

The Creative Artist, Mental Disturbance, and Mental Health: A Narrative, Autoethnographic Case Study of One Year in the Life of My Son the Struggling Actor

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ABSTRACT

This article is a narrative, autoethnographic case study approach to portray the challenges facing the creative artist of becoming successful both in one's chosen artistic endeavors as well as in adjustment to life. The focus of the article involves commentaries and an analysis of excerpts from the blog entries which describe one year in the life of a struggling actor who moved to Hollywood two years ago to become a successful actor, and who happens to be the author's 32-year-old son. The excerpts from the blog of this struggling actor demonstrate the relationship of the creative artist to mental disturbance as well as mental health, and continuous themes involve the factors of eccentricity, resilience, and egocentrism. A qualitative research methodology is utilized in this article, including the methodologies of narrative research, autoethnographic research, case study, and intertextual analysis.

Keywords: creative artist, mental disturbance, mental health, eccentricity, resilience, egocentrism, case study, narrative research, autoethnographic research, intertextual analysis.

Introduction

The question of how to deal with artistically inclined people who have mental health needs is one that has spurred much controversy, and has been and is currently both a significant and perplexing issue in our society (see for example Andreason 2005; Benjamin 2008; Jamison 1993; Runco and Richards 1997). In my own work on this subject, utilizing the work of Abraham Maslow (1962, 1971), I have formulated what I refer to as The Artistic Theory of Psychology with the following main points:

1. *The successful creative artist resonates with the highest levels of Maslow's hierarchy of human potential.*
2. *There are some people labeled as mentally ill who have the potential of becoming successful creative artists.*
3. *A sensitive, understanding, and supportive educational environment may be conducive to enabling a mentally disturbed person with creative artistic potential to significantly develop and actualize this potential in life. (Benjamin 2008, p. 64).*

In my definition of "creative artist" I include various creative disciplines, such as music, writing, painting, dance, mathematics, acting, etc., and I described the "successful creative artist" as:

A person who has received the respect and acknowledgement for his or her work by a community of his or her peers or society-at-large and also who is considered both psychologically and ethically to be a "well-adjusted" member of his or her society and the greater world (Benjamin 2008, p. 64).

For a current ongoing illustration of the positive benefits of community support for potential creative artists with mental health needs, see the illustrative description of "The Living

Museum," which is a therapeutic haven for artistically inclined mental patients in Creedmoor psychiatric facility in New York City¹. I have personally witnessed this same kind of community support in the monthly creative artist support group meetings that I facilitate in Belfast, Maine (Benjamin 2013a, 2014).

Recently I have witnessed my 32-year-old son Jeremy immerse himself in the highly unrealistic venture of moving to Los Angeles to "make it" as a Hollywood actor, complete with a number of public blog journal accounts that described his very personal authentic and vulnerable experiences every day for a year². Although I have no doubt that mainstream psychology would categorize my son with a handy psychiatric classification after reading his blog, I decided to view his various "unusual" personality characteristics and continuous ups and downs in the context of eccentricity, resilience, and egocentrism (Benjamin 2013a, 2013b). However, regardless of how one decides to view my son's blog journal accounts, I believe that a discussion and analysis of excerpts from his struggling actor journal blog can shed some important light on the challenging experiences of a creative artist, that may be useful both to the creative artist and to mental health practitioners who may become involved if mental health needs surface. As I will describe more specifically in the next section, in order to present a meaningful description of the experiences of a struggling actor, I have chosen to engage in a narrative, autoethnographic case study, that includes what has been referred to as intertextual analysis (Chang 2008; Chase 2005; Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; Ellis 2009; Gunhild 1999; Kristeva 1980; Polkinghorne 1988; Yin 2009).

My son Jeremy has managed to find his own way of surviving and progressing in his "unrealistic" dreams without seeking assistance from the mental health profession, as he has now been in Los Angeles for over two years and is completely

immersed in an actor's (and writer's) lifestyle, interspersed with doing some aerobics teaching. Nevertheless, I believe there are many young people with similar creative artistic inclinations to that of my son who would benefit greatly from receiving support from mental health professionals who are empathic, authentic, and understanding of what it is truly like for the struggling creative artist. This includes the struggling creative artist's challenge of finding a way of meeting his/her continuous day-to-day survival needs while continuing to practice her/his creative art—which I have referred to as “The Reality Argument” (Benjamin 2011). This kind of therapist/client relationship is at the forefront of Carl Rogers' Client-centered Therapy (Rogers 1961), and the above therapist qualities have been demonstrated to be fundamental aspects that are common to all successful psychotherapies (Benjamin 2011; Wampold 2001; Watson and Bohart 2001).

