

## Seeking Care: Mindfulness, Reflexive Struggle, and Puffy Selves in Bullying

Keith Berry

What does it mean to become ourselves, to experience who we and others understand us to be? What might the process look like for younger selves who are immersed in the looming problem of bullying, and what is at stake regarding how we respond to its complex storyline? How can we engage ethnographic research that studies ourselves and others in ways that are also more caring than harmful for all persons involved? As senseless bullying continues, I seek meaningful answers to questions of becoming and identities within these intricate relational spaces. Yet as I perform this seeking, the search becomes ever more complicated and personal.

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It is winter 1982 and I am in the fifth grade, about to return inside from recess. A chubby bowl-haircut wearing boy, I am said to be my mother's angel, someone known to behave and stay out of trouble. I am standing on the same playground where, just a few weeks before, with full music and make-shift costuming I spun as Wonder Woman for my friends and teacher (Berry). Spinning embodied my desire to perform with Wonder Woman's strength and beauty amid conflict and uncertainty, and also opened and exposed me, rendering me unable to hide.

At recess I spot my friend Noman across the parking lot. Noman is a petite, polite, and soft-spoken Pakistani American boy who is in my class. He carries himself beautifully and speaks with a gentle voice. He has a faint and curious fifth grade mustache. His giggles are cartoonish, always cherubic, and always warm. Noman and I spend lots of lunches together, engaging in the rituals of small talk or eating in quiet. Often uncomfortable around the "cool kids," I am comfortable around him, and I think he feels at peace around me.

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**Keith Berry** is an Associate Professor in the Department of Communication at the University of South Florida. He uses ethnographic methods and phenomenology to examine identity negotiation as it occurs across diverse relational scenes. He has published in journals such as *Qualitative Inquiry* and *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, and in books such as the *Handbook of Autoethnography*.

I see Noman standing against the brick wall leading to the school entrance, gently kicking rocks across the sidewalk, awaiting Miss Cheek's cue to return inside. He has just spent recess, as he tends to do, ritualistically walking quietly around the parking lot, staring at the ground. Though he tends to keep himself in isolation, he harms no one.

Noman smiles and nods "hello" as he spots me walking up to him. Prepared for outdoor recess on a blustery Chicago day, my eyes are fixed on his long, thick, and puffy winter coat. He seems well protected. "Nice coat," I say sarcastically, poking at his chest, near his heart, feeling the sharpness of my finger's attempt to penetrate the puffiness. He mumbles, "(Something) cold and (something) snow." My pokes escalate, and I clumsily yell, "I cannot hear you, No-man, talk louder!" He acquiesces to my aggression, his body goes limp, and he stares at the ground. Still not satisfied, I grab Noman by his coat, my boy fingers barely able to cling onto his puffed-up coating, and push him against the brick wall. "Owwww," he exclaims, underscoring the physical impact of his head and back hitting the unforgiving wall. His eyes are shut, seemingly to prepare for more roughness.

The pain shown on Noman's face prompts me to quickly realize what I have done, and leads me to stumble awkwardly through an apology. "Uh, oh, I'm sorry . . . my friend." He nods as I move away, the imprint of my assault slowing receding from the surface of his coat, the imprint slowly replaced by puffiness. We walk inside, never to speak of the incident again.

This autoethnographic essay explores identity as it occurs through bullying and responses to bullying. I move through/between experiences teaching a course on bullying and the *It Gets Better Project* in order to seek a reflexive and mindful understanding of this complex and high-stakes issue. I convey modes of relating that effectively constitute expanding and contracting selves—"puffy" and deflated selves who seek to negotiate care within situations of harm. I also consider connections between practices of mindfulness and autoethnographic reflexivity by looking at what it means to mindfully seek care within reflexive struggle.

I explore bullying relationally, assuming people co-constitute meaning in interactions and relationships, or with John Shotter, "a knowing 'from within'" (33). The approach stresses complexity and contingency in explaining lived experience. I assume identity is not only something people form, but negotiate in/through relating (Jackson). Thus, the constitution of bully, bullied, and researcher identities entails a give and take in which some identities are valued and privileged over others. I advocate mindfulness as a helpful conversation partner in processes where scholars reflexively convey hardship, like bullying. Mindful practice entails aspiring to be curiously, gently, and honestly present and in the moment, and opening ourselves to the pleasant and dissatisfying experiences comprising the relationships we maintain with ourselves and others (Batchelor; Chödrön; Salzberg). It involves compassionately exploring the role of suffering in our lives and respecting the innate interconnectedness of all beings.

