Blogging Homelessness: Technology of the Self or Practice of Freedom?

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ABSTRACT  This article analyzes a blog written by a man who describes himself as having been in and out of homelessness and addictions over a long period of time. I use Foucault’s ideas about governmentality and technologies of the self to explore the material on this blog and to suggest that the blog is not only a technology of the self through which power is exercised but also a practice of freedom and a means to ethical care of the self. I propose a complex dialectic between domination and liberation as the writer transforms a disciplinary practice through which power is exerted into a call for the construction of an ethical self by writing regularly for his audience of readers and followers.

KEYWORDS  Blogging; Addiction; Technologies of the self; Governmentality; Practices of freedom

In this article, I use Foucault's ideas about governmentality and technologies of the self to examine a blog written by a man who describes himself as having been in and out of homelessness and addictions over a long period of time. Blogs vary in content and style, but they typically consist of a website with chronologically organized postings starting with the most recent, often with links to other sites. They may be written by anyone who has access to a computer connected to the Internet and wants to write a blog. Readers typically have the opportunity to post comments on a blog and can
also become “followers” of the blog and see who other followers are. The blog discussed in this article (http://livinghomelessourwritetospeak.blogspot.com) was initiated by me as part of a larger project on media representations of homelessness (see also Schneider, 2012; Schneider, Chamberlain, & Hodgetts, 2010) in January 2010 and involved four long-term homeless men living at the shelter that was associated with the project. Along with a research assistant, I met with the four writers weekly over a period of three months in early 2010. During that time, all four men posted to the blog. They had access to computer technology in the computer room of the shelter and at the local public library, located just a few blocks from the shelter. They were each given a memory stick on which they could save their writing for later editing and posting to the blog.

Tim Barber, whose writing will be examined in detail here, was the only blogger to use his real name on the blog.1 His first post was a proposal to end homelessness that he had been working on before the blog project started. He also wrote posts that addressed shelter policies and procedures, such as policies about the use of drugs and alcohol in the shelter, the use of paper plates and plastic cutlery, and the availability of free bus tickets. After we stopped meeting as a group in April 2010, Barber continued to post to the blog, the only writer to do so. After a few weeks, it became clear to him that it was now “his” blog, and the tone and content of the blog changed dramatically. Where before he had discussed various topics related to homelessness, he now wrote mainly about his struggles with addiction and his efforts to achieve sobriety and stable housing. He collected 65 followers and received a number of comments on his posts. At this writing, he is continuing to post regularly, at a rate of one or two posts per month. Drawing on Foucault’s ideas about technologies of the self, I suggest that the blog is not only a technology of the self through which power is exercised but also a practice of freedom and a means to ethical care of the self. I propose a complex dialectic between domination and liberation as Barber transforms a disciplinary practice through which power is exerted into a call for the construction of an ethical self by writing regularly for his audience of readers and followers.

**Literature review**

A number of scholars have examined information technology use among marginalized people. Much has been made of the digital divide, in which participation in the public sphere is thought to be restricted for those without access to digital technology and the Internet, particularly those living in poverty. Mohr (2008), for example, describes the inability to make oneself heard as a key aspect of poverty. Scholars (e.g., Ganesh & Stohl, 2010; Toft, 2011) have also examined the use of digital technology by housed and homeless activists in the context of homeless social movements and have concluded that while the Internet has enabled individuals to take on various activist roles, organizations are still centrally important in social movements. Others have examined the use of digital technology by individuals who are homeless (e.g., Eyrich-Garg, 2010; Redpath, Reynolds, Jaffe, Fisher, Edwards, & de Augustine, 2006), particularly in the context of serious health issues such as HIV/AIDS. These studies have asserted that increased access to digital technology would make health information much more readily available to this group of people. Hersberger (2003), on the other hand, found that
parents in homeless families do not feel themselves to be negatively affected by lack of access to digital technology, and in fact feel overwhelmed with information that they receive in other ways, such as face-to-face interaction. In addition, they resent the implication that they are not doing enough for their children because they do not have Internet access.

