

# *Currere* and *The Hours*

## Rebirth of the Female Self

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**T**HE MOVIE, *The Hours* (Fox, Rudin, & Daldry, 2002), tells the story of three different women's lives in three different places in three different times. Virginia Woolf lives in Richmond, England in 1923. Laura Brown lives in Los Angeles, California in 1951. Clarissa Vaughn lives in New York City in 2001. In this paper, I weave and intertwine the stories of these women with another story—my own *currere*. Thus, I introduce the life and voice and reality of a fourth woman, living in a different place (Tulsa, Oklahoma) and a different time (2008). By juxtaposing my life, my voice, and my reality with those of the women of *The Hours*, I am able to view my female self through a new cinematic-autobiographical lens. In doing so, I gain new insights into how my back-in-the-day longings, now-a-day musings, and some-day yearnings collide with societal expectations and constructions of women, women's "work," and motherhood. Yet, even in the face of the inevitability of these collisions, this exercise in cinema and *currere* provides me with a crack, an opening, a place/space within my self to define my own uncertain-future-woman-journey.

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I first watched *The Hours* on an ordinary Saturday night. I was alone. My husband was out of town on business. I thought that I might watch and multitask, that I might finally make time to fold the overwhelmingly enormous pile of wrinkled laundry that was strewn across my living room loveseat. I began the movie. I folded no laundry. Instead, I curled up on my other couch with notepad and pen in hand, much like Virginia Woolf had done as she composed her novel in the film. In my notebook, one that I had hastily grabbed from the dining table before sitting down to watch, I jotted notes, thoughts, and lines from the movie.

As I looked back upon my scribbled notes/thoughts/lines in preparation for writing this paper, I became conscious of a metaphorical irony that had previously eluded me. The notebook that contained my musings was one that my husband had gotten from work. Because his company and its products support the construction trade, a black and white photograph of the ultimate "manly man" construction worker was on the notebook's cover, and pages and pages of graph paper with perfect little half centimeter by half centimeter boxes were within. The "manly man"

on the cover was wearing a hard hat and mirrored safety glasses and reflected in the lenses of these glasses was a construction site. By using this metaphor of construction to examine how my own life intertwines with the lives of the women of *The Hours*, I am able to build upon my understanding of my own everyday existence and create the possibility for the rebirth of my female self.

## Construction

The main use of any culture is to provide symbols and ideas out of which to construct a sense of what is real.

—Allan G. Johnson, 2005, p. 39

In *The Hours*, Virginia Woolf is a writer and a wife who suffers from bipolar disorder. Her doctor, her husband, and the societal norms of the time dictate that she should be cloistered in the country, away from the hustle and bustle and stress of London in order to protect her sanity and save her from herself. Laura Brown is a mid-century, dress-wearing housewife and mother trapped in a two-car household in suburbia. Her breadwinning, war veteran husband goes to work everyday while she stays at home with her young son, making breakfast and baking cakes. Clarissa Vaughn is a present-day publisher and single mother who has lived for ten years with another woman. Every day she visits and cares for her poet friend, Richard, who is dying from AIDS. While we are only allowed to glimpse but a single day in the lives of these women, we are able to see, quite clearly, the socially, culturally, and historically constructed reality of their whole lives as women. And within this single day, we can also see Virginia, Laura, and Clarissa battling against and breaking down these socially, culturally, and historically constructed realities in order to personally create their own realities. “A woman’s whole life in a single day. Just one day. And in that day, her whole life” (Virginia Woolf in Fox et al., 2002).

All three women experience the constructed reality of the social, cultural, and historical context in which they live. And, yet, the rigidity of these constructions is time- and milieu-dependent. Clarissa, residing in present day New York, is freer to have a career, explore sexuality, and experience unconventional motherhood, than if she had lived in earlier times or even if she had lived in a more conservative rural or suburban environment. In contrast, Virginia and Laura’s “acceptable” realities are decidedly more narrow since their “societies limit the alternatives that people perceive as available to choose from” (Johnson, 2005, p. 164). It is easy to imagine how Virginia’s and Laura’s realities might have been constructed quite differently if they, too, had lived in another time or another place—for there are times, as the movie demonstrated, when you are just early or there are times when you are just late or “there are times when you [just] don’t belong...” (Laura Brown in Fox et al., 2005).

