**CAREER WRITING AND THE TALE OF TWO SISTERS: THE FAMILY PROJECT, HEROIC DRIVE, AND HOW NO SIBLING HAS THE SAME PARENTS**

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Reinekke Lengelle (Gerding) & Elke Haggerty (Gerding)

**Introduction**

What do a grandmaster Jedi and a grandfather have in common? The answer will become clear in this story of two sisters who used the Career Writing method to identify career questions, life themes, and tapped into the wisdom of their childhood heroes.

The conversation about career learning started in earnest when Elke invited Reinekke to join a self-acceptance book study group in 2018 with others interested in nonviolent communication (Rosenberg, 2012). In January 2021, Reinekke invited Elke to a Career Writingworkshop that Reinekke facilitated for Zurich University of Applied Sciences. Their conversation about personal and professional development continued and the study group went on to work with Mark Wolynn’s book on inherited trauma (2017).

In the meantime, the sisters called each other every few weeks to talk about work activities and what they were learning about themselves. Reinekke was just about to launch her book on bereavement (Lengelle, 2021a) in the wake of losing her spouse and Elke was developing her Nonviolent Communication (NVC) consulting business.

Two distinct moments became the impetus for writing this chapter. The first was noticing that during the self-acceptance group calls and the Zurich workshop, Elke and Reinekke told different stories about their same parents and drew different conclusions about themselves as a result of an arguably parallel upbringing. The second moment was when Reinekke was about to embark on the first draft of this chapter and Elke called her to share a recent insight — something that Reinekke had articulated for herself in almost identical terms around the same time, “I think I know where my story and the source of my pain originates: Papa leaving us and Mom’s critical words….”

It is not necessarily clear to people grappling with career questions that “career concerns are part of the family constellation that must be addressed in the counseling setting…” (Savickas, quoted in Vess & Lara, 2016, p. 85). As children of particular parents, in specific cultures, with distinct traumas and resulting life themes, career challenges and choices reflect the tensions in the family and the “family project” that we are all inevitably a part of.

We are not necessarily aware of it, as Mark Savickas notes,

These parental influences are swallowed whole, not processed, not digested, and are inside the person’s mind in a complex way. Within the family drama, there are always some kinds of issues. Subtle or overt there are always differences of opinions, disagreements in the values between the two parents. And so, somehow the individual has to reconcile the issues that are going on in the family that have been unrecognized in them, not mirrored or not paid attention to. (Vess & Lara, 2016, p. 86)

As sisters, raised in the same home, and born within 18 months of one another, they decided to embark on a comparative biographical exploration to digest some familial influences and answer career questions currently alive for them. They sought to explore their life themes and identify the ways in which their self-stories differed based on their unique interpretations of their parents’ actions and words. They were also interested in their distinct but kindred solutions to the pain and capacities within the family project, and enquired into this using the Career Writing method (Lengelle & Meijers, 2015).

**Theory**

Career Writing is a narrative career learning method for developing a career identity (i.e., a story about the self that provides both meaning and direction) that makes use of creative, expressive, and reflective writing. The method and exercises are intended to help a person construct and deconstruct their interpretations of self and make meaning of their lived experienced in order to support their career progress. This narrative method, developed by Lengelle and Meijers (2015), takes inspiration from the field of writing as an arts-based transformative learning activity and career construction theory, in particular the notion that our identities are formed in response to childhood experiences that often show up in present-day boundary experiences.

The conceptualization of “self” in the method is inspired by the Dialogical Self Theory (Hermans & Gieser, 2011) where the self in seen as multi-voiced and in conversation with itself in ways that allow one’s narrative to be shaped in a continuous process of positioning and repositioning, where external voices can also be experienced as part of the self (e.g. the voice of my beloved; the voice of cultural expectations).

In this particular chapter, two of the writing exercises used were directly inspired by the Career Construction Inventory (CCI) as created and used by Mark Savickas; these are based on his principle that we are “always trying to actively master what we passively suffered” (1997, p. 11) and hence, as he famously says, our preoccupations become our occupations. This claim has been confirmed by anecdotal evidence (Lengelle & Meijers, 2018; Lengelle, 2021b) and is similarly captured in the words of career coach and author Barbara Sher, who says, “talent plus pain is drive” (Sher, 2013).

