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The Readiness is All: Here Am I. Send Me.

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ABSTRACT

The article uses contextual biography to examine the psychological and existential dimensions of “an internal environment that interacts with the other contexts in which the [author] evolves (Vidal, F., 2003, p. 73). Through a network of enterprises (Gruber, 1980) as a key aspect of that internal environment, this contextual autobiography conceptualizes a slice of the author’s life through the integration of particular literary and life contexts and her position within these background experiences. By using a unique and creative narrative of personal experiences, the author posits the universal or ontological problem of understanding the “all” of readiness for one of Shakespeare’s central characters with the juxtaposition of her own life as undertaken through the literary contexts examined. A catastrophic spinal injury coupled with the loss of her beloved father serve as prime catalysts for extreme life changes for the author creating questions of self-doubt and self-awareness, and whether the readiness for her was indeed, all. The article purposively adds to our understanding of how the internal environment and network of enterprises within an individual’s life experiences juxtaposed with literary contexts may profoundly inspire others to live unique lives of action and readiness. Findings of the study present the participant’s joyful journey of discovery and personal renewal with the most important lesson learned being that education is the ticket to a life of freedom and personal success.

Keywords: Contextual biography, creativity, crushed L-1, the day of infamy, narrative, ontological lens, readiness, spinal injury, systems approach, Titanium rods.

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In this article, the author has “abandoned nomothetic methods in favor of the more idiographic focus of biography” (Vidal, 2003, p. 73; McLeod, 2008) through a creative narrative and personal contextual autobiography. Through an examination of the *internal environment* and *network of enterprises* (Vidal, 2003; Gruber, 1989) of a slice of the author’s life experiences, the article juxtaposes particular literary and life contexts and her position within these background experiences. The idea of the study is to use a unique and creative narrative of personal experiences, to posit the universal or ontological problem of understanding the “all” of readiness for one of Shakespeare’s central characters with the conceptualization of the author’s own life and the network of enterprises of her internal environment as undertaken through the literary contexts examined.

Based upon complexity theory as the “study of interconnected, interdependent, dynamic systems and system is a group of interrelated and interacting elements that form a complex whole” (Montuori, 2011, p. 414) and an evolving system approach, the article investigates how the complex whole of an individual participant may be created through life experiences. Various types of system approaches have been used in many of the social sciences, but these approaches have also extended into the arts and humanities. According to Montuori (2011), “Creativity researchers have used system approaches drawing on very different sources and in very different ways. The main focus has been to highlight creativity as a phenomenon that occurs in the context of multiple systems, and therefore, involves a network of interactions” (2011, p. 414). This study highlights creativity in new and unique ways.

Dependent upon these interactions, the interconnectedness of relationships, interdependence of experiences, and the unpredictability of life events and outcomes as the author’s internal environment are discussed through the novel and creative vehicle of narrative and personal contextual autobiography. Most importantly, these elements working together give voice and signature to the juxtaposition of literary and life contexts within the author’s background experiences. A catastrophic spinal injury coupled with the loss of her beloved father serve as prime catalysts for extreme life changes for the author creating questions of self-doubt and self-awareness, and whether the readiness for her was indeed, all.

Method. The methodology of the study houses a theoretical framework that resides in the systems approach, chaos and complexity theories, and the qualitative case study (Montuori, 2011; McLeod, 2008). According to current literature, in the 1980s, chaos and complexity theories introduced important new dimensions to system approaches, leading to a new focus for scientific research (Montuori, 2011; Gruber 1988). Researchers began to emphasize the “role of self-organization, emergence, and unpredictability” (Montuori, 2011, p. 415). These developments in science led to what has been called the ‘challenge of complexity,’ taking the form of “interconnectedness, interdependence, and unpredictability” (p. 415). Montuori (2011) claims that “[c]omplexity is now being recognized as a basic fact of existence. Central to our understanding of complexity is that it emerges out of the inclusion of relationships as a dynamic, constitutive process dimension of the phenomena we want to understand rather than viewing them as static elements in isolation from their environment” (p. 415). The case study method includes “in-depth investigations of a single person, group, event, or community” (McLeod, 2008). This study examines a single participant, the author, in an idiographic approach with the inclusion of relationships and the significance of representative literary works rather than as static elements in isolation in the author’s internal environment. This method was chosen as the most important way of illustrating the “subjective dimension to experience” (McLeod, 2008) and showing how different aspect’s of a person’s life may be related to each other. This relatedness, or connectedness of the personal experiences of the participant’s life involves creative invention. According to Weber (1996), tactics of invention may include ways to “find an analogy” (pp. 353-367). Although many of Weber’s tactics were focused on invention, several of his strategies apply to all kinds of creative work (Weber, 1996; See Runco, 1999).