Other scholars have examined the personal benefits of blogging and the possibilities for identity construction. Maurer (2009), for example, examined the homeless blog, of which there are now quite a number, as a genre that enables individuals to write themselves out of difficult situations and into new subject positions. Others (e.g., Hardey, 2002; Orgad, 2005; Pitts, 2004) have studied blogs on which individuals with serious illnesses write about their day-to-day illness experiences and their efforts to, as McCosker (2008) puts it, “recover in public” through communicating usually private aspects of their illness in a public forum. These studies contribute to a thread of research that asserts more generally the value of writing in healing and recovery from traumatic experiences (e.g., Schneider, Austin, & Arney, 2008; Singer & Singer, 2008).

Writing stories of illness is, as Frank (1998) says, a moral occasion and an opportunity for self-actualization. Barber’s homeless blog, with its focus on his continuing struggle with addiction, has many similarities to an illness blog (I do not, however, want to imply that I agree with the discursive positioning of addiction as an illness), but I do not focus my analysis on its value to him personally. Instead, I am interested in how power is implicated in Barber’s telling of his addiction story. Using Foucault’s ideas about technologies of the self as a lens, I explore both how Barber is subjectified by addiction discourse and how he resists this subjectification through his efforts to achieve ethical care of the self and construct relations of mutual care.

Technologies of the self

Although Foucault’s work is often characterized as being about power and domination (e.g., Martin, Gutman, & Hutton, 1988), he himself wrote that his main interest was in fact “not power but the subject” (Foucault, 1982, p. 778). Throughout his career Foucault was interested in the relationship between societal regulation and individual self-regulation (Garland, 1997; Miller, 2007; Turner, 1997) and in the constitution of selves within the complex power relations of society. In his early work, he was concerned with how subjects are “constructed in disciplinary practices as objects of knowledge” (Miller, 2007, p. 261), docile bodies regulated by discursive regimes associated with particular kinds of knowledge. In his later work, his interest shifted to how subjects regulate themselves, to how “a human being turns him or herself into a subject” (Foucault, quoted in Martin, Gutman, & Hutton, 1988, p. 3). Foucault (2003) described “the encounter between technologies of domination of others and those of the self” (p. 147) as governmentality and saw subjectivity produced through individual self-regulation as no less an effect of power than the subjects produced through the disciplinary practices described in his earlier work.

A central aspect of governmentality is what Foucault calls “technologies of the self,” “which permit individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happi-
ness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality” (Foucault, 1988, p. 146). He traces the development of technologies of the self from ancient Greek society, in which the most important principle was to know the self and to care for the self in order to “improve one’s self, to surpass one’s self, to master the appetites that risk engulfing you” (Foucault, 1988, p. 5). This required one to know rules and regulations of conduct established within a regime of truth and to align one’s behaviour with these regulations. In the early Christian period, technologies of the self also required confession: “each person has the duty to know who he is, that is, to try to know what is happening inside him, to acknowledge faults, to recognize temptations, to locate desires, and everyone is obliged to disclose these things either to God or to others in their community and hence to bear witness against oneself” (Foucault, 1988, p. 40). Technologies of the self thus require the gaze of the other, and in fact, “this form of power cannot be exercised without knowing the inside of people’s minds, without exploring their souls, without making them reveal their innermost secrets” (Foucault, 1982, p. 783).

At the core of governmentality is a subject that Garland (1997) calls the “responsibilized actor,” the individual who actively participates in shaping his or her self and governs him- or herself to align with larger social, governmental, and institutional aims. Thus governments exert power over individuals not through coercion of passive subjects, but through the production of subjects who choose to be active in their own government. As Foucault (1982) says, “Power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free” (p. 790). While individuals may choose the various ways in which they care for the self and constitute themselves as subjects, they are limited by the patterns that are available in their culture. That is, the constitution of subjects always takes place within some system of truth. “This form of power applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him” (Foucault, 1982, p. 781).

