In his *Journals and Papers* Soren Kierkegaard wrote, “Deep within every human being there still lives the anxiety over the possibility of being alone in the world, forgotten by God, overlooked among the millions and millions in this enormous household” (1981, p. 363). That is a harrowing description of a life without love. For Kierkegaard, love is relational, so to live without love is to be truly alone (Dalførth, 2013; Milbank, 2014) Yet what is love? It is a beguiling question that’s been pondered for millennia. There’s no consensus. Love is joyous. Love is wonderful. Love is esoteric. Love is ineffable. Love is enigmatic. Love is pain. Love is a battlefield. God is love. Love is all you need. As Pascal (1660) noted, “The heart has its reasons, of which reason knows nothing” (p. 227). We know (or at least we think we know) when we are in love. We know when we love someone. We know when we are loved. There are few things more joyous (and sometimes more painful) than being in a reciprocal loving relationship. Lovers may have reasons and rationalizations. However, as Art Bochner once told me, “Few questions are more perturbing than when someone you love asks ‘Why do you love me?’ It’s a question that requires an accounting of the inexpressible, and no answer is satisfying” (personal communication, April 17, 2007). Why you love them—as if you could positively and definitely answer that question to their satisfaction or yours—is less important than asking, with Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1950), “How do I love thee?” (p. 7). We often consider love as a thing, an object, a feeling, as a noun. However, as Browning frames it, love is a verb. A doing.

It is my contention that autoethnography is, at heart, about love. This chapter will examine the concept of love as a verb, of love as action, and explore the connections between the philosophy of love and the practices of doing autoethnography. It will consider how autoethnographic research connects to the three imperatives of love described by the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard: love of self, preferential love, and agape love. I show how Kierkegaard provides another philosophical basis for personal narrative research, as well as practical and material action for autoethnographers through his conception of love. Doing autoethnography is, after all, an existentialist approach to research (Bochner, 2013, 2014; Herrmann, 2014a). And Kierkegaard is generally considered the father of existentialism (Guignon, 2003, 2004; Herrmann, 2008). Before getting there, first a little history to contextualize Kierkegaard.

**AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC CONNECTIONS TO KIERKEGAARD**

Kierkegaard recognized the existential necessity of the living subjective individual’s point of view. As he wrote in his papers, “Damn and hell, I can abstract from everything but not from myself; I can’t even forget myself when I sleep” (1967–1978, p. 132). I am using Kierkegaard as the underpinning for this chapter because our late-modern situation is similar to the one in which he found himself in the early to mid-nineteenth century wherein political movements and philosophical systems tended to ignore the living individual (Garff, 2005; Hannay, 2003; Kirmmse, 1990; Stewart, 2008). Political upheavals occurred across the globe. Technological change transpired as part of the Second Industrial Revolution. “Scientist” replaced the term “natural philosopher,” and science became a separate profession. Philosophers tried to systematize the life-world: Hegel, Marx, and Engels within dialectics; Comte within positivism; Mill within empiricism; Emerson and Thoreau in transcendentalism. Kierkegaard recognized the importance—even necessity—of the subjective individual.

Fast forward 200 years. We’ve seen the modernization of China, the Arab Spring and Eastern European
revolutions, the collapse of the Soviet communism, and the end of apartheid in South Africa. More, we have seen advances in medicine, neuroscience, artificial intelligence, genetics, technology, as well as media and communication. Like Kierkegaard, we are living in exciting but tumultuous times. And like Kierkegaard, autoethnographers are using personal experiences to probe and question the underpinnings and grand narratives of culture.

What has not changed is how Western culture continues its endeavor to apply science to understanding the outer universe and the inner world (Richardson & Guignon, 2008). Reductionism, scientism, and objectivity do work. You cannot send the Opportunity Rover to Mars without science and its philosophical underpinnings. However, as Heidegger (1968) said, “Science does not think” (p. 3). What he meant was that science qua science does not examine its own presuppositions, presumptions, or assumptions. Science and scientists do the work of science. There’s nothing necessarily wrong with that, until you get to the human sciences, where that philosophical approach becomes immediately problematic (Herrmann, 2020). As Nagel (1989) noted, “there are things about the world and life and ourselves that cannot be adequately understood from a maximally objective standpoint, however much it may extend our understanding beyond the point from which we started” (p. 7). Of course, we do have materiality. As Guignon (2012) wrote, “There are indeed certain ’essential structures’ of humans—such characteristics as temporality, historicity, thrownness into a world and understanding. But these structural aspects of the human cannot be reduced to empirically discovered, law-like causal determinants of objects” (p. 99). Our existence is necessarily facticity-full. However, from the subjective and intersubjective point of view, you are more than a quantifiable object. Your life means something to your loved ones, to your colleagues, to your friends. Your life means something to you.

