

## Adult Educators: Making a Difference, Transforming Lives

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**[Abstract]** Transformative learning is described as an adult experience of revising beliefs and values previously surmised to be true, and at times this may occur years after a significant encounter. Adult educators may be a catalyst for such changes in their learners, even though they do not always witness the fruits of their labor. Based on the author's research and her personal transformation during the study, this article highlights three stories of the long-term effect of transformative learning on adult educators. It discusses how their beliefs and values were originally constructed and later challenged through new experiences in their university programs. Ranging in age from 35 to 65 and representing diverse backgrounds, participants shared their stories through interviews, art, and writing. This essay also expands the research to include how adult educators, possibly unknowingly, may provide a pathway for learners in the healing of their grief stemming from childhood losses. Two stories of transformative learning are from the study participants; the other is the researcher's story that had been kept secret for nearly 50 years.

**[Keywords]** transformative learning, adult educator, childhood loss, grief, adult education

### Introduction

Although transformative learning has been researched for more than 50 years, much remains to be learned about its significance. This includes the role of adult educators as program developers, teachers, authors, and mentors when fostering this phenomenon in their instructional environments. In addition, Butterwick & Lawrence have said that transformative learning takes place "at moments in our teaching contexts and much later, outside of those parameters... We cannot always know what the actual impact of the learning experience has been on our learners" (2009, p. 36). Research of all of these understandings broadens the literature.

Based on my study of transformative learning experiences of adult educators, this article provides a brief literature review, parameters of the study, an overview of grief, healing and storytelling, plus three stories of transformative learning. Two stories are from study participants; the other is my story that had been kept secret for nearly 50 years. Pseudonyms are used in all stories.

### Literature Review

One cannot discuss transformative learning without giving credit to Jack Mezirow, the originator of this educational theory. Mezirow's many contributions were inspired in 1978 by his wife's midlife return to college and the transformation he saw in her. Transformative learning is described as an adult experience of revising beliefs and values previously surmised to be true. According to theorists including Mezirow, people's viewpoints may be only assumptions learned during childhood. These learned beliefs become accepted as true without an understanding of how or why they were formed (Cell, 1984). The experience of transformative learning challenges such strongly held assumptions and enables learners to interpret their own meanings rather than to adopt the beliefs and values of others.

According to Schapiro (2009), "Transformative learning is not something we do to other people ... [; it is something that people do for themselves" (p. 106). Mezirow (1991) confirmed that transformative learning must occur in a safe and nurturing environment, and he identified the ideal conditions to foster this learning: accurate and complete information, freedom from coercion, openness to alternative views, empathy to weigh evidence, capacity for reflection, and an equal opportunity to participate. Even if a

particular environment is well suited for transformative learning, the final action rests with the learner. In addition, it can occur immediately or well into the future (Mezirow & Associates (2000).

### **Background of the Study**

In 2013, I completed my dissertation, *Truths about Transformative Learning: The Narrative Inquiry of Adult Educators' Experiences in Graduate Education*. The purpose of the study was to expand the literature by sharing in-depth stories of adult educators who had personally experienced transformative learning as few studies had explored this topic. As a qualitative study, it focused on the experiences of educators whose transformations were sparked by their graduate programs in adult education.

Prior to their interviews, each informed me that their graduate adult education experience had been transformative. Using narrative inquiry as the methodology, I interviewed six participants, 3 to 18 years after they had completed their program, to gain insight into how their transformative learning had occurred and the long-term effects of their experiences.

The criteria for subjects' participation were as follows: (1) they had self-reported transformative learning in relation to their graduate adult education program, (2) they had completed their degree at least three years previously, (3) they were practicing adult educators, and (4) they were at least 35 years old.

Every study has its limitations. One limitation of my study was that although transformative learning can occur through experiences other than graduate education, my case studies focused on people's years in graduate school. However, such transformations can involve experiences that happened outside of the graduate environment. Two stories presented here discuss transformative experiences originating from traumatic personal losses at an early age.

