

**STORIES OF PERSONAL EXPERIENCE AND NEW DIRECTION:
CHANGING PERSPECTIVES ON THE ROAD TO AUTHENTICITY**

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Abstract

This narrative inquiry self-study focuses on my journey to live and lead a more authentic life. My desire to undertake this topic emerged during the years I worked on my Master of Education, and was stimulated by a significant and palpable change in my personal and professional mindset part way through my studies. By choosing narrative inquiry as my methodology to study this phenomenon, I was able to analyze stories of my experiences in the past and present, leading me to a new vision of my future where the multiple roles I live can be undertaken with one voice and viewpoint. Focusing on the 4 directions of narrative inquiry, I was able to look: (a) inward, to better understand my feelings, reactions, and perception of past events and situations, (b) outward to my surroundings and external influences, (c) backward, to rethink and review my past experiences, to give voice and a sense of understanding to the little girl I was and clarification and freedom to the adult I am, and (d) forward, where I can contemplate the effect my perceptions and understandings of “reality” have on the possible scenarios of my future. Through this research into my self, I was able to come to a clearer understanding of my self and what I believe to be true: Authenticity in leadership and life is built upon one’s understanding of self. For me this understanding has come from and is built upon my quest for an undivided life: a life where the roads weave and bend around challenges but always bring about inspiration and growth.

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CHAPTER ONE: UNLOCKING THE DOOR

Waking Up

It has long been evident to me that I am a perfectionist. I have all of the markers. From my early years in elementary school, I would rewrite homework a number of times to make sure that it was perfect; the rage that would ensue when my things were out of place; to very rarely attempting anything new for fear of failure. I would find myself doing only tasks that I *knew* I would be good at and, whether I was conscious of it or not, I knew that if I didn't try, then I couldn't fail (Schafer, 1998). A scary thing that I have recently come to realize, however, is that for all of the years that I knew I was afflicted with this issue, I did not once seek out a resolution to it. It was as if I found comfort in the knowledge of “who I was” even though a part of me knew that I was limiting myself. I think now that I was sabotaging my authentic self—why, I don't know.

I was, as many perfectionists are, a self-proclaimed “control freak.” There was always a right way of doing things, my way, and those that stepped onto my path were quickly made aware of their place in my world. As negative as this may sound, this personality trait served me well in my academic endeavors, which for a young girl from a weary home in a small town was necessary to facilitate my escape.

The troubles at home began before my birth and reared themselves periodically throughout my childhood. I was the first born to a young 19-year-old mother and even younger 20-year-old father who had just left his traditional “son-loving” Italian home. Looking back now, I am struck with the feeling that I perceived my role as that of “care-taker,” whether that meant the house, my brother, or my mother. I do not remember overt gestures or comments by my parents that placed me in that role but, simply, it just seemed to be that things needed taking care

of so . . . I did. The stress and strain of the adult expectations I placed on myself were challenging, and I recognize now that they were simply underdeveloped coping skills to deal with a struggling family trying to be normal.

Little Helper

My memory of my time in kindergarten is, I'm sure, made up mostly of stories told to me, and I don't believe that I have a vivid recollection of what I am about to share, but this reconstruction is my story at this time in my life. As Atkinson (1995) stated:

When we tell stories, we sometimes create new mental images of things that help us become who we want to be by integrating previous experiences into a form that makes more sense to us. This is using our inner creative power to make stories with the power to transform ourselves. (p. 5)

From the age of 2 until about 5 or 6, my mother ran a daycare from our home, and she tells me that she had up to 15 kids, although I am sure that is more how it felt to her than the actual number. I was always the oldest, and by default I became Mommy's Little Helper. I took it upon myself to stop napping by age 3; there was just too much to do . . . and I did the best I could to make sure that all the babies had what they needed. I accomplished my task to such a degree that my brother, only 15 months younger than me, felt no need to speak until the age of 2. When he did start talking, he spoke in complete sentences. Why talk when your older sister finished every sentence with "and him too?"

When I went off to school, the helper skills that I had acquired over the previous years found their way into my classroom. I may have appeared to some as a bit of a do-gooder, but I didn't know how to behave any other way. I was quick to help others, and I was a bit advanced academically—I knew my numbers and could read simple texts before I got to school. So when

others needed help reading or counting, I jumped at the opportunity to help. My little helper duties also extended from the classroom to the coatroom where, at the end of every day, I was the last student to leave because I had to make sure that everyone had their boots, hats, and mitts, their backpacks, and their lunch bags. Apparently I would check the hooks and the shelves after everyone left to make sure that nothing was left behind before I was able to pack up and go home.

We lived only a short walk from my school, but every day I would be late coming home. One day I was especially late, and my mom, not being able to leave the other 14 kids behind to look for me, became very worried, so much so that when I did come in she berated me with questions like, “Where have you been? Why didn’t you come straight home?” to which I answered “I came straight home from school Mommy!! Honest!!” because I saw nothing abnormal in my daily duties, which was the true reason as to why I was late. I had no idea that if I simply told her about being the Little Helper she would have understood what took me so long to get home.

She immediately got on the phone saying, “Well we’ll just see what your teacher says,” in a tone that I understand now was to be threatening to a small child, but I, although a bit confused, saw no issue with her speaking to my teacher. After a brief but informative conversation on the phone she turned to me and said: “Why didn’t you just tell me about all the extra stuff you do at the end of the day?” to which I responded “What extra stuff?”

Power Through

Fortunately, I understand now that my family situation and my response to it were mild compared to many others that I have been made aware of in my current work with at-risk teens and adults. Although my childhood duties may have exceeded the social norms of the time, they

did not functionally debilitate me as a human being. I choose to look at the struggles I faced as a child and the moments I take now to revisit them as opportunities for personal growth on my path to increased awareness and self-love.

Not long after beginning my postsecondary education, I became more familiar with the effects that stress in the home can have on children, specifically, that many tend to do poorly in school, a trait exhibited by those suffering from what Schafer (1998) described as learned helplessness. However unlike those who suffered, I appear to have behaved differently. For as long as I can remember I had two mantras in life: (a) “Suck it up!” and (b) “Power through!” I am not sure why I was different from the textbook cases. Perhaps it’s a combination of many factors and influences throughout my life, and I am eager to explore the facets of my memory in search of a greater understanding.

However, looking back now, I equate my obsession with academic success as my way to gain control, not unlike an anorexic who, in search for control, obsessively manipulates his or her nutrient intake (Schafer, 1998). Or perhaps the same personality trait or gene or emotional coping mechanism that was fuelled by my family’s disorganization and lack of happiness propelled me to succeed in an environment that flourished upon structure and discipline. What was it about structure, organization, planning, and order that made me feel safe? Was it safety that I was looking for, or was it a cry for help or a plea for love? What did I need as a child that this “order” gave me? Was it simply a sense of control?

In the past few years I have noticed a profound change in my behaviour. I no longer cringe when something is out of place. I can leave my office at the end of the workday, even if my desk is a complete disaster. I have begun to enjoy the journey more than the getting to the end. I hear more of what people are saying and think less about what *I think* they should do to

improve their circumstances. I now find comfort in the unknown. I have even begun to write about my life experiences, some from childhood, some more recent, without concern for the final product, simply for the joy of writing. Through this writing I feel that am unlocking a door to a great secret that really is no secret at all . . . that the word “living” is a verb and is not to be taken lightly or abused or something that you leave until the end of your “bucket list” to do. I look back and think that so much of my life was spent simply existing and not living. I kept things in order, I moved things and people back to where I thought they should be. I did what I thought I was supposed to do.

Starting . . .

It has been through my experience in the Master of Education program, where professional development has become personal development, that I have been able to overcome my unhealthy penchant for perfection and begin the release of my creative self, my authentic self. As an educational leader, the impact of my increased self-knowledge has begun to manifest in what I feel are amazing ways. I am working towards a sense of freedom, peace, and balance, not only at work but also in every aspect of my life.

However, like Shields in Shields and Patton (2004), after my time in postsecondary education I felt accomplished but empty. I felt directionless and unsure of myself. It was during that time I recall seeing a teacher from high school whose interaction with me started a chain reaction of events that I believe, in part, has brought me to today.

Shortly after my four years of undergraduate studies at university I moved into the new home created by my father and his wife, where nothing felt familiar or right. I began to work at a local hardware store for minimum wage, which is where I ran into my high school biology teacher who was, incidentally, the teacher who had inspired me to take molecular biology and

genetics at university in the first place. As I stood there, a lowly cashier at a hardware store, the look on his face as we spoke, the look of utter disappointment, immediately struck me and haunted me for years afterwards. What I had yet to put my finger on and could not share with him in that moment was that the road to “scientist” was not intended for me. And although I knew well enough to steer my car out of that particular rut, I was driving aimlessly on other preset roads trying to find my path. I could articulate none of these thoughts to this teacher standing in front of me in our 5-minute encounter.

Almost 10 years later our paths crossed again, but this time I proudly commented on my job title and position within the board of education. To my dismay, there was still a palpable sense of disappointment, which I recognize now may or may not have originated with him. As proud as I was, I still had yet to name my chosen road, and even though I knew I was headed in the right direction, something still wasn't right. It wasn't long after my second encounter with him that I signed up to complete my Master's degree in Education and I attribute my doing so in part to him.

As I began considering further study through the M.Ed. program, I started slowly, unsure of this new learning path. But the momentum soon built, and before long I found my anticipation, my feelings, intensifying as I felt myself heading in the direction that I wanted or needed to go; I remember it felt as if my insides wanted to pop out, and it was all I could do to contain myself. Similar to Helwig's (1992) comment on Frost's *Road Not Taken*, “The single life we are given is both too much and not enough. Even the most singular of us is plural, haunted by the ghost being we own and are” (Helwig, 1992). I believe that I had begun to discover my parallel lives, lives yet to be and perhaps meant to be un-lived. At that time in my life, I found I drove faster and faster, read more and wrote more, lived more and loved more. It was an amazing

time. Looking back now, I see that I had finally discovered what had eluded me for so long—my road, my path to what would make me happy. I felt myself moving to a spectacular place of joy and peace, love and understanding. It seemed to me to be a slow place, covered in lush green leaves and surrounded by crystal water. I imagined walls lined with books, a kitchen filled with food, and a cellar topped to the ceiling with wine. I couldn't wait to get there! It all began with the application essay that I wrote for entry into the M.Ed. program.

Lifelong learning and professional development are synonymous with my philosophy of life, "to lead a life with a strong sense of personal and social responsibility." The Master of Education program will provide me with the opportunity to fulfill my sense of purpose by developing my leadership and management skills as they relate to education and being able to work with like-minded professionals to enhance and expand my knowledge of education best practices and implementation. Ultimately, I will put all of my knowledge and experiences to good use as an excellent teacher and in time a respected, dynamic, professional and forward-thinking administrator.

I am fortunate enough to be surrounded by a variety of people and processes which have encouraged me to further my formal education. I have had the opportunity to develop my management and interpersonal skills as they relate to staff development, the chance to work with Simcoe County's adult students, and am currently involved in and have the privilege of leading a group of fantastic minds in the development of course material that exceeds today's educational standards.

Most recently, I have had the benefit of being chosen to take part in a workshop to develop my coaching techniques. As a member of the six-person team, I performed a variety of exercises that enhance skills in lateral as well as vertical communication with

colleagues. These new strategies have complemented my current repertoire of managerial techniques and strategies. Being responsible for the health and safety, discipline, and staff morale is a task to which I give the utmost time and energy. I routinely use communication techniques which combine respect, patience, and positivity. I have been very successful in all of my managerial roles, and the secret to that success has been my own personal and professional development in leadership and customer service.

Through a somewhat incidental path of employment I have found what many take a lifetime to find, a passion for my work. As a Program Coordinator for Adult and Continuing Education for three years, I have helped people to be “bigger than their circumstances,” shared life-changing moments, and learned the virtue of humility. I am also the right hand of the Centre administrator. In this managerial role, I am responsible for a variety of tasks including all student intake and registration, staffing and staff development, health and safety administration, guidance and student development, evaluation of equivalency credits, facility management, and for communication between students, staff, administration, and the community.

When I became a Program Coordinator, our department was in a state of flux. We were reorganizing student timetabling and introducing adult-specific curriculum. I volunteered to take part in the curriculum development. I felt very strongly that the resources and course material that were available did not address the needs of the adult student population. I knew that the curriculum needed to be relevant and practical. Fortuitously, shortly afterwards, I attended a workshop on Differentiated Instruction (DI), and at that moment the possibilities for our adult course material became limitless.

I quickly began to research and include multiple practices into our course materials, which were student centered and completely driven by the vision of increasing student achievement. Now, two years later, we have four courses that use innovative teaching techniques that empower students and support their personal and educational success. Students are motivated to finish high school and seek out either postsecondary education or sustainable employment.

I have had the good fortune to be employed in a unique management role which allows me the opportunity to experience firsthand what it means to be an education administrator. It is time for me to expand my knowledge base and use the skills that I have acquired to enhance my education so that I too can be a purveyor of genuine and innovative education.

Now, this essay doesn't really sound like me—it is a bit more formal than I am used to in my present life, but I did write it. Looking back, I see it was really the beginning of my map. I wrote about what I had done up until that point and how the Master of Education program would enhance my leadership skills, but I know now that I had no idea as to how that would really happen. In that essay I sounded hopeful and optimistic, and I believe that the part of me that found the courage to write it hadn't quite convinced the rest of me of its truth. Was it my soul peeking its shy head out for a short while, just long enough to scribble down feelings of hope and possibility? I wrote thoughts then that I would later understand to be closer to my true self than anything I had written or done before. I am grateful to my soul or inner self for making the desperate journey to the surface in hopes of finding a hospitable environment in which to settle. And settle I did, although still safe and secure, hidden from plain sight, my inner self was there, closer than ever, fuelling passion and enlightenment for the years to come.

Where Do I Go From Here?

What started me on this educational path? It was not a deep-seated desire to further my education, although that notion is in there somewhere. It was not the desire for status or money, although I suppose those things would be appreciated. It was spring fever! Every year in the spring, for as long as I can remember, I would feel an overwhelming need to make a major life change. For years I would satiate this need by either changing jobs or moving to a new home. These unexplained desires for change led me to apply to the Master of Education program at Nipissing University in 2009. Unbeknownst to me, this choice marked the beginning of my journey toward self-knowledge, which has led me to an increased sense of autonomy and authenticity in my personal life as well as in my professional role as a leader of an adult educational facility.

