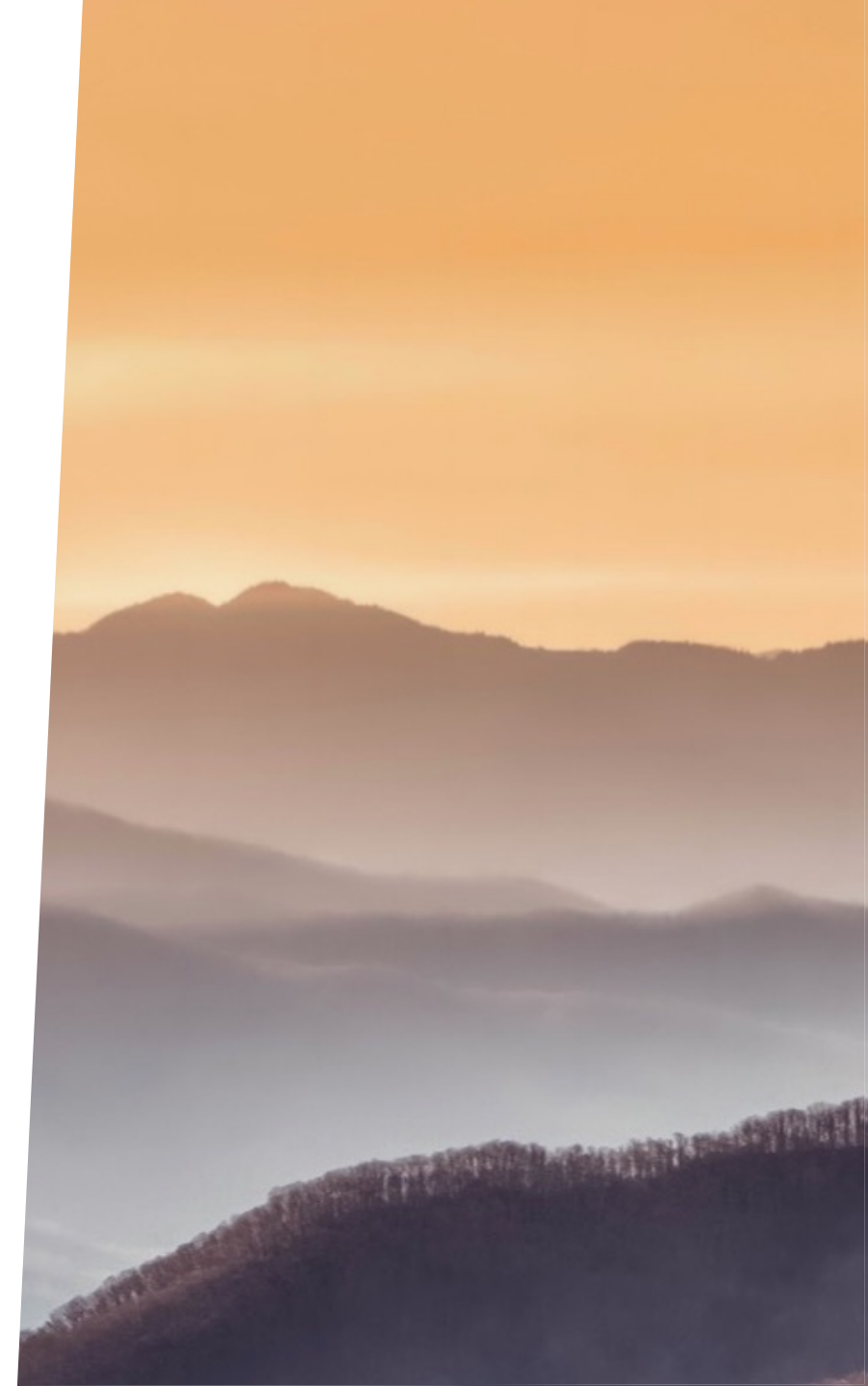


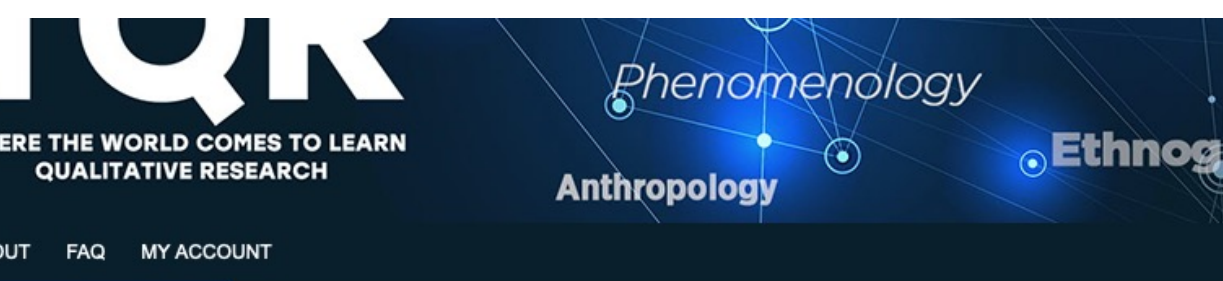
THE POWER OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH THAT I NEVER KNEW: LESSONS LEARNT FROM AN EVOCATIVE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

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MY FIRST EVER AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

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“Khi mô về?” (When will you go home?) Evocative Autoethnography on Death, Impermanence, and Time-Space Extension

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Abstract
This article is motivated by my personal wish to pay tribute to my beloved grandfather, who passed away during the COVID-19 pandemic while I was stranded in Australia. Relying on an evocative autoethnography of a grandson, a father, a PhD candidate and graduate, and a researcher, and in reference to the concepts of place-making theories such as time-space expansion, I tried to embrace my experience of grief and loss as well as to make sense of my feelings of distance, impermanence, and death during this chaotic period. The story I will tell below chronicles my emotional and spiritual journey from the moment I first learned of my grandfather’s illness (early 2020) until the time after his passing (October 2021). I have found out that during this process of attempting to converse with, heal, and take care of myself, I have transcended the physical-social aspects of place and touched on spiritual space.

Keywords
death, impermanence, time-space expansion, COVID-19, place-making, evocative autoethnography

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The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on many people, especially international students. I have been affected by the "new normal" of mobility restrictions, border closures, lock-downs, and social distancing, as well as psychological injuries such as stress, depression, loneliness, and fear. This trauma has been exacerbated by the loss of my grandfather in October 2021, which has motivated me to talk with myself, grasp what I have been through, heal and seek inner peace. Writing has been a helpful 'technology of self' for me in my efforts to cultivate this awareness of impermanence, allowing me to attend to and release all the emotions and thoughts that have been bottled up in my head and are difficult to talk about or vocally convey with others.

