



DISSERTATION NEWSLETTER

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Dissertation Writing: A Contemplative Perspective

By Dr. Patrick Mahaffey

For three decades, I have witnessed the process of dissertation research and writing, first my own, and then by serving on over 80 dissertation committees at Pacifica. On this basis, I offer some observations and metaphors from contemplative spirituality that may be helpful to those currently engaged in the process. For me, deciding to write a dissertation was to answer a call to complete a task that was integral to my individuation; it was a mountain I needed to climb that included a descent into a few valleys along the way. Once I committed myself to the process, I had to confront internal obstacles—self-doubt, complexes stemming from family history, and marital issues. Working on the dissertation was simultaneously a process of working through psychological material. By the time I had finished it, I was a more complete individual than when I started. On the one hand, I had integrated ideas I had researched more fully and deeply; on the other, I resolved many intrapsychic issues and achieved great wholeness in my being. Research, I discovered, is *re-search*; it involves circumambulating ideas and your personal history.

The most important tip for completing a dissertation, I believe, is to work on it as regularly as possible. The best way to keep yourself honest is to keep a log of the number of days per week and the amount of time devoted to the work. Make a tally at the end of each week. You will soon discover how much time you need to invest to make tangible progress. Working four to five days per week for a total of 10 hours is infinitely better than working the same number of hours on one or both days of a weekend. Consider your dissertation writing to be like a spiritual practice that you are committed to doing on a daily basis. Contemplative yoga traditions refer to spiritual practice as *sadhana*; your dissertation work, I suggest, is a form of *sadhana* or a form of depth psychological work; for me it was both.

Spiritual traditions often distinguish stages in the contemplative journey. Putting it simply, there is an initial stage, a middle or liminal phase when most of the work is done, and a final stage. Vajrayana Buddhism, for instance, describes deity yoga, one of its most powerful practices, as

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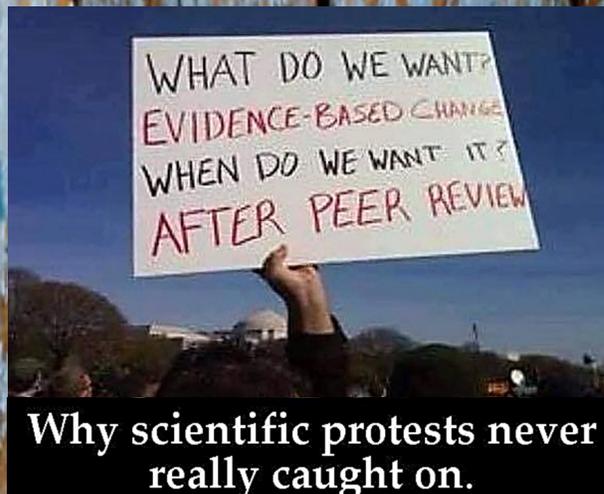
having a *generation stage* and a *completion stage*. During the generation stage, practitioners project their psychic energy onto a “deity”—a form that you generate as a subtle reality that embodies what you aim to realize; in the case of dissertation writing, the deity is the dissertation. Thus, you infuse the deity/dissertation with your libido and create the form in vivid detail. This takes a lot of time to master. Eventually, after working through resistance and by empowering yourself through dedicated practice and perseverance, the fruition of practice is attained; the complete draft of the dissertation is complete. Then is the time for completion stage practice. You take back the energy you projected into the manuscript and assimilate it fully into your being—and your life. In my case, I had climbed the “mountain.” More accurately, I became the mountain; I embodied the metaphor in the form of my dissertation and in my psyche. I hasten to add, however, that this was no final destination—far from it. Instead, it was an initiation into the next chapter of my life. Now, thirty-some years later, I realize that I have written several other “dissertations.” Indeed, I have learned more since writing the first one than I ever could have imagined possible. But without the first one, the subsequent learning and occasions for mastery would not have been possible.

I close with a mantra from the *Prajnaparamita (Perfection of Wisdom) Heart Sutra*. In Sanskrit it reads, *gaté gaté parasamgaté bodhi svaha*. An English translation rendering is *gone, gone, gone way beyond, all the way to awakening*. So, dissertation writers, I enjoin you to answer the call to write the dissertation the psyche is asking you to write; commit yourself to daily practice; infuse the project with your psychic energy; persevere to completion; take back the projection and assimilate the work into your being; go beyond it and engage in the next chapters of life that beckon you to the next phase of self-discovery; and, finally, offer your gifts for the sake of the betterment of the world.

