



Full Circle: A Heuristic Inquiry into the Experience and Therapeutic Value of Revisiting and Exploring Personal Historic Diary Material Using Writing and Performance

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Abstract

In this study, I selected a sample of my own historic diary entries (ages 14–43) and wrote into them reflectively and creatively. This culminated in a script-in-hand performance shared with a closed audience in the landscape. My curiosity was how this process might be therapeutic to me and possibly others. I found therapeutic value in re-storying, becoming more reconciled to life events, improved self-image, confidence, and integration of parts of self. There were impacts on the audience, and findings relate to how sharing life story enables two-way connection, being heard, and seeing oneself in others. There are implications for ongoing work creatively and therapeutically engaging with diaries, especially regarding life review and end of life.

Keywords: diaries, journals, autobiographical performance, drama therapy

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THE EAST

1982–2021

Stage 1: Initial engagement

Within each researcher exists a topic, theme, problem or question that represents a critical interest and area of search... The initial engagement invites self-dialogue, an inner search to discover the topic and question. During this process one encounters the self, one's autobiography, and significant relationships within a social context (Moustakas, 1990, p. 11).

Introduction

This study began 40 years ago when I was 14 and began writing a diary. Age 54 at the time of writing, my attic is weighed down by boxes of these 'insight-writ' journals (Decent, 2019). Despite the fact I have rarely looked at them since, they are precious to me—sacred, private, mine—me. I have always intended to return to them. The focus of my study here was to select samples, to write into them reflectively and creatively, and to create something from them involving writing and performance (something I do: Decent, 2022a; 2022b). My curiosity was how this might be therapeutic to me and possibly others (Hunt, 2000, pp. 12–13).

Haiku

I remember the
first books, silk bound, flower-edged
pages, insight-writ.
Decent, 2019

Returning to one's diaries might be considered a kind of midlife rite of passage or form of life review, part of a period of mid-life reassessment 'virtually all of us' go through (McAdams, 1993, p. 198). This is not without risks—the instinct to avoid revisiting painful episodes of the past, embarrassment, or mis-remembering drives many to never look at diaries again and/or destroy them (Decent, 2022c, Crowther, 2013, pp. 13–14). However, I find myself curious to look again. Perhaps a younger self calls to me—to my grown-up self of the then future—me, now? What would we make of each other? Is it time to find out? The sense of interaction between parts of self and stages of life the diary offers feels potentially rich from an emotional and psychological point of view.

My project was also to write again in response, bringing new reflective and creative possibilities. Imaginatively anything is possible—so my young self can talk to my older self—why not? And I can control how that conversation goes. As an autobiographical theatremaker, I have found creating a 40-page script, a 70-minute show out of complex life events has helped to make those events more manageable, circumscribed, and to find meaning in them (Pennebaker, 1990, p. 103). Here I employed reflexivity, creativity, and writing tools such as editing, imagination, story construction, poetry, and dialoguing to rewrite my relationship with the past. This does not rule out destroying some or all of my writings as part of the process.

This links to the sense of ceremony and eco-psychological work I have done for myself in the past which often includes ceremony and/or a sharing of one's story with a circle of others. As a performer, I have had therapeutic experiences, feeling witnessed by and connecting to others, especially in performances of life story. This goes both ways as we are heard—and hear each other—in one another's stories. In this study I sought to explore how these elements might weave into the growing field of creative writing for therapeutic purposes (CWTP) and my practice as writer, performer, and facilitator.

Methods and Methodology

Drawing on my life's search for self-understanding through journal writing, creative writing, eco-psychology, and autobiographical performance, I found my way instinctively toward this project. Heuristics felt a natural fit:

ETHICS: Control and agency

A key motivation for this project was to take control of my diaries, a fear being this might one day be taken from me by ageing, illness, or death. To take control is to take responsibility, as not to do so only hands the problem onto someone else. If I leave them adrift, I am handing ethical decisions over to someone else. Many diarists, (including Anne Frank (Frank, 1997) and Anne Lister (Whitbread, 1988), died without the privilege of control and agency over their words. Is it ethical to read or publish the diaries of others? This aside, it feels important that I take control of my personal archive and enjoy the agency I have, and not leave an ethical dilemma or burdensome task for another.

