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# Doing. Myself. Justice.

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## Doing, Myself, Justice.

Kaci Darsow, Western Washington University

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### **Abstract**

*The titles for these capstones were due five weeks ago.  
Five weeks ago I had no idea what this presentation would look like.  
I still don't know.  
I had, and have, so many ideas, so many things I want to share with you.  
But these three words kept showing up in my journal, over and over. Just like this:  
Doing, Myself, Justice.  
When Nick asked for my title, all I could do was write this on the chalkboard.  
I didn't know what it meant. I still don't know what it means.  
But so far I've spent 26 years finding out, and 5 weeks trying to put it into words.  
These words.*

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### **Keywords: poetry, gender, identity, storytelling, outdoor education**

No matter what I say up here today, I have no way to control what you will hear,  
Or where you'll go, what you'll do after I've shared.  
I only have control over what I say and how I say it.  
I hope you'll hear what I mean.  
But I also hope you hear in my words ideas I've never dreamed of.  
I hope you find a seed in this experience to plant somewhere along your journey  
In a place I've never been.  
I hope it blooms a color I've never seen.

Each and every one of you that's here today has so many dimensions to your life,  
And you live in a world that I cannot fully understand.  
I invite your interpretations of my words because:  
1. It's unavoidable, and 2. Maybe it will keep you listening.  
When someone has a strong opinion that is different from mine, or that  
challenges mine, I find it easy for me to stop listening, to disengage, or to write  
them off.  
I've spent my time in grad school challenging my own assumptions,  
Questioning things I thought were solid Facts.

I intend to push your thinking in the ways I have pushed my own,  
But I do not want to push you away.

I think I'm getting ahead of myself. What is a capstone?  
Google says:



- (1) The top stone of a structure or a wall
- (2) A crowning achievement; a culmination; a final touch.

A capstone is the coming together,  
The synthesis,  
Of so much thought.  
So a capstone is a puzzle.  
Or a piece.  
Or both.

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***(.b) Doing. (.b) I am capable of doing this. (.b)***

There are pieces to this puzzle in my head that don't belong here.  
They don't fit on this stage or in this presentation, but the picture isn't complete  
without them, and a picture is worth a thousand words, but my words are  
slipping through the cracks and getting lost in the ether between spoken and  
written, written and thought, thought and felt, felt and  
Told.  
They vanish.  
Swallowed up by the pieces that don't belong.  
My pages are blank.  
My sentences  
                  trail  
                          off...

To bridge the gap between what I mean and what I'm saying  
I have to dig deeper,  
To uncover the uncomfortable.  
To solve the puzzle so I can rearrange the letters into an answer that only looks  
scrambled if you're dyslexic,  
Like me.  
In math classes they always make you show your work, but  
You never get points for style or creativity.  
I'd like to buy a vowel.

I don't think I ever had a chance to become  
Anything but an educator.  
I've been teaching myself from the beginning,  
Interpreting assignments and adapting lessons  
To fit me, to fit my brain.  
See I,  
Never fit  
In the classrooms I was given,  
These spaces were designed for efficiency.  
The greatest good for the ones that count.

A combination of dysgraphia and ADD  
Meant that I could be “bright” and “clever”  
And a smartass  
But never smart.  
Always a cutup, and secretly  
Teachers’ favorite,  
But never teacher’s pet.

I learned to read people long before  
I learned to read,  
And I  
Knew how to play the game  
Long before I knew how it felt to succeed.  
See I  
Understood the system wasn’t built for me,  
So I  
Looked to the stars and found  
Constellations only I could see.  
I still  
Use ‘em to navigate where I’m s’posed to be.  
But before I get to this Master’s degree,  
What I, want is to climb around this Cedar-Time tree.  
Gene once said to me, “If you are deeply rooted  
It doesn’t take much to ground yourself again.”

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***(.b) Myself. (.b) I guess I should introduce myself. (.b)***

It’s Sunday morning.  
My sister is screaming and rageful tears flow down her cheeks.  
Her socks don’t fit again.  
I do my best to blend silently into the wall,  
But it’s no use.  
My own wardrobe irritations are making me fidget.  
I’m as uncomfortable in this dress  
As those fuzz balls in her socks must be, but this is what dressing up means,  
No one is comfortable or feels good when they “look nice”. Right?

