November 2000. From beneath my bed covers, I spy the clock. 9am. 10am. 11am. Insistent cat screams drift into half-waking stress dreams.

*I have to feed them.*

I slip into my nightshirt, fill cat bowls, move to the couch. Cocooned in my PJs and a pink blanket. Flooded by tears. Speechless.


I consider all the ways I might end my pathetic life: razor blades, car crash, bullet to the brain. Every day I weigh my options. Who would care? But I am too tired to act. They say suicides tend to happen when you are coming out of major depression, still caught up in the darkness, but energized enough to take action, the ultimate irony of recovery (Solomon, 2001).


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What you have just read is a story I tell in “Chronicling an Academic Depression” (Jago, 2002), my autoethnography published 18 years ago in the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography (JCE)*. In my major depression1 story, I highlight the mental health challenges I faced as an assistant professor. That story connects to what Art Bochner (1997) has referred to as “institutional depression,” which he defines as “a pattern of anxiety, hopelessness, demoralization, isolation, and disharmony that circulates through university life” (p. 289). Additional roots of my descent into major depression stem from the impact of the breakup of an affair with a colleague.

In this meta-autoethnography (Ellis, 2009), I examine the life my autoethnography has lived since publication and consider the risks and rewards inherent in autoethnographic writing. In this layered account (Ronai, 1995), I include a chorus of voices that have contributed to this autoethnography’s meaning as it has evolved over time.

Every autoethnographer knows that writing about life’s challenges requires honesty and vulnerability (Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Ellis, 2007). It isn’t easy. The ethics of autoethnography can be difficult to navigate, especially when our self-presentations open us to criticism, judgment, and worse. Moreover, as Carolyn (Ellis, 2007) has told us about relational ethics, we need to exercise great care when we write about others. “The bad news,” she explains, “is that there are no definite rules or universal principles that can tell you precisely what to do in every situation or relationship you may encounter, other than the vague and generic ‘do no harm’” (p. 5). Of course, the more experience we have, she explains, the better we are at navigating these sometimes-tumultuous waters (Ellis, 2007).

When we publish our stories, we hope that they are used and used well (Coles, 1989), but we have no control over the meanings others bring to our accounts. Once our stories appear in print, they lie out of our interpretive control. Ultimately, publishing autoethnography can be risky, to our careers and to our close relationships. But as Bochner and Ellis write in *Evocative Autoethnography* (2016),
Sometimes we just have to put our story out there and accept the consequences. We have to figure out how important it is to tell it, think about the potential rewards and risks, and determine if the work has something important to offer others by putting meanings into motion. Nobody can make these judgements for you.

(pp. 152–153)

So I ask, what have been the consequences of publishing my major depression autoethnography? What meanings did others attribute to my words? How did they use my story in their own lives? What are the risks and rewards of living an autoethnographic life?

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This meta-autoethnography starts long before the publication of my major depression story. It begins in August 1993, when I enroll in the doctoral program in Communication at the University of South Florida (USF). After a difficult period in my twenties, including substance abuse and my first bout of major depression, I am intimidated to begin the program, having never taken a communication course before. Thankfully, my background in cultural anthropology, cinema studies, and education positions me well.

In my first semester, I enroll in Art Bochner’s course, “Interpretive Perspectives in Communication,” and my life changes. In this course, Art teaches us to think about academic research and scholarly writing in a new way, to employ an interpretive perspective, to consider the value of including the personal and spiritual in our academic work, to embrace stories. In the following semesters, I take “Narrative” and “Writing Workshop” with Art as well as “Communicating Emotion” with Carolyn Ellis. In these courses, we read Jerome Bruner, Robert Coles, Laurel Richardson, George Herbert Mead, Gregory Bateson, Barbara Myerhoff, Clifford Geertz, Richard Rorty, Erving Goffman, Norman Denzin, Carol Rambo, and so many others; we read Art and Carolyn’s work; we discuss epistemology and ontology; and we write stories.

At the time, I am fascinated by the ideas we are discussing, but I don’t yet know how privileged I am to participate in the paradigm shift Art and Carolyn are helping to propel in the social sciences. Years later, when I devour Art’s Coming to Narrative (2014), I am back in his class, listening to his argument for an interpretive perspective and the incorporation of personal narratives in academic research.