Perhaps it is serendipitous that the theme of authenticity resonated through each course that I have taken; I now live and breathe the word and its meaning like a yoga mantra. My self-awareness and the conscious thought that I have given to my actions have increased throughout my educational journey, starting with my first course in the fall, *Educational Leadership*, where researchers such as Fullan (2000, 2002) played a major role in my introduction to educational research, through to the winter semester and *Curriculum*, where I was introduced to John Dewey (1938) and his theories of experience as education. The following spring, I took *Ethics* where learning about Starratt's (2004) posture on ethical leadership began to change my perception of my self and my actions, quickly followed by *Mentoring*, which I took during the beautiful month of July at the Bracebridge campus, where I discovered Palmer (1998; 2004) and his teachings about authenticity and living an undivided life, taught by my thesis supervisor, Dr. Carmen Shields. It was during that gorgeous summer month, as I commuted from Barrie to Bracebridge

and back again, that I can distinctly remember feeling changed, feeling like the metamorphosis that had taken place was the one thing that I had been searching for every spring of my life.

This change prompted me to sign up for Dr. Shields's next course, *Narrative Inquiry*, a course that until that summer had been the furthest thing from my mind. It was fluffy and touchy-feely; it would force me to dig into places of my soul that I had worked so hard to bury. Now, I am forever grateful for the teachings of Dr. Shields and the work of authors such as Clandinin and Connelly (1991, 1994, 2000, 2006). Through their work, I was able to find my communicative writing outlet, narratives of my own experience, a natural and authentic way for me to share with others what I feel can be important contributions to educational research. Specifically, I can say that the positive impact that my increased self-awareness has had on my skills as a leader unfolded in that course, as did my increased awareness of the thoughts and feelings of others, which has helped me to put aside personal gain as a motivator. I also learned that to be authentic, I must keep my values and sense of purpose at the forefront of my actions.

In the moment somewhere between reading about being open to creativity and the value of authenticity in leadership and decision making, I found my voice. I have been forever changed by the knowledge that I acquired from material presented in the courses I have taken and the research it has sparked me to do for myself. I feel a strong desire to explore the intricacies for these life-changing events.

Using narrative inquiry as my thesis methodology, I am delving into my transformation by looking in the four directions that comprise this methodology: (a) inward, to better understand my feelings, reactions, and perceptions of events, (b) outward to my surroundings and my external influences, (c) backward, to rethink and review my past experiences, to give voice and a sense of understanding to the little girl I was, and clarification and freedom to the adult I am, and

(d) forward, where I can contemplate the effects my perceptions and understandings of “reality” have on the possible scenarios of my future (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

CHAPTER TWO: THE MAP

Every Journey Needs a Beginning

I still remember the temperature in the room that day; the air was cool, almost chilled from the air conditioner, but the sun outside the window told a different story. The mid-July heat was beating its way through the school window in a losing battle against the ever-ready AC. But the temperature outside my skin had no impact on the warmth I felt inside me that day. I remember the feeling clearly as Dr. Shields read from Estes (1992), Women Who Run With the Wolves, about the stream that runs through us and carries with it all that we are. It was as if I too could feel my life source running through me, energizing every cell, every part of my being. Not only was the sun beaming through the windows into the room, but the energy my soul was producing was winning over the air conditioner and filling the entire room with warmth and radiant heat.

Much earlier in my academic career, I realized that I am an auditory learner, but it was not until I had taken time to reflect on that moment in my Mentoring class that I truly understand that that was indeed the case. As Dr. Shields shared those beautiful words, and those of other significant authors that I have included in my research for this self-study, I was moved, I felt transcended, and I evolved. I knew in that moment that the world was full of possibilities that I had never let myself be open to before. I knew I was a writer, a mentor, a teacher, a pupil.

During those few weeks in July I was introduced to written works and authors that I now consider close friends, such as Parker Palmer and Julia Cameron to name a couple. They, along with some amazing others that I have picked up along the way, have travelled with me throughout the journey I have been on during my M.Ed. years, a journey that I believe and hope has no end.

The Power of Story

I think I had always considered myself a bit of a storyteller. I found great joy in regaling others with a tale or two. However there was often a part of me that felt uneasy sharing with certain others (new, more popular, cooler people), people I may have been trying to impress. I would frequently find myself embellishing small bits of each story, perhaps in hopes of making it more interesting, to make what I was saying seem bigger and better. I often caught myself doing this, and I recall vividly asking myself, “Why are you lying right now? What purpose does this serve?” Was I so self-conscious that I didn’t trust that my story would be enough to woo the crowd? What disservice had been done to me or had I done to myself so early in my life to lead me to believe that I wasn’t enough, that in order for others to approve of me, I had to stretch myself and my words?

In my memory, the stories I once told were shallow and entertaining, but when given the opportunity to reflect and write stories of my experiences that were as true as my memory would allow me to believe, I no longer felt the need to lie to others or myself. It was very liberating to share of myself and know that it was enough. I believe that through the time spent writing narratively in my *Narrative Inquiry* course in the fall of 2010, I began to understand the power of story within me and the power that stories had on me. I still fancy myself a storyteller, but now I find my own truth enough for me and, if it so happens, for others that I may share them with. As Atkinson (1995) stated,

Story is a tool for making us whole; stories gather up the parts of us and put them together in a way that gives our lives greater meaning than they had before we told our story. Story is a tool for self-discovery; stories tell us new things about

ourselves that we wouldn't have been as aware of without having told the story.

(p.#3)

When contemplating my path to complete my Master of Education degree, I initially thought of the course route, as I believed that I was not capable of doing a thesis or major research paper; I didn't believe I had the literacy skills necessary to write either of those independent works, and I wondered what I could possibly offer the education world that would seem worthwhile. But those feelings of insecurity and self-doubt quickly faded away once I started writing narratively. Combined with enlightening work on narrative inquiry shared with me by Dr. Shields, I knew in a moment that I had found my voice, my methodology, and that I did have something to share with others, which was what I had learned about my evolving, authentic self.

I feel that the use of story as a research methodology is fitting, as “we are, all of us, living stories, eager to find our own voices by which we can be known to others” (Atkinson, 1995, p. 12). As Buford (1996) notes, stories connect us to each other, to humanity, and as a tool for self-discovery they can tell us things about ourselves that we wouldn't have been aware of otherwise. Used as a fundamental unit of knowledge, stories are the foundation of memory. Atkinson (1995) mused that

as storytellers, we seek-and find-deeper meaning in what we thought we knew before but didn't really know we didn't know until we expressed it with words. Writing stories gives real words to our thoughts – brings clarity, and clarity – understanding what we have said about ourselves – brings self-knowledge, while self-knowledge brings meaning. The more meaning we find in life, the more we get out of life. (p. 14)

Combine these words with Clandinin and Connelly's (1991, 1994, 2000, 2006) view on the research audience: that the purpose of narrative inquiry is to have readers raise questions about their own practice; to connect to the story and be drawn into it as a participant; that there is a conversation between researcher and reader, and the value of this chosen methodology becomes clear. These points link to a goal of my research, which is to reconstruct and share my experiences in a realistic way, using stories that evoke emotions, physical reaction, connection, and awe, for as Dewey (1938) described, education, experience, and life are inextricably intertwined. Ultimately I want clarity, understanding, and self-knowledge . . . to get more out of life (Atkinson, 1995).

I agree with Clandinin and Connelly (1991, 1994, 2000, 2006) that Dewey's statement, when taken in its most general sense, means that to study education is to study experience. Using a research methodology that supports the study of experience using story as method to help me discover my own authentic voice and to provide a possible avenue for readers to see something of themselves through socially defined and culturally similar story particulars is meaningful to me as a professional and as a person. I feel able to express my thoughts, memories, and feelings using this methodology, which gives credence to my experience as a viable contribution to the study of education and, hopefully, has a positive impact on those who read my work.

There are some in the research community, "formalists" Clandinin and Connelly (2000) call them, that require predetermined questions on which to base their research. However, I find that the beauty of narrative inquiry is in the burgeoning questions that emerge through the ongoing inquiry and reconstruction of experience. Previously, as a long-time student of the sciences, I felt that a valid study must be quantitative, repeatable, with the goals and study purposes made clear at the onset. But as Buford (1996) commented, "Oliver Sacks is the

undisputed master at writing narratively for scientific purposes” (p. 12). I recognized, perhaps like Sacks, that for me, quantitative methodologies did not seem to get to the root of the human experience that I deeply wanted to know. As Buford also states, “the foundation of memory is essential to the way we make sense of our lives” (p.12), and although I had initially shied away from the possibility of writing a research paper, I recognize that using narrative inquiry as my methodology provides me with understanding and insight gained in the living, telling, reliving and retelling of my experiences, and through this process, I believe I will begin to fully become my self (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994). I am not exactly sure what I will find on the other side of this adventure, but I hope to find the courage to ask myself formerly forbidden questions and then muster the strength to shine a light on the answers. I know that I have changed; I know that I am becoming more conscious of my authentic self: more true to what I believe matters in my life. It is how this change has happened and why that behooves me to conduct this study. The power of this change resonates through every minute of my day, but the most significant impact that I have seen has been in my role as an educational leader in a high school for adults.

There is an increased need and desire for moral and authentic leaders in education, authenticity born of self-knowledge, which may be gained from purposeful, reflective practice or narrative inquiry (Bolton, 2010). Part of the value of this self-study for me is to gain a greater understanding of the connection between narratives of experience and the pursuit of self-knowledge as essential components of authentic educational leadership.

The Road Was Written All Over Me

I believe that another reason that I was drawn to self-study narrative inquiry was that it allowed me to spend a significant amount of time looking inward, searching past events and situations and simultaneously beginning to heal myself from past experiences through a process

of self-reflection as I reconstructed new meaning to use in the writing of my thesis. As Atkinson (1995) defined it:

Life storytelling is a tool for meaning-making and that new meaning in our lives helps heal old wounds that may have been left unattended for a lifetime. This increases self-understanding and self-acceptance. (p. 6)

In similar fashion, Mooney (as cited in Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001) notes,

Research is a personal venture, which, quite aside from its social benefits is worth doing for its direct contribution to one's own self-realization. It can be taken as a way of meeting life with the maximum of stops, open to get out of an experience its most poignant significance, its most full-throated song. (p. 13)

By placing one's self in time and space, as a social being, within a culture, the value of self-study becomes evident (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001). Each being creates the world around them along with the world within them; through self-study, connecting to purpose and conviction, reasoning and theory, I, the self-study researcher, have the opportunity to influence the world around me and to understand and influence myself and others simultaneously (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001).

Early in my research, the latent scientist in me still harbored the idea that validity of research is gained through repeatability; however, upon further research and personal contemplation I have come to agree with Bullough and Pinnegar (2001), who outline the redefinition of validity with the trustworthiness of the storied data, and with Mishler (1990), who argues that the trustworthiness of a study is created by the social constructs and tacit understanding of those situated in the specific field of study. To that end, I, as a narrative researcher, can feel confident moving forward with my research by relying on my understanding

and the strength of the framework of narrative inquiry as defined by Clandinin and Connelly (1991, 1994, 2000, 2006). The validity of my work rests in the trustworthiness of the methodology. Bullough and Pinnegar list a series of guidelines for autobiographical work which shed light on the quality of self-study research. They believe that “the guidelines point towards virtuosity in scholarship” (p.#16). A number of their guidelines resonate with me in regard to my work, specifically that self-studies should ring true and enable connection and that self-studies in education are about the problems and issues that make someone an educator. I know that for myself, when reading research, if I find a sense of validity in the connections I am able to make to my own experiences, I am propelled to read on with confidence. And the fact that I began my self-study research in the midst of educating myself as a leader and educator has meant that every new discovery I make, every question I pose and answer about who I am propels my professional self towards a state of authenticity and enlightenment. Powerfully and rightfully this engages the educator in me to a heightened state of awareness and therefore allows me to be more present in my work. It is for these reasons that I have chosen self-study narrative inquiry to investigate my phenomenon: the development of my authentic and undivided self through self-discovery and personal enlightenment. I feel it is the most fluid and transparent method to allow for a much-needed multifaceted interpretation and analysis of my own complex human experience.

Synergy

The past shapes the future through the medium of a situation, and the future shapes the past through the stories we tell to account for and explain our situation. Where we have been and where we are going interact to make meaning of the situations in which we find ourselves. (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 9)

Each experience or phenomenon is an entity in itself, a whole in three dimensions, with a temporal plane and a social plane, both of which occupy a place in the concrete world (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). No one experience can be taken as a single, identifiable unit in time and space; for they each are connected to each other, like the matrix of neurons of the brain, connecting and reconnecting, ending and beginning. Their value cannot be determined through a microscope but rather through the observation and evaluation of their impact and effect on the world around them from multiple, yet simultaneous viewpoints and perspectives. Therefore, the analysis of my phenomenon, evaluating the burgeoning questions posed through the three dimensions noted above, and moving specifically in the four directions, *inward*, *outward*, *backward*, *forward*, occupying temporality and sociality, must also be done as a whole (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). An experience is not simply the sum of its parts but a synergistic entity created and maintained by the teller of the story. As Dewey (1938) states,

the principle of continuity of experience means that every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after. (p. 35)

In this case, I am the storyteller and, as such, to truly evaluate or analyze my experience requires it be viewed from multiple directions and perspectives.

Can't Leave Home Without Them

Although defining my research direction proved to be a challenge, I knew that there were certain works by specific authors that would be included in my thesis, as they each have had a significant effect on my growth and level of increased self-awareness which is leading me to my desired state of being—one of authenticity, reflection, and self-love. The work of authors such as Palmer (2004), Clandinin and Connelly (1994, 2000), and Bolton (2010), to name just a few,

resonate with me, and I find that their words echo inside me long after I turn their pages. The value of their teachings, their vision, their art, propels me to want more for myself and encourages me to challenge the world around me in search of my truth.

Parker Palmer (2004) defines identity and integrity; he encourages the readers to view themselves through the stories he tells, and he intertwines the concepts of trust and vulnerability, mentorship, and authority of oneself. His book *A hidden wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life* (2004) has become a talisman for me. During my first reading, it engaged me to deeply reflect on my actions and “truisms”; to ask myself whether or not my actions truly reflect who I am. It showed me the beauty of living an undivided life and demonstrated strategies to start me on that life path. I find comfort in the pages of this book and reread a number of sections that I have highlighted as personal gospel. One specific passage has become my mantra through my evolution, and as Palmer (2004) acknowledges, is hard to stick to:

No fixing, no saving, no advising, no setting each other straight. The rule is simple, but abiding by it is hard work for people accustomed to straightening each other out as a way of life; especially those of us in the so-called helping professions, who sometimes act as if our entire reason for being is to set people straight. (p. 115)

There I was in black and white. In these words I believe I found the reason I had never felt whole. I had spent my entire life sorting other people out and spent no time looking inward to my own soul, which I now realize has been desperate for attention.

Using Palmer’s (1998, 2004) teachings as a guide or beacon to follow, I find some hard truths a bit easier to manage than I had anticipated and comfort in the *unknown*, whereas in the past my discomfort with a “lack of control” would send me into a state of emotional turmoil until some sense of control was regained (often in an unrelated area or facet of my life).