—Patrick Mahaffey, PhD, Mythological Studies Associate Chair and Research Coordinator

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Underworld Sojourn

As the fall weather descends upon us, I am obliged to look to the myth of Demeter and Persephone to serve as a metaphor for selecting one's dissertation topic and the seasons of writing that follow. Some people know exactly what their topic is long before writing begins. Then there are many others, who much like Persephone minding her own business, suddenly gets swallowed up by a force so overwhelmingly powerful that they are defenseless against it. This was exactly how I felt when I realized my topic was not only about early father loss and complicated mourning but also a need to confront the demon lover.

Being devoured by the darkness of one's topic can be treacherous. Imagine Persephone being held captive by Hades in the dark, dank underworld. She does not want to be there, but forces beyond her control have led her to this place. Meanwhile, poor Demeter is scouring the earth in search of Persephone. As a researcher you are at times much like Demeter, in search of something or someone precious and it appears as though they're nowhere to be found. It took me ages to gather my references and find my research participants. More often than not I felt like I would spend far too much time seeking information from a source that knew nothing of what I was in search of. Imagine Demeter tirelessly knocking on doors and asking endless questions in desperate hope for even the tiniest morsel of information that would help her locate Persephone, only to be repeatedly denied. Is it any surprise that Demeter became so depressed and quit doing her job?

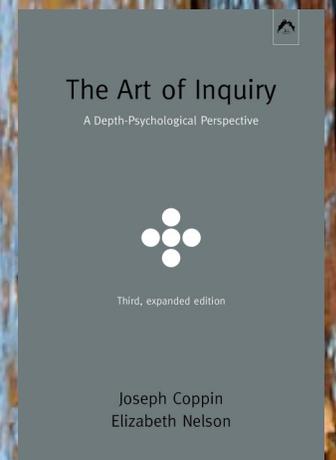
How intriguing that Persephone eventually found her footing in the underworld with Hades. What once terrified her later became recognized as her calling in life. Is this not how many of us are called to our topics? The most wounding experiences one faces in life often serve later as a profound source of wisdom and courage.

Finally, as the seasons come and go, transforming the landscape of the earth, so too does the process of writing. For months there are great amounts of fruitful labor. A bounty of ideas and words flow onto the paper and the reference list grows. Then there are the months where everything stops and the trail runs cold. Dead leaves fall from trees. A blanket of snow covers the earth. Do not fear. Spring will come again, as it does every year and you will find your way once more.

—Christian M. Vincent, PhD, is a 2017 graduate of Pacifica's Depth Psychology Psychotherapy program. Her dissertation is titled, *Hello Demon Lover: The Woman Artist's Journey Through Father Loss and Transformation*.



Apples growing on the Lambert Road Campus. Photo by Rachel Reeve.



Recent Publication!

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South Hall on the Lambert Road Campus. Photo by Robyn Cass.



Strategies for Narrowing the Research Topic



Here are some strategies to help narrow your topic into something more manageable:

Aspect—choose one lens through which to view the research problem, or look at just one facet of it [e.g., rather than studying the role of food in Eastern religious rituals, study the role of food in Hindu ceremonies, or, the role of one particular type of food among several religions].

Components—determine if your initial variable or unit of analysis can be broken into smaller parts, which can then be analyzed more precisely [e.g., a study of tobacco use among adolescents can focus on just chewing tobacco rather than all forms of usage or, rather than adolescents in general, focus on female adolescents in a certain age range who choose to use tobacco].

Methodology—the way in which you gather information can reduce the domain of interpretive analysis needed to address the research problem [e.g., a single case study can be designed to generate data that does not require as extensive an explanation as using multiple cases].

Place—generally, the smaller the geographic unit of analysis, the more narrow the focus [e.g., rather than study trade relations in West Africa, study trade relations between Niger and Cameroon as a case study that helps to explain problems in the region].

Relationship—ask yourself how do two or more different perspectives or variables relate to one another. Designing a study around the relationships between specific variables can help constrict the scope of analysis [e.g., cause/effect, compare/contrast, contemporary/historical, group/individual, male/female, opinion/reason, problem/solution].

Time—the shorter the time period of the study, the more narrow the focus [e.g., study of trade relations between Niger and Cameroon during the period of 2010–2016].

Type—focus your topic in terms of a specific type or class of people, places, or phenomena [e.g., a study of developing safer traffic patterns near schools can focus on SUVs, or just student drivers, or just the timing of stoplights in the area].

Combination—use two or more of the above strategies to focus your topic very narrowly.

Booth, W. C. (2016). *The craft of research* (4th ed.). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

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