Findings. The main findings of the study reveal the participant’s joyful journey of discovery and continued personal renewal. Lessons learned from her chosen path are intended to be a light to others who may find similar journeys for their own lives. The most important lesson learned was that

education is the ticket to a life of freedom and personal success. The author's personal epiphany of understanding that her readiness to face whatever trials or obstacles that life presented to her, to overcome and to learn from these experiences, and to live a life of meaningful contribution to others was indeed, all. The personal renewal and oftentimes real transformation that the author experienced in her internal environment and through her network of enterprises presents a unique and important study of an individual who simply is trying to find her way to positive action in life. As Hamlet must choose whether to live or to die, so must all human beings make the choice. For Csikszentmihalyi (1997), the "choice is simple: between now and the inevitable end of our days, we can choose either to live or to die. [I]f we don't take charge of its direction, our life will be controlled by the outside to serve the purpose of some other agency. We cannot expect anyone to help us live; we must discover how to do it by ourselves" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997, pp. 1-2).

The contribution of the article to the literature highlights the importance of studying a creative approach of an individual participant as a process that unfolds over a lifetime, for "no systematic studies of living creative individuals existed" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997, 2013). This article intends to add to our understanding of how the internal environment and network of enterprises within an individual's life experiences juxtaposed with literary contexts may profoundly inspire others to live creative lives of action and readiness. The unique and novel structure of the article presents background experiences, literary analogies, an educational journey, and personal renewal due to those experiences resulting in the story of an individual life with voice and signature that creates a backdrop of understanding. A catastrophic spinal injury coupled with the loss of her beloved father serve as prime catalysts for extreme life changes for the author creating questions of self-doubt and self-awareness, and whether the readiness for her was indeed, all.

Here am I. Send Me.

The ontological quest of Shakespeare's young *Prince Hamlet of Denmark* reflects the deepest and innermost human reflection in his famous query, "To be, or not to be, that is the question." (Shakespeare, 2015). Without a rich and full understanding of the Bard's play and the fateful plight of the young Prince, most readers and even many teachers misunderstand what Hamlet asks. Through an ontological lens, the pensive Prince inwardly debates whether or not to live or to die, therein *lies his rub*, promulgated by the mysterious untimely death of his father and his mother's *o'er hasty marriage* to his uncle. Hamlet continues throughout the remainder of the play wrestling with his own personal angels of self-doubt and inaction, only to single-handedly conquer them and to finally *act*. For the young Prince, *the readiness is all*.

Perhaps like Hamlet, my life has also been directed by the enduring life-compass of my father, a brilliant man who never had the advantage of going to college. In fact, both of my parents came from much different worlds. My mother was the eldest of four children whose own father, my Papa, was a very wealthy man who made his fortune in oil, gas, and cattle. Everything he ever touched turned to gold. The story goes that he picked my grandmother, the daughter of a full-blooded Indian, out of a cotton patch and made her a princess equipped with her own cattle spread. My father's story was a polar opposite from my mother's. My dad came from an extremely poor family of eight children, whose parents struggled daily to keep their farm and to put a scrawny chicken on the dinner table to accompany the homegrown vegetables and homemade bread my grandmother had somehow concocted in her tiny kitchen to feed their hungry brood.

On December 7, 1941, that infamous *day of infamy*, Japan bombed Pearl Harbor (<http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/day-of-infamy/>). Several of my mother's cousins serving in Hawaii were killed that day. My dad being only seventeen and a junior in high school urged my grandparents and the local judge to sign for him so that he could enlist in the United States Navy. They all agreed. After the papers were signed, my dad dropped out of high school and began his service on one of the U. S. Navy's aircraft carriers, the U.S.S. *Antietam* (<http://www.public.navy.mil/>). Years later, I would drive my mother to Maryland to see the fields where the bloodiest day in American history, at

least since before September 11, 2001, had occurred (<http://www.history.com/topics/american-civil-war/battle-of-antietam>).

