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The gift of pain with transformative possibilities

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Abstract

This personal narrative explores the experiences of pain metaphorically as a gift. The intention of this article is to offer alternative ways to reflect on pain, life and taking risks to move from health literacy toward health agency with help. I describe my approach to decision making using the hermeneutic wager which provides a means to imagine possibilities while mindfully assessing risk. Learning to manage pain and learning to live well with pain is a gift that we are not always aware is within our grasp.

Keywords

Pain, support, reflection, healing, risk, self-empathy, hermeneutics

Introduction

The purpose of this reflection was to write about my personal experiences of living with chronic pain that were motivated by my academic research. I am a philosophical hermeneutic researcher, and transformational theoretical adult educator who teaches on the topic of the healing potential of empathy. My teaching is also informed by the perspective of a person who also lives with severe chronic pain. It was because of this unique set of experiences and background that I have endeavored to share my approach to learning to live well again with chronic pain. The practical and transformative outcome was that although I still live with pain I was able to re-engage in the world through a deep reflection, self-empathy along with a process to assess risk-taking through the hermeneutic wager^{1,2}. The metaphor of the unopened gift of pain serves to help unwrap, so-to-speak, the unfolding of these reflections into practice; a transformation of self, which provoked an awakening of imagination, once again.

Chronic Pain a Gift?

At first thought one might think, “how could living with chronic pain possibly be considered a gift?” This kind of gift needs to be reflected upon in a uniquely different way. This gift is different than the ones we might expect to receive at social occasions, when gifts are exchanged as an expectation of our traditions, or ones we received as children when we eagerly tore off the ribbons, bows and decorative wrapping paper to reveal its contents. The gift of pain when revealed, fulfills the anticipation of what might have been and what becomes my possible future. The unopened gift of pain simultaneously contains hope, gratitude, generosity or healing as well as disappointment, sadness or indifference depending on how we choose to perceive and interpret it. As with all gifts, we graciously

acknowledge it with thanks and humility, remembering that it is the unopened gift that suspends us within the liminal space of unrevealed potential. As frightening as it may seem, only by carefully unwrapping this gift can we uncover possibility, layer after layer, allowing ourselves to confront our pain, losses, isolation and sense of purpose before we can learn to live well again^{3,4}.

To open the gift of chronic pain, as a metaphor for healing, means to accept that the curing of our pain may not ever happen. This gift is about healing our suffering by looking beyond pain as something that has unceremoniously dissolved our worlds. This gift represents the possibility of the impossible: hope! When there is no cure for the pain, then we need to shift our attention to confronting the liminal *space*, which is the time in-between the 'what was' and the 'what is next.' It is a place of possibility, waiting, and not knowing. The hermeneutic wager is such a transformative process to help heal our souls, find our place again in the world, lift ourselves out of isolation and find a new (and different) narrative that enables us to re-story ourselves. This is not an easy task as I have learned first-hand. The unwrapping of this gift can be quite elusive, emotionally painful and devastating. This self-reflective gift is not a physical gift that one holds, shakes and admires. It is found deep within ourselves and our identity and uncovered through our thinking, learning and personal agency. Through this process, the gift unfolds to reveal itself even though pain has placed us into the chaos of our lives through learning to manage our pain with the discouraging a reality of live with physical pain, where we do the very best we can day-in and day-out, month after month, year after year^{3,4}.

Beyond survival

This essay was written without a focus on my obvious physical pain. Rather my goal is to share with other chronic pain sufferers and those who treat them, my reflections and perspectives on learning how to live well beyond the healthcare experience.³ There is transformation that occurs as patients become people again and are awakened by the multitude of challenges that lay ahead of them. The intention of this article is to offer a means to explore the afterlife of healthcare reflectively, to take what we already know about pain (health literacy), build on what we need to learn and apply it in a way that goes beyond merely managing our pain. All of this in order to learn how to thrive in our lives (personal agency) in a transformative way while acknowledging and appreciating that each person begins their acute pain to chronic pain journey in their own unique manner and for a multitude of reasons. However, the commonalities of most all chronic health conditions are loss, isolation, hopelessness, depression and other issues that result in profound personal suffering. I offer my experiences of learning to live well with chronic pain as reflected through the metaphorical gift, one that became tangible only as I learned to reflect deeply about my situation, listen to others, take thoughtful risks and work toward transformation. I offer the idea of intersectorial possibilities of adult learning theory and philosophical hermeneutics as a means to learn to live well with chronic pain.