*I am able to find bits of myself in each of the characters of The Hours.<sup>1</sup> As a graduate student, I identify with Virginia the writer and the intellect. I often spend my days stringing words together to create sentences and paragraphs and ultimately essays to turn into my professors and to submit to scholarly publications. And, like Virginia, I often feel as if I am cloistered in a city where I do not belong. I moved to Tulsa from the West—following not the path of my own choosing, of my own free will, but the path of my husband’s career. In this sense, I can also relate to the character of Laura Brown, who was dependent upon her bread-winning husband. My husband’s career, although forcing me to leave the comforts of familiarity and home, has provided me with the financial stability that allows me to pursue my academic interests as a full-*

*time student. Yet, without a full-time “job,” I find myself fighting against the “good wife” construction that says that it is my duty to cook breakfast and bake cakes and do the laundry and have dinner on the table and clean sheets on the bed. However, I, like Clarissa Vaughn, live in a time where I am more free to buck conventionality and to create my own definitions of what it means to be a woman and a wife and a student living in the middle of the United States in 2008. Yet, even this temporal freedom is fleeting. The call from the social, cultural, and historical constructions of the “good wife” and the “good woman” is strong. These constructions call my name. “Be a good wife...don’t make waves...do the right thing...follow the acceptable path.” I feel boxed in—surrounded by expected realities.*

### Perfect Little Boxes

We put lines around ourselves to form boxes, such that we conform to social norms.

—Mary Aswell Doll, 1995, p. 93

The social, cultural, and historical constructions of reality ultimately produce perfect little boxes built out of patriarchy and expectation. The women of *The Hours* are all expected to dwell in these perfect little boxes and conform to social norms. Virginia lives in a home surrounded by gates and walls and is expected to abide by her doctor’s orders, ask her husband’s permission before going on a walk, and participate in the daily lunch planning. Laura lives in a perfect stucco home, on a perfect palm-lined street, and is expected to bake perfect cakes and wear perfect dresses. Clarissa lives in a hip, brick apartment home, in a hip New York neighborhood, and is expected to throw fabulous parties, selflessly act as the caregiver of her sick friend, and always, always put others before her self. Yet, these women are neither happy nor at home in their little boxes. They are constricted by gates/walls/stucco/brick, weighed down by the stones of social norms, inundated by the waters of expectation, and drowning in the flowing social stream of patriarchy (Brod, 2002). “It’s just too much” (Clarissa Vaughn in Fox et al., 2002).

*I live in a little brick home with little red shutters. But the walls of my own perfect little box extend beyond the now-a-day confines of my little brick house because the walls of patriarchal norms and expectations and perfection also existed in the dwellings of my past. In most of my educational experiences as a child, I was the proverbial “good girl.” I studied diligently. I did my work. I was successful. I was a good student. I followed the rules. I never got a B in all of the years that I was given grades...all through middle school and high school...only As. I wanted to do my best always...I couldn’t do anything half way. I continually pushed myself onward and upward. At all times, I strove to be successful; I strove toward perfection. I strove away from a female self that society and culture and history had told me was un-successful and im-perfect.*

*John Wooden’s adage that “success is peace of mind which is a direct result in the self-satisfaction of knowing you did your best to become the best that you are capable of becoming” became my personal mantra. I posted it around me—in my locker, at my desk, next to my bed. Throughout my years in middle school, high school, and even my undergraduate years in college, I strove to do the best to become the best that I was capable of becoming. And through it all, as I worked and I studied and I pushed myself upward, I convinced myself that I was on a journey of self-actualization, forever engaged in the “project of ‘always becoming’” (Miller, 2005, p. 47).*

*But the truth was that I didn’t want to fail. I feared failure. I didn’t like making mistakes. I used to get very upset when I made mistakes. It would almost make me sick...on the verge of*