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As incidents regarding LGBT youth, identity, and safety have increased (Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen and Palmer), so too have examinations of the problem. For instance, consider how cyber bullying has pervaded youth culture, making for a more complex opponent in efforts to manage bullying (Patchin and Hinduja; Hinduja and Patchin). Or consider Lee Hirsch, Cynthia Lowen and Dina Santorelli's work accompanying the acclaimed film *Bully*, in which they provide strategies for professionals, parents, and to communities. Although one might not ever have had intimate contact with bullying, one surely has come into contact with someone who has, or has heard related stories. Bullying is located as an *en vogue* topic in US cultural discourse, prompting questions about whether statistics on bullying are exaggerated through myths (Cloud), and critique about how popular representations (e.g., in the hit television show *GLEE*) problematically suggest suicide as the "logical" outcome for bullied gay youth (Goltz, "Gay Suicidal 'Logic'"; also see Goltz, "'Sensible' Suicide").

Often prioritized in bullying discourse are sex, gender and sexuality. On the one hand, C. J. Pascoe's investigation of aggression explores uses of "fag" by teenage boys as an abject label among high school students, and Keith Boykin's and Kenyon Forrow's writing examines racism and homophobia among young gay men of color. On the other hand, Haley Kilpatrick explores the dramas of "girl talk" within bullying, and Rachel Simmons investigates aggression among girls as a "hidden culture." And in line with the popular movie *Mean Girls*, Rosalind Wiseman proposes how "queen bees and wannabes" comprise a network of bullying in high school. Shared within these diverse accounts is the idea that bullying is intertwined with everyday performances as sexed/gendered/sexualized selves.

The dynamic nature of bullying gives me pause. At times the largeness of the issue makes seeking palpable and specific understanding(s) feel vast and untouchable. Bullying stories often come to attention through cultural discourse in fleeting and impersonal ways. Stories appear on television news and the Internet and come and go with little sustained and critical reflection. Yet, the thought of losing more youth to suicide, or of youth feeling as though being anyone other than who they feel they are is not enough, feels frustrating and unloving. Thus, I write here believing we are overdue for meaningful and caring accounts that more intimately explore bullying and advocate greater care for the vulnerable selves involved with the problem. As with Jodee Blanco's memoir accounting her experiences with bullying in elementary and high schools, and Kenji Yoshino's exploration of gay covering, we can learn much from reflexive accounts. I write inspired by how autoethnographers relationally and intimately situate truth(s) "*between* storyteller and story listener" (Bochner 161, emphasis in original), and by the diverse ways the "ebb and flow of relationship experience is depicted in an episodic form that dramatizes the motion of connected lives across the curve of time" (158).<sup>1</sup> As such, the essay engages in a mindful exploration of ways we

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<sup>1</sup> Bochner inventories how these truths "dwell in the listeners' or readers' engagement with the writer's struggle with adversity, the heartbreaking feelings of stigma and marginalization, the

might better understand bullying and reflexive processes. I convey this account hoping others will reflect on and share their own stories; the problem feels too big and complex to respond to it alone.

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It is 2012 and I am teaching the seminar, “*It Gets Better*: Communication, Conflict & Difference,” which uses the *It Gets Better Project (IGBP)* as a pedagogical entry point for understanding the intersections of interaction, relationships, culture and identity. *IGBP* is a popular international and online social movement comprised of videos created by public personae (e.g., celebrities, politicians) and private citizens. Those appearing in videos seek to comfort and encourage high school students, primarily LGBT youth, who endure the wrath of bullying in high school. The videos often dynamically charge these young and vulnerable people with the task of personal and life-saving endurance amid ongoing crisis.