The same is true of human emotions. From a scientific standpoint, human emotions, including love, are the firing of certain neurons and synapses in the brain, or reactions to pheromones, or barely controllable psycho-physiological urges of the id, or evolutionary biological drives, and so forth. None of these perspectives, however, speak to any of our passions, our concerns, or, as Frankfurt (1988) called it, “the importance of what we care about” (p. 80). None speak to how we subjectively feel our emotions, including love. None speak to our personal experience of love or the commitments we make to whom we love. This, according to Kierkegaard, is where narrative writing comes in.

Kierkegaard is best known as a modern philosopher and theologian. Almost all twentieth- and twenty-first-century philosophy, including existentialism, absurdism, epistemological anarchism, postmodernism, and certain forms of analytic and game theory, is indebted in large respects to Kierkegaard (Glock, 2004; Guignon, 2003; Mulhall, 2001; Westphal & Matustik, 1995). He was also an astute cultural critic, interrogating the arts, politics, the political economy, the church, nationalism, and the mass media of his day (Backhouse, 2011; Herrmann, 2015; Matuštík, 1994; Pérez-Álvarez, 2009; Stewart, 2011). Moreover, he is regarded as a founder of humanistic and existential psychology and a phenomenologist of human emotions and identity (Klempe, 2017; McCarthy, 2011; Strawser, 2015; Welz, 2013). The latter appears strange to say because the normative narrative of phenomenology doesn’t include Kierkegaard: it goes from Schleiermacher to Dilthey to Husserl to Heidegger to Merleau-Ponty. Like many genealogical narratives, that narrative is “truth troubled” (Tullis Owen, McRae, Adams, & Vitale, 2009).

The Kierkegaardian concepts of anxiety, care/concern, repetition, fallenness, temporality, self-reflection, and the dichotomy of constancy/change of the self through time remain important aspects of philosophical, psychological, sociological, and narrative inquiry (Caputo, 1988; Herrmann, 2015; Klempe, 2017; McCarthy, 2011; Magurshak, 1987). Kierkegaard’s re-centering of the subject and the study of the emotions and love become retrospectively and prospectively important for autoethnography. He was fighting some of the same battles autoethnographers are facing today in a world that lauds objective scientific research and overarching ideological systems. As in Kierkegaard’s day, the personal humanness and experience of being human are being subsumed, assimilated, and subordinated to larger scientific and economic discourses.

From the beginning of his authorship, Kierkegaard (2000) was interested in various perspectives on living and discusses “ways of life” that have resonance with autoethnographic research. As Bochner (2012b) noted, “In practice, autoethnography is not so much a methodology as a way of life” (p. 225). Autoethnographies are, to borrow Kierkegaard’s (1962) book title, Works of Love, although a better translation is Acts of Love. Kierkegaard, like Browning, emphasized the idea that love is not only an ephemeral feeling or emotion but also a verb, action, doing. Love was extremely important to Kierkegaard, who suggested that there are three different ways of performing love or being a lover: love of self, preferential love, and love of all humanity. We will look at each of these in turn and connect them to autoethnographic research.
KIERKEGAARD, AUTOETHNOGRAPHY, AND SELF-LOVE

Kierkegaard took love of self seriously. As he wrote to his cousin: “Above all do not forget your duty to love yourself” (1978, p. xxi). Here, he was reminding his cousin who was suffering from a long illness and separateness from others that he needed to love himself. Furthermore, in his sustained investigation into love, Kierkegaard continually reminds his readers of the often overlooked second part of the second love commandment. Both commandments are well known.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind. This is the first and most important commandment. The second most important commandment is like this one. And it is, Love others as much as you love yourself.

(Matt 22:37–40, CEV)

Most theologians concentrate on the first commandment: love God. Scholars and theologians who examine the second commandment emphasize the first part: love your neighbor. In contradistinction, the first section of Kierkegaard’s Works of Love accentuates the second part of the second commandment: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (1962, p. 17, emphasis in the original). This “as yourself” is of particular import to Kierkegaard, given that his entire philosophical and religious opus was to show and assist people through the various spheres of life to become responsible self-actualized individuals. This is key to understanding his writings.

