

## **Creating an alternative dissertation: Learning from the gates of loving inquiry**

By Ahava Shira

*A learning space has three essential dimensions: openness, boundaries and an air of hospitality.*

Palmer, 1993, pp. 71-75

*Where it was a matter of integrating into the same, it is now a question of recognizing what differs, and of trying to compose a moving whole in which each one welcomes the contribution of the other while guarding their own life.*

Luce Irigaray, 2002, pp. 170-1

*It can be very awkward to move from between seeing with the eye of judgment and the eye of the heart, half caught in an old way of being and yet sensing, even remembering, that a larger and more generous vision is possible.*

Gendler, 2007, p. 109

My alternative PhD dissertation documented my practice of Loving Inquiry during a year of living in my new home on Butterstone Farm, Salt Spring Island. Using the arts-based practices of poetry, narrative and photography, I learned to pause, breathe in and open my heart into relationship with the human and natural beings there.

### **Preparing to Enter**

Speaking of the shift which has occurred in the core idea of schooling in both Germany and Canada, in “From Alternative Education to the Mainstream,” Sliwka and Yee (2015) acknowledge how the traditional focus on cognitive development has been expanded to include

“engaged learners” and support for students’ “cognitive, metacognitive and social-emotional development.” (175)

In the fall of 2007, I was living in Vancouver for three months while finishing my doctoral coursework at the University of British Columbia. At the end of a seminar on the arts-based research practice of Living Inquiry with Dr. Karen Meyer, as I reread my fieldnotes, I noticed I had been writing poetry and narratives to shift my behaviour in relationships from violent (aggressive, competitive, intolerant, judging self and others) to loving (kind, understanding, compassionate). Recognizing this emergent intention, I shifted the first “i” in Living (Inquiry) to “o” and identified my own research methodology as Loving Inquiry.

That December, I returned to Salt Spring Island, and moved with my partner to Butterstone Farm, 23 acres of forest and pasture, ponds and creeks, gardens and orchards on the eastern side of Mount Maxwell, the island’s tallest mountain. After ten years of teaching healthy relationships to students in middle and high school classrooms as a professional violence prevention educator, and writing research poetry and essays about my experience of relationships with people, the farm became a new place of learning. As I began to write my dissertation on Loving Inquiry, the research questions I asked included:

- ~ What is the nature of a loving relationship?
- ~ How do I engage in loving relationships with nature?

### **Encountering the Gates**

As I walked through the farm, I was surrounded in every direction by fences, each with its own particular, handcrafted gate. Living on the farm I was constantly coming into contact

## Creating an Alternative Dissertation

with these gates. As I attended to my ongoing experience of opening the gates, I observed a similarity between my encounters with the gates and my encounters in relationship.

- Both require me to pause and listen to what was happening inside myself as well as outside.
- Both need me to practice letting go of anything keeping me from being present—whether an internal belief or emotion, in the case of relationship with another, or an external barrier such as too much snow or ice in the case of the gate.
- Both demand my sensual, embodied awareness, and invite certain contemplative, spiritual qualities of attention.

Walking through the gates on the farm became a journey of encounter, marked with a tone of sacred possibility. Each time I practiced “Loving Inquiry,” whether through my senses, writing poems and stories, or taking photographs, I was walking through a gate. Sounds, smells, visual cues, sensations as well as images, metaphors and linguistic resonances all became openings into relationship.

Thus, “Opening the gates” became the central metaphor and structure for the thesis.