learning that proceeds heuristically has a path of its own. It is self-directed, self-motivated, and open to spontaneous shift. It defies the shackles of convention and tradition. . . . It pushes beyond the known, the expected, or the merely possible. Without the restraining leash of formal hypotheses, and free from external methodological structures that limit awareness or channel it, the one who searches heuristically may draw upon the perceptual powers afforded by direct experience. (Douglas & Moustakas, 1985, p. 44, qtd. in Moustakas, 1990, p. 3)

Heuristics is a qualitative autobiographic methodology that allows for flexibility of design, reflexivity, and creativity, and is built on constructionist assumptions about knowledge, which I share (Gilgun in McCullis, 2013, p. 85; McLeod, 2013, p. 248). In my study, I searched myself and my diaries as research subjects, while being present as researcher. Heuristics is also characterised by stages I can relate to and could comfortably overlay with the Four Shields, an eco-psychology model I have used for over 15 years. (Foster & Little, 1998). More of which below and as we go.

Four Shields	Chronology	Heuristic stages
EAST	1982–2021	1: Initial engagement ▪ Lifelong diary-writing ▪ Earlier thoughts and writings about re-visiting ▪ CWTP MSc studies
SOUTH	Jan–Mar 2022	2: Immersion ▪ Selection and reading of diary samples ▪ Writing into diary samples reflectively and creatively
	Spring Equinox 2022	3: Incubation ▪ A break
WEST	April–June 2022	4: Illumination ▪ Writing of performative piece ▪ Preparation for performance
NORTH	Summer Solstice 2022	5: Creative synthesis ▪ Performance and feedback
	June–Sept 2022	6: Explication ▪ Analysis of findings ▪ Writing up research manuscript
EAST	Autumn Equinox 2022	

Literature Review

As well as writing a diary when young, I also read, including *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1997) and the poetry and autobiographies of Maya Angelou. (And I was delighted to find references to these readings in my diaries!) In my 20s, coming out and doing an MA in women's studies, I discovered the diaries of Anne Lister, 'the Dead Sea Scrolls of lesbian history' (Donoghue in Whitbread, 1988). Since I began the CWTP Masters in 2019, I have been reading the literature of CWTP. For this study, I narrowed my reading to four areas:

- diaries
- the therapeutic value of writing
- life review
- autobiographical performance.

Diaries

Diaries have been the object of study within a range of fields including literature, history, social sciences, psychology, cultural studies, autobiographical studies, life writing, narrative theory, and CWTP:

Unfolding in the interface of life and literature, the diary challenges generic boundaries, as well as discursive constraints and limitations; it thus allows us to raise epistemological questions around knowledge and truth and enhances interdisciplinary thinking by revealing different layers of how we understand the web of human relations, our place within it and our relations to others. (Tamboukou, 2017, p. 2)

12 February

I just saw a programme – an evening with Maya Angelou. It was really good. She was talking about self-love, and did this poem about being plain proud of yourself. [*Phenomenal Woman*] I should be able to walk into a room of people, any people, with my head held high, and not worried of what they think of me. I do worry though. Seeing things like that refreshes me. I get dragged down by life—by thinking I need a boyfriend, wishing I was beautiful—when I see someone like her, it's like coming up for air. I'd like to be an intellectual—read books and poetry, go to the theatre, and concerts and stuff. When she said we shouldn't worry about trying to survive but to thrive, she put into words what I've been thinking lately. I think 'I've got my whole life ahead of me, and it's going to be great.' Why do I think 'It's going to be great', why don't I make it good for TODAY?

Thurs 12 February 1987 Age 19

Full Circle, Decent, 2022d, p. 15

Feminist scholars have been at the forefront in reclaiming the diary for the study of women's lives and as an activity particularly practiced by women (Wright & Ranby, 2009; Richardson, 2001; Huff, 1989; Rich, 1980; Woolf, 1953). These scholars particularly notice—and experience for themselves—how this practice can enable personal insight and movement between inner and outer life. 'I write because I want to find something out. I write in order to learn something that I did not know before I wrote it' (Richardson, 2001, p. 35). I echo this experience.

Of all the literature I was able to find, Kristine Haertl has conducted the most similar study, in which she revisited over 30 years of her poetry and journal writing to explore the role of personal writing in the development of self, also a heuristic study (Haertl, 2014). Her findings mirror very much what I would expect to find in mine:

Results indicated themes related to the (i) interpersonal and personal nature of writing, (ii) the spiritually transcendent nature of writing, (iii) the fact that writing facilitates perspective taking, (iv) the importance of challenge in personal growth, (v) the dynamic nature of writing, and (vi) the power of writing to influence personal identity. (p. 55)

The focus of her study is different from mine, but using her own diary writing as material, Haertl's discoveries fall into a body of literature that evidences the role of writing on the development of self and its therapeutic value as practice.