Truth, in this version of the word, refers to systems of expert knowledge, particularly in what Rose (1999) calls the “psy” disciplines—psychology, psychiatry, and even social work—which encourage the constitution of individuals as particular kinds of subjects. The most relevant example here is the way in which expert knowledge of homelessness and addictions produces a regime of truth that makes distinctions between normal and abnormal behaviours, healthy and unhealthy practices, and in which individual deviancy is identified as the cause of homelessness. This plays itself out in the detection and diagnosis of “disorders” within the person, typically mental illnesses and addictions, that have caused the person to be homeless. Treatment of these disorders then becomes the focus of that person’s efforts to re-establish permanent housing, and various surveillance mechanisms are in place to ensure that individuals do their part and care for the self by “working on” their identified issues. Those who cannot or choose not to responsibilize, to care for the self according to the goals of this expert knowledge, are excluded from full citizenship and participation in society. As Rose (2000a) writes, “Citizenship becomes conditional on conduct and self-governance” (p. 33). The stakes are high for those on the margins of society, and a return to
full citizenship would seem to depend on taking up and acting on disciplinary versions of homelessness and addictions.

Foucault describes technologies of the self as embodied in specific practices, particularly writing. For the Greeks, “[t]aking care of the self was linked to constant writing activity” (Foucault, 1988, p. 27), and a relationship developed between writing and scrutiny of the self. Rose (2000b) points to other such practices, for example, 12-step programs and group therapy discussions, in which individuals display knowledge of their selves (e.g., “My name is Bill and I am an alcoholic”), confess their wrongdoings, and strive for a more positive self. Bakardjieva & Gaden (2011) describe the Internet as providing today’s opportunities for the shaping of the self, and blogs seem an ideal medium for enabling the confessional writing and the connection with others that characterize technologies of the self. While Foucault’s ideas refer to the ways in which individuals manage their own conduct rather than to specific technology such as the Internet, in this case the technology of the computer hooked into the Internet allows Tim Barber, the blogger in this project, to write regularly to an audience and to demonstrate that he knows himself and is attempting to construct a self in accordance with expert knowledge of homelessness and addictions.

The blog as a technology of the self
As noted earlier, after April 2010, when I stopped meeting with the group of four homeless writers, Barber was the only person to continue posting to the blog, and the character of his writing immediately changed. It was now his personal blog, and he was no longer constrained by my expectations or the need to be part of a “writing group.” I focus here on his postings after it became his blog. The material drawn upon in this article comes from Barber’s posts between April 24, 2010, and February 26, 2011, 28 posts in all. I printed and read the posts numerous times, looking for repeated themes in the writing, and then interpreted these themes through the lens of Foucault’s ideas to arrive at my analysis.

Barber’s post on April 24, 2010, was a transitional blog, in which he took a more confessional approach to his writing, detailing his fall from sobriety and relapse into addiction. He began to address his audience more directly—“I thought I would update you on my circumstances” (April 24, 2010)—and to develop his relationship with his followers. While he had earlier expressed his interest in receiving comments on his posts, he now explicitly solicited them and encouraged more people to become followers: “I hope I can receive comments on this blog, as I wish to hear what your opinion is” (February 23, 2010) now became “I would like to thank all those who have commented on some of my posts and encourage you to continue leaving comments. It is actually helping me very much with my recovery…. My goal is to try and have 50 followers by the end of June” (June 7, 2010). He actively sought an audience with whom he could share his daily troubles and with whom he could interact.