Students are assigned to create their own videos as final projects, which they can post online with the *IGBP*. The existential challenge created by the assignment is significant: I am asking students to outwardly perform an appreciation for diverse cultures and lives, and to explore what it is like to embody particular selves, before they might hold the ideological commitments that typically would support those selves. That is, many students are reaching out in support of LGBT youth, even as the course challenges them to (re)imagine how they might feel about the issues. We work through these challenges phenomenologically by talking about the importance of reflexively coming to terms with how they are approaching and interpreting this issue and their projects from the unique vantage point of their lived experience. We discuss the benefits of working to open themselves to different ways they might relate to and understand themselves and others, and the importance of being patient as they learn and grow. The project entails palpable risk, but the results are rewarding.

For instance, four hockey players in the class, two women and two men, decide to complete the project as a team. Although each student is competent, I do not know what to expect, especially from the men who are new students to me. I fear that the men—hockey playing men—might not understand or care about *IGBP*. Yet, their outcome could not be further from what I had expected. The team submitted a lovely video, called “Our Promise,” in which they, along with other student athletes they recruited, appear and convey their promise to help end bullying and discrimination. One male player even enthusiastically advocated: “Gay Rights in Sports!”

Overall, I am impressed by the ways all student videos speak to a willingness and ability to experiment with mindfulness. The group of mostly young adults from

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resistance to the authority of canonical discourses, the therapeutic desire to face up to the challenges of life and to emerge with greater self-knowledge, the opposition to the repression of the body, the difficulty of finding the words to make bodily dysfunction meaningful, the desire for self-expression, and the urge to speak to and assist a community of fellow sufferers. The call of these stories is for engagement within and between, not analysis from without” (161).

Northern Wisconsin and Minnesota produce beautiful projects that speak against hate and in support of inclusivity and care. Seeking to comfort a suffering population, these (mostly and presumably) heterosexual students stretch and (re)imagine their comfort zones and belief systems. Of course, for most students the project provides only a start in the process of becoming more mindful and inclusive relational partners and advocates. We discuss how consistency matters, how mindfully continuing to confront bigotry is vital, and how the videos are not panaceas that will end violence and social injustice. Still, by taking stands, they begin to perform novel selves, and do so openly and graciously. Led by the athletes who emerge as role models for other students, they experiment with suspending bias and relating with greater awareness and empathy.

Participating in their risk-taking and advocacy requires me to confront a number of my own mindless presumptions and stereotypes. I come to understand more deeply that many students are more flexible and willing than I sometimes might imagine. I am reminded of how the processes of doing advocacy and being advocates take multiple and distinct forms. I become more aware of how the project is a vital and applied way of learning about interaction, relationships, and conflict, and working to interrupt and reform harmful social practices.<sup>2</sup>

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It has been more than thirty years since the bullying episode with Noman. Yet, working with the videos and students and writing this essay readily bring back and make meaningful my actions from that day. I struggle with the violence, particularly the contrasting image of my aggressive and larger body over Noman's gentle and petite body. The aggression felt so easy in the moment, taking little effort to exert maximum force. "No-man . . ." impulsively flew out of my mouth, and my hands easily overcame Noman's weaker body. I also struggle with how uncomfortable I felt afterward. I seemed like a stranger to myself, once my fingers left his coat. I knew it happened, but no longer felt comfortable about "who" enacted the violence.

I struggle with how that moment, in effect, qualified me to fit in and dwell safely within a larger space of aggressive bodies and beings. I felt stronger and safer in that moment, and perhaps necessarily so. I had spun as Wonder Woman just a few weeks before. That performance left me vulnerable and marked as a boy who does not necessarily perform like most boys. Still, I was not interested in holding such an affiliation, as the peers who occupied that relational space often were bulkier and tougher boys, boys with whom I did not identify. I also struggle with the chance that, because

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<sup>2</sup> I aim through my teaching to embody critical communication pedagogy and identify closely with the germinal work in this area by Deanna Fassett and John T. Warren (*Critical Communication Pedagogy*). This advocacy includes a commitment to learning and identity as constituted through everyday relational practices and the importance of dialogue in seeking to understand and transform harmful social constraints. This semester's video projects only fuel my resolve to perform pedagogically in these ways. I am indebted to the students because of the ways their projects and our ongoing dialogue created necessary and exciting openings for learning.

Noman and I shared a similar relational spirit, the violence actually rendered me a bully onto myself. In this sense, through that moment I taunted and was violent with the “me” I saw in/through him, a me I felt was questionable in the eyes (and puffiness) of others. Noman was not the only friend needing the protection of a puffy coat.

