Autoethnography as a Way of Life

Listening to Tinnitus Teach

Ernest Becker¹ concluded his passionate psychotheological synthesis of the denial of death by casting doubt on whether a victory over human limitation could ever be programmed by science. “Who knows what form the forward momentum of life will take in the time ahead or what use it will make of our anguished searching,” he said. “The most that any one of us can seem to do is fashion something—an object or ourselves—and drop it into the confusion, make an offering of it, so to speak, to the life force.”²

I recall sitting at the desk in my home office in Philadelphia meditating on these words the first time I read them in 1973. At the time I had no idea how profoundly transformative this book would be for me, how I would become one of Becker’s anguished searchers with a deep appreciation for the forward momentum of time.

Now, as a retired professor, I understand my anguished searching as a “narrative quest.” I had been using whatever moral imagination I possess in pursuit of a coherent story that would provide a meaningful sense of wholeness to the different chapters of my life. In Coming to Narrative: A Personal History of Paradigm Change in the Human Sciences,³ I relied on my memory, however fallible, to help me step into the shoes of my various former selves in order to arrive at interpretations of the epiphanies I had lived through and to make whatever unifying sense I could of them. My intention was to probe and examine my memories, self-investigating by turning my memories of significant incidents inside out and upside down. The text I wrote worked the hyphens of scholarly and literary form: memoir and essay, evocative and analytic autoethnography, story and theory. I pivoted between telling believable, evocative stories about events that I had lived through, replete with real-life, lively characters, and making a determined effort to grasp the meanings of those events and understand why they stood out in my memory.

The betweenness that I experienced during the seven summers I was working on that book is endemic to the storytelling work of autoethnography, which requires writers to

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¹ Ernest Becker
² ibid
³ Arthur P. Bochner, Coming to Narrative: A Personal History of Paradigm Change in the Human Sciences, 1996.

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put recollected experiences into words. When I attempted to fit language to my experience, I encountered the chasm between experience and words; between the chaos and fragmentation of living a life and the smoothing orderliness we often bring to it when we write; between what we can say about the past now and what we imagine took place then; between how we mourn or celebrate the past and what shape our grieving or rejoicing gives to our future.

Remembering, then articulating what we remember, is always an activity under the influence of the present, fusing what one desires, what one imagines, and what may actually have occurred. Thus, I had no illusions about the memories in which I was dwelling. I realized that I was transforming my original experiences into something else—something remembered. Many of my memories were saturated with deep feelings and emotions. No matter how hard I tried, I felt frustrated with how difficult I found it to articulate deep and powerful emotional effects. The urge that inspired me to make something meaningful and whole out of my past was a desire to reach some truths about my life in the spirit of Richard Rorty’s cleverly expressed observation, “Where there are no sentences, there is no truth.” Still, I knew I had to exercise some modesty about what I could claim about the truth inherent in my sentences.

“To reach some truths” I needed to progress in my understanding of the meaning of my lived-through experiences as a whole, to grasp them as something more than merely a series of unconnected episodes. In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre defined the unity of a human life as “the unity of a narrative quest.” Over the course of a lifetime, a person is bound to encounter episodes of threat, vulnerability, and jeopardy as well as cravings, interruptions, and blows of fate. These episodes provide the quest’s testing ground of character, integrity, and constancy. It is through these incidents and epiphanies that the goal of one’s quest reveals itself. As MacIntyre observes, “A quest is always an education both as to the character of that which is sought and in self-knowledge . . . and knowledge of the good.”

This education takes place over time. Becker and MacIntyre emphasize that our lives have a temporal structure, which MacIntyre construed as a narrative quest for the good, an effort to form and practice a conception of the good and to reach eventually in old age “a sense of completion.” In retirement, the question of what is the good for me takes on a new and potentially refreshing significance. The retired person usually has a long past on which to reflect in search of an embodied narrative that ties their particular life together over time: “To ask ‘What is good for me?’ is to ask how best I might live out that unity and bring it to completion.” I emphasize “completion” because in retirement the completion or end of life usually comes into the clearest focus.