Like autoethnographers, Kierkegaard continues to be misread and misunderstood (Boer, 2013; Klemke, 1976). First, his method was misunderstood, as scholars thought his pseudonyms spoke for him, which they did not. The pseudonymous authors he invented gave their own particular first-person life perspectives. For example, Constantine Constantius is the pseudonymous author of Repetition and a psychologist; Either/Or’s Judge William is a societal ethicist; Anti-Climacus is the radically ideal Christian who wrote The Sickness unto Death. In other words, Kierkegaard was using pseudonyms to provide first-person narratives and stories to show his readers various life perspectives and the necessity for self-reflection. As he noted:

One of the tragedies of modern times is precisely this—to have abolished the “I,” the personal “I.”

Therefore I regard it as my merit that, by bringing poetized personalities who say “I” to the center of life’s actuality (my pseudonyms), I have done what I can do to accustom contemporaries once more to hear an “I,” a personal “I” speak.

(1967–1978, p. 88)

While I’m certainly not suggesting that Kierkegaard was an autoethnographer as we use the term, he was a personal narrative writer (Bjerg, 1991). He utilized the first person, trying to reach each reader individually through these various first-person perspectives. As he wrote:

So in the pseudonymous works there is not a single word that is mine, I have no opinion about these works except as a third person, no knowledge of their meaning except as a reader, not the remotest private relation to them.

(p. 529)

Therefore, in accordance with Kierkegaard’s understanding of his own writing strategy, whenever I am quoting a pseudonymous work I will use that pseudonym’s name.

Second, like autoethnographic writers, Kierkegaard was accused by scholars of being irrational, asocial, anti-social, solipsistic, and narcissistically subjective (Boer, 2013; Haecker, 1948; Rose, 2002). Even Skogard (2017), in his recent chapter in Love in the Time of Ethnography, perpetuates this error, saying that “Kierkegaard is reasserting the primacy of intellect and I believe abandoning love altogether” (p. 84). However, this overlooks the important reasons that Kierkegaard used the first-person perspective. As Holmer (1958) noted:

Kierkegaard’s constant and lifelong wish, to which his entire literature gives expression, was to create a new and rich subjectivity in himself and his readers. He sought at once to produce subjectivity if it were lacking, to correct it if it were there and needed correction, to amplify and strengthen it when it was weak and undeveloped.

(p. 17)

Kierkegaard was concerned with a process he called “leveling” which creates “the crowd,” which is “a homogeneous abstraction where all individuals become interchangeable, where no one lives as an
individual, but lives solely within the definitions of the crowd’s monological voice” (Herrmann, 2013, p. 346). Against this, he was trying to resuscitate the personal “I” that was lost in the abstractness of systematic philosophies and the mass-media phenomenon of his time. He worked to reintroduce the idea of life and love as lived experience and individual responsibility for one’s self.

For autoethnographers, the criticisms about Kierkegaard’s concepts of self-love and subjectivity likely sound familiar (Bochner, 2000; Denzin, 2009; Ellis, 2009). Love of self is one of the critiques often proffered by those who do not believe autoethnography is an acceptable research method. Autoethnographers are considered self-absorbed navel-gazers who delude themselves with overbearing subjectivity and overwrought emotions. Autoethnography is often accused of being a-social, contextless, egotistical, self-indulgent, unprincipled, vacuous, and narcissistic. At worst, autoethnography is “bullshit” and autoethnographers and personal narrative researchers are “self-obsessed c**ts” (Campbell, 2017, para. 16). Many of these critiques are of the same type that confronted Kierkegaard by individuals who cannot differentiate between self-centeredness and self-love. As will be fleshed out here, for Kierkegaard self-centeredness is not the same as self-love. Self-centeredness involves a narcissism that disregards others, whereas self-love necessarily includes our love of others.

As Anti-Climicus wrote in The Sickness unto Death:

> The self is a relation which relates itself to its own self, or it is that in the relation that the relation relates itself to its own self; the self is not the relation but that the relation relates itself to its own self. (Kierkegaard, 1980, p. 13)

While there’s been a lot of speculation over what this ambiguous statement means, at base it can be interpreted that not only are we conscious but we constantly establish our self by way of introspection about our self. I can think of myself and think of myself thinking of myself. Through the action of self-reflection, I can then make continual personal ethical decisions about who I ought to become, and then act upon these interpretations and reinterpretations, and change what I do in the world, and who I am becoming. For Kierkegaard and for autoethnographers, the self is not so much a noun but is a “selfing”: the activity of creating a self (McAdams, 1997; van Ommen & Painter, 2005). The application of this existentialist idea of continual becoming is one reason personal narratives and autoethnographies are not just narratives of “retrospective sensemaking” (Weick, 1989, 2012) but also future-oriented prospective narratives (Langellier, 1989; Richardson, 1990).