The powerful autoethnography paper “*Khi mô về?*” is a direct result of this struggling writing process. It was a challenging journey, but one that was worth every obstacle and hardship.



MY STORY IN A CHAOTIC TIME

Our first baby
 My grandfather
 The start of COVID-19

The dawn of the sense of impermanence, death, time-space extension

“I would usually wake up in the middle of the night and must pen down every emerging feeling and thought that rushed through my head like an irresistible flood after a dam cracked. Dread, heartbreak, and hopelessness. His smile, my guilt, and my homesickness. They were too jumbled. I had to keep going until I was mentally and physically worn out.”

Writing journey through the dark and unknown

The publication of “Khi mô về? (When will you go **home**?)” on The Qualitative Report

March 2020

October 2021

Late 2021- March 2022

Oct 2022

a year from his passing (destiny?)

The passing of my grandfather
 My year-long depression
 My intensive writing process

The publication of my article was not just a simple act of sharing words on a page, but a tribute to my grandfather's memory. *In this act of tribute, I found solace for my grief and sorrow.*



Three key lessons for qualitative research

I want to share with you three valuable lessons that I learned while writing this autoethnography.

Lesson #1: Awakening your awareness. Writing allows you to slow down and awaken your senses.

Lesson #2: Sharing is receiving. Are you courageous enough to speak up about your hidden feelings?

And finally, Lesson #3: Writing is a means of healing and transforming your vulnerable self.

Lesson #1: Awakening your awareness.

The true beauty of writing this autoethnography lies in its ability to awaken our senses and allow us to truly become aware of ourselves. By pouring our hearts out onto the page, we delve deeper into our own minds, uncovering new perspectives and insights that may have otherwise remained hidden.

