

Chapter 7

Reflections of an Academic Father: A Dialogic Approach to Balancing Identity

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the complexity of balancing the professional and personal goals and identities that can often seem incongruent as teacher educators manage the demands of life in the academy. The author explores that complexity by discussing what he learned from reflecting upon his efforts to balance the tension between his professional and personal goals as an academic and as a father. He draws upon dialogical-self theory to discuss ways the facets of one's identity can be brought into dialogue with one another as people respond to the challenges they encounter. The chapter describes the reflective process of engaging in dialogue with philosophical mentors that supported the author's efforts to manage the tensions created by feeling like his senses-of-self as an academic and as a father were at odds. By sharing his struggles and his reflective process for responding to tension, the author aims to help readers find ways to see tension as a mechanism for growth and their own complex identities as sources of insight.

INTRODUCTION

It's hard to imagine that anyone reading this book has gone through life without feeling like their personal and professional goals have been in conflict with one another at some point in time. This is, after all, a book that was crafted for teachers who have made—or are thinking about making—the transition from working in the K-12 setting to teacher education. This transition is one that includes a shift in professional identity: A teacher becomes a teacher educator and a researcher. Taking on this new role begins with doctoral coursework and the dissertation. The focus and commitment required by even this initial stage of the transition offers one example of the ways in which academics must learn to balance their professional and personal goals. I don't mind admitting that I found my doctoral coursework to be

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much more challenging and time-consuming than I imagined it would be. I didn't think it would be easy. However, even with my background as an English major, making sense of the readings in my doctoral courses required me to develop new reading habits that included allotting more time to understanding the material. That experience shook my confidence, and I found that my commitment to succeeding in my doctoral program made it difficult for me not to lose focus on some of the non-academic goals in my personal life.

The transition to academia is a complicated process of becoming that will test your ability to stay true to yourself and remain committed to the goals you set in all areas of your life. There are also plenty of new tasks to greet you on the other side of the crucible of a terminal degree program, such as the nerve-racking process of sorting through job postings, preparing application materials, waiting to be invited to campus for a job talk, and settling into a new role in your shiny new job on the tenure track at a university.

The process of completing a doctoral degree program, getting a job, and securing tenure are just some of the things that you must manage while trying to remain focused on your larger scholarly motivations for making the transition from K-12 teaching in the first place. It can be easy to get caught up in these things and forget that there is an important scholarly issue that you want to address or a problem that you are passionate about responding to with your work. Getting caught up in the pressure to build a record of publication can make it easy to focus on quantity instead of content. That pursuit of quantity can obscure your scholarly passion, erode your motivation to focus on the issues that you find most compelling, and even make it difficult to maintain a healthy personal life. Trying to balance all of our professional and personal passions and the countless commitments that come along with them is not easy. At least it hasn't been for me. The push and pull our goals exert on us have the potential to cause us to throw ourselves so headlong into the pursuit of one that we can lose sight of others—even those that might have previously seemed to be the most important things in our world.

In this chapter, I address the importance of balancing the professional goals and demands of being an educator with the personal goals and commitments that fill our cups as human beings. I share my own struggles to manage the tension between my goals and senses-of-self as an academic and as a father to highlight the importance of recognizing, embracing, and listening to the various aspects of our identity that inform our personal and professional goals. Later in this chapter, I will discuss the process that has helped me manage the professional pressures and concerns of academia while also finding my way through the world as a new father. The intersection of these two significant facets of my identity made it quite difficult for me to effectively manage two powerful goals that, on the surface, seemed to be at odds with one another: enacting change I felt was important in the field of education and being a father who was a provider and a nurturer. To unpack my efforts to create healthy tension between these goals, I will discuss how I engaged in a philosophical dialogue with the scholarly mentors who helped me see that the various *I-positions* (Hermans, 1996; Hermans, 2013) I occupy could bring fatherhood *and* my role as a researcher/teacher educator into a productive dialogue. My goal is to offer points of connection to my experiences that might help readers embrace the struggles they encounter and learn from them by valuing and listening to the voices created by each of the various facets of their identities. I argue that each aspect of one's identity—their *I-positions* (Hermans, 1996)—and the goals that flow from them can inform each other in powerful ways.

