

Autobiography Reflection Paper

Elizabeth J. Sandell

May 15, 2014 (Draft)

Introduction

I have the best job in the world: teaching college students about education and human development. Every day, I get to carry out my personal life mission: “To teach, organize, and host people in transition, so they grow in faith and hope, control their own decisions and resources, and use their gifts and talents.”

I am the result of my European-American heritage, membership in the Baby Boom generation, influence of a hard-working single mother, economic stability of an early marriage, and travel throughout the world. These are my reflections on the cultural heritage that has influenced my life mission and my current work.

In my family of origin, change and transition was a major part of our lives. I was born in Massachusetts and lived in 24 different homes in 6 different states before I graduated from high school. Frequent relocations before my parents divorced were because of my father’s mental illnesses. My parents divorced when I was seven years old. Frequent relocations after my parents divorced were because of my mother’s continued education and improved employment conditions.

As an adult, I have traveled to all 50 states and to 6 continents (all except Antarctica). My experiences with cultures other than my own often cause “cognitive dissonance.” This is my discomfort felt at a discrepancy between what I already know or believe and new information or interpretation. I enjoy figuring out how to understand the new reality of the other culture and how to accommodate the new ideas.

Ethnic Background

Many of my ancestors were adventurous and hard-working people of European heritage. They went through major transitions themselves and contributed to their families and their communities. My mother's ancestor, my great-great-great-great-great-great-grandfather, Barthlomew Longstreth, came to North America in the 1600s. His family members were Quakers who had been persecuted in England and came to Pennsylvania to practice their religion. Ancestors in my mother's family fought for the colonies during the Revolutionary War and against slavery during the Civil War. I have always been very proud of this heritage.

Recently, I learned that Bartholomew Longstreth died when he was killed by his slaves in the fields of his Pennsylvania farm. This was shocking to me; I find it difficult to accept that my family ancestors built their fortunes by owning other people, who hated them so much that they fought back. This is part of the "white privilege" that I have inherited. Eventually, my Longstreth ancestors migrated to Muscatine County, Iowa, where they farmed land that was taken away from the indigenous peoples of the region. This is another part of the "white privilege" that I have inherited.

Later, large numbers of Prussian (now known as German) immigrants started arriving to the "east coast" of Iowa in the middle 1800s – which is when my father's ancestors were arriving in Scott County, Iowa. The Iowa census of 1890 showed that a quarter of Scott County residents were natives of Prussia/Germany. A disproportionate number of those immigrants (including my father's great-grandparents) came from Schleswig-Holstein, which was in a border and personal rights dispute with Denmark in the 1840s. Other Prussian immigrants came to Scott County, Iowa from Bavaria, Hamburg, Hanover, and Mecklenburg.

My father's ancestors came to the United States to escape famine and military conscription in Prussia. When they arrived, they had to renounce their allegiance to the Prussian Kaiser Wilhelm. They settled on rich farm land that the US government took from the indigenous people in the Iowa territory. This was more evidence of the "white privilege" of my ancestors. My great-grandfather gifted my paternal grandparents with some of this farmland when they were married. My paternal grandfather incorporated many inventions, such as gas-powered tractors and insecticides, into his farming practices. He used a new innovation called DDT to control pests on the crops and in the barns. As a result, he died early from bone cancer due to the poisonous effects of the DDT.

My parents valued political action based on their values and beliefs. They believed that their position in the dominant groups in society meant that they had responsibility to make the world a better place. Before her marriage, my mother was actually arrested in Philadelphia during a demonstration against the Korean Conflict. My father was a conscientious objector to participation in the Korean Conflict. During their honeymoon, my parents worked with a Quaker mission group in Monte Verde, Costa Rica. From their example, I learned the value of working to make change for the better in the world.

Family of Origin

When I was born, my parents were still married, and three of my grandparents were still alive, so I probably received a lot of attention typically given to first born children. I was my mother's first-born child and only daughter. Her second child was my brother, who is about four years younger than I am. When my brother was born, my parents were near the end of their marriage, so he never really lived in a two-parent family. In the 1960s, some people used

the words “broken family” to describe my family. However, I have always felt that my experience was healthier than I might have had if my father had stayed with my mother. More details about my childhood experiences in a single-parent family are described in other sections of this paper.

Years later, I reconnected with my biological father. I found that he had married a second time, and that I had a half-sister and a half-brother. I actually like these half-siblings very much. Through conversations with them, I have come to understand more about my father and my own childhood experiences. This half-sister and half-brother each have children now. My brother has remained single, with few significant, long-term relationships.

As the first-born child, I internalized a sense of responsibility to live up to my parents’ expectations. I was orderly and succeeded at school and behaved myself socially. I often credit my German and English heritage with characteristics of organization, determination, and sense of time. However, my personality and behavior do seem to agree with theories of birth order: that the oldest child will be confident, determined, organized and likely to succeed.

