

Reconstruction of the self in literature



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

THE POWER OF LOVE

Introduction

When Leonard Andre Scovens was a young boy his stepfather physically abused him with objects such as extension cords, hangers and pieces of wood. His stepfather would justify each beating by telling Leonard that it hurt him more than it hurt Leonard and that he did it because he loved his stepson. Leonard's own father was absent from his life for 20 years, addicted to crack cocaine. His early role models taught Leonard that love was supposed to hurt. Leonard grew up lost to drugs, guilt, rage and pain. This essay delves into Leonard's journey from addiction to authorship and uses the interactionist social theory lens to examine the effectiveness of deep, loving relationships in facilitating self-transformation.

Meanings are created through relationships

According to social interactionist theory, individuals create identity and commit to actions on the basis of meanings they give to objects. These meanings are shaped by an individual's social interactions; the meanings are not permanent and can change with future interactions (Jacobsen, 2017, p. 99-107). According to George Herbert Mead, under the interactionist theory an individual's identity is an integral of two components: the 'I' and the 'Me'. The 'Me' consists of the attitudes of others which an individual assumes as affecting their own conduct. The 'I' is the part of self that reacts to this information and can be considered as the ego. (Elliott & Lemert, 2014, p. 182 – 188). The sense of self becomes not something that the individual has created in isolation; it is what the significant others in the individual's life

have come to treat the individual as being (Auguste, Briggs & Vreeland, 2014, p. 11).

In a poem titled: *When I was Nine* Leonard narrates a childhood experience of being horrifically beaten by his stepfather. The stepfather used extension cords to mark out wounds in Leonard's back, thighs and arms leading to significant bleeding. He then hit Leonard's head with a slab of wood (Furey & Scovens, 2012, p. 12). These were common interactions in childhood which left Leonard with life-changing meanings of what loving relationships looked and felt like. Leonard in a letter written in prison describes that by 1996, at the age of twenty, he was "so lost and wild and confused and needful." He goes on to describe his rage as a fire searing inside, struggling to survive as he warred with himself. Leonard explained that "the rage was a direct product of [him] being so thoroughly abused as a child" (Furey & Scovens, 2012, p. 68).

Leonard (as cited in Arthus-Bertrand, 2015) refers to his earlier childhood experiences as communicating the wrong message and goes on to explain that as a result he grew up hurting everyone he loved and that he "measured love by how much pain someone would take from [him]." In this account of young Leonard's experiences, it is evident that his childhood relationships played a primary role in shaping his behaviour and meaning around love, relationships and violence.

Lonnie Athens in his Theory of Violentisation describes five stages through which people can evolve into violent criminals. Under Athens' theory, violent socialisation takes place via the 'violentisation process'. The theory

describes 5 stages an individual progress through to violent criminals; facilitated by social interactions with violent significant in one's life. At Stage 1 – Brutalisation a young person is exposed to violence from aggressive authority figures using violence to address problems. This follows into Stage 2 -Defiance where the exposed young person starts mirroring these violent behaviours in their own life. As the violent actions succeed, the young person gains respect and fear in the eyes of others. Violent performances is the third stage (Violent dominance engagement) during which individuals test their newly made violent resolutions. Before a violent person can graduate from Stage 3 they must achieve at least one or usually several major victories against formidable opponents. This validation and feedback builds and consolidates identity; a normalisation of violence. In Stage 4 – Virulency the individual continues to use violence and build social interactions with others who share the same perspectives. This serves to consolidate repeating acts of violence. The individual identity becomes one with violence at its core (Athens, 2015, p. 630-632). At the end of this stage, the former violent individual becomes an ' ultra-violent' one who lives and dies by the motto, " Do unto to others as they have done unto you, but do it to them first" (Athens, 2017, p. 503).

In 1996 Leonard met Patricia Ann Reed (Pat) during drug rehabilitation for a long standing crack addiction. Pat welcomed him into her house; which Leonard returned the generosity by stealing from her and returning to Baltimore where his family was. Leonard rescinded back into crack addiction and made further contact with Pat seeking her help. Pat again agreed to help and welcomed Leonard back into her house. Shortly after in 1998, on the

night of March 23, Leonard under the influence of crack strangled 40 year old Pat and her six year old son, Christopher Thomas Reed to death. Leonard's violent identity, fuelled by crack addiction took him over the edge. He received two consecutive life sentences (Furey & Scovens, 2012, p. 22-23 & 68).