Therapeutic Value of Writing

'Writing as a means of processing one's life experience is not a recent practice' (Baker & Mazza, 2004, p. 141). Their essay provides a useful overview of the literature about and evidence for 'the healing power of writing' (as it is titled), citing Pennebaker (1990), whose research was amongst the first to offer empirical evidence, and Proffitt (1975), whose *At a Journal Workshop* was an early text in developing self-help literature about journal writing. As well as journal writing, creative writing (poetry, prose, and theatre) has also played a part in helping me achieve the psychological wellness I have (Rogers, 1961, pp. 350–351). Creative writing for therapeutic purposes further evidences the therapeutic value of writing (Williamson & Wright, 2018; Thompson, 2004; Baker & Mazza, 2004; Wright & Cheung Chung, 2001) and provides techniques for writing with this intention. Methods such as writing prompts, free writing, dialoguing, poetry, life story techniques (Bolton, Field, & Thompson, 2006) are all tools I used for writing *Full Circle*.

Life Review

I relate returning to diaries to psychological life review as described by Keisari & Palgib (2017), Brown-Shaw, Westwood, and De Vries (1999) and McAdams (1993, 2001). As I 'review my life' through reading old diaries, as Lejeune says, 'a dialogue begins... From the bottom of my past I am listening to someone; and I feel something working its effects on us, him and me.' (Lejeune, 2009, pp. 325–326). Through this dialogue transformation may occur, particularly pertaining to sense of self and the composing of one's life story narrative (Keisari & Palgib, 2017, p. 1079). These studies by Keisari & Palgib (2017) and Brown-Shaw, Westwood, and De Vries (1999) are particularly relevant as they investigate the mix of life review with the performative (their fields within drama therapy and psychodrama).

Autobiographical Performance

As an autobiographical performer I am drawn to and inspired by the work of others who bring themselves and their lives to an audience including Bryony Kimmings (2022), Mem Morrison (Artsadmin, 2022), Ursula Martinez (2022), Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver (Split Britches, n. d.). Susanna Amato navigated a similar theme in her 2021 show *Landfill of Memories* in which she brought piles of personal mementoes to the stage (cards, letters, gig tickets, photos—not specifically diaries) and shredded them whilst telling the story of her (real) hoarding issue alongside the losses of her father and sister (Amato, 2022). 'Performance, can be a transformational act' (Heddon, 2008, p. 3). This project is informed by my interest in the therapeutic impacts there may be for myself and other performers of autobiography (Harari, 2015, p. 164).

THE SOUTH

January–March 2022

Stage 2: Immersion



Initially engaged, the **Immersion** stage began in New Year 2022 when I began to organise my journals. After sorting and removing letters, cards, and other material, I put all the journals and dates diaries/Filofax pages into chronological order in phases of my life, beginning when I started writing in 1982, aged 14.

Dates	Age	Where	
1982–1987	14–18	Hitchin, Herts	School years
1987–1990	18–22	Aberystwyth	Student years
1990–2002	22–34	Manchester	Beginning of working / adult life – 20s+
2002–date	34–	Calderdale	Continuing working / adult life – 30s, 40s, 50s+

I decided to narrow my focus to the diaries of February, as a simple way of selecting the sample. February was coming with the nature festival of **Imbolc** marking earth's reawakening after winter. It felt 'live' to connect this February with those of my past. I decided to start when my diary began in 1982 and finish 30 years later in 2011, age 43, leaving an 11-year gap between then and now.

In January I had skimmed the diaries; in February and March I read in earnest. The dates diaries/Filofax pages were incredibly useful in quickly locating myself in time, place, and events. Throughout I wrote in my *Dissertation Journal* and wrote a few poems. As I read, I identified key parts of it, significant events or parts of my process. Another idea came to me—to

select one entry of each date of February (1st, 2nd, 3rd . . .) from each year of the period. This became a bit of a logarithm I set myself but was a useful and creative container to work with when I went into the **Illumination** stage.

Findings

1. *I experienced difficult emotions*

It was overwhelming, uncomfortable, painful, hard work, sometimes unbearable. I risked and dared the opening of wounds! (Moustakas, 1990, p. 6). I noticed a desire to close the book—edit—re-write—and began to give myself permission to do so (developed in the **Illumination** stage). I also noticed I responded differently to past events—with more maturity, experience, and distance.