Kierkegaard saw loving the self as a prism by which we can understand our own emerging self-consciousness, to understand the tensions in the actual and the possible, the finite and the infinite, in our own lives. As Anti-Climicus noted, “The more consciousness, the more self; the more consciousness, the more will, and the more will the more self” (Kierkegaard, 1980, p. 99). To love one’s self is a relationship of paradoxical syntheses where one can see oneself more clearly through self-reflexivity. For Kierkegaard, self-love is not an exclusionary, competitive love that acts to the detriment of others but a love that starts to open to one’s self—warts and all—and thereby can change the self. Like autoethnographic and personal narrative writers, for Kierkegaard the emphasis on the self and on loving one’s self was not intended to be an ego-driven, narcissistic, self-aggrandizing love.

Whoever has any knowledge of people will certainly admit that just as he has often wished to be able to move them to relinquish self-love, he has also had to wish that it were possible to teach them to love themselves.

(1962, p. 23)

This is not a love based on self-centeredness but a love based on self-care.

As Ferreira (2001) noted:

Kierkegaard distinguishes between two forms of self-love: a ‘selfish,’ exclusive love of self, which is at odds with the good of the other, and a ‘proper,’ inclusive love of self, which both encompasses the good of the other and is the measure of the good of the other.

(p. 35)

To love one’s self is justified in a number of ways. First, the as yourself reminds us that we ought to love ourselves the right way: unconditionally, the way the Creator of the universe is said to love us. Second, we need to be willing to love ourselves in attempting to become the best future possible selves we can be. That of course comes with correcting and fine-tuning our self’s direction when we find ourselves becoming who we don’t want to be. It means recognizing one’s foibles and shortcomings. It means critiquing one’s self when we do not live up to the standards we have set.
for ourselves. It means self-forgiveness. Above all, it means that despite all of the problematic aspects of our lived lives, we are compassionate to and with our self. Finally, if we want to love others in the fullest way possible, we must first love ourselves. If no one is to be omitted from our love, we must love ourselves, because “we cannot arbitrarily exclude our own self” (Ferreira, 2001, p. 33). If we are to perform acts of love, we need to love our self first; otherwise, we have nothing to give to others. After all, one cannot draw water for someone else if our own well is dry.

Autoethnographers do not come out and state that being self-reflexive is an act of self-love. However, when one ponders the self-reflexive parts of autoethnographic writings, self-love is there in the midst. These autoethnographic acts of love are self-reflective ascertainties and implementations of where and when to “care for the self” (Foucault, 1994), logotherapy (Esping, 2010) and self-care (Quaye, 2017; Wright, 2009). When Ellis (1998) was writing about her minor bodily stigma, she was writing about how she could properly love herself, even as she was questioning her physical self. When Griffin (2012) wrote about being an angry biracial Black woman, she was simultaneously writing about learning to love herself. When Adams (2006, 2011) penned his works about the closet and coming out (or being in), he was writing about loving himself despite the confusion, the stigma, and the definitive familial dilemmas that might come about as he discovered and created his self. As Muhungi (2011) suffered the loss of his indigenous language, he needed to navigate the sense of loss and relearn self-love. When Boylorn (2017) wrote about blackgirlness as she was growing up, this too was an act of self-love. As White (2014) narrated their fat-trans identity, they worked from a space of self-love and self-care. As Bochner (2014) “came to narrative,” he was not only writing about his intellectual paradigm change, but also writing lovingly about the type of person he wanted to become. Vickers (2007) wrote autoethnographically about an activity that assisted her to love herself and overcome her post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after years of workplace bullying. These are all examples of works of (self) love in autoethnographic and narrative research.

Finally, autoethnographers need to remind themselves that self-love may include not publishing. As Tullis (2013) noted, “Autoethnographers may knowingly take on some personal and professional risks to write, perform and present their research” (p. 252). Then again, they might not consider some of the unintended consequences. We must seriously consider self-love before we publish about our lives. Personal narrative research can haunt us for years. “Ted” and “Alice” are the people who wrote about the abortion (Ellis & Bochner, 1992). Corey and Nakayama (1997) became the porn guys. Jago (2002) became the depressed professor. Blinne (2012) became the one who masturbates. Although all of these scholars are more than their autoethnographic snapshots, these published selves will always be out there. Therefore, one act of love, one aspect of self-love, is the ability to be responsible for the self that one commits to paper, publishes, and performs. As Kierkegaard (1962) noted, “You shall love yourself in the right way” (p. 22), and writing about one’s self is one way to learn to love one’s self. For Kierkegaard and autoethnographers, writing from the first-person perspective is not about being self-centered but an important aspect of self-care. Self-love is a starting point, not the end point.