As I write these memories, I am struck by how easy it can be to struggle with the struggle, or to relate to/with some reflexive praxis in markedly distressing ways. Why *did* I do that to Noman? Did others see what I did and choose to ignore it? Working through these pressing questions and implications on identity, particularly less desirable identities, can easily lead to harsh critique and judgment: How *could* I do that? What was my problem? I was well loved as a child, but was I unhappy? In turn, the allure cast from the volatile nature of that physical force, and from naming myself a “bully” serves to perpetuate the anguish I feel about that day. I grapple with what it means to have been that kid and to have enacted that violence. So many years later, it feels dirty and cruel. Revisiting and thinking more deeply about the violence and its meaningfulness, I drift into unrelated and distracting thoughts, protection, perhaps, from trying to accept how mother's little angel could possibly be such a devil.

Drawing mindfulness into the process of reconciling this struggle invites me to be more open and at peace, and helps me begin to clarify concerns in lighter and more comfortable ways. I work to recognize and remember that my bullying story is a dimension of me and my lived experience, but *I* am not that story, nor does it comprise the whole of my story. Indeed, we are all many stories and selves. In turn, working mindfully nudges me to consider how one moment of doing bad or harm does not necessarily mean being a bad or harmful person. Thus, infusing this reflexive work with mindfulness asks me to be easier on myself and encourages me to slow down and to breathe.<sup>3</sup> It tugs at my heart and invites me to practice for myself the patience for which I passionately advocate with students, which includes contemplating the idea that I, too, can perform with a puffiness that feels so objectionable.

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Across student projects in the conflict seminar, as well *IGBP* videos and the related book (Savage and Miller), bullied selves come into contact with a central message of patience: “hold on.” Persons appearing in videos stress this message in a number of ways. “The good part comes after high school.” “Once you graduate, you’ll be amazed at how you can be yourself.” “Just wait, you’ll see!” This way of relating is of great pragmatic utility. Persevering through bullying, not taking one’s life because of conflict, no matter how aggressive, is imperative. In this way, the videos provide

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<sup>3</sup> Pelias hopes his essays will be read with “critical compassion,” that is, “with open hearts and minds, ready to feel what might be there and ready to think of its possibilities; ready to accept and ready to reject; ready to pull in and ready to push away” (13). Trying to better understand the incident with Noman suggests how critical compassion is also relevant and useful concerning the ways writers relate to our stories. Also, see Chatham-Carpenter's work on the challenges of self-care and well being within her autoethnographic research examining anorexia.

viewers an intimate mode of protection or coating to weather the onslaught of their own relational winters. Yet, there is also a way in which the “holding on” narrative appears with a puffiness of meaning concerning identity, and in ways that reveal and conceal a number of complexities dwelling within this identity negotiation.

By holding on, teens facing bullying are encouraged to expand and bravely perform selves of perseverance, or to enact a distinct hanging-in-there-ness. Nevertheless, as they hang and physically survive as such, the guidance inadvertently renders them “on hold” beings, people who practice self-care, at least partly, by waiting until a later date to be more open about themselves. They must hold on, or hold out (withhold) aspects of themselves, until the chance for harm passes. In the sense of a restriction or withdrawal, they are asked to enact a contraction of selves to survive. Puff yourself in these more closed and less authentic ways. Thus, bullies and the abuses of relational and institutional power sustaining their aggression “win,” at least in part, and at least for now. The vulnerable selves within bullying are urged to protect themselves, and the problem will pass with time.<sup>4</sup> Yet, not all vulnerable selves are protected in these ways.

“You’re fine,” Rose shouts to the camera in her video.<sup>5</sup> “Just be whoever you are.” Rose is someone I do not know, yet whose video is familiar. “The bullies . . .” she continues, fighting back tears, “*they’re* losers!” I watch Rose’s video repeatedly, struck by her passion. I wonder where these videos were when *I* struggled with my identity many years ago. I watch this and other videos intrigued by how persons convey terrific support, and, yet, troubled by the presence of aggression within the gentleness. It is a pattern that occurs often across the videos.

