



Self-Understanding in the Lives of Women

Ien Dienske

University of Utrecht

The experience of the becoming of women cannot be understood merely conceptually and abstractly but through active participation in the overcoming of servitude.

Mary Daly, 1973¹

Suppose I meet somebody, and I want to get to know her better. What will I do? What would you do?

Most often we'll ask questions and tell something about ourselves. We might ask: "Where were you born? Are you married?" And so on. And when we get to know a person better, we'll be telling some of the stories of our lives. We'll want to know what the other considers important in her life, and we are pleased if she is interested in our hopes and beliefs. When we become friends, we'll tell each other about our sorrows and our failures. And after years of friendship we will most probably reveal some secret stories of our lives, tales about guilt and shame, accounts that point to the solution of a key problem in our existence.

Everyday, again and again, we tell each other stories. When someone returns from a journey, we ask to be told about it. When we've had a terrible experience at the dentist, we would like to commiserate with someone. And when we come home after work, we would probably like to tell someone about our joys and troubles of the day.

In short, telling stories to one another is very common. Telling stories to others is of such importance that we can't imagine a life without it. Stories are the vehicle of a person's thoughts about life. I might even say that to know a person well means to know the stories and events that mean the most to her and to have heard the everyday experiences that serve as a background.

Not all stories are important in getting to know someone or in getting to know ourselves. Important are, I think, the tales that have made something clear to us: something about ourselves, our relationships; something about the meaning of our lives. Stories in which we see ourselves and the world in a new way. Important also are the tales that we'll always remember; in which case they may point to an existential depth.

I'd like to tell you three true stories.²

I've chosen these stories because they tell us something about important problems concerning self-understanding in the lives of women. These problems are the focus of our attention here. In the three stories we'll try to find hidden meanings and a structure of meaning. If you are willing to look in the same direction, the direction of self-understanding in the lives of women, and to do so from the same point of reference, the phenomenological point of view, you may discover the same meanings in the stories as I'll try to make explicit here.

The Future as a Foggy Nothing

As a girl of about twelve years old, I was convinced that life contained a secret. That secret I supposed to be hidden in the center of life itself. It was impossible to see it from the outside, but I knew that it was there, and that there were very old people who knew this secret of life. I was firmly resolved to ask them about it.

I realized very well that I should not confess this belief to anyone. My brothers would laugh at me, and the adults would think me a little childish. So I kept my knowledge about the secret of life to myself. I never told anyone. The old people I meant to question had to be very old, or they wouldn't understand. To know the secret of life meant to be wise, so I started to look for wise old people. From the age of about thirteen to twenty-one, I kept on asking old men and women to tell me about their lives because I felt that it would be impossible to ask directly what I wanted to know.

For about eight years I asked my questions, sitting in trains, waiting for a bus, or walking in the street. "When you look back on your life, has it been worth all the trouble? What would you do differently now if you had the chance? Have you changed? Why? In what respect?" And so on. I had to know what they had done with their lives, what they regretted, what had been good, and why.

My future was like a foggy nothing at that time. I was walking in a white cold fog, and it was impossible for me to see more than one meter ahead. So there was nothing for me to look forward to. By the time I was twenty-one, I had forgotten about the secret of life but still asked old people what they had done in life. I still remember my last victim, a retired lawyer. He was sitting on a bench, facing the sea, and I sat beside him. I was searching for my first question while we discussed the weather. I looked at him. He had a quiet face and he seemed satisfied. Satisfied with his life, having no other wish than gazing at the sea on a beautiful day. After we'd finished discussing the weather, I started asking my questions. "I guess you're retired? What was your profession?", and so on, until I finally arrived at the important ones. "Looking back on your life, are you satisfied?" "Oh yes," his answers had become very short by now.

"Why are you satisfied?" "Oh, I had an interesting job, and I've saved some money for a rainy day," I was shocked. Was that all? Saving up for an easy retirement? I looked at him and gave up; my hopes of those ten years to find wise old people were busted. I realized that old people couldn't tell me anything about life or living.