MY JOURNEY OF BECOMING

When I think about my own journey to manage the push and pull of my professional and personal lives, I'm reminded of something my tenth grade Scripture teacher (Brother Walt) told me one day many years ago in the hallways of the Catholic school I attended in Baltimore: *It's dangerous to be a fanatic about anything—even the Bible*. You might find it shocking to hear that a man of the cloth said something like that about the Bible, especially to one of his students at a Catholic high school. I did, initially, because I knew that Brother Walt had spent his life committed to the study and teaching of scripture. But, I understood that he was not telling me there was anything wrong with studying the scriptures or living them out. It took me years to figure out and apply the larger message I think he was trying to share with me, which is that success and fulfillment require an openness to other ideas and the ability to balance our goals and passions. This is, though, much easier said than done. Brother Walt's advice has stuck with me in the decades since that hallway conversation. His message becoming clearer and clearer each time I have found myself slipping into old habits of focusing too intently on one goal at the expense of others. In particular, taking on the identity of father as I neared the watershed moment in the life of an academic that is securing tenure brought the challenge of maintaining a healthy tension between my commitment to my professional and personal goals into focus.

The Story of Commitment

I began my career as a high school English teacher in a small Appalachian town in North Carolina after a few failed attempts at being a college student, including a six-year enlistment in the Marines. I can trace each of those failures to remain engaged as a student back to a moment when I had forgotten Brother Walt's message and became so focused on some other pursuit that I failed to see any value in finishing my degree. When I eventually finished my English degree and became a teacher, I found that, in spite of my checkered past as a student, I loved teaching. My inability to sustain interest in being a student over the years actually helped me find a kinship with the kids in my ninth-grade English classes. My experiences in the Marines taught me that real life is always happening all around us and each minute is precious. I had become committed to the idea that none of those moments should be wasted or seen as simple preparation for the future.

My number one goal as a high school teacher was to help students learn to do more than endure their classes and count the minutes until they could get back to their "real" lives. I wanted to teach in ways that valued every moment and helped students see the importance of what they each brought to the table. I was struggling to actualize that goal. I realized that I felt ill-equipped to do anything other than be complicit in a system that I believed was leading students away from themselves, so I left my job as an English teacher and went to graduate school full of questions about how to become an agent of change. Remaining committed to finding ways to respond to these questions is a central professional goal that has been difficult to keep in focus as other goals and commitments in my professional and personal life, such as getting tenure and becoming a father, have loomed large at different points along the way.

A Balanced Pursuit of Goals

Becoming an academic has given me a chance to spend a lot of time thinking about what I believe school ought to be. It has offered me the time and space to think about how to teach from a dialogic stance

(Fecho, 2004; Fecho, et al., 2021), which is an approach to teaching that actively undermines the idea it's okay for school to be some kind of alternative existence where who you are as a person has nothing to do with what you're supposed to learn and the precious minutes of your "real" life are allowed to be wantonly wasted in the service of memorizing information to be used at a later date for a yet-to-be-defined purpose. My concerns about how school is being conducted in the United States and the ways in which standardization is pushing schools to marginalize the needs, interests, and lived experiences of students made it easy for me to begin my academic career committed to a research agenda designed to directly address the constraints of standardization (e.g. Stewart, 2010; Stewart, 2011; Stewart, 2012) that lead students and teachers away from themselves.

I left my first academic job at Appalachian State University in 2014 and took a position as an Assistant Professor at Virginia Tech. The transition to a research-intensive university was accompanied by the expected pressure to make a name for myself in my field. I knew when I made the jump to a larger university that a strong publication record was a fundamental requirement for tenure. I enjoyed the process of conducting research and sharing what I was learning with my field, so I welcomed these higher stakes with open arms. I enjoyed the work and did not find it onerous to balance teaching, research, and life outside of work. I taught my classes, conducted research that was important to me, published papers, and went on adventures in the mountains. I tried not to worry too much about the promotion and tenure process. Brother Walt's advice and the lessons I'd learned in the past from focusing too much on one goal helped me strike a balance between work and life that I enjoyed. I don't want to make it sound too idyllic, but I had managed to establish a healthy tension between my personal and professional goals. I had, for the most part, avoided losing myself in the pressure cooker of publishing, teaching, and university service. I was happy and doing work that I felt mattered, so publishing that work was a natural extension of my main scholarly goals.