**PREFERENTIAL LOVE:**

**AUTOETHNOGRAPHICALLY LOVING OUR LOVED ONES**

Although written from the first-person point of view, and often accused of narcissism, autoethnography is never only about the self. In many cases it includes Kierkegaard’s second type of love, preferential love—the love of and for family, friends, lovers, colleagues, and so forth. As he wrote in *Works of Love* , “To love people is the only thing worth living for, and without this love you are not really living” (Kierkegaard, 1962, p. 365). Preferential love is the love we have for some particular someone. Many early Kierkegaardian scholars suggested that he maintained strict separation of the two forms of love proposed by the Greeks: *eros* and *philia*. However, Kierkegaard (1962) noted that preferential love includes both *eros* and *philia*, erotic love as well as friendship. Various interpretations of Kierkegaard’s thought suggest that his philosophy of love is both asocial and only concerned with universal love for people. (Wait, isn’t that a paradox? How can it be both?) Either way he was interpreted by early scholars, however, he was supposedly uninterested in interpersonal or romantic relationships.

In fact, many scholars suggested that romantic relationships and friendships are negated in Kierkegaard’s philosophy altogether (Buber, 1947; Rose, 2002). Some interpreters thought that he considered preferential love immoral. Others thought that because he stressed the equality of all people to the Creator, and that we too are to treat others equally, that there was no possible way for there to be preferential love—*philia* or *eros*—in his philosophy. A thorough reading of his various discourses and *Works of Love*, however, shows this is not true. For Kierkegaard, the equality of
value of people “does not imply that he also needs to be committed to the identity of treatment” (Lippitt, 2009, p. 84). I can love and value both you and my significant other equally, but how I enact that love will be decidedly different.

Kierkegaard defends preferential love and its exclusivity in numerous places.

Love and friendship are good fortune. Poetically understood . . . it is good fortune, the highest good fortune, to fall in love, to find the one and only beloved; it is good fortune, almost as great, to find the one and only friend.

(1962, p. 64)

Kierkegaard champions philia and discusses how the “mine and yours become ours,” which is the strength of preferential relationships (1962, p. 266). Furthermore, because he was a blunt and succinct critic of Christendom, he noted one particular heretical yet popular belief as the cause of this misconception about philia and eros:

When people carried out in life their understanding of Christianity, it was thought that Christianity had something against erotic love because it was based upon a drive; it was thought that Christianity, which, as spirit, has posited a cleft between flesh and spirit, hated erotic love as the sensuous. But this was a misunderstanding, an exaggeration of spirituality.

(1962, p. 52)

Kierkegaard was no gnostic. He did not believe that being spiritual meant that you needed to leave any and all worldly things behind, including other people, especially the particular people that we love. This is not to say that Kierkegaard did not see some dangers in preferential love.

Kierkegaard was concerned that preferential love could become so exclusive that it excluded everyone else. First, he feared that larger important concerns for all humanity would be negated if one was only immersed in and consumed only by preferential love. Second, he saw how one’s love of and for the beloved could make one forget to love one’s self. Finally, and a larger concern for Kierkegaard, was that preferential love would come to be viewed as simply an exchange, that we have these preferential relationships based only upon what we can get back from someone, that these would become simple economic or teleological relationships. This is what Heidegger (1962) also feared. As he noted, “the greatest danger” is “that calculative thinking may someday come to be accepted and practiced as the only way of thinking” (p. 56). Both philosophers would have taken the social exchange theory of relationships, with its base economic underpinnings, to task.

Without doubt we get something out of these preferential relationships, but preferential relationships for Kierkegaard are not necessarily about what I can get out of you. Rather, they are about the edification of the other. For Kierkegaard, edification is not mere empathy for another but respect for another individual’s capability, mysteriousness, possibility, privacy; it expresses equality and mutuality between individuals (Herrmann, 2008). Edification “turns out to be an implicitly mutual relationship between two people because when we build up others we are allowing them to build up others, including us, as well” (Ferreira, 2001, p. 140). Edification is a dialogic practice.