### **Grieving over Personal Loss**

Grieving has the power to transform. During our lifetimes, all of us will experience the loss of a loved one: a grandparent, parent, sibling, child, spouse, friend, or even a public figure we greatly admire. Kübler-Ross and Kessler stated, "Grief is one of life's passages we all experience. It is one of life's equalizers, a shared experience for every man and woman who lives" (2005, p. 229). After losing a loved one, each person grieves in their own personal way and along their own timeline as they try to become whole again.

If the grief has resulted from a suicide, there is the anger and denial phase of grieving, but the emotional state of shame also takes center stage. Great stigma is attached to suicide, so the surviving loved ones may rarely talk about it. Guilt may become a focal point as family and friends often wonder if they failed to recognize signs that suicide was impending. "The survivors may feel isolated and cut off from everyone, compounded with the guilt they may feel" (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005, p. 184). These feelings may lead to survivor shutdown.

Kübler-Ross and Kessler (2005) identified children as the "forgotten grievers" (p. 160) because they are old enough to love but lack extensive experience in understanding tragic loss. Because their lives are only beginning, children may be unable to find words to express their emotions. In this situation, adults must talk about their feelings and loss to help children open up.

Although every loss is difficult, when individuals are forewarned of a loved one's impending death, they have the opportunity to say goodbye. In contrast, those who experience the sudden death of a loved one have no preparation or final words. Kübler-Ross and Kessler described the result as "just the loudest absence one could ever imagine" (2005, p. 195), leaving survivors in a heightened sense of shock that may take years to gradually unearth. In some cases, the grieving process is postponed and becomes "unfinished business" (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005, p. 229).

### Storytelling to Overcome Pain

Poulos (2009) addressed the issues of death and unfinished business through the discussion of secrets. Keeping traumatic life events tucked away as secrets puts grieving on hold. We fall into a silence that may eventually be difficult to overcome. Poulos wrote, "Sometimes ... tragic losses, painful conflicts, sharp grief, numbing depression—can seem to surround us, hem us in, strike us mute. Beleaguered, we fall into silence. And silence falls into secret longing ... from which we do not know how to extricate ourselves" (p. 32). Poulos (2009) continued, "Rather than secretkeeping, we might do well to turn to storytelling as a means of overcoming the pain, shame, loss, grief, anger and sadness" (pp. 132–133).

Telling our stories is "a way of purging or releasing ourselves of certain burdens" (Atkinson, 1995, p. 15). Storytelling may take on various forms, such as journaling, writing, art, videos, presentations, or discussions. No matter how they are told, stories "can transform our lives if we are open to their power, if the time is right, and if the person telling or hearing the story is ready" (Atkinson, 1995, p. 136).

### Richard's Story

At the time of our interview, Richard, an African American male, was in his fifties and he worked as a corporate trainer. Richard had four brothers and two sisters. He explained, "With each child being pegged for their strength, I was always called the smart one, or the bookworm, or the professor."

When Richard was six years old, his father died. "After that," he recalled, "I was never the same. I have a picture of [myself] the year that he died, [and] I look like the saddest kid that ever lived." Richard wrote in his life history, "I was fortunate enough to have a mother, who always took care of us. But my life was never the same after that happened."

After high school, Richard continued at a university. As a writing assignment, Richard focused on a closely held secret that had happened when he was 16 years old: his brother, then 25, committed suicide. "I didn't understand what [these events do] to your life," he later wrote. Richard had rarely talked about this loss, yet with that assignment he began to share his burdensome secret. The professor provided positive feedback and encouraged Richard to continue writing. Richard stated many years later, "[I] found a way to deal with [difficult issues] in terms of my writing. I write a lot about that event, because it's one of these things that are personal and you deal with it in your own way."