*tears. I was scared to death that I would let somebody/anybody down but mainly myself. So I worked harder and studied more. I would spend hours in the library. Studying. Recopying notes. I pushed myself, propelled myself—forward, onward, upward, without hesitation—forever hunting excellence and success but perpetually haunted by the possibility of failure. Looking back, this relentless pursuit of expectation and perfection and the forever-present fear of failure was exhausting...overwhelming... too much.*

Each woman in *The Hours* breaks out of her perfect little box. Virginia breaks *loose* of her confinement and demands that she be able to choose London/life over Richmond/death. Laura breaks *away* from her husband and child and suburban existence and begins a new life in Toronto. Clarissa breaks *through* her thin veneer of confidence to admit that she is unraveling, ultimately, allowing herself to break *down* emotionally.

Breaking down the walls of these perfect little boxes, provides these women with some freedom, some independence, some sense of autonomy, some “ability to define [their] own humanity” (Virginia Woolf in Fox et al., 2002). Yet, for Laura Brown, the woman who was most able to gain freedom, independence, and autonomy and define her own humanity, breaking away from her perfect little box has consequences. Her actions are unforgivable in the eyes of her family and society. By putting her own interests before the interests of others and exercising her own power to choose, Laura Brown can no longer be the “good wife,” the “good mother,” or the “perfect angel” (Johnson, 2005). She becomes an abandoner, a “bad mother,” and a “mythic monster [who] disrupts norms” (Doll, 1995, p. 100) when, like the big, bad wolf of the fairy tales, she blows down her perfect little box.

*It is difficult to break loose of the perfection-hold that has contained me throughout my lifetime. It is difficult to dismantle the perfect box that I have built around me all of my life. Yet, I have begun—little by little—to let loose, to let go of the need for absolute perfection and upward movement that is, ultimately, driven by my fear of failure. I have begun—little by little—to chip away the protective/perfectionist outer facade I have used to shield myself from the possibility of self-defeat.*

*But even as I change and transform and become more patient with and accepting of my utterly imperfect self, I also recognize that “I can never be totally different from what I have been” (Wang, 2004, p. 47). Thus, old fears still emerge. Old uncertainties still surface—the doubt that I am not good enough, not smart enough, that I don’t know enough. And old thoughts to compensate for these fears and doubts reappear...all I have to do is work a little bit harder, work a little bit longer.*

*So even today, I still push forward. I still strive upward in my journey of educational experience. However, I have tried to redefine this journey for myself. I have tried to no longer view this journey as having a single perfect destination, a single perfect pinnacle of success, or a single perfect measurable outcome. I have tried to no longer fear mistakes or failure. As a result of this redefinition, my journey is now about movement, but not necessarily progress. My journey is now about growth, but not necessarily success. My journey is now about process, but not necessarily product. I dwell in my own definition—in a new wall-less home—in a box that is not a box (Aoki, 2005).*

### Mirrored Safety Glasses

I am made to feel that who I am is who I appear standing before you.

—Mary Aswell Doll, 1995, p. 124

The human self is highly relational in the sense that who we think we are and how we experience ourselves can't be separated from how other people mirror and treat us.

—Allan G. Johnson, 2005, p. 201

For each of the women of *The Hours*, de-constructing her perfect little box is a messy task. Just as in the movie when little Richie, Laura's son, smashes his erector-set house, these perfect little boxes crumble leaving a pile of rubble and disarray, the remaining "fragments of a home" (Hasebe-Ludt, 2003, p. 151). But the pile of rubble and disarray is not composed of the gates/walls/stucco/brick of a literal house, but, instead, of the jagged shards of the metaphorical self (Doll, 1995).

Paradoxically, sifting through the jagged shards of the self cannot occur behind the protection of mirrored safety glasses. "There are many ways to avoid facing the world in ourselves and ourselves in the world" (Johnson, 2005, p. 19), and as long as Virginia, Laura, and Clarissa wear "safety glasses" that shield their inner reality and mask their crumbling inner soul, they continue to present a smooth facade, a shiny surface appearance that merely reflects society's constructions, norms, and expectations. As long as the mirrored safety glasses remain, each of these three women lives a half-life having "to deny, mask, and distort the fullness of who she really is or could be" (Johnson, 2005, p. 188).