Here’s a quick anecdote. I’ve known Art Herbig for nearly two decades, starting when we began our master’s program together. While we have not written autoethnographies together, we write together often as we are exploring the concepts of polymedia and polymediated narrative (Herbig & Herrmann, 2016). This friendship is more than a simple exchange. It is not simply that I get something from Art and he gets something from me. Rather, as friends, as people who have preferential love for each other, we are continually working to strengthen and edify each other. We recognize our similarities and our differences. We understand each other’s likes and dislikes. We have a mutual understanding of each other’s strengths and weaknesses. Although we are both communication scholars, Art comes to projects as a rhetorician and documentary filmmaker, whereas I come from an organizational and philosophical background. We work to “build up” each other. We work to make our foundation firmer. I often write either using too much casual vernacular or become tangentially philosophical. Art often writes in oblique academic sentences that sometimes lose the reader. We critique each other harshly, but lovingly (you should see our feedback), yet all our work is, to use Kierkegaard’s term, to “edify.” The relationship here is a loving one. The fact that we have good outcomes in the form of published works is not the point of our love for each other. Rather, it is a bonus of our loving friendship, of our philia.

However, if we are to follow Kierkegaard’s conception of love as edification and building up others, autoethnographers must consider the various consequences about what they write and publish about
those with whom they are in relationships. As Bob Krizek once told me, “Just because you have a story to tell, doesn’t mean you have to tell it” (personal communication, May 12, 2011). Writing about others is not necessarily about narrative truth. As Bochner (2000) noted, “The purpose of self-narrative is to extract meaning from experience rather than to depict experience exactly as it was lived” (p. 270). However, writing autoethnographically needs to be about fairness “to make certain you’re not just drawing conclusions in your favor” (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 147). When I have read some of my earlier autoethnographies, I have retrospectively questioned some of my decisions. “Was I fair to my former fiancé?” “Would I let Dad read what I wrote about him?” “Oh . . . that story I wrote about losing our family home is ‘off.’” What we write about others has implications, not only for them, not only for ourselves, but for those relationships. Knowing this, I sent the aforementioned anecdote to Art Herbig for his review, not necessarily for his approval, but because I have a responsibility to him and our friendship when I write about us. If you’re wondering, he replied, “I love that.”

Like Kierkegaard did, autoethnographers and personal narrative writers often explore preferential love relationships. This should come as no surprise given that these relationships are the most important ones in our lives. Like the relationship between Art and I, autoethnographies focusing on preferential love are about understanding the self in relation to the ones we love, trying to understand the ones that we may have loved at one time or did not seem to love us back (Foster, 2002; Krizek, 1992; Wyatt & Adams, 2014). These preferential autoethnographies are built upon trying to understand more fully other persons in relation to ourselves and ourselves in relation to others.

Goodall’s (2006) works on narrative inheritance is an expression of preferential love, when his son started asking about his family history. Adams (2006, 2011) and Bochner (1997) and Ellis (1995) have each written autoethnographically to understand, to empathize, and to identify with their families, lovers, and friends, relationships that are preferential. For Kierkegaard (1997), “It is love that leniently and mercifully says: I forgive you everything!” (p. 172). By writing autoethnographically, Bochner (2012a) and Townsend (2018) have worked to have compassion for and to forgive the flawed people for whom we have preferential love. These autoethnographies, too, are acts of love. [In contradistinction, I published three autoethnographies about my challenging and changing relationship with my father, whom I finally realized did not love me and whom I stopped loving over time (Herrmann, 2005, 2014b; 2016). I suggest here that sometimes writing autoethnographically about preferential love relationships is simultaneously and primarily an act of self-love. Or as the Facebook relationship status goes: “It’s complicated.”]

### AUTOETHNOGRAPHY, KIERKEGAARD, AND AGAPE LOVE

Loving the self properly and preferential love are important aspects of Kierkegaard’s thought and for autoethnographers. However, Kierkegaard was also concerned with agape, the universal love for all of humankind. There continues to be a debate about how Kierkegaard’s conceptions of self-love, preferential love, and universal agape love can be integrated. That academic debate often misses the point that Kierkegaard (1962) made when he noted, “The fundamental equality in love lies in the category neighbor. Whatever your fate in romance and friendship, whatever your privation, whatever your loss, the highest still stands: love your neighbor!” (p. 20). For Kierkegaard, agape love, because it is universal, includes both love of self and the love with those with whom we are in preferential relationships, although the expressions of that love will be different. Moreover, universal love is, paradoxically, an act of self-love. As Kierkegaard wrote:

To love yourself in the right way and to love the neighbor correspond perfectly to one another; fundamentally they are one and the same thing. You shall love yourself in the same way as you love your neighbor when you love him as yourself.