### **Gate of Listening: Paying Attention through Art**

In *The Way of Love*, feminist philosopher and writer Luce Irigaray (2002) offers, “Silencing what we already know is often more useful in order to let the other appear” (p. 165). Ecologist Stephan Harding (2006) adds:

We need to allow ourselves to be open to the subjective agency at the heart of every ‘thing’ in the world so that we can speak and act appropriately in their presence and on their behalf. We must keep alive and nurture a sense of ‘otherness’ of whatever

phenomenon we might be considering, allowing a strange kind of intimacy to develop in which the urge to control is replaced by a quickening awe at the astonishing intelligence that lies at the heart of all things. (p. 37)

In order to enter and embrace the reality of the other beings on the farm, I had to let go of my ideas of who I thought the “other” was, or who I wanted them to be. Irigaray suggests we find “gestures or words” that “touch the other in his, or her alterity” (p. 151). Using poetry, narrative and photography, I searched for those words and gestures that touched the other in their alterity, or difference, approaching the other in what Irigaray refers to as a “poetic way of dwelling”(152). These arts-based practices allowed me to “slow [my] pace” (Meyer, 2010, p. 95), “listen deeply,” “be empathetic, aware, non-judgmental, and cautious” (Nielsen, 2004, p. 42), and discover “moments of arrest” in which “new possibilit[ies]” could announce “[their] presence” (Fels, 2009, pp. 4-5).

Guided by curiosity, spontaneity, and a sense of play, allowed me to enter into relationship with an openness and intimacy that kept alive this sense of “otherness.” As Tibetan Buddhist monk, dharma art teacher and Miksang founder Trungpa (1992) offers:

What a work of art is all about is a sense of delight. Touch here, touch there, delight. It is an appreciation of things as they are and of what one is — which produces an enormous spark. Something happens—clicks. (p. 75)

My poems, narratives and photographs accessed the “creative use of the imagination” to touch into this experience of delight in things as they are (hooks, 2006, p. 90). Even a “mere momentary glance” became a place of contact, producing sparks of joy and wonder (Thomas, 2004, p. 242).

### **Gate of Choice: Knowing What I Wanted**

Dr. Richard Waters, assistant researcher at The University of Queensland and educational consultant at Independent Schools Queensland, suggests that relationships with students fostered by teachers in alternative education settings tend to be non-violent, inclusive and supportive rather than the disciplinary and authoritarian relationships found in mainstream settings.

When I entered the academy as a mature student, I was already a published poet and spoken word performer with a Master's degree in Curriculum Studies and seven years experience as a violence prevention educator. So it was with purposeful deliberation that I chose a doctoral supervisor and thesis committee who would support and encourage me to create an aesthetically beautiful and pedagogically useful thesis. Well aware of my passionate inclination toward poetry and other arts-based practices, I was also determined to discover the authentic form and content for my research practice rather than follow a traditionally prescribed path.

### **Gate of Openness: Discovering the Possibilities**

As a doctoral student and arts-based researcher in the Faculty of Education at UBC, I was afforded a tremendous amount of freedom to follow my creative impulses and to attend to the emergent written and photographic expressions from my practice of Loving Inquiry on the farm.

The limitations I encountered were those that my committee, and especially, my doctoral supervisor placed on me to assure that the dissertation would be deemed acceptable by the external examiner and defense committee. By way of an introduction, I wrote an invitational, citation-heavy prelude in which I shared the arts-based research ancestry of Loving Inquiry. As a reflective epilogue, I took myself on a physical walk through all the gates in the thesis in their final order and wrote about it. This I called: "The Gateless Gate."

### **Gate of Belonging: Learning from the Ancestors**

The research ancestries of my thesis were the arts-based methodologies of Performative Inquiry (Fels, 1999; Fels & Belliveau, 2008), Narrative Inquiry (Leggo, 2006, 2007; Oberg, 2008, 1991, 1985), Poetic Inquiry (Leggo, Prendergast & Sameshima, 2009) and Living Inquiry (Meyer, 2006, 2010), nearly all of which were developed and taught in the Faculty of Education at the University of British Columbia, where I took courses by their creators and attended conferences as their student and colleague.

As I practiced Loving Inquiry on the farm, through the arts-based practices of poetry, narrative and photography, I was walking in the footsteps of these and other scholarly artists, educators and researchers who offered inspiration and reflection.

