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Heron's Lesson: A Fusion of Autoethnographic Narrative, Poetry, and Theory Questioning the Fixed Notion of "Self"

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Abstract

Keywords

Autoethnography;
Spirituality;
Narrative; Poetry

This autoethnographic piece is rooted in the belief that “self” is not bound by the physical body. The writing flows from narrative to poetry and then delves into reflexive and theoretical thinking about life. In essence, the narrative highlights the importance I place on Divine guidance in all aspects of my life and illustrates a moment of clarity inspired by the peaceful presence of a heron. The choice to be still and listen from my heart opened space for consciousness to *be*, even in the midst of the counterintuitive demands of my doctoral program. I question if academia’s notion of “productivity” and the obsession with *doing* over *being* is in alignment with my priorities. The lesson I needed to learn was already present in me and intuition arose because I gave myself permission to know it.

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On a rainy Sunday morning, I sit tucked away in the deepest corner of my sofa, sipping slowly on my freshly brewed coffee, savoring the moment and the space in the hum of silence. Vibrations of dawn yet to arise penetrate through and from my infinite core. My internal and external worlds meshed as one. Are they ever really separate? I nestle deeper into the cushion, appreciating the perfectly worn spot upon which I sit, and allow the sensation of wonderment to spread throughout my whole being.

The twinkling city lights reflected on the water catch my eye. The light rain seems to dance freely on the river, creating designs that the conceptual mind could never imagine possible. Then, water joins water, and the river keeps flowing. How can I move through life like water? I breathe into this question and notice the peace present in the space between the inhale and exhale. It is obvious that I cannot *think* my way to an answer. Awareness is the answer. It's the steady presence of peace behind the impermanence of thought, the wisdom in the noise of knowledge, the rhythm of harmony in a so-called "disjointed" world. Are we ever really separate? Could this be the space of ubiquitous consciousness not bound by the limits of the mind? Might this be the mode of being "which is the being of consciousness" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2013, p. 364)? Is this the divine in me that is always present, always being, and always accessible? Could it be that *being* is knowing the divine in me because being *is* the divine.

My spirit soars to the tune of this thought, and I feel in harmony with the flow of life. The rain's song gently reawakens my biological senses and I return my attention to the water. My eyes follow the natural movement of the river still sparkling like watery stars dancing to their own choreography. I allow my gaze to be moved by currents of the water. I trust their path. They lead me to a large branch wedged in the muddy bank of the river, resting in land, water, and air. "My heron!" I exclaim in a sudden state of excitement and gratitude for its presence. Before I lived by the river, I never put those two words together—*my* and *heron*. But, then again, seeing a heron was less common in my previous abodes. My choice of words does not imply that I possess heron or that heron can be owned by anybody or anything. Instead, it's a recognition that heron and I are connected. "My heron!" are sound vibrations carrying the expression of love and gratitude for the message it shares through its Beingness. Heron doesn't question being a heron, so why should I question being me? What others think of me does not determine who I know myself to be "because I am immediately outside of myself and open to the world" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2013, p. 483). How easy it is to get caught up in the games of the mind and fall into the trap of seeing myself through academia's labels rather than as a continuation of being, the infinite expression of the divine. I have much to learn from heron as I do from water.

I reach for my binoculars perched on the window ledge, an easily accessible place to store an item in such high demand for daily use. Heron is magnified and suddenly it's easy to tell that this beautiful bird is resting, not hunting. It slowly raises its left leg into the belly of its feathered body. Then, the outstretched neck sinks deep into its chest as if it were curling into a ball, perfectly balanced on a thin pole. And all the while, the rain keeps dancing.

Still sitting on the sofa, I tuck my legs into my chest, not as gracefully as did heron, and wrap my arms around my knees. My exhale is audible, but slightly heavy. I find my thoughts have already drifted to a non-existent fictitious future. "What am I going to do for my dissertation?" "Am I going to make it through the program?" "What if I don't do well on comps?" "Should I be writing more, presenting more, reading more?" More, more, more! In the consumption of thoughts that don't serve my best and highest good, I glance over at the

river. There's heron, present, still, and centered with the totality of life. As I inhale, I imagine the universal essence of life force energy seeping into every pore of my body and filling the space in and around me with divine light. Worries don't live in this space. I exhale a much lighter breath that seems to be coming from an infinite place of compassion and acceptance that is simultaneously "internal" and "external." Are they every really separate? Before getting up, I take one last glance at heron, smile with gratitude, and shift my attention back into my apartment.