This new conviction made me cynical. A couple of years later I gave up the ideal of ever becoming wise myself.

Important for the atmosphere of this story is the girl's secret. As children we all loved secrets, as you may remember from your own childhood. We looked for them, protected them, and even made them up sometimes.

The secret in this story has a very intimate atmosphere because it is about the mysteries of life which may tell us something about the spiritual core of our existence. The mysteries of life and death remain our lifelong companions if we are receptive to them. The girl feels that there is no place for this mystery in everyday life: "My brothers would laugh at me, and the adults would think me a little childish." So she hides and protects her secret and tries to get more information in an indirect way.

Also important for the atmosphere of the story is her feeling of walking about in a foggy nothing. The fog is cold, and she can't see anything ahead of her. The fog isolates her from other human beings. This image says: "I was busy with a future I couldn't see. I was looking for examples which could inspire me, which could tell me what to do with my life, and which I

could use to create a path into that foggy nothing.” Now we can summarize some meanings of stories in connection with self-understanding:

1. Stories may contain an existential significance. That is, stories may at least point to possible meanings that make the lives of women (or men) worthwhile. The story just told points to the secrets of life and death.
2. We need these stories as examples, both in childhood and in times of crisis. They can help us to create an image of our own lives in the future.
3. Creating an image for our future lives entails much more than knowing what job we want to do.

If we fail to create this image, as was the case with the girl, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to understand who we are now and who we were in the past.

In the narrative the woman says: “I had to know what they had done with their lives, what they regretted, what had been good, and why.” So she not only needed stories of people’s lives as examples, she also needed to hear about the important values in other people’s lives, why these values were important, and how these values worked for them.

4. Knowledge of possible important values—hidden or made explicit in the stories of people’s lives—can be helpful as points of orientation in the course of our lives.
5. When children have an experience that never receives a wide response (in our story the belief in the secret life), it is quite possible that even the memory of the experience gets wiped out. (In our example the memory of the experience returns at an older age, but that is not necessarily always so.)

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Only after about ten years did the young woman give up searching for examples which might teach her how to live her life. Going through all these years of disappointing experiences before giving up, nine or ten years—which is a very long time at that age—this also points to the girl’s need for stories with which she could identify. The ending of her story emphasizes this importance once again: “I realized that old people couldn’t tell me anything about life or living. This new conviction made me cynical. A couple of years later I gave up the ideal of ever becoming wise myself.”

6. Stories which we can identify with will help us to give shape to our lives.

The Emptiness Behind Me

The first story was about a girl who couldn’t recognize herself in the stories she heard around her. But surely there are other sources available in our culture. One could read books, novels and poetry, turn to autobiographies, or go to the theatre. We’ve got an almost inexhaustible cultural tradition. So certainly there are other possibilities if one can’t find any living examples.

The second story is about these cultural sources. I will only give a summary here because the original narrative is four pages long. The author

was forty years old when she began to realize, very gradually, that something was missing in the books she read. What she felt, however, was not a clear experience, and she couldn't give that feeling a name.

After reading *A Room of One's Own* by Virginia Woolf, she had a flash of insight. She was struck by that part of the book that deals with the importance of a tradition in writing books and the lack of such a tradition in a woman's life.

"Of course, I knew that cultural achievements always stand in a tradition, also the new ones," she wrote. But the idea to apply this to the lives of women had never crossed her mind. Finally her vague hunch about women and tradition got a firm shape:

Then, very slowly, the feeling was there. It was behind my back, an emptiness I had never realized before. I knew it had been there ever since I was a little girl. An emptiness, unnamed and unrecognized. A long, long nothingness. It sucked at my back. It hurt me. There is no tradition to which I belong. I can't live a life like my mother's or my grandmother's. There is no line of women, generation after generation, where I fit in, from where I can go on. There is no greatness, no history of great women. I never learned any names. No triumph, no glory to my kind. Not a single beam of greatness has fallen on me because I am a woman. There is no continuity to support me. We are not part of the ever-growing history written down in standard works. I'm an outsider. I am not an heiress to this culture.