EXPERIENCING UNHEALTHY TENSION

In 2016, though, my whole world was turned upside down (in all the best, but infinitely complicated, ways) by the birth of our son. Moving to Virginia Tech meant that my push for tenure lined up (im) perfectly with the sleep deprivation that comes with the first year of parenthood. Taking on the new identity of father in the high-stakes context of the culmination of the tenure process created a new, powerful tension in my life. I was immediately captivated by my new role as a father. I felt a burning desire to connect with this tiny human who needed around the clock nurturing. In the moment, I put aside the professional concerns that were creeping into my consciousness as I neared the make-or-break career moment that is the final act of the promotion and tenure process. While holding our newborn son in the middle of the night, I became less focused on questions like: Have I published enough? Are my student evaluations good enough? The joy I felt from nurturing our son pushed my worries about writing for publication, keeping up with my administrative responsibilities, and properly serving the students I taught and advised into the background. But, time and tides, as they say, wait for no one. Work and life both keep moving on, and sometimes the cadence can be quite unsettling.

The reality quickly set in that my professional responsibilities were not going anywhere. Even with the carrot (or stick—it cuts both ways, does it not?) of tenure looming, I was reluctant to give up any opportunity to bond with our boy and be fully engaged in this experience with my wife. Being the primary source of financial income in our household complicated things. Losing my job because I failed to

make the most of the time I had left to round out my publication record for tenure would not be a great way to start my journey as a father. But, not being a full partner in parenthood wasn't how I wanted to start this journey either. My new role as a father seemed to be in conflict with my role as an academic. From a practical perspective, it was my job that would keep our roof over our heads, buy clothes for our backs (and diapers for Paul), and put food on our table, so I did begin to worry about financial security. However, it was not the most significant source of tension creating conflict.

My professional passion for making schools places that serve students and communities was weighing even more heavily upon me. It didn't matter how much or how little sleep anyone at home was getting. I still had to be a productive scholar, an efficient program leader, and an effective teacher if I wanted to continue to pursue that passion. But, worries about failing in that larger professional sense were quickly replaced by fears of failing to be the father and husband I wanted to be. I struggled to see how I might balance these competing demands and began to feel lost. I suppose that's the trouble with fully committing to our goals. They can cause us to lose sight of the proverbial forest by focusing too intently on a single tree that seems to be swallowing up the path. The message Brother Walt tried to convey so many years ago was one that I needed to reflect upon carefully.

I was going to have to figure out how to balance my roles as an academic and a father to find the path forward. I could not simply just focus on one and ignore the other. I had to find a way to avoid viewing these two facets of my identity from a *this or that* perspective. I started looking for ways to reconcile the demands of each, the tensions they created, and the challenges they presented. I began to ask myself how I might commit to *both* of these roles, instead of seeing one as more important than the other. How might my commitment to one inform the other? My experiences and expertise as a scholar told me that viewing the tensions we experience from a dialogic stance (Fecho, 2004; Fecho, 2011), which aims to see how things might mutually shape one another, could open my mind to new ways of thinking and novel approaches to living up to my goals and commitments—at work and at home. Taking such a stance is, however, heady work that is difficult to do in isolation. And, in terms of managing the personal and professional tensions in my life, I felt very isolated.

TRANSCENDING ISOLATION AND EMBRACING TENSION

Back in the last century, Dan Lortie (1975) raised the pressing concern of isolation that remains a problematic hallmark of the teaching profession. You may find yourself working with a particularly collaborative middle school teaching team or a member of an unusually collegial university department. But, at the end of the day, it's easy to feel like you are (with apologies to John Donne) an island. There are so few mechanisms in place for teachers at any level to process their experiences with a group of supportive colleagues that it's not unusual to fall into habits that exacerbate that isolation. I know I have. There are patterns that are so commonplace that it's not hyperbole to call them tropes of the teaching profession. For example, you can shut your door and just do what you do when faced with a school policy or curriculum directive that does not fit with your own pedagogical beliefs. While taking such an agentive stance might be empowering, closing your classroom door further separates you from your colleagues. You can begin to lose yourself in the work and forget that there are other people and other voices who might help you think about other ways to respond to a conflict between a troubling policy and your own closely held pedagogical beliefs. To sustain ourselves in the profession, we must find ways to connect with others. Those connections can support our efforts to respond to the challenges we encounter from

a dialogic stance, which entails recognizing, embracing, and interrogating the experiences that are creating unhealthy tension in our lives (Fecho, 2011). I believe that seeking connections with others, being committed to reflecting upon our lived experiences, and thinking deeply about who we are as teachers, scholars, and, perhaps most importantly, people can help us avoid losing the motivation and ability to do the important work that must be done to reach the goals we have set.