2. *I discovered an archive*

It was all there!—my life as I lived and remembered it. Journals, dates, diaries, letters, photos all linked up. I have this with which to do more autobiography or reminisce if I want to. The process helped me form a more accurate chronology of my life than I had previously, which made me feel clearer about my life events.

3. *I experienced lighter emotions and positive connection to past*

It was exciting, thrilling, fun! Rediscovery of past, hilarity of youth, fond memories, remembering others.

ETHICS: Self-care

I learnt in the **Initial engagement** stage (finding references to my Mum's drinking in childhood (Decent, 2021) that returning to diaries could be unsettling. I decided to bring loving kindness to myself from the start.

- Professional support – therapy and academic research advisor
- Made time for the project and took breaks especially in Immersion stage.
- Maintained ongoing self-care routines – yoga, meditation, time outside, spiritual, and journalling practices, Zen group, Journey group, Writing group.

ETHICS: Finding others in diaries

Reading diaries raised the unexpected issue of remembering people no longer in my life. I was at liberty to search for them. I had no intention of making contact with anyone and didn't. This curiosity felt a natural response to diary reading. All the information was out there in the public domain of the Internet. But there are ethical issues in terms of self-care and privacy of others, especially if one is unreconciled to a story of the past. Something to be careful of and not get distracted by.

4. *Change of perspective on self and others*

I saw myself differently than I did at the time of writing. Found myself liking my former self/selves, admiring what I had done and achieved. Positive self-esteem and re-appraisal of my life—saw success and creativity where I had seen failure. Humour, especially in my adolescent self. Compassion for my earnest/sad/struggling younger selves. Seeing my ‘story-writing’ of others—as only mine, one-sided, imperfect.

I also noticed multiple selves—a ‘now’ adult self, a child-playing-at-grown-up self, and a lost adolescent self (explored deeper in the **Illumination** stage).

Contemporary journal

It is interesting, revisiting this. I am noticing—amongst other things—how little I have changed, despite these years—how similar I am—to who or how I am now and have been throughout my life. I like myself too though, which is nice. I like myself when I write.

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Decent, 2022d, p. 10

Spring Equinox, March 2022

Stage 3: Incubation

The **immersion** stage had been intense. At **Spring Equinox** I went to Kintyre, Scotland, for a week’s break and wrote some haikus while dipping my feet in the sea.

I sit here, woman,
old enough to know not all
the stories find words.

Gigha

Decent, 2022e

THE WEST

April–June 2022

Stage 4: Illumination

Having immersed myself in the material and incubated the process, I entered the **Illumination** stage. For the next three months, I worked on creating a script. Though I was enjoying remembering my life, I never wanted to create straight autobiography. Instead I found myself more interested in emotional responses and shifts in perspective I was having and the rediscovery of younger selves, all still unfolding.

Parts of Self

The Four Shields (Foster & Little, 1998) is an eco-psychology system that understands human nature as connected to and mirrored by the natural world—the four directions, the four seasons, the four elements (air, fire, water, and earth). My notion of psychological selves is based on this model, plus the shamanic concept of soul parts (Ingerman, 1991), and the Internal Family Systems (IFS Institute, 2022). In the Four Shields:

- the South represents the Child (the emotional, instinctive, the body).
- the West represents the Adolescent (inward looking, reflective, the psyche).
- the North represents the Adult (the rational, responsibility, the mind).
- the East represents the Spirit (regenerative, new perspective, birth, death, rebirth).
- Psychological wellness is found through all four shields being healthy and in balance with each other (Foster & Little, 1998, p. 4).

The shamanic concept of soul parts is an ancient way of understanding psychology in which trauma is described as the loss (or theft) of a soul part and recovery as *soul retrieval* (Ingerman, 1991, p. 4). This concept has always resonated with me and I have worked with it for a number of years. I was also working with a therapist who uses the Internal Family Systems—a model that also considers human psychology in terms of parts congruent with my understanding of self/selves/soul parts (IFS Institute, 2022).

The Adolescent

As I read the diaries, I re-encountered younger parts of myself. 7 February 1984 (age 16) was particularly impactful. Reading it made me laugh hugely, vividly taking me back to the vibrant teenager I used to be, wildly fooling around with friends. However, this was quickly followed by a wave of sadness as I recognised somewhere along the way I had lost her and been quite a serious adult for most of my life.