For hours and hours, the rain fell, the wind blew, the thunder shook, the temperature dropped, but heron remained still, as if it were unphased by any external change in the elements. "Heron," I whisper, "I want to be like you." For a moment, it's head lifts slightly, pointing in my direction, and then slowly descends back into the nest of inner tranquility. Was my whisper heard, or felt, or recognized through a sense beyond the tangible? Is this the oneness of all that is, the steady awareness, the eternal consciousness not bound by space or time? Is this what makes heron, "my heron"?

Heron was with me all day long, but it wasn't until I stepped outside (outside of my house, outside of my work, outside of my thoughts) that I felt resonance with heron's lesson. I am an energetic being, beyond the physicality of "self," harmonizing to the tune of body, mind, and spirit. My humanness does not separate me from the life force energy of the One. I am the breath between heaven and earth.

As I stood on the bank of the river, I sensed the energy of wisdom in heron's stillness. A gentle reminder to be quiet, to listen, and to allow the rhythm of life force energy to guide my actions. Rain will always fall, but I need not fall with it. Wind will always blow, but that doesn't mean I need to let myself be blown away. "Heron," I said softly. No response. "Heron," I muttered with more urgency, "what are you *doing*?" Heron didn't respond. Maybe this was my answer. *Doing* seemed to be less important than being in alignment with the flow of life. Who I am is not determined by what I do.

Heron's stillness captivated my attention. For a moment, I too became still and centered with the universe, the light of infinite presence. Are we ever really separate? Minutes passed, but I wasn't keeping track of time. Time seemed incomprehensible in stillness. The rain began to pick up speed and tiny droplets of water kissed my face. My attention slowly shifted back to the earth beneath my feet. I felt grounded, yet vast.

Stillness opened space for an inspiration to arise. Was it always there? I felt called to write and I followed the inspiration. The movement of words and thoughts seemed to form on their own. Just like heron, I remained unphased by the pouring rain and continued to write until "Heron's Lesson" was born.

Heron's Lesson

Quiet solitude
Resting in heaven and earth
No destination

At first glance, this haiku might easily be mistaken for a poem about heron. And while that is partially true, from the level of stillness the words serve as a parallel to my own life. Stillness enhances my awareness of energy and shines a light on a deeper notion of "self" and the

oneness of all that *is*. Remembering that I am body, mind, and spirit united has become essential in remaining humble, authentic, and balanced in the realm of academia which views me in terms of what I “do” and “produce” with the mind.

Heron’s quiet presence illuminated a lesson I needed to learn. Somehow, I sense the infinite light within me already knew what I needed to learn. I believe it is important in this space to unpack the personal meaning of this poem. This is not to say that the poem cannot suggest alternative meanings for various readers. Quiet the mind and listen with the heart as the light in heron speaks.

Quiet solitude

Although I have seen a duo and even a rare trio of herons flying gracefully over the Tennessee river, I most frequently see a single heron at a given time and never fail to be amazed by their patience and timeliness. Sitting. Standing. Waiting, waiting ... still waiting. And when you least expect it—snap! A fish is caught at just the right moment.

On this rainy Sunday, heron stood in silence for hours by itself. What seemed like endless stillness reminded me of the sensation that is sometimes present during my meditations. When the chattering thoughts cease to dominate the mind, space is given for consciousness to arise. And, in that space, there is no doubt about the power of stillness. Drawing inward is a choice that I take to cultivate the energy needed for the demands of my doctoral program. Stillness clarifies questions and inspires ideas. Speaking without ever listening closes the possibilities to hear what is not spoken. Action rooted in impatience only serves to drain my energy reserves and gives way for the chatter of my mind to dominate.

Resting in heaven and earth

Heron flies freely through the heavens, yet it remains grounded in the earth. At all times, it is in (or a part of) both worlds. I, too, am connected to the celestial and terrestrial realms. They are an integral part of my humanness and beingness. The humanness is temporary but the beingness is eternal, infinite consciousness unbound by space and time (Tolle, 2016).

Resting in heaven and earth implies both are present and accessible, but also points to the supportive nature of heaven and earth. Inspiration flows from heavenly energy and, when accessed, is a source of intuition, purpose, and meaning (Peng, 2014). Earth energy is grounding, nourishing, and rejuvenating (Peng, 2014). Tapping into earth energy ignites a sense of stability, even in the face of the unknown. *Resting in heaven and earth* is a reminder that the support and guidance I seek is always right here—with me, in me.