Richard began to encounter academic challenges during his second year of college so he moved back home and began working as a bank teller. He did well and was eventually promoted to supervisor and taught those whom he supervised. Earning more money and having additional responsibility motivated him to return to college as a part-time student. Years later, he earned an undergraduate degree in psychology. However, he admitted, "The bachelor's degree wasn't transformative. It was just something I needed to get." Also, Richard's mother died during this time and he was saddened that, along with his brother's suicide, now both of his parents had died.

Even so, Richard still felt a desire to become more educated. He enrolled in a master's degree program in training and development where classes were taken individually as time permitted. This experience was transformative as Richard explained, "I became secure in understanding who I am as an African American male, more confident in myself and the skills I brought to the workplace, and more grounded in who I am today and who I am still evolving into as a human being." However, after not being selected for another position, he left that employer after 25 years.

Richard was then hired as a trainer at a competing bank where he explained he was no longer treated like a "dinosaur" but became the "go-to-guy." I was working on a master's [degree]. They were happy to have me. After completing his master's program, Richard applied to a doctoral program in adult education. Before it even began, he received the news that his bank training position had been eliminated. "This was one of the lowest points in my life," he said. Despite this setback, Richard found a part-time training job and entered the doctoral program.

Although much of Richard's life experience was valuable, he said his graduate studies influenced his transformations most heavily because they shaped many of his perspectives. Once he began graduate school, he said, "It was as though a door opened. It changed my life in a way I could never have envisioned." Richard said he truly became a different person through graduate education: "Before my transformative experience, I identified myself as an underling, a dinosaur in the workplace. Today I proudly identify myself with words such as *professional, accomplished, and lifelong learner.*"

Richard suggested that many people do not realize the value of education. He said of his own experience, "I originally looked at education as a means to an end, a goal to achieve in order to move up the career ladder, but I now view education from a perspective wrapped up in hope."

Richard said he has become a professional in the strongest sense of the word, "with a confidence that was unknown to me prior." His graduate experiences added a level of personal fulfillment and appreciation, along with "a sense of accomplishment that people cannot understand unless they have experienced it themselves." It was transformative.

At the time of this study, Richard was still enrolled in his doctoral program and the following comments are related to his completed master's program that influenced him in four significant ways: It allowed him to form strong relationships with various faculty and peers. His program included a support system that provided him with mentors. He encountered opportunities for inclass discussions. His faculty encouraged reflective practice.

In addition, based on his experience in his freshman writing class, Richard began sharing the secret of his brother's suicide in discussions and writing. Unleashing his burden was transformative and now through his writing, enables Richard to assist others who may be facing a similar experience.

### Patti's Story

Patti is a Caucasian woman who was in her 60s at the time of our interviews and she worked as a nonprofit executive and a community college professor. Patti shared, "Statistically, I'm not a person to graduate with a degree. I don't speak a foreign language. I don't play a musical instrument. I was never a National Merit Scholar." Her journey to college was an uphill battle, which included her firsthand encounter with domestic violence and she stated, "Domestic violence was swept under the rug or went completely unrecognized."

Patti said it wasn't until she critically reflected on her early years that she was able to see that her mother, a victim herself, perpetuated that sense of helplessness in raising her daughters. When Patti was growing up "College was never talked about or considered as an option for me, because women who wanted to work became clerks, secretaries, or hairdressers." Patti confessed that even years later, at the time of her doctoral graduation, "My mother thought I was getting a certificate somewhere. She was not even proud of what I was doing."

Although Patti did not experience a supportive family, she did have mentors who stepped into her life. "From grade school through college," she said, "there has always been someone who took the time to guide me and believe in me as a person." In fourth grade a teacher encouraged her to read about famous successful women and later, a high school teacher "Took me aside and asked whether I had ever considered going to the university." These encouragements planted seeds in Patti's mind about changing the direction of her life.

Patti got married after her high school graduation, had two children, and stayed in this relationship for six unhappy years. In spite of this, she dreamed of becoming a teacher. Eventually Patti got a divorce and entered college and confessed, "I was a mother, divorcée, and college student. I had made a decision that was welcome and necessary, but one that was also frightening to me." Patti and her children lived on about \$3,000 a year but she shared, "My children and I were happy, safe, and fortunate in so many ways not measured by money."

