



Blessed are the uncertain, for they will experience excess



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ABSTRACT

In this paper I look at the possibility that uncertainty may not merely be a stage in the research process, but an outcome in itself. Exploring how university education and scholarship collided with my own personal experiences and identity I discuss how a combination of poststructural theory and my encounters with peace, conflict and religion enabled me to value uncertainty, and I make the case that uncertainty can open up the future to the gift of chance. By intertwining discussions of both lived experience and academic work, the organisation of the paper reflects how the two became inextricably linked, continuously folding into each other, so that my sense of self influenced my research, and conversely, my research influenced my sense of self. The outcome is a discussion of how I incorporated uncertainty into my research and personal life, which I explore using the example of religion, and how I lost and gained my faith, rejecting my previous Christianity while reconstructing a kind of faith found in uncertainty, a sense of place and ethical space to come.

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1. Prologue

When I saw the call for this Special Issue: “*Learning in the ruins*” for a paper which asks what happens to our knowing when we enter academic spaces, I was at first excited, and then daunted at the prospect of submitting something. The “engagement with the emotional aspects of learning in the ruins” described in the brief, would require a very personal story. I knew it would be difficult and exposing to put together something so personal, and instinctively felt this should be a narrative piece, something I was also nervous of. And yet I persevered, partly because this paper is the paper I wish had existed when I started this journey (not in exact content, but in essence) and partly because I feel there should be more room for reflection like this in the academy. What follows is an auto-ethnographic, narrative account of how learning impacts identity. It speaks to issues of knowing and unknowing, uncertainty and flux, and predominantly religion, however it does not claim an authority on these themes (I have no expertise in theology), it is simply my story. My modest aim is to offer one example (of many) of how engaging with theory and scholarship impacted my personal life and identity, and the emotions this evoked. True to a narrative approach, I attempt to ‘show, not tell’. However, while the personal story is prevalent in what follows, because the subject of the story is the complex and subtle emotional impact of scholarship, one cannot escape addressing the theoretical underpinnings of the journey directly. Through trying to engage with “the

emotional aspects of learning in the ruins and the theoretical frames invoked” (brief) this paper attempts to walk a fine line between personal narrative and theory.

2. Introduction

When I asked a friend how she thought I had changed over the course of my PhD she replied that I don’t know as much now, I used to know more before – she laughed and quickly added that this was surely just an impression, that a research trip and PhD later I probably knew more now.

I’m not sure I do.

The crisis of unknowing is nothing new to the fledgling academic. Uncertainty is something tolerated, and sometimes even valued, as part of the generative process. However, while we may stay with uncertainty for a while, traditionally we are encouraged to move on at some point, to have answers (complete with argument and counter-argument, exposition, discussion and ‘evidence’). I currently find myself in the field of education, where an evidence-based policy agenda is prevalent in much research and informs a methodological will of relevancy and political utility. In this context the uncertainty experienced can be seen as merely a stage in the research process, a means rather than an end. This paper looks at the possibility that uncertainty may not be merely a stage in a process, but an outcome in itself.

Getting to the point where I was able to embrace the, at first seemingly illogical, proclamation that the uncertain are blessed was not easy. I do not want to give a false impression, at times uncertainty was debilitating. Even now, while I have learnt to hold

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uncertainty for the most part, on occasion I find myself wanting to know, to decide, to have some certainty. However, while I was, in the words of this special issue's title 'Losing it' – in my case losing certainty – I did have some help on the way. I was helped in understanding my experiences and given a language for describing, and theory for framing, them by a number of scholars whose influence can be seen in my work and in what follows here. For this I have to thank the philosophy of the poststructuralists, and in particular Anker (2009), Caputo (2006), Derrida (2006), Rollins (2006) and Lather (2007).

3. Knowing less – a potted history

My journey with uncertainty is not neat, it works backwards and forwards, and intertwines my personal experiences with my academic experiences. As multiple spaces, both physical and intellectual, converge and fold into each other, my research is influenced by my sense of self, and conversely, my identity/self is tainted by my research. My inability to compartmentalise my research sees theory and philosophy permeate my own life and choices, producing both losses and gains.

Uncertainty has been a flirtation throughout my life but I always kept it at arm's length – asking questions, but too fearful to allow myself to ask too much. I moved beyond flirtation to a more sustained relationship with uncertainty when I moved to Mindanao, the Philippines, in 2001, where I lived and taught in a Christian school for two years. Mindanao became the context of my PhD research, but this experience predated and became the catalyst for my post-graduate studies. By encountering another culture in a depth impossible to experience as a tourist, I gained new experiential knowledge that enabled me to see how much I am product of my own cultural heritage. Presented with the complexities of cross-cultural living, in all its excitement and frustrations, my ethnocentricity and linked concepts of who I am and the basis of beliefs I held as true, began to decrease with each new encounter and perspective I experienced.