The longer I remain in academia, the more essential knowing and living this has become. I’m often required to be reflexive and explain my “identity” as material forms, social constructions, and the things I have done. To refuse to solely identify as “Jessica” (whatever that is) and instead articulate the infinite awareness that I AM—the same infinite awareness that is heron—often results in being dismissed as “non-academic” and “spiritual,” as if that were a bad thing. I find it strange to be in a situation where I need to justify who I know myself to be. It’s even more perplexing to me to be told that my onto-epistemology must be grounded in research, much of which doesn’t match my approach to life or how I have experienced the world, in order for my work to be “acceptable,” “publishable,” “trustworthy,” “rigorous,” “professional,” “academic,” and the list continues. For me, *resting in heaven and earth* is a recognition of my interconnectedness to all that is and serves as a loving reminder to just BE,

even in a world obsessed with *doing*.

No destination

Heron had no place to be other than the present moment. *Being* was more important than *doing*. There were no goals or incessant action. Goals imply a destination and from my experience in academia, the destination is sameness. The system is driven by the desire for predictable progress enacted through predictable goals and methods. There always seems to be a pre-planned path and an emphasis to act, move, go, do.

In my doctoral program, I'm often faced with pressure to produce manuscripts and presentations on top of taking four classes and working a minimum of 20 hours per week. Expectations are set for me to have a research agenda because this will somehow ensure my *worthiness* as a "successful" academic. If you can step back to view this scenario you might (hopefully) catch a glimpse of the obscurity oozing out of these so-called norms. *No destination* is the choice that I make to be present and still in order to hear the call for purposeful action and then act at just the right time. It is also a reminder that I need not engage in perpetual busy-ness to know my value. In my life, I have found great wisdom in non-action. Guidance has come from listening, trusting, and following the intuitive timing—the timing of knowingness.

Intuitive timing is not tangible in the sense that it can be (or needs to be) organized into to-do lists, predetermined dates on a calendar, or quantifiable and traceable data points. Intuition is an energetic way of knowing, not bound by reason. Reason is thinking. Don't misunderstand me. I am not saying that thinking is inherently "bad" or "wrong"; instead, I'm highlighting the point that too much thinking clouds the mind and clutters the space in which intuition is accessible. It's unfortunate that this way of knowing and experiencing the world tends to be labeled as unscientific and inappropriate for research.

Moving Forward

Since entering the doctoral program, I have been through many circumstances that have challenged me to evaluate my beliefs, but not always in the positive way that reflexivity is portrayed (Creswell & Báez, 2021). How I experience the world and come to know what I know does not align with the paradigms prioritized in my courses nor is it highlighted in the majority of the manuscripts in which I'm required to read. During my first year as a doctoral student, I began suppressing parts of myself and learned to keep quiet about my beliefs and experiences because they were being misconstrued, ignored, or rejected, all of which are reactions that most likely happened because non-Eurocentric ideas are not commonly represented, understood, or discussed within the academy. Yet, the more of myself I suppressed, the more I had to face feeling like an imposter, an incomplete fragmentation of the totality that I am. What is pushed down will always resurface, sometimes in the most unexpected way. For me, this included a lot of tears and extreme emotions that manifested as physical imbalances. I will not choose, however, to judge or label these experiences and my reactions as "wrong," "bad," or even "good." Nor do I see them as a sign of weakness. In fact, it takes great strength to love yourself, forgive yourself, forgive others, and give yourself permission to heal and learn and grow in an environment that is built on competition and criticism. Instead, I choose to approach these experiences as life's teachers that showed up at the perfect timing and in the perfect way for me to recognize and learn from the lesson. They are doorways to shedding the layers that no longer (or maybe never did) serve my best and

highest good.

I'm currently approaching a "fork in the road," that is, as I move forward in my doctoral program of study, I'm presented with a choice that will determine how I proceed. The path is lit on one side, but a crowd of people are standing on the other side. Do I abandon who I am and what I believe and the guidance from all that IS or do I take the standard path of salad-picking a "safe" paradigm and doing ordinary research to ensure the approval of others and the guarantee of a smooth path to graduation? I choose the support and guidance of the Light to illuminate each step as I walk the path of trust and intuition. I choose to show up for myself even when the wind blows, the thunder shakes, and the rain falls. Heron, thank you for showing me what I needed to learn.

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