I was introduced to the work of Clandinin and Connelly (1991, 1994, 2000, 2006) by Dr. Shields, and it was through their words that I was able to view the methodology or vehicle for me to move forward in my research. For many years, I was not able to find my voice, and participating with others in the narrative inquiry course triggered the writer in me. Stories are powerful, and I, like so many others I assume, have learned more from the stories of life being told and enacted around me than from what I was directly taught. This knowledge is what Clandinin and Connelly have imprinted on me; when I read the last line in their chapter in Denzin and Lincoln's *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (1994), I knew that through narrative inquiry I would be able to give purpose to my "helping" way of life while still honouring my self.

It is in the research relationships among participants and researchers, and among researchers and audiences, through research texts that we see the possibility for individual and social change. (p. 425)

During the weeks leading up to writing the proposal for this research text, I picked up Gillie Bolton's (2010) book *Reflective Practice*, and at the time I anticipated that it would be a textbook of sorts, dry and laborious. But what I discovered in the six days it took me to devour it was that the tools I needed to bring my voice to life were already a part of me and, in a strange way, for a very long time I had purposefully been forbidding them from coming to the surface. Writing, journaling, storytelling, things I chose not to do: "Why would I write something down that I have thought already in my head, the inefficient, timewasting act of writing seems redundant; seriously who has time for that? Think about it, come to a solution and move on." I can vividly remember thinking this very thought on more than one occasion. However, after reading Bolton's work, at what might have been the perfect place and time in my life,

immediately after taking Dr. Shields's narrative course and during my favourite, most memory-laden time of the year, Christmas, I suddenly found myself not simply wanting to write but needing to write my story. And although Bolton's book refers more to the professional uses of reflective practice, I felt that the idea of reflection as storytelling was an appropriate means for me to gain a better understanding of myself. Atkinson (1995) linked reflection and storytelling by stating:

Becoming more reflective of the things that happen to us can lead to developing the art of telling stories about our lives. Reflection and introspection helps us to put events and feelings in order. The more we reflect on what has happened, or how we feel the clearer it all becomes. (p. 14)

I had come to realize that sharing my story had as much to do with what I would get out of it as it would what others might get out of it. I understand now that for so long I had defined myself by what I did *for* other people—that the act of writing about and for myself seemed counterintuitive. When I became more interested in myself and less interested in what I did, the floodgates opened and there really was no turning back. As the evolution of myself began to unfold, Bolton's words (2010) hit on something deep, something exciting: that living and being are verbs and that I needed to take action.

The very notion of *me* is problematic, however: I am not a static entity but in the process of being created every day as social and political forces impact upon me; I am a story I tell and retell every day, with fresh facets and new viewpoints each time. I am not so much a thing – static in shape, form and time – but more a verb – *me* but *to me*. (p. 57)

My Pit Crew

There have been a number of authors, works of literature, and research that have impacted me throughout my journey, some before, some during, and some as a result of this research. However, what they all have in common is the profound effect that they have had on me, although each different in its perspective and specific message or story. For me, the elation and sense of awe I felt after reading each one felt spectacularly similar and unique simultaneously. It was as if each word on every page offered new, yet somehow mystically old knowledge that I, as a new human on this earth, felt comforted by.

Perhaps it is Dr. Shields that I should list here as the most powerful influence, the leader of my pit crew, because as I searched through my research and cherry-picked the works that have had the most significant impact on me, I have discovered that each piece I'd chosen was either provided by her as a course reading or suggested to me by her as a reading I might find pleasurable.

For example, authors such as Buford, whose short article written for *The New Yorker* in 1996 (the first piece of writing that I read about narrative in my life), hit me like a ton of bricks. I was struck by the simplicity of the message as it described the complexity of the conversion of our society back to storytelling as a valued method of communication. It hinted at the “wrongness” of our objectification of so much in society and eased me in to the idea that subjectivity *does* have value. It was clear to me after reading this article that narrative inquiry was not going to be a hard sell for me; a part of me knew that I needed this methodology as a vehicle for my own voice.

Dr. Shields also included a chapter from Atkinson's *The Gift of Stories* (1995) in her course pack, and it described in great detail the power of storytelling. Each paragraph presented a

new epiphany for me, and statements such as “stories tell us new things about ourselves that we wouldn’t have been aware of without having told the story” (p.1) and

“n telling our life story, we gain new insights into human dilemmas, human struggles, and human triumphs, while also gaining a greater appreciation for how values and beliefs are acquired, shaped and held onto; in this way, the story of one person can become the story of us all (p. 4).

Such messages glued themselves to my psyche in such a way that I am forever changed. In connecting with this particular piece, I began to understand the power I might wield in my storytelling and why I chose this methodology and method for my thesis writing.

Highlighting another significant influence that Dr. Shields shared with me was the writing of bell hooks (2003). She identified for me the dominant culture of objectivism as dehumanizing and promoted teacher–pupil interactions to be mutual pursuits of knowledge. She suggested that educators who are tuned to their emotional frequency as well as the emotional frequencies of their students are better equipped to provide a respectful learning community based on love and empowerment. hooks finished her chapter Heart to Heart with: “Love will always move us away from domination in all of its forms and will always challenge us to change” (p. 137). These are words that echo in sacred parts of my heart and mind on a personal as well as professional level. I choose to envision that it is the love that I have not only for myself but also for others that will challenge and change me. I am at my best and a significant support to and for the ones that I care about when I am aware of who I am; the knowledge of self that I gather through narrative inquiry allows me to be open and honest, aware of my motives and purposeful in my actions.

When Travelling a New Road, You Must Constantly Adjust

When it was suggested to me that I use metaphor as part of my methodology, to make the intangible tangible, to make my abstract thinking concrete for the reader (Bolton, 2010), I was unsure how to proceed. I thought, “How can I choose a metaphor for all that this research paper will be when I have no idea where my writing will take me?” I toyed with a few ideas, but nothing felt real or authentic. But then, by happenstance, I was flipping through some of my field texts and I discovered a theme: travel. As I delved a bit deeper into not only my field texts but what I thought of the theme of travel, I thought of the place that *driving* holds in my life—a vehicle for travel—and I was overwhelmed by the connections I was able to make to my intrinsic and extrinsic self. Some of my most joyful moments have been while driving. I seem to come in close contact with that energized feeling that I have always been in search of. The actual act of driving in a car has played into my need for change and a sense of direction.

This self-study research journey is not just a metaphysical one. I see that the physical act of movement, of motion while travelling in a car has taken my mind to places I had kept closed for a very long time. I can see myself in the early stages of my evolution stuck in the ruts pre-made by those that went before me. I could say I felt the wheel turn in my hands as if being driven by someone else. I distinctly remember the road trip home to Barrie from Bracebridge when my mind was blown open by the thought of there being possibilities for living my life that I had never conceived of before, and now, as I write, I know that the road before me is new and unmarked and as is the case driving, I will need to constantly adjust.

CHAPTER THREE: EARLY YEARS: ON THE ROAD

Before I Knew Where I Was Going

There I was, like so many others, behind the wheels of our very own cars, moving along the streets, dirt roads, and highways of life. Like me in my car, before I knew where I was going, my movement in the stories in this chapter over many years was slow and directionless. I realize now that I drove through my life blind and aimless; metaphorically I think now that I was following the car in front of me or using a map created for or by someone else. There, in my Honda Civic, my little “tin can,” grey, tiny, and stale, I did everything and anything that I could to take control of my direction, but all the while I just kept following the car ahead of me. Recently, I noticed that every year when I found myself turning the same mundane corner, I would get the urge to veer in a different direction. However, even if I managed to stray from the deeply grooved path set out before me for a short while, I would find myself back behind that same car that I had been following before. Where was it taking me? Who was in it?

I would notice from time to time that there were cars following me too, and this would fill me with a feeling of importance: “Wherever I am going must be a good place, as others seem to want to follow me there.” Strangely enough, I even found myself waving people along, asking them to get behind me, asking them to follow my lead. To be honest, sometimes it was more like telling them to follow me, and they didn’t seem to mind. My guess is that they were just as directionless as I was and were happy to feel safe following behind someone else.

Looking in the Rearview Mirror

There I was . . . happy, organized, confident, strong, weak, scared, unsure, and alone; a girl who took control of her surroundings by creating order, structure, and displaying an attitude of “no regrets.” A girl who made decisions wholly on whether or not it pleased . . . mom, boy, girl,

stranger, or provided the immediate gratification needed to create joy for a fleeting moment. Was it really that bad? Was I simply a shadow of myself driving through life blind and scared? No, I don't think that is entirely true, although that would explain why I felt the need to have an alcoholic drink every day after school all through grade 10. What 15-year old "quits" drinking for fear of becoming an alcoholic? I remember thinking that I could have turned to pot, as it was as easy to get as french fries in the cafeteria, but that I was smart enough to stay away from it, not because it was wrong but because I knew I would enjoy it too much, need it too much, and somehow I knew that it would stop me from getting out, from becoming something better, happier, something free.

Cloudy, fuzzy, vague—that is how I would describe most of the memories before starting university. I had hoped that in writing this self-study research I would unlock some of the secrets of what my life was like as a young child and teenager; however, for all of my pondering and struggle, the memories are still hazy at best. I find that as I retell and reconstruct my story, I rely on my feelings and emotional memory more than the filmstrip of my past. And I laugh now as I write this statement, because my somewhat photographic memory was my claim to fame for most of my academic life. I could simply spend a bit of time with notes or in a class and I could vividly recall lines, pages, and the blackboard with such clarity that writing tests was, among other scholastic endeavors, quite easy for me. But as it turns out, the experiences which Dewey (1938) would say were the real lessons of my education seem forever muddled and grey. However, the power of the emotions I feel are attached to some of the muddle in my mind is no less powerful than a vivid recall of my past. I think that the discomfort I felt, the hidden anger and disconnection from my true self, are what pushed me to finally pull away from the convoy I had been following.

Identifying the most significant moments in my life and listing them is a task I feel would be insurmountable, but what I have gleaned from my vivid and emotional memory are snippets of my early years. Moments in time that, when I tell and retell them, I am newly moved, shaken, and taken aback, each time for reasons different from the last, however, each and every time I am enlightened and changed by what I learn.

The Night the Laughter Stopped

The table was round, wrought iron painted white, with faux leaves masquerading as nature along the skinny metal legs. My younger brother and I had just, for the umpteenth time, been scolded for putting our feet up on the cross support between the four table legs. For some reason we felt it necessary to put our feet up while we ate, a ritual I find myself doing even to this day. Looking back, we clearly exhibited the childhood tenacity that would prove to be invaluable in our futures, as the table top was glass and there was no doubt that our mother would see our feet up, yet we insisted . . . persisted to do so all the same. Perhaps it was the incessant kicking and pushing that took place in the prime real estate located just under our meal that irritated her? Or maybe there was no room for her feet? I do know that she seemed to take particular offense to these negative disruptions to her meal, and yet, strangely, she favoured an exorbitant amount of storytelling, joke regaling, and even encouraged the odd “gross-out contest” as normal family occurrences.

For all of the mealtime memories of laughter and suffering through cold Brussels sprouts, I vividly remember one meal in particular. Returning to that time in my mind now frustrates me. Then, I had no idea what was happening, whereas today, looking back, I wish that I could revisit my younger self and say, “NO, STOP, DON’T!!!!” I don’t

recall my exact age, although I know for sure that it was before the age of 14 and most likely after the age of 12. I have no memory of the food we ate or the day of the week that it was, but what I will never forget is the anger I expressed and the names I called my brother when it happened, feelings that would haunt me for years to come.

My brother and I are, and have always been, very close in age and in lives. Currently, we are avid texters and do the best we can to keep up with each other, as we live many miles apart. I love him in the way that all parents want their children to love each other. I know he is a good man and he lives a purposeful life. He loves deeply and would lay down all that he has for the people who are dear to his heart. I hold him in the highest regard as an honourable man. And it is with these thoughts of respect and love that I feel the deepest pangs of pain and regret. Regret is a strange thing, for I feel to truly regret one must know that one is doing something wrong as one is doing it. I, at the age of 13, was completely unaware of and today still not in full comprehension of the pain of one small boy—pain unknowingly inflicted by the three people who loved him the most, yet I still regret my actions.

I'm sure that it started out as a dinner like all the rest. It was probably roast pork, my mother's favourite, which we had twice a week, accompanied by mashed potatoes and perhaps frozen peas or corn (or any other small frozen veggie that the Jolly Green Giant so proudly marketed). At the table, Dad sat across from me, closest to the patio door, mom sat to the right of me with easy access to the fridge and stove, my brother to my left, in the back corner, and me, positioned between my brother and the railing leading down to the sunken living room. Strangely, my brother and I were pinned in with our backs to

the living room where the TV was, which I know now was purely strategic on my mother's part.

True to form, we would all share stories filled with laughter and ridiculousness, a custom highly cherished in our home. I, the odd one out, never seemed to tell the funny jokes. And even though I think they spent more time laughing at me than with me, I will always look to those mealtimes as the happiest of my childhood. Perhaps those times are what planted the seed that led me to marry an entertainer/comedian.

However, on this particular night, when all seemed normal, my brother began to spin his tale, perhaps in hopes of winning the nightly contest, when all of a sudden he stopped, midword, he stopped. He stared blankly ahead towards my mother, his fork laid perfectly still on his plate.

"Hello?" My mother asked. "Go on," I said, "finish your story." My father yelled, "HEY WHAT IS THE MATTER WITH YOU?!!!" This went on for what felt like hours, which turned out to be more like a minute. Then right in the middle of my yelling "HHEEEYYYYY!!!" he turned to me and quietly said, "What?" We all immediately began to fire questions at him: "Why did you stop talking?" "Why didn't you answer us?" "Why? WHY? WHY?" to which he begrudgingly replied, "I don't know, I don't know, I don't know." My father was furious, and my mother was extremely irritated. I was annoyed. "Why did he always do stupid stuff that ruined our good time?"

Fast forward a few years to when I was in grade 9, my brother in grade 8, short for his age, and the "class clown" was taken to the hospital for a variety of tests: tests my mother said would hopefully help her understand why he seemed different than other boys. After some poking and prodding he was given a CT scan, where, like on cue, he

proceeded to have an epileptic seizure, visible only via the measurement of the electrical activity of his brain. There were no overt physical symptoms; he simply stared ahead and was perfectly still.

My mother later explained to me that my brother had epilepsy and that it was likely that he had been having these “petitmal” seizures for years. She said that when he was having one, his body would simply become very still; however on the inside, his brain would literally be going a mile a minute and that in the short time in which they occurred, his body would expel the same amount of energy needed to run around a track 100 times at his top speed. (Once medicated, he almost immediately grew a foot and a half.) Scariest of all for me was that during the electrical firestorm in his brain, he would have no recollection whatsoever of what he was going through and was unable to register any conscious thought and therefore was unable to know anything that was going on around him.