Thomas, another male teenager, proclaims, “These people have NO self-esteem.” “Why would you care about what people like that say?” Caryn asks. “They’re pathetic.” Speaking with exuberance and a finger snap in the air, Simon says, “They’re just *mad* jealous of your fabulousness!” As with the support urging bullied teens to hold on, these characterizations about the bullies allow for a complex way of orienting to

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<sup>4</sup> “Hold on” to identity as it is used here is also problematic because of the ways the position suggests a core and static nature to identity, a thing to which youth are urged to hold on and manipulate. In this sense, youth have something internal that awaits expression, some day, when things are better. Yet, a closer look would show us that identity and identity negotiation are performed and co-constituted in and emerging through our ways of relating. Amid the sedimented ways relational partners might relate and come to understand ourselves over time, selves are always and already in process, fluid, and are forever subject to change. This post-modern position of emergent identity resonates well with the Buddhist notion of empty selves. As Batchelor writes: “There is nothing thinglike about me at all. I am more like an unfolding narrative” (82). Mindfulness serves as a key way to recognize and accept what it means to relate through this emptiness. Looking more closely would also call us to examine a number of other aspects of the videos that are taken for granted, like what “better” really means and how it impacts the well being of youth, and the presence and role of heteronormative assumptions commitments within this campaign (see Goltz, “It Gets Better”).

<sup>5</sup> Rose and other names of people appearing in videos are composite characters that illustrate some of the salient themes I appearing in *IGBP* videos.

bullying and to bullies, and indeed, a distinctive understanding of care and identity negotiation.

*IGBP* videos of this nature seek care by coupling the positive with the negative, or the affirming with the demeaning. Appreciating the supportive outreach—that LGBT teens should love themselves as they are—entails grappling with the negative—that bullies are losers and should be dismissed or taken less seriously for who they are. In one way, the response tends to make sense: why should viewers, let alone bullied viewers, care about persons who act with aggression toward them? It also seems reasonable to understand, and perhaps even to advocate, whatever sort of effective messaging is necessary to help prevent self-harm. Yet, there is a disconcerting way in which this relating also results in bullying the bully. While certainly not in all videos, the aggression amid care, and harshness within gentleness, persist enough to be distressing, especially because it occurs in a context that presumes supportive and ethical relating. These tensions suggest battling aggression via aggression, advocating an “eye for an eye”—or perhaps, a heart for a heart, or a body for a body—response. Ironically, this “care” cries out against cruel treatment against vulnerable selves by using ad hominem tactics, a reaction that, by its nature, attacks selves. In this sense, video performers lovingly puff up the identities of the bullied, even if doing so means mindlessly demeaning and deflating the identities of the bullies.

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I am still thinking about Noman and wondering how he understood my bullying him. I find myself not fully letting go, wanting to know how, if at all, he explained that violent moment to his family, or to himself. As I try now to give meaning to the moment, a blast of aggression that breached what otherwise was a warm and trusting friendship, I wonder about how my actions might have caught Noman by surprise. I fear my attack might have been just one of a number of aggressions performed against Noman by our peers, and I wonder if Noman might have kept to himself so often as a means of self-protection. Indeed, I think about how the physical and emotional duress stirred up by the slam against the wall might have felt like the ultimate betrayal: we were on the same side—two boys living outside of the social cliques—and I accosted him. In a grade school time when alliances felt especially important, when friends should care for and protect each other in uncertain and disturbing situations, I betrayed one of my own, puffing myself in ways that enabled my dis-ease to spill over into his being.

As I reflexively move within these concerns and interpretations, words like “accosted,” “attack,” “betrayed,” and “alliances” feel heavy and negative, even if fitting. Digging deeper into their meanings feels heavier, perhaps too heavy at times, even though I understand and advocate through my research reflexive writing as a complex and necessary means of self-understanding, of working to be accountable for our actions and selves, and of intimately and ethically pursuing social change (Madison). Still, I am mindful of how dwelling too strongly within the digging, within the seeking, might more so illustrate my being caught up in the storyline, and attached to the pro-



cess of seeking certain answers for things about which I only can speculate.<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, the emotional intensity of the story and my working through it prompts rumination and keeps me, at least in part, reflexively hooked by the past. It keeps me from being as fully in the moment and aware as possible, which includes being able to relate to and interpret the story and the larger issue of bullying more freely, comfortably, and clearly.