Transformational learning: wisdom for change:

Mezirow (2003) envisioned the purpose of advancing transformative learning as a means to assist learners in transitioning from a habituated awareness of their experiencing (i.e., a life without pain) to an awareness of the circumstances for their experiencing as an ontological relationship (the lived experience of pain).

Transformational learning theory makes explicit our “perceiving, thinking, judging, feeling, and acting through critical reflection”, which with the help of guided reflections such as the hermeneutic wager create an awareness of our habituated ways of thinking. This opens up the possibility of challenging the reasons why we experience chronic pain as we do, and why we then become enabled to apply these reflections into practice based upon these insights^{5,6}.

Why Reflection?

“Reflection is the process of knowing how we know. It is an act of turning back upon ourselves. It is the only chance we have to discover our blindness and to recognize that the certainties and knowledge of others are, respectively, as overwhelming and tenuous as our own” [p.24].⁷

Personal reflection became essential to confronting the unwrapping of my gift of chronic pain. What I mean by this is that after I realized that healthcare was unable to help me any further with my pain, there simply was nothing else that could be done. I was alone and isolated. But isolation means something other than solitude. Whereas with solitude I have choice, “I went for a long walk away from everyone to clear my head, but I will return to meet-up with people later”, Isolation is lived with a degree of suffering, “I hardly hear from my friends from work anymore since I had to leave because of my pain, I do not blame them, I am rather sad these days”. So, when everything in our lives changes due to pain, when nothing is as it used to be, (stuck in the liminal space) I feel exhausted, shattered, isolated and I do not know what to do anymore and I hide away from the world. Isolation creates an additional layer of pain leading to depression, despondency, feelings of loss, purpose and value⁴. If a gift was ever needed, it is right at that moment. What I learned is that I simply cannot expect it to be delivered to me, rather I need to find this gift of pain myself with the help of others.

The concept of self-empathy emerges from the writing from Helen Riess¹, who in her paper titled, The Science of Empathy, describes the idea of self-empathy for healthcare providers to prevent burnout or loss of their empathy for their patients. However, I believe this concept is transferable to people living with chronic pain. Riess writes, “Self- and other-empathy leads to replenishment and renewal of a vital human capacity” [p.76]. The person living with chronic pain needs to be empathic to themselves in order to even begin to imagine what living well with chronic pain might look or feel like. This offers a twist for personal reflection with the healing possibility to challenge oneself in a gentle way about one’s condition and perception of barriers.

Sincere Self-reflection

If self-reflection is helpful to find this gift how do I get started? I found that the hermeneutic wager² helped me as it provided five reflections that over time tailor my gift of pain to suit me uniquely. The hermeneutic wager, weighs out the risk of my decision making toward crafting-out my gift of pain. The five reflections are as follows, *imagination, humility, commitment, discernment* and finally, *hospitality*.

My reflections began with *imagination*; it is about thinking, finding and imagining all the possibilities that maybe available for me. During this reflection, I delved deeply into my situation to think about what and who I needed (outside of healthcare) and what I can do that would be of interest to me to help find activities to reduce isolation. Imagining possibilities represents little or no risk because I have not shared this with anyone and before I do, I can feel safe that if I do this it will be with people who would understand a life with pain. During this stage, I imagined

going to a pain support group because I had read that it was helpful for some people. I found the contact information, the location and time. What I do with the information is still up to me as I have not taken concrete steps or made an actual effort to attend a meeting.