We need to face up to the ways we use orthodox academic practices to discipline, control, and perpetuate ourselves and our traditions, thus stifling innovation, discouraging creativity, inhibiting criticism of our own institutional conventions, making it difficult to take risks, and severing academic life from emotional and spiritual life. No matter how much they may threaten us, we need to consider alternatives—different goals, different styles of research and writing; different ways of bringing the academic and the personal into conversation with one another.

(p. 291)

As I take classes with Art and Carolyn, I find a new way of thinking about academic research and knowledge, a new way of writing, a new way of being in academia, and a supportive community of people who truly honor the “human” side of human communication research. I embrace autoethnography. As I write autoethnography, I make sense of my experience and find my voice. At the risk of sounding schmaltzy, I also find an intellectual and emotional home. Work and life become one, with all the risks and rewards that integration brings. As a graduate student, I am already living an autoethnographic life.

The vulnerability inherent in autoethnographic research is apparent to me from the beginning. Putting my stories in print and sharing them with others proves challenging and even frightening at times—but also invigorating and satisfying. I am amazed at the conversations this work prompts, the understandings that develop, the resulting potential for positive change. When Norm Denzin publishes my first autoethnography (written under Art’s guidance) about my family (Jago, 1996) in Qualitative Inquiry, I finally feel like a “real” academic. When I decide to write an autoethnographic dissertation later that year, Eric Eisenberg, my advisor, warns me I might be taking a risk with my burgeoning career. “Not everyone appreciates this methodology,” he says. “And you will be on the job market.” I appreciate Eric’s sincere concern for my future, but in my heart, I know autoethnography is not an option; it is the only option for me. So I write about growing up without a father and interview six other “father-absent” women (Jago, 1998). The process is grueling but also richly satisfying. Together, my coresearchers build a community of understanding about fatherlessness. Eventually, I publish an autoethnography about one of my coresearchers (Jago, 2006).

In 1998, I graduate from USF and accept a position as an assistant professor at the University of New Hampshire (UNH) in Manchester. In my first year at UNH’s commuter campus, I participate in delivering the communication program housed in Durham (“the mother ship”). Soon after I arrive, my colleague,
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Associate Professor Jeff Klenotic, and I begin to create a new program in “communication arts,” an applied program that will live on the Manchester campus and be under our control. I am overjoyed to create the relational communication area of the curriculum. As I build courses, I apply everything Art and Carolyn taught me. My favorite class is a seminar entitled “Narrative” where my students learn about narrative theory and write autoethnography. I teach the course almost every spring for years to come. When *Evocative Autoethnography* (Bochner & Ellis, 2016) is published, I am overjoyed to have such a rich text for teaching. Even though I live far away from USF, Art and Carolyn are with me in the classroom. I cherish their presence—and so do my students.

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In the fall of 2000, in my second year as an assistant professor, I fall apart; another bout of major depression renders me unable to do my job. With the support of my colleagues and dean, I go on medical leave for a year. With the help of good therapists and psychiatrists, I recover and start writing my depression autoethnography. The process is overwhelming. I revisit the depths of depression with every keystroke, always fearful of falling back into the black hole. But the process of writing is therapeutic and cathartic. I render myself vulnerable and hope the rewards, for me and others, will outweigh the risks. The idea that autoethnography can inspire dialogue about difficult and often marginalized experiences motivates me (Bochner & Ellis, 2016).

In early 2002, I take a deep breath and submit my story to JCE.

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JCE reviewer:

I do worry somewhat about Barbara’s career given the story in this paper. She says [on page 9] that she wants to enhance others’ understanding, but I wonder if this work might not also enhance others’ fears. Might it not be best for her left unpublished? That doesn’t mean I don’t see benefit from her writing it for herself and others in her situation. Only Barbara can answer this and I guess for the most part it should not be our job to protect writers. Or should it?

(Anonymous, personal communication, May 21, 2002)

***

When I receive the reviews from *JCE*, I am overwhelmed. The comments from the three reviewers and the editor are generally positive, but one reviewer (whom I later find out was Carolyn) encourages me to address the risks of publishing. I am surprised by the reviewer’s concern; I am so committed to sharing a story I worked hard to write (and live), a story I need to publish for tenure that I haven’t fully considered the potential risk to my career. Am I being naïve about publishing? Self-destructive? I wonder, do the benefits outweigh the potential harm?