The tension I was encountering between my professional goals and fatherhood caused me to feel deeply isolated. I was surrounded by supportive colleagues, but I was reluctant to share my worries even though I knew I needed help with this struggle. I just felt too much pressure to act like I could handle it all. The scholars I knew who were also fathers all appeared to have figured it out. I worried about how they might view me if I admitted that I needed help. I've since learned that becoming a parent is not simple for anyone, but, in the moment, I was too intimidated to admit my struggles.

Unable to turn towards my colleagues, I found that it was productive to turn inward by intentionally reflecting on who I am and how I came to be that person. I don't want to downplay the importance of having the courage to admit when we are struggling. If anything, I want to pause here and point out that having the courage to ask for help might be one of the most important things we can do as teachers and as human beings. However, I have found that turning inward and reflecting upon my lived experiences, the challenges I encounter, and the various aspects of my identity can also provide important guidance in a time of need. Thinking about who we are and how we came to be that person can help us find intellectual connections with the scholars whose work can help us find our way when we feel alone and in danger of getting hopelessly lost.

Novel Forms of Connection

The idea of overcoming isolation through philosophical connection came from an article I had written back in 2013 with one of my colleagues at Appalachian State. We raised the idea that we could learn much from the students we were teaching *and* the scholars whose ideas shape our thinking. Greg and I wrote this article (Stewart & McClure, 2013) to explore the value of engaging in philosophical and theoretical dialogue with scholars who have nurtured our thinking in the past. In moments when we are unable (for whatever reason) to share our concerns with others, we can find support and transcend isolation by turning towards our philosophical and theoretical mentors and the mentor texts that have informed our thinking when confronting complex questions. Reflecting upon having written that article helped me find a way to overcome the isolation I was feeling and learn from the challenges I was encountering as a new father and a developing scholar. Those scholarly voices became a source of kinship and connection that helped me begin to create a healthy tension between the goals and identities that seemed to be pulling me in opposite directions.

Much of my scholarly life is dedicated to exploring how bringing our experiences into dialogue with one another can be a source of growth. This line of scholarship had helped me make sense of the world as a teacher/researcher in the past. Intentionally reflecting upon how I might apply these concepts to the unhealthy tension that I was experiencing reminded me that *Dialogical-self* theory (Hermans, 1996; Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010; Hermans, 2013) provides a framework for thinking about how the different aspects of our identity (*I-positions*) can be brought into dialogue and mutually shape one another to support the development of new thoughts and potential responses to a challenge (Grimmett, et. al., 2018). I began to think about my various identities—or the senses-of-self that help me make meaning of the world around me. By engaging in a philosophical dialogue with *Dialogical-self* theory,

I found a framework for reflecting upon and responding to what was now the biggest challenge I'd ever encountered. I began to see a path towards bringing the two most significant *I-positions* that I occupy (*I-as-father* and *I-as-academic*) into productive dialogue with one another. I worked to reframe and reposition these core facts of my identity by trying to flatten the hierarchy I'd built around them so they could inform, instead of dominate, each other.

A PROCESS OF BECOMING

From a dialogic stance, responding to tension is a process of becoming. As Hermans (2012) argued, the self is in a constant state of positioning, repositioning, and even counterpositioning as the multiplicity of *I-positions* one occupies agree or disagree with one another. Making sense of, understanding, and responding to what the voices of the facets of our identity are trying to convey is an iterative process without a clearly defined destination. The importance of the perspective flowing from one aspect of our identity can shift as the voice created by another aspect raises different ideas or calls for different actions. However, bringing the multiplicity of *I-positions* we occupy into dialogue with one another creates conditions for us to form what Hermans and Hermans-Konopka (2010) called *coalition positions* in which two or more *I-positions* support and inform one another. The voices of these *coalition positions* can offer key insight as we seek novel ways to respond to the tensions we encounter (Grimmett, et. al., 2018).