Although we have not spoken much about his experiences before the diagnosis or what it was like for him then, I can’t help but wonder about the intense fear he felt when in one instant a room could be full of people and, the next, empty. Or how it would have felt to go from having a good laugh with his family to have them yelling and screaming at him for no apparent reason in the blink of an eye, with no hopes of an explanation.

Regret is a funny thing. Although I couldn’t have known what was wrong that night at the dinner table, in the last 20 years I have been unable to shake the heaviness that I feel in my chest whenever I picture his face in that moment of uncertainty. Perhaps it is that memory that perpetuates my need to explain and clarify; perhaps it has brought

me along a path in life that continually puts me in the role of teacher. I don't want anyone to suffer the pain and fear of not knowing. (Course writing, Fall 2010)

Moving On, Moving Out, Moving Through

When I was 17 years old, my mother and father separated. It was the spring of my grade 12 year, and I remember I was taking chemistry, music, and English. My parents had been unhappy for a long time—it seemed to me to be for as long as I could remember—but it was when my brother and I had become old enough that they finally decided it was time for my father to leave. The circumstances surrounding his departure were quite exciting to say the least, involving the stereotypical “belongings on the lawn.” I was upset; however it was not because our family was breaking up, as my parents had been distant for such a long time; it was my mother's emotional devastation and her loss of control that impacted me the most.

A short time after my father left, we received a visit from a bank representative who informed us that we had one week to vacate our house. This circumstance was a result of some poor money management on both my parents' parts. Soon after, they both declared bankruptcy.

The events that followed are still a bit of a blur, but the impact of that time has stayed with me. My mother was in no state to organize a move and, therefore, the responsibility of packing our three-bedroom home and moving us fell to me. I cannot recall where my brother was during these events—it is possible that he was staying with friends, as he often did during that year. Fortunately, my father did have the foresight to locate an apartment for us and, although we were not in communication with him (and wouldn't be for years), I was grateful.

I took two days off from school and proceeded to pack every room, one by one. What I do recall is that this was the time in my life when I developed a strong penchant for the art of the “Clean Sweep!” I pitched everything from childhood—toys to clothes to furniture. I was focused and driven, and I knew that I did not have time to contemplate the intensity of the situation, that all of my time and energy needed to be on packing. My mother did the best she could between emotional outbursts. Close friends of mine came by to help, but, for the most part, I felt that the burden was mine.

In one week we were moved and shortly after that it was exam time. I was able to compartmentalize my emotions just long enough to study and write all three of my exams and, strangely enough, they went surprisingly well.

One month after we moved, I began to relax enough to allow myself the time to release all of my emotions. I spoke to the “right people” and did “all the right things” and, now, 17 years later, I am contemplating the impact that this time in my life has had on me.

In the present, I believe that as a result of this life experience I came to see myself as a strong, organized, and dutiful person. I can be counted on to get things done and, in order to do so, I can put my emotions aside. I am confident that I will know what to do when a difficult time comes and that others can turn to me when they need things done in their times of crisis.

My need for family decreased from that experience and, in conjunction, my sense of independence increased. I think that I have always felt capable as a person, but from that point on, my life was my own, almost to the point of selfishness. My sense of power and control during the experience of my family break-up were greatly reduced, and since

then I have taken as much control as I could. My ability to express my feelings was all but nonexistent for a long time after that experience. This stifling of my emotions and myself although a nonauthentic response has led me to a workplace trait that I once thought desirable: being able to leave my life at the door.

At that time, I created the following motives or rules to guide my life whenever I came across a similar situation:

- I am uncomfortable if I have no power in a situation/relationship/decision-making process.*
- In order for a situation or problem to be taken care of, I must have the answers and take control.*
- My feelings are not important when a job needs to get done.*

I believe that it is expected that when I take responsibility or control of a situation the task will get done or the problem will get solved. I will do so because, for me, there is no alternative to completing a task. If I am ever unable to finish a task, I feel anxious and irritable. These feelings usually subside if I am given the opportunity to complete something else; usually this something else takes the form of cleaning. I set myself a cleaning task that may or may not need to be done and, once completed, I feel a sense of accomplishment and that I have regained my sense of control.

I believe that this “stick-to-itiveness” has proven to be a great asset in the variety of leadership roles that I have held and, although there is a certain finesse to being a leader that I haven’t always had and am still working on, the ability to get things done will not likely be removed from the job description.

As my principal has pointed out to me in the past, I need my “four walls”, a space that I can be responsible for. I do well when given the opportunity to make decisions and take control of situations. I suffer a great deal from the inability to tolerate ambiguity, which unfortunately runs rampant in the education system. Actually, I suppose the ambiguity is fortunate, as I have been forced out of my comfort zone on a number of occasions, when I challenged my control issues and attempted to acquire the needed skill (or virtue) of patience.

There was a time when those that did not concede to the power of my leadership role were soon made aware of what I thought. But it has been a long time since I looked at leadership as an independent endeavor. It takes a team to have a leader and the most effective leaders, in my opinion, are those that are contributing members of the team.

(Course writing, Spring 2010)

Examining this story now helps provide me with a clearer picture of myself. I see the scared little girl pretending to be an adult before her time, putting up walls around her whenever possible, perhaps in response to not knowing when they will be ripped away from her. And although my parents thought that their separation would have less of a significant impact because we were older, it is obvious to me now that nothing could be further from the truth. Reflecting, retelling and reliving this once-traumatic experience has had a significant impact on my direction in life. Looking back, I can see that I let myself fall into the preset grooves created by so many others who have suffered through a family dissolution: the cocooning of personal denial, the building of a personal fortress to avoid being inflicted with more pain, and the uncontrollable, insatiable desire to prove my worthiness of love. In revisiting these unexplored feelings during that chaotic time in my life, I have allowed myself to release some of the pain, and in doing so I

think I have begun to create a new road for myself, one driven by no other, a road free of ruts and obstacles. From the living of this story when I was 17 to the retelling of this story in 2010 and reliving of it now in 2014, I have noted significant changes in my perspective and therefore my understanding of what I believe to be true. At 17 I was doing what needed to be done to survive. In 2010, I recognized the pain of that time in my life but felt the independent skills acquired from that moment and moments like it awarded me opportunities in leadership roles that I may not have had otherwise. And now, after reliving and retelling these moments in my life yet again, I recognize the power of reflection. I see my reactions in 2010 as a latent defense mechanism to all things bad in my life, but now, I feel that that moment in time, although life changing, was one of many that have brought me closer to a place of personal authenticity and awareness in my life. Changing perspective and having the opportunity to see a situation through new eyes years later has in itself brought about more changes in me that I look forward to exploring.

Taking a Step Back

This story begins in the middle, somewhere in the middle of my life: a place that for the most part, seems to be removed from my memory, yet never forgotten. I lived what many might consider a regular childhood, although by whose standards I make this claim I am not sure. My parents married young and had two children in their early 20s. They may or may not have finished high school, but at the time no one cared—my dad worked, and my mom had us. They appeared to be content with their lives, or at least comfortable where they settled; however this was not the life they wanted for us. Like many parents, they wanted their children to have every opportunity and to be more than they felt they were themselves.

My mother went back to college when I was in my preteen years, and she became the only educational assistant at my high school when I was 15. As a family, we struggled with normal things like bills, sports, work, clubs, school. Perhaps as children we were apprised of more problems than we should have been but, fortunately for me, unlike the other parents I knew, my parents were very trusting in our abilities and reminded us often that we could be anything we wanted to be: that we simply had to apply ourselves. I took that to mean in school, and my brother took it to mean athletics.

I was an independent child and teenager with clear, scholastic goals and aspirations that, looking back now, pertained little to what I wanted to do and were more about what I felt I was supposed to do. I think this route was not dissimilar to many people in my generation. While I had a strong penchant for the sciences, which I dove into with great passion, I never really knew what I would do with the information; I just seemed to like to learn it. I guess it is not so weird that I find myself furthering my education now in the field of education!

What I think made me different from other teenagers was my parents' divorce and the unfortunate onslaught of events that, in my opinion, rendered my mother the paranoid, depressed, and sickly individual that she is today. I am unsure as to whether it was my independent attitude—my “pull it together, people” mindset that came first, or whether my attitude manifested itself as a result of having to literally pick my mother up off the floor; but either way, the years that followed proved to be a struggle at survival for me, which I feel now, parallel no other time in my life.

When I consider the lessons learned in my upbringing and how I have used them to build my present, I feel I can say that I am proud of the person that I have become and

I relish my ability to think on my feet. I went to university without any financial help from my family, although they did provide some moral support. I work hard and take enormous pride in my employability. Now, I often say to my husband that we will never go hungry as we are workers and we value an honest day's labour. I believe this mentality comes in part from having to always do what was necessary in order to survive, which I equate in my mind not only to survival but also with the will to flourish.

Tough Love

I have a very dear friend of 20 years who, similar to my mother, suffers from mental illness, depression, mania, and other symptoms. However, unlike my mom, she has been actively dealing with her issues since her teen years. One of the symptoms of my friend's illness is hoarding, which began to manifest itself in a substantial way when she encountered certain negative experiences, such as disputes with her parents, work, or relationships. Unable to face issues head on, she would begin to acquire things that I can only assume she attributed to her personal value, things such as empty cardboard boxes, dirty dishes, and, among other things, piles of clothing.

As her friend I tried and tried to do what I thought would help her . . . tough love! Statements such as "Get over yourself," or "It's not that bad in the grand scheme of things," and the worst: "If you just tried or cared enough you could do it." All of these comments did nothing but send her into a veritable tailspin that often pushed her progress back even further.

What I have come to learn is that mental illness is a tricky thing. Unlike a third arm growing out of your body, which is easily identified, mental illness is unseen and, as such, often overlooked as the source of undesirable behaviour. At times, I didn't

understand how or why we were friends. My life revolved around structure and order, and hers seemed to be the exact opposite.

Perhaps our connection grew because I was used to dealing with mental illness. What felt normal to me? What seemed to give me purpose? I think now that at the time it may have been all of those things. However, fortunately for me, I am not a static mass of flesh but I am a living, evolving human being, and I began to find that I no longer needed to help her in order to feel like myself. I wanted more from our relationship than to listen, give advice, and feel unsuccessful in my efforts.

*One day, although I know that my epiphany began to brew long before that, I watched the television program *Hoarders*, where I learned that in order for someone with the hoarding condition to stop hoarding they needed people who would support them in creating their own solutions, people who understood that what hoarders need is the time to literally sort through all of their issues.*

This little bit of information seemed to be exactly what I needed to salvage our relationship, which was heading to an impasse. I didn't want to have to save her and she, unbeknownst to me, didn't want to be saved—she just needed to feel safe to work through her solutions. When I began to implement my new mindset strategies, I found that I was able to comfortably step back from her life in a way that was not disrespectful of our friendship but afforded me the ability to release ownership from her problems while still supporting her. It had been a cathartic time as we each grew and learned, concerned with finding solutions to our own problems, which as a result helped us become better friends.

I believe now that this tale holds great significance for me. Over 20 years we had built a trusting relationship where we felt courageous enough to be honest with each other and, in doing so, I have learned how to be a better person, which has improved my ability to really be there for someone who is mentally ill.

For so long I made the assumption that it was my job to ensure the happiness of those around me, to the point where I lost myself. The insight my friend was able to provide me, whether she knew it or not, gave me the strength and courage to release ownership of my mother's problems. My mother has made a number of choices in her life that I may or may not have made were I in her shoes. What I realize now is that it is not for me to judge or decide what is best for her. What I will continue to do is to support her in any way that I can that does not cause me to second-guess my future or myself.

Although my friend may not have articulated it in so many words, she was my resident expert on mental illness and, as such, she was able to teach me strategies that I would later use with my mother. I am grateful for our ever-evolving friendship. The power of storytelling here is in the immediate connection that I was able to make between these two significant individuals in my life. From this connection, I was able to sense a deeper knowledge of myself. As Atkinson (1995) noted,

There are unforgettable moments in the telling of our stories when we recognize a connection in our lives, a connection that links one moment of our lives with another, maybe years apart, or a moment that connects us in some deep way to others and ourselves. These are moments when our perception of ourselves and the world can change instantly. (p. 4)

I Am Only Half of a Predetermined Whole

The relationship that I have with my husband has often amused and befuddled me. Here is a man who, fortunately for me, has had, since our first meeting, the magical power to see me in ways that I am only now, almost 10 years later, just beginning to see in myself for the first time. It is true that he too has evolved and changed, not because or in spite of me, but along with me, but since our first meeting, I have known that he *knows* me.

So it is not to say that this transformation that I find myself going through is a transfiguration but simply an unveiling of my self. Between us there is a level of connectedness that is beyond what my conscious or analytical mind can see. It is a connection that awards me the strength and security that I have needed to take the necessary time in those places I find uncomfortable and scary to learn and grow.

During my narrative inquiry course, I was asked to reflect on a specific item in my home and describe what it meant to me and, although the thing I chose is truly not a valued item, what it has brought to my life I wouldn't give up for anything.

Sharing Moments

As I looked around my "Clean Sweep" of a home, it was difficult for me to find an artifact that I felt was worthy of discussion. I considered the black, perfectly hand-sized rock we had stolen from the Athabasca Glacier on our honeymoon, the dark wood framed parchments of the two beautiful songs handwritten for me by my husband. I even considered The Keg paper coaster that he, then just friend, wrote his phone number on the back of when we first met. And although I suppose I could have completed this assignment satisfactorily with any of these things, I wanted more. I wanted this opportunity to delve into an experience that I gained from one thing, one item in my life, to be more than just an assignment.

Some of you may know that my husband—the talented musician, engaging entertainer, and wonderful restaurant server—and I work opposite schedules: me days, him nights, and on top of that we have our own, as well as joint, social calendars. I have school obligations, and he, an active athlete, plays a variety of sports; therefore at times it is very difficult for our paths to cross. However we decided a long time ago that the time we do have together is precious and is to be treated with respect. We have both agreed that in order for our relationship, our marriage, to maintain its stamina, the ground rules are easy . . . there is one, and that is that nothing is more important than each other.

That being said, there is nothing really grand or monumental about how we spend our time together, as long as it involves a heartfelt conversation where we share our feelings, our hopes, our frustrations, our needs, our problems, and possible solutions. It could be a few hours, dinner and a cheap bottle of wine, or 15 minutes between shifts. But no matter what, when, or how, the moments are special because we are truly present for one another.