In the blog posts analyzed, Barber touches on addiction in almost every post. He describes himself as an addict in the lingo of the 12 steps: “Hi, my name is Tim Barber and I am an addict” (June 10, 2010). He details his daily struggles with consumption of illegal drugs, moving between optimism and discouragement, admission of “using” and celebration of sobriety. He writes, “I can never rid myself of the damage of addic-
tion, I will always be an addict whether I stay clean or not” (October 15, 2010). He asserts that “[a]ddiction is a disease” (November 2, 2010) and writes, “I know that I will always be an addict but I also know it is my choice if I use or continue to stay clean. Thankfully, I am going on ten days clean and trying my best to continue this way” (January 3, 2011). He also writes: “I found out that I can not use any kind of mood altering drug, whether it be alcohol or even weed for that matter. Anything I use chemically will end up with me using crack and this is not the direction I want my life going” (April 24, 2010). “I actually got offered to smoke a joint today and I said No. Can you believe it? I actually said NO” (November 3, 2010). And later: “Received $1104 dollars on Tuesday morning, it is now Wednesday afternoon. You see where I’m going with this. Hold on, you’re in for a hell of a ride” (February 11, 2011).

In these posts, Barber displays himself as doing the work expected by society to become a full member. He echoes the demands of the dominant discourse of addiction and recovery as the way to work on himself. He takes up the “addict” identity as an internal essence, a fixed feature of the self that involves a loss of control over consumption behaviours. We see him shaping his life around the struggle to cope with this essential feature of his self and to restrain himself from letting that essence take over his life. He announces the “truth” of himself as an addict and details his attempts to deal with it in various addiction programs. He writes, “I really want to turn my life around and that is why I have applied to go into a new treatment program as well as a concurrent disorder program in Claresholm” (January 3, 2011). He willingly and actively participates in a form of professionally enforced discipline, the goal of which is to produce in him a state in which, while he remains “an addict,” he disciplines himself to become something society regards as desirable, someone who does not engage in out-of-control consumption of various “substances.” As Reith (2004) writes, “The forms of governance that contribute to the creation of ... addict identities also attempt to regulate them and return them to their ‘normal state’” (p. 296). Barber also seeks to become the best version of himself that he can, writing, “I can only hope that I will continue to stay strong and continue to try and be the best version of me I can possibly be” (July 15, 2010); “I have not been the better version of myself that I was trying to be” (November 2, 2010); “I know I am not perfect but I want to be the better version of what I have been” (December 2, 2010). This desire to be a better self accords with Foucault’s (1988) assertion that disclosure of the self also requires a renunciation of the self and the constitution of a positive new self (p. 49).

In these excerpts from the blog, we can see various aspects of Foucault’s technologies of the self being played out as Barber displays himself as the responsibilized actor who engages in practices of the “self upon the self by which one tries to work on, to transform oneself and to attain a certain mode of being” (Foucault, 1988, p. 2). He writes in a confessional mode—“I will be honest and tell you I had a slip and I continue to battle addictions of various sorts” (September 15, 2010)—to an audience of “normal” (that is, apparently non-addicted) people. He accepts the truth of knowledge about addiction as filtered through 12-step-program discourse, as he seeks “to master the appetites that risk engulfing” (Foucault, 1988, p. 5) him. He does this willingly, as he regards it as a benefit to himself.
The blog as a practice of freedom

Barber seems to embody what Rose (1999) calls “government through freedom” (p. xxiii), in which the active self is the means through which power is exercised. He seems to perfectly illustrate how governmentality is accomplished through technologies of the self. Freedom here seems limited to the freedom to choose only those forms of subjectivity that align with “official goals” (Peterson, 2003, p. 195) of governmental, institutional, and social administrative structures of power and knowledge. This is a rather deterministic and pessimistic view of the relationship between societal regulation and self-regulation, and it raises the question: In a world in which individuals are governed through freedom, is there any room for freedom that does not govern? Is telling one’s story on a blog only a technology of the self that re-inscribes the power relations of disciplinary practices, or is there room for some other form of freedom?

