

Teaching Transformation

Progressive Education in Action

A Collaborative Anthology from
the Goddard Graduate Institute

Lise Weil, Editor

Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg, Managing Editor

Introduction by Elizabeth K. Minnich

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Contents

Time to Tell Our Story: Preface by Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg.....	7
Introduction: The Moral, Political Action of Education by Elizabeth K. Minnich.....	11
Vision from the Ground by Sarah Bobrow-Williams.....	17
Leading and Following: A Perspective on Teaching and Learning by Ruth Farmer.....	27
The Virtual and Place-Based Culture of the Goddard Graduate Institute by Karen Campbell.....	43
Rigor, the Ridiculous, and Radical Resonance: Transitory Community and the Construction of History by Katt Lissard.....	63
What Happens at a Goddard Residency (and Why Is It So Hard to Explain)? by Lori Wynters.....	79
A Kitchen Table Discussion on Transformative Language Arts with Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg, Minna Dubin, Deb Hensley, Yvette Angelique Hyater-Adams, Kao Kue, Joanna Tebbs Young, and Angie River.....	87
Embodiment Studies: “Academia as a School of Life” by Lise Weil, Juliana Borrero, Emilee Baum Trucks, Katie Soule, Sonja Swift, Kate Lidfors Miller, and Britta Love.....	117
Homecoming and Prayer: “Not To Be Cut Off” by Susan Pearson, Linda Schneck, and Bernadette Miller.....	151
“Goddard is a Place for People Willing to Bet on Themselves”: Graduates Steve Wright, Kris Hege, Karl Stenske, Mike Alvarez, Nicolette Stosur-Bassett, David White, Justin Kagan, and Larry Greer.....	187
Undiagnosed Visionaries by Sarah Van Hoy.....	211
Editors and Contributors.....	229
Appendix: A Sampling of Graduating Student Presentations.....	241
Resources.....	253

Teaching

to know, understand and have access to their birth records and cultural identity. In addressing the loss and its far reaching influence I identify how grieving is necessary and often overlooked. Finally, I will share about my development of Rationalization Therapy and how I believe it can help adoptees in their healing process.

Karl's work altogether speaks to how claiming and naming the trauma of adoption and seeking appropriate help can help adoptees lead healthier lives. Faculty member Karen Campbell says of Karl's work, "What [Karl] is sharing is so compelling it could well do more than provide support to those who share similar histories, but also those of us who rarely think of what adoption actually means."

Having already worked as a motivational speaker before he came to Goddard, after graduation, Karl developed a business as a post-adoption specialist for adoptees, families, and professionals; his services include public speaking, consulting, a mentorship program, and workshops, all of which grew out of his MA study. He's also in the process of having his thesis material adapted into and published as a book, *The Hidden Life of an Adopted Child: Understanding the Impact of Adoption*. He also works as Director of Foster, Adoption and Kinship for Olive Crest, a foster family agency.

Mike Alvarez on Creativity, Suicide, and the Necessity of Seeing New Connections to Address Social Ills

I came to Goddard with a clear purpose: to study the paradoxical relationship between phenomenal creativity and suicide. I say 'paradoxical' because if creativity is the ultimate

celebration of existence, why is it that so many creative people end their lives? On the surface, it seems like I could have pursued my research in any MA or PhD program in psychology, but in truth, Goddard's Individualized Studies MA program was the only place. The only place where I could study human lives, in all their complexity, without reducing them to mere statistics or the machinations of the brain. The only place where I could step outside the comfort zone of a single discipline. The only place where 'self' is a valid source of knowledge and its examination an equally valid method.

My reasons for studying creativity and suicide are personal. During my undergraduate years, I suffered from anxiety, depression, and paranoia so severe that at some point, I thought the only remedy was death. After a failed suicide attempt, I was admitted to the psychiatric ward of a hospital, and upon release, I sought refuge in psychology. I learned much about the biochemical basis of so-called mental illness, its sociodemographic correlates, and its statistical distribution nationally and globally. But as fascinating and as important as these were, they did not speak to me personally. Or touch me. Or move me. I share Susanna Kaysen's sentiment when she writes of her diagnosis with borderline personality disorder in her memoir, *Girl, Interrupted*: "It's accurate, but it's not profound."

