CURRERE: THE AGENTIC (RE)WRITING OF THE SELF

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This paper is an explication of my understanding of the autobiographical method of *currere,* as well as an account of how I used this method as part of my self-work toward subjective reconstruction. First, I define the concepts of *currere*, agency, and self as I understand and use them in this paper. I then outline the method using my own experience as an example of how *currere* can be applied to (re)kindle one*'s* agency and (re)write one*'s* self. Lastly, I explore some themes relevant to the method that situate, both figuratively and literally, my ongoing encounter with *currere*.

THE CONCEPTS

CURRERE

Much has been written about and through *currere* since it was first described (Pinar, 1975). Given the scope of this paper, I do not propose to quote much from this body of work. Rather, I begin by introducing a definition that sits well with me: *Currere* is "an act of self-interrogation in which one reclaims one*'s* self from one*'s* self as one unpacks and repacks the meanings that one holds" (Norris & Sawyer, 2012, p. 13). *Currere*, therefore, offers us a method to explore how we came to be and to reassess our understandings of ourselves, which, upon more mature reflection, may prove to be inaccurate or incomplete. In tandem, *currere* requires us to view ourselves both as we currently are and as we may come to be in the future, each of these viewpoints representing separate elements of an ongoing formation where each temporal perspective informs the others. Coupled with other forms of self-work—in my case therapy and a twelve-step program—written and verbal accounts of these temporal perspectives can then offer insight into how we might deconstruct our past experience and reconstruct it, such that we are able to loosen the constraints we and others put on our capacity to understand our place in the world. Left unexamined, experience and perspectives become ossified, restricting our potential for engagement with ourselves and with others. *Currere* keeps our experience limber, offering flexibility for it to be reworked and reshaped so that we can continue to use it as the raw material through which we iteratively work our subjective formation.

AGENCY

For this paper, I borrow, Britzman*'s* (2003) understanding of agency as "the capacity of persons to interpret and intervene in their world" (p. 40). Agency, like health, is something that we all have to a greater or lesser degree, but it is also something that we may rarely consider until we feel it has been diminished.

I grew up in a conservative Irish Catholic family in conservative Catholic Ireland in the 1980s where the order of things had been long established before I came along. Admitted—or rather conscripted—into the faith as an infant, the Church, and the Church-dominated culture of the country and the family, shaped how I was raised. This upbringing created clear boundaries around how I might view the world and my place in it. Shame and guilt were the order of the day; compliance and unquestioning obedience were my only options to avoid conflict. The asymmetry between child and parent, parent and state, and state and Church made it clear that my place was to be silent, to accept authority, and to dutifully engage in the pageantry supporting the "normalcy" of it all.

The world had been interpreted for me. As such, I moved through adolescence and into my adult years with little consideration of how I might intervene in the world. A programmed spectator, I kept silent, clapped when appropriate, and watched the world happen around and to me. However, I have been able to revisit and reorder my past experiences using *currere* and my other self-work. Viewed as valuable information about my subjective formation, I have engaged in this self-work "so that I can wield this information, rather than it wielding me" (Pinar & Grumet, 1976, p. ix). In this way, I have been able to work through the fear, shame, and resentment that dogged me through most of my life (see O'Connor, 2010; Uscola, 2023).

My return to formal studies in 2017 coincided with, and partly precipitated, an existential crisis that forced me to reassess my journey to that point. My interior was in disarray. I was an accumulation of experience—a pastiche hastily compiled in the face of authority and perceived threats—much of it clouded by alcohol from my later adolescence and then further clouded by the passage of time.

Finding and reclaiming agency through my engagement with curriculum—both through formal studies and through the lived curriculum of *currere*—I have developed my capacity for "systemic self-perusal" and the agency to "shift my ontological centre from exterior to interior" (Pinar & Grumet, 1976, p. 14). Through *currere* and my other self-work, I have been able to make a conscious contribution to my own journey, where I am neither a passenger nor yet the "*captain of my soul*," but an oarsman who can influence, to some degree, my pace and direction on life's sea.

Self

Perhaps more than any other question, the one regarding self—"Who am I?"—is the most enduring. Here I sketch my understanding of self as I conceive it for this paper.