THE RETIREMENT SEASON

The metaphors of “seasons” or “chapters” of a life express the dramatic journeys and epiphanies many people experience as they move across time and through their lives. Seasons imply cycles that we pass through as we age akin to the winter, spring, summer, and fall of our lives. As life goes on, we must weather storms and live through interruptions in the flow of the story of our lives. Chapters suggest that a life is like a novel,
a narrative; life has a unifying storyline and a plot; twists and turns; a beginning, middle, and ending; scenes and settings; and trouble. Every new chapter introduces a somewhat unique challenge as one moves from childhood to adolescence to adulthood to retirement and to old age. As the momentum of a life marches forward, one is rarely aware of precisely the direction it is heading, but in retrospect, looking back, one may recognize a unifying theme or narrative that has embodied their particular life.

When I read biographical or autoethnographic life reviews, often I find myself hiking across time with the storyteller through struggles and setbacks to satisfaction to peaceful old age. In the West, most of us are socialized to favor upward mobility life-stories—fairy tales that come true—and we find lives experiencing unliberated tragedy an affront to our desire for progress over the life course. Ordinarily, we do not praise, celebrate, or strive for lives that begin well and end badly. Nevertheless, even MacIntyre recognized that the quest for the good is commonly beset by dangers and distractions that can interrupt or derail the progress and wholeness we yearn.

Unfortunately, retirement is frequently over-hyped as an uncomplicated release from the stresses of work, a golden opportunity for self-development, and a gratifying lifestyle of consumption and leisure. If you have good health, high income, a stable social network, and sufficient interpersonal competence, you may in fact experience this sort of uncomplicated and straightforward transition to retirement. But this is by no means certain. Undoubtedly, many people experience retirement as a stressful transition and a crisis of personal identity, especially when retirement is accompanied by unanticipated illnesses; grief and/or loneliness related to loss of lifelong friends, a spouse, or family members; inadequate savings; the absence of a sense of meaning and value that employment and routinized work had provided; and worry about the uncertainty of the future and end of life. The stress and decline that can accompany retirement is reflected in the words taken as synonymous with “retire,” which communicate a quite different sense than the hype—retreat, recede, quit, scrap, be uncommunicative, resign, depose, seclude oneself, dismiss.

Nevertheless, most people look forward to retirement and anticipate that this chapter of their life will take the form of a progress narrative. But conversely, they look upon old age, which often overlaps retirement, differently: as a time of life that lacks the “good for me” storyline. For the most part, even very old people do not long for death, though they fear, as I do, a degrading and painful one and an extended time period of dependency on others.

I have experienced the transition to retirement as relatively smooth and continuous—I read, I write, I keep up with my fields of interest, I occasionally lecture and give workshops, I stay in touch with old friends and colleagues in my discipline, and I certainly don’t miss the pettiness, acrimony, academic dishonesty, insensitivity, and posturing I experienced among many former colleagues during the later period of my university employment. In this sense, I have experienced retirement thus far as a breath of fresh air. But my transition to old age has been something else entirely, something riddled with extraordinary and unexpected challenges, ordeals, uncertainty, and, occasionally, uncommon, free-floating anxiety that makes me question whether the experience of old age actually coheres with the theoretical claims to the unity of a single storyline across time.
Moreover, I find myself too frequently immersed in the ambivalence described by Small, spending too much time thinking about growing older while strenuously trying not to think about it.17

LIVING AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC LIFE

Is there a way to resist or escape this ambivalence? For most of my academic life, I have devoted my teaching and research to the goal of integrating personal and academic experience.18 I have lived the life of an academic writer, though I no longer feel any pressure to publish. To be candid, I have not felt any such pressure for the past thirty years.