Methodology

For the purpose of accurately describing the experience of a struggling creative artist/actor and consequently enhancing mental health practitioners' abilities to gain a deeper understanding of the challenging experiences of the creative artist, I will present a number of excerpts from my son's journal blog entries, along with my own comments, in the context of a narrative qualitative case study with a dominant methodological focus of intertextual analysis (Chase 2005; Camic, Rhodes, and Yardley 2003; Clandinin and Connelly 2000; Creswell 2007; Gunhild 1999; Kristeva 1980; Polkinghorne 1988; Wertz 2011; Yin 2009). Although I believe these research methodologies in the case I am considering offers a rich description of the experiences of a struggling creative artist/actor, and utilizing one's experiences in qualitative research has been steadily gaining momentum and acceptance (Anderson and Braud, 2011; Wertz 2011), there is undoubtedly much controversy in mainstream psychology over using these experiential research methods due to their subjective component (Irwin 2004; Jackson and Mazzei 2009; Clandinin and Rosiek, 2006; MacLure 2011). This controversy is particularly intense in regard to a researcher using his/her own experiences as part of the research, and this researcher-based experiential research was initiated in psychology to a large extent by Clark Moustakas in the 1960s in the context of heuristic research (Moustakas 1994; Sela-Smith 2002), in which a focus upon the self experience of the researcher was included as a legitimate part of the research. This inclusion of the experience of the researcher was developed from a participation observation methodology in the field of sociology by Carolyn Ellis in the 1980s in the context of autoethnography (Chang 2008; Ellis 2004, 2009), and subsequently was followed by Rosemary Anderson in the 1990s in the context of intuitive inquiry, with the researcher utilizing his/her relevant experiences particularly in qualitative interviews (Anderson 2004, 2011). The basic argument that has been used to justify using these subjective researcher-based experiential research methodologies involves the richness and depth of knowledge available to the researcher (Ellis 2009; Moustakas 1993; Anderson 2011).

The use of intertextual analysis in the form of “shaping of a text meaning by another text....borrowing and transformation of a prior text”³ was developed to a large extent by Julia Kristeva

beginning in the 1960s (Kristeva 1980; Gunhild 1999). Intertextual analysis has also been the source of much controversy in regard to its legitimacy as a research method, with much of the controversy focused upon the vagueness of its definition and boundaries (see for example Irwin 2004). In regard to utilizing the case study as a research method, once again there is a difference of opinion in psychology as to its legitimacy and usefulness, which reflects some of the controversy between quantitative and qualitative research methods (Creswell 2007; Robson 2002).

In spite of the controversies of these research methods, I believe the following intertextual descriptions of one year in the life of a struggling creative artist/actor through a narrative, autoethnographic case study conveys a great deal of insight into the challenging experiences of a creative artist. The next section of this article, the Results section, presents the verbatim experiences in terms of excerpts of my son Jeremy's struggling actor blog journal entries, with my own comments in the form of an intertextual analysis; the final section, the Discussion/Conclusions section, concludes with an assimilation of what we can learn from this intertextual analysis.

I acknowledge that of course I am quite subjectively involved in this endeavor as the father of this struggling actor, and as described above, there are undoubtedly pros and cons in doing this. However, a researcher utilizing his/her own experiences to study social issues is a dominant part of autoethnography (Chang 2008; Ellis 2009), and I believe that this study may serve as a rich complement to other studies that have the purpose of enriching our understanding of the experiences of the creative artist.

Results: An Intertextual Analysis of Excerpts from Jeremy Benjamin's Struggling Actor Blog⁴

In this first blog excerpt that I have chosen, which Jeremy wrote after being in Los Angeles for a week and a half, we see a rather amusing and unusual quality in my son, which I describe as one of his “eccentricities.” I view this kind of eccentricity as a possible balancing act between the creative artist and mental disturbance, and the following is an early glimpse of why I have characterized my son Jeremy as “eccentric with a capital E” (see Benjamin 2013a, 2013b).