Race

According to my answers on the U.S. Census, my race is Caucasian/White/Non-Hispanic. As far as I know, my ancestors were Caucasian/White/Non-Hispanic as far back as we have recorded. I know my race or skin color is not my culture, but my skin color gave me some unearned advantages that became my culture.

In the 1960s, I grew up in Iowa, where the majority of people were “white.” The indigenous people had been moved out so that European Americans could move in. Iowa was not a “slave state” so there were relatively few African Americans. I was in the majority, in terms of skin color. I belonged. As I grew up, I learned that I could interact with social and educational

systems so that they worked *for* me instead of *against* me. I could get along every day without worrying very much about how others would treat me. I expected that neighbors would be at least polite and, more likely, would actually be nice to me.

My mother did make efforts for me to learn about people who were not “white” like me. She took me to music gatherings at what we called “Negro churches.” She sent me on a church youth group mission trip to work with children of Mexican migrant workers. She let me volunteer in her Project Head Start classroom for disadvantaged African American children to get ready for kindergarten. These activities led me to think of my own life as normative, average, morally correct, and even ideal. My mother had used her education to climb out of Depression Era poverty, so I thought everyone could do that. When my community worked to benefit other people, we were trying to allow the “others” to become more like “us.” I assumed everyone wanted to be more like us and that I should be helpful of those who were not yet like us. I was oblivious to the unique qualities of their cultures.

I have learned that I possess many of the conditions of what McIntosh (1989) has called “white privilege.” I can be sure that I can rent or buy a home in an area that I can afford and that I would want to live. I can watch media and see people that look like me. I learned historical “facts” that people who were my color made civilization. I can go to a hairdresser’s shop in Mankato and find someone who can cut and style my hair. I am never asked to speak on behalf of all the people in my racial group. If I am stopped by a patrol car, I can be confident that I was not singled out for my racial profile. I can get a new job without co-workers thinking that I got it because of my race and not because of my capabilities.

Language

My father's ancestors spoke German. My grandmother and my father both went to English-speaking schools and churches. They were bilingual, in English and in German, during a period of history in which speaking German might make people suspect them as disloyal to the United States. However, they did not seem embarrassed about speaking German and they did not seem desperate to speak American English. Actually, I remember my grandmother and father speaking German when they did not want me to understand them, so I rather thought that being bilingual was a desirable quality.

My first language is English, which was the language of all the educational and social environments in which I was raised. This was such an advantage. I always understood my teachers, and I could express myself very well. When I was about nine years old, I realized that I actually enjoyed writing. I liked to learn and share new things through the written words. Throughout my academic career, I was successful at producing academic papers and presentations – in English, of course.

I did want to achieve a second language. I studied French for six years during secondary school, but I did not maintain any capacity for speaking, writing, or reading the language. For the past fifteen years, I have studied the Russian language. Now, as I put it, I speak enough Russian to get in trouble, and I understand enough Russian that native Russians leave the room when they do not want me to understand their conversation. Even with translators, however, I am challenged with communication with Russians. Often, I realize that we may be using similar translated words, but we are having completely different conversations. For example, it took me two years of conversation with colleagues in Russia to realize that when they used the word “kindergarten,” they were talking about care and education programs for children between ages

three and seven years old. This is quite different than colleagues in the United States, where we use the word, “kindergarten” to refer to educational programs for five-year-olds.

Gender

According to my birth certificate, I am female – a girl, now a woman. When I was growing up in the 1960s, the possibilities for girls and women were limited. I expected to grow up, to find a nice man and get married, and to raise a family. I remember that I thought my employment choices were secretary, nurse, social worker, or teacher.

When I was in elementary school, I became friends with five other girls who, like me, were tall and smart. We all sang in school and church choirs. We all earned good grades. We all succeeded at standardized tests. There were enough of us that our academic success was acceptable and not criticized. We were socially successful, and we set some of the school standards for “cool.” Three of the five friends were among the homecoming queen candidates.

My mother, at least, expected me to attend college. She advised me to get a degree and a teaching license, so “if something happened to my husband, I could always get a job as a teacher.” From my early years, I did expect to go to college. I didn’t want to work for the low wages of a secretary, and I was not scientific enough to be a nurse. I wanted to change the world. At one point, I wanted to grow up and become a kindergarten teacher in room 10 at Madison Elementary School (where my mother was a teacher). Eventually, I majored in social work, with a minor in early childhood education. These academic majors were acceptable for women in the 1970s.

Sexual Orientation

My sexual orientation is heterosexual. Dating, marriage, and a happy heterosexual marriage were always among my life goals. These goals were reinforced by my family, my religious faith, and my community.