(1962, pp. 22–23, emphasis in the original)

Like many theologians, Kierkegaard uses the term “neighbor,” not as a location marker, but as a universal: “your neighbor is everyone” (1962, p. 17).

In an in-depth discussion of the parable of the Good Samaritan, Kierkegaard notes that determining who one’s neighbor is, is not the point of the story. Rather, the parable is about “becoming a neighbor oneself, about showing oneself to be a neighbor just as the Samaritan showed it by his mercy” (1962, p. 22). Likewise, he points out that the Samaritan does not address otherworldly spirituality. Rather, the Good Samaritan sees another in worldly, material need—physical and financial—and performs acts of love: tending to his wounds, carrying him to an inn, paying the innkeeper to allow the beaten man to stay until he is healthy. Moreover, agape is a gift without
expectation of reciprocity. Love sees need in the here and now and acts to alleviate that need. Autoethnographers are primed to show that kind of love in action.

Let’s take one example. Through a heart-wrenching personal experience, Arnold (2020) recognized the medical system in her area of Tennessee treated the mothers of stillborn babies in a clinical manner, under the auspices of the grand medical paradigm. The medical narrative did not consider nor allow for the emotional, the personal, the familial, or the intimate motherly aspects of that experience. As an autoethnographer, Arnold used her personal narrative to change how the medical institutions in her region attend to women and the stillborn babies, introducing a more complete care approach into the system. This is an act of love. This is love of neighbor.

As Kierkegaard (1962) wrote, “Our neighbor is our equal” (p. 18). His concept of agape love can be summarized as all-inclusive, transcendent, non-preferential, non-comparative, and edifying, based on the idea that we are all equal because we are all human (Polk, 1997). Agape love is about the building up and edification of all people. This love was the basis upon which Kierkegaard became a dedicated, even harsh, social and cultural critic. For Kierkegaard, agape love includes righteous anger aimed at injustice (Wolterstorf, 2015). As he wrote, “Justice severely sets the boundary and says: No further! This is the limit. For you there is no forgiveness, and there is nothing more to be said” (1997, p. 172). He considered his critical activity as “a corrective” (1938). As Sjursen (1969) noted, “For something to be a corrective it must necessarily be bound to the public domain, as a polemical assertion against either public actions or statements” (p. 202). Despite Kierkegaard’s supposed emphasis on individualism, he was absolutely concerned with the state, the church, and other organizations as political and historical institutions (Sirvent & Morgan, 2018).

As such, he attacked the economic-religious-cultural narrative that was based upon the idea that the rich had divine favor, which “prompts the old atrocity again—namely, the idea that the unfortunate, the poor are to blame for their condition, that it is because they are not pious” (1967, p. 164). These same discourses about poverty proliferate today. Autoethnography as critical interrogation shows the intimate connections between the individual, the discursive, and the political. Take the autoethnographic approach to homelessness, for example. It is not simply the fact of a lack of shelter but also the discourses of stigma, shame, and individual failure that accompany the fact (Rennels & Purnell, 2017). Finley and Diversi (2010) noted they “want to bring attention to the politics in the construction of knowledge about homelessness” through autoethnography (p. 11). Same with the issue of poverty. As Krumer-Nevo (2009) wrote, working with those in poverty “needs political, historical research and practice that is grounded in the lived experiences of people in poverty and in the lived experiences, dilemmas and challenges of practitioners and activists” (p. 318). Agape love in action not only says, “no one should be homeless or hungry,” but should act upon those needs in explicitly political and personal ways. As noted, love sees need in the here and now and acts to alleviate that need.

Moreover, Kierkegaard opposed what we would now call Christian nationalism, the blurring of the lines between the church and the state. He critiqued both sides—politicians and preachers—who were play-acting as the pious faithful to attain and maintain power. Kierkegaard believed that the combination of state power and church power was extremely dangerous, for the state, for the church, and for individuals (Backhouse, 2011; Herrmann, 2015; Sirvent & Morgan, 2018). Recently, narrative writers and autoethnographers are seriously taking up Kierkegaard’s critique. They are writing their experiences from within the church showing us the problematic aspects of church culture, including the politicization of evangelicalism, support and/or opposition of LGBTQIA inclusion, purity culture, and how eschatological belief systems inform both (Barton, 2010; Herrmann, 2021; Ingersoll, 2017; Loren & Rambo, 2018; Šumeru, 2017).