In the Battle of Antietam (September 17, 1862), Generals Robert E. Lee and George McClellan faced off near Antietam creek in Sharpsburg, Maryland, in the first battle of the American Civil War to be fought on northern soil. Though McClellan failed to use his numerical superiority to crush Lee's army, he was able to check the Confederate advance into the north. After a string of Union defeats, this tactical victory provided Abraham Lincoln the political cover he needed to issue his Emancipation Proclamation. Though the result of the battle was inconclusive, it remains the bloodiest single day in American history, with more than 22,000 casualties (See www.history.com).

Standing on those hallowed grounds so many years later, I was overcome with pride that my dad had fought in World War II on the aircraft carrier so named after this historical battle. After a brief conversation with the proprietor of the gift shop at Antietam concerning my dad's connection to this hallowed ground, I was invited to come into the restricted back halls of the building where no visitors were allowed to see framed pictures of the massive U.S.S. Antietam sailing the Pacific waters off the South China Sea. It was the first time that I had ever seen pictures of my dad's ship. Also hanging on the wall next to the original U.S.S. Antietam were pictures of the current U.S.S. Antietam. The Navy had decommissioned the Antietam that now proudly navigates the world's oceans as a United States' naval cruiser.

After the end of the war, my dad returned to finish his high school education at his desired alma mater. His parents had long-since lost the farm and had moved to the coast, far away from the plains of Texas. Once again, my dad convinced the school's officials to allow him to live in the basement of the high school where he would start the boiler furnace each morning and drive a bus before school to earn his keep. Once again, they all agreed. Upon graduating from high school, my parents married and my dad went to work for a large oil company in Texas. He spent the rest of his career climbing up the corporate ladder with the company. At times, there were others who were not nearly as intelligent as my dad who would pass him on the ladder because they held a college degree while my dad did not. Yet, before his career was over, my dad spent six years in Stavanger, Norway, and eventually retired as a Superintendent with the company.

My dad believed that education was the ticket to a life of freedom and personal success. He drilled that fact into my head from a very early age and even promised he would buy me *any* car of my choice if I would only graduate from college before I got married. I remember thinking something foreign—and red! Having dated my childhood sweetheart all through high school and later through college, I understood his fear. However, his voice rang clearly within my head in those years, and there would be nothing that would stop me from finishing, not ever. In fact, I still can hear his voice. After graduating from college earlier than my classmates, my dad wanted to buy me that car that he had promised a few years before. Rather than a red, foreign sports car, I found a modest, used dealer's model, a 1974 Buick Apollo with 3,000 miles, light green with a white vinyl interior that I convinced my dad looked and felt *just like leather*—a car that they no longer even manufacture.

*"Are you sure *this* is the one you want, J?"* my puzzled dad asked while standing next to the car in the dealer's lot. Surely, I hadn't meant *this* car.

"Yes, daddy. This is the car I want," I replied.

After working throughout college, driving nothing but a bicycle, and helping all I could on merely an hourly wage, I understood the sacrifices my parents had made for me. I could not imagine asking for anything more and gratefully accepted my dad's gift as his fulfilled promise, the completed contract that the two of us had agreed upon just a few short years prior. Five months later, only three weeks after my childhood sweetheart graduated from college and completing my first stint as a high school

English teacher, we were married. I have pictures of rows of my students who made the trip to attend our wedding. Since then, my husband and I have truly enjoyed a life that we have built together for forty-one years and counting, raising two intelligent, dark-haired, brown-eyed beauties, true “daddy’s girls” and even two hairy-legged sons-in-law. Our eldest daughter, often mistaken as a model, is a gifted elementary teacher turned assistant principal and her husband, our first hairy-legged one, is a Land Man with an oil company and professional roper who never met a stranger. Our baby, another gifted child, married to our Marine, has climbed the corporate ladder successfully in human resources and makes more than teachers could ever dream. Both daughters have received their Masters’ degrees and are making a difference in their own ways, undoubtedly setting the world afire! With the birth of our twin granddaughters, the cycle of life is now complete. Happily, we have invested our entire lives into the lives of our children and grandchildren and have been *doubly* blessed beyond measure.