But I am an autoethnographer. This is what I do. Risks be damned, I decide to publish.

In the reviews, there are also many suggestions for revisions, good suggestions from smart people. But I can’t go back into the story; I can’t relive the trauma. Not right now. I make only minor changes, and *JCE* publishes it. I regret not addressing the reviewers’ comments more fully.

To this day, the story remains true for me. I still struggle with depression every day. Some days are better than others, but the darkness never goes away.

***

In Revision (2009), Carolyn writes:

There are many “secrets” we walk around with that perhaps don’t need to be hidden. We think sharing them will make us feel vulnerable. Perhaps sharing them will make us feel less vulnerable, or maybe we will find that vulnerability is not necessarily a bad thing. Besides, sharing events in our lives opens the possibility that we will get feedback that might help us change our lives for the better. Perhaps we might
learn from others in similar circumstances and offer them insights from our experiences.

(p. 188)

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Excerpted from an email I receive from an associate professor of sociology:

I just read your article in [JCE]. It was recommended to me by someone who loved it. I love it. And I have in turn forwarded it to others. Bipolar lives with me. Wish it didn’t, but there it is. Thus, your work really resonated with me at a personal level . . . . Have you heard from others like me? . . . . Your article rang “so true” for me. In so many ways. Thanks for writing it. As a qualitative researcher, I think it is a contribution to the qualitative literature. From the perspective of someone who is ill, it also informed my personal life.

(Anonymous, personal communication, February 3, 2003)

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Excerpted from an email I receive from an assistant professor of sociology:

Just wanted to let you know how moved I was by your article . . . . From reading your article, it sounds like you and I have a lot in common—professionally, being new faculty members, making the transition from grad student to [assistant] professor, and personal things like being fatherless and being plunged into depression because of the end of a relationship. It was actually a bit spooky in places . . . . because I could have written so many parts of it. Anyway, I’d love to talk if you’d like.

(Anonymous, personal communication, January 9, 2004)

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Excerpted from an email I receive from a first-year doctoral student:

I really related to your experiences and enjoyed the article very much . . . . I have gone through many similar episodes. And unfortunately, just as I begin my doctoral program, when I really need to focus on some difficult classes, it all happens again (due to a completely unforeseen development). I’ve spent 2–5 AM the last several nights just crying and crying. Also, I am a bit scared to give out my name for now, but I am wondering whether you’d be willing to give me advice?

(Anonymous, personal communication, September 12, 2004)

***

When I answer the phone in my NH apartment, Mom offers her usual greeting. “It’s your mother calling from Tampa!” She sounds cheerful. “How are you?”

“Hi, Mom! I’m ok.” I imagine my 73-year-old mother relaxing in her living room Barcalounger with her TV tuned to a tennis match or an equestrian event. “How are you?”

“I just read your depression story,” she tells me. “You are such a good writer!” She pauses. Then her tone lowers, her voice cracks, her words come hesitantly. I can hear the sadness in her voice. “I didn’t know how bad it was. I knew it was bad, but I didn’t think it was this bad. I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you.”

Tears roll down my cheeks. “No, Ma! It’s not your fault. You helped me every day. I don’t know if I could have gotten through without you.” I pause for emphasis. “I LOVE YOU!”

“I love you, too.”

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In 2003, I receive an email from Professor Kimberly Myers at the Penn State College of Medicine asking to include a version of my depression story in Illness ...
In the Academy: A Collection of Pathographies by Academics. I agree (Jago, 2007).

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In 2012, I receive an email from Professor Pat Sikes from the University of Sheffield in the UK. She wants to reprint my depression story in her two-volume collection Autoethnography. I agree (Jago, 2013).

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In 2016, I receive an email from Sarah Brown, a journalist for The Chronicle of Higher Education. The Chronicle is doing a story on professors coping with mental illness. “I read your depression story,” Sarah says. “And I want to interview you. Of course, I’ll let you give me feedback on what I write before publication.”

I am thrilled at the prospect of my story reaching more people and potentially helping them, so I eagerly accept. I have a phone interview with Sarah, and two weeks later, a photographer comes to my office to shoot photos for the article.

He asks me not to smile.

On September 23, 2016, “How 4 Professors Built Careers Despite Mental-health Struggles” (Brown, 2016) is published, without my editorial feedback. Not only does my photo make me look depressed (which I was not at the time), but the article suggests I hid my condition from the university, which is absolutely NOT true. But it’s too late; the story is published.