In his final works, Foucault is more optimistic about achieving freedom that does not govern. In an interview dated January, 20, 1984 (published in 1988, after his death), he reflects on an ethic of care for the self as a practice of freedom and develops his ideas about the ethical self, who can reflect on his relationship to power and in so doing distance himself from it. Foucault is cautious about this concept of freedom, as he worries that it might be understood as a return to the idea that there is a “real” human nature apart from that constructed in relations of power. He therefore talks of practices of freedom, rather than freedom itself. In fact, he says, “practices of liberation open up new relationships of power, which have to be controlled by practices of liberty” (Foucault, 1988, p. 4). He posits a version of the subject that engages in care for the self as an ethical project of self-formation that requires reflection and self-regulation as a basis for ethical relations with others. Care of the self must come before care of others. As Miller (2007) puts it, “To be moral means to reflect on and to ask about the right relation to have with one’s self and others” (p. 265). Miller (2007) notes that this is the “most expansive” (p. 266) form of agency that Foucault articulates, one that goes well beyond the responsibilized actor who must shape himself in line with official goals. This is a subject that reflects on power and forms itself within relations of power, one that is also capable of ethically choosing to transform the self in order to care for others. This ethical care of the self is a practice of freedom.

Frank (1998) offers the telling of illness narratives as one means of engaging in the construction of the ethical self. The illness storyteller is a subject who cares for the self through stories that develop and extend relations with hearers who recognize the moral value of making particular choices about how to care for the self. Stories offer the opportunity to “put ourselves together” (Miller, 2007, p. 266) from the resources available in our culture, to reflect on our choices, and to “decide on what terms to play the truth game” (Frank & Jones, 2003, p. 183). As we select and reflect on various stories of our selves in order to form ethical relations with self and others, we struggle toward the possibility of a moral life. This struggle to be ethical does not take place outside power; rather, it is “animated by power” (Frank, 1998, p. 333) even as it is another practice through which power is exercised. However, the struggle to ethically care for self and others and the recognition of that struggle by others constitute the practice of freedom. As Frank (1998) writes, ill people “need to care for themselves,
and for others, and to have their caring recognized as their affirmation of the value of their lives” (p. 344).

I believe that Frank’s ideas about illness narratives can be applied to consider the possibility that Barber’s telling of his addiction story is both a technology of the self through which power is exercised and a practice of freedom through which he attempts to move toward ethical care of the self and a moral life. Barber reflects on the story he wants for his life and the stories he wants to avoid, which Frank (1998) regards as central to any personal ethics. Barber engages in relationships of mutual care through his expressions of gratitude and his interest in “giving back.” Barber’s readers recognize his struggle to care for himself and affirm the value of his life, not just despite his struggle to overcome addiction, but because of it. I now examine various aspects of Barber’s writing in which he shows himself to be striving toward ethical care of the self and relationships of mutual care.

**Gratitude**

One way in which Barber engages in relationships of mutual care is through his expressions of gratitude to his followers and to staff at one of the places he temporarily lives. Elsewhere (Schneider, 2010) I have analyzed gratitude as a requirement of the charitable relationship, the means through which individuals “pay” for the charity, services, and help they receive. Now I want to consider gratitude as recognition of the other and as a way of participating in relationships of mutual care. In his blog, Barber acknowledges the contributions of his followers to his life and, in doing so, makes a contribution to theirs. He writes: “I also think that you, my reader are praying for me and for my good health. So, for you who have been praying for me a big thank you goes out to you and I hope you will continue to keep me in your prayers” (June 23, 2010). Also: “It really is incredible to have such wonderful support from each and every one of you. … I feel an incredible bond between you, my reader and myself. Just seeing all the wonderful comments that have been left on my blogs keeps me strong and willing to go yet another day without the use of drugs or alcohol” (November 8, 2010).