What I did feel was inspiration, a motivation to transgress the received view of social science inquiry as neutral, detached, and disinterested. Carolyn Ellis and I described our early attempts to breach conventions of writing and research as “breaking bad,”19 though our approach was decidedly more loving than Walter White’s, who had not yet come onto the scene. Stacy Holman Jones has portrayed what she thought we were doing as “a feral pedagogy” of narrative and autoethnography that recognized the academy as “a place of deeply held exclusions.” We used whatever “street-cred” we had as senior and well-published scholars to break away from our domestication, critique “homogenizing ideas about truth, reality, and knowledge,” and legitimate new forms of research and writing.20

In the 1990s, we formulated autoethnography strategically as a mode of resistance to conventional ethnographic writing practices, as an ethnographic alternative, as a critical response to concerns about silent authorship and researcher reflexivity, and as a humanizing, moral, aesthetic, political, and personal form of representation.21 We took what Rorty called “an experimental attitude”22 that eschewed the objectivity of laws and theories in favor of a “radical empiricism” in which we “make ourselves experimental subjects and treat our experiences as primary data.”23

Autoethnography not only permits but encourages a focus on self-understanding. But this concentration on self-understanding need not be exclusively academic. Autoethnography is not only a research methodology but also a way of life. The autoethnographic way of life originates in doubt and uncertainty. To be alive is to be uncertain. Autoethnography suits me, and people similar to me, because it is a genre of doubt, a vehicle for exercising, embodying, and enacting doubt. In academic autoethnography our enactment of doubt can satisfy our readers’ hunger for reality and desire to know “what it feels like for one human being to be alive, and by implication, all human beings.”24

Autoethnography allows a person to lean into uncertainty rather than struggle against it. The shape of autoethnography is not the exclamation point (!) but the question mark (?). Autoethnography is not a discourse of order, stability, control, and destiny but one of ambiguity, contradiction, contingency, and chance. Other genres of empirical inquiry show an insatiable appetite for abstractions, facts, and rigor; autoethnographers hunger after details, meanings, and peace of mind. These are not issues to be resolved only differences to be lived with.25 We autoethnographers acknowledge our contingency and finitude; we open ourselves to otherness, dedicate ourselves to social justice and narrative
ethics, and seek to apply our moral imagination and desire for edification to keep conversation going. As long as we can keep conversation alive, we believe we can sustain our hope of building a better life and a more just and loving world. We know that suffering is an inevitable part of every life, and thus we nurture an autoethnographic temperament in order to prepare to face the inevitable travails of an ageist society and the uncertainties of old age to which we must acclimate.

I have defined autoethnographic temperament as a disposition to question almost everything about existence, using the voices in your head to talk back to yourself in a spirit of rigorous scrutiny. Here’s how autoethnographic temperament works: You listen closely to yourself talking; you talk back to yourself, commenting directly on what you hear yourself saying; you don’t stop there but rather insist on keeping the conversation going, interpreting and reinterpreting, discovering something strange about the self you started with in an effort to transform yourself into a new being. The conversation moves in the direction of edification as you show a willingness to be your own worst critic—picking at scabs, exposing warts, vacillating between angst and anger, striving for an acute self-consciousness and a shameless subjectivity. In order to bring insight to the dramas of life, you go public with the secrets and unmentionables that you usually cram in the back of the closet behind your old shoes and clothes that no longer fit. Picking from the ripened fruit of your lived experience, you interrogate various ways of dealing with life in the here and now by reflecting on a particular there and then. You put your consciousness on the page, showing how a person might endure life’s injustice, pain, and suffering, or escape it, or cope with it—going deeper and deeper into the darkness of what Paget called “a complex sorrow.”

You acknowledge that two choices are available, either you try to escape existence or you learn how to endure it. You land on the side of survival. You don’t arrive at any neat or concise answers, but you are able to lure readers into your story (and into theirs as well) by asking searching questions within episodes of unfolding instances of lived-through life, indulging their curiosity by threading the needle of tragedy with the emancipating grace of consciousness. I believe an autoethnographic disposition can help us achieve a measure of acceptance, compassion, and perhaps even wisdom so vital to our capacity to resist and/or escape some of the oppressive scripts and ambivalence that can plague old age.

In the autoethnographic story that follows, I apply an autoethnographic temperament to my struggle to live with tinnitus rather than fight against it.