During, I had role models and positive media images with whom I could identify. Most of my friends had two-parent families (father and mother). I don't remember any LGBT friends or neighbors. When I became engaged, my fiancé and I received congratulations from friends and family. We were living acceptable heterosexual roles and relationships. There have been many advantages to our marriage. In my work environment, I have always been able to talk openly about my relationships, our family vacations, and future plans with each other. In our family, we receive reduced prices on health, auto, and homeowners' insurance policies.

Geography and Region

My mother, my brother and I lived in Davenport, Iowa during my elementary and middle school years. Davenport was one of the "big cities" of the state of Iowa. Located right along the Mississippi River, for many years, Davenport was at the crossroads of the country, people traveling north and south on the Mississippi and crossing the mighty river to travel west into the frontier. Since we lived in Davenport longer than any other place during my childhood, I say that I grew up on the "east coast" of Iowa on the Mississippi River.

There were no microwave ovens, no cable television, no video games, and no cell phones. We had a landline telephone that was a party line. In other words, two or more households shared the telephone wires. We could eavesdrop and interrupt each other's conversations. We had three flavors of ice cream: vanilla, chocolate, and strawberry. We had

three black and white television stations: NBC, CBS, and ABC. We attended three levels of school: elementary school, junior high school, and senior high school.

Nearly all my childhood friends were of German descent (Reuter, Koenig, Rector, Schumacher), although occasionally a friend's ancestors were from other Northern European countries (Olson, Van Scoy, Jays, Smith). While the Germans lived on the western side of the town, non-Germans would usually reside in the eastern part, with Harrison Street being the dividing line. More rarely, a classmate was from among the small number of African Americans lived in the city center, south of tenth Street.

Davenport was a fairly safe city. Children were outside a lot: roller skating, riding bikes, walking to the swimming pool, playing tennis, building forts, playing with dolls and house props. We never worried when my brother would spend hours fishing alone at the shore of the Mississippi River. My friends and I would walk about 20 blocks to go "downtown" and hang-out at the department stores on the weekends. We would collect soda bottles and take them to the grocery store for the deposit, about 5 cents a bottle.

Economic and Social Class

When my father left the family, my mother, brother, and I literally had nothing. We were homeless. We slept for a few months on couches at the home of one of my mother's sisters. My mother was a first-generation college graduate who had majored in history. Because the Baby Boom generation was causing huge increases in school enrollment, she quickly found a job teaching Kindergarten. This gave her enough income that we could move into a two-room apartment.

Some of my friends were poor and lived in what we called "slums," along the riverfront. Some of my friends had parents who were medical and business professionals; they

RUNNING HEADER: Sandell Autobiography

lived in the suburbs. Everyone was affiliated with a worshipping community. My family was somewhat in-between: Methodist middle-class working single mother in a rented duplex apartment in the middle of the city.

During the next ten years, each move was for the better: from 2-room upper duplex to 4-room lower duplex to a 3-room university apartment to home ownership in Mankato, Minnesota. Each move reflected an improvement in our economic and social conditions. My mother completed graduate degrees in Iowa and settled in southern Minnesota. She was a Kindergarten teacher in Iowa and, later, a college professor here at Minnesota State University, Mankato. My mother used to tell me: “Get a teaching license, then, if something happens to your husband, you can always get a teaching job.” She based this advice on her own experience. She was my role model as a teacher and as a person.

Religion and Spirituality

My earliest memory is from when I was three years old. Outside, there was a storm with thunder and lightning. I was afraid. I cried. My mother held me in her arms to comfort me and said, “Thunder is only Baby Jesus playing with marbles.”

My parents went to church, but most sermons were about the philosophy of good deeds. After they divorced, my mother took me and my brother to church. We learned Bible stories. We sang in children’s choir. Our church was like a club. Some of my friends were Protestant – either Methodist, Presbyterian, or Baptist, and some of my friends were Roman Catholic. No one was Jewish or atheist.

When I was about 12 years old, I realized my family was a little different than my friends’ families. We did not have a father at home. I learned from the Bible that God would be

the father to the fatherless, so I prayed to God and asked God to be my father. I believe that God has watched over me since then.

I had many questions when I was a teenager. What kind of person was I going to become? How could I be a good person? How could I be happy? Why was I alive? I reflected on the design of the world. The world seemed to be designed very carefully. The Creator of this well-designed world must know why I was created, so I wanted to learn more about the Creator.

Our new home was very close to a church that my school friends attended, so I went to church with them. I told my mother about the church people. I said to her, “They have something that I want to know more about.” This church helped me know the Creator. I learned that the Creator has a plan for me. I learned that the Creator wanted a relationship with people. I learned about how to have a relationship with the Creator through the Son, Jesus Christ.

I came to understand the happiness that the church people had in their lives was because they had personal relationships with Jesus Christ. When I was 16 years old, I told God, “OK, if you want to know me, I want to know you. I cannot understand life by myself. I am too selfish.”