Re-construction of the self requires leaving behind the protection of the mirrored safety glasses to see beneath and beyond the smooth facade of the "good woman" and into the depths and recesses and caves of the private self—into the "window of the soul" (Doll, 1995, p. 69). Gazing into the window of the soul provides these women with a meeting place for the past and the present and the future (Pinar, 1992), for back-in-the-day longings, now-a-day musings, and some-day yearnings. Gazing into the window of the soul allows these women to embrace the messiness and jaggedness and imperfection of life, from the inside out (Doll, 1995). Gazing into the window of the soul allows these women "to look life in the face always. To look life in the face and to know it for what it is. To know it, and to love it for what it is and then to put it away" (Virginia Woolf in Fox et al., 2002).

*Redefining my own upward journey in terms of movement, growth, and process is a challenging endeavor when the impetus for the course of my life has always been success, excellence, perfection, avoidance of failure, and keeping up appearances. Leaving the comforts of my home built of perfectionism and fear of failure and embarking on a new journey towards an unfamiliar and unknown home in an unfamiliar and unknown state can be disorientating. Without a true North, a compass, or an upward direction to guide my path, I often feel simultaneously lost and stuck. A stranger in my own home. A wanderer with no road to wander.*

*I remove my mirrored safety glasses and look—deeply—into the window of my soul. For looking into the window of the soul allows me to embark on autobiographical exploration, to create an "autobiography in-the-making" (Miller, 2005, p. 231) that can be a means to "pry open identity categories" (p. 55) and "investigate [my] multiple, intersecting, unpredictable, and unassimilatable identities" (p. 220). In this sense, looking into the window of the soul can be a sort of identity-archeology—an exploratory method to excavate my experiences, perspectives, and assumptions and to begin to expose and make meaning of the many interacting and unpredictable layers of identity and self. Thus looking into the window of the soul allows me to move beyond the rigid and inauthentic identity categories that society has reflected upon me and to welcome new, more fluid representations of my self. And when I look deeply into my inner soul, I am finally given the crack, the opening, the opportunity to draw my own "every-changing*

portraits” of my self—for my self (Miller, 2005, p. 152).

And so I look. My first instinct is to interpret my self, my journey, and my present position in life by the standards that defined my past, to view my current life through a lens that that would falsely interpret my graduate student life as one of static waiting. But, if I am honest with myself and with my place in my current journey, I realize that I am not stuck, that, indeed, I am moving and I am traveling—in a new way, in my own way. The truth is that I am learning and that I am growing, everyday. I am just moving and traveling and learning and growing in a path that cannot be measured by how well I fit the “good girl” definitions that bubble up from my past. And as I examine these “good girl” definitions, my perfectionist history, and the upward-driven course that was my previous home in a new light, I realize that it is not that I am stuck or stifled in the present but that I was in the past.

My previous home, my previous perfect little box, could not contain the present me. Thus, I left my familiar world and I set out to sea/see. I swim in strange waters and encounter the unknown. I swim alone on a solitary journey, in schools but on my own. I am completely immersed in my academic journey right now. I enjoy the challenge, the new learnings, the constant state of discovery and intellect that I currently reside in. I am challenged by new ideas and I welcome these challenges. I welcome these disruptions and complications and new (and forever) incomplete understandings. I welcome the notion of thinking outside the confines of conventional understanding and definition. Truly, I am coming to a place of at-one-ment (Jung as cited in Mayes, 2005) with myself and with the on-going, ever-incomplete, dynamic work-in-process-not-progress that is my present course.

Yet as much as I am nearing a place of at-one-ment, a place of self-acceptance, and a place of comfort and familiarity with my new journey, a mother journey beckons from the murky depths of my current landscape. The distant call of this (m)other journey presents me with feelings of tension, ambivalence, and uncertainty. Where does this tension/ambivalence/uncertainty come from? Is the “good girl/good woman” in me struggling against the “bad girl/bad woman”? And how do I reconcile these feelings and answer the challenging questions that emerge from this dynamic conflict? How can I continue to explore and journey and, simultaneously, embark on the journey of motherhood? Do my own educational experiences have to stop? Does my own academic journey have to end once I start having children?