LISTENING TO TINNITUS TEACH

2012. Lodz, Poland. Carolyn and I are staying in an apartment owned by the partner of Marcin Kafar, a Polish anthropologist who did postdoctoral work with us in Tampa the previous year. We are attending a conference on biographical research in the social sciences. Autobiographical and autoethnographic presentations are on the program as well.

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When it happens for the first time, I am leaning over the bathtub with a portable shower hose rinsing the soap from my hair. At first, I think my ears must be stopped up. Perhaps the pressure from the shower hose is too great or maybe I have some hard wax in my ears. I shake my head like a dog after a bath, but I still hear the low buzzing sounds. I bend my head in one direction, then the other, gently tapping my wrists against each ear. The sounds persist.

Carolyn calls to me from the other room. “You better hurry! Marcin will be picking us up any minute.”

I finish dressing quickly, stopping briefly a few times to assess the level of the ringing in my ears. Occasionally, I’ve heard ringing before, but not for more than five to ten seconds. On the ride to the university, the ringing continues, but after we arrive and get out of the car, the sounds disappear. When we return later that night, in the quiet of the apartment, I hear the persistent high-pitched, whistling sounds again. The next morning, I hear them again, but when we venture out into the city, the ringing disappears.

After we have completed our academic obligations, Marcin takes us to the train stop, where we depart for Krakow. It is now time to play. In Krakow, then in Berlin, we are tourists—people-watching in outdoor cafes, eating potato pierogis and drinking beer, taking leisurely walks through the city, and visiting Holocaust memorials.

We spend an afternoon at the Wannsee Villa, site of the Wannsee Conference House in the suburbs of Berlin, where fifteen Nazi government officials, eight holding academic doctorates, minced no words in speaking about the methods of killing, liquidating, and exterminating Jews to be carried out in “the final solution.” In eighty-five minutes of mutilated history, they discussed and signed off on a gruesome plan devised to carry out the most diabolical and efficient means of mass killing in the history of humankind, after which they relaxed around the fire, toasting their work by sipping French cognac, flirting, and talking shop. Standing in the conference room, I imagine I am looking onto the actual scene that took place in this room. I see the venom dripping from their nostrils and feel the presence of evil surrounding me. For several minutes I am immobilized, frozen in space and time. I am a Jew, fixed in the moment, immersed in the lived history of antisemitism. Eventually, I pull myself together and join Carolyn as we continue our tour through memorials to murdered Jews in Europe and the German resistance. I scarcely think about the incidences of ringing in my ears that had disturbed and mystified me in Poland.

By the time we get to the airport in Frankfurt to make our final connection to Tampa, I am exhausted. Waiting for the signal to board the plane, I feel I might be coming down with a cold. My throat feels rough, I have a mild headache, and all I can think about is how much I yearn for a nice long nap. I won’t allow myself to think about the ten hours of flight time awaiting us. Why is the trip home always so much worse?

When I close my eyes, I overhear Carolyn engaged in a technical conversation with another passenger about the importance of virus protection on cell phones. Her cohort appears to be an expert on how hackers gain entrance into cell phones through apps—at the moment not a conversation I want to join.

Finally, we get the signal to board. Oh, am I ever ready to get out of here. Within minutes after takeoff, I fall asleep. I don’t know how long I slept. Perhaps a couple of
hours. I recall being awakened by my own sneeze. The first sneeze was innocent enough. But then came another, and my eyes began to water. Then another sneeze and another. Within a minute or two, I am transformed into the passenger from hell. You know, the person you would never want to be sitting near on a cross-Atlantic flight. Now my watery eyes are dripping, and I’m submerged in a fit of sneezing.

“Take some deep breaths. Try to stop sneezing,” Carolyn pleads. But there’s no space between sneezes for me to respond. When I do catch my breath, I glance up and see the unforgiving eyes of the passengers across the aisle. They look at me with contempt. I don’t blame them. I’ve been in their shoes. I want to stop, but I can’t. I leave my seat, keeping my head down, and dash for the bathroom to retrieve toilet paper into which I can sneeze, since I’ve run out of Kleenex. I dab my eyes and nose, but I can’t get them dry between sneezes.