The sock tantrum continues.  
I want desperately to help her.  
I know how it feels  
When something so seemingly simple,  
Just doesn’t feel right.  
No need for us both to suffer,

She just wants to get it right. She knows how that feels, that this isn't it.  
Her agitation is concrete, tangible.  
Identifiable. Fixable.

Exasperated, Mom gives up. She announces,  
"We won't be going to Church anymore," she looks tired and sad.  
I ask why.  
Instead, she says church shouldn't be a battle  
It's about being together, about having a place to go.  
She just wanted to give us Religion.  
Methodist was hers, the only one she could offer.  
She said it was a gift  
We didn't have to take it.

Church had been our thing, my mom, my sister and I.  
Dad didn't go, Drew hadn't been born yet.  
I asked my dad about Religion. He said,  
"Be like water."

Water in a glass  
Accommodating, calm  
Water in a stream  
Mellow, easy going, go with the flow  
Rainwater  
Soft, rhythmic, giving.  
He spoke of small water,  
Tranquil, healing.

Years later,  
Standing by a Lighthouse  
Looking at the Pacific  
His words revisit me,  
"Be like water."  
Waves crashed powerfully against the shore  
Passionate, relentless  
Big Water.  
A force for change.

I am grateful for my big heart,  
Ocean deep  
With rocky shores and high surf  
Flowing and overflowing  
Ebbing with the tide,  
Embracing all the shores I meet,

Yielding as the  
Moon pulls me this way and that  
Always to return.

The work is on going,  
This work of shaping the world.  
Of softening edges,  
Rounding rocks.  
Of wearing down  
And wearing away  
Stone structures.

“Be like water”  
Carving character into the mountains  
And making this wonderful wet place what it is.  
Home.

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***(.b) Justice. (.b) I'm still learning about Justice. (.b)***

I don't remember  
The first time Santa asked me what I wanted for Christmas,  
But I've heard the story so many times.  
I can picture every detail,  
The way Drew can still taste that dog food from Grandma Gidding's house.

When I was 3, Santa came to my preschool class  
All the other boys asked for “guns”  
All the other girls asked for “Barbies”  
I asked for “bin-ok-a-lars, please!”  
I guess I had some searching to do.  
Maybe I knew then.  
What I needed to see most was still far away.  
Or maybe,  
I just wanted to see beyond the binary.

Boy did  
Those binocs gave me vision.  
They helped me dream big. Not long after I got them,  
I came home from preschool and declared that,  
“Courtney Phifer was the most beautiful girl in the world!” and that,  
“I was going to marry her.”  
I had it all figured out from the get go.

But something happened along the way.

Maybe I misplaced my field glasses; maybe they got out of focus.  
Maybe I felt strange having them all to myself. Whatever the case,  
By third grade I felt that I needed a serious talking to.  
I sat myself down and had a chat.  
I was 8 years old, it was time to realize I couldn't wish myself into another life.  
I had to deal with this one, had to straighten it out.  
Step one, no more wishes. I vowed to never make another one again.  
Step two, no more crushes on girls.  
There had been at least one every year since Courtney.  
I convinced myself I didn't have crushes on all those girls, but that  
I was jealous of them  
Because they were prettier than me.  
They were everything I was supposed to be, but wasn't.

No one told me to hide, to lock pieces of myself away in a closet  
And throw away the key.  
I just knew. That's what I had to do. To survive.  
Later, I learned to name this "Internalized homo- trans\*phobia".

If only someone could have told me  
Everyone's gender is a performance  
Maybe I wouldn't have felt so out of place, just because I wasn't in the chorus  
line.  
The year I played Santa in the school music recital,  
No one believed the big confident voice booming from under  
The beard was mine.