LESSON #1: AWAKENING YOUR AWARENESS

TO WRITE IS TO SLOW DOWN AND AWAKEN YOUR SENSE

Bourdieu (1977): the concept of 'habitus'

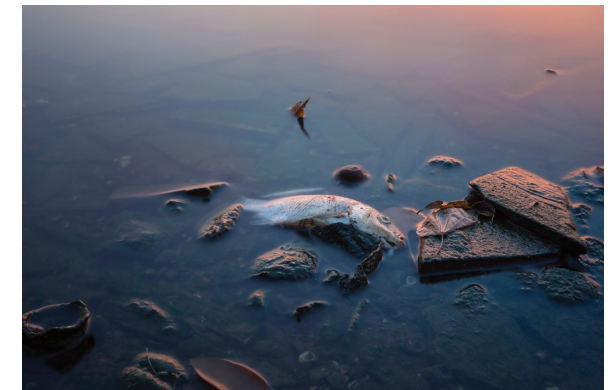
- It's like we're fish swimming in water, surrounded by it so much that we hardly notice its weight. But what happens when the water changes? When it boils, becomes contaminated, or alters its flow?

The crucial change of my 'water' was the new normal caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the passing of my grandfather.

- It was a jarring reminder of how much our lives can be uprooted in an instant
- Writing became my lifeline. Through evocative autoethnography, I poured out my feelings and emotions onto the page.



Suddenly, the fish is jolted into awareness, questioning everything it thought it knew.



LESSON #1: AWAKENING YOUR AWARENESS (2)

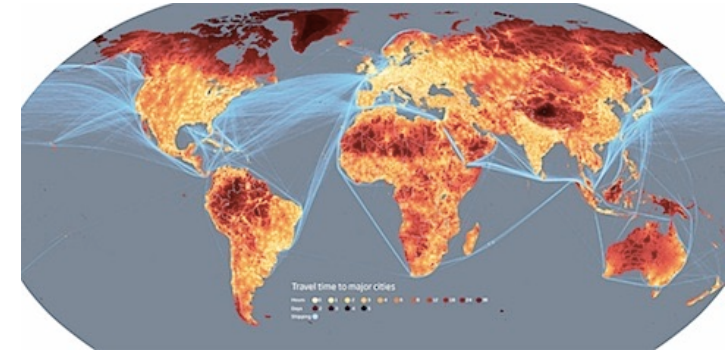
TO BE AWAKENED IS TO UNDERSTAND THE TRUTH

Time-space compression (Harvey, 1989) cannot be taken for granted

- “Prior to the COVID-19 epidemic and border closures, it took only eight hours to travel from Australia to Vietnam and an additional four hours to reach my hometown. We needed only one night of sleep before we could visit our family. However, the COVID-19 pandemic and its subsequent new normal order had altered everything. As a result of border closures as well as new laws requiring coronavirus testing, quarantine limitations, and vaccination requirements, the time-space interaction had been expanded. I had never felt as if my home was so far away.” (Nguyen-Trung, 2022)

All lives are impermanent. My grandfather’s was; so is mine

- in “three hundred years from now [all lives will be] dust” (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2011, pp. 83-85).
- “We all assumed that our family or loved ones were always “there”; even if we were thousands of miles apart, we could see them after a few airline rides or hours of travel. We all believed that our love for our family and friends was felt and understood by them because we could tell them how much we loved them with a simple phone call. The pandemic has shattered these long-held beliefs. It has made us realise how much we tend to forget that the safety and health of our family is one of, if not the most, crucial aspects of our existence.” (Nguyen-Trung, 2022)



Lesson #2: Sharing is receiving

There is immense power in sharing our stories with others. When we bravely open up about our deepest feelings and vulnerabilities, we create a space for empathy and understanding to flourish.

LESSON #2: SHARING IS RECEIVING

DO YOU HAVE THE COURAGE TO SHARE YOUR DEEPEST EMOTIONS?