Eventually my sneezing fit ends. When it does, my ears begin to fill with air. The pressure is so intense, I think my ears might burst. Once the sneezing stops, it does not start again, and I no longer feel as if I am catching a cold. I doze off again, and when I awake the plane is starting its descent into Tampa. Suddenly, I feel my ears pop, and the ringing I had experienced in Poland comes roaring back. This time it sounds much louder, almost deafening. I can’t differentiate between the sounds in my head and the noise from the plane landing on the tarmac. In Poland, I had casually mentioned the ringing in my ears to Carolyn, but I hadn’t called excessive attention to it. As we began to depart the plane, I say, “The ringing in my ears is really intense and loud. It’s scaring me.”

“I can tell you’re upset. Do you think the sneezing exacerbated the ringing?” Carolyn asks.

“I don’t know, but I’ve got to do something about it,” I reply.

“When we get home, you should call Dr. Pila,” she advises.

I don’t wait until we get home. I call him from the baggage claim.

“There’s good news and some not such good news,” Dr. Pila says the next day, after I report my symptoms, he examines my throat and ears, and tests my balance. “You have tinnitus. The good news is tinnitus won’t kill you. It is not a fatal condition. But it is not treatable, either. There is no cure.” Dr. Pila moves closer to me and places a hand on my shoulder, his soft brown eyes meet mine. “You just have to learn to live with it, Art. Some people find tinnitus extremely irritating; others are able to minimize its effect on their lives.”

“So that’s the story,” I tell Carolyn when I get home. “No pills, no shots, no surgery, no magic bullet. I just live with it. I have a new companion inside my head. Damn, I thought it was already too crowded in there for something like this,” I joke. “Let’s get out of Tampa and head for our mountain hideaway as soon as possible. The flowers and the birds will make me feel a lot better.”

“And some long hikes in the mountains,” Carolyn adds.

A week later, we’re back in our mountain cabin. But I don’t hear the birds singing. What I hear is the sound of crickets in my ears. In my spacious and sacred study, I am determined to finish my book this summer, but I’ve just made a new discovery. It never dawned on me before how much I rely on the quiet in my workspace to focus and concentrate. But I am never alone now. I always have noise in my ears.
Many competing thoughts run through my mind. My inability to control either the thoughts or the tinnitus scares me. Is it always going to be like this?

I start listening to music through earphones to drown out other sounds. It works. I can’t hear the tinnitus chirpings. But I can’t write either. At night I play white noise on my iPad to fall asleep. That works too, but I can see that Carolyn does not appreciate the intrusion on her sleep. She’s a good sport, but I can take little comfort in my own sound sleep when Carolyn is becoming sleep deprived. Besides, I don’t want to be the subject of her next autoethnographic sleep paper. I know this is not working when a gift from Carolyn arrives by Amazon delivery—a pair of plug-in earphones for sleeping with music. I get the message, but find the earphones just another nuisance. I’ve always been a sound sleeper and don’t fancy changing how I sleep at the age of sixty-five.

“’You’ll just have to learn to live with it.” Dr. Pila’s words are my constant companion. They inspire me to go online to a self-help Tinnitus blog. I click on the first message that comes up, which is foreshadowed by the preview: “Tonight’s the Night.” I read: “I can no longer cope with these maddening, deafening sounds. I appreciate all the advice and empathy you all have shared. I’ll miss you. But tonight I’ll end my life. Goodbye, Bob.” The message is accompanied by a photo of a young man’s face, his hands covering his ears, his mouth wide open in a full-force scream. The photo resembles Edvard Munch’s iconic painting *The Scream*, in which a genderless creature with a distorted face expresses the horror of experiencing waves of unbearable anxiety and panic. I decide this blog is unlikely to provide the therapeutic support I need.

Two hearing tests yield nearly identical results. My hearing is normal except for the highest frequencies. Those are gone. “You need to get a grip,” one of the clinical assistants tells me. “I have tinnitus. Got it in the military. Too much exposure to the sounds of gunfire and helicopter rotors. I took up biking after I was diagnosed. Get a motorcycle and get out on the road.”