Bringing Multiple Senses-of-Self into Dialogue

I began the iterative process of bringing my professional goals into dialogue with my personal goals by reflecting upon the things that motivate me as a scholar. At the start of my academic career, my central motivation as a scholar/teacher educator was to respond to the challenges that made me feel ineffective as a teacher. During my doctoral program, my advisor, Bob Fecho, picked up on my concerns about how schools were leading students away from themselves. He turned me on to a book by Derrick Jensen that voiced my biggest worry about what students learn in school. "In sum" Jensen lamented, "one of the primary things I learned was to kill time" (2004, p. 4). Jensen went on to argue that schools are designed to lead students away from their own passions in the service of creating "a steady supply of workers, and a population pacified enough not to resist the expropriation of their resources" (p. 9). These ideas had spoken directly to my scholarly motivation, and I focused my scholarship on pointing to ways that teachers might transcend the contemporary education reforms (e.g., Stewart, 2010) that were compelling teachers to lead their students away from themselves and make schools as a soul-deadening enterprise (Fecho, 2004) for all parties involved.

Reflecting upon this motivation helped me develop some fresh clarity on who I was becoming as a scholar. I used that clarity to begin thinking how it might inform and be informed by who I wanted to be as a father. I re-engaged with Hubert Hermans (2001) as a philosophical mentor and considered how I could apply his concept of establishing "dialogical relations between" the *I-positions* that I occupied (p. 248). Hermans had argued that "each of them has a story to tell about his or her own experiences from his or her own stance" (p. 248). He further argued that "as different voices these characters exchange information about their respective *Me's*, resulting in a complex, narratively structured self" (p. 248, italics in original). Reflecting upon the goals flowing from *I-as-academic* in dialogue with Hermans helped me see that I had structured myself and developed a voice that was devoted to doing work focused on

making learning a dialogic, generative act (Stewart, 2010; Stewart, 2012; Stewart & McClure, 2013) in which teachers actively seek to make their classrooms spaces that embrace the notion that real life is happening every moment. The next step in the process was to listen to that voice and think about what it might contribute to a dialogue between *I-as-academic* and *I-as-father*. I needed to think about how I might reposition my scholarly work and ask myself what the voice of *I-as-academic* was saying in relation to the positions I was taking as a new father. I had to figure out how to re-connect with Brother Walt's advice so I could avoid focusing on my professional goals to the detriment of my goals as a father or listening so intently to the voice created by *I-as-father* that I lost my motivation to remain committed to being an agent of change in the field of education.

My philosophical dialogue with Hermans (2001) helped me understand that the voices of these *I-positions* can "function like interacting characters in a story, involved in a process of question and answer, agreement and disagreement" (p. 248). Hermans helped me see that I had to listen for and consider the harmony and dissonance in what the voices of *both* of these *I-positions* were trying to say. It was not going to be productive just to reflect upon who I was becoming as a scholar and how I might keep pushing down that path. I also needed to reflect upon who I was becoming as a father and listen to that voice as well. I had to take stock of who I was becoming as a father and consider what my thoughts, feelings, and goals in that role might tell me about my work as a scholar.

Thinking about who I was becoming as a father presented a significant challenge for me in terms of allowing these *I-positions* to mutually shape one another, instead of being set in opposition. Even as they are "conversing with one another" the *I-positions* we occupy may often be doing so "in opposition" (Hermans, 2001, p. 149). Thus, it can be easy to focus on conflict and incongruence. This was certainly the case for me in terms of my efforts to understand how my sense-of-self as an academic could be brought into dialogue with my sense-of-self as a father. For example, the simple logistics of these two roles felt very much at odds. Time spent thinking, teaching, and writing meant time away from home. Being present at home meant I was out of the office. The pull to be the kind of father who believes that joy comes from being a full-share partner made it pretty easy to feel like work is far less important than fatherhood. It was difficult to resist the urge to see these roles in a hierarchical fashion and simply conclude that the logistical conflicts between them were too significant to overcome. In order to move beyond simply seeing my *I-positions*, the goals associated with each of them individually, and how I manage professional and societal expectations in binary ways that might privilege one perspective over another, I once again turned towards my philosophical and theoretical mentors for guidance.