My initial introduction  
To the concept of social constructs certainly didn't come with that name. I was  
Baffled by the mystery of linear time, and  
Frustrated with my inability to distinguish between imperative and trivial tasks,  
So my mom told me a story:

Long, long ago,  
Humans were invested in each other's survival.  
Like today, everyone back then had their own individual blend of characteristics.  
When it came to hunting and gathering, people understood the most food could  
be Collected if everyone worked to their own strengths.  
Those whose attention could rapidly shift to every subtle movement were  
The most successful hunters.  
Those who could plan ahead, remember where caches were, track the seasons  
and avoid distraction could consistently reap plentiful, ripe harvests.

I lost track of Time

Not because I was lazy, or stupid, or forgetful or didn't care,  
But because I used to be a hunter. One of the best.  
As agriculture expanded, the balance of power shifted to the organized.  
Just like that, a new way of knowing the world was born.  
Linear Time suited capitalism and colonization just fine.  
Efficiency became justification for violence.

Labels divide, make categories. Categories give order. Ordering dichotomously,  
by 'self' and 'other', creates hierarchy. Hierarchy facilitates domination and  
excuses oppression.  
Mutually reinforcing, round and round we go. Based on make believe.

See, social constructs are like the lines on a map. They don't really exist.  
They have meaning because we make it.  
Because someone said so and we believed.  
No one thought to question a thing everyone can clearly see.  
But the fabric of reality is wearing thin  
It's fraying at the fringes.  
I've been pulling on these loose threads slowly  
Unraveling the wool  
That's been pulled over my eyes.  
Now that I see, I know I can see  
I want everyone to wake up from the matrix with me.  
I feel like I need to shout.  
"The Emperor is fuckin' naked y'all!"

Please excuse this jargon trans\*gression,  
A multisyllabic obsession  
Is my favorite way of expressin'  
Linked and layered forms of oppression.  
I've never read any History that didn't have a false dichotomy,  
Reproducing that Cisheteropatriarchy,  
Like, "Sex can only be binary!"  
Though that's what got taught to you n' me  
That don't really square with biology.  
Back when my mom told me Herstory,  
Heard a narrative framed radically  
With critiquing game fierce as can be.  
Took a few more years for me to see, the way this set the stage perfectly.  
Early start to thinkin' critically helped me to develop this theory:  
Undoing oppression systemically like pulling a patch of blackberry  
Brave the branches sharp and prickly, don't just eat the fruit contentedly  
Dig out every last root effectively, because it grows rhizomatically  
Any bit left will only breed more.

Wendy once asked me, "Why does it have to be a battle?  
Why must you rip it out by the roots? What if you planted  
Some conifers instead?"

---

**(.b) Doing. (.b) I'm Hummingbird, doing what I can. (.b)**

A cedar does not reach the canopy in one day. I am growing slowly.  
My branches will never be done reaching up and reaching out  
Casting longer and longer shadows  
Shading out as much of the thicket as in within my reach.  
It will never be over, I will not "win."  
To win, like a war, would be to stop growing,  
And Wendy is right. This is not a war.  
This is a spreading of safety, of love, of striving to do better.  
Process is the outcome.  
There will always be more to learn.

The words we use have weight  
They matter.  
The give life and meaning to the world,  
But can also take it away.

I never noticed how quiet these trails were last winter,  
Until I heard that first varied thrush's call.  
A referee's whistle blast  
That woke me up to the return of the birds.

The year before, I didn't recognize this call  
Couldn't picture who made it  
Or put the face to a name.  
How long did I sleep  
Before I knew of birds?

I've become disenchanted with "nature" and "the environment".  
This is the only place those words even appear in my capstone.  
I mean to say I am disenchanted with the words, with the constructs,  
Not the places. Not the things falsely separated, boxed in to those categories.  
Try to define either of term without making a divide, a false exclusion. I can't.  
None of the more than 23 Salishan languages of this region have any such word  
Or concept.  
What box could contain all things? The source of all things,  
the connections between all things, the essence and substance of it all,  
The box itself and the box maker?

I call myself an educator, and my profession fire starting.  
This is best done outdoors.

I wanted this presentation to be a demonstration of my mastery of Education,  
A showcasing of my teaching style.  
Well, this isn't my style, but it is  
My story  
And that has value too.  
I wanted this presentation to be about antiracism, about decolonizing EE.  
I wanted an entry point with accessibility.