Barber describes the effect his connection with his followers has on him—“I have been kind, caring, compassionate and downright happy” (June 23, 2010)—and he attributes this to his increasing number of followers and especially to one of them who met him for coffee. Early in the post in which he confesses his $1100 bender, he writes, “Alpha House: ... Crabby staff” (February 11, 2011). (Alpha House is a housing agency in Calgary.) Toward the end of the post, written a day or two after the complaint about the Alpha House staff, he writes, “I would like to thank the Alpha House staff for all of their help. I’m starting to understand what they go through on a daily basis” (February 11, 2011). And in his very next post: “Please Alpha House, keep up with the wonderful job that you are doing for the homeless and addicted three hundred and sixty five days a year. You really are making a difference in a person’s life. I thank you from the bottom of my heart” (February 20, 2011). A week later he writes: “A. and P. are very kind and compassionate with all the clients and I can’t say enough about how wonderful they really are” (February 26, 2011).

It would be easy to see this as the dose of gratitude required to maintain access to services and, in Barber’s case, also connection with his followers. But it can also be
seen as something more: he needs and appreciates the recognition by his followers of his efforts to achieve a moral life through his attempts to be a better version of himself. In turn he acknowledges that others also have a need for recognition of their contributions to his life. In expressing gratitude and taking seriously the need that others have for recognition, he validates his own struggle for recognition. He participates in relationships of mutual care.

Giving back
Barber also expresses his desire to “give back” to other homeless people. “I want to be a much better person who can actually make changes in other peoples’ lives. I actually have a great desire to actually start helping in the homeless industry in any way that I can” (February 26, 2011). Also: “I hope that I will be able to give back some of my time to them [Alpha House] in the future” (February 26, 2011). He sees caring for others as an aspect of his self-care: “I feel so alive when I can give back to the place that is helping me in my recovery” (February 26, 2011). Here he expresses his desire to participate in relationships of mutual care with others who have had similar experiences to his own.

Addiction discourse
Barber is not completely taken in by the hegemonic discourse of addiction and the possibility of recovery that it offers: “I will be straight up honest and tell you, I used. It’s as simple as that and I truly am getting sick, sick and tired of my addiction. Sometimes I truly challenge that notion though. I believe that I also have some sort of fucked up brain” (November 29, 2010). And later in the same post, “For all those that think I can beat this addiction, I am truly sorry but I can’t try and stop it. I am hooked and I don’t think there is anything I can do to stop it” (November 29, 2010). He not only declares himself incapable of achieving responsible self-government in line with official goals, but also ever-so-cautiously contests the whole notion of addiction by attributing his behaviour to a malfunctioning brain. However, he does not attribute his current life to factors outside himself; instead he takes personal responsibility by locating it inside his brain, paving the way for an almost immediate return to his desire to be a responsible actor: “I so want to get my life turned around but I still don’t learn. I’m getting a lot frustrated with my way of thinking and living like I do. I’m sick of it” (November 29, 2010). The price of failure to responsibilize, continued exclusion from normal social life, and perhaps also loss of his connection with his followers, is too high. Despite having a sense that the whole notion of addiction is a game of truth, he will continue to participate in it and to care for the self on its terms. In making this choice, he constructs the active choice-making ethical subject who takes up the call to care for the self and develop relationships of mutual care.

Children
Barber’s desire to see his children again is a continuing theme of his blog. He tells us that he has two children, now about 7 and 9 years old, whom he has not seen in several years. He is actively working toward regaining contact with them through a lawyer who is making efforts on his behalf (July 15, 2010). He dreams of a life that includes them: “I am constantly thinking of my children and of finally being in a place
of my own. ... All I really ask is to be free of this homeless situation and to be able to talk to my children once again” (May 19, 2010). In one post he imagines a life with his children—“It’s so nice to be able to see my kids laughing and playing” (May 15, 2010)—and imagines himself having the life of a “normal” parent who takes his children swimming, makes meals for them, and socializes with other families with children. He expresses his desire to care for them, but he also acknowledges his challenges in doing so: “[I] should have been a better father. ... Thank God for [their] [m]other! ... I feel as though maybe [I] should just leave them alone and let them be with [their] [m]other. I don’t know how to handle this pressure of raising children” (July 23, 2010). He expresses his desire to care for his children, but he acknowledges that care for himself must come first, writing: “I have decided that I am going to start worrying about me and me only. No more thoughts of my kids” (November 29, 2010).