Kristeva (1977) writes that “if maternity is to be guilt-free, this journey needs to be undertaken without masochism and without annihilating one’s affective, intellectual, and professional personality, either” (p. 364). Yet, I struggle to envision a guilt-free mother journey for myself that would not, in some way, involve the ultimate self-sacrifice—the expending of my academic flesh and the pushing aside and the passing away of my own educational course. I am left with a Laura-Brown-Dilemma. Do I choose a (m)other life? Or my life? Or can I choose both?

I realize that no single perfect choice exists. My some-day life as an academic and mother will not fit in a perfect little box. My some-day life will never fit the social, historical, and cultural definitions of what it means to be a “good woman” and a “good wife” and a “good mother” in a patriarchal society. For if I am to remove my mirrored safety glasses and live honestly and authentically, I realize that I must dwell in the hybrid in-between, “where lives truly live in all their messiness and imperfections” (Hasebe-Ludt, 2003, p. 155). I realize that I must attend to the emotional moment in all of its wildness, chaos, and unpredictability (Johnson, 1995). Living honestly and authentically means listening to, attending to, and living from the inside out instead of clinging to inauthentic outer expectations and appearances. It means that I

*have to accept that my some-day life will undoubtedly be messy, jagged, and perfectly imperfect.*

## Everyday Existence

The incredible challenge of doing nothing-in-particular—the challenge of life.

—Mary Aswell Doll, 1995, p. 34

Accepting and embracing the messiness and jaggedness and imperfection of life, from the inside out, requires knowing life and loving life for what it truly is—not the perfect, grand events of fairytale stories, but the hour by hour, moment by moment experience of non-events and ordinary jobs done within an ordinary everyday. We see this celebration of the ordinariness of everyday jobs and non-events throughout *The Hours*—in eating breakfast, making a cake, planning for a party, taking a walk, running errands, buying flowers, kissing, and hugging. We see this celebration of the ordinariness of everyday jobs and non-events in the small quak-ings of motions that mark the women’s existences (Pinar, 1992), in the active –ing of their liv-ing (Doll, 1995).

Yet, looking life in the face and knowing it for what it truly is can be an overwhelming task. Looking and knowing require acknowledging “the power and the danger of naming [the] every day” (Hasebe-Ludt, 2003, p. 153)—a power and danger that finds Virginia, Laura, and Clarissa confronting the trivial, the routine, the schedules, and the day to day pulsings of their being. Facing and know-ing and acknowledg-ing and confront-ing bring uncomfortable awareness. The “–ing” loses its power. The small quak-ing of motions that mark their existence become a “twentieth-century version of hell” (Pinar, 1992, p. 256). The three women fear that they are passively float-ing the stream of life. Sink-ing. Drown-ing. Disappear-ing.

“Someone has to die so that the rest of us will value life more....It’s contrast” (Virginia Woolf in Fox et al., 2002). And so someone does die. Richard, the poet, the visionary, the man dying of AIDS, the all grown up little Richie, throws himself out the window, plunging to his death. It is a dark and depressing and dramatic event with no happily ever after. But, it provides necessary contrast for death and life are invariably interconnected. Life gives way to death; death spawns new life. Life and death coexist in a circular and recursive journey.

With Richard’s death, the linear life of conventionality, manifested in absolutely straight lines, the shortest distances between two points, and predetermined paths and destinations, can be left behind in favor of a circular life.

The circle’s rounded shape is soft, recursive; it curves back upon itself. It is in constant motion; therefore, it is dynamic, using its own energy to spiral movement inward toward reflection. The circle also spirals outward toward what the new science of chaos calls fractal patterns, which loop and loop again, forming harmonic swirls. (Doll, 1995, p. 92)

Thus, a circular life, with its soft, recursive shape, inward and outward spiraling, and constant motion, presents the women of *The Hours* with possibility: the possibility to embark on an open and dynamic journey that, although recursive, never returns to the original starting point; the possibility of a place/space for defying conventionality and norm and conformity; the possibility of finding the necessary courage to deviate from the patriarchal path of least resistance (Johnson, 2005); and the possibility of a traveling along a new path without fear of failure.