I imagine it showing up in the inboxes of academics across the country. I am simultaneously gratified and horrified.

Despite the misrepresentation, I still want UNH to add the story to the UNH Newsroom, the curated site of popular press articles featuring UNH faculty. I want to do anything I can to push back against the stigma of mental illness in the academy. But they don’t respond to my inquiry, leaving me with the sense that having a mentally ill faculty member is something UNH would like to hide that I embarrass them.

Fuck them, I think. The academy still has such a long way to go in addressing the mental health challenges faculty face.

***

In the twenty years I have been teaching Narrative at UNH, I have guided approximately 300 students through the challenging journey that is autoethnographic scholarship. As a gesture of camaraderie and to help them understand the ethics of autoethnography, I require students to read my depression story. Risky?

Yes.

Do the details of my story undermine my credibility? Our professional relationship?

Perhaps.

Is sharing my story rewarding?

Absolutely.

Whenever my students read my story, I am gifted with stories about their own mental health challenges—and there are many, many more with each passing year, especially recently. In fact, a 2019 analysis of evidence from two national surveys of the mental health of undergraduates, including a total of 788,235 students in U.S. colleges and universities, reported significant increases in rates of depression from 2012 to 2018. In one survey, rates for students with moderate to severe depression increased 74% in women and 49% in men over that time period (Duffy, Twenge, & Joiner, 2019). I see these statistics mirrored in my students and together we create a safe space for conversation about our experiences.

In 2014, 20-year-old Amanda (who has granted me permission to identify her) sits across from me at my office conference table to discuss her autoethnography project. “I read your article,” she says, sounding hesitant, her blue eyes fixed on mine. “Thank you for writing it. I saw so much of myself in your story. I suffer from major depression too.”

I put my hand to my heart and lean toward her. “Oh Amanda. I am sorry to hear this. I know how hard it can be.”

“Thank you. I am taking two different medications. They help, but.” Her voice trails off. She licks her lips, a sign of the dry mouth that can accompany some antidepressants. “I want to write about my own depression.”

I smile, so proud of her honesty and bravery. “Ok. But before you begin, I need to ask a question. Are you sure you want to do this? It won’t be easy—and you’ll be sharing your story with me and the rest of the class. I want to make sure you’re up to the task. It’s my responsibility as your professor to protect you.”

As I say these words, I think about Carolyn’s JCE review of my depression autoethnography.

Amanda sits up straight in her chair and looks right at me. “Yes. I am sure.”

During the next three months, Amanda writes “Depressed—Proceed with Caution: An Autoethnography of Depression” (Cote, 2016). Her beautifully written story is a gift to her classmates, to her family, and to me. “The writing process . . . was liberating,” she says in her autoethnography.
Once past the tsunami of emotion found in my memory of the time, I felt the urge to write. It felt as if a higher being was pulling me to the table, my fingers to the keys, my words to the screen. I couldn’t get away from it. A sign, perhaps, telling me I had to do this. In the end, writing this story left me with peace.

(p. 33)

Six months later, Amanda (Cote, 2017) bravely publishes “The Healing Power of Storytelling: An Exploration into the Autoethnographic Process,” a commentary on her autoethnographic adventure in UNH’s Inquiry Journal, a publication that highlights undergraduate research.

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In May 2018, I receive an email from Tony Adams. “Stacy Holman Jones, Carolyn Ellis, and I are starting work on a second edition of the Handbook of Autoethnography. . . . We write to ask if you would be interested in including your article as an exemplar” (Adams, personal communication, May 23, 2018).

I respond immediately, “I’m in! Thanks for thinking of me.”

In the end, we decide against republishing “Chronicking an academic depression” and decide to publish this article instead.

***

In January 2019, I present a version of this chapter at the Symposium on Autoethnography and Narrative Inquiry: Reflecting on the Legacy of Carolyn Ellis and Art Bochner. I am the first speaker on a panel Art has organized, and I am honored to be chosen. But due to back problems that have hampered my ability to travel, I haven’t presented at a conference in four years. So, as I sit next to Art at the long table in front of a room full of autoethnographers, friends, acquaintances, and strangers alike, my stomach tightens. I sip water and clutch my nine-page 18-point font script. I never present without a script; in fact, I hate presenting, laying myself bare to others, sharing intimate details of my life in a face-to-face setting. It’s nerve-wracking—but going personal is inherent to autoethnography. Nonetheless, I worry. How will others see me? My work? Am I sharing too much? What is the self I am presenting (Goffman, 1959)?