Ever done pushups with a rabbi standing on your back? It was a first for me. A metaphorical/psychological repenting for my sins, perhaps?...My first morning in my new apartment I was up against a traffic jam that was quite possibly the worst I've ever battled. I left plenty of extra time to get to the fitness studio, but still arrived to class 5 minutes late. Nothing infuriates me like being late to a group exercise class. Turned out everybody (the instructor included) was late due to the same traffic jam. Nevertheless, after class I went outside and performed 50 pushups to atone for the 5 minutes that I was late (10 pushups per minute is my rule). I asked a burly man—a stranger—if he would kindly stand on my back for the first ten pushups and the last ten pushups. Note: this is an effective way of making friends. He handed me his business card and invited me to his synagogue.

One striking aspect to Jeremy's personality that may very well prove to be one of his primary attributes for his potential success as a professional actor, is the extreme amount of energy that he possesses, constantly juggling myriad amounts of creative activities into each and every day, functioning effectively in spite of being continuously sleep-deprived. The following blog excerpt, which Jeremy wrote after being in LA for about a month, gives us a very good illustration of both his personality and his lifestyle.

There are so many projects happening in this town—and I've only glimpsed the halo of condensation surrounding the very tip of the tip of the tip of the iceberg's offspring that guards the actual iceberg—that if you blink you miss three opportunities, if you go to the bathroom you miss ten, if you're driving in traffic and are away from your computer for an hour you miss a hundred, and if you're on a movie set all day you miss a million and one opportunities to see about other movie sets that might hold pizza in your future. It's staggering to think of all the auditions that pass you by because you weren't available to pounce at just the right moment.... Somehow I wound up in 2 different film projects this weekend and they both waited till the very last minute to tell me my call times (causing me to panic that I may have double-booked—excuse me, triple-booked, because I also have an audition to squeeze in tomorrow), and if there is such a thing as a last minute that occurs after the last minute, that would be when I received the scripts. Now in the hour between the fun-filled cardio-dance-fusion class I just took and play rehearsal, I have to learn lines to play a double-agent villain in a farcical short film shooting tonight immediately after rehearsal, and I also have to learn a few phrases in Mandarin Chinese for a film shoot tomorrow morning. Meanwhile, I have to learn a monologue for Monday's acting class, and I have to learn lines for the new scene I'm doing with my new partner.... My next project is getting my part wrapped in time to hop on the freeway and race over to the yoga studio where I'm scheduled for my very first volunteer shift so that I can vacuum the locker rooms and clean sweaty mats once a week in exchange for unlimited free classes. I'm crossing my every bodily appendage that's crossable I can fit both in!

As Jeremy nears completion of his second month in LA, we can see that the borderline between eccentricity and mental disturbance for him is starting to become more blurry, with preliminary warning signs appearing from his self-imposed continuous sleep deprivation.

Sleep deprivation comes in those classic phases: first it's the holy-shit-I-can't-believe-I'm-awake-and-I've-got-all-this-stuff-to-do half-grumpy, half-panic mode when you're still picking crusties off your eyelids, then once you get past the day's first cluster of tasks and hit that first pocket of downtime, that euphoric wind of giddiness hits you and you're hyper-aware, energized, ready to tackle the world and the day is one big party ahead of you, then you ride a few more waves of errands/meetings/auditions/workouts/whatever, you start yawning and you enter into the okay-I-can-cope-with-this-but-I'm really-fucking-tired-let's-just-get-this-day-done-with mode where you're making compromises with yourself, then you find yourself in class struggling really hard to pay attention, it's late in the evening, you're hungry, your eyes are sore from staying open, you're pissed off about twelve different things that don't really make any sense and you hit the FUCK-FUCK-DAMN-PISS- FUCKITY-FUCK-FUCK-

SHIT-EATING-MOTHERFUCKER mode where you turn into a two-year-old who missed his nap and is inwardly throwing a tantrum.