How much can I say about racism, when I am on the privileged end? I am white.  
I was conditioned to think that meant neutral, "without race".  
And why not? After all, race isn't real, biologically.  
But to ignore my racialized identity, to pretend race doesn't apply to me  
Is to normalize whiteness,  
Make it the default, make everything else "other".  
To not mention my whiteness is to  
Ignore the safety my skin affords me.

My gender expression means I'm Subject  
To whispers and stares, nasty comments and not being welcome.  
To aching internal organs when I can't find a bathroom  
That feels ok.  
But it also means that when I read about each  
Of the 6 transwomen and  
One gender non conforming person who were murdered  
In this country this year,  
All of whom were people of color,  
I was saddened and outraged  
And fearful for my community,  
But not my life.

Up until 5 weeks ago,  
A trans\* person of color was brutally killed by transmisogyny and hate  
Every. Single. Week. of 2015.  
5 weeks ago, I titled this capstone.  
I only read the news stories, I didn't have to live them.  
I wasn't wondering if I would be next.  
I maybe an unwelcomed radical queer who really has to pee,  
But in the United States of America,  
My humanity retains its value.  
Because I am white.

I don't have all of the answers. I might not be doing this subject justice,  
But I can do better than staying silent, than condoning the status quo.  
Dad, I know our family never owned slaves, but they were settlers.  
Maybe we don't have a direct hand in slavery, but we do  
Have a legacy in the colonizing of Montana,  
The displacing and massacre of people who knew  
The Cabinets as "God's Country" long before we did.

I don't have to do it all now. This can be a beginning, a conversation starter.  
It's part of the process, and process is the outcome.  
Terry once reminded me, "we hold the Moon in our bellies."  
It is too much to ask to operate on full-moon energy 365 days a year."  
It's ok to be waning,  
I will wax again.

---

***(.b) Myself. (.b) Celebrating my confident self. (.b)***

This is a celebration poem, a  
Proud of myself poem,  
A love letter to myself spoken  
Word poem.  
This is new ground.

This is going to the memoirs with no one but myself,  
Holding my own while my idols stumble and start over,  
Wrapping my arms around love in the dark,  
To find I'm hugging myself in the morning.

This is showing up late because I saw my reflection in the mirror this morning  
and for the first time since forever I saw myself! Really saw myself, recognized  
me and my beaming bright smile,  
So captivating I can't look away.  
And it happens. Every. Day.  
This isn't arrogance, this is long awaited requited love.  
Love, at its most radical self  
Love that is persistent, tenacious.  
This love is a revolution.  
And a revolution without dancing is a revolution not worth having.  
I'm not letting anyone take this away,  
So you'd better get ready to dance.

I've always felt at peace walking among trees,  
It's where gender isn't.  
I never knew that same centering stillness

Could be found inside.  
Unlocking these doors  
Quieted the storm in me  
A storm that raged so long  
The calm was unsettling.  
I'm still adjusting.  
Sometimes I forget.

I don't have to shout my thoughts to be heard.  
A lighthouse's beam is needed most  
When winds rip and roar  
When the sea is in upheaval.

I'm learning to shine for myself  
To trust in my light.

Nothing is exclusively good or exclusively bad; the binary is false.  
If it wasn't for darkness  
Earth wouldn't cast a shadow on the moon.  
The lunar cycle urges me to be mindful of space  
Crescent, quarter, gibbous, full:  
A reminder to dance with my full moon-shadow.  
Gibbous, quarter, crescent, new:  
Stars shine brightest when the satellite is dark.  
This planet is cruising in orbit at 66,000 miles an hour, while rotating at just over  
1,000.  
Don't forget to enjoy the ride.

Ryan once showed me an open window to let in a little light and some fresh air.  
Turns out that window was a mirror  
Was a magnifying glass  
Focusing that ray of sunshine on my doors of doom to melt the metal locks and  
let me escape, I'm free. And forever. Grateful.