### **Gate of Un/knowning: Being Surprised**

From the time I clued into using the gates as the organizing metaphor, I was unsure how many gates the dissertation would contain. I played with the number 21 for a while, as that was the same number as my birthday and the address of the farm, with an 0 in the middle. However, I didn't want to force it. At the end it appeared that 21 was extremely doable so I went for it. I also didn't have names for the gates until, during the final months of the process, I found a word file in which I had been gathering a list of qualities (of attention and awareness) that were important for loving relationships and recognized them as the names of the gates.

### **Gate of Perception: Encountering the Academic Other**

The only place I encountered resistance was at the very end of the process, when the Dean of Graduate Studies chose to step outside her jurisdiction and make it her business that I had handed in an alternative dissertation. This resulted in two weeks of stress, on the heels of an

Creating an Alternative Dissertation  
already intense and demanding writing process and with less than a week to the deadline for  
handing the thesis in for graduating that Spring.

I spent the better part of a week attempting to translate my alternative format into a more traditional structure, which, according to the dean, needed to include a hypothesis, criteria and goals. Fortunately, my committee fought for me. After submitting a carefully crafted letter as well as published documentation of the history of successfully defended arts-based dissertations at UBC to the dean, I was dismissed from having to compose this traditional structure for my thesis.

### **Gate of Reflection: Questioning my Abilities**

I carried a lot of fear, anxiety and doubt with me as I walked through the gates.  
Throughout dissertation writing, I kept asking myself: “Can I pull this off?”

Truth is, I thought my committee would be more involved. Astounded by the amount of sustained effort thesis writing required of me, I had also not anticipated how stressed I would feel about it. During the last 8 months of writing, I struggled with pain in my descending colon. A craniosacral bodyworker told me it was as if I was giving birth.

### **Gate of Paradox: Experiencing the highs and lows**

Through prayer, meditation, and the support of my mentors, spouse and dear friends I managed to navigate the uncertainty of the creative process. The last month was the most exhilarating and exhausting. I barely ate or stood up from my seat in front of the fireplace. My dissertation “baby” felt seriously overdue, yet I still needed to carry it through to delivery.

### **Gate of Impermanence: Letting Go**

It was difficult to discard certain pieces of the thesis yet it was a critical aspect of the process. A friend and OISE PhD graduate living on Salt Spring offered invaluable support

throughout the writing process. Nearing the critical point of completion, after her feedback had led me to spend a whole day substituting already-chosen quotes at the start of each “gate” with more diverse new ones, I called my supervisor and told him about it. He said “Ahava, I think it is time to let go.”

### **Gate of Joy: Embracing Success**

I felt tremendous joy in succeeding to write an authentic, artistically rich and theoretically compelling arts-based PhD dissertation on “love” in the academy. Moreso, in navigating the difficult process with Graduate Studies, I was able to make use of my practice of Loving Inquiry by remaining open to their different perspectives and points of view, while “guarding [my] own life” (Irigaray, 2002, 47).

I had wanted my thesis to be elegant, truthful, poetic, wise and meaningful. I’d wanted it to speak about my practice of Loving Inquiry in a way that would resonate with scholars and educators and laypeople. I’d wanted it to be beautiful and original and a significant contribution to the field of arts-based research and educational inquiry. At my defense, my committee affirmed it was all those things. Receiving the feedback from my external examiner describing my thesis as “cutting edge” and “speaking in metaphors” was also a thrill. (Lynn Butler-Kisber, external examiner thesis defense letter, March 2010)

### **The Gateless Gate: A loving inquiry on Loving Inquiry**

Writing my dissertation, I was committed to taking risks, letting go of what I thought was true and seeing things in new ways. Walking through the gates became a physical and symbolic practice of opening and opening again.

## Creating an Alternative Dissertation

As I learned “to practice this generosity of spirit in relation” to myself and the beings on the farm, I began to realize “how we are all inextricably and ecologically connected, all of us needing to be heard” (Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers and Leggo, 2009, p. 154).

Through my practice of writing poetry, narratives and taking photographs, I was engaged as the student, the artist, the arts-based researcher and the “loving inquirer,” who loves and loves and never stops loving.

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Creating an Alternative Dissertation

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