I looked at the emptiness behind me. There, somewhat aside, was my mother and, somewhat more aside, my grandmother. We are not in one line. The line is broken. I can't and won't live like my mother, my grandmother, and the generation before them.

There is a perceptible emptiness behind me.

In another part of this narrative, the woman mentions two conditions which had served as incentives to the awareness of the emptiness behind her. In the first place, there was the women's liberation movement at the background of her life, and, in the second place, there was a personal contact with a feminist woman. Without these conditions she would never have become aware of the experience which had been there, hidden for over thirty years.

This provides us with additional themes:

7. The second story tells us how difficult it is to become aware of and to understand an experience which has not existed as a matter of course in a tradition.
8. This story also indicates that without a tradition at hand, without a tradition of women who mention their own experiences from their own points of view, an unknown number of experiences of girls and women will remain hidden.
9. Unrecognized experiences can't help us to get to know ourselves better. Or, in other words, stories told from the perspective of women articulate our experiences so that we will be able to know and understand ourselves better.

It is well known that people may experience many difficulties in trying to shape their lives in a personal way because of the prescribed cultural forms and rules. But what makes it even more difficult for women who refuse to accept the false security of humiliating cultural forms is that there

is no alternative for them in the cultural past. Or, if there is something, they won't know because no-one has told them. This leads us to the following realization: Girls and women need an accessible tradition which they can adhere to and which they can use as a starting point for an alternative or personal shape of their lives. *It is worth a lot of trouble to create a tradition which contains a variety of dignified women figures.* The new stories that women tell each other are the beginning of this badly needed tradition.

The story of "The emptiness behind me" bears out the assertion Mary Dale made when she wrote: "Women have been unable even to experience our own experience."³ And when she wrote: "This becoming who we really are requires existential courage to confront the experience of nothingness,"⁴ she was talking about the experiences described in "The future as a foggy nothing" and "The emptiness behind me." All human beings are threatened by non-being, but Daly has suggested that "the liberation of women involves susceptibility to the experience of non-being in a most dramatic way, and I suppose this is so due to this "hole called civilization." That is how Adrienne Rich⁵ named the problem in one of her poems which ends:

centuries of books unwritten piled behind these shelves;
and we still have to stare into the absence
of men who would not, women who could not, speak
to our life—
this still unexcavated hole
called civilization, this act of translation, this half-world.

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One study which is very important to the understanding of the problem which we are exploring is Carol P. Christ's book, *Diving Deep and Surfacing*.⁶ Here she shows us how in modern literature written by women the experience of nothingness is described in different ways. And she makes it quite clear that stories are "the boundaries against which life is played out." In this study we learn about the difficulties women are faced with when trying to create new stories about themselves as free women.

If we fail to find examples of free women, the stories of our lives will often closely resemble the stories we had rejected in our mothers. Most likely we'd find ourselves drifting semi-consciously into similar, conventional stories. Carol Christ also says: "Women need a literature that names their pain and allows them to use the emptiness in their lives as an occasion for insight rather than as one more indication of their worthlessness."⁷

It seems important to me to stress here two things. A deeply felt experience can produce an equally deep insight. And the insight mentioned in the third story took a long time to be gained. It took thirty years. We have seen that there are several reasons for that.

The Laughter of Insight

In this last story the author begins with a description of an experience from her youth. When she was about twenty-one, it had become clear to her that she didn't dream the dreams of all the other girls she knew. She didn't dream of herself living with a husband in a nice house. "I could not even imagine for myself the only existent example of a woman's future, let

alone live it. Although I was used to facing difficult questions in life, I panicked.” She went to the director of the school she attended to talk about it. During this conversation his wife entered the room to serve coffee. With a big smile and the gesture of the master, he said: “This is the woman who helps me.”

After this incident she knew what she didn’t want to be. She could not find the words but she knew it: “I’ll not become the servant of some man.”

We want to know here what can happen when a woman refuses this future, which is said to be appropriate for women (in other words or in no words at all). We want to know what can happen when there is no variety of dignified women figures.