I spent some time thinking about Fecho's (2011) argument that ideas that are in opposition with one another have much to teach us. Engaging in this philosophical dialogue with Fecho deepened my understanding of how I might operationalize Dialogic-self theory as it called my attention to the notion that "acknowledging and unpacking tensions and the pull they have on us creates opportunities for learning" (Fecho, 2011, p. 43). That perspective helped me unpack who I was becoming as a father, and think about how the ways these two senses-of-self seemed to conflict with one another might contribute to a productive dialogue between *I-as-academic* and *I-as-father*. Fecho (2011) reminded me to "use the difficulty" and position it to "enter into an exploration and unpacking of that issue" (p. 45). My reflective process, then, included an earnest effort to call the dissonance into question and to think about how embracing that tension would allow my goals as a father to inform my goals as an academic.

Embracing Harmony and Dissonance

I sought to embrace and unpack the tension between my two core identities by thinking about how some of the other various *I-positions* I occupy could help me see the harmony between my personal and professional goals within the dissonance. My philosophical dialogue with Fecho's (2011) scholarship included a focus on exploring culture and how it shapes who we are and who we are becoming. Fecho argued that our senses-of-self remain in flux as they engage in dialogue with the multiple identities and cultural contexts we occupy. That notion reminded me that there is significant value in embracing the things about us that make us who we are. I put what I was learning from this philosophical dialogue with Dialogic-self theory and Fecho's scholarship into practice by reflecting upon what I value from the position of *I-as-son* to generate some novel ways of viewing the conflict I was feeling between *I-as-father* and *I-as-academic*.

I thought about the things I had seen my own father do that created the blueprint I try to follow as a father myself. As I reflected upon his efforts to be a nurturer while still providing for our family, I conjured old memories of my father sitting by my bedside telling me stories and offering words of encouragement until I fell asleep. Once I drifted off, he would often go back down to his office in our basement to finish up some work he had brought home. My father also modeled that it was important to do work that serves others. He did not talk much about his time in the Navy during Korea or the work he did as a lay theologian in the Catholic church. However, knowing he had done these things had a significant impact on my view of the importance of service. The ways of being he modeled led me to pursue service-oriented careers, such as joining the Marines and becoming a teacher. By reflecting upon the worldview being my father's son created, I came to recognize that aspects of my own family culture could inform my efforts to see how my roles at home and at work could productively shape one another. The voice of *I-as-son* made a powerful contribution to my inner dialogue because it deepened my practical understanding of the theoretical concept that our *I-positions* shape one another. I was able to see some concrete ways my lived experiences as a son shaped my professional choices and the development of my view of fatherhood.

Bringing the positions of *I-as-son* and *I-as-father* formed a *coalition position* (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010), which helped me bring another voice into the dialogue and begin to see the conflict between *I-as-father* and *I-as-academic* from a novel perspective. My mother and father both shared their passion for the outdoors with me as a child. Weekends spent hiking and camping turned into extended trips in the backcountry. By the time I was a teenager I developed a life-long passion for the outdoors, and *I-as-adventurer* became another core facet of my identity. I reflected upon how this *I-position* might inform the process of positioning and repositioning my senses-of-self as an academic and a father.

I started looking for ways that my sense-of-self as an adventurer had shaped who I was becoming as a father. They were rather easy to see. Sharing my outdoor passions with our son has been central to my identity as a father. Before he was even two months old, Ginger and I had loaded Paul up in a baby carrier for short hikes in wild places like a section of the Appalachian Trail near where my parents live in Pennsylvania. He has always been quite happy to spend time in the forest, and going on adventures with him has fed my soul. Paul has been crazy about bikes since he got a balance bike from one of our friends on his second birthday. It has brought me great joy to see him thriving in the mountains, riding his bike, and being happy just spending hours throwing rocks into a creek. Spending time riding bikes has become one of the key ways that Paul, Ginger, and I have bonded. So much so that I have fully

embraced the role of being a “Bike Dad” and spending countless hours finding parts and building bikes that enabled a four-year old to pursue his passion for exploring the world on two wheels.