7 February

Today me, Sam & Toni juggled stools in the science room amongst other things. Basically we pratted around like anything. In the end everyone got mightily fed-up with us. Sam realised and went to clean up her locker. I was told I was in danger of becoming another Sam (AH!) so I cleared up the stools (all of which I had turned upside-down.) I'm going to try belt-up a bit at school. I'll try again tomorrow.

Tues 7 Feb 1984, Age 16

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Decent, 2022d, p. 9

The Child

In May I went out to the hills near where I live to mark **Beltane**, the nature festival of life and manifestation. For the previous year I had been suffering from planter fasciitis, making it painful to walk. As I burnt sage near the ground, I noticed the smoke blowing over my feet. I got a sudden insight about a child part of me who has been trying to be ‘the grown-up’ all my adult life—and is now very tired by this job. Reading my diaries had brought a sense of this child–adult self back to me and the life story that had created her. I explored this in therapy and in my journal.

Contemporary journal

When I was 16 another part took over—a child part that I call my child–adult or pseudo-adult self—what A. [my therapist] called ‘the parentified child’. She was a child–me who was trying to be very grown up and support Mum but who is only about 12, maybe younger. She has kept me going all these years—being sensible, dragging me forward—getting us to live a ‘useful, active, positive life’—and done a pretty good job. But she is only a child. I recognised too in therapy, that she is exhausted! She’s 12 years old and been working so hard for me all my life—dragging me around, taking responsibility. No wonder my feet hurt.

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Decent, 2022d, p. 33

The Adult

While journalling I began experimenting with self-dialoguing. I wanted to talk to my ‘child–adult’ self. Through these conversations I also discovered the stronger voice of a more ‘true adult self’— who I had not been so conscious of before—who really was a mature, reliable Adult—not the child pretending. Smudging my feet on the hill with sage smoke took me into a shamanic journey into which all three of these soul parts came.

I go on a journey to the sound of the wind, the trees and the trickle of the stream. **My child self** appears—she tells me she needs to be a child, playful, relieved of adult responsibilities, expressive, joyful and looked after. **My true adult self** is there too—she is ready to take proper care of my child self—and my **lost adolescent self** too—her inner exploration, sadness, whatever is there. **My adult self** can hold her too. **My East** is here too—a sense of new beginning—that I can be different, change—be a different kind of adult.

Shamanic Journal, May 2022

Decent, 2022f

This was a very healing and insightful moment brought about by the heuristic process of reading my diaries, writing, therapy, and nature-based practices.

Partners and Others

Another theme was how I was seeing past relationships. With partners, in the diaries I was processing each relationship in the moment, often struggling and repeating a narrative. As I went round these circles again, I could see this pattern more clearly—and my narrative-writing—myself as the heroine, my exs as villains—a way of avoiding responsibility for unsatisfying scenarios, masking my difficulties asserting myself and my needs. I saw how muddled I was and my exs more kindly. I began to reimagine my relationship past, rewriting it though a poem *Words I Never Said* (Decent, 2022d, p. 20). I felt lighter afterwards, freed of a stuck story.

Metta Meditation

May they be filled with loving-kindness. May they be well.
May they be peaceful and at ease. May they be truly happy.
Thorp, 2016

I also noticed friends, especially those no longer in my life. Faded into the past, I am long reconciled to those endings, in some cases virtually forgotten. As I began to see my own storytelling here, I wondered what story these others might have about me? Had I hurt people and left them with a poor story of me, as I had 'written' that of others? I wrote about this and brought these lost and forgotten friends and exs into my daily meditation practice for a time. This inspired also a poem *Forget Me Not*.

Forget Me Not

Forget me—or no, not yet
Only remember a little longer
Remember how we played and loved
Gave each other a little something
Everything we've since forgotten.
Time is a trickster
Memory, patchy. There's
Enough to remember and forget.
Now is all we have, the
Only time we have left to dance
Tomorrow, we forget.

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Decent, 2022d, p. 27

These processes—the recovery and integration of soul parts and my shifting perspectives on myself and others—sparked in the **Immersion** stage, were deepening in the **Illumination** stage. This experience felt like the story I wanted to tell. I began to construct a script drawing on the diaries, poems, and current journalling as content.