**Methodology**

Data used in the biographical reflections comes from written exercises about the childhood hero and reflections on mother and father. In conversation, the authors did a thematic analysis making use of the term “life themes” (Savickas, 1997) to identify where they were each struggling with a life/career question and to articulate the different solutions they created for themselves.

More specifically, the research used a three-part identity learning career writing exercise that was inspired by the work of Savickas. The initial question that Savickas asks in his Career Construction Interview (CCI), “how can I be useful” (Vess & Lara, 2016, p. 86) was turned into an invitation to write down a salient question imagining each participant would have an hour and a half career counselling session with Mark Savickas. The second part was the invitation to identify and describe the childhood hero and have a short dialogue with the hero about the question. The third part was a mother-father writing exercise Reinekke developed that mirrors Savickas’s idea that one of the ways to identify our preoccupations is to,

“…describe your two parents.” We would listen for, you love them both but they do not agree on everything. Everything does not match perfectly. So we would ask about, ‘‘What are your father’s key values? What are your mother’s key values? What values was there no disagreement?’ (Vess & Lara, 2016, p. 87).

The order of the exercises (i.e., your question, childhood hero, and parents) is deliberate, though the hero writing represents the solution while the parental reflection points to the problem or preoccupation. Reinekke offers the hero exercise first in order to provide inspiration and hope. The mother and father exercise is an opportunity to explore the strengths and obstacles that are part of the inherited narrative so a person can stop “swallowing these narratives whole” and makes use of the principle that “Individuals compose a self and career by reflecting on experience, using the uniquely human capacity to be conscious about consciousness.” (Brown & Lent, 2004, p. 148).

**Background story**

Reinekke and Elke are the third and fourth children of Dutch parents who emigrated to Edmonton, Canada in October 1975 when Reinekke was five years old and Elke was four. They have an older sister and brother; all four siblings were born within five years. The intention was for the family to emigrate together, however their father returned to the Netherlands for what was supposed to be a temporary stay, leaving their mother to raise the children on her own. Their mother later remarried a man who would become a loving stepfather. Reinekke and Elke reconnected with their biological father in their teenage-young adult years.

***The writing exercise in three parts***

**Elke’s story**

Elke completed a Master of International Law[[1]](#footnote-1) and a Master of Business Administration with a focus on organizational behaviour[[2]](#footnote-2). She went on to college teaching before marrying and raising four children. She has developed a consulting business which is focused on collaborative communication.

1. *Career question*

If you had an hour and a half to spend with Mark Savickas for career counselling, what would you say in response to his question, “how can I be useful?”

“My desire is to help people recognize their potential through discovery so that they are confident bringing their unique contributions to the world. I offer training and coaching to help people understand and articulate their feelings and longings so that they can live authentically and have productive relationships based on understanding, trust, and mutuality. My goal to help others discover their potential mirrors the very question that has followed me around, “Am I good enough? Is my contribution enough?”

*2. Childhood hero*

A) Who was your childhood hero?

“My hero is my mother’s father, ‘Opa’ Willem Binnendijk. Opa was a tall, slender man with a big smile. He narrowly escaped execution during the second World War for his involvement in the resistance, instead ending up as a prisoner of war in a camp. Though I sensed his heaviness and longed for him to share it to get relief, Opa kept the conversation playful, telling stories, and playing cards with me. As we visited, he would say I had beautiful dimples and deep understanding. He was the most encouraging and accepting person in my life.”

B) What advice would your childhood hero give you today? Write a dialogue with them asking them for their thoughts. You can use the question you began with (it may have evolved from the initial wording).

If I were to ask, “Opa, as a child, I disliked it when I wasn’t included, wasn’t given a choice, and did not think I mattered. I think I can make a difference by hearing others so that they know *they* matter. What do you think?” He might reply, “I can see you are already listening. You are quiet, but you see things. You are very smart. You are already enough.” “Tell me more Opa.” “Ah,” Opa would reply, “because others can see that you care deeply. Now, yes, there is that dimple. Shall we play another game? I think you will win this time.”

C) Summarize in one sentence, what you have learned about how you might respond to your question?

“To offer my whole self is enough. The goal is to find myself.”

*3. My parents: their core belief about life and about work*

Elke describes her father like this: “My father is the man who was absent, even before he left us. For example, he would ignore a child on his lap to focus inwardly. I sensed, at age five, that he would not be returning to Canada, and he did not. I think he was afraid and chose security: he kept a top job that he did not enjoy. When I was older, he tried to insist on study choices that did not interest me, assuming rather than asking about my interests. He also offered earnest, well-meaning diagnoses like, ‘Did you know you are autistic? This is actually a good thing, you know.’ He gifted me *The Drama of the Gifted Child* by Alice Miller so I could be freed from parental foibles.” From my father, Elke says, “I took away that I wasn’t good enough, that security was most important, and that you need to become aware to break unconscious childhood patterns.”

Elke’s story about their mother is that, “she told us what we did wrong to fix us so we could successfully care for ourselves and be secure. While she did not hear and reflect our feelings as I would have liked, she showed her care by being a fierce provider. She was a pioneer who saw endless creative opportunities, creating her own role within government. To her, getting a good education, making a good impression, and working before play were keys to staying secure; these were important because you could not necessarily count on others.” From her, Elke learned to “be very creative, to see possibilities,” and to “strive to be successful without taking risks.”

*Combined belief of mother and father about life and work*

Elke’s combined life belief is, “break patterns and be successful without taking any risks.”

**Reinekke’s story**

Reinekke is an associate professor of interdisciplinary studies[[3]](#footnote-3) and a senior researcher[[4]](#footnote-4). She completed her PhD in career writing[[5]](#footnote-5) in 2015 with Mark Savickas as one of her PhD supervisors. She is the co-creator of career writing. This past year, she wrote an award-winning book on grieving called “Writing the self in Bereavement: A story of love, spousal loss, and resilience” (2021) after losing her partner, Frans Meijers, who was a career researcher and co-creator of career writing. She is the mother of two daughters.

*1. Career question*

If you had an hour and a half to spend with Mark Savickas for career counselling, what would you say in response to his question, “how can I be useful?”

“Several years ago, doing this exercise, I wrote, “I love my work, but it’s not steady.” Love and steady. These two words as a combination starkly show my life theme. I have been focused on love and whether it is ‘steady’ (reliable, will stick around, won’t leave) for most of my life. Interestingly, during the writing of this book chapter, I became a tenured professor after 25 years of being a sessional instructor, adjunct, and an assistant professor. It was a hard-won journey of persistence and a labour of love – finally my work is steady. When Frans and I met Mark in person in 2011, Mark asked me about my favourite novel and I told him it was “Jane Eyre” – certainly a story about steady (and initially unsteady) love and developing one’s character to endeavour to deserve it. Frans dying after a decade of being partners in work and life, showed me that no matter how steady love may be, we may lose it, and we will be okay. Currently, three years post-widowhood, I am in a new loving relationship and have a permanent full-time job, yet both these things still feel fragile. My question to Mark would be, “how do I relax into the moments of unsteadiness and not worry.”

*2. Childhood hero*

A) Who was your childhood hero?

Yoda was my childhood hero. He is the Jedi Master from George Lucas’s Star Wars Series. In the second movie, *The Empire Strikes* back, the young Jedi Luke learns from Yoda that we project our fears on to others, but that those fears are ultimately our own. We have to be courageous and patient about gaining wisdom and face our shadows; anything less will always result in tragedy and pain we inflict on others and undergo ourselves.

B) What advice would your childhood hero give you today? Write a dialogue with them asking them for their thoughts. You can use the question you began with (it may have evolved from the initial wording).

“How do I relax into the moments of unsteadiness and not worry”?

Yoda: “mmm, yes, mmm, Yes, yes, the shadows will make you unsteady. The illusions seen through, create what is steady. All else in life is unsteady; all outward relying is not steady. To see through this, is to be steady.” And Reinekke also notes that Yoda’s philosophy doesn’t mean he does it all alone; he has steady friends and is part of a strong alliance of rebels.

C) Summarize in one sentence what you have learned about how you might respond to your question?

“The concepts of what is steady and not steady are ultimately illusory. I’ve learned that I can also live with the unsteadiness of loss and that the most pain I experience is through self-created worry.”

