

**Metaphors, manifestos, angst and agency: Listening to and learning from women's lived experience in academe. Re-humanising academic lives, work and cultures through story.**

Abstract:

When I set out to take on a PhD, I knew it would be hard and that there would be a lot of unexpected learning throughout the process. What I did not expect however, was that the process of completing my PhD would be a healing journey. Previous to my PhD there had been some significant events in my life centred on loss, grief that had not only affected my mental health, but my physical health as well as I developed an eating disorder to cope. Add a chronic illness diagnosis and it was a time where I truly had to focus inward in order to keep my head above water. This chapter will describe how the journey of the PhD was a grounding and healing experience for me. How in order to complete my PhD I had to go through a process of becoming and unbecoming, moving from one phase to another, transforming from one self to another, a truer version of myself. How going through this, far away from family, actually allowed for more reflective time and focus with my own thoughts and allowed me to find my own voice again. As an early academic, this process is still in motion, what is certain though, is that my PhD was a turning point on my journey.

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I remember the day I left Canada to start my PhD in Edinburgh vividly. I had already spent a year away living in Southampton and had come back for the summer to go through the bureaucratic process of switching from one visa to another. This was not the first time I had lived away from home, it's a process so frequent that often people I haven't seen in a while ask "so where are you living now...and where to next?" However, this time seemed different. I broke down numerous times that day before leaving with my parents for the airport asking myself "what am I doing? This is going to be really hard and I don't know if I can do it ever, let alone right now" Thankfully, my parents have that kind of unwavering support and belief in me that usually results in them telling me I could change the world if I wanted, and they would be there to support me doing it. They also do a great job at reminding me that I am human, it is okay to express myself through tears of uncertainty and that I am remarkably resilient and can manage it all when things get hard. It's this last bit that I still need more regular reminders of. Due to the years preceding the beginning of my PhD journey I still have a tendency to hold it in.

To say the years leading up to my PhD were tumultuous would be an understatement of rather grand proportions. It all started between April and September of 2004 when I suffered a number of losses. A friend to lung cancer, another in a climbing accident, another in a hiking accident. It was that middle one that left the largest of scars, a love that will never be nurtured. My sense of self and the world were shattered in a way that means I am still putting the pieces back together over ten years later, wondering how many pieces I lost along the way. What I tried to do, rather successfully, was to try and focus on what I could control, on what I could manage and what would reinforce the pain. Because if the pain left, then that

means that they were really gone and I had moved on, an inconceivable idea at the time. I didn't want to feel good, I didn't think it was possible to enjoy, or hope for, anything ever again. I didn't know who I was anymore without these people and to an extent I still don't know who I would be without that blanket of grief that I carry with me. Which is ironic considering how often I needed a security blanket when I was a young girl to hold on to when things got overwhelming.

Enter the development of dangerous and unhealthy coping mechanisms. My mental health was fractured in ways that no one could have planned for nor knew what to do with at first. My family, whom I love dearly and would walk through fire for, are a bit 'stiff upper lip'. I remember coming home after the final death announcement to a family dinner and being told by my grandmother that the dinner table was no place for outbursts of emotions and that I should pull myself together. Which perhaps, without actually blaming my grandmother, is where some of the unhealthy coping mechanisms started. I internalised the idea that it was not safe to express what I was feeling and therefore tried to starve myself of all the emotions I was feeling. Yes you read that right, starve myself, emotionally and physically for about six years in total. I didn't want to feel those emotions, I did want others to think I wasn't coping or cause more upset at the dinner table so to speak, so I developed an incredible amount of self-control in hindsight, and also tried to keep those emotions away through exercise.

These were the years leading up to my PhD. Years of self-control and unparalleled determinism to portray a certain self, one in control, one that had it all together and could move on. Then the unravelling of that self as it became evident to all that glanced at me, that I was clearly not coping. Trying to take up as little space as possible so that people maybe wouldn't notice me and not ask me to talk about what I was feeling. I didn't know how to put into words what I was feeling. Although a reasonably emotionally intelligent woman, I was trying to push all emotions away, positive and negative, so had lost touch with the language that would have helped me express myself. On the surface I was numb, but like an iceberg, there were far deeper and stronger feelings underneath that had remained unacknowledged. To add salt to the wound, during those years I was also diagnosed with a chronic illness that left me in a lot of physical pain and again, flipped my sense of self off in another direction.

Sharing all this is not with an intention for sympathy, but instead the context for how writing my PhD actually provided me with the simultaneous structure and freedom in order to recover from it all. Underneath all the pain, I was able to recognise that in order to become the woman that I knew I could be, I needed a change of scenery and a change of pace. I needed to let go of the patterns and thought processes I was holding on to, the woman that I was. As cliché as it sounds, I needed to find, and return to myself. I had already started the recovery process before leaving for the UK; endless hours of doctors' appointments, cognitive behavioural therapy, EMDR, counselling, journaling, acupuncture, yoga and the seemingly small, yet enormous task of accepting my precarious situation, were either still in place or had been completed by the time I landed in Scotland.