This experience started to erode the firm footing of any certainty in my life. Since then I have met many other people who have had a similar reaction to cross-cultural living. For some, like me, this sparked a continuing pursuit of questioning, unravelling and trying to stitch back together, but for many it seemed that while they had a similar initial experience, it was not significant or prolonged enough to leave any lasting impression. I think this may have been the case for me had I not nurtured these beginnings by starting post-graduate study.

4. Knowing less – the longer version

What follows is an exploration into uncertainty, a kind of mapping of my own meandering relationship with uncertainty.

I will punctuate this version with extracts from a blog that I wrote between May 2006 and March 2007, a decisive period in my relationship with uncertainty. They are edited and the date they were written does not always relate to the period they reflect upon. At first I was reluctant to include these entries. My blog was written as a type of vent at a time in my life when I was very angry, it was not meant for academic audiences. Having moved on from that place it is not a time I am proud of. However anger was, in my experience, a part of my journey into uncertainty, and therefore relevant to the theme of this special issue.

4.1. Certainty unravelling in Mindanao

I cannot be sure when the processes of unravelling began, but for the purpose of starting this story somewhere, living in

Mindanao seems as good a starting point as any, although I could construct an alternative narrative which starts much earlier. I first went to Mindanao because I was a committed Christian. The beginnings of an erosion of my certainty found in cross cultural-living seemed to be inflated further by my situation, where as a teacher in a Christian school I was surrounded by co-workers and missionaries who seemed to possess a certainty in everything they believed in and did. While they saw this certainty as a sign of faith my perception was that it actually diminished their experience of God. A Mennonite friend of mine became the subject of much murmuring and speculation when she asked a Friar friend of hers to conduct a house blessing at her new address. The unfamiliar practices (for Evangelical Protestant missionaries) of sprinkling holy water and reciting liturgical prayers led to some of those present questioning the authenticity of my friend's Christianity. I felt shocked at the implied categorisation of recognised and standard Catholic practices as somehow unchristian, and, as well as being generally frustrated at what seemed to me quite narrow attitudes, I was saddened that their certainty in their own interpretation and experiences of Religion had resulted in an inability to embrace the multiple and diverse aspects of the manifestation of God, even from within the same religion as theirs (Christianity). Many conflated their own culture with that which was Biblical, and used this to further legitimise and sure-up their certainty in their actions and beliefs.

When I first arrived in Mindanao I was surprised to discover that drinking alcohol was frowned upon by Protestant Christians (informed by a North American Evangelical Protestantism), and, apparently, I shocked a few people when they learnt that I enjoyed beer. I rather begrudgingly incorporated this knowledge into my life and made sure that I was discrete about where I drank in order not to offend others (which was a shame because Filipino San Miguel is a rather nice beer). I was amused, then, to find myself shocked when I found Western Christian missionaries drinking Nescafe! I laughed as I realised the sense of shock and outrage I had over them drinking Nescafe was the same as their response to me drinking beer. It all fell together for me, it was simply a difference in culture: In the U.S. Conservative Christians frown on drinking alcohol and promote a coffee culture alternative, whereas in the UK even conservative Christians tend to drink alcohol, but in my Christian circle coffee had to be Fair Trade. However, while my interpretation of coffee etiquette became cultural, their interpretation of drinking alcohol remained 'Biblical'.

Blog Extract 31st Jan 2007

The emphasis on personal salvation, in my opinion, is a Western addition, in keeping with our modern individualistic society. Within Asian culture the collective action is much more important than the individual. When I was working in the Philippines it always used to amuse me when the Southern Baptist missionaries got frustrated at this cultural difference. They would insist that each individual person experience an individual conversion, when the reality was that if the village elders converted, then the village would convert enmass. The emphasis on the collective can be seen in the bible verse 'As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord' (Joshua 24:15), where the head of a family takes the decision for the whole collective. Also, throughout the bible, the focus of salvation is us, the people, the nation, and the marginalized...

I witnessed an American Missionary instruct a Filipino that his cultural approach to resolving a dispute (using a third party mediator) was unbiblical, and instead he should have it out face-to-face. To legitimise his claim the missionary quoted "do not let the sun go down on your anger" (Ephesians 4 v 26). I was unsure about

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