*3. My parents*

Reinekke describes her relationship with their father as, “very close. We were friends; I felt he was sensitive to my needs and helped me a lot in life and put me on the course of learning about the self.” What I took from my father was his willingness to be gentle and admit to uncomfortable, “socially unacceptable” truths. He taught me the value of self-awareness. My father’s core belief about life and work: Life is scary and our only way to freedom is evolution of the self.”

About their mother, Reinekke says, “my mother is a strong and stable person and was the steady parent in our lives. She gave us a childhood with lots of adventure and taught us to be self-reliant. She could be harsh with her words in the sense of being critical and pointing out where we fell short of her expectations. I believe we didn’t get the empathy we needed as children. I see all four of us as very sensitive and soft-hearted; our conscientiousness is overdeveloped. What I took from my Mom was the ability to succeed, to present myself in socially acceptable ways, to be creative, and to enjoy life. My mother’s core belief about life and work: There is a creative solution for everything and enjoy life.”

Combined belief: “Life is scary and the way through is the creative evolution of the self.”

Savickas talks about differing values of parents creating particular tensions which an individual must in some way resolve (e.g., mother says work is hard; Dad says work is inspiring). One can observe that each of us takes or resists what our parents inadvertently offer us in unique ways and internalize what we believe they thought about us (e.g., Dad was proud; Dad judged me as inadequate). From each parent we also hold messages about what is acceptable and what is not acceptable; we are simultaneously attempting to make sense of these tensions, while we are trapped within them.

**Results and discussion: emerging themes**

Perhaps the most poignant overlap in our life themes is how we have responded to critical words and the physical separation (Reinekke) and the emotional separation (Elke) from our father. Elke’s question is focused *on being enough* and Reinekke’s question is focused *on being loveable enough*. Elke’s solution is “finding the core self; this core self is enough” and Reinekke’s is “creatively evolving the self, which attracts steady love from within, and with others.” We have both chosen (career) paths focused on personal development and facilitating others in the process of self-development. We note that in our work – as the idea of preoccupations becoming occupations suggests – we are giving to others precisely the things we believe were missing in our own lives.

Elke concludes, “accepting others by hearing them without judgement will help them come to a place of self-acceptance and to see their own beauty.” Reinekke sums her insight by saying, “giving others the opportunity to develop different aspects of themselves and love even the ‘unacceptable’ parts, will offer a sense of freedom, from which to connect deeply to others.” Our career focus is clearly a meaningful response to our family project: to succeed is to be safe and secure and this is achieved by breaking unconscious childhood patterns and experiencing that we are enough and loveable, and therefore belong.

The fact that Reinekke has devoted her career to *writing the self* which is focused identity learning and Elke was interested in mediation early on and is now primarily focused on nonviolent communication is no coincidence. The mastery we both seem to desire here is to respond to the critical words of our childhood and gain empathy for ourselves and others. We were preoccupied with hurtful words that we have turned into the occupation of healing words. Both of us also note a preoccupation with security and stability as a message passed on by both parents and brought under threat by the real experience of being left by our father.

Interestingly, the difference in our perceptions of familial support is most visible in our experience of our father. Though both of us took the message that developing yourself is important, Reinekke experienced feeling supported and Elke experienced being diagnosed. Both of us learned that self-development is the key to freedom and belonging.

Our final observation from our work together is that our dialogue about differences and similarities in our life themes helped us to fill in gaps in our own narrated experience. We were also moved by the other’s pain and felt a deep empathy for the solutions we are each endeavoring to make. We were able to do this work together because of our regard for one another, which included room for each of us to have a unique narrative about our childhoods. We also laughed together about our striving to be good and loveable.

**Conclusion**

The intent of this book chapter was to explore the differences in the stories we tell, with the hopes that career counsellors, researchers, and those involved with career learning, can see what people may learn with and from their siblings about the “family project” and how its themes may be shaping career decisions and identity. Career writing is a way in which to explore such stories as the method facilitates the (internal and external) dialogue about experiences – the essence of authoring the self within career construction.

We maintain that the stories people share about parents in order to engage in career identity development inform current consciousness and show the different ways in which we have internalized family scripts and are trying to undo or revise them. Our exploration suggests that two siblings from the same family may well have the same life themes and those will translate into career choices in unique ways, while no person experiences their parents in identical ways.

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