I had always enjoyed, and excelled at academia in my field and knew that I wanted to complete my PhD at some point, so naturally jumped at the chance to move to Edinburgh to begin this part of my academic journey. Academia was a part of my identity that I had managed to keep relatively intact throughout simultaneously dealing with an eating disorder, chronic illness and grief. I knew who I was in the academic setting, although a challenging environment, it was always one that I welcomed and would happily put in the hard work to achieve success. Academia was, and still is, my safe space, my comfort zone. It is where I have the freedom to pursue my interests and passions, meet new people and be challenged. The processes, although potentially mundane and frustrating, are familiar to me, and that is what I needed. I needed a base from which I knew I could return to on the days when the journey of reflection and rediscovery of self became too much.

I viewed my PhD as a time to start a fresh, to be in a new environment where people didn't know my sob story and hopefully just saw me as slightly on the smaller side. A time when I could get away from the patterns and habits that had developed throughout the eating disorder and begin to reconstruct healthier habits. Somewhere in my head that was struggling with the process of recovery and moving to another country for an unknown period of time with no supports, I also knew that I needed to get some extra support right from the beginning. I started counselling again as soon as I could when I got there. I needed reinforcements and professional support if I was going to shift my focus from eating disorder to PhD. I began to see my PhD as an opportunity to retrain those neuropathways and perhaps use that self-control and determination in a different way. To find my voice again, and in hindsight, I think I wanted to find a way I could express myself. I somehow knew that the process of doing my PhD would mean a transformation of selves, from a woman that was struggling to see purpose and did not trust herself, to one that could develop a project, start it and finish it and know that it was her voice and ideas that could make a difference.

I was unconscious about some of the above for quite some time, I was blissfully unaware as to how going through all of this, whilst at the same time as actually completing a PhD was not going to be a straightforward process and far from easy. Never one to shy away from hard work and with a tendency to take on more than I necessarily should, it seemed an appropriate way forward from my perspective. The gift of the PhD, which is much easier to call a gift once you have stepped away from it, is that it truly does give one the opportunity to focus primarily on one thing for an extended period of time. In my case, I had few other distractions, no partner, family on the other side of the world, not even a plant to water, I therefore had an extended period of time of reflection about not only the PhD itself, but how I got there.

Always an advocate for nature based healing, I would go for walks during breaks around the parks and neighbourhoods of Edinburgh and be awestruck that I was there and not entirely sure how I got there considering how rough things had got for a few years. I was able to regain confidence in my ability to persevere and put perspective on all that had happened. Even though I was still in the process of recovery and adjusting to life with a chronic illness, I had managed to end up there, living near a castle, studying at one of the better Universities

in the world. If I'm honest, I'm still not entirely sure how I did it. What I do know though, is that my PhD was the focus I needed and it gave me the space me to slow down.

When I was neck deep in the eating disorder and trying to appear like I had it all together, one strategy that I used was to schedule myself to be so busy that I wouldn't have to think about any of it. I was finishing off my Master's degree, working two jobs, had numerous volunteer commitments and would say yes to a variety of social excursions. Any chance not to reflect and process. This is a great strategy when someone is trying to hide their insecurities. If you are involved in all the "right" things and appear to always be working hard and doing "good" things, then surely all is well in your world. Especially when your body shape is closer to the "ideal" on the outside, no matter how much it hurts on the inside. When in reality it is all for appearances, all to push people away from getting to close to the naked truth, that you are struggling with life, feel completely unlovable and unworthy of their support and have no idea what to do about it. Writing a PhD is a solitary act, no one else can write it except for the student. Therefore, I began to realise that although there were the standards expected by my supervisors and the University, the main person that needed to be happy with the end result was myself. I began to feel a sense of pride and confidence in myself when I would reach certain milestones or even if I wrote a sentence I particularly liked. I began to use my brain in a way that would produce insightful thoughts about research as opposed to being anxious about food and exercise. These small moments were all part of the healing process of unbecoming the woman with an eating disorder and becoming a truer version of herself.

The PhD process then, especially on a student visa with work restrictions, gave me the space I needed, although struggled to admit that I wanted, in order to start processing and reflecting on the complexities that are inherently involved with an eating disorder, grief, living with a chronic illness and the impact they were having on my life. Now don't get me wrong, being in academia comes with its own set of pressures that are widely discussed within this book series as well as without, but those pressures somehow seemed more manageable. There was now a well developed inner strength and self awareness I carried with me. My toolbox of inner resources was well stocked and I began to be quite stubborn when it came to my work schedule and would aim to do very little work on the evenings and weekends. A mentality I hold onto even now as a full time academic.