Discussions of what constitutes the self must invariably contend with and articulate the duality of that concept. This division of self into subject/object, self-as-knower/self-as-known, or *I/Me*, bifurcates self in recognition that we regularly engage in dialogue with ourselves, which can only be done if an "other" is present with whom we might engage.

The object-self, "*Me*," is usually viewed as that which is co-constituted through engagement with others. This object-self is mediated and negotiated, to varying degrees, through the perspective of the subject-self ("*I*"). The object-self is that which is presented outwardly to the world but is also that self which, presented inwardly, can constitute Mead's (1934) "generalized other" with which the subject-self can engage.

This subject-self is variously referred to as the soul, the spirit, the transcendental ego, the pure ego, or simply the "*I* self." My understanding of this self is analogous to the irritant that enters an oyster and precipitates the formation of a pearl. Although this is a crude framing, I do not believe that the cosmic randomness that causes a grain of sand to enter an oyster is dissimilar to the circumstances through which my selfhood began. Something—I know not what—caused me to be. I also believe that there is something unique about me: some agentic nucleus that preceded all experience. Whether this is the case is largely irrelevant because I believe it to be the case as a matter of faith, which both empowers and compels me to intervene in the world.

The Method

The method of *currere* entails four steps: regressive, progressive, analytical, and synthetical. I will briefly introduce each step below and outline how I progressed through them.

Regressive

Through the regressive step, we return to our past experience and examine how it came to constitute our present. Pinar (2010) explains that, in this step, "one's apparently past existential experience is conceived as data source" (p. 178). The inclusion of "apparently" is crucial here, for one might conceive of our past experience, and how we adapted to this, to be largely inaccessible to us and to be something that has already been processed and spent like an exhausted resource. We know, of course, that past experience has a bearing on who we are today, but understanding the relationship between the past and present may be limited if we conceive of the relationship between the two as linear where the past, being past, is sedimented and fixed. Writings on *currere* frequently evoke such geological and archaeological imagery; one is encouraged to "get under one's exteriorized horizontal thinking" and "to begin to sink toward the transcendental place, where the lower-level psychic workings … are visible" (Pinar, 1975, p. 407). For me, alongside archaeology, I find it helpful to conceive of the regressive step as being similar to mining and its associated processes.

When we think of how gold is mined, many of us may think of underground mining with its deep tunnels reaching into the earth in search of veins of the precious metal. Or perhaps we imagine open pit mining where huge vehicles tear apart whole mountains. These sorts of extractions involve invasive and destructive approaches. Consider, in contrast, the Nome Gold Rush (1899-1909), noted as being exceptional due to the ease with which gold could be obtained. For millions of years before the first prospectors arrived in Nome, Alaska, melting glaciers deposited sediment rich with gold along a 40-mile stretch of the shore. Thousands of prospectors all walked across this unnoticed fortune as they trudged inland to dig into and along the creek beds in search of gold. All the while, hundreds of thousands of ounces of gold lay right there on the beach, ready to be collected with far less effort and to far greater reward. I mention this because I view *currere* as similar to this placer mining on the beaches of Nome. We all learn from experience to some degree, but there is often more benefit to be had from revisiting our experiences of the past and panning valuable overlooked learning than there is from engaging in new experiences in search of understanding.

To me, the sands on the beach of Nome represent the lived experience that I paid little heed to, but which occurred nonetheless and was deposited over time on the shores of my potential understanding. I may have been too busy, too distracted, or simply not ready to process certain experiences, and so I noticed some and overlooked others (sometimes intentionally). When I entered the regressive step of *currere* through my self-work, I sought to revisit my past and try to see a little more in and around what I had paid attention to originally. Particularly through my engagement with my studies, I was able to revisit the shores of my experience and, following Pinar (2011), begin "disassembling the structures of the present self, providing opportunities for reconstruction" (p. 198). *Currere* allowed me to go back to my past experiences which, unbeknown to me, had become a rich deposit of knowing. When I returned, because I was different, I saw my life experiences through different eyes, so I did not need to excavate to find what I had missed. Instead, I sifted gently through my past, paying special attention to that which the passage of time had made more accessible.