I used to be a traditional qualitative researcher, writing stories about people's lives

Writing our heart out is not easy, it exposes our vulnerability

- “And some of the feelings I’ve had and still have about my cancer I wouldn’t want to share. I’d feel so vulnerable.” (Ellis, 1999, *Heartful Autoethnography*: p.675)

Sharing your weakness is to “give voice to [my and] their own emotional experiences” (Ellis, 1993, p. 711)

- “His death occurred unexpectedly while I was working part-time. My brother called me through Facebook Messenger. The crying could be heard in the background. I had a horrible feeling. Then he told me about the death. I recall how I felt at the time: “Even though I expected it, I couldn’t believe it. I couldn’t breathe regularly, I had to get permission to return home. I cried the entire way back home. I’m sure driving under those conditions was hazardous. But I needed to be at home, where I could find out what had happened and be with my family.” (Nguyen-Trung, 2022)

LESSON #2: SHARING IS RECEIVING (2)

WHEN YOU SHARE YOUR HEART, PEOPLE WILL CARE FOR YOU

The care from the academic community (the editorial board and reviewers): *Their appreciation was a balm to my soul, a reminder that my story had touched them in some small way.*

“Thank you for submitting your autoethnography to TQR! It is a very compelling document, I appreciated it very much.”

“The previous passage was incredibly raw and emotional, and your vulnerability is palpable~ Thank you for sharing so much with readers, who will certainly sense the powerfulness of your emotions.”

“Your paper includes a lot of highly personal and vulnerable accounts of your own personal journey of loss and grief, and we commend you for your candor and willingness to explore such intimate topics.”

LESSON #2: SHARING IS RECEIVING (3)

WHEN YOU SHARE YOUR HEART, PEOPLE WILL CARE FOR YOU

The sympathy and support from colleagues and friends:

- *As I poured my heart out onto paper, I never expected the outpouring of sympathy and support from others. The kind words of those who read my autoethnography brought me comfort in my darkest hours*
- But what touched me even more was how they opened up to me about their own struggles during the COVID-19 pandemic. It was as if a floodgate of emotions had been opened, and I found myself listening intently to their stories of homesickness, loneliness, and the pain of losing loved ones.
- As they shared their experiences, I realized that the pandemic had brought with it not only physical health challenges but also emotional and mental health struggles. The grief and loss they had experienced were palpable, and it broke my heart to hear how one person had been locked in grief for their granddad, even though he had passed away nine years ago.

“I am reading it now and wanted to express my condolences to you and your family on the passing of your grandfather. It was (and no doubt continues to be) an immensely difficult time - thank you for sharing your reflections in the article. It is beautifully written and your clear introspections will help many others make sense of their grief and loss.”

“Thank you for sharing this heartfelt and emotional experience with us Kien. My heart goes out to you and your loved ones. Your paper is a beautiful tribute to your late Grand-Father who would have been very proud of you as all your MSDI Colleagues are.”

Lesson #3: TO WRITE IS TO HEAL AND TRANSFORM YOURSELF

Writing can be a tool for healing and transformation. It allows us to confront our fears and sorrows, to pour our emotions onto the page and make sense of our own journeys. Through the act of writing, we can tap into our inner strength, find new ways of coping, and emerge from the darkness renewed and transformed.

LESSON #3: TO WRITE IS TO HEAL AND TRANSFORM

WHEN YOU WRITE YOUR HEART OUT, YOU TRANSFORM YOURSELF

My depression and homesickness consumed me, leaving me feeling lost and helpless. But in the midst of this darkness, I discovered a lifeline that would carry me through the storm: writing.

- When life became too fast-paced and unpredictable, I found myself struggling to keep up with the world around me.
- So **the lesson** is: it's important to slow down, to be mindful of the fleeting nature of life, to prioritize the well-being of my soul and the people I hold dear.
- Because, in the end, what else truly matters? When everything else falls away, it is the relationships we have and the soul we cultivate that remain.

“When the pain was overwhelming, writing became a reliable way to talk with myself” (Nguyen-Trung, 2022)

A REUNION WITH MY GRANDMOTHER



As I hugged her tightly, memories of my beloved grandfather flooded back. Being with my grandmother again after so long was everything I had hoped for and more. It reminded me of the precious moments we shared, and I couldn't help but feel grateful for this beautiful moment.

So, let my article be a tribute to my grandfather, a celebration of his life and all that he meant to me. Let it be a testament to the power of vulnerability and the transformation that can come from sharing our stories. And let it be a reminder that even in the depths of darkness, there is always the possibility of rising up and seeing the sunlight once again.

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Thank you for your listening. Any question?.



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