My physical and mental health began to take top priority within my day to day life. So when it came to facing the pressures of academia; deadlines, quality of work, teaching, marking, reading, writing, presenting at conferences, supervision etc...I felt more equipped to say no. I was able to take the pressure off myself and know that sacrificing my health, whilst in the process of recovery, would be a backward step. Fortunately, I also had brilliant supervisors that did not make unrealistic expectations on me, they were high, but not unmanageable. Although they knew little about my backstory, they knew that I had strict boundaries when it came to my health and wellbeing. Knowing how stressful the academic environment can be, these habits developed throughout my PhD have become invaluable. So although the PhD is in the past, and I say that it helped my recovery process, it has also resulted in an increased ability to implement boundaries, which is an important aspect of academic life.

Now, when it came to actually writing my PhD, things took an interesting path. Like most research projects, I went in expecting to write about one thing and came out the other end writing about something else entirely. I thought I would be learning more about certain aspects of organisations and structures that impacted on the work being done, I came out with a whole chapter discussing emotional labour and the emotions of shame, guilt and anxiety in relation to my field of study. If there is anything that triggers some deep self reflection and processing, it is studying and writing about the emotions of shame and guilt.

Shame and guilt are two emotions that are rampant when one is involved with eating disorders and chronic illnesses. There is shame about not being able to cope, about having something 'wrong' with you, about what may have triggered the eating disorder, about how your body looks and functions, about the emotional pain that you are causing yourself and inevitably those around you and many more that others will be more acutely aware of than I. When combined with the shame, guilt and anxiety that can come with working in academia; am I writing enough and publishing in the right journals? Am I putting in enough grant applications? Do I have good student evaluations? I should be doing more, I am not smart enough to be here and will get found out any moment now (imposter syndrome), is it okay to take time for myself and say no to being accessible all the time? It can be a tricky emotional journey to navigate. There were days I slipped, days when I took way more than two steps back and questioned myself and whether any of this was worth this amount of hard work. This is when the ability to be in a position where I could pause, take a day or two off from looking at my PhD, and spend time walking or going to yoga became essential.

When you are in academia, you tend to spend a lot of time being curious and thinking critically, paying close attention to detail. I was able to use these strategies to get curious about myself and my own journey. It was almost like doing two research projects at once, one on my PhD topic and the other on myself. I began to really enjoy finding those moments where I would make links between behaviours and thought processes, where I would find out more about why I am the way I am. I continue to be fascinated by the way that the events of 2004 and subsequent years impact my day to day life and thought patterns. I am a completely different woman, but a woman that is now incredibly sure in who she is.

The flexibility that my PhD allowed me was an integral part of the recovery process. I had spent many years surrounding myself with rigid schedules and habits around food, exercise and overall pretty poor self-worth. In order to break those ways of being, I needed the space to have days where I was not going to be okay and to honour those moments. If I was struggling and did not feel like I could do it, I needed to know that it was okay for me to step away from it all for as long as I needed. Sometimes this was an hour or so, sometimes it was longer. I learned to take it easy on myself and not berate myself if I was not being "productive" in the academic sense of the word. I reminded myself that I was being "productive" in my own personal way. That if I wanted to be a productive academic, I needed to look after myself and honour the journey I was on at the time.



Having these moments and events as part of my story have also reminded me about the importance of sharing my story. So often in academia we spend more time alone in our offices than we would like, we can often forget the importance, or not prioritise connecting with those we work with. When in reality, connecting with each other and knowing each other's stories is how we develop not only as individuals, but as a team. The team that I am currently in, is incredibly supportive because we know each others stories. Not always in full detail, but enough that allows us to rally together and step up, or advocate on each other's behalf. We do not leave anyone on their own to deal with the pressures of academic or personal life, and this is a comforting realisation for someone that learned the hard way that it is far more beneficial to let people in when you are struggling.

I titled this piece of writing "PhD: Pivotal Heart Development" because that is exactly what the PhD process was. My heart had been closed off, hidden even from myself and I continue to work on opening it up and learn more about what it holds. That being said, I truly believe the experiences and emotions that I went through before my PhD, also meant that I had the strength and determination to complete it, I needed to go through it all. Now that I am a few years post PhD and in a full time academic post, I can see how different my mindset is from what it once was. Although still a work in progress, I am now more willing to talk about when I am struggling with someone, I have a healthier and more relaxed outlook on my work life balance and yet realise what that looks like is flexible and adaptable, I am more able to look after my stress levels, more likely to say yes to slowing down, and no to rushing and trying to fit it all in. I know now that if I do not look after myself, how can I expect to look after others or do the job that I am passionate about?

This type, or form, of knowledge is not one that is necessarily recognised or celebrated within academia. It is not quantifiable, it is not something that emerges through my publications or shows up on my performance review. It is an important knowledge base, though, from which all those other academic necessities emerge. This knowledge allows me to keep myself upright in the academic spaces that can be saturated with pressure, hierarchies and ego. This knowledge of self allows me to remain authentic and reminds me of my emotional investment in the academic arena that supported me through my transformation. So although I am not naïve to the competitive, fast paced and high volume of work nature that is academia, I feel better prepared for it because of that pivotal heart development.