Like his writings about gratitude, Barber’s writings about his children can be seen as both a technology of the self and a practice of freedom. It has been made clear to him by his interactions with various authorities, including social workers and people in the legal system, that as long as he does not responsibilize and continues to live as a homeless addict, he will be denied access to his children. His statements about his desire to be reunited with his children could therefore be seen as a performance for the benefit of these authorities. But here again, I believe that it is also something more. He expresses his desire to care for his children, but not until he has cared for himself. He recognizes that it is not enough that he cares for others. He must also care for himself on the terms of the dominant discourse. Only when he has cared for himself will he be able to engage in the relationships of mutual care he so desires with his children, in line with Foucault’s assertion that “care for others should not be put before the care of oneself” (in Rabinow, 1997, p. 287).

Hope
Barber plays with the concept of hope in his writing. As a number of scholars have noted in relation to breast cancer (e.g., Ehrenreich, 2009; Sulik, 2010), optimism and hopefulness are “feeling rules” (Hochschild, 1979) for ill people; that is, they are required of ill people in order to display themselves as appropriately dealing with their illness. In his early blogs, starting on February 15, 2010, Barber signed himself “Tim Barber, Homeless but not without HOPE.” He continued to use this signature during March and early April, when all four writers were still posting to the blog. When the blog became his own, he began to use his signature in a more personal way to signal his state of mind.

- May 15, 2010 (morning): Homeless but trying not to become HOPELESS
- May 15, 2010 (evening): Homeless but regaining HOPE
- May 19, 2010: Homeless but not without some HOPE
- June 7, 2010: Homeless Still; Gaining HOPE With Every Day
- June 10, 2010: HOPE for the HOMELESS
- June 23, 2010: You, My Reader give me HOPE. I think we all need a little HOPE
- July 13, 2010: Homeless with Hope
- July 15, 2010: Hope is everywhere. I find plenty of hope with you, my reader
He then stops referring to hope in his signatures:

November 29, 2010: Homeless in Calgary
December 2, 2010: Homeless
December 19, 2010: Homeless Depressed Alone
January 3, 2011: Not feeling so lonely anymore.
February 2, 2011: Not Alone
February 12, 2011: Still living homeless
February 20, 2011: Never alone
February 26, 2011: Delighted with the new me.

While it is tempting to see this use of the concept of hope as a performance for the audience of his attempt to adhere to the dictates of prevailing feeling rules, it can also be seen as something more. He plays with the word “hope,” shaping his use of it to the content of each blog, demonstrating creativity in the telling of his story. Even when he stops using the word “hope” in his signature, he continues to play with the signature to develop a personal voice, to convey his struggles to his readers, and perhaps also to entertain. It is part of what makes this “his” story, his unique way of being “an addict.” It is a way for him to show his skills as a writer and to engage his audience: with each new post, his readers will look forward to seeing how he closes the post and will understand more of Tim Barber. It may also be a way for Barber to motivate himself to keep going in the struggle to ethically care for the self.

**Audience**

The presence of an audience is a key aspect of both the technology of the self and the practice of freedom. An audience is required in Foucault’s technologies of the self to witness confessions and impose a regime of truth. Barber’s followers play this role in reminding him of the dominant discourse of addiction and encouraging him to stick with his struggle. One of his followers writes: “Addiction is a powerful thing. One has to get rid of all the old and start anew. Some people may require explanations and apologies” (April 24, 2010). Another writes:
Thank you for your honesty, as it is something you’re going to have to do for yourself to help in your healing. You have had a long history with addiction and homelessness, so becoming free from this is not going to be a short process, its [sic] actually going to be a life long way of life. But support is going to be key for you to help yourself. Get yourself a sponsor, which should be someone that had a long history of clean time in. (June 10, 2010)

Yet another writes: “Addiction is hard to beat. [I]t’s one day at a time” (November 2, 2010). All of these words of advice and support reference the 12-step discourse of addiction, encouraging Barber to apologize, get a sponsor, and take the struggle one day at a time.

