A Labour of Love: the lived experience of a heuristic MSc dissertation

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Introduction

- The gap in existing knowledge: a chink in my own self-knowledge.

- Heuristic methodology: seemed best suited to my desire to plumb my own depths, to ‘get to the bottom of’ my uneasiness about the mismatch between something I felt and what I showed the world.

- Approached the research project as a cognitive, academic exercise, yet quickly found myself in the grip of something much more organic and feelings-driven.

- Aim: to convey something of that phenomenon by relating it to the experience of pregnancy, labour and birth.
The unknown, unknowable

- ‘swimming into an unknown current’
  (Moustakas, 1990, p13)

- “no amount of teaching about the heuristic process could have prepared me for the lived experience...”
  (Etherington, 2004, p130)
Moustakas’ 6 stages:

- Initial engagement
- Immersion in the topic
- Incubation
- Illumination
- Explication
- Creative synthesis

(Moustakas, 1990)
My stages

- Conception
- Pregnancy
- Labour
- Birth
- Afterbirth
- Postnatal period
The conception took place the previous year, with a vague thought, a ‘fleeting awareness’ (Moustakas, 1990), which took seed and grew inside me like a secret life.
Pregnancy: first trimester

The first phase of the heuristic process, much like the first trimester of pregnancy, felt like ‘doing-not-doing’ (Macmillan, 2004).

Because I had chosen the full-time route, I was outwardly busy doing other things – skills sessions, DVDs, research module classes, essays, sorting out placements. It looked like life was going on as normal. But I knew.
Second trimester

I became self-absorbed, focusing inward.

I was starting to ‘show’: class-mates stopped me in the corridor and ask me if I was OK, or texted me after class to say they thought I looked a bit down, not my usual self. Others were becoming aware of changes.
Third trimester

The dissertation group meetings felt like antenatal classes; it was good to meet and get guidance, and enjoy mutual support, but we knew that at the end, we would have to go away and do the hard work on our own.

I felt full, heavy with knowledge, and daunted by the process ahead of me.
A ‘sweep’

A hypnotherapy session in late April offered an opportunity to ‘probe deeper,’ to ‘shift the focus’ (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985).

Like the membrane ‘sweep’ which the midwife may perform to help to ripen the cervix and trigger labour (NHS, 2012), it was a painful procedure, and it facilitated movement.
Labour

It’s not called ‘labour’ for nothing; giving birth is hard work, and so is a heuristic inquiry.

Meeting with skills tutor (also my dissertation supervisor): like a skilled midwife, she tuned into my needs for privacy and solitude, and proved a ‘safe anchor,’ someone I could put my trust in, a quiet, calm presence (Walsh, 2012). I felt understood, valued, held.
First stage of labour: mostly internal work, and ‘not linear but episodic and idiosyncratic, or orderly chaos’ (Walsh, 2012).

“Trusting the process” was my mantra – a belief that this process works, not fighting it.

Contractions (tightlyings of the womb) are painful but necessary; just the body doing its job. “Thousands of women before me have done this.”

Learning to trust.
Transition

The agonising phase between the first stage of labour and the second when a woman may swear, cry, or vomit, or want to leave (Walsh, 2012).

For me, transition was always characterised by a sense of, “I can’t do this, I want to go home” (even when I was having a home birth), and at the same time, knowing that the birth was about to happen.
Transition

“I can’t do this!”

and

“I’m just about to do it!”
Birth

During a DVD session with a fellow student the following day: ‘a sudden urge to push’ – something I had to get out – and it was me.

Reminiscent of Rogers’ description of himself as ‘midwife to a new personality’ (Kirschenbaum & Henderson, 1990).

Crowning – getting the crucial words out – like getting the baby’s head out – was so painful.
Afterbirth

Delivery of the placenta: a physiological third stage.

Waiting for the creative synthesis; trusting, hoping, an anxious time (would it come?) And it did – at the last possible moment.
Postnatal period

Having delivered myself of some childhood conditions of worth, through the heuristic process, I now needed to care for myself like a mother cares for her new-born.
Other metaphors within the metaphor

- Natural time course; personal, organic and internal process, and artificial time schedule imposed by the establishment, in turn influenced by societal norms as well as wellbeing/safety concerns (Walsh, 2012).

- Project plan like the birth plan – “out the window” – didn’t go the way I expected.

- As with labour, a responsible professional involved in the process (the midwife/the dissertation supervisor), who might intervene and say, “this is no longer normal,” and take action to bring the process to an end.
Things people said

- “You’re brave...”
- “Trust you to choose the hard way!”
- “Never again!”

Engaging in heuristic self-search inquiry (Sela-Smith 2002) is a risky business – like childbirth, I can only say with hindsight that it was safe for me.
References


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