Meanings evolve through relationships

An important aspect of the self is its reflective nature; its ability to reconstruct itself. Mead refers to this reflective character of self-consciousness as that which enables contemplation of the self as a whole within an reflexive experiential purview. As a result the individual is able to consciously integrate and unify various aspects of themselves, to form a single consistent, coherent and organised personality. Furthermore by the same process, the individual can undertake and effect intelligent reconstructions given the right interactions exist to facilitate that self-reconstruction (Mead & Morris, 1934).

Once Leonard was in prison, his reconstruction process began as his meanings and identity started to shift. In his own words, he says: " it wasn't till [he] came to prison, in an environment that is devoid of love that [he] began to have some sort of understanding about what it actually was and was not" (Arthus-Berthand, 2015). Seven years into his life sentence following the death of his younger brother, Leonard became deeply empathetic of the victims of his crime. It was at this time he received a ' mysterious note' from a woman named Agnes Furey. At first Leonard was unaware of who Agnes was but found out that she was the mother and

grandmother of Pat and Chris. Agnes first wrote at the age of 75 after many years of immense grief, as she wanted to learn more about Leonard. This began a healing and transformative journey for both Agnes and Leonard as they exchanged hundreds of letters and phone correspondence. They slowly built a bond cemented in a need to understand each other and heal (Furey & Scovens, 2012).

The reconstruction of self is emphasised by Mead as being of importance in the psychology of ethics: “ when there is moral disintegration, the reflective self brings together different voices that conflict with each, evaluates them, and makes the best decision”. In this sense the old self has disintegrated, and out of the moral process a new self arises. Mead describes this process of reconstruction are primarily a social process. The reconstruction of self is not one-directional which only focuses on the endeavours of the reflective self. A beneficial environment for the reconstruction of self then, according to Mead, is one where all the personal interests are adequately recognised, all meanings are given room to be fully developed, and all values are subject to open criticism. (Sun, Hickman, Alexander, Anderson, Collins & Stickers, 2013, p. 119-120).

Agnes and Leonard corresponded for eight years before co-writing *Wildflowers in the Median* in 2012: “ This is the fruit of our relationship at work – transcendence, healing, redemption, justice. This is where the journey has taken us on our path to higher ground.” In Leonard’s own words, Agnes gave him his best lesson about love: “ She gave me love...she taught me what it was” (Arthus-Berthand, 2015). Their story is a tale of healing and redemption.

Leonard continued to write and with Agnes, formed an organisation called Achieve Higher Ground. Through the organisation, they have opened Florida's Department of Corrections to restorative justice practices. Agnes facilitates restorative practice programs in Florida while Leonard runs a restorative justice-centric peer-to-peer program in his own prison (Furey & Scovens, 2012, p. 107)

Conclusion

Through Agnes, Leonard experienced deep personal transformation – his best lesson of love. Their relationship shifted internal understanding, awareness, meaning and identity for both. Within their story and a core theme of this essay, is an exposition of love as a transformative agent. From the interactionist perspective, Agnes' expression of love created interactions that brought out and shaped Leonard's new liberating meaning and identity. This is in sharp contrast to the violent interactions of Leonard's early life that created a broken and violent identity. In addition, given that Leonard was able to transcend his former violent identity, the strength of loving interactions is overpowering years of deeply rooted violent trauma is highlighted by the story. While requiring further investigation into this transformative power of love, the sentiments of Leonard and Agnes story is captured eloquently in words of Martin Luther King Jr.: "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."

A second aspect of the journey of Agnes and Leonard is the importance of significant, positive interactions at a young age to prevent children assuming

violent adult identities. Restorative justice with this objective in mind has significant potential to create the ideal structural framework to heal and transform children in the early stages of violentisation. As education in schools are significantly shaped by relationships, which can often develop into conflicts that require resolution, forgiveness and healing; restorative practices help students learn from their mistakes and reconcile and resolve problems with others. An important component of restorative practices is the focus on restoring relationships after harm has been done, which allows offenders and victims to practise love. Furthermore, a school system that uses restorative practice have consciously embedded forgiveness, empathy and love within their behavioural management system. This serves to replicate to some extent the relationship dynamics of Agnes and Leonard as exemplified in their transformative journey.

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