Jeremy's continuous sleep deprivation results in various additional obstacles and setbacks that he now needs to deal with and find a way of overcoming, and some of his coping strategies appear to be skirting the borderlines between eccentricity and mental disturbance.

One thing I forgot about sleep deprivation; it makes you do strange things....I got in a verbal skirmish with a business owner who was hassling me about where I'd parked, I was in hyper-overdrive mode, chugging caffeine, not wanting to be five minutes late to set, and in a fit of rage I unintentionally tore off the passenger-side door handle of my car as I got in. A couple years ago I had done the exact same thing to the driver's side door handle; sometimes when adrenaline is pumping, you're trying to make a rehearsal on time, your body does not process input-data from your surroundings, it only processes two words: MOVE FASTER, and when you perform your habit of tugging on the handle to make sure you've locked the door, and at the same time your legs are already in a full sprint because they are not available to move any slower, sometimes you come busting in the door to rehearsal only to look down at your hand and realize that the car-door handle is still clasped in your hand. So for the past couple years I've been using the passenger side door every time I get in my car. Now that both door-handles are missing, I will be getting in my car from the trunk from now on. This is a new obstacle that will attempt to slow me down, but will not succeed in doing so because NOTHING slows me down; traffic jams, economic recessions, inclement weather AIN'T GOT NOTHING ON ME!!!! Three hours sleep and this hyper redheaded mofa is ready to kick some ass!!!!

As we approach the last week of Jeremy's third month in LA, we now come to a pivotal point in Jeremy's LA adventures; one that will set the stage for the next six months of Jeremy's first year in LA. Jeremy's next blog entry speaks for itself.

I'm feeling weightless, for two reasons. One, the yoga studio offered a special workshop on arm-balances today. Two, I'm no longer living way out in North Hills: I now live in a far more convenient location, which is, anywhere I park my car! Found a free zumba class, and tonight got free tickets to a play of some sort; the day is abundant with zero cost recreation. As of noon today, I am relieved to be homeless. That is, I found a way to live efficiently and minimize car commuting through a mixture of couch surfing and car camping. My roommates offered me an affordable deal on storage; \$20 a month to keep a heap of my belongings (books, cd's, movies, appliances, musical instruments and other personal memorabilia) in their closet, and after living with them for two months, I know I can trust them. I set off with a suitcase and frame-pack stuffed full of all my clothes and costumes, and luckily my car is a hatchback that offers ample surface space when the seat is down, so I can spread out on two sleeping bags and a pillow and get a good night's sleep anywhere where it's legal, with my bicycle locked outside. At last, I'm free from the burden of being tied down to a single address, and can roam freely without worrying about

commuting mileage! Got it all planned out: can brush my teeth at public restrooms and shower at gyms. And with the money I save on rent and gas, I can drink a lot more coffee. In my mind, this is an upgrade to my quality of life, not to mention it's a prerequisite to being a film actor: as I'm hearing, most A-list Hollywood actors have stories about a period of time spent living in their car when they first came to LA and worked to establish themselves. Got to start gaining credibility by letting go of extraneous comforts. Tonight will begin the real test of my will to persist in being a struggling actor. What am I made of? The morning will tell.

Finally Jeremy's sleep deprivation gets the best of him, and he experiences what he without a doubt considers to be the low point of his time thus far in LA, and which is also an indication of the serious dangers of The Reality Argument for our struggling actor.