The following quotation is clear enough:

I decided not to marry and have children. Of course, I had to hide this decision because I knew very well that if people learned about it, they would judge me a pathological case.

I had made up my mind for once and for all, but during all those years up to now I waited for the great sorrow that would unavoidably come. I believed so unconditionally, and I expected this sorrow, which I would have to cope with, sooner or later. I waited for years and years.

So she only partly escaped from the taken-for-granted expectations of the culture she lived in. As long as there was not any cultural background for her which validated her choice, she could not escape from this expectations.

The end of the story tells us when it was possible to hear the incessant propaganda which tells women what we are and what our destiny is. Mostly we don’t hear it: like music which never stops. The end of the story also tells us how it was possible to stop this all-penetrating propaganda. It stopped for a moment when she experienced what the Japanese call “the small satori.”

Only after reading feminist literature did I understand that it had been the incessant, all-penetrating propaganda which had made me believe this. After eighteen years I could laugh, relieved. I saw myself, sitting in a chair, waiting in vain for a feeling that wasn’t mine, would never be mine, for a pain that didn’t exist. And at the instant I laughed, the propaganda that had deafened all other things was silenced, and I saw myself in a clear, radiant space where tranquillity and rest reigned. And I laughed. I laughed; throwing back my head, I laughed the liberating laughter of insight.

Reflections

“One of the false gods of theologians, philosophers, and other academics is called ‘Method’ . . . Under patriarchy, method has wiped out women’s questions so totally that even women have not been able to hear and formulate our own questions to meet our own experiences. Women have been unable even to experience our own experience,” Mary Daly said in 1973. But it’s very hard for me to resist the temptation of offering a small gift to the lesser deity, method; I’ll say something about the way in which I analysed the three stories and where methodological justification can be found.

The general background of my phenomenological approach is to be found in the work of Merleau-Ponty, and more explicitly in W. Lippitz, *Lebenswelt, Oder die Rehabilitation des Alltagswissens*,⁸ and in the Dutch book, *Beleving en ervaren. Werkboek fenomenologie voor de sociale wetenschappen*,⁹ written by Ton Beekman and Karel Mulderij. My guiding interest lies with the problems and possibilities for women and girls to know themselves and the world, which I see as a continuous dialogical process. Stories play a role in that process. I've started searching in everyday life and in relevant stories and have found some meanings of stories in connection with self-understanding. These findings can become intersubjective when the reader can assent to the meanings that were uncovered.

I have chosen these three stories because they seemed helpful. This kind of phenomenological clarification cannot be done without descriptions of concrete events. Of course, I could have chosen other narratives, but I could never have done the same kind of analysis without any stories. In phenomenology as a story-telling technique (a term of A. J. Beekman) which I practiced here, methodological advantages and important existential dimensions can be present in the used examples at the same time.

Notes

1. M. Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973) p. 16.
2. I have given the three stories names. The first one "The future as a foggy nothing" was written in February, 1983. "The emptiness behind me" in March, 1981, and "The laughter of insight" in November, 1982. The original material is in my possession.
3. Daly, 1973, p. 12.
4. Daly, 1973, p. 23.
5. A. Rich, *The Dream of a Common Language*. (New York/London: Norton and Company, 1978) p. 27.
6. Carol P. Christ, *Diving Deep and Surfacing. Women Writers on Spiritual Guests*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1980) pp. 1-26.
7. The woman who wrote the memories I quoted here told me that she already had written down the last two stories when she read the study of Carol Christ. But even after reading this book she had difficulties understanding the consequences of her described experiences.
8. W. Lippitz, *Lebenswelt. Oder die Rehabilitation des Alltagswissens* (Weinheim und Basel: Beltz Verlag, 1980); especially pp. 70-77.
9. T. Beekman and K. Mulderij, *Beleving en ervaren. Werkboek fenomenologie voor de sociale wetenschappen* (Meppel: Boom, 1974).
10. Special thanks go to Jo Hilhurst and Anemieke Duyuendak. They were generous in helping during the translation of this article.