At Goddard, I immersed myself in the literature on suicide, human creativity, and eventually, trauma. I was timid at first when it came to venturing outside psychology, but soon I found myself reading historical, sociological, philosophical, and literary texts, which my advisors encouraged. I also immersed myself in the works and words

Teaching

of those individuals whose lives I studied. For example, while researching Iris Chang, the historian who documented Japan's gruesome atrocities in the Pacific during World War II, I traveled to the Hoover Archives to comb through boxes of personal artifacts she had left behind. And when writing a case study of Kurt Cobain, I listened to every song he had ever written, sung, and performed. The purpose of my work was not to diagnose these individuals, or to quantify their experiences, but to arrive at a humanistic understanding of what drove them to create and what led them to end their lives—in their own subjective terms.

Over the course of my study, I came to see myself reflected in these persons. In each I saw a fragment of me. Like Iris Chang, I, too, am the child of Asian parents who endured the hardships of immigration. Like Kurt Cobain, I too lived through a broken and impoverished childhood. And like the digital artist Jeremy Blake and his soulmate, filmmaker Theresa Duncan, I too suffered from paranoid delusions that evil forces were conspiring against me. But in each of these persons, I also saw the creativity I had long denied, forgotten to nourish. My advisors urged me to nurture this creativity, and so I wrote short memoir pieces recounting my struggle with mental illness and admission to a hospital. I also began writing my own history of trauma. Soon, I found myself taking photographs of moments I found arresting, and weaving tales around them—some fantastical or otherworldly, others grounded in so-called reality. These stories and images became 'data' to analyze for yet another case study: my self.

My learning experience at Goddard is comparable to what one sees when two mirrors are placed face to face. The

image on the surface stretches inward infinitely, beckoning the viewer to look deeper while teaching the viewer humility, for one cannot grasp all that one sees. I entered the IMA program to study suicide and creativity and write psychological case studies, but in the process, I learned quite a bit about myself. This self-knowledge, in turn, afforded new insights into the phenomena that brought me to Goddard in the first place. The culmination of my studies is a book-length thesis that juxtaposes memoir with psychobiography, theoretical musings with self-analysis. Such a thesis could not have been produced elsewhere, and such a thesis was a modest starting point rather than an endpoint.

After graduating from the IMA program, I returned to Goddard to pursue an MFA in Creative Writing and continue my memoir (now represented by an agent). Currently, I'm pursuing a PhD in Communication, and a Graduate Certificate in Film Studies, at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, where I am studying suicidal individuals' use of technology to create meaning in their lives, and the representation of the 'cybersuicide' phenomenon in moving image media. Simultaneously, I am also in the midst of fulfilling a contract for a book titled *The Paradox of Suicide and Creativity*.

On the surface, it would appear as if I am someone who 'collects' degrees with no apparent relation to one another. One might ask: communication, film, psychology, creative writing ... what's the connection? But the greatest gift of a Goddard education is that it enables one to *see* such connections—to look at a problem or issue from multiple vantage points, and to communicate one's discoveries in a language accessible to all. I'm a firm believer that no

Teaching

discipline should remain entrenched in its own silo, for interdisciplinarity cultivates a sense of shared responsibility. For instance, turning the raw materials of databases, which are fragmented and decontextualized, into stories that possess unity and coherence draws attention to the lives behind numbers, making researchers accountable for their actions. Likewise, placing textual and visual media within their respective contexts invites sociological questions that go beyond a mere discussion of aesthetics.

By adopting an interdisciplinary stance toward the study of suicide and creativity, I am able to ask (and seek answers to) such questions as: How has the medicalization of suicide turned works of art into symptoms of pathological minds? What techniques do filmmakers use to naturalize, or subvert, prevailing attitudes toward suicide, and to evoke sympathy (or disgust) for individuals with diagnosable mental disorders? How have suicide attempt survivors used social networking sites to create affective communities? And what are the benefits and harms of narrativizing one's traumas online, as opposed to writing them in one's diary? The list of questions one can ask is almost endless.

Psychology and psychiatry currently have a monopoly on suicide, which is not surprising, for they have advanced our understanding of the suicidal mind to an extent no other discipline has. However, there are dangers to placing all our bets on the 'psy' disciplines, especially when they turn reductionistic—and in many ways they have, or perhaps have always been. I do not deny that many suicidal persons can attest to being helped by current treatment regimens and by the medical model writ large. Nevertheless, there is something troubling about treating symptoms as primary and

stories as secondary, and about viewing the mentally ill as hapless victims of a defective genetic makeup—instead of agents who have survived terrible circumstances and possess the capacity for change. When suicide is studied in a vacuum, the result is a view of humankind as an assemblage of raw parts that can be tinkered with by anyone with power vested in them.