By Richard embracing the circularity of life/death, Laura Brown can finally come to terms

with her long-ago decision to leave her son and live her life. And with Richard's death, Clarissa Vaughn is able to find a place/space within herself where she can embrace her own life, the small quak-ings of motion that mark her existence, and the -ing of her liv-ing. She is finally able "to look life in the face and to know it for what it is. To know it, and to love it for what it is" (Virginia Woolf in Fox et al., 2002). She is finally able to face life and know life and love life despite (or because of) its ordinariness, and she is finally able to "move in and out of [daily/ordinary/everyday] occurrences without getting stuck" (Doll, 1995, p. 35).

*I imagine my life in the distant some-day future. I can picture my educational journey in vivid detail. I can visualize my office at a small liberal arts university. I can see myself doing research in urban elementary schools. I can envision myself talking with my students. In my mind, I know that my desk chair is comfy, that my office windows are paned, and that when these window are cracked open just a bit, I can smell the salt breeze. Yet when I try to imagine my mother journey, my mind goes blank. Yes, there are children in these future daydreams, but these children are merely abstract entities, faceless and nameless entities. I become stuck.*

*So what does this mean and what does my some-day future hold? There are no easy answers to these questions. However, Wang (2004) contends that if the maternal is understood metaphorically then the "potential of maternity can be embodied in many creative activities in which we are engaged... [and that] we give birth not only to babies" (p. 99). Aha moment. Wang's statement expands my notion of the mother journey. It gives me hope and provides me with needed clarity. I become un-stuck.*

*I realize that I have already embarked on my own mother journey. It is within all that I do, all that I create. It is already part of me. It is already a part of my own educational course. Thus, I am embarking on my own mother journey—everyday. Indeed, my own mother journey is directly embodied within the -ing of my own existence. My own creative mother journey exists in my write-ing, my learn-ing, my ordinary, day-to-day live-ing. And while I may not know all of the exact answers to the uncertain-some-day-mother questions in this certain present, I am finally able to realize that I cannot merely study a little bit more, work a little bit harder, or propel myself forward, onward and upward, without hesitation, in order to obtain the perfectly correct answer. I am finally able to realize that I cannot live an inauthentic life that is merely defined and measured by social, cultural, and historical constructions or expectations. I am finally able to understand that the true answer to any some-day question will only emerge during the creative, imperfect, meander-ing, move-ing, grow-ing, process-ing journey that I have already begun.*

## Rebirth

*I search out an opening into myself.*

*A "good girl" emerges.*

*Swimming upward. Striving forward.*

*Propelling without hesitation to escape failure.*

*Rising toward excellence and expectation and perfection.*

*STUCK...*

*I remove my safety glasses and look deeply into my soul.*

*I chip away at my perfect little box.*

*I shed my protective skin.*

*I emerge anew.*



*A new journey, a redefined journey, a migration away from home.  
 An academic journey in and out of schools.  
 Marked by movement, growth, process.  
 UNSTUCK...  
 A-mother journey calls.  
 ACADEMIC/mother. MOTHER/academic.  
 LIFE/death. DEATH/life.  
 The tension between spawns possibilities, hope, clarity.  
 I embrace the creative –ing of my existence.  
 I choose the messy life, the jagged life, the imperfect life, the circular life.  
 I emerge, again, anew.  
 Renewed.  
 Rebirth.*

## NOTE

1. While some of the italicized text are my autobiographical reflections directly related to *The Hours*, the majority of the italicized writings emerged out of the *currere* process. *Currere*, formulated by William Pinar and Madeleine Grumet (1976), is a form of autobiographical inquiry that is composed of four, systematic stages: regressive, progressive, analytic, and syncretical. I followed these stages during a semester-long writing project.

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