ETHICS: Mention of others in diaries

I considered how to protect the privacy, identification, or self-identification of others—friends, family, exs—mentioned in my diaries.

- Parents – both have died. I have written about them in previous work (Decent 2022a & 2022b) and consulted with family members about this.
- Siblings – I decided to avoid much inclusion of them as they could easily be identified. Possibly a topic for other life story work but I would need more time to consider and consult.
- Ex-partners – the commonalities in the way I related to them was a key discovery—so ‘merging’ them was what I wanted to do. Where necessary I used initials (not their own). I had a little concern about dates as I mention these in the diary entries. Someone who knew me very well—or the ex themselves—might be able to identify from the date. As this was a private showing (and no one knew me to that degree) it felt okay. To consider for wider public performance.
- Friends – as above-mentioned generally / changed names / used initials where necessary. With more time and considering a larger public audience, a process of consultation with relevant people would be appropriate. As this was a private showing I hoped the measures I took would keep others safe.

Script Content

Historic Diary Material

In the **Immersion** stage I was drawn to the parts of the diaries that made me laugh, insightful bits, or bits I remembered that said something about my relationship with writing. Putting these centre stage felt like a recovery and celebration of parts of me that had been lost or ignored.

I found myself editing these entries—finding a better word, taking out repetition, reordering phrases. It had never occurred to me before that I could edit or rewrite my journal, which felt very liberating. Editing enabled me to refine things in the diary I could now clarify that gave more satisfaction as self-expression. It also became part of a re-storying process. For example, on 24th February 1984, age 16 I found this:

Fri 24 February 1984

I really love Mum. I'm proud of her when we're with people and she's sober. She's a really great person, and I'm glad she's my Mum. That's why her drinking is so tragic.

Decent, 1984

My adolescence was clouded by my Mum's drinking, my early diaries peppered with somewhat stark entries about it. However, this entry touched me as it was also evidence of a counter-narrative I have always known, that despite everything I have always loved my Mum and was proud of her. The last sentence brings it down—but now I wanted to hold that first feeling—and remind myself (and perhaps others) that nothing is completely clear-cut. So for the script I edited it out.

Fri 24 February 1984

I really love Mum. I'm proud of her when we're with people and she's sober. She's a really great person, and I'm glad she's my Mum.

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This more positive finish, located later in the script, enabled me to re-story, suggesting reconciliation with those events and my mother within the larger story arc of my life—which is the case. This felt healing as well as narratively effective.

Poems

I had created poems throughout the process, including *Haiku* (p. 1), *Gigha* (p. 9), *The Strength in My Back* (p. 20). Poetic inquiry was not my methodology, but the principles relate. 'The potential power of poetic inquiry is to do as poetry does, that is to synthesize experience in a direct and affective way' (Prendergast, 2009, pp. xxi–xxii). Poetry also told these experiences in a different voice from that of the diaries.

Contemporary Journal

Through all this I was journalling. Key moments of my journey were documented in my journal, and in some cases brought about by it. There was an interesting loop to this as I both read—and wrote—a journal (Thompson, 2004, p. 74). I gathered bits across dates, recomposed, and created more coherent and concise sections for the script.

Script Structure

Selecting and organising material is a way of working with life story that for me replicates the selective, partial, and fragmentary nature of life, experience, and memory. However, as a story it needed shape. This was coalescing around the four directions and my journey that could be said to have gone through four stages:

1. **Seeing what was there** (first opening and reading the diaries)
2. **Noticing what was there** (responses, feelings, comments, shifts)
3. **Re-storying** (creatively supporting and encouraging positive shifts)
4. **Reconciliation/ending** (creating positive ending, healing, peace)

Onto this structure I wove selected poems, the edited historic diary extracts, and contemporary journal entries, examples of which are scattered throughout this paper. The structure embodied the Four Shields aspects of the seasons, the directions, and the recurring lunar month of 28/29 days. All this was my attempt to show the concentric circles of living and dying of which my life is a part.

Contemporary journal

Throughout my life I have often felt stuck or wanted it to be different—a sense of never having had the capacity to just be myself boldly and live that. Or sort of waiting for the life that would really fit me to start to happen. But in the middle of it all I can see I have been listening to myself too. Always wanting and changing things.

Full Circle

Decent, 2022d, p. 10

THE NORTH

Summer Solstice – 21 June 2022

Stage 5: Creative Synthesis



Photo courtesy [Christian Lisseman](#) ©2022.