The second reflection is *humility*. Humility asked of me whether I can accept taking the risk and with this acceptance be able to confront my pre-understanding, prejudices, and expectations. What if I am disappointed or I fail, rather than finding what I thought I was looking for? Am I ready to share my story and hear others without judgment or criticism? If I feel humiliated can I accept that giving up is not the answer and that it will take time to learn how to be with others living with pain.

Commitment is when we can accept the risk with all of its possibilities and uncertainties. I am open and receptive. During this reflection I move into action, I go to the pain support group. I show up! Commitment served as an approach to help transition my understanding of pain from health literacy to health agency (learning to apply my knowledge about living with chronic pain).

Discernment serves as a reality check for imagination and commitment. During this reflection, I think about what the experience was for me, the meaning of attending the support group and whether I would return. This reflection also means returning to my humility with reflections to confront and process my feelings, negative, positive, indifference and ask myself why.

Reflection can give us distance from ourselves; “the ability to stand back from oneself is a fundamental prerequisite for linguistic orientation in the world, and in this sense, reflection is in fact freedom.”⁵

The final reflection is *hospitality* and it serves to remind me to remain open to all the people I meet and welcome all new experiences good and bad, helpful or not. Therefore, whether I had decided to continue to attend or not I acknowledge that all experiences and people are welcome even if I decide that I am not ready to participate right now, but perhaps will be in the future.

The hermeneutic wager should be thought of as a series of interconnected reflections rather than a linear progression. I found myself cycling and re-cycling back and forth frequently and still do as I imagine new possibilities.

My decision to attend the chronic pain support group came about through my reflections using hermeneutic wager. During the first few meetings I was not sure it was going to be for me, but the witnessing of other people’s humility, hospitality and compassion was just what I needed at that time. Attending a chronic pain support group meeting may seem trivial but with all first steps into

new experiences it can be anxiety provoking. However, overcoming the perceived risk of attending that meeting has led me to many other positive experiences.

Practical applications and concluding reflections

Whereas grieving the losses in my life due to chronic pain was an essential human process, I came to the realization that suffering could be negotiated with myself. My recommendations for people who live with chronic pain is to find their own gift. To explore new possibilities through reflecting, accepting, learning and thriving with the help of others including specific learning theories and, in my case, the hermeneutic wager.⁸ This is my transformative gift to others who live with chronic pain.

Within the literature about how adults learn, Mezirow, offered that adults go through a series of phases as they learn or re-learn how to live with challenging life events. These can be applied to learning how to live well with chronic pain, as transformative possibilities. Transformational Learning Theory was specifically developed to help adult learners work through life altering events with a progression of phases. These phases begin with experiencing a *disorienting dilemma* such as the transition from acute to chronic pain, *self-examination* (critical self-reflection), *critical assessment of assumptions* (why do I think this way), *recognizing that others have gone through a similar process* (seeking out supportive communities), *exploring options* (possibilities to be explored), formulating a *plan of action* (showing-up) and *reintegration* (finding a community of support). It is important to acknowledge that everyone will experience these phases differently due to their unique circumstances, readiness, relationships, physical and emotional health ...etc. However, with a community of supportive others we can reflect and talk toward finding our re-storied life with chronic pain and one lived well with purpose, understanding and transformative possibilities.

This process of thinking, reflecting, and assessing risk was transferred into my pain support group who have recently co-designed a community-based project to reduce social isolation for men living with chronic pain, HOMEBASE.

HOMEBASE, a Movember Foundation funded project, has become a tangible example of the fruits of this self-reflection. The project strives to provide multiple opportunities for men to engage within their communities with peers through tailored activities. Our vision is to offer every man suffering from chronic pain a community of care that extends beyond healthcare and into their communities to prevent social isolation and learn to live well with pain⁹. As individuals participate in HOMEBASE, they connect with others, reflect and re-story their life.

This process replaces self-sympathy with self-empathy, health literacy into health agency with meaning and purpose restored to people living with chronic pain. As I recall my own reflections during this process although my levels of pain did not change, however, all other aspects of my life improved and continue to do so. The transformative possibilities keep unfolding.

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