Beyond the intermingling of the church and the state, Kierkegaard (1978) critiqued the media of his day, noting that “the present age is the age of advertisement, the age of miscellaneous announcements: nothing happens, but what does happen is instant notification” (p. 70). He was concerned that people would lose themselves in the crowd, losing individual self-reflection to be current and fashionable. Moreover, he noted “everything in our day, even the most insignificant project, even the most empty communication, is designed merely to jolt the senses or to stir up the masses, the crowd, the public, noise!” (1990, p. 47). One can only wonder what he would have thought of Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram.

Likewise, Kierkegaard was concerned about the ethics within our workplaces, our employment, and our organizations. As he wrote:

What means do you use in order to carry out your occupation? Are the means as important to you as the end, wholly as important? … One thinks that the end is the main thing and demands of one who is striving that he reach the end. He need not be so particular about the means. Yet this is not so.

(1847/1956, p. 141)
Organizational autoethnographers are taking up this call. When Denker (2017) wrote about struggling with her employment situation at a tavern, she was writing from a position of loving herself as well as critiquing how the job necessitated the performance of sexuality. When Poulos (2012) wrote about being denied tenure, he was writing with love in mind, including the love of his profession. When Hunniecutt (2017) wrote about being socialized into the military, she was writing not only about her predicament of being a female soldier but also about the discourses that create untenable subject positions for women in the military. Watson (2017) showed her love of journalism and media, while critiquing the nonexistent gender parity and the ethically challenged decision-making in her workplace. Once again, these critical autoethnographies are based upon love, working for the emancipation of all who find themselves oppressed, subjugated, and tyrannized. These autoethnographies are written from a space not of self-righteousness but of righteous anger at injustice.

Like his concern about various preferential relationships, these societal critiques also belie the accusations that Kierkegaard was a-cosmic, narcissistic, and solipsistic. Agape love for Kierkegaard meant looking both inward and outward with a critical eye. Autoethnographies, as cultural critique, are also acts of love of this kind. As Holman Jones, Adams, and Ellis (2013) noted, “autoethnographers intentionally highlight the relationship of their experiences and stories to culture and cultural practices” (p. 22). As Allen-Collinson (2013) wrote, “At the heart of autoethnography, for me, is that ever shifting focus between levels: from the macro, wide sociological angle on socio-cultural frame-work, to the micro, zoom focus on the embedded self” (p. 296). Like Kierkegaard had done, autoethnographers recognize that the political is the personal. The work of autoethnography involves pursuing justice: racial, gender, ethnic, religious, social, and economic. By interrogating taken-for-granted cultural interpretations, grand narratives, and hegemonic discourses, autoethnography acts as an emancipatory practice (Adams & Herrmann, 2020). Or to use Kierkegaard’s terminology, it “edifies” and “builds up.”Autoethnographies as cultural critiques are acts of love that hopefully will emancipate a better future for all of us.

CODA

Autoethnographers regularly express their high regard for existential and phenomenological approaches to first-person research, and Kierkegaard is sometimes given a nod of acknowledgment. However, his actual approaches are not reflected upon retrospectively in autoethnographic practice. This chapter examined how his work informs the philosophical basis for autoethnography as a research practice. The object of his work and life was “to avoid the pitfalls of merely academic exercises and to keep one’s eye on the state of one’s soul and on the state of our souls in congress with others” (Mooney, 2008, p. 6). Similarly, his particular practices of narrative writing and cultural critique need to be brought forward into present discussions and future deliberations of autoethnography. His examination of the various forms of love and the variety of works of love can inform the practical and material aspects of autoethnographic research. As he wrote:

> The foundation—love—is laid in every person in whom there is love. And the edifice to be constructed, is love. It is love that edifies. Love builds up, and when it builds, it builds up love. Love is the ground; love is the building; love builds up. To build up another is to build up love, and it is love that does the building up. Love is the ground, and to build up means precisely to construct from the ground up. 

(1962, p. 212)

From love of self, to preferential love, to the universal love of agape, Kierkegaard provides a place for both reflective contemplation and active public undertakings autoethnographers can draw upon.

REFERENCES


Kierkegaard, S. A. (1956). *Purity of heart is to will one thing* (D. Steere, Trans.). Harper. (Original work published 1847)