Of course, this applies not only to suicide, but to any human or social ill. Now more than ever, it is important to cultivate the ability to see, and realize, connections: between knowledge and the context of its production; between form and content; between art and science, culture and technology; between self, world, and other. And this Goddard teaches, and teaches well.

Nicolette Stosur-Bassett on Art and Sustainability in Action

I'm fortunate to have been raised in a family environment that valued education highly and I was privileged growing up to attend a variety of learning institutions. On my educational journey, I was exposed to varied and diverse pedagogies, many of which valued independent study and self-learning as their core. That being said, four years of public high school left me jaded and disappointed by years of pointless test-taking and unclear educational expectations; I didn't know what I was learning or why, and was left with questioning the application of my learning in the real world (and its even more real job market).

I was living in Vermont when I found out about Goddard. Attempting to explain Goddard's IBA program,

Teaching

Mike Alvarez, MA-IMA and MFA is a two-time Goddard graduate, and a Communication PhD candidate at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, where he teaches courses in film and media studies and TV production. His dissertation explores suicidal individuals' use of information and communication technologies to create meaning in their lives. Mike is the recipient of a Paul and Daisy Soros Fellowship, and his writings have appeared in *Cross-Cultural Studies*, *The Awakenings Review*, *Mason's Road*, *Connotation Press*, and *New Writing*, among others. He is also writing a book titled, *The Paradox of Suicide and Creativity*. You can follow him on Twitter @mfalvarez121 or visit his website: www.mfalvarez.net.

Emilee Baum Trucks, MA-IMA is an author, artist, and market researcher based in Atlanta, GA. Her book, *The Agency of Bliss* (find at amazon.com), emerged from her MA in Embodiment Studies at Goddard College. She is currently working toward her PhD in Expressive Arts at The European Graduate School in Saas-Fee, Switzerland. She is also chair of the Transformative Language Arts Network, a non-profit organization.

Sarah Bobrow-Williams, MA helped found Goddard's Social Innovation and Sustainability degree. She brings to this task her work, centered around working with marginalized citizens and organizations to plan and develop cooperative, culturally affirming and just economies and supporting local management and protection of environmental and cultural resources and knowledge. Sarah has been the Southern Rural Black Women's Initiative for Economic and Social Justice's Asset and Finance Development Director for 12 years,

Appendix: A Sampling of Graduating Student Presentations

At the end of their studies, all GGI students present a talk, workshop, and/or performance of their thesis project during graduation weekend, which occurs at the residency following their final semester. Here is a sampling of presentation descriptions published in both the residency schedule and on Worlds of Change (www.WorldsofChange.com).

The World Is Littered With Opportunity, with SIS graduating student Steven Wright. Community engagement and sustainable construction combine to shift power dynamics in historically ignored communities. Journey through seven years of sustainable construction with trash and tires and community organizing throughout the Americas with a focus on the ever-complex US-Mexico Border Region. Lessons learned the hard way, and things learned through the Goddard lens, learn how 4Walls International is poised to use community consultative methods to relocate climate refugees using native materials.

Suicide, Creativity, and the Self, with IMA graduating student Mike Alvarez. Experience the songs of Phyllis Hyman and Kurt Cobain, the photographs of Kevin Carter, screen shots from Jeremy Blake's "time-based paintings" and much more as we examine the paradoxical relationship between suicide and creativity. What do self-destructive behaviors and creative activities have in common? Is creative work intrinsically healing? And how does the disease model

Teaching

of mental disorders diminish our understanding of the human meaning behind suicide and creativity? These are some of the pressing questions my presentation will address—questions that have far-reaching implications in a time and place where the self, and its manifold human dimensions, are radically medicalized. I will also read excerpts from my memoir, in which I recount my past struggle with suicidal depression

Rosie's Second Shift: The Domestic Lives of Women Workers During World War II, with IMA graduating student LisaMary Wichowski. Rosie the Riveter is the quintessential icon of the World War II home front. Her image has been used countless times as an expression of feminist agency. The image we associate with the name is ubiquitous, paraded for Halloween, or trotted out whenever a female celebrity such as Madonna or Beyoncé wants to affirm their feminist credibility. Though she is most known as an industrial worker, Rosie, like working mothers of all generations, had a double shift every day, first on the munitions assembly line and then at home caring for her family. The war disrupted family ties, removing hands able to help out around the house, but there were few options for childcare when even the education system worked in shifts. Rationing and shortages hit hard and shopping was made all the more difficult by long work hours and short store hours. Finally, housing was in short of supply, just as everything else was. How did women cope with these challenges then? What institutional supports did they have? Finally, how can we apply the lessons of that era to help working women today?