Now it was time to take the **Creative Synthesis** of this work to others. The performance took place on **Midsummer Solstice**—the festival of light, sun’s brightest day. I invited a small audience known to me (this was a research experiment, not a professional performance). Though I collected feedback, this was not measured as such, but was there so I could assess the effect of the performative experience on me. I created a circle in the landscape orientated to the four directions and all the elements were present—air, a fire at centre, water in the stream, and the earth on which we sat. I began by burning sage as I do for nature ceremony and read from my script, for which I had made covers from handmade paper, a creative experiment using blank journal pages as part of the pulp. I began in the East and moved to the next direction for each section, to South, West, North, back to East—much as this paper.

Findings

The performance was a healing experience for me. I felt empowered, encouraged, and heard (Emunah, 2015, p. 72). One of the most powerful aspects was a profound sense of my **True Adult** self embodying me and taking charge almost at that very moment. **She** looked after the audience, guided and held them; **she** held the space and gave them a meaningful experience. This is what a truly healthy Adult does—steps up, take care of themselves and others. The performance felt like a ceremonial threshold I went through that completed the work of recovering my **True Adult** self.

ETHICS: Care of audience

The audience participants needed taking care of, including physical safety, psychological safety, and data protection.

- Planning and preparation – reconnaissance of site, risk assessment, fire safety, first aid and emergency plans
- Previous experience of outdoor performing (Decent, 2022g)
- Communication and information – what to expect, bring
- Facilitation skills – making welcome, creating group
- Time for talking and grounding at end
- Insurance in place
- Signposting to professional support
- **Approval of Metanoia Institute & Middlesex University Research Ethics Board** including Research Ethics, Participant Information and Data Protection, Consent Forms guidance and protocols

I have put myself and my life on stage before but never my journal itself. Sharing my diaries past and current felt like a new exercise in self-revelation—one I was ready for. I shared with others a voice and words that had previously just been for me. Doing this gave me a profound sense of getting closer to people within new boundaries I had set. I felt more deeply seen—and honoured for doing this.

It had been my hope the audience would see themselves in my stories, and I was delighted to find they did (Decent, 2022c). I experience this as two-way empathy—as the audience see themselves in me, so I as writer-performer feel seen and recognised and less alone in my (apparently not so unique) struggles and experiences.

The feedback reflected that specific intentions I had for the piece had been noticed and were shared—rewriting life story, the value of journal writing, the work of my soul retrieval and integration. ‘It seems to me that this creative act is about making those selves one.’ (Decent, 2022c) This type of feedback felt like an act of witness that embedded the psychological work I had done more deeply.

ETHICS: Self-revelation

As well as the privacy of others there is also the issue of self-care required in taking of one's private life into the public domain, whether as writing, performance, or part of an academic paper. I have navigated this before in previous performative autobiographical work (Decent 2022a, 2022b) and feel I have experience at finding the boundary between what to share and what remains private to me. It is important to be clear about one's expectations of an audience—that they may be treated as witness and fellow-traveller but never therapist. Though this is an area I am familiar with, it is an issue of self-care that all creatives and researchers doing autobiographic work should consider carefully.

THE EAST

June–Sept 2022

Stage 6. Explication

Having completed almost all stages of the heuristic process—and moved through all four directions (p. 3) it only remains to return to the East—the place of rebirth—to explicate the implications of this work for myself and for others, and its limitations.

Implications for Self

I have articulated much of what I gained, the entirety of which worked a 'personal transformation that exists as a possibility in every heuristic journey.' (Moustakas, 1990, p. 6). I let go of old stories, found greater liking and admiration for myself throughout my life. I re-storied experiences and felt more reconciled to myself and others. A key growth was being kinder to myself when I look back and now. Altogether this makes me feel different—more joyful about the future and more peaceful when I think about the end of my life.

The project gave me as a writer–performer great encouragement to take the work forward, to develop *Full Circle* into a piece of theatre for others. I am curious, too, to further examine how creating and sharing such works can provide therapeutic experiences/reflective opportunities to those who listen and watch—another area for CWTP and drama therapy to investigate.

Implications for Others

The project I hope adds to the literature about the therapeutic value of journal writing. For some of the audience, *Full Circle* was a homage to it, and I cannot overestimate its value to me throughout my life. On 5 February 1994, I returned to diary writing after a few years' gap. I remember writing this entry—the very moment I gave myself permission to write 'just for me'—a practice I have never stopped since.