As I read my presentation, I take care to speak clearly. I try to bring my story to life through thick description (Geertz, 1973), dialogue, tone of voice, inflection, pacing. Interjections of humor help to lighten the mood, and audience laughter calms me.

At the end of my presentation, I look over at Art and notice tears in his eyes.

I gently put my hand on his shoulder. “It’s ok,” I say. He turns to me. “It’s not what you think.”

“I know.” And I do. Or at least I think I do. I believe Art feels compassion for me, for the pain I have suffered, not in a pitying way, but with sincere concern and love. I hold back tears.

I appreciate his concern, but I also wonder if my presentation of self over the years in my work has portrayed me as a troubled and sad person. In my autoethnographic work, I have written about many aspects of my life, including my family (Jago, 1996, 1998, 2011a), my mental health (Jago, 2002, 2007, 2014), cohabitation (Jago, 2011b), loss (Jago, 2004, 2015), and most recently, the challenges of being alone at mid-life and the importance of friendship (Jago, 2019). Currently, I am working on a project about the pain I have experienced over a lifetime of back problems and four recent spine surgeries (Jago, 2021). All of these experiences have been difficult, but I have also had many joyous and uplifting moments in my life. Why don’t I write about them more often? Does autoethnography lend itself much more easily to stories of difficulty, pain, and loss? And if so, what are the identity consequences? I see myself as a survivor, a strong woman who perseveres. But do others?

***

My depression story continues to be lived and written, including one new episode of major depression after an emergency appendectomy in 2011 and a horrifying experience with antidepressant medications in 2014 (Jago, 2014). I continue to see both a therapist and a psychiatrist, two relationships that help me keep the darkness at bay. I am not living a restitution story, one where my life has been restored to what it was before (Frank, 1995), but I cope with mental illness on a daily basis.

When I wrote “Chronicking an Academic Depression,” I never imagined the life my autoethnography would live. As a result of publishing my autoethnography, people around the world continue to reach out to thank me and to share their own stories of mental illness. Together, we have supported one another. But more importantly, we are building a community of understanding that I believe has created spaces for challenging the stigma around mental illness that persists in the academy and beyond.

Over the past few years, concerns about the high rates of mental illness in the academy have led to
more research about the stress, anxiety, and depression experienced by both undergraduate and graduate students (for example, see Liu, Stevens, Wong, Yasui, & Chen, 2018; Duffy et al., 2019; Evans, Bira, Gastelum, Weiss, & Vanderford, 2018; Leveque et al., 2017; and Rudick & Dannels, 2018), especially in relation to the impact of COVID-19 (for example, see Son, Hegde, Smith, Wang, & Sasangohar, 2020; and Wang et al., 2020). There has also been research exploring the mental health challenges faced by faculty (for example, see Burns & Green, 2019; Calafell, 2017; England, 2016; McCallum, 2017; Price, 2011; Price & Kerschbaum, 2017; Price, Salzer, O'Shea, & Kerschbaum, 2017; Quijada, 2020; Sabagh et al., 2018; Whitten, 2020). Although I am saddened by the rates of mental illness reported in these studies, I am pleased to see the topic getting more attention. Nonetheless, we have a long way to go, especially as the stigma of mental illness persists. Many questions remain: What can we do to address the conditions in the academy that contribute to mental illness in students and faculty? How can we help students and faculty to overcome their mental health challenges?

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Writing autoethnography has been very rewarding. Making sense of my experience and sharing those stories with others, including friends, family, and colleagues; engaging in dialogue about life’s challenges; making a contribution to academic research; and building communities of understanding continues to be gratifying. But there are always risks—personal and professional. In the end, for me the rewards of writing autoethnography have definitely outweighed the risks. I continue to embrace the vulnerability that comes with living an autoethnographic life.

I wouldn’t have it any other way.

NOTE

1. I am referring to major depressive disorder (MDD). Please see the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th edition for a complete definition of MDD. MDD is not synonymous with the everyday sadness that people often refer to as depression. MDD is a clinical diagnosis.

REFERENCES