In comparison to the regressive step, which relies on looking back, the progressive step involves looking forward to what is not yet present. Understanding that potential futures are part of our present just as much as current understandings are part of our past, we might project how our professional and personal lives might evolve. This step is, for me, the most challenging. The past is territory (both familiar and overlooked) that I have already survived; though challenging, I find I can readily reexperience my past and learn from it. My future, however, is frighteningly uncertain. For many years, I believed I was not a particularly ambitious person, in that I had an aversion to self-promotion and allowed myself only a very limited planning horizon. Through my self-work, I have come to realize that this had much to do with my perceived lack of agency, feelings of inadequacy, and lack of validation. This step is challenging because it requires faith: faith in oneself, faith in humanity's future, and, perhaps, faith in a higher power.

Over 70 years ago, Erich Fromm (1947) explained that "faith is not one of the concepts that fits into the intellectual climate of the present-day world" (p. 197). This is likely even more the case today as we so often hear that we should "trust the science" and "the experts" (whichever ones hold your perspectives, that is). We also live in a time when organized religion is increasingly viewed with skepticism and painted as a refuge for fanatics and factions who are anti-science, anti-progress, and, perhaps, variously anti-Christian/Islamic/Semitic as well as anti-immigration/government/engagement. Ironically, my own engagement with *currere* began with a deeper consideration of both faith and "my" faith—that is the Catholic faith I was born into and shaped by, and which I eventually rejected.

My rejection of Catholicism, largely on the grounds that it was irrational, "a fanatic conviction in somebody or something, rooted in submission to a personal or impersonal irrational authority" (Fromm, 1947, p. 204), unfortunately left me resentful, adrift, and fearful. Engaging with rational faith, "a firm conviction based on productive intellectual and emotional activity" (Fromm, 1947, p. 204), still left me feeling adrift. There was something missing. Eventually, I came to realize that I could not solely *think* my way toward serenity. This realization came through a combination of reason and idealization, the latter "useful untruths" (Appiah, 2017) that allowed me to engage more fully with Al-Anon.[1] Through this self-work, I found faith in myself that empowered me to imagine a future where I might be at peace with myself and the world, or at least more so than I am currently. To connect with my higher power, I returned to St. Augustine, knowing that I must believe—in both myself and the possibility for serenity in the future—so that I may understand.

In this step, having looked in turn at the experiences of the past and the possibilities of the future, I now take a snapshot of the present. The question, "Who am I *now*?" is easier to ask and answer than the atemporal existential one. When I ask myself who I am now, I take an inventory of myself as I am, "just for today."[2] In Al-Anon meetings, this happens for me most easily when I am able to suspend the intrusion into my thoughts of the past and of calls to the tasks of the day and beyond. Separated from these, I am able to listen to the shares of other people and make note of how I relate to these *at that moment*, for they are all telling versions of my story. This present is at the centre

of the triptych that fills my attention. I can see the past and the future in my periphery, but I give my attention to the present, and I make connections with myself through the connections I make with others. Here, I am vulnerable, engaged, and open to alterity.

☾

God, grant me the Serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
Courage to change the things I can,
and Wisdom to know the difference.

Most Al-Anon 12-Step meetings open with the Serenity prayer (above), which, to me, is a basic outline of *currere*, where contemplation of the past demands acceptance, imagination of the future requires courage, and inquiry into the present necessitates wisdom. Like *currere*, Al-Anon meetings encourage inquiry into the self—into our lived experience—where we iteratively attempt to identify those things that we might engage with to determine if they are both within our power and to our benefit to change. Where change is not possible, acceptance, at least in the present, is the goal. Where change is possible, faith and determination are required to bring this about. Ultimately, it is through the incrementally accumulated wisdom we gain through engagement with our lived experience, a greater capacity for metacognition, and the humility that is the pre-requisite for all this work, where we can make peace, at least in the moment, with ourselves and the world, striving to be happy while embracing the challenges of being human.

Paul and Beierling (2017) explain that engaging in the autobiographical method of *currere* requires courage and that "exposing or shining a light on our innermost remembered experiences as recovered or recalled is not a simple task" (p. 13). Similar courage is required in exploring and sharing our current emotional condition. We come, in faith and humility, to check in with ourselves.