The education that my dad and I had earned served as the genesis of a life-long career. After being married for only a year, I ventured back to get my Master’s of Art, while my parents lived in Stavanger, Norway. Loading up two young babies only two years and four months old, along with eleven boxes of books, I placed my precious cargo on a plane and flew to stay with a mentor on the coast while I finished writing my Master’s Thesis. I literally read and wrote around the clock, while a dear friend and mentor helped me watch the children. When it was time to nurse the baby, she would bring her to my room upstairs in their townhouse and I would read to my little two-year old as I nursed. I remember typing my thesis on an electric Smith-Corona typewriter that had the letter “q” broken, making it very difficult to type about William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom* (Faulkner, 1936) and Quentin Compson’s *Quest for the South!* (Hindman, 1983). Computers have made things so much easier now.

My doctoral journey began years ago when our girls were in high school. I was accepted into a doctoral program, where I began work in English. Summers held endless hours of reading, thinking, and writing, sitting in the hot upstairs bedroom that should have been the closet of a young married couple with whom I shared rent, while my beloved husband cared for our girls four hundred miles away. I would have finished that program and would be blissfully teaching fulltime in a university somewhere, had life not intervened.

In the late 90’s, I won a Fulbright Scholarship to Japan from an applicant pool of 4,200 educators across the United States (Japan Fulbright Memorial Fund, 1997-2008). After an extremely rigorous process, two were selected from each state and two hundred were sent for a four-week study trip to Japan in order to examine their educational system. I was one of the two selected from Texas. I spent ten days in Tokyo and then flew to Naha City, Okinawa, and back to Tokyo. Honored to be selected as both the spokesperson for our prefecture and also for the entire group of two hundred educators, their selection of me somehow overcame the bias of our chilly, northern friends who believed we southerners *talk slow, walk slow, and think slow*. Needless to write, they warmed up to our way of thinking! If time and space permitted, I would share more of that incredible, life-changing journey—but the story must move on. Life is so short and after all, people have dissertations to think about and children to teach!

After teaching in my beloved high school for close to twenty years, life delivered another life-changing experience for me. Hanging the last small piece of wallpaper above my kitchen stove one brisk day in November, in a matter of two to three seconds, my life changed completely and forever. I suffered a terrible fall from the height of the countertop to the cold, tiled floor beneath, landing on my tailbone. As I was falling helplessly in the air, I cried out loud, “Dear God, Please don’t let me be paralyzed.” I said it twice and then hit the ground, crumpling into a broken, barefoot woman wearing nothing but a t-shirt and her favorite black shorts. I could not move from my armpits down. Of course, I had only two burning concerns in my mind and voiced them quickly to my family.

To my husband: “Babe, quick. Get up there and get down that piece of wallpaper! You must save it for me!”

And to my youngest daughter who was still living at home: "Hurry, honey. Go get me a razor and some soap—you have got to shave my legs!"

The sound of sirens blaring, the excruciating pain, the mean glare of the sun in my eyes as they gurneyed me to the ambulance, rushing me to the closest community hospital, and the endless, emergency evacuation to a regional trauma unit an hour away, where I discovered unknown allergies for Codeine and Morphine, and where I learned new words of *unstable fracture, crushed L-1, and spinal injury* are all part and parcel of fragile memories of the experience. Lying inert in a hospital bed for two weeks while my worried family members looked on, the fresh-faced young surgeon consulted with other surgeons across the country of what to do with me. I remember waking up momentarily from the haze and saw both of my parents sitting on the floor at the end of my hospital bed, their heads nodding with lack of sleep and much concern. I can still see the worry in our brown-eyed beauties' eyes and feel the strength of their daddy's hands. Perhaps my life was not the only one forever changed.

The fresh-faced surgeon who saved my life gave me two choices. I could either wear a total body brace for a year and hope, as he crossed his fingers, that I could spend the rest of my life in a wheelchair, or I could agree to an experimental surgery where he would place two long, Titanium rods alongside each side of my spine by attaching them to four screws that he would drill into my spine. I would have to wear a torso brace for at least eight months and might have a chance to walk again.

What would you do? I went for the surgery.

Not believing that I could return to teaching at my high school again that year, by the first of January, I was back half a day, and by the end of January, I was back full time, wearing my torso brace all the while. My students called me "Zeena, the Warrior Princess." To this day, those are the students who still call and send cards. We went through that agony together and it changed all of us. I learned to walk again, from being flat on my back and helpless, to a walker, to a cane, and finally upright, as we were intended to be. Now, as my family and I look at other people riding through life in their wheelchairs, we never look at them the same. It could have been me. God had heard that little two-second prayer after all. Living in constant pain each day, I never complain and even family members forget what I went through because I am so grateful to be able to walk. I will just continue to turn on my heating pad each night, take my *Bayer Back and Body* tablets, and thank God that He gave me another chance to stand upright.