This context brings me to my artifact, which is our MAC, 27 inches of technological genius, and as avid users of our computer, like almost everyone else, it is rarely off. Often when we haven't spent time together we start to talk and my husband will undoubtedly say: "Oh hey, do you want to hear the new thing I've been working on?" We invariably make our way up to the MAC to hear what he has produced, written, and created—a new piece of music that he wants to share with me. We listen and talk, critique, and explore his new creation. During this shared moment of creativity, where he, the proclaimed artist, creative, soulful, and wise, and I, the wide-eyed student, engage in thought-provoking prose, our computer begins to share in the excitement by probing us with cues and ideas, as if it is a bystander or supporter of our "unique" moments of connectedness. It encourages us to remember moments of our past by providing us with

momentary glimpses of our world through the screensaver slide show. Now for those of you who own MACs, I'm sure you will attest to the clarity of photos and perhaps, like us, find the soothing motion of the photos as they move in and out in combination with a musical playlist from our favourite artists, intoxicating.

We find that as each photo, each memory, presents itself, we are instantly given permission to feel those feelings again. And being together to share those moments simply adds a level of connectedness between us. And, although our office chair isn't made for lounging, I will curl up on his lap and take in the show created by, for, and about our lives. Most recently during one of our office romances, we discussed, as we often do, what really matters in life in a time when mortgages are coming due and tuition needs to be paid and artist struggles are apparent; these moments of pure, authentic joy, no matter how fleeting, fuel our souls for extensive periods of time. I am grateful to the man who truly feels his feelings and shares his art and passion for life with me every chance he gets. I am also grateful to our MAC for making what may be time sensitive moments easy and beautiful. (Course writing, Fall 2010)

As I look back on these few stories of my experience, I see my life as a series of jagged roads and dirt paths, and along the terrain I see the impact of relationships and who I was in those relationships, on my ability to choose new paths. On the early roads, I see that I stayed with the familiar, for as unpleasant they may have been, everyone I knew was right there with me, whereas later in life, I gained the confidence to explore new relationships and therefore new roads.

From a young child innocent of intentional harm but guilt ridden all the same by the idea of having potentially damaged my relationship with my brother, to a teen propelled into adulthood by knowledge and experiences before truly understanding their meaning, I see that the

imprint left on me of what a marital relationship looks like, or perhaps shouldn't look like, left me lacking the ability to see and therefore experience true love. I believe now that this lack of role modeling led me to a series of dysfunctional personal relationships. Time, reflection, and a bit of luck have brought me to what I would call the pinnacle of all my relationships with a partner and equal who, with the conscious knowledge of his own struggles of self-understanding, allows me the time and space to grow and be myself. I am the driver and willing passenger simultaneously, the beauty of which I call love.

I am no longer sitting in the back seat of my parents' car as a by-product of their experiences, trying to absorb who they were in order to find myself. I am no longer the unfortunate victim thrown from the road called "perfect family," meandering aimlessly along other people's paths, and I feel that I have left the dark, dank roads of uncertainty behind me with an illuminated path before me and, although still unknown and a bit rocky, my journey is filled with confidence to reach my own potential.

All that I was before I started on my self-study journey can not be summed up in a few stories, but they do help identify for me that the journey did not really start in 2009 when I began my master's degree, but that I have always been on it, eyes wide shut. My soul had been peeking out its timid head on rare occasions, being the impetus for my upcoming awakening, taking hold of the wheel and steering me off in a new direction onto a beautiful, albeit bumpy road.

CHAPTER FOUR: LATER YEARS: A NEW DIRECTION

OMG, Is This Really Happening?

It's not like me to travel without a map, without a plan, letting the experience guide me, but that is where I found myself, newly registered in the Master of Education program and eager to take it all in. I began with my first course, *Educational Leadership*, with Dr. Heather Rintoul. For the first time in a very long time I was asked to reflect on a group assignment, forced to look at myself with a critical eye, something I had avoided doing my entire life. And although it was not necessarily the most profound moment of self-discovery, it opened my eyes to the possibility of there being a part of me out there that I had yet to meet.

Reflection Assignment

This workshop experience has been an enlightening one for me. Although in my current employment I engage in a number of group projects, this particular group task proved to be challenging for me because of my preconceived notions. Fortunately, as a new student to the Master of Education program poised to absorb a plethora of new information, I was able to participate in the process of a graduate group workshop. By going through the process, I feel that I am better prepared to successfully participate in future graduate-level group endeavors.

*I am what my principal likes to refer to as a “Scurry” personality, a term coined by Spencer Johnson in his book, *Who Moved My Cheese* where the character Scurry wastes no time and runs out into the “maze” of uncertainty and challenge in search for the greatly desired outcome—which is the cheese (Johnson, 1998). I prefer to refer to myself as a “finisher”—when it comes to new challenges or initiatives, I enjoy jumping*

in and doing what needs to be done to achieve the desired goal, the goal being the most important and, often, the only thing on my mind.

It is due to this defining personality trait that, after we were assigned the project, I immediately began to look for articles to support our topic. I also made numerous attempts over the next few weeks to initiate email contact with my group members, to which I received little to no response. Each of the three unanswered emails that I sent in succession became more elaborate as I delved deeper into the research that I had gathered, without the much-needed feedback of my group members to keep me on track.

As I look back to those emails, I realize that it is possible that the other members may have been anxious about finally meeting, anticipating that I would jump all over the meeting with what may have been perceived as the need to lead. What I didn't realize when I was sending those emails, or perhaps I'd forgotten as I was blinded by my great desire to complete the task, was that I was making a number of assumptions about what my group members were doing or not doing based on the lack of email responses. As in most situations where blind assumptions are made, I was wrong to come to any conclusions prior to knowing the truth. It became very apparent when we met after the sixth class that each member had given the topic considerable thought. Each of them expressed creative and solution-focused ideas, and we were able to put a comprehensive plan together in less than an hour. Fortunately, I was given the task of researching theorists for our presentation, and I feel that this task complemented the efforts that I had already put into the project.

I initially found it ironic that our topic was Collaboration & Workplace Culture and that, due to time constraints and geography, as a team we were not able to devote

much time to collaborating or to the culture of our group. This outcome is a lesson in itself. As a professional, when there is a shared vision, I have learned that I must simply trust in the fact that the people I am surrounded by are also geared towards the same goals and, as long as positive attitudes and concerted focus is given to the task when time allows, great things can be accomplished. (Course writing, Spring 2010)

The act of reflecting, considering events and situations outside of oneself, looking at scenarios from as many angles as possible to bring an experience into focus (Bolton, 2010) is not an easy task. And although the reflection I wrote was short, writing it was a hard pill to swallow. For the first time I had to articulate that my way was not the right way. I had the opportunity to see the situation from an alternative perspective and, fortunately for me, I embraced the moment. Perhaps if I had remained closed-minded through the experience, I might not be where I am today.

Higher education, I'm sure, is intrinsically designed to challenge us not only academically but on a deeper, more personal level; at least that is what it has done for me. The aforementioned reflection was the first of many, and what I soon discovered was that even with my apparent lack of memories, I had a lot to remember.

Was It My Mom in the Car Ahead of Me?

It makes sense that your parents lead you when you are young, but when do you let go of the idea that you need them to lead? Had I assumed it was her ahead of me all along? Did I want it to be her? Once I realized that she had become one of the followers behind me, I fought very hard to get her back out in front, but during all of my trying, I realized a few things . . .

Letting Go

My mother has always been somewhat of a high-energy person, and throughout my life I have observed the many sides of her. All through my childhood I thought of her as outgoing, open, and honest, which made for some great dialogue and brought all my friends to the house. I was so proud to be her daughter. She was strong and smart, and she never let us forget that we could do anything we wanted with our lives; however, as she got older and my father left, and first my brother and then I left, she suffered from what I can only call a severe case of empty-nest syndrome.

When I was 18 I left for university, and after my second year, I never lived at home again. In the 5 years that I was away, my relationship with my mother was strained but, for the most part, amicable. However, when I visited her she always presented me with another outlandish story about her failing health or about the people in the community that were out to get her, and, for a very long time, I tried to provide her with support and what I thought were viable solutions. I did feel very guilty for being so far away, but no matter what I or my brother, grandmother, or aunt did or said, nothing seemed to work, and she began to fall further into a depression laced with drugs and alcohol. When I heard from my brother that she had accidentally set her house on fire after leaving something on the stove, I knew that I had to distance myself from her.

In January 2001, her father died, and after getting the bad news from my uncle very early in the morning, I spent the rest of that day and the next trying to reach her to let her know. Unfortunately, it wasn't until after the funeral that we discovered that she had taken a leave from her educational assistant position and moved to a new city 5 months before. I struggled a great deal for the next few years trying to figure out why she

was the way she was. In discussions with my grandmother and upon looking back on my life with her, I knew that her mental health was unstable. However, at the age of 25 I knew very little about how to deal with this information.

In June of 2005, after starting a new life with my now husband, sitting on my back porch, I picked up the phone and called my mother in hopes of finding that she had found herself and was doing well. She was my mother after all, and the great memories that I held from my early childhood caused me to pick up the phone. My brother had been in contact with her for years, and I knew that she lived just a short distance away. It was her 50th birthday, and I wanted so badly to find the mother that I so desperately wanted on the other end of the phone. Unfortunately, what I was met with was a lonely, depressed, insecure agoraphobe who submerged herself in her job and did very little else.

By personality, not surprisingly, I am a fixer. Tell me your problems and I can give you all the answers you need. This turned out to be exactly what my Mom was looking for, or so I thought. She needed help, her health was failing, and she had no friends and very little money. She told me that she looked up to me and that she was so proud that her little girl was smart enough to help her. What I came to learn was that she may have been looking for help, but I don't think she knew how to take it.

My mother is socially awkward and at times can make others around her feel uncomfortable. She lies, although I'm not sure if she realizes it. She seems to feel that everyone in a crowd is out to get her, and she makes inappropriate comments, which pushes the limits of her relationships with others. Although she says she is recovering, I know she drinks and is addicted to a variety of medications. For these reasons and more,

I have found it very hard to be present in her life. But for all that she is and that I am, I know I have tried.

In the past, once a month or so and every Christmas, I would make a desperate attempt to reconnect with her, always in hopes that we could build a mother–daughter relationship that would last, and often I would come away devastated by her lack of strength and integrity. Periodically, we would have a really great conversation, where I would feel like she was making progress, but more often than not, I was forced into situations where I felt the need to take the parental role, as she appeared not to be able to fend for herself. My whole life I have lived under the mantra of “suck it up,” with the mentality that if I didn’t like something about my life, I changed it rather than wasting time complaining about it. So my approach with her, as with most others, was just that.

The most recent “problem” she shared earlier this year was that she had cancer. My initial internal response was “prove it,” quickly followed by, Oh My God, what do I need to do to help? My initial unfeeling and insensitive response was due to the fact that so many times before she had told me that she suffered from a variety of illnesses, but in each case, miraculously, there were no symptoms shortly afterwards. I would always excuse her behaviour and rationalize that she was crying out for help, but no matter what I tried to do to make her better—coddling, agreeing, disagreeing, fighting, providing tough love, external resources, I would be met with yet another problem to fix. This time I felt that without confirmation from a medical professional I couldn’t be sure that she was really sick. I battled daily with what I would do should she actually be ill. I discussed it at length with my husband, as she had no money for any type of long-term care, although neither did we. I knew that with my brother living three provinces away, her care would

be my responsibility and, selfishly, I wished and prayed that she was lying once again for no other reason than to relieve myself of the burden.

She gave me the name of her oncologist but refused to let me go with her to any of her appointments. When I asked her direct questions about her diagnosis and prognosis, she would either say, “let’s not talk about that now” or give a very vague answer such as “my appointment is next week,” “the test results aren’t back yet.” I was riddled with guilt for my behaviour, however, no matter how hard I tried, I could not overlook all of my past experiences with her. I couldn’t trust her, even though I desperately wanted to.

So I finally decided to let myself go; to free myself from the sense of responsibility that I have felt for her since I was very young. I realized that I am not my mother’s keeper and I do not have to carry the guilt of her poor choices with me. I decided not to allow her negativity to continue to poison my life. I realized that all I can do is love her and that I can’t fix her. And, although I have thought these things before, it was not until I started the master’s program and was able to understand my motivations, able to articulate my values, that I began to comprehend that the conflict that I have been feeling for so long has been within myself.

I see now that due to a variety of experiences from my early teens that I noted in Chapter Three, I have held on to this belief that I have to fix my mother and the only way that I knew how was to flip our roles and become the parent. I think I believed that I had to tell her what to do because she couldn’t do things on her own. I have recently given myself the power to acknowledge the origin of these beliefs and, in doing so, let them go.

I see now that my mother is an adult who has made her own choices in life, and no matter what I say or do she is responsible for herself. I have also acknowledged that

she does suffer from mental illness and that the burden of her loved ones is that, in order for us to be able to provide her with help and support, she will need to acknowledge that she is ill. The catch 22 is that she can't, because she is mentally ill. It is possible that had she received help at a much younger age, she would not be suffering today. But unfortunately the foundation that she has built her life on seems to be askew from that of others, and her perception and therefore her reality, differ from most of us. I have come to terms with the fact that there is little that can be done, as her reality cannot be undone by medications or a few well-placed suggestions.

Recently, I have had some wonderfully candid and liberating conversations with my brother, my grandmother, and my husband, and what I see is that by knowing what I value in my life—happiness, laughter, authenticity, loved ones, and enjoying the little things, I have given myself permission to let go—I am in better shape to live my values.

While I have not let go of my mother, I have let go of the belief that by telling her what to do she will change. I have come to terms with the fact that if she would like to change her life, that is her choice and that, as her daughter, I will be there to support her with love, resources, and most of all, honesty. I will never stop loving her, but I have stopped trying to squeeze water from a rock. If she is indeed as physically ill as she has led us to believe, then I hope that she will allow us enough time to help her. As it stands now, she moves between statements such as, “I want to be closer to my family,” and “no one loves me; I’d rather be alone.” My hope is that she will get the help that she so desperately needs in time for us all to mend our strained relationships. (Course writing, Spring 2010)

Aha!

When do we truly see ourselves as independent from those that surround us? What does that moment look like? I have been trying to capture that moment, trying to see “in through the looking glass” (Bolton, 2010, p.69) for a while now. I catch glimpses in stolen moments, and during my *Mentoring as Supportive Practice* course when asked to write about whether or not I had been mentored in my life, I, still in the early stages of understanding my self, although unsure how to respond, gravitated toward linking mentorship to leadership, as that was a term I was used to. I was still having trouble deciphering myself from others, from myself, as leader to mentor. I realize now that I had yet to see myself through my own eyes.

Is It Mentor as Leader or Leader as Mentor?

I have often asked myself this very question. Does being an effective leader mean that you impart your wisdom to those who ask, whether they articulate it as a question or not? Does being an effective mentor mean that you are looked to as a leader by a specific person or group of individuals? Can I be one without being the other? Would I even want to?