Reflecting upon the connection between our shared love of adventure and how that has influenced my role as a father motivated me to find a similar connection between fatherhood and academia. And, that connection became most obvious when I reflected once again on Fecho’s (2011) idea of embracing dissonance and seeing it as a source of insight. In particular, thinking about how happy our son is playing in the woods and jumping his bike off ramps gave me pause. It re-invigorated my concerns about school leading students away from themselves. Would school lead Paul away from his passions? What could I do to ensure that might not happen? This worry became a site for productive dialogue between *I-as-father* and *I-as-academic*. By accessing the ability to learn from harmony and dissonance, I set out to follow Fecho’s (2011) advice to see tension as a trampoline and dissonance as a source of inspiration, instead of paralysis. My philosophical dialogue with mentors and the process of positioning and repositioning the *I-positions* I occupy helped me embrace dissonance and see how the tensions in my life can inform one another. Thus, the new role of fatherhood became a productive foil—a source of insight. My hopes and dreams for our son became a catalyst that has renewed my motivation to do work as a scholar that points to potential responses to the challenges I see in the landscape of schools.

Clarity Through Dialogue

Fatherhood has made me see the problems of contemporary schooling in a new light. Making schools places that lead students towards—not away from—their passions has become more important to me than ever. If I want our son to attend schools that will nurture his curiosity and passion for the outdoors, I will need to continue to do work that articulates ways to bring school content into dialogue with students’ lives. Becoming *I-as-father* has helped me see the landscape of schooling through the eyes of a parent whose child will one day sit in those classrooms. I have come to realize that my motivation to publish scholarship that calls for change and suggests possible routes to enacting change isn’t just part of my job anymore. These things are now part of my mission as a father who has a son who will soon spend the next twelve years of his life in classrooms that will shape his view of the world and his role in it. Becoming a father made the problems I want to respond to in schools more concrete. It has served as a well-timed reminder that schools need to serve all students and lead them where they want to go in their lives.

Bringing the *I-positions* I occupy into dialogue helped me see that my goals as a father and as a scholar do not have to be mutually exclusive. This dialogue has deepened my understanding of the importance of Brother Walt’s advice not to become too focused on a single pursuit. The position of *I-as-son* helped me see that being a father who was committed to doing work that serves others and modeling that for our son is central to my identity as father. The dialogue between *I-as-father*, *I-as-adventurer*, and *I-as-academic* helped me reposition myself in relation to my scholarly goal of making schools places that value the needs, interests, and cultural contexts of the students they serve. Listening to the voices of each of these *I-positions* deepened my commitment to engaging in scholarship in the field of education that aims to make the world a better place for *all* people, not just our own son. The dialogue between the *I-positions* I occupy helped me see that devoting time to that commitment is not incongruent with my goal to be a father who nurtures our son’s development. Pursuing my academic passion allows me to live out my goal to be a father who models the importance of doing work that serves others. Even when we develop this sort of clarity, living up to and striking a balance between our professional and personal

commitments is easier said than done. It's also not something that I think we can do alone. Whether we reach out to others and share our concerns with them or silently turn our thoughts towards the scholars who supported our development along the way, it takes a community to accomplish difficult things.

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I see a lot of value in my reflective process of engaging in philosophical dialogue to find balance in my personal and professional life. I would not have shared this process if I didn't think it could help someone else who is struggling to reconcile competing goals and feeling as though they cannot share their concerns with their colleagues. The philosophical community that has supported me in this journey has helped me listen to the voices created by the *I-positions* I occupy and see the dissonance between them as sources of insight, not trees that obscure the path forward. However, I recognize that this journey might have been made easier by having the courage to reach out to colleagues for advice when I was struggling. Processing my experiences with a colleague might have led to a conversation about time management that would have helped me manage that challenge more efficiently. A colleague might have also pointed me to towards connections between my scholarship and fatherhood that I have yet to make through this reflective process. As I've found in my non-academic pursuits, we can accomplish more with people physically by our sides than we can on our own. I have run more than a few 100 miles races in the mountains, but I have always relied on the support of friends who stayed up all night to meet me at remote aid stations with food, water, and encouragement along the way. So, I can't help but think about the missed opportunities for growth that may have resulted from turning towards my philosophical mentors instead of my colleagues for support. However, I know that asking for help as an academic can be scary.