In the blink of an eye, things got incredibly worse. This entry—that I'm writing on Saturday—is falsely labeled Friday, because my computer access has just become limited to scraps of time I can scrounge at public libraries. If the tone in the previous entry was any tipoff of how far from lucidity I've regressed due to accumulative sleep deficit, didn't hit me until after the damage was done that this...all of this...is not working...I realized how lethally tired I was when I stepped outside into the fresh air of a quiet Silver Lake neighborhood and blinked my eyes, trying to formulate my game plan for the night, but I did not realize the detrimentally self-destructive blunder I made until I was already several miles en route to the highway and brought my car to a screeching halt, spun around and raced back to the venue, screaming profanity at the top of my lungs the whole way there because I had left my backpack on the sidewalk, forgetting to grab it after loading my bicycle into the car. My backpack contained my computer, my wallet, all my personal notebooks, reading materials, CDs I teach with, my electric razor, my portable video camera, and myriads of other small things. When I got there it was gone. Made some frantic phone calls to the facilitators of the events, went and filed a police report, snooped around the neighborhood ransacking every dumpster and every bush in the vicinity. No luck. Down and out. Still emitting hysterical screams of profanity at the top of my lungs, drove to Burbank to park my bedroom in front of the apartment where the next morning's film shoot was taking place, then I set out to find a public bathroom. Just my luck, every gas station I came upon had an "Out of order" sign on their bathroom, so I set out searching for a vacant back alley in which to take a piss. I ended up finding a bar and urinated like a civilized gentleman. But that moment that I surveyed the neighborhood for alleyways with intent to perform an unrefined action, that moment will forever be concretized in my memory as me at my rock-bottom; homeless, not a dollar or cent on me, no computer, no ID, wandering the streets seeking out the sketchiest looking alley available. If my future should hold any lofty accomplishments such as a role in a network television show—which I firmly believe it does—I will hold the recollection of that moment as a mental reference point from which to measure my progress.

As Jeremy approaches the end of his fourth month in LA, he has virtually no tolerance for anyone putting stops on his creative self expression, especially in the context of his unique high energy dancing expressions, and I believe his reflective

thoughts can serve as a colorful and illustrative description of the whole dichotomy between the creative artist and mental disturbance.

How dare anybody stop a guy from dancing during the climatic last song at a rock concert. How fucking dare that douchebag tell me to "tone it down, you're not allowed to dance like that"—IT'S A FUCKING ROCK CONCERT FOR CHRISSAKE—I didn't come here to be stifled, and judged by anyone. I came here to sing my song loud and proud until I find my audience....We fight by putting our most honest, uncensored art out there, by opening those doors of creativity within us—with the breath of all the demons of hell blowing on the other side of those doors to keep them closed—so we can take flight through those doors and explore the vastness, find our treasures, reel them in and do our diligence to refine and craft them until we produce something of value, because at the end of the day, that's all we really want to do; to make a movie that doesn't suck. To write a story that doesn't suck. To compose a song that doesn't suck. So, to anyone reading this, if you ever happen to see me dancing at a concert, please stay out of my way and let me dance, at least till the song is over, and I promise I will do you no harm, and we won't have a problem. We cool? Cool.

As Jeremy completes his sixth month in LA, he reflects upon the sacrifices that go along with the commitment to become a successful Hollywood actor and creative artist, giving us a glimpse into his increasing egocentric focus, which he explains to himself as unavoidable in order to have any chance of being successful in the LA "acting jungle."

Could barely keep my eyes open between caffeine binges today....Most actors I know share this feeling much of the time; the feeling that we work our asses off and scramble to hit all of our marks, only to be a constant disappointment to the majority of people in our lives. Was supposed to drive my Oregonian friend to the airport today, but had to ask her if she could recruit another friend to do it because last minute auditions arose like popping popcorn filling up my afternoon, leaving me in a razor-sharp time crunch to try and meet up with her for a farewell coffee before she departs. To make any social commitments puts you in a gauntlet that taps the limits of your chi, precluding the possibility of being a good friend to anyone. The cliché of actors being self-centered is true but wrongly worded; being precarious and telling people to "play it by ear" is all we can do, being in a perpetual state of job-searching. Our survival means saying "yes of course I can audition for you at 6 p.m., in the hour of my day between my other two auditions when my friend/significant-other was expecting me to fulfill such-and-such commitment." And if you happen to be dog-sitting, it means getting home in the middle of the night after comedyville. To friends/family whose survival means being at that desk from nine to five, us artists cannot expect them to understand our priorities. It is a lonely road we have chosen. To ride that road to its great heights, we must be absolutely certain—through the rigors and the trials—that the love for our craft is worth it.

Jumping ahead to Jeremy being in LA for nine and a half months, after resolving a challenging conflict in a most monumental way he does some philosophizing about what

it takes to succeed as a creative artist in the LA acting world, with some relevant thoughts about emotional and mental disturbance. I think Jeremy's musings gives us an interesting perspective on the whole question of what is mental disturbance and what is mental health, especially in the context of an aspiring creative artist.