In 12-Step work, Step Six is a commitment "to have God remove all … defects of character" (Al-Anon Family Groups, n.d.). In meetings over the last few years, it regularly comes up that these character defects are quite often the survival mechanisms that served us well in the past but that have outlived their usefulness. While these survival mechanisms may have helped us protect ourselves (quite often in childhood), as adults they have become distinctly unhelpful behaviours that we have come to believe are simply "who we are." In meetings, we iteratively confront these survival mechanisms and attempt to free ourselves from them in our present.

Twelve-Step work also offers a sort of "time out" from how we usually process our thinking. In my home group, we are reminded just before the sharing portion opens, that "we do not interrupt, provide feedback, respond directly to, refer to someone by name, or interpret another person's share." In such a space, people feel safe enough to share ideas that are perhaps only partly formed, prototypes of potential perspectives, or just raw unstructured thoughts on their experience. Dewey (1910) accurately points out that this sort of reflective thinking, with "judgement suspended during further inquiry," is "likely to be somewhat painful" (p. 13). There is safety and security in certitude, and desperate people will grasp at any truth in panic. Holding judgment in abeyance to allow for due consideration can be challenging in the absence of necessary support.

Through my academic writing, my engagement with Al-Anon, and through psychotherapy, I have been fortunate to have spaces and opportunities where I can reassess my experience, check in with myself in the moment, and incrementally find

the most generative perspectives from which I can learn and grow. In such spaces, I encounter my past experiences and current faith in the ongoing process of recovery, intertwined in an intentionally located present.

Synthetical

In the synthetical step, I exist in the lived present. I feel my embodied self—my strength, my potential—and, sustained by my conscious engagement with my be(com)ing, I take my place in the world.

In the synthetical step in particular, I engage with *currere* (in my scholarly work, my self-work, and in my engagement with others) as a means of exercising my agency. I chart my course according to my increasing capacity for understating my place in the world. Here is where I find I have a purpose: to continue doing this work. It is most meaningful because it is *my* task and, like Sisyphus, only I, alone, can do it.

I do not remember when I formed my affinity with Sisyphus. I do, however, recall the impression the 1981 film *Clash of the Titans* had on me when I first saw it, likely several years after its release. I remember being entranced with the adventures of Perseus and Pegasus, sitting transfixed as they did battle with Medusa and the Kraken. The appearance and appetites of Zeus and Poseidon were a chilling contrast to the Christian God that surrounded me at home and at school. I recall learning later about the punishments these older Gods inflicted on mortals, and learning of Prometheus, Cassandra, and Tantalus. But it was Sisyphus and the nature of his punishment that I most connected with. However, it was not until I came across Camus's (1942/1979) *The Myth of Sisyphus* and the final line, "we must imagine Sisyphus happy" (p. 111), that my connection to Sisyphus' fate was solidified. Initially, I was puzzled. But soon, through the course of my self-work, Camus' statement began to make sense to me.

One might well view Sisyphus as a tragic figure, engaged in work that is doomed to fail, repetitive, and pointless, but I now see the heroism of the labor Sisyphus performs. As with engagement with *currere*, the value is in the effort itself. While I have faith, it is not the Christian faith of my ancestors. I do not believe in an afterlife wherein I might be rewarded finally for living well. I do not need such motivation; the reward for living well lies in the practice itself. Fromm (1947) remarked, "Man is the only animal for whom his own existence is a problem which he has to solve and from which he cannot escape" (p. 40). Again, through my engagement with the curriculum of the self, I believe I have come to accept my fate and, like Sisyphus, appreciate that whatever purpose and meaning there is to be found lies in the pursuit of understanding my place in the world and in taking responsibility for positively impacting the world where I can. Having spent most of my life in education, I have been privileged to have the opportunity to engage with ideas and, along with colleagues, learn to have agency over my own learning and, to a degree, the world around me. Like Fromm (1947), I can accept that "there is no meaning to life except the meaning man gives his life by the unfolding of his powers" (p. 45). For now, this sustains me, and I believe, to varying degrees, positively impacts the many people around me.