I have been labeled a leader since I was a little girl. The adage “she is 6 going on 60” was commonly heard in my house. Was I born under the sign of leader, or did my parents will it into being? Did it begin when I was 3 years old, the oldest of 15 preschoolers and mother’s little helper at her makeshift daycare? Was it during my childhood with my younger brother who, because of my ability to take charge, never had to do anything for himself, including talk until he was 2? Was it at the age of 17 when I had to take care of everything while helping my mother through a devastating divorce?

As I begin to dissect my experiences through self-reflection, intense moments of solitude, and observation, I have come to think that each remembered experience of my childhood has encouraged me to take a parental leadership role. This situation has led me down the route so many perfectionists have followed, leading with my parent voice, with the “because I said so” attitude. In my mid-20s, I was not only made painfully aware of the insulting nature of this leadership style, I was fired because of it, but I’m not sure I’m ready to share that story yet.

My work journey to this point in my life has been interesting and varied and my resounding truth is that I see myself as an equal partner with the team which I have the privilege to lead. I learned early in my education career that each employee and student brings with her/him valuable tools and experiences which may or may not fit into the pigeonhole traits identified as appropriate, but can be utilized by leaders with win-win mindsets.

For me, it is the conscious act of acknowledging that smart leaders know a great deal about what they know and very little about what they don’t, but wise leaders acknowledge that they know very little but strive very hard to learn as much as they can about all that there is. Essentially, I have learned that a wise leader takes the time necessary to build trusting relationships with those they are surrounded by, giving others the right and opportunity to contribute to the well-being of all.

What Mentoring Means to Me

I define the mentoring relationship in much the same way. It seems to me that a mentor opens her/himself to others through the development of authentic relationships, and individuals to be mentored choose their mentor willingly. The question I am

grappling with is, has this happened to and for me? Have I opened myself to the possibility of being a mentor? Am I open to being mentored? I hope the answer to both questions is yes and, as I reflect on my personal experiences, I have flashes that might be considered mentoring moments. But to articulate a time when I was mentored or when I mentored another is a bit more difficult.

For the most part, many of the jobs that I have held as an adult have been supervisory, management or leadership roles, and I believe I have evolved over time from a dictator type of leader to a more empowering leader, although I know I am still a work in progress. That being said, it is difficult for me to say whether people come to me with questions and in search of advice because I am the one sitting in the front office or whether it is because they trust that I am the right person to go to. My hope is that for whatever reason they come, they leave feeling more confident that their needs have been met. (Course writing, Summer 2010)

No Turning Back

When I knew that I had been changed, I consciously and happily defined the moment as the pinnacle of my journey—what my husband would call my TSN turning point (The Sports Network). I knew that everything leading up to that time from now on would be labeled BEFORE, and all experiences from that point on would be defined as AFTER. The paper that I wrote then, and reread now, still gives me a sense of hope and longing for the journey ahead of me.

Have I Learned, Evolved, Changed . . . ?

Serendipity! What an ingenious concept. We, the beings who must make sense of our surroundings, have coined a word for the lovely happenstance and interplay of

actions, reactions, energy, and matter of our lives. We have termed it so with a light, airy tone that floats off of the tongue like a fairy in flight, to remind ourselves of the freedom within it and to stop and bask in the awe created by it. Was it serendipitous that I chose to take this course? That I was willing to give up eight of my precious vacation days on a chance that I might enjoy a course on the topic of mentoring? It's true that I went into this course eyes completely wide shut. I was keen on learning something new as long as it fit into my box of what was necessary to learn. "Haven't I already been mentoring students? Don't I already mentor the staff? I think that I even mentor my friends; well I definitely guide them in the right direction! Of course, I thought, this course will only enhance my already well-established ability to help others." Looking back, yes, I think that taking this course was a lovely happenstance and a beautiful interplay of actions, reactions, energy, and matter.

Whether it is evident or not to those around me, although I feel that it is, I will be forever changed by what I have learned and absorbed, forever changed by what has infected me, altered every cell of my being, saturated every micrometer of each phospholipid bilayer, and forever enhanced my fluidity (Bullard, 2009). Maybe a bit dramatic, but how else do I, the science geek, describe the impact that the dialogue, readings, and read-a-loud sessions have had on my psyche?

Before this course, I felt that I was doomed to be forever the fixer. That my purpose for being was to answer questions and solve the arithmetic of people's lives! What I have come to learn is that in relationship, there is "no fixing, no saving, no advice giving and no setting each other straight" (Palmer, 2004, p. 115). I may still be involved in the solutions that people create for themselves, but now it will be in the form of

mentoring. By living my most authentic life and modeling with passion and verve the art of living, and by loving and sharing, listening and being quiet, I can support others as they learn and develop their own solutions.

I have always felt fortunate in the depth and breadth of my relationships, but now a different glass has been placed in front of them. I see a new kaleidoscope of colour and possibility within all of my relationships. Maybe the lens has actually been placed over my self-reflecting eye? Maybe it is because I see myself in a new light that I will be forever destined to envision new possibilities with those around me? I think that it was beautifully said by Freire, as quoted by Mullen (2005), “Authentic mentor leaders search for ways to honor human potential by discovering possibilities not hampered by conformity” (p. 68). I also admire the words of Starratt (1994), who said:

In any discussion of what the group or social collective should do, there will be differences of opinion. In order for a moral choice to emerge (not simply an arithmetical calculation of allowing the consequences of X’s opinion and Y’s opinion to be figured into the decision, nor a calculation of political favour-swapping) one has to engage seriously the perspective of others. This means entering into an empathetic appreciation of the value and legitimacy of those perspectives, a kind of taking those perspectives as if they were one’s own in order to understand the reasoning and to feel the affective colorations embedded within them. (p. 37)

Although he was originally speaking about ethical decision-making, I feel that the sentiment applies directly to the act of mentoring. As the mentor, one must decide how to

best mentor an individual and, for that to be effective and ethical, it is imperative that the mentee's perspective is respected.

Immediately prior to taking the course on Mentoring, I had taken Ethics in Decision Making with Dr. Paul Begley. He, like Dr. Shields, stretched my thinking about how I perceive myself and the roles I play in life. For the first time, someone had asked me to answer the question "Why?" and my response was intended only to further my own thinking about my own ethics, not in any way to place my existence on a sliding scale of good and bad. For the first time there was no right answer, I felt lost and found all at the same time.

This new learning was a lot to absorb, so in the short week between the spring and summer courses, I went searching my bookshelf for an easy read that would not ask me to think or feel or reflect or ponder my existence. I picked up a book that I had rescued from a friend who was doing a clean sweep during her divorce. The main message in the book was simple and to the point: It was learning to trust. As I placed myself in the text, I thought about my need to learn to trust myself, the universe, and what I knew to be true from my own experience (Sharma, 2006). This book will not be winning any literary awards, but I loved it for its simple message and what appeared to be a work of art serendipitously written just for me at that exact moment in my life when I needed it, somewhere between Ethical Decision Making and Mentoring as Supportive Practice.

In the past when I was confused or uneasy, I asked myself, "What is real here?" But it was not until I experienced the Mentoring course, through listening and dialoguing with my articulate classmates, I began to find my own voice. I began to pose new questions for myself such as: What am I feeling? Where does this feeling originate from?

Do I have ownership of this situation? Who has the power? These questions empowered me to rise above the circumstance, find peace within the moment, and helped me feel whole. I find now that there is a sense of my own wholeness in what I am learning, I equate my thinking to Parker Palmer's discussion of integrity (Palmer, 1998). "Integrity is whatever wholeness I am able to find within that nexus as its vectors form and re-form the pattern of life." (p.13) Further, he writes, "by choosing integrity, I become more whole, but wholeness does not mean perfection. It means becoming more real by acknowledging the whole of who I am" (p. 13).

Authenticity has become my favourite word. Perhaps my desire for acquiring this trait originated in my scientific studies where empirical evidence was in vogue, or maybe it has emerged from my years of family strife, where no one seemed to be able to tell the truth and we perpetually struggled to live the lies we told. I cannot be sure. But now, authenticity seems to provide me with a concrete place I can go to search for personal and spiritual discovery, which is a start.

I am an educator, a leader, a wife and a friend, and I am not sure if I can or would choose to break down how I will incorporate what I have learned in this course in each of my many roles. What I do know is that I am forever changed on a metacognitive level. I am better able to understand myself, and I am better able to be whole and present in each of my life roles. (Course writing, Summer 2010)

I Didn't See This Coming

Relationships can be tricky, and when referring to the relationships that we hold with our parents, in my experience there seem to be intricacies, black holes, and surprises. Is it simply the age difference? Is it the embedded power struggle? Whatever the reasons, my relationship with

my father has been strained and lacking. I have come to recognize that there are times when knowing why there is pain in a relationship does little to fix it. Rather, it is the release of that pain that can create a shift in understanding.

I recall vividly a significant moment in my father—daughter relationship. In July 2010, as I was driving home from the Mentoring course, amidst the tire to pavement sounds and hum of the wind against the moving car, a string of beautiful and purposeful words bubbled up before me. A poem emerged, crafted in forgiveness, words and feeling that I longed to share with my father.

Becoming My Father's Daughter

Dad,

*What Makes Me Think Of You . . .
Kraft peanut butter on toast &
Cold wieners stolen from the fridge
Oil changes &
Brake checks
My long, straight brown hair &
The coffee spoon song
Belly laughs &
Hockey games
Moustaches &
Shoulder rubs
Golf &
Lefties
White sneakers &
Car batteries
"Great Value" &
Laundry room old ladies
Defensemen &
Anything "Weston"
Italians &
Being patient
Car accidents &
Becoming
Pain,
Happiness &
Everything in between*

I am me because you are you!

*Love Always, your Daughter and Friend,
Dionne*

(Personal writing, Summer 2010)

I believe now that the release and sense of relief I gained from allowing myself to feel the pain and joy of the memories of my father acted as a catalyst for remembering, retelling, and reliving other significant moments in my life, both large and small. As Atkinson (1995) noted, Telling our story while it is in process whether we are at the threshold of adulthood or at the midpoint of our lives or later, helps us to gain perspective on our past and our present while also helping us to imagine how the struggle we might be in the middle of could eventually turn out. Telling the stories of our lives can give us a clearer sense of what we really hope for. (p. 4)

From Here to There and Back Again

I have been working on writing my autobiographical assignment for weeks, more in my head than on paper. About a week ago, I felt that I was ready to put pen to paper. Leading up to that decision, I had contemplated focusing on past work experiences, dissecting either a painful or a joyous personal experience, building on a previously written annals, going deep into one of the pictures from my chronicle, and everything in between. Finally, I settled on something work related that I felt had a personal twist.

To my good fortune, we experienced a few inclement weather days, and on the Tuesday, day two of the three snow day stretch, I chose to work from home. Having little to do at home that was actually work related, I decided to begin to write my autobiography. In the 5 hours that I devoted to the work, I was able to churn out approximately seven pages. Feeling tapped out for the day, I began to read and reread what I hoped would be an elegant and entertaining piece of narrative work. However, instead I uncovered a painful truth: that for all of my effort that day and the weeks

leading up to it, I had yet to “say what I mean” (C. Shields, personal communication, December 3, 2010).

On Friday morning, for the second time this snow-filled week, I found myself on my way to work from my warm and cozy home. Similar to most mornings, I had snoozed for about 45 minutes before dragging myself out of bed to get ready. I poured myself a coffee from the automatic coffee maker that my husband had set the night before. Forty-five minutes from feet on the floor to foot on the gas, I’m off, a quick 5 minute drive through my subdivision to Highway 27 North.

My iPod is set at random, and today, like so many others, I skip through the heavy rock and thrasher tunes that I am more partial to on the drive home. Singers such as Norah Jones, Dave Matthews, Ray LaMontague, Dave Thomson, The Avett Brothers, and the like fill my morning with relaxing and soothing hope, desire, and the occasional tear. My route is speckled with children in their parents’ cars at the end of their long driveways, waiting for their school buses, farmland being snorted and sifted through by horses wrapped like cocktail wieners, with only their heads and legs bearing the weight of the frost, and the all-too-infrequent scent of warm homes heated by wood.

Fifteen minutes into my drive, I eagerly look for the variety of zoo animals that graze in the field beside the Elmvale Zoo. Today will it be wildebeests, zebras, or antelope, or maybe it’s too cold and snow covered for any of these exotic four-legged creatures? I coast along the familiar route, subconsciously taking my coffee cup away from my lips as my body anticipates every bump and pothole. This day, like others recently, I start to think. My thoughts are fluid, and they sift through the arpeggios and passionate, harmonic resonance coming from my stereo. I remain conscious of my place

on the road, but that only triggers thoughts of my place in time and space, work, school, relationships. Today I linger on thoughts of school and contemplate my writing.

I begin to dissect what I had written. My intention was to write about a recent experience that I had had with a staff member at my school. My paper of seven pages was filled with how she had felt unheard and alone and how I was able to support her through her situation with knowledge that I had gained from a variety of experiences in my life and through the recent knowledge that I had been acquiring from course work. I recall that when that day had ended and she came to my office to thank me for taking the time to listen to her, I began to reflect on all the things that I had said to her and how I had helped her. It was the next day that I decided that my involvement in her experience would be a good story to tell for my autobiography. However, it wasn't until this chilly Friday morning, as I pondered in my silver, four-wheeled personal reflective space, that I realized that yes, it is a good story to tell, but unfortunately it isn't my story; it is hers.

Somewhere on my favourite stretch of road, where the sun cascades itself onto the earth below, I am struck by the beauty of this space. I told my husband just weeks ago that should we ever move, this stretch of road must remain on my commute. I am also suddenly struck by the realization that my autobiography is a trite falsehood, a lame attempt to just get it done. In the awe of this moment, I begin to think about Starratt's (2004) conceptualization of ethical leadership and his posture of the ethic of presence. I, now present in the moment with myself, have come to understand a truth that I may have missed had I not been afforded the time to ask myself some personal questions. Questions such as: "What other papers, conversations, or relationships have I run through without thinking? When have I used time and conscious thought wisely? What did I do before this

commute? The truth is that, had it not been for my commute, I might have finished the tale about my coworker, neglecting all that I had learned, and submitted that piece as my final course assignment. The in-authenticity of it causes me to shudder.

Now I have long since known that I am an avid decision maker and recently, having been given the opportunity to participate in a program called Smart Skills (Wiele, 2003), I became more consciously aware of my desire or propensity for the quick decision. However, since I started the Master of Education program in September 2009 and have had the privilege to share experiences with amazing people, read and analyze poignant research articles, and delve into work by authors such as Palmer (2004), Estes (1992), Starratt (2004), Liu and Noppe-Brandon (2009), and Cameron (2009); (to name just the few that are currently on my nightstand), I have started on a conscious journey to slow myself down, contemplate more, and not rush through things just to seem finished. I am on a journey towards an undivided life (Palmer, 2004), a journey involving a greater understanding of my place in the universe, not only as a human but as a woman (Estes, 1992), where I feel inspired and creative, whole and fulfilled.