Instead, I go to an ear, nose, and throat (ENT) physician in Asheville. The doctor tests my balance and examines my inner ear. No diseases. No explanation. At this point, I don’t need an explanation. The source of my tinnitus is no secret. I used to listen to music through ear phones. I spent many hours of my youth in altered states of consciousness with the music cranked up to high volumes. I read online that aside from the military, musicians run the greatest risk of tinnitus: Phil Collins, Eric Clapton, Barbara Streisand, Pete Townsend, Neil Young. I’m in good company.

Meanwhile, my writing life is disintegrating. I’m not producing anything. I contact a couple of audiologists, but our conversations revolve around the science of hearing loss and the need for research on tinnitus. I learn that the sounds aren’t really in my ears. My brain produces them when it doesn’t receive the higher frequency sounds. Small comfort to know that “it’s all in my head.”

Over dinner each night, I share my frustration and anxiety with Carolyn. After several weeks, I believe the whole episode is becoming a thorn in her side, too. She doesn’t exactly say that, but I can feel it. She wants to help, but what can she do? There is no cure. She can’t fashion a miracle. *I was the passenger from hell. Am I now the partner from hell?* I have to live with it, but does Carolyn? There is no adventure here. No thrill. No
intellectual challenge. Only pain, anger, and loneliness. The emotional climate feels heavy. In my more enlightened moments, I realize that I’ve become attached to a desired outcome that is impossible. Things are never going back to the way they were before I started hearing these noises in my head.

I interview two Asheville therapists by phone. I want to take the plunge, but neither of them impresses me. I don’t feel the immediate connection for which I’m looking. They refer to themselves as cognitive therapists, and I have a deep distrust of cognitive psychology. I am not convinced I can reframe my way out of this. Each appears highly intellectual, but is that what I need? They seem too similar to me, too heady. I haven’t been able to think or theorize tinnitus away. I want something different. But what? I have to do something.

In my online search for something else, something different, I come across a reference to a woman trained as a Buddhist priest in California; she has a master’s in psychology and operates a private counseling practice in Asheville that centers on personal and spiritual awareness and mindfulness. Since this sounds sufficiently outside the box, I phone her.

Awaiting her call back, I remember some years back reading several books by Pema Chödrön, a Buddhist nun and meditation master. I used to routinely carry one of them, *Start Where You Are: A Guide to Compassionate Living*, with me when I traveled. I also assigned it in several undergraduate classes. Chödrön believes that nearly everything important that happens to us in our lives either wakes us up or puts us to sleep. Now that I dwell on it, the book I am writing, *Coming to Narrative*, is largely the story of events in my life that awakened me. Tinnitus certainly has my attention too. Obsessed with the noise in my head, I’ve been focusing on tinnitus as a thinker and have turned it into what Chödrön would call an “Extremely Big Deal” in my ego-bound cocoon. Maybe I need to go deep beneath the storyline I’ve created in order to let go of it. I’ve been blaming myself for some of the indiscretions of my youth; I am angry that this has happened to me at a time when I need to fully concentrate on my writing; I am ashamed that I haven’t exercised greater discipline and afraid that I might never again be my joyful writing self.

My phone rings. The soft, compassionate, empathic voice on the other end identifies herself as Nancy. I feel an immediate connection through the warmth her voice communicates.

At our first session, Nancy listens patiently, leaning into my story. When I finish narrating the story of what brought me to her practice, she asks me what else is going on in my life.

“Is there anything that might be a part of your story that you haven’t told me? Something that occupies your attention other than your book and tinnitus?”

“Yes,” I reply. “I have an important friendship that weighs heavily on me.”

“Tell me about it,” Nancy urges.

“Almost every day, I correspond with my friend, Buddy Goodall. We’ve known each other for many years professionally and personally. Bud was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer about a year ago. He’s been writing a blog about his experiences as a cancer patient and about how he is anticipating and approaching the end of his life. Our e-mail exchanges are intimate, vulnerable and open-ended.”
“So you are dealing with tinnitus and with Buddy’s illness. Both make you feel vulnerable,” Nancy observes.

“Yes, they do. Each is a major preoccupation of mine nearly every day.”