This project also examines the less explored territory of returning to diaries. Anecdotally, a common fear would be that many sense they write mostly when they're down, angry, or in other negative emotional states. The journal was a process—a place to vent—but these are not places people want to return to, be read or remembered (Decent, 2022c). When I found rejection, loneliness, or a sense of failure in my diaries in the **Immersion** stage, I cringed, mourned, wanted to close the book. But as I stuck with it into the **Illumination** stage, I was able to see how the diary had helped me cope with these times—and from the distance of time could see that these experiences were unlikely to be unique to me. In the **Creative Synthesis** stage, I therefore brought a little of them into the limelight in *Full Circle*, and sharing them created a sense of 'we've all been there'—breaking down my isolation and creating connection with and for others.

As a facilitator, I continue to explore how a similar managed, supported, and creative engagement with diary material for others, which could be as psychologically fruitful as it was for me, including

- re-evaluation of oneself and life events,
- celebration of oneself and life events,

5 February

Writing is a strange process. I have tomes of crap from adolescence onwards, and I'm not sure I've always found it helpful. But I write this now for myself, to try to come to terms with things and to be more honest with myself. An exercise in self-knowledge. Not as some great work, or feeling I have to perfectly capture and express the full truth of something. When I write it will be because I am just trying to express something that is going on in my head. I am struggling to avoid that self-conscious feeling of some unknown reader hovering over my head, trying to make some kind of sense out of this. This is just for me.

Sat 5 February 1994, Age 26

Full Circle

Decent, 2022d, p. 13

- life re-storying,
- reconciliation with life story—less regret, self-blame,
- developing a more positive relationship/making peace with self and others,
- a response to midlife and/or preparation for end of life,
- positive remembering and reminiscence.

Limitations

There was not scope to explore every creative possibility. For example, I would like to do more paper-making—making a new journal entirely from paper pulped from diaries. There are cut-up or found poetry techniques as per Brion Gysin and David Bowie (Brion Gysin, 2022; marslife01, 2013). And blacking out words on the diary to create new text. There could be many ways to select which diary to look at—choosing a particular year or topic.

I was disappointed not to have done more with the four elements (air, fire, water, and earth), which might come into developing more ceremony or performance as I go forward—tearing, burning, pulping, burying the diaries. I am still left with the practical dilemma of what to do with my diaries—sadly I did not get to the point of getting rid of any. Am I more ready now to get rid of them, maybe even unseen? Certainly closer.

I have not said much about the eco-psychological elements and performing in nature, which were significant. Much yet to explore, imagine and develop—for myself, other journal keepers, creatives, and researchers.

Finally, this was not a participant-based project nor an ethnographic one. On both counts more could be learnt about diaries, how we relate to them once written, and how people are processing, preserving, or getting rid of them. This study is a personal one and does not set out to demonstrate anything about diaries in general; my findings might well be particular to my age, gender, class, and sexuality, which may or may not limit its relevance to others (Sue et al., 2007; McIntosh, 1990). From an ethnographic point of view, there may be much to be learnt from my diaries about the lives, opportunities, and experiences of a 50+ educated, queer, white woman born in the mid 20th century—but that has not been my focus here. It is my hope this exploration offers something about reflective and reflexive relationships with writing, constructing self-stories, midlife and ageing, and other findings and therapeutic possibilities.

The Strength in My Back

The bluest sky
hangs over my head
every day

Seeing it now,
the many days
reaching forwards and back – every day –
nothing is new.
Growth comes again
the bulbs pop up
High above the crows, clattering, chattering.

I am alive and
now

my back is strong
youth and age gathered up in my arms. I

bend backwards to look up
arch myself to see the day blue sky and the stars.
Count them all
Know my luck.

THE END

Full Circle

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I am a writer, poet, performer, and facilitator based in the north of England. I have been engaged in a process of personal development throughout my life through a combination of journalling, shamanism, eco-therapy and my creative and performative autobiographical work.

I have delivered workshops for over 10 years, working with women's groups, elders, those in recovery from drugs and alcohol, those experiencing mental health problems and others. My workshops (live and online) increasingly incorporate a relationship with nature as part of the creative and personal process.

As a poet and performer, I have created two solo autobiographical shows. In 2020 I created an outdoor performance of poetry in the landscape. I am currently developing a new piece of outdoor theatre arising from my MSc research project in CWTP as described in this paper.

<https://emmadecent.co.uk>

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