That experience caused me to panic that I was running out of time. How could I possibly reach more kids before my time was up? The conclusion I reached was to teach teachers—that's how I could reach more kids. I applied at our Regional Educational Service Center as an Education Specialist in Language Arts and Advanced Placement and got the job. I drove back and forth from my hometown for three and one-half years to the Regional ESC and experienced much success. A local university afforded me a Midmanagement/Principleship certification and while taking classes, the dean asked me to begin teaching for them. I taught there for ten years serving as an Adjunct Professor. My husband calls my teaching as an adjunct therapy and not real work at all. He is probably right. I would do it for free (although please don't tell them!). Sharing my love for the world of ideas, communication, and the pursuit of knowledge spilling over into the students who attend there is a gift. Priceless.

As the years piled upon one another, I suffered another life-changing blow. What I have resisted from writing about is that my dad was one of the very first quadruple by-pass patients. My dad suffered through twenty-four years of hypertension, heart attacks, pacemakers, endless medications, and eventual heart failure. A new, enthusiastic doctor believed that if my dad were to endure one more surgery, his quality of life would improve because he had enough dormant heart tissue to regenerate his heart. She was wrong. The thing that I had feared most for all those years happened. My dad died

on the operating table. He had survived the surgery, but in attempting to take him off of the by-pass machines, it proved too much for his weakened heart and he never woke up.

While driving alone back to my hometown on that devastating day again in November, I remember sensing a presence in the sky to my left up in the fading day. A small, white puffy cloud had passed across the face of the sun and I strongly felt that Christ and my dad were standing there together behind the cloud, telling me, "It's ok, my child. Be at peace. Your father is in My Hands now!" For the first time, I now truly understood the full brunt of Hamlet's pain at the loss of his own father. I could hear his lines to his trusted friend, Horatio reverberate in my mind:

"Methinks I see my father, Horatio." "Where, my lord?" "In my mind's eye . . . Truly, Horatio . . . I shall never see his like again."

The loss of my sweet daddy who was a very complicated man continues to haunt me these many years later. I do not think a child, especially a daddy's girl, can ever recover from the loss of a beloved parent—especially when that parent was a person like my dad. My trusted and brilliant compass. No, Hamlet. *I shall not see his like again.*

I used to say that my epitaph was sure to read, "All She Lacked Was One More Class!" but that certitude then changed to read, "ABD" [All But Dissertation], to now "She finally did it!" Failing to finish the doctoral race would have been a curse worse than having unshaved legs lying on a gurney awaiting a fresh-faced young surgeon to carve his initials upon your spine. My journey through this world has been a qualitative one, no doubt, filled with moments of transformation and epiphany, characteristically choosing the road less traveled (Frost, 1920). Frost was not alone. For me, too, that chosen path has made all the difference. Like my main-man Hamlet, my readiness is indeed *all*. The rest is *not* silence with a trusted Horatio standing solely by, but a joyful journey of discovery and continued renewal. Perhaps the lessons learned along the way will be a steady beacon to others who may find this same way as their own way yet again.

Results and Policy Implications. With a more idiographic focus upon contextual autobiography as an individual case study, this article examined the internal environment and network of enterprises of the author's personal experiences juxtaposed with particular literary and life contexts through a unique and creative narrative (Vidal, 2003; Gruber, 1989; McLeod, 2008). This novel approach posited the ontological problem of the *readiness is all* (Shakespeare, 1603, 2015) with the conceptualization of the author's own life experiences. Findings of the study present the participant's joyful journey of discovery and personal renewal with the most important lesson learned being that education is the ticket to a life of freedom and personal success. Policy implications of the study suggest the importance of studying the internal environment and network of enterprises of individuals within society to better understand society's larger external environment and the people who inhabit it. As a result of this study, researchers may employ more creative and innovative approaches in their research studies to discover new ways of interpreting data to tell human stories of interconnectedness, interdependence, and unpredictability. The unique and novel structure of the article presents background experiences, literary analogies, an educational journey, and personal renewal due to those experiences resulting in the story of an individual life with voice and signature that creates a backdrop of deeper understanding.

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