But I believe Barber’s commenters also play another role as witnesses to his struggles to construct authentic relations of mutual care. Some, for example, comment on the authenticity of his writing and laud him for his efforts: “I … was struck by the authenticity and poignancy of your writing. … Your honesty is refreshing to say the least” (June 6, 2010); “I’m praying for you, friend! And thank you for being brave enough to post publicly about your struggles” (February 11, 2011); “Your blog has touched my heart. You’re so honest and soulful” (January 7, 2011); “I feel so encouraged and hopeful when I think about homeless people being able to speak out in this way” (July 19, 2010). Barber responds by telling them how much it means to him that they recognize his struggle to master his appetites and achieve a new life through care for the self.

Authenticity is a problematic construct in any context, but particularly in relation to the work of Foucault. Governmentality works exactly because the responsibilized actor sees benefit to him- or herself, freely takes up the dictates of the dominant discourse, and perceives these as central to the construction of an authentic self. Governmentality thus preserves and exploits the values of freedom, autonomy, and authenticity to achieve its ends. Frank (1998) offers the possibility of achieving a form of authenticity beyond that of the responsibilized actor. He writes, “Authenticity must earn recognition” (p. 342). That is, authenticity is not something that can be regarded as self-evidently a characteristic of individuals. Rather, it must be discursively produced through social interaction. Frank (1998) suggests that the claim to authenticity depends on how a person lives out the choices he or she has made. While Barber is not entirely successful in living out the choices he claims he would like to be making, his confessions of drug use and his claims that the support of his followers is helping him to stay sober are part of what he does to be ethical and truthful. He makes himself accountable to his followers and achieves and maintains authenticity though his interaction with them. This sense of authenticity is both necessary to the construction of relationships of mutual care and produced through it. It also depends on a shared set of moral values in which the audience recognizes the value of particular ways of relating to self and others. The audience is both complicit in encouraging Barber to shape himself in line with broader social goals and the means through which Barber finds his voice in his struggle to engage in practices of freedom.

Conclusion
Despite his repeated failures to stop using illegal drugs, to remain in stable housing, and to achieve a “normal” life, Barber’s blog documents his struggles to be the “best
possible version of himself.” He uses the blog to help himself achieve this: “It feels better to know that I do have people out there that actually care about me. It would be hard for me to imagine where my life would be without this blog. This blog has given me a purpose in life and a reason to get up each and every day” (July 15, 2010). According to Frank (1998), “[c]ontinuing the struggle is contemporary care of the self” (p. 339, emphasis in original). Practicing freedom requires never-ending work. In a constantly shifting dialectic between domination and liberation, between the subjectivities of docile body and active agent, between technologies of the self and ethical care of the self, Barber’s telling of his addiction story on his blog both re-inscribes relations of power and constitutes ethical care of the self. It illustrates how technologies of the self prescribed by the dominant discourse of addiction are transformed into practices of freedom through the construction of authentic relations of mutual care.

Notes
1. Ethics approval for the blog project was received from the University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board. All the bloggers involved signed consent forms in which they acknowledged the possibility that scholarly articles would be written about the project. No attempt was made to conceal Tim Barber’s identity, as he used his real name on the blog and the blog is publically available.

2. Other homeless blogs include
   - The Homeless Guy: http://thehomelessguy.blogspot.com
   - WanderingScribe: http://wanderingscribe.blogspot.com
   - Homeless Nation: http://homelesssnation.org/en
   - View from the Sidewalk: http://view-sidewalk.blogspot.com
   - Homeless in Abbotsford, BC: http://www.homelessinabbotsford.com
   - Homeless in Long Beach: http://homelessmary.blogspot.com
   - Jamie’s Big Voice: http://jamiesbigvoice.blogspot.com
   - Click Homeless: http://www.clickhomeless.com

References