Win win win!!! January 31st of 2013 marks my first commercial booking. It looks like they've cast me in a different role than Cat Man—I think I'm playing a mason of sorts—but a commercial is a commercial and that spells yeehaw!....A couple of social conversations that seem worth exploiting here: a friend of mine asked me if I ever just simply don't feel like talking to people. I said, "Emotions are like fuel, the mind is captain. Keep engine full of juice and the fires stoked, but always remember who's behind the wheel and what the destination is. Harness the fuel by distilling the ingredients that propel you from the ingredients that stagnate you. An optimally efficient fuel filter is called passion. An inefficient one is called by many unflattering names in the psychiatric texts. When I feel antisocial I force myself to behave otherwise because my competition is networking with a smile 24 hours a day 7 days a week, and a casting director might be lurking in any grocery isle or on any treadmill, and I ain't here to pout, I'm here to win. Put on a smile and win, brother...I think that's the difference between actors in LA and actors everywhere else I've been: in my previous hometown, my peers and colleagues tended to be very involved in their emotional lives. It was not uncommon for someone to fall out of contact and disappear for months on end, sequestering themselves in complete unavailability and unresponsiveness without physically leaving town, then resurface and say something like, "I was going through some personal growth." Whatever the language they use, I fail to see how that translates to an effective networking technique, can someone explain that to me? Nobody could explain it to me, so I came here, where you're involved in your character's emotional life, then you're networking, then you're driving in traffic and that's your whole day and then maybe after a couple decades of marathon networking when you're at the height of a career in Hollywood, the undercurrent of your emotional life you were never available to pay attend to overflows and spills onto the surface resulting in erratic behavior for the tabloids to seize, hence the media orgies of celebrity antics people just can't get enough of. I'd rather be the famous actor you read about in the news who gets arrested for masturbating in the chimpanzee cage of the LA zoo while tripping on hallucinogenic spoiled milk after being excommunicated from the Church of Scientology than the guy you never heard of who does something other than acting somewhere other than LA and who doesn't return calls when he's in an emotional rut. In another social conversation, an old friend asked me how LA is treating me, to which I replied, "I elect to answer your question with another question; how am I treating LA?....I only want what's best for the city, and what's best for the city is for Jeremy to have a thriving career in television and film."

And as Jeremy approaches the end of his first year in LA, he has the following illustrative and unique advice for anyone who wants to become successful as a Hollywood actor.

An old buddy of mine from Portland writes a column for some sort of movie review website, and every once in a while he likes to use me as an interview subject to give his readership a glimpse into the minutiae of Hollywood from the perspective of

the [little guy]. The last question he asked me was what advice I would give to an aspiring actor contemplating moving here. I said, "I'll answer that question with a question; How much do you love the craft of acting and how badly do you want to work as a professional actor? If your answer to that question is so infinite and fueled with such impetuosity of absolute determination it defies any combination of words that would even begin to answer the question, then come on over. My advice? Be relentless. Be open. Be thorough. Be responsible, check your cell phone for messages every 30 seconds and check your email for casting breakdowns every 5 milliseconds and if you blink, if you go to the bathroom, if you take a nap, you miss opportunities. Don't miss opportunities, and don't ever let your energy level drop below a thousand and fifty percent. Do it. Do it big. Want it as badly as your lungs want the next breath of air. Keep your body charged and ready, subscribe to a militantly consistent exercise routine, practice yoga at least once a day, be emotionally available, be ready and willing to give of your deepest most primal most honest most vulnerable self to a stranger holding a camera in an otherwise empty room without hesitation. Sleep in your car so that you can wake up at 5:30 in the morning to film your dance audition in an alleyway and then run to the nearest Starbucks before anyone can call the cops, scream because you have to use the bathroom so badly you might actually explode, but don't use the bathroom until you've uploaded and submitted that audition and then submit your headshot and resumé to fifty other casting breakdowns on your laptop while you're on the toilet because you don't have five because you don't have five seconds to spare, drink a quadruple shot of the strongest coffee money can buy as you're sprinting—don't walk, don't run but SPRINT—to your next errand of the morning and function the entire day in that fashion, sprint through the text ten years in that fashion and if that sounds like your style, come on down to LA and give acting a try."