Patti's college experience also provided her with mentors. In her bachelor's program a professor invited her to attend the women's studies meetings fostering her interest to become politically active. At age 27, she chaired the university's Take Back the Night march which had the goal to uncover the unspoken subject of rape. On-campus violence had been covered up for years, and Patti's university had one of the largest incidences of rape and domestic violence in the United States.

After her undergraduate studies, Patti entered a master's degree program in adult education. Here, a professor selected her to study under a Brazilian visiting professor, Paulo Freire. Freire influenced her in many ways. Not only had he supported people of poverty, but he had also experienced poverty firsthand himself, much like Patti had. Studying with Freire was how Patti became familiar with the practice of reflection.

Another enriching opportunity was when the dean of the urban affairs program asked Patti to write an article. Titled *The New Shape of Poverty*, it "discussed poverty from a feminist viewpoint. Unbeknownst to me, my article proposed an idea that was new and radical." It was so well received that it was chosen as the cover story of a scholarly newsletter for urban affairs. Because of the positive feedback from professors and others regarding the article, Patti was invited into the adult education doctoral program that included an assistantship.

Patti's transformations have been influenced by many people, some quite well known. One of them was Angela Davis, a political activist who visited Patti's university campus during the women's rights movement. Patti recalled, "I was very inspired by what she stood for and what she was doing." Another was Helen Thomas, longtime member of the White House press corps, whom Patti met at a private reception. "As a prominent woman journalist, she spoke about her transformative life and how she has been successful in a man's world." And at a women's leadership breakfast, Patti had the opportunity to meet Barack Obama, who at the time was a senator from Illinois. "His ideas and the way he portrayed them through discussion influenced my thinking on issues that were largely outside my small world."

Patti recalled, "I had no time to develop relationships with other learners in my classes. I was probably closer to my professors than to any of the students." To conduct her doctoral research, Patti worked with domestic violence victims from a women's shelter. She was seeking to find ways to create an environment in which people could become empowered in their settings. She asserted, "Empowerment through education creates a just and moral society in which power is shared. This is the first step to reducing the prevalence of domestic violence." Patti admitted that her research was instrumental to her own transformations. Not only was she able to identify her own voice, but she said, "I believe it is my responsibility to have a voice for those who are marginalized."

Patti's doctoral program influenced her transformative learning in four significant ways. Professors provided her volunteer opportunities outside of the classroom. The program exposed her to diverse populations both inside and outside of the classroom. A professor selected her to study with Paulo Freire. Patti was continually validated by faculty.

Patti continues assisting others and has held many political positions. She has also received the Lifetime Achievement Award, A Woman of Distinction Award and Living with Trees Award.

### Gigi's Story

Gigi is a Caucasian woman with two children and two grandchildren and has been happily married for more than 40 years. As a young child, she enjoyed school and dreamed of becoming an elementary teacher. Her mother encouraged her by observing, "There will always be a need for teachers."

As a teenager Gigi was intrigued by news stories, especially the shocking announcement that President Kennedy had been shot in Dallas, Texas. Her avid interest in this story may have stemmed from her visit to a Kennedy campaign center, or possibly the timing was just right to explore the implications of such an event as tragedy was not new to Gigi. Her interest in the Kennedy assassination may have been linked to

the hardship that entered her life a few days after her 10th birthday. Her family was driving home from a family vacation when their automobile was struck head-on. Gigi was the lone survivor.

After her release from the hospital, Gigi moved in with other family members. Though her new family provided some stability, they did not provide the emotional support that Gigi needed. She was often told that she had a chip on her shoulder and was ungrateful. She was advised to move forward, not look back. No one talked about the loss of her original family and Gigi was instructed to do the same. Afraid to grieve, she held everything deep inside.

