgrounds. Some have danced before, but many haven’t. It’s hard work. Our hearts pound, we drip sweat, our muscles sometimes ache. There are no tutus—it’s contemporary dance—but a peacock feather may creep into a performance eventually. Music ranges from smooth jazz to edgy modern sounds, through orchestral surges to rock riffs. We’re even channelling Tina Turner’s hot version of “Proud Mary”. Tina is still dancing at 73. My current favourite is Madeline Peyroux singing Leonard Cohen’s song, “Dance me to the end of love”. The words ‘dance me through the panic till I’m gathered safely in’ evoke, for me, some aspects of ageing.

We’ve heard about the research evidence that dance, involving creativity, memory, and movement, supports healthy ageing. But dancing is more than that. Our dance teachers encourage us to explore our imaginations as well as our abilities. They choreograph in a way that not only respects an older body, but allows us to express, through dance, the experience

of life we all bring to the classes. Joy from such weekend pleasure seeps into our weeks.

Curiosity is essential for engaging in creative ventures, such as dancing. Researcher, Trish Carroll, highlights the value of curiosity, a willingness to reframe assumptions and frameworks, for adults exploring the uncharted territory of ageing. From a different field, Liz Lerman, a choreographer of community dance projects, describes how asking questions is 'a way of life' that is integral to both the creative arts and sciences. It certainly been integral to my professional and academic life, and may provide a bridge, through creative explorations, to my older age.

In our dance, we are working towards a performance project framed around 'Artifice'. Wendy has encouraged us to explore identities and possibilities and to play with camouflage and illusion. In engaging with artifice, through collage, symbol, song, music, costume, and dance, we can explore hidden aspects of our selves. Our lives—who we are, what we may become—are made more visible. The process is a glorious rich palimpsest that touches on authenticity in a literal, embodied way.

But there are risks. Rollo May, an existential psychologist, writes about courage and creativity. He describes how creativity is an essential part of the negotiation of identity. Yet creativity involves conflict. Creative explorations may entail some disintegration of identity as well as offer possibilities for reintegration. As an existentialist, May relates creative courage to authenticity. The acts of creation we choose to commit to may involve conflict – especially when they challenge prevailing paradigms and our own assumptions. May (21) maintains that creative commitment is healthiest when it accepts doubt and uncertainty as part of the process.

It's a paradox that when I'm dancing I am unaware of how my ageing body looks. My body, as a source of pleasure, merges into the music. This immersion is intensified by being in a group. The energy in the room becomes charged. Plus, I can't remember having so much fun since I was a child, and perhaps not even then. Dancing has taken the philosophical idea of an embodied storied self to a new visible level. As I've mentioned, I've been involved in mindfulness and secular Buddhist philosophy. Although I've found the impact of this practice on my life and wellbeing to be profound, I was always uncomfortable that passion did not sit well alongside Buddhist calm and contentment. In my gap year, an ageing female Buddhist teacher, who was an existential psychologist and feminist, introduced me to the connections between feminist thought and the Vajrayana Buddhist tradition (Klein). There I found, amongst other revelations, the Dakinis, sky dancers, who embody the powerful essence of female wisdom and energy. It's an image that comes to mind as we dance.

As well as integrating my mind and body, personal, and professional lives, I'm rethinking my academic research possibilities. Creative ventures can inform a way of doing research—of inquiring into human experience—that opens rather than delimits possible outcomes (Gauntlett). Identities can be fruitfully explored through creative projects (Roy & Eales).

The dance group may be involved in research into healthy ageing in the near future. A year ago, I would not have dreamt of such possibilities. Never, in my furthest fantasies would I have imagined dancing in a public performance. Currently I am exploring and integrating childhood passions, bodily health, phenomenological research, and an unknown creative potential. I have no idea where this performance is heading, but I'm enjoying the show.

#### FINALE: LIFEWORK

Over this past year, a hazy focus has cohered around the idea of integrating living and working in a way that draws threads of personal and professional life, philosophical beliefs, and earthly passions, into a whole-hearted, authentic way of being. I've got as far as a working description of what I'm seeking. Instead of retirement from Working Life, we could find a way to transition to what I'm calling LifeWork. I'm thinking of *LifeWork as any engaged occupation that unites the threads of meaning in a person's life, allows them to be all that they are, nurtures their spirit and supports their wellbeing, connects them with others in a meaningful way, and allows them to draw on a lifetime of skills and experiences to continue to contribute to the world.*

Increasingly we hear stories about women, and men, in their sixties and beyond, who live this way; whether they are working or volunteering, creating or cooking, teaching or writing, mentoring young people or minding grandchildren. Each has crafted an individual way of thriving as he or she ages. In such a way, we can contribute with passion, from a sense of authenticity, rather than from a need to please, placate or prove ourselves.

I'm not sure what the future holds. No one is. I'm not sure if this latest performance is an indulgent escape from thoughts of mortality, or will evolve into a creative, rich exploration. I do know I feel better than I have in decades, despite multiple health problems. I'm back in academia part time, but I'm focusing on creative writing, dancing with friends, exploring ways of connecting like minded people, and my family are delighted.

#### ENCORE

The afternoon is a rich part of the day. As shadows lengthen, the slanting rays of the sun infuse the treetops with a warm glow. It's a time, perhaps, to turn the lights up so the beauty in life can be seen. Near the end of life, plants can explode in a burst of colour, light, and growth before they move to a final stillness and become one with the body of the earth. A revered Australian poet, Rosemary Dobson, died recently in July 2012. I leave the final words of this story to her, from the last stanza of her poem "Canberra Morning" in the book, *Over the Frontier*.

Life gets better  
as I grow older  
not giving a damn  
and looking slantwise  
at everyone's morning.



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