Discussion/Conclusions: Assimilation, Assessment, and Applications⁵

In the context of summarizing what we may be able to learn from the above blog excerpts of Jeremy's first year as a struggling actor in Los Angeles, I will mention that after being in LA for 14 months, Jeremy landed a highly paid television commercial, and in the next few months he landed a second highly paid television commercial, followed by a few other television commercials during his second year in LA, and had a 10 minute one act play that he wrote performed at a Hollywood theatre, with good reviews. I will also mention that Jeremy lived primarily out of his car for 6 months, in order to save money and significantly reduce his time lost and tremendous stress he was continuously experiencing in LA traffic. Finally, I will mention that Jeremy has had many setbacks and disappointments during his 2 years in Los Angeles, including his backpack that contained his expensive computer with all his precious acting/writing contents being stolen after being in LA for 4 months. However, Jeremy has demonstrated continuously that he possesses an impressive amount of resilience, as he has always bounced back from adversity, and perhaps this quality of resilience is the most promising and significant quality that he possesses in regard to putting him in the

relative context of mental health as opposed to mental disturbance⁶.

The following are some questions, and tentative answers, that come to my mind regarding how Jeremy will fare as he continues his quest to become a successful actor (and now also writer) and creative artist.

- 1 How much longer does Jeremy have the wherewithal to survive the continuously intensive and challenging ups and downs of the life of a struggling actor in Los Angeles, amidst all the thousands of other struggling young actors competing with each other in the frantic race to obtain those precious few Hollywood roles to remove them out of oblivion? Based upon the unrelenting persistence and resilience that he has demonstrated in his 2 years in Los Angeles as a struggling actor, inclusive of a number of well-paid television commercials and the one act play that he wrote being performed at a Hollywood theatre, I would venture to guess that Jeremy's determination will never end—i.e. what we see here is nothing less than a lifelong commitment to his goal.
- 2 Will Jeremy be able to continue walking the delicate and tenuous tightrope and balance his eccentricities in favor of his artistic creativity and avoid the pitfalls of mental disturbance, as some of his friends have expressed their concerns about his mental health? Jeremy has clearly demonstrated his strength of character, transforming his many unusual eccentricities into a way of meeting his obstacles without succumbing to the pitfalls of mental disturbance, and I have every reason to believe that this will continue for as long as he chooses to strive after his goal, which I believe will be for the rest of his life. I will also say that for Jeremy, I think that his mental health is intimately connected to his staying true to his dreams, and never giving up on his quest to become a successful actor, as well as writer, which is the artistic achievement part of my definition of the successful creative artist (see above, and Benjamin 2008).
- 3 Will the comradery of his growing community of support from fellow actors and artists be enough of a buttressing force to help Jeremy overcome the many obstacles that stand in his way of achieving his goal of becoming a successful professional actor and creative artist? The short answer is "Yes." Jeremy's network of friends and associations in Los Angeles has steadily grown, and he very much feels part of what he frequently refers to as a "small world" community, and I believe this will help sustain him through his continuous challenges and setbacks into the coming years.
- 4 Will Jeremy succumb to the LA way of putting your acting ambitions and your "self" above all other considerations—inclusive of family and friends—in a lifestyle that can be described as selfish, impersonal, and egocentric in the extreme?

Here I will include my own perceptions as Jeremy's father, along the lines of the autoethnographic nature of how I have chosen

to convey my son's journal writings from his blog. In my extended comments to his blog excerpts⁵ (see Benjamin 2013a), I have frequently discussed Jeremy's serious difficulties with forming an intimate romantic relationship⁷, which is the main task of successful adjustment to life for a young adult of his age, according to the well-respected developmental psychology ideas of Erik Erikson (1963), and is a crucial part of my own definition of the successful creative artist and mental health (see above, and Benjamin 2008, 2013a). However, Jeremy's difficulties in forming an intimate romantic relationship is not the only concern I have in answering this question.