Themes

Education

One of the elements that separates *currere* from other autobiographical methods of introspection is its focus on experiences of formal education. While others have used

the method to explore their life history more broadly (e.g., Wang, 2010), *currere* is particularly suitable for my personal exploration of self as I have spent almost my entire life in and around education: 22 years as a student and 12 years as a teacher. As such, my be(com)ing is inextricably linked with curriculum, both as educational practice and as *currere*—as lived experience, a journey, a curriculum of the self.

Approaching 40, I returned to graduate studies, largely as a way of escaping a life and way of being that no longer fit. Like a hermit crab that had outgrown its shell, I moved to Canada to find a new shell, but, crucially, for a time I was naked, exposed, and vulnerable. Casemore (2017) knows that "the past, however painful and enigmatic, requires our engagement if we are to evoke potential futures" (p. 42). In many ways over the years, I had been trying to avoid opening the Pandora's box of my subjective formation. Physically relocating to different countries afforded me the opportunity to "reinvent" myself in each new place. To my dismay, however, I inevitably (re)encountered myself as the same person on arrival and thereafter. This changed, however, shortly after I arrived in Vancouver. It was there that I encountered the method of *currere*, though, at the time, I was not aware how central a role it would play in the following years.

PLACE

My educational experience and career have involved a repeated physical relocation, and for the most part, I transitioned to places that were themselves at the beginning of historic transitions. I cannot say that this was intentional, though I also believe that it is unlikely that it was entirely coincidental. Perhaps there was a subconscious draw to these places—part of me knowing, or hoping, that they might offer me a fresh start and somewhere to escape myself.

My primary, secondary, and undergraduate studies all took place in my hometown. When I was 21, I moved to Poland, just as it was preparing to become a member of the European Union (EU). Freshly graduated, I taught English to executives who, along with many others in the country, were brushing up their language skills to be able to take full advantage of the opportunities that would follow in the wake of full integration into the EU.

On September 14, 2001, I arrived in China for the first time, just as the impact of 9/11 was beginning to be processed. At that time China had not yet joined the World Trade Organization; this happened three months later.

In 2004 when I returned to Ireland to pursue an MA, I found myself in a place that seemed very different from the one I remembered. The heady days of the "Celtic Tiger" were in full swing, and I became a tourist in my own country.

In 2007, I moved to Nepal to work with the British Council in language assessment as the country was in transition from being the world's last Hindu monarchy to becoming a secular republic. Returning to China after this time in Nepal and after the spectacle of the Beijing 2008 Olympics was profound. I witnessed phenomenal social changes taking place there over the next seven years as China weathered the global financial crisis, while in Europe and elsewhere the impacts were devastating.

In these places, with youth and privilege in my favor, dynamic environments enabled me to enjoy day-to-day experiences without giving much consideration to who I was or where I was going. I was carried along by the currents of the day, insulated to introspection and self-reflection by superficial social engagement and thrill seeking.

My move to Canada for graduate studies was different. It seemed that the swift winds and currents that had carried me forward had disappeared. I was becalmed, my pride and self-esteem pricked by my reduced status, income, and privilege. It was at this

"dislocation" of my *self*, "where what was once familiar abruptly appear[ed] strange" (Greene**,** 1971/2004, p. 140), that I was fortunate enough to be able to actively engage with curriculum—perhaps for the first time—in order to make sense of my life world.

This was not initiated as a proactive attempt at self-work; it began out of desperation. Facing an existential crisis, I sought help where I could. Over the next two years, through psychotherapy and 12-step work, I made a conscious effort to make sense of my present by unpacking and reconsidering my past so that I could begin to imagine a future where I was not entombed in my sedimented and ossified self. I could work through this accumulation, engaging in an archaeology of the self, panning my past experience for wisdom that did not seem to have value at the time. My education greatly assisted me in this.

Graduate study is largely about writing. Although we spend a great deal of time reading and discussing, it is in the work of writing that we focus our efforts. But writing is hard, solitary, lonely work, with few places to hide. Writing afforded me the opportunity to write—and *re-write*—my story. Through consideration of differing ontologies and epistemologies, I found value in my experience and in myself, which assisted me in reclaiming my agency. Later, when I began doctoral studies, I developed a consideration of humility that allowed me to have both a confidence in my own abilities—something that had been largely lacking until then—and an understanding of my responsibility to exercise that agency to be of service. Now, though I continue my studies in Vancouver, I am not tied to the physical place, but to the place I have created within myself whereupon I can stand and face the world. This is the foundation of my self, claimed from but still located in the world. This is where I can continue to be(come).