And now, for more than 40 years, I follow Jesus Christ. I married a believer. My faith has had an impact on my personal life mission statement. That statement includes an important phrase: To teach, organize, and host people in transition, so they grow in faith and hope...” We volunteered with youth groups at church. I worked full-time for a church for seven years. I am a missionary to countries of the former Soviet Union.

Exceptionalities and/or Special Needs

I have always enjoyed school and teaching roles in various settings. I seem to easily learn new things, and I am fulfilled when I can teach those things to other people. When I was a college sophomore, I had a course assignment to carry out “Piagetian tasks” with children of

different ages and stages. These tasks were based on Jean Piaget's stages of cognitive development. For example, children were asked if the original identical amount of water was more in the tall cylinder or the short cylinder. I was astounded by the results: children do think differently at different stages, and children's mistakes reveal their thinking processes. I was hooked on early education at that time.

I have been a teacher and an administrator in several types of schools, including nursery schools, daycare centers, and early childhood family education, I have also been a teacher trainer in churches, colleges, and universities. My approach to teaching has been influenced by the teachings of several leading educators, including John Dewey (USA), Lev Vygotsky (Russian Federation), Jean Piaget (Switzerland), and Paulo Freire (Brazil). In teaching, I vary the style in which I present information, so I can reach as many students as possible through their various learning styles and communication preferences. I alternate among formats, such as lecture, interactive activities, small group discussions, field experiences, writing assignments, and demonstrations.

Generational Characteristics

I am a member of the Baby Boom generation – people born in North America between 1946 and 1964. There were a lot of us, which caused a demographic bulge that “remodeled” society as we passed through it. School districts had to adjust school buildings to our increased numbers. Marketers had to craft advertising campaigns to appeal to our pockets. Health care providers had to find medical treatments to cope with our issues.

We thought of ourselves as a generation that was different and more special than those before us. We grew up when society was relatively affluent, and those of us who were “white” were privileged. We were the healthiest and the wealthiest generation up to our time. Our

experience was that the world improved with time; this influenced our world view and our expectation that we could have a positive impact on the world. Our generation influenced the passage of the Civil Rights Act, creation of the Great Society programs, and the end of the Vietnam War.

Education and Employment

My mother completed graduate degrees in Iowa and settled in southern Minnesota. She was a Kindergarten teacher in Iowa and, later, a college professor here at Minnesota State University, Mankato. She was my role model as a teacher and as a person. My mother used to tell me: “Get a teaching license, then, if something happens to your husband, you can always get a teaching job.” She based this advice on her own experience.

When I was a college sophomore, I had a course assignment to carry out “Piagetian tasks” with children of different ages and stages. These tasks were based on Jean Piaget’s stages of cognitive development. For example, children were asked if the original identical amount of water was more in the tall cylinder or the short cylinder. I was astounded by the results: children do think differently at different stages, and children’s mistakes reveal their thinking processes. I was hooked on early education at that time.

I am still trying to change the world for the better. I finished my bachelor’s degree in Social Work, but I never was employed as a social worker. I realized after graduation that I did not have the patience to tolerate a lack of progress among “welfare recipients.” My minor in Child Development provided me with a profession that saw faster growth among its clients: children before age five years. My master’s degree in Educational Leadership prepared me to be an administrator in programs for children and families. My doctoral degree in Curriculum and

Instruction equipped me to teach teachers of young children. I have been a teacher and an administrator in several types of schools, including nursery schools, daycare centers, and early childhood family education, I have also been a teacher trainer in churches, colleges, and universities.

Family as an Adult

After I graduated from high school, I married a young man from our church. He already had a master's degree and a full-time teaching job. Even at this point in my life, I would never recommend that an 18-year-old get married. However, my husband did provide the financial security that I had never had as a child. And he encouraged me in my own college education and in my career. He brought stability and "grounded-ness" to my life.

Now in mid-life, I have been married to my first (and only!) husband for more than 40 years. Through his family, I have two college-graduate nieces. I have enjoyed the role of "aunt" and have tried to be emotionally supportive of these beautiful young women. My husband and I have "emotionally" (but not legally) adopted two young women whom we met when they attended graduate school at Minnesota State University. Vera and Nara have each married and have children. They live far away from Minnesota, but we connect with them by phone, email, and annual visits. They have enriched our lives in many ways.

Conclusion

I am the result of my European American heritage, membership in the Baby Boom generation, influence of a hard-working single mother, economic stability of an early marriage, a varied career in southern Minnesota, and travel throughout the world. Moving and traveling and experiencing other cultures often results in cognitive dissonance – which I like because it provokes my thinking in new directions! We celebrate the differences and use our reflections to better understand each other and ourselves.

Resources

McIntosh, P. 1989. *White privilege: Unpacking the invisible backpack*. [Monograph]. Ann Arbor, MI: Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan.