“WHO AM I?”

One of the starting points is the researcher’s own narratives or experiences ... it is here that we deal with questions of who we are in the field and who we are in the texts we write on our experiences of the field experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994:418)

“If you must choose an animal to represent who you are or would like to be, what would it be?” I find it very interesting to listen to different persons’ responses to this seemingly simple question. Apart from the usual well-known animals, such as a lion, cheetah or fish eagle, some individuals provide quite unusual answers, such as a tortoise or house fly. However, I suspect that you are not interested in these “other” people’s answers, but rather in my answer to this question. So, here it is. I find it easy to identify with a glossy starling as it reminds me a lot of my own personal characteristics. This relatively small bushveld bird may not be a challenge to one of the glamorous “Big five” mammals and birds, but it still manages to make a difference and contribution to the overall functioning of the ecosystem. Specifically, its self-assured, friendly and inquisitive demeanor appeals to me. I regard myself as someone who enjoys life thoroughly. I’m frequently stimulated to explore and investigate interesting and thought provoking issues and ideas. As a keen marathon runner some of my training runs take me through an experimental farm area where I often spot glossy starlings along the road. Each time such a sighting gives me renewed pleasure and motivation to persevere with the training run, on a small scale, and life, on a much larger scale. Enough said about my favourite bushveld bird. Next I want to introduce you to the concept of “horizons”.

The metaphor of a “horizon” can be utilised in the phenomenological perspective to refer to the personal context in which an individual experiences temporality, spatiality, expectations, emotions and ideas. This horizon includes those things that are within one’s immediate world and are part of your understanding. As you move through your world these things are constantly and dynamically in the process of either being formed or being altered by an awareness of your past and present. Even the things that are beyond your immediate awareness are part of this horizon (Stewart & Mickunas, 1990:45-46; Turner,
In the following paragraphs I’d like to share with you some of the salient and applicable elements of my “horizon”. It will provide you with some insight in my personal background and interest in the chosen research theme. Also, it provides an account of my conscious values and beliefs which are constantly in a state of flux as I interact with and experience the world I live in.

Let’s start with some “background” elements of my personal horizon. I’m the oldest of three children that grew up in a stable, relatively conservative Afrikaans-speaking family during the 1970’s and 1980’s. Many family vacations were spend in the Kruger National Park that sparked of a keen interest in the biological sciences. Not surprisingly, my first career choice was in part motivated by this interest, as well as an explicit inclination to avoid people-focused vocations. It lead me to successfully complete a BSc-degree at the University of Pretoria (UP), majoring in Botany and Zoology. This was a significant event for my family; me being the first ever family member to receive a tertiary qualification. The following year I successfully completed a BSc(Hons)(Zoology)-degree at the Mammal Research Institute, UP. More than one year, and many nature conservation job applications, later I was eventually appointed in a three year-contract veterinary research technologist position at the, then, Technikon Pretoria. Towards the end of the contract period I was offered a permanent lecturing position in the Faculty of Natural Sciences of the same institution. I gladly accepted the offer. Today, eleven years and some promotions later I hold a senior lecturer position in the Faculty of Health Sciences, Tshwane University of Technology.

I was exposed to numerous formal and informal student activities during my full-time tertiary training as a zoologist at UP. The formal course material challenged me to re-think and re-evaluate many personal assumptions; assumptions regarding socio-political issues, religious values and general life philosophy. Many formal class discussions in our Honours-group addressed specific topics such as research philosophy and evolution. That significantly facilitated the development of an analytical and logical thinking style. All these activities had a positive influence on my personal growth and development. It transformed me from a very naive teenager into a competent young natural scientist.
I grew up in a family and community where relatively conservative Reformed Christian values were dominant. Things like regular church attendance, active participation in other church activities and being a “good” boy, were the “right” things to do. The result was that I experienced a fairly “protected” upbringing - physically, emotionally, socially, politically, philosophically and spiritually. I’ve regarded myself as a Christian for as long as I can remember. However, in Grade 12 (matric) I made a conscious decision to follow Christ. During my UP undergraduate studies I became involved in a 10-day Christian youth camp for Grade 12 learners. This involvement continues to this day, some 13 camps later. It contributed tremendously to my personal, academic and research interests. Four specific persons have made a significant impact on my life during these camps. On the one hand, I met Dr Etienne Kok, a sexologist, who’s love for teenagers rubbed off on me. On the other hand, three ministers of religion significantly influenced my theological thinking and personal worldview - Drs Johann Voges, Willie de Koker and Kobus Myburgh. They showed me through their own lives that God is actively involved with people, even in the midst of traumatic experiences when God seems to be passive/absent. All of them were, and still are, excellent practice-what-you-preach role models. Perhaps the most significant impact of these camps was the role it played to expose and sensitise me to adolescent traumatic experiences. One specific experience was the suicide of a female student that previously acted as a camp counsellor. I became acutely aware of the many terrible and heart-wrenching traumatic experiences that adolescents have to deal with in their daily lives. Accounts of rape, molestation, parental neglect, suicide, suicide ideation, drug abuse, alcoholism, irresponsible sexual behaviour and poor self-esteem suddenly seemed to be all too common. In short, my initial general inclination to avoid people-focused activities was completely transformed into an intense people-focused one. That gradually signalled the start of a new chapter in my life.

In this period, I was requested to be a guardian lecturer who had to attend to the general academic well-being of students in a specific study course. Before long my office became a safe haven for troubled students who just wanted to tell their trauma stories in an effort to seek some advice. Unfortunately, one of those troubled students eventually committed suicide during her experiential training in Cape Town. I realised that further tertiary studies would be necessary to significantly impact on the lives of all these traumatised and troubled adolescents. At first, I
completed undergraduate Psychology-studies at UNISA, together with some theology subjects. The fairly liberal approach of UNISA’s Theology Faculty challenged my, then, fairly conservative and fundamentalistic viewpoints. It contributed a lot to the positive growth and development of my later theological beliefs. This was followed by very stimulating part-time BA(Hons)(Psychology)-studies at UP. Two lecturers significantly influenced my professional and academic interests during these studies. The first was Prof Johan Schoeman who supervised my Hons-research project that dealt with the incidence of students’ traumatic experiences. He motivated me to eventually publish the project results in an accredited psychology journal. Significantly, a few years later these results also became the impetus for my doctoral studies (see Chapter 1, section 1.1 “Rationale and Justification”). The second lecturer was Prof Rex van Vuuren who’s enthusiasm and expert knowledge introduced me to the fascinating world of phenomenology.

I enrolled for a MSc(Veterinary Ethology)-degree parallel to the Hons(Psychology)-studies, partly because of work-related requirements for promotion within my career context. Without knowing anything about Prof Johannes Odendaal beforehand, I chose him as supervisor within minutes of our first meeting. I’ve never regretted this fairly impulsive decision. He proved to be an excellent supervisor with whom I still share similar work ethics and a love for the world of academia. He taught me a number of important research attitudes: to belief in research dreams that others are sceptical of; to constantly challenge the boundaries of multidisciplinary studies; and to persevere when everything seems to go awry. Today, I am privileged to have him as a colleague at the Tshwane University of Technology. I continue to regard him as a personal and professional mentor.

So, what does the “current” elements of my personal horizon looks like? My personality “element” is characterised by four salient life attitudes. Firstly, I tend to be predominantly positive in all life contexts, even when circumstances threaten to be overwhelming or when things go wrong. In these
As we move through life, we leave trails, intended or not. Trails of action, trails of sound, trails of colours, trails of lights. Who knows how long they last? (Armstrong, 2003:223)

Now that you are aware of who I am as a person and as a researcher, I’m pretty sure that you will often find clear “footprints”, and perhaps sometimes evidence of faint ones, of the various personal horizon elements in the chapters that follow. Always keep in mind that I’m
somehow present on every page of the thesis, but know at the same time that the mere act of reading the thesis will also draw your personhood into those pages.