Becoming

I was struck by a conversation between actors Dondré Whitfield and Will Smith in which they discuss their conception of the "Journey to Manhood." The difference, they said, between being "male" and being a "man" is about service: "Males seek to be served, while men seek to be of service" (Whitfield, 2020, 8:38). While this idea has been touched upon in many ways over the years, there was something about the rawness and vulnerability of the actors' conversation that stuck with me. When the concept of service first arose during my 12-step work and I considered my own service in the program and elsewhere, I kept returning to the idea of what it means to be an "adult." Indeed, I have often lamented that there does not exist in my culture a process or event where one *becomes a man*.[3] I think of tribal initiation ceremonies or religious celebrations where the transition from adolescence to adulthood is marked and celebrated. Absent such a formal initiation, how does one know when one is no longer a child?

Achieving the age of majority at 18, I did not feel that I had become a man. Nor at the age of 21. Nor at 31. To my mind, I was closer to 41 before I would say that I had reached a level of maturity where I might call myself an adult. That is not to say I did not attend to my responsibilities before this time. However, until this time, I attended to these largely as a way to seek validation from others, to protect myself from criticism, to maintain harmonious relationships, and to maintain and support a sense of self that was essentially sustained by the approval of others. My motivation was largely extrinsic; I did these things because I needed the approval of others so that they would see me—and so that I could see myself—as a good person. Put crudely, I was a child being "good" so that Santa Claus would leave me a gift. Likely internalized also, was an image of God, watching in judgement, an oddly terrifying entity with love and forgiveness in one hand, vengeance and damnation in the other.

My transition to adulthood, where I finally took responsibility for writing myself, came from a combination of the agency that grew in me as I reassessed my subjective formation and my growing awareness of my capacity for self-validation (Ishiyama, 1993). Rather than continuing to seek approval from others to maintain and direct my being, I was able to shift my focus inward and use this to enable my becoming.

This is not an isolationist approach; instead, it allowed me to achieve a harmony between my inner world, my intrinsic power, and the outer world where I use my agency to take responsibility for and act in the world. I transitioned from *being* in the world—a product of things that happened to me—to *becoming* in the world, an agentic self, involved in my own subjective (re)formation.

CONCLUSION

Experience is not what happens to you; it's what you do with what happens to you.

— Aldous Huxley

While we are all shaped by our experiences and use them to make sense of the world, it is also true that we have a degree of agency over how fixed that shape remains; it is this fixedness that *currere* addresses. As we grow older, we may lose the physical and mental flexibility of childhood that allowed us to adapt to the world around us. Our bodies and minds might become more rigid, conditioned through schooling, socialization, and other calls to conformity. As we get older still, many people may no longer be able to touch their toes, nor endure for long the discomfort that comes when their understanding of the world is challenged.

In the same way, experience left unexamined becomes ossified, fixing our understanding of the world, and our place in it, into a configuration that may, at a later date, not serve us or others well. *Currere* is an ongoing engagement with our lived experience such that it remains limber, such that our past does not simply accumulate and become compacted. In the same way that stretching through yoga or tai chi, for example, can afford us physical flexibility in later life that can both protect us and offer prolonged mobility, so too can deliberate engagement with our past experiences in the present offer us the potential to reform our subjectivity as we progress through life. Our experience is a sustainable primary data source that we can return to. It can help us make sense of the present and resist accepting the world as it is presented to us and, instead, engage with others in seeking to beneficially shape the world around us.

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Endnotes

[1] I am a member of the Al-Anon fellowship. In contrast to Alcoholics Anonymous, "Al-Anon is not a program for finding or maintaining sobriety. It is a program to help the families of alcoholics recover from the effects of someone else's drinking." See https://al-anon.org/newcomers/faq/

[2] This is one of the Al-Anon slogans.

[3] To be clear, my concern here has to do with the transition to adulthood rather than differences between genders.