During Friday's serendipitous moment in my car where I took the time to think through scenarios and ask myself questions like, "Is that what you really mean?" I discovered a lot about myself. I also began to see other occasions in my life, not differently but more consciously. I realized that my commute was not only the time necessary to finish one large coffee but also where I discovered myself as an artist, where I found my love for my mother, where I forgave my grandmother, where I wrote my father a poem, where I uncovered my Element (Robinson & Aronica, 2009), where I found the warmth of the sun and the brilliance of its rays, where I speak to my grandfather, passed

10 years now, where I sing, where I digest the reading from the night before, where I cry, where I have my difficult conversations with others, where I meet challenges head on, where I fight tooth and nail, where I hate, where I love, where permission is given, where I decided to have children, where time is my slave and I move it forward and back at my leisure, where I found Me.

Like Cameron (2009) and her morning pages, I am able to unload all that is wound so tight inside me and allow my thoughts to ruminate in front of my eyes, in my ears, and give each one the chance to be held alone. In this place I not only allow them to spread their wings and take flight, I give them the chance to land on fruitful ground where they can take root and grow healthy and strong. I feel I am both present and lost in those minutes between home and work and work and home.

I wonder if part of the joy of going to work is the going and not the working. I wonder if others feel this sense of peace and calm, energizing solitude on the road. I imagine that the northbound route has a dramatically positive effect on me that perhaps others going southbound may not experience. This may be a good question for my Toronto-bound friends.

I wonder now who I was before I began taking this particular drive? Previous to my current job, I commuted a shorter distance; and try as I might, I cannot locate the same feelings of joy and exploration that I feel now. Perhaps my new sense of being is a result of a positive combination of satisfaction gained from going back to school, the joy, responsibility, and love for our new puppy, and the newly discovered walking paths that I partake in two to three times per week.

As I reflect on the life I led before this conscious awakening, I can see long, contemplative showers and a few half-awake minutes before getting out of bed. But I also recall a yearning for answers, the question “Why?” continuously pursed on my lips; bouts of depression linked to periods of drinking where reflection took place but the outcomes were much different.

In reflecting on how and when I allow myself time to process my thoughts, I began to think of how others may do it; and I came to a realization that may prevent an argument with my husband. In thinking of why I do what I do and inadvertently why others do what they do, I now think that I understand why it may be that my husband enjoys watching sports highlights in the morning that he has already seen the night before. As he works from home, perhaps that time is his commute. It is amazing how self-centered I felt the moment that I had this thought and that, even though there is no doubt that I love my husband, I was reminded that there is still so much I have to learn. As Clandinin, Pushor, and Murray Orr (2007) stated, this type of inquiry requires a particular kind of wakefulness, which I feel my commute affords me.

Shortly after the realization that what I had initially written was not authentic, I came to understand the power of the moment in which that understanding took place. I realized that the narrative self-study I wanted to write, perhaps a sacred story, is a means through which I am held to account: account for the process of becoming my self (Crites, 1971, Munro-Hendry, 2010). What I mean to say is that, in that moment of self-discovery in my car, I met and had a conversation with my authentic self. I was able to ask questions of myself which took me inward to my purpose and outward to being present in the beauty of my surroundings, to a past time in my life where confusion and darkness

prevailed in my thoughts to looking to my future, bright as the sun on that stretch of Highway 27 (Clandinin & Connelly 1991, 1994, 2000).

Now I am conscious of when my authentic self comes and goes throughout my day. I find I am interjecting my self into everyday conversations with others that used to be acceptably shallow and superficial. I find that I am hidden between the lines on the pages of the books that I read, in my cooking, in each delicious bite, and in the calm, assertive energy I show my dog. I find my self in this self-study research, happy to have taken the time to rewrite my initial autobiographical story here in front of the Christmas tree, the lights blinking in an encouraging pattern and the Christmas music, songs I love and new ones to learn, keeping time with the click-clack of my computer keys. (Course Writing Fall 2010)

Great Things Happen When You Least Expect Them

I wrote the above piece and felt a sense of freedom; I was at ease and at peace with my self. I enjoyed writing it, reading it, and rereading it over and over again. I shared my joy with others and took some much-needed time off work to truly enjoy the holidays. Our daughter was born promptly 40 weeks later. Looking back, I couldn't have been more ready for parenthood, but I definitely know I was not prepared.

CHAPTER FIVE: SPEED BUMP

I Was Ready, or So I Thought

Two days before discovering that I was pregnant, I started the Research Methods course, online, with Dr. Begley. I was nervous at the prospect of this daunting course, which had haunted me since I learned about it in my first week as a master's student. Me, the girl who had to have her OAC English mark bumped up 20% by a gracious and understanding teacher, so as to not ruin my average; Me, the girl who, through 4 years of undergraduate study, wrote a maximum of three essay-style papers—was about to embark on an online course that was devoted entirely to preparing to write my thesis. I remember that at the time I had conceded to the idea of a major research paper and was even toying with the course route to avoid writing a paper altogether. I was petrified and perhaps a bit emotional from the rush of hormones that I knew nothing about.

I was comfortable with Dr. Begley's process, as he had been my Ethics professor the year before, and perhaps it was that familiarity that gave me the courage to take a risk when I wrote my first post.

As online courses can lack personal connection, Dr. Begley had us upload a brief biography to help us get to know each other. Looking back now, I recall feeling a sense of whimsy as I wrote my bio; having never had to describe myself in that format before, I took a hopeful and futuristic approach to the endeavour. What I realize as I reread the excerpt is that even though I thought I was attempting to be funny and playful, what I really was expressing were deep-rooted dreams in a hopeful, almost prophetic way. It was as if my soul, once again, peeked out to say hello. I put down on paper a dream I had yet to articulate for myself.

Be-ing Human

*As my frequent readers can attest, I have had the privilege of interviewing some of Canada's best and most interesting writers. Today is no different. I am here in sunny California at the home of Dionne Thomson, Ph.D., Ontario's own writer and guest lecturer on the "Art and Science of Being" and "The Struggle for Wholeness," discussing her most recent work, *Human Beings, be-ing human: A look at the struggle to "be" in a world of nonpresent beings; which has been favoured as an excellent contribution to today's literature on "Living a Whole Life."* With her husband, musician and entertainer who many would know simply as "dave," her two children, One and Two, and their small pack of dogs, Dionne maintains that it is the simple things in life that have brought her the most joy.*

Her move to California, although a bit turbulent, was, according to her, the best decision she ever made. She attributes her vision and desire for writing to be found in the rolling hills of the mountains and splashing waves of the ocean. As she and I sit in her backyard of unmanicured natural beauty, sipping cabernet from her favourite local winery, I can't help but also be inspired to be more connected to the earth that she so richly speaks of in all of her books.

Before she put pen to paper, Dionne worked in adult education as a Program Coordinator, which she tells me was a management position where she oversaw and supervised all of the day-to-day operations of a 180-student high school, serving adult students ranging in age from 18 to 80 years old. She speaks very highly of her time in adult education and attributes her inspiration, focus, and direction in her own professional education to the energy and drive shown by the students she worked with, who, against what would be seen by some as insurmountable odds, returned to school to get their coveted high school diplomas.

As many of you know, shortly after 2013 a number of significant and revolutionary initiatives led the way to the excellent education system that Ontario is proud of today; however,

in 2010, the turmoil that educators were facing from the reform initiatives, still in their preliminary stages of development, was significant. Like many of the time, Dionne felt unsure as to the quality of education that she was able to provide in a world where technology, humanity, and bureaucracy were moving much faster than the education system positioned to replenish it. She felt that she had more questions than there were answers.

It was during her graduate studies, working towards her Master of Education degree, that she felt that perhaps her path was beginning to diverge from its original course. As she acquired more knowledge in areas such as leadership, reflective practice, and narrative inquiry, she had a feeling that her as-yet-unknown creative self was knocking at the door.

These feelings of uncertainty were new, strange, yet oddly comforting and, although this self-declared scientist with an undergraduate degree in Biology, who would have consistently chosen the safe and straight route to the end of her life, felt that something had shaken inside her, freeing . . . well . . . everything! Fortunately for us, she took “the road less travelled” and explored the opportunities and potential within her creative self.

Written by Jane Smith, May 13, 2032

Excerpt from the Journal of Super Duper Stuff in Education July 2032

For a full transcript of this interview please contact the Journal of Super Duper Stuff in Education 1-800-999-7867.

I was ready in January of 2011 for my life to take shape to become all that I had anticipated it could be: travel, love, joy, exuberance, and frenzy. But for all of my readiness, I still had no clear vision of my future. I felt as if I knew what my life should feel like but not what it would look like. And perhaps that is a more practical approach, one that I, the preplanning, superorganizing control freak would have never taken before. I was ready for my life to change, and change it did.

Hit the Brakes, Proceed With Caution!

My pregnancy was uneventful: no sickness, no massive moods swings; there was ankle swelling and consistent discomfort but, all in all, it went well. After my Research Methods course I decided to take time off from school to enjoy this new stage in my life. With my proposal done, all that I had left to do was write this thesis, and that could wait. As a new mom-to-be, I was captivated by the idea of what my body was doing and, to be honest, I was literally consumed by the experience. Everything that I did at home, at work, with friends was in essence in preparation for what life had in store for me. Does everything happen for a reason? Do we fulfill our own prophecies? I don't know. But I am grateful for the organized and everything in its place aspect of my personality and also the carefree, live in the unknown aspect of myself. In preparation for my daughter to arrive, I found myself flip-flopping between these two sides of myself.

I had the opportunity to stay home from work for 2 months prior to delivery and, joyfully, it was a beautiful summer to take in from my back deck. Through all the planning and painting and growing and eating, I was able to find moments of peace and tranquility.

In the morning, before the world woke up, I cuddled up in a Muskoka chair with my favorite blanket, dog at my feet, and let my being soak in all the day had to offer. There, my

mind could devour each second like a gift: moments of clarity, snippets in time when it was quiet and the air stayed still long enough for my soul to rise to the surface and spark feelings of joy and enlightenment within me. I wrote and sipped coffee, watched the sunrise and the dew fade away. I played fetch with my dog and laughed out loud, enjoying the break in the stillness so early in the morning.

Looking back now, I see that these moments were too few and far between and that I relied too heavily on happenstance instead of consciously creating free space for my soul to roam. The morning would turn to daytime, busy and routine, and I would let go of my solitude, where I felt aware and alive and, in a sense, push my spirit away until it was safe for her to return. Now, I would do just about anything for that time back and, although I am beginning to weave my spirit into my daily life, the road ahead seems very, very long.

A Moment of Clarity Before the Fog

Perhaps my need for change every spring is a pathological symptom of my divided life? The changes I have made in the past are feeble, although well-meaning attempts at a reconnection to my inner self. As Parker Palmer (2004) said, for him it was the return of depression that signaled to him that he had gotten lost behind the dividing wall, but he notes that for others the symptoms could manifest as feelings of aimlessness, anxiety, and/or anger.

I believe that my soul feels most powerful in the presence of sun and greenery. With its yearly influx of strength, I feel a whole-hearted effort to fully wake myself up. It is in fleeting moments such as this one now, here on my front porch, reclining in my Muskoka chair shaded, by an enormous flowering plant, where I sense something or someone trying to impart some great wisdom. I feel it on the tip of my tongue like a

memory difficult to retrieve. So this is it, “the root of the root, the bud of the bud”
(Cummings, 1991), my soul is the spring rain and the warm generous sun, it is the
growing grass and the budding tree and the black pungent soil, it is the morning air
impregnating my mind with its delicious smell. (Journal entry, July 2011)

Anger, Disappointment, Disapproval

What is it about surface dwellers that compels me, engages me, enrages me?

What sparks that need within me to help them discover their inner selves?

*Would I really confront a total stranger with my thoughts about their self-esteem and
destructive attitudes?*

Probably not. No.

The vehicle for my desire to transmit knowledge must be more intrinsic—

Perhaps I am the vehicle?

I am not the saviour of humanity.

Be-ing,

Is my job, my purpose.

Enjoy-ing,

Is my job, my purpose.

I was struck today by one word,

Re-view

View

View-point

Re-see

Re-tell

Re-live

Re-peat?

NO!

Be-ing is the action of a life with purpose.

Through this moment, this writing

I am be-ing. (Journal entry, July 2011)

September 14, 2011, Speed Bump

This is what happened. As far as I can tell, I didn't slow down, and I hit the speed bump pretty hard. The next thing I knew, I couldn't find myself on the map anymore . . . I couldn't find my self at all.

What a beautiful baby,
gorgeous blue eyes, lovely blonde hair.

Wait? What? Blue eyes? Blonde hair? Where did that come from?

For the first six months of my child's life, I reacted. My memories of that time are fleeting, dull, and they lack depth. As I am sure many mothers will say, all the days just kind of blended together. What I do remember is that at 6 months of age my daughter became a person. I'm not sure what she was before that; perhaps she was a loved and doted-on extension of her father and me, but at 6 months old she sat up, looked around, and I recognized an independent person, unique in her own right.

It was around that time that I started to think about thinking again. I remembered there were books I wanted to read, things I wanted to buy, people I wanted to see. Although it still took a few months to put any of those thoughts into action, I was happy to just be thinking about seeing myself again. What I had yet to realize was that the me that I knew, remembered, counted on, was gone . . . forever.

The Drive to Work

Although I have at times felt arid, empty, and shallow since the birth of my daughter, some enlightening experiences have recently occurred that have sparked my desire to write again.

I have been on maternity leave from my job as Program Coordinator of the Adult Learning Centre for almost a year now, and I will be returning to work in 2 months.

Recently I have been visiting my school in hopes to be a part of or, at the very least, remotely aware of what kind of school I will be walking into in August. What I have come to learn over the past few months has been disturbing, albeit a bit comforting: that my replacement has been less than stellar.

Over the past few years in my role as Program Coordinator, I focused a great deal of my energy on trying to be an authentic individual, which I had hoped would translate into my leadership style. And, although I had not been actually told that I had been doing a pretty good job of that, my most recent visits to my Centre have led to my understanding that this seems to be true.

I know that coming into any role as a temporary person is a difficult thing to do for both the replacement and the staff and, as such, earlier in the year I took the staff's expression of frustration and pleas for my return as simply growing pains; but now, almost a year in, the exhausted expression of joy at my imminent return signals to me the validity of their frustrations and concerns. Although what the staff are saying is that they are not being communicated with, what I know to be closer to the truth is that they are not being listened to.