Gigi entered a new school where, she recalled, “I changed from an A student to a C student, but friendships grew and provided me the support network I needed to get through the middle-and high-school years.” Due to her grades however, she was not identified as a college-bound student. Lack of encouragement from family and high-school counselors caused her to conclude that college was not in her future. She later wrote, “The internal message was that I wasn’t smart enough to be successful at college. This led me into the world of work straight from high school.” Gigi began her work experience on a factory assembly line. Several years later, she married. Soon she had a son and daughter and became a stay-at-home mom. As her children reached their middle-school years, Gigi returned to work, first at a public library and later at a research library. She also enrolled part-time at her community college, but with no intention to earn a degree. Eventually, she discovered that she had accumulated enough credits to transfer into a bachelor’s degree program. She wrote, “It was a positive experience that kept me on the path to learning more.”

Next, Gigi enrolled in a master’s degree program in adult education. She revealed, “I was not sure what an adult educator was, but the program fit my schedule, and 18 months later I had my first graduate degree.” With this accomplishment, she began work at a neighboring community college as coordinator of career programs in its continuing education department. Later she was promoted to manager of the department, where she worked for 20 years before retiring.

Earning the master’s degree was transformative in that it changed how Gigi felt about herself. She stated, “I had become a qualified professional in every sense of the word. I had gained not only skills and a professional job but also confidence in my place in the world.”

Years later, Gigi still had a desire to learn more, so she enrolled in a doctoral program in adult and continuing education. It had a summer residential requirement and followed a cohort model in which learners went through the program as a group. This model presented opportunities for transformative experiences as students could build close relationships with faculty and peers, share personal stories with each other, and reflect on their beliefs.

One of Gigi’s first doctoral course assignments was to write an educational biography to be shared in a small-group setting. She panicked at this requirement as it would have to include stories from her childhood that had always been kept secret from those who came to know her. Recalling her story was still too painful. In the end, however, Gigi attempted to put some of her life on paper. She could not yet know the full impact of her doctoral experience.

In 2011, a classmate invited Gigi to share her childhood tragedy with a group of young children who had also lost a parent. The only way Gigi could conceive of telling her story was to create a storybook version and read it aloud. This was the first time she had shared space with children who had also suffered the tragic, life-changing loss of a parent. Gigi described the experience as transformative. She later wrote, “It was sad but powerful as I no longer felt alone in my tragedy.”

In 2012, Gigi and several cohort members presented personal stories of transformation at the 10th annual International Conference on Transformative Learning. Though it was still difficult for Gigi to share her story, she was becoming more confident in doing so. “It’s hard to believe that for so many years I kept my story secret, was not expected to attend college, and [now] successfully presented my story tearfully at an international conference as a doctoral student,” she said. Her secret burden was getting lighter.

Through her transformative learning experiences, Gigi learned to be a more effective adult educator and a more compassionate human being in general. Many of these experiences were possible through interactions with faculty and peers.

Gigi's graduate opportunities increased her self-confidence, encouraged her to develop a voice to speak for herself and others, and helped unburden her painful tragedy of 50 years prior. Possibly this was the most valuable experience of her graduate studies. She continues to write and present her story.

### Conclusion

At the end of the first interview, participants were asked to create an artistic representation of their transformative experience related to graduate study. Richard depicted transformative learning on a vertical scale stating it is a life filled with "limitless possibilities." Patti's art portrayed the metamorphosis of changing from a caterpillar to a butterfly, symbolic of "not understanding what the true destination is going to be." Gigi more recently drew transformative learning as a rainbow, stating "Transformative learning is a rainbow above me...celebrating who I am becoming."

This article has documented a fresh look at the powerful impact adult educators have on their learners. Transformative learning is a real experience and the stories presented in this essay demonstrate life occurrences that prompted new perspectives and the results of the experiences.

Adult educators may not know the impact they have made on their student's lives; however, it is important here to recognize their efforts. Even long after leaving their academic programs, learners may reflect on their experiences and continue to be transformed and healed.

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