Jeremy's blog entries clearly show a progression over the period of one year from his initial shock, disbelief, and disturbed reaction in regard to the extreme impersonal nature of how people related to him in Los Angeles when he first arrived⁷. As we have seen in the previous section, after surviving his first year in Los Angeles, Jeremy successfully learned how to be exceedingly and meticulously high tech efficient, juggling myriads of appointments and people down to countdowns of seconds, using all of his available time with the utmost degree of resourceful creativity. His frenetic and continuous physical energy is non-stop, and is much of the reason that he has been able to sustain himself in Los Angeles for two years in spite of all his continuous challenges and setbacks, as he has described in vivid and colorful detail in his above blog entries.

However, I must honestly say that I have had concerns that Jeremy may eventually indulge himself in living the same kind of selfish, impersonal, and egocentric lifestyle that he had such shock, disbelief, and adverse reaction to when he first landed in Los Angeles two years ago. Jeremy has without a doubt become quite egocentric in regard to his monumental focus on his own dreams and ambitions, and this quality can certainly be described as selfish or impersonal. On the other hand, based upon my visiting Jeremy in LA in May, 2013 and April, 2014 (see Benjamin 2013a), I am relieved to be able to say that I believe he will retain his own way of showing caring to his family and friends.

What I can say at this point in time is that Jeremy has maintained his dedication to his major dream and goal for over two years, he is eccentric "with a capital E," and he is filled with creativity, determination, and resilience. I can also say that Jeremy has not succumbed to the pitfalls of mental disturbance—in spite of some of his friends' previous concerns (see Benjamin 2013a). I am undoubtedly extremely subjectively involved in all this as Jeremy's father, but this is part and parcel of what autoethnography and experiential qualitative research is all about (see the Methodology section above).

In conclusion, I will say that I believe the illustration I have presented of my son Jeremy's first year as a struggling actor in Los Angeles sheds much light on the challenging experiences of creative artists in general, and that this enhanced level of understanding may be useful to mental health practitioners who become involved in giving therapeutic assistance and community support to creative

artists with mental health needs (Benjamin, 2014). I also believe that the unrelenting drive, persistence, and ambition that Jeremy has demonstrated to achieve his artistic/acting goals is indicative of the deep down yearnings of many creative artists, and are qualities that I think are of fundamental importance for mental health practitioners to understand and appreciate if they are going to be effective in treating creative artists with mental health needs. But in regard to deciding if someone is a “successful creative artist” in my definition of the term as described in the Introduction (see also Benjamin 2013a), having an excessive egocentric focus on one’s creative art without demonstrating caring and concern for family and friends is not indicative of “satisfactory adjustment” to life in the context of Erikson’s (1963) stages of human growth and development. And we clearly see from my very personal illustrative depiction of the struggling acting pursuits of my creative artist/actor son, a representation of the challenge of the creative artist learning to become successful in both his/own creative art form as well as becoming a well-adjusted caring human being.

Notes

1. For a description of “The Living Museum” see <http://www.columbiajournalist.org:80/www/6-an-art-asylum-within-anasylum./Story>
2. See Jeremy Benjamin’s Struggling Actor blog at <http://journalofastrugglingactor.wordpress.com/2012/05>
3. See the wikipedia description of intertextual analysis at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Intertextuality>
4. See Elliot Benjamin (2013b), *The Creative Artist, Eccentricity, and Mental Disturbance: The Journal of a Struggling Actor for Three Months—my Actor/Writer Son*. (<http://evolutionarylandscapes.net/categories/essays/>), for a more extended intertextual analysis of Jeremy’s first few months in Los Angeles as a struggling actor.
5. See Elliot Benjamin, *The Creative Artist, Mental Disturbance, and Mental Health* (Swanville, ME: Natural Dimension Publications, 2013a) for a more extended discussion and analysis of Jeremy’s first year in Los Angeles as a struggling actor.
6. See Frederick Flach (1988), *Resilience* (New York: Fawcett Columbine) and Lisa Nichols (2009), *No Matter What: 9 Steps to Living the Life You Love*. (New York: Grand Central Life Style) for descriptions of how important this quality of resilience is to mental health.
7. See Elliot Benjamin (2013a), *The Creative Artist, Mental Disturbance, and Mental Health* (Swanville, ME: Natural Dimension Publications) for more inclusive and extensive blog excerpts from Jeremy’s Struggling Actor blog.

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