“In terms of your preoccupation with tinnitus, would you say that you work with it or you struggle against it?”

Her question startles me. I don’t conceive of tinnitus as good in any way. It’s not a partner; nor is it a co-collaborator. It’s more like an opponent, a demon I want to exorcise.

“Of course, I am struggling against it,” I say. “What else can I do?”

“You could let it be.”

Her reply is blunt but compassionate, stunning in its simplicity and sensibility. We both let her comment stay in the air for a few minutes, sitting in silence. I think about how mistaken my approach to tinnitus has been. *Tinnitus is not an opponent I can defeat. It is a condition I must live with. How did I miss that?*

During the last half hour of our session, Nancy leads me through some breathing exercises and gives me a homework assignment. On the long drive home, I reflect on several points she raised: the more I think about tinnitus, about the sounds, the more space it occupies in my life. It is all about attention. Then, another one of her comments pops back into my mind. “Despite all the talk about multi-tasking,” she had said, “nobody actually does two or more things at precisely the same time. When you’re attending to one thing, you’re not attending to something else.” The implication was obvious. Quit thinking about tinnitus. Make it background, not foreground. The exercises she gave me on body focus were mindfulness practices that put this concept into practice.

I had five sessions with Nancy. By the end of the third session, I found myself needing to listen closely in a silent room to hear the sounds in my head. They never disappeared entirely, but the hold they had over my everyday life greatly diminished. This was not only a result of mindfulness practices. Nancy made two other related interventions. “The problem you’re experiencing is not the illness or disease called tinnitus,” she observed. “The problem is what you think tinnitus means.”

Again, I was startled by her insight. Here I was, a communication professor who had spent much of his life teaching students about symbols and insisting that they focus on meanings, but now I had to learn this lesson for myself. I had been reacting to tinnitus as if it had some deeper significance, as if it were spoiling my life.

In our third session, I shed a lot of tears about the decline in Buddy’s health and my compassion for his suffering. The end of Buddy’s life was drawing nearer, and I was feeling a deep sense of loss and grief. I had gained so much wisdom from my exchanges with Buddy and from paying attention to how he approached the end of his life. “Good conversation is the kiss of life,” I say to Nancy. “That’s what I tell my students. I will miss Buddy’s kisses.”

“You’ve talked a lot about death in our sessions,” Nancy replies. “You’ve also expressed your resistance to the unpleasantness and uncertainty that tinnitus has brought into your life. Do you see a connection?”

“Well, Buddy’s illness has been a wake-up call. Suddenly I was stripped of the armor that protected me from the reality of my own mortality. This life of mine will not go on forever. Tinnitus was a bleak reminder that my body is in decline too.”

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“Yes, Art, but there is a difference between Buddy and you. He is dying, you are aging. Your compassion and gentle loving kindness has been a compassionate gift to Buddy. You have been there for him. In return, Buddy’s friendship and honesty appears to have softened you and opened your heart. Now you need to apply that same gentleness and kindness to yourself. You don’t need to fight against tinnitus. Giving up your hope that you can make tinnitus go away so you can return to your life before tinnitus came along is the sanest thing you can do. It may be hard to swallow, but it is your first step in healing. You’ve already shown that mindfulness practices can drive tinnitus to the background.”

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Nancy and I met two more times, and I checked in with her about a year later. Her wise counsel made me aware of what thinking can and cannot achieve. I am seven years older now and still an anguished searcher. “Old age is not for sissies,” my mom said repeatedly during the last few years of her life. She was right. Old age brings troubles and tribulations, but also brings greater opportunities for kindness, love, a measure of happiness, and a sense of what a good, even if incomplete, life can mean.

Living an autoethnographic life is not a panacea; it cannot cure physical illnesses or conquer mortality. It is simply the best way I know to meditate on and scrutinize what it means to be alive, as Shields expresses it, “a bare body housed in a mortal cage” dizzied and liberated by a vigorous confrontation with existence.34

NOTES
7. MacIntyre, After Virtue, 219.
8. MacIntyre, 218.
17. Small, 272.
33. Chodron, 68.
34. Shields, 97.