Instead of engaging the story in these ways, I choose to compassionately abide within the memories of this violence. I ease the ways I dwell within the struggle and become more resolved to let go. Indeed, I was seeking something on that day. Perhaps I sought a more solid grounding during a time when who I was felt scary, as I suspect it did for many kids. Perhaps it did relate to my feeling vulnerable after the spinning. I was seeking something, likely a fuller sense of peace and well being, and certainly in ways that paradoxically sought care through harm.

I practice relating mindfully to reflexive struggle by abiding in ways that are more patient and okay with not knowing for sure, or not knowing at all. I seek useful answers, but I search for them in ways that are more open and at ease, and less protective and urgent. I seek them in ways that create feelings of lightness and openness in my body. This seeking, however, still involves difficulty. Just as the videos in and of themselves are not “fixes” for overturning social injustice, mindful practice is not a magic antidote for soothing struggle. There are no “easy outs” to mindful practice. Old mindless habits sometimes (often?) creep back into my reflexive process, enticing me out of the present moment. Yet in these times I work only to recognize and note any judgmental thoughts and feelings that appear. I experiment relating to any difficulties as if they are vibrant and alive, and as if they are “here” to teach me something. I contemplate much, question often, and dig deep within struggle; yet increasingly I do so in ways that are infused with softness.

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Autoethnographically exploring bullying and our responses to the problem illustrates a relational space of heightened complexity, curiosity, and concern. Mindfully and reflexively engaging the issue immerses and implicates us within an emotional and thoughtful context of vulnerable selves who negotiate relationships, identity, care, and awareness. I end by further describing some of the ways I find these ideas to be meaningful.

The presence of *IGBP* in our ambient culture marks a significant shift in the resources available for LGBT youth. Spending time with the videos posted online and those created by my students reinforces the positive steps forward concerning LGBT lives and selves. I’m grateful *IGBP* exists for people in need, as youth who have access to and choose to engage the videos have at their disposal a visible and extensive re-

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<sup>6</sup> Mindful practice entails peacefully exploring our “attachments,” or the ways people cling—sometimes feverously and often outside our awareness—to others, experiences, ideas, feelings, objects, etc., and the ways attachments relate to or fuel suffering.

source through which to respond to hardship like bullying. Much more work still needs to be done. However, now present is an unprecedented opportunity for youth to perform and become more aware about themselves and others, and in novel and more prideful ways. In turn, the videos offer non-LGBT and non-bullied people detailed and vivid stories from which they can more mindfully learn about and respond to the problem and its consequences.

Yet, these performances also occur within a complicated and, at times, contradictory relational space that shows its own sort of struggling with struggle. At one moment, videos espouse loving counsel that feels constructive and invaluable. At other moments, in many videos, and sometimes in the same heart-warming videos, the counsel feels like half-cooked support that privileges the care of some youth (typically the bullied) over others (bullies).<sup>7</sup> Consequently, these videos demonstrate a selective process of caring that espouses compassion for some, but not all. They display a “cherry-picked” attempt at mindfulness (Berry); indeed, partial care that is more mindless than mindful.<sup>8</sup> This shortsightedness matters and is unfortunate, in part, because it relies on and effectively advocates a spirit of separateness and competition, rather than connection and collaboration, among/between beings. If we return to the idea that all beings are interrelated and “one,” relational support that aligns with the latter, although perhaps difficult to perform given the circumstances, would seem to enable a more mindful and lasting response.

I am also reminded of how there are multiple sides—positive and negative, affirming and potentially damaging—to most of our lived experience. While the “hold on” narrative likely serves to enable many people to continue living, those who honor this counsel in the strictest sense of the word risk not being themselves, or not relating in the fullest and most open ways possible. Furthermore, while videos attacking bullies might serve as a motivation for viewers to not harm themselves, the messages are grounded in aggression, a way of performing typically deemed as offensive and inexcusable, at least when performed by bullies. The inherent risks and contradictions of the *IGBP* videos leave me struck by the ways in which acts of bullying themselves are not the only dimension to this cultural phenomenon riddled with complexity, ignorance, mean-spiritedness, and harm.

Exploring bullying in these ways directs our attention to implications that matter. I hope this essay encourages a more mindful look at responses to bullying and hardship generally, including how our ways of responding speak to and shape identities, often outside our everyday awareness. May my story provoke more open and con-

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<sup>7</sup> The study of relational communication tends to assume interaction and relationships are complicated by dialectical tensions (Baxter and Montgomery).