As I wrap up this chapter, I think it's important to be honest about how my own fears related to being successful in the world of academia kept me from admitting that I needed help. The pressures that come with the "publish or perish" messaging in academia, which encourages young scholars to lose themselves in the service of promotion, tenure, and building a reputation, are intimidating. They certainly motivated me to keep my struggles to myself instead of risking having others see me as someone who was not up to the job. I also felt far more societal and professional pressure to be a *provider* more than a *nurturer*—a *successful academic* more than a *fully present father*.

My reflective journey has raised the idea that being overly worried about appearances, the expectations of society, and the culture of academia should be a signal to me that one voice or one of the *I-positions* I occupy is exerting an unhealthy tension on my thoughts and actions. These worries could be seen as signals that I'm falling into the old habit of ignoring Brother Walt—an indication that I need to reflect on how I'm balancing my priorities. In the process of becoming, our worries and the voices that lead us towards those worries ought to inform—not control—our responses. I believe it would be unproductive to allow our worries about appearances or societal pressures to subjugate our identities and lead us away from our passions. Listening to our worries without becoming paralyzed by them can be an important part of a larger dialogue that makes it possible for us to work towards our goals. Listening to your concerns and calling them into question can be an important source of growth—a way for fear and tension to be a trampoline that allows us to reach new heights.

Having said this, I realize that my positionality as a white, cisgender, heterosexual male professor with tenure is rife with privilege (Anicha, et al, 2017; Burnett, et al., 2012; Case, 2012; Miller & Roksa, 2020). I recognize that so many of my peers are navigating marginalized identities and discrimination

that I will never experience (Coston & Kimmel, 2012; Davis & Wagner, 2005; Rivera & Tilcsik, 2019). I understand that reaching out for help and being open about who we are and what we are struggling with is not easy. I do not want to suggest that it is necessarily the right thing for anyone else to do. But, I hope that sharing my own experiences, putting my own struggles on paper, and exploring the potential that comes from reflecting on how I seek to balance and learn from my identity positions might help others see pathways to doing the same thing for themselves.

I feel fortunate that my reflective process and my lack of courage to ask for help did not cause me to hide core aspects of identity so well from myself and others that I was unable to listen to what the voices of my various *I-positions* had to teach me. This journey of becoming has helped me see the importance of being true to yourself and not hiding who you are. Even if you don't feel comfortable sharing your own identities publicly, I hope that you'll find ways to bring and keep them at the surface of your own consciousness. Each of the *I-positions* you occupy has the potential to inform who you are, what you want to do, and where you are heading. If you can find a process that allows them to mutually shape one another in a way that is right for you, they can help you find your way when you feel like you are struggling to follow the path towards your goals. You may decide that finding your own philosophical community and engaging in a philosophical dialogue is the right path for you. Or, you might feel perfectly comfortable reaching out to colleagues as part of your process. Whatever route you choose, I hope that you'll be able to love and value all of the *I-positions* that make you who you are as a scholar and as a human being. It might be the most important thing you can do.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Dialogic Stance: A philosophical perspective derived from the work of Russian Literary Theorist M. M. Bakhtin that considers the influences of language and culture on meaning making and values multiple perspectives.

Dialogical-Self Theory: A psychological concept created by Dutch psychologist Hubert Hermans that views the self as a micro-society that includes different identity positions that participate in an internal dialogue that is closely connected with external dialogue.

Dialogue: A process of mutual shaping in which ideas come together to inform one another.

Healthy Tension: A condition in which the push and pull of ideas that are in opposition to one another are in balance and one perspective, idea, concept, or argument does not dominate another.

I-Positions: Senses of self that include aspects of an individual's identity. These facets are part of the larger identity as whole, yet function relatively autonomously.

Philosophical Dialogue: A reflective process of bringing ideas into contact with one another through reading, reflection, and/or writing for the purposes of making meaning.

Philosophical Mentors: Scholars or other individuals who have influenced the meaning one makes.

Standardization: A trend in schooling in the United States in which curricula are driven by high-stakes assessment and school activities leave little room for individual interest.

Unhealthy Tension: A condition in which the push and pull of ideas that are in opposition to one another are out of balance and one perspective, idea, concept, or argument dominates another.