---

***(.b) Justice. (.b) All education is Justice work. (.b)***

What drew me to outdoor ed was the opportunity  
To break the mold of education as I knew it,  
To escape the stale, stagnate, sterilized  
Boxes  
Of the classrooms I had been forced into,  
That had held me captive.  
The chance to make even one student's academic experience  
Better than my own.

Pulled in by an approach that embraced multiple ways of learning, I saw  
Opportunity in student centered, experiential, systems and critical thinking  
For walking with both socially conscious and ecologically literate lenses.

Although

The forces that give rise to the linty of -isms

I fight

Share roots with

Those that drive

The degradation of our planet.

My Resistance is often met with resistance in these spaces.

Examining difference ends at learning styles.

Looking closely and poking around

Doesn't apply to privilege.

I wasn't ready to take point,

So I pointed a finger instead.

But how can I blame them, when I'm afraid to look too?

I'm afraid to look

Because when you are at your worst,

You tear me down

Because when I am at my worst,

I tear me down.

Because every meltdown is a distillation and I re-forge

Stronger every time.

Because, "My heart is broken so I'm building a boat." Except

Boats remind me of you.

Of sailboats built nightly to cross oceans in our dreams.

Dreams. I'm learning to let go of

Dreams made of moonlight and salt and sea.

Green Sand,

The tighter you squeeze

The more slips through your fingers.

Stubborn mementos

In tiny glass jars placed high on a shelf or stuffed in a shoebox under.

My bed will never feel the same.

As walking barefoot on the beach next to you.

I don't care if these thoughts

Don't belong here.

I'm doing myself justice by

Standing here whole.

Let's not pretend

Education can happen in a vacuum.  
Separating mind from body,  
Learning from life,  
The word and the world means  
A bowling ball and a feather  
Dropped from the same height  
Will fall in tandem.  
This allows for only one of  
Many ways of knowing,

Theoretical physics.  
Students suffocate  
When they go unseen, when everyone is treated the same,  
When the complexity of our multidimensionality gets left at the door,  
Humanity is lost.  
All of the air gets sucked out of the room.

Air is essential.  
Not only for survival,  
But combustion too.  
John once told me, "Education is not the filling of a pail,  
But the lighting of a fire."  
Nothing burns in a vacuum.

Talk about race,  
Talk about class  
Talk about ability, age, gender, sex, sexuality, documentation status, family  
history,  
You name it.  
Talk about where you come from and  
What you've been through  
Talk about it all.  
I can tell you what it's like to grow up without a mirror,  
How hard it is to feel like you belong without seeing a reflection.  
I can also tell you how dangerous it can be  
To live without windows.  
How lonely it is.

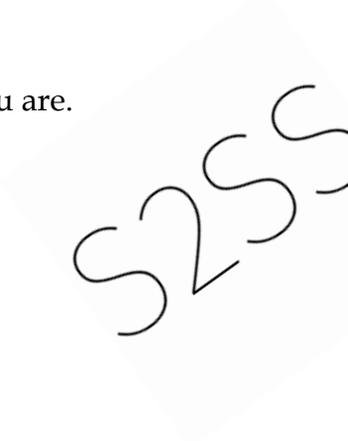
Education is my passion,  
Burning deep in my bones  
Sometimes a slow smolder,  
Others a raging inferno of inspiration.  
When I leave parts of myself at the door, I smother my own flame.

A learning-fueled wildfire, could blaze a lifetime, if you remember to let it breathe.

I'm remembering to breathe, to bring my whole self.

I've given examples of how learning styles and heartbreak and trauma and queer identity struggles can impact an education not because my story is exceptional, Unfortunately it's far from it,  
But because this story is mine, the only one I could offer. It's a gift,  
You don't have to take it.

But if you walk away with nothing, you didn't come here with a hungry heart.  
The table is spread with a copious bounty, please  
Take something for your journey  
Not because you arrived incomplete,  
I know you are whole.  
Take something so you will have it to share,  
especially when your pockets feel light.  
Take something unfamiliar, even if you don't know what it means.  
I trust you  
To nurture the seed  
You are enough. You are so enough; it is unbelievable how enough you are.



S2SS