<sup>8</sup> The bully the bully narrative tends to appear in videos by private citizens. Nevertheless, this mindlessness is instructive insofar as it points to ways of relating that are more competitive than collaborative, and relating that tends to disregard our interconnectedness, how we are all one. In this sense, I'm reminded of how mindfulness and mindlessness function reciprocally, insofar as mindlessness, if related to well, can often assist people in becoming more mindful, more aware.

nected ways of relating to/with ourselves and others. Similarly, may it be a useful start to rich and sustained dialogue with and about youth of difference, ongoing challenges, and experiences relating to the care offered to them by others. This exploration also has revealed ways of seeking care that point to a synergistic relationship between mindfulness and reflexivity in autoethnographic research.

On one level, a mindful orientation resonates well with reflexivity by reminding autoethnographers of the importance of looking curiously and openly at the wide range of moments and performances comprising relational stories. Insofar as mindfulness presumes an infinite number of possibilities for what in our lived experience we might see, hear, touch, feel, etc., the orientation encourages researchers to gently but persistently amplify our observing, questioning, and reflecting. Similarly, mindful practice entails trying not to live too rigidly, which reminds us there are and will always be additional ways we can understand culture, relationships, identity, and research. Thus, we are wise to utilize a variety of perspectives and approaches in research, and to revisit and revise research projects over time, to see what can be learned anew about the conceptual foci and methodological practices involved in the research (Ellis). In these ways, mindfulness helps stress how reflexivity (much like mindful practice itself) is not just a “buzz word,” or something that grants researchers permission to tell our personal stories. Rather, reflexive inquiry entails difficult and often tiring work. Being reflexive is a life commitment.

On another level, a mindful orientation serves as a helpful source of support regarding what it takes to research hardship. Assuming suffering to be universal, mindfulness does not entail asking whether or not to examine hardship, nor does it involve critiquing autoethnography for doing so. On the contrary, mindfulness stresses how, at least in part, this work *must* entail looking at suffering. Indeed, mindful learning and awakening come from exploring the diverse ways struggle appears, how we relate with/to its puffs and puffiness, and the ways we might uniquely and happily dwell within our work to reconcile and represent hardship. In this way, mindfulness encourages autoethnographers to continue directly and thoroughly engaging our struggles, and our struggles with reflexive struggle. Overlooking these things as they appear in our research and in our everyday lives, at least in part, means avoiding an essence of life.

Thinking further about how this struggle is engaged leads me to reflect on how effective mindful practice is rooted in loving kindness. Loving kindness entails working to befriend ourselves and others in peaceful and non-harming ways; cultivating ways of relating, as *gentle friends*, that emphasize love, understanding, and patience (Salzberg). The practice assumes we must care well for ourselves in order to care for others. As I think about loving kindness, I also think about how struggling with reflexive struggle relates to this aspiration. As I worked to better understand what happened with Noman, at times it became easy to lose perspective, to let my boundaries slip, and to relate too closely and for too long to the issues at hand. It also was then rather easy to into self-critique. Granted, the emphasis in autoethnographic research on prioritizing experiences with hardship makes these losses and slips feel inevitable.

However, considering mindfulness and loving kindness in our work offers autoethnographers a friend who, in effect, reminds us to risk immersing ourselves within hardship, but to do so gently and safely. That friend asks us to perform with open minds and hearts as we put ourselves “on the spot” in doing such personal and serious work; yet, if possible, to not do so in overly-personalized or so intensely serious ways. To be sure, the struggle is often serious enough that we do not need to add to it. That friend reminds us that doing the brave work of autoethnography must entail *compassionately* seeking care for ourselves and others. As open and vulnerable selves, we can accept that friendship, explore it, laugh and cry within it, and learn what it can teach us.

There will always be those stories that invite responses that compel us to stay a little longer with the struggle than perhaps we should. We will always have those moments of/with hardship that compel us to relate harshly with/through puffiness, or to be puffy in ways that care more mindlessly than mindfully. I aspire to seek care within struggle by staying open to those moments, and by curiously inquiring into what they might contribute to our research, and what they might offer us. I aspire to do so with a greater sense of balance, humor, and joy, and ultimately, by relating in ways that create more opportunities for good rather than harm.

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