Being heard is a human dignity that I take very seriously; I think a leader should have the ability to listen to team members and then make decisions based on both sides of the coin—profitability and the human element. It took me a long time making some serious errors, but some breakthrough thinking afforded to me from my work on my Master of Education came to support my understanding that boss does not make leader and leader does not make boss. My role as Program Coordinator may be a supervisory one, but in order to be effective and truly happy in my job, I have come to learn that I am

an equal team member and contributing partner in our school's success, not the reason for it.

This understanding, I believe, may be what is lacking in my replacement, whose impact has been more boss-like than leader-like and, as a result, the staff have begun to feel lost, very low in morale, and eager for my return.

The power of authenticity is not simply knowing yourself and carrying on; it is so much more than that. It is the ability to honour the humanity of others, a trait I find can be lacking, lost, or sacrificed in organizations for the much easier and containable structure of bureaucratic, top-down administration. I have learned that the honouring of others begins and ends with the honouring of oneself. (Journal entry, June 2012)

Waiting

Yesterday the story of every person took place. Here is the version that I understand to be true.

The couple arrived at the restaurant at no particular time for no special occasion, simply to eat as is necessary. They strolled and swaggered through the dining room with purpose and direction. They sat across from each other, equals with varying perspectives of the same space. As was their nature, they exuded an elegance and poise embodied by their relaxation and exaltation of the experience. Their presence was palpable to all, all except their waiter.

The young couple sat patiently waiting for service and yet minutes passed and their waiter did not present himself in the customary fashion, not even so much as an "I'll be right with you." The waiter was resting his eyes in the comfort of the staff room, as he found himself exhausted by his family obligations and the haphazard nocturnal

wakefulness of his newborn child. To him, a man, a good father, a good husband ensures his wife has acquired a plethora of sleep at the sacrifice of his own. The couple waited.

Once he felt sufficiently rested, he greeted his guests with the appropriate level of optimism and charm expected of him. However, in his robotic welcome, he neglected to notice what the couple had brought with them to the table.

He spent no more than a minute with the Potentials and left them to discuss their plan. After moments of discussion, Mr. Goal Potential and Mrs. Dream Potential became eager to discuss their options, but again their waiter was unavailable. The waiter was waiting for his turn at electronic scrabble, which he played on his phone in the solitude of the staff washroom. He spent considerable time racking his brain for the mystery word locked in his seven letters, and he found the immediate gratification of a high-scoring word, enough to sustain the necessary amount of joy needed to get through each day. Scrabble is a game not loved by all, as it requires a certain level of intellect and visual spatial skill possessed mainly by self-declared wordophiles. Fortunately for the waiter, and the e-Scrabble website, the waiter possessed such skills.

The waiter did finally return to the Potentials and shared with them his specials. The Potentials found the specials intriguing and asked for more time to contemplate all the specials and how they could incorporate them into their decision-making for the future. The waiter left them to their thoughts.

The waiter returned to his game, waiting for the next moment in his life to happen, hoping that time would pass quickly, wishing for the Potentials to finally make a decision. However in a fleeting moment, while poising his head upward, searching his memory for the next possible letter combination, he caught a glimpse of himself in the

bathroom mirror; there he realized that it was his lack of engagement that was delaying the Potentials. He noted that during past experiences with other guests he could, through questions, discussions, and suggestions, aid the Potentials to decide what they wanted. The waiter put down his electronic game and took the large and necessary step towards his Potential. (Journal entry, August 2012)

Originally, I thought I wrote this journal entry about my husband . . . funny what time can do to your perspective. I now see that that story is ALL about me! Perhaps I was entrenched in the arduous task of raising my child or busy hiding my depression from myself. Was that my spirit reaching out to me through my pen? I think it was.

Honouring My Self, My Soul

It seems to me now that the journey to gain knowledge of oneself and to honour what one finds there has a definable beginning: the inquisitive glimpse in the mirror at an unrecognizable face that can propel you forward at varying speeds and in a multitude of directions—but the journey doesn't appear to have a discernible end. In my case, I recognize two separate beginnings, or maybe the first few years were a preamble to the real show. I am a mom, a teacher, a wife, a friend, a woman, and I love all of those roles. Yes, this is where I find myself . . . on my road.

Nice To Meet You!

*It is Christmas time again. The holiday tunes are playing on my Galaxie radio station, and I sit at the kitchen table with my morning coffee, eager to hear the click clack of computer keys. My self-study has sat idle for 2 years, waiting to be completed, not because of lack of desire or stories, but I became pregnant and wanted to take the time to **be** pregnant, thinking I would come back to the research once I had some time while at*

home on maternity leave. And all through my leave, I made attempts to squirrel away time to write and focus on this last stage of my Master of Education. However, there were never enough minutes in the day, and my focus and attention waned and wavered between sleep-deprived fuzziness and a type of uncertainty that I had never experienced before.

Every new mother would describe it differently, but it is a tale as old as time, a story, I feel, that when told can never be fully understood until lived. I found myself 1 year postpartum looking in the mirror and finding the reflection unrecognizable. There were glimpses, shapes, and shadows that triggered memories of who I once was, but that girl, the clean lines and a place for everything and everything in its place girl, was nowhere to be seen. And I was ANGRY, so angry that I could let this happen to me, that I could allow my life to be changed for the worse. I stopped caring about the little things that I once held in high regard like a clean house and entertaining and being social and reading—books, unfortunately had lost all meaning. I anguished over the thought, “How could I ever string a thesis together if I couldn’t even get through five pages of a book that I had already read?” I was at a low ebb and tired and scared. A girl whose entire life was surrounded by those who got depressed and never let it get to her was now in a pit that could only be described as a thick wasteland of black paste laced with webs of poisonous words—whatever, no, never—that stung like bees, eyelids heavy and watery, heartbroken, aching, crying, screaming. What have I done? I had just started to like myself, just started to feel safe and real; why would I give all that up? What will become of me?

Motherhood is not for the faint of heart. But I was a strong, independent woman who had battled and overcome much dysfunction in my life. Of course I could beat the depression of early motherhood with a wave of my hand . . . or so I thought. For months before I returned to work I had convinced myself that the self-loathing and lack of self-recognition was simply due to lack of normalcy and routine that going back to work could provide, and I masked my depression, under the cover I had labeled "I will feel better when . . ." It was as if my righteous path of self-discovery that I had so lovingly embraced in the years leading up to motherhood had been temporarily blocked by estrogen and progesterone.

I believe now that I had, like in the past, built an impermeable structure around my authenticity such as it was; no flex, no give, no room for change. I think I felt that I had become authentic and I could check that off my to-do list. Given that, when life, as it does, turned me on my head, I couldn't fathom what to do next.

I returned to work in August to allow myself a few weeks to acclimatize to being back at work. I jumped in with both feet and found myself sad when it was Friday, for the weekends brought early mornings and days filled with the fearful thoughts that I had become accustomed to around coping with my daughter.

Those first few weeks fuelled my thinking . . . I was right. I just needed to get back to work to start feeling like myself again. I selfishly rode the joy brought on by the staff's cheers for my return, and secretly, I wanted to hear how much my replacement had failed to even remotely fill my shoes. I reveled in staff stories about how they suffered through and couldn't wait for my return. For those first few weeks before the students returned I

was euphoric and worked hard to reestablish the orderly little world that I had created for myself before I left.

September brought with it a new group of students, some new to the school, some simply new to me, and I fell right back into step as the go-to makeshift counselor for staff and students alike, managing each crisis as it arose on cue. But at 4 p.m., it was time to pick up the baby. Forget about the student who wants to commit suicide or the staff member that is having problems at home; forget about the report due, the schedule that you haven't written yet; remember to stop at the store to get the homo milk . . . Oh God, seriously, how could you forget the milk . . . the baby will have to have the skim again. What kind of parent are you really?

On Sunday, baby is at grandma's for the night—time to pull myself back together, sit down, relax, watch the MASH movie that I have seen a hundred times, have a drink, and breathe. Hawkeye has been committed temporarily to a mental health facility . . . he saw something that he just couldn't let go of. I have seen this movie a hundred times, I know it is because a mother had to kill her baby to assure silence for the group on the bus so the sniper wouldn't hear them and kill them all. I know this, and yet still I cry, I bawl, I scream, I retch. I cry, and hurt, and curl up in a ball until I can't cry any longer. For two hours I am uncontrollable, and I cry for a child, for myself.

Monday morning I make a call to Canadian Mental Health, a call I have made many times on behalf of the struggling students I see every day, but today I ask about support for postpartum depression. That must be why I can't pull myself together. I am a professional, and I'll just see what resources are available, maybe make an appointment, and see if I can sort out these few minor issues I have been having. A woman takes my

call, asks how I am feeling, if I have thoughts of harming my baby; asks if am I using any substances to cope. Was it what she asked or that she asked that caused me to break down and let it ALL out; I cry uncontrollably. There in my office with students waiting, I do it, finally—I take time to let out all the angst that had been piling up for months. She agreed to see me the next day and every week after that.

I have always known that therapy was good for most people but have always put off taking the plunge myself, as I simply thought that if I had staved off depression for this long I must be fine. But if you ask my husband, he would tell you that for years I may not have been doing the great job that I thought I was doing. There have been tears and fits of anger, low points, and poor decisions, all pushed aside as temporary and quickly forgotten. But there in the comfort of the soft, warm lamplight, I let go, I gave in, I held myself up, I heard what I had stifled for years. I listened to myself tell stories about my mom, my husband, my baby, and myself. I heard a woman in pain, fearful of losing herself to this thing called motherhood. But lo and behold, underneath all the tales held down for so long, there I was, set free in the telling and forever changed. (Journal entry, December 2012)

So here I am today, no longer sitting on the edge of a new vision of my authentic self, emotions in check, not put away but given their space to be expressed openly and without fear. I see now that what I had yet to understand or remember was that being authentic does not mean being a certain way. Rather, it is a state of being created by love of self and others and a sense of joy, ebb and flow, a back and forth movement, in and out, experienced by reflection and understanding. Life is a journey that has no end and begins now, as I am ready for the ups and downs that situate events and situations I have lived and will live. It is ok if I forget, take a

wrong turn or hit a dead end because the power of my authentic self, my spirit and soul, will be there to guide me. I just have to remember to listen. I am reminded again of Helwig's (1992) *Haunted by Lives Unlived*, that "the single life we are given is both too much and not enough. Even the most single of us is plural, haunted by the ghost beings we own and are."

The power of story and the gifts it has awarded me up to this point were not acquired through frivolous acts of penmanship. Rather, it was a conscious act of looking (a) inward, to better understand my feelings, reactions, and perceptions of events, (b) outward to my surroundings and my external influences, (c) backward, to rethink and review my past experiences, to give voice and a sense of understanding to the little girl I was and clarification and freedom to the adult I am, and (d) forward, where I can contemplate the effects my perceptions and understandings of "reality" have on the possible scenarios of my future (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). I believe that the methodology of narrative inquiry has provided me with the "voice by which I can be known to others" (Atkinson, 1995, p. 12). My early experiences with narrative inquiry through the guided mentorship of Dr. Shields helped me to understand that the time taken to explore oneself is not selfish but can be a valuable contribution to the world of education if attention is given to connectedness and honesty. Using the tools of narrative inquiry and working diligently to honestly represent my experiences as I understand them, I feel that I have achieved my goals up to this point in time.

CHAPTER SIX: ENJOYING THE RIDE

Taking the Time to Get There

It has taken time for me to find the end of this story and the beginning of the next. I feel that I have lived a thousand lives, each one built upon the last. I am so grateful for the opportunity to reflect on what all has brought me here. I have no regrets; as Helwig (1992) quoted Edith Piaf, “I regret nothing. It is a dreadful thing, regret, that eats away the heart and must surely, in the name of sanity, be stifled in the energy of love for the choices made.” I have come to learn to live in the energy of love created by my choices.

It is by no accident that I have taken this long to complete this self-study research work. Each change made to my perspective at work, in my relationships, and in my mind could happen only when they were meant to happen. I needed to take each course, I needed to have my first child, and experience the catharsis of meeting myself afterwards. I needed to move out of my home and back to my home town and, most importantly I needed to take the time to forgive and let go of the woman that I was to make room for the woman, mother, wife, educator I want to be.

Driving has always afforded me the much-needed solitude to think and reflect; even when not in my car, when stealing a moment for myself, I see myself as moving forward. Dewey (1938) states that experience is education. I feel that reliving the situations and events that I have detailed in this study in present day through reflection upon the past has had a great impact on my growth as a person. Through the entire process of writing field text and turning it into a research text, I struggled with naming my phenomenon; I simply knew it as change. In order for me to truly understand, recognize, and name the phenomenon, I needed to gain further insight into my self. I needed time to process and live in each new understanding and perspective. I

needed to experience myself coming to new understandings about myself. As Shields and Patton (2004) stated:

Reflection involves reviewing the assumptions we have held. Critiquing them as we go, we awaken to new ways of storying our selves and move forward to reinterpret experience yet again. (p. 977)

Initially, I read Helwig's, 1992, article *Haunted By Lives Unlived* in the fall of 2010 as a course reading, and at the time I made the following note: "I love this article; it stimulated a space in my brain just behind my ears in such a way that the thought of the article ending has made me fearful that I will not be able to be there in that moment, in that part of myself again." I reread this and most of the other articles from that course just recently, and I was struck by a similar feeling, although this time, with all of the pondering and reviewing that I have done over the past few years, I have begun to understand what that feeling was. As I revisited and relived my thoughts from most of the research papers and books that resonated for me at the beginning of this academic journey, I could feel myself transcending to a different place, as if somehow I was able to cross over to the road not taken, if only for a moment; there, beauty and a sense of awe had come over me. I sensed however that this crossover was fleeting, not yet fully a part of myself. I wasn't fully there yet and I had yet to truly name my experience, and until I could, my roads could not exist simultaneously. I was ever so slowly beginning to recognize my growth and development, the merging of my divided self (Palmer, 1998, 2004). I was on the cusp of pulling it all together. I was at the precipice of a mountain that had taken me 4 years to climb. However, my journey's purpose was to elude me for a while still. Unbeknownst to me, my purpose was sparked by inspiration acquired months before.

The Jolting Bump on a Seemingly Flat Road

Inspiration is often fleeting, and if you don't take the time to recognize it, you may miss it. I fortunately had my eyes open to opportunity when my principal chose to share a new resource with us: Carol Dweck's 2006 book *Mindset*. In her very brief 5-minute description of the book followed by an equally short YouTube clip, I managed to fill the paper in front of me with notes, thoughts, and ideas, each linking to my work on this thesis.

Dweck's (2006) viewpoint as it was presented that day is that there are two different states of mind a person may be in, or mindsets as she refers to them, that impact not only who they are but how they learn, achieve, and ultimately, whether or not they will succeed. I believe that this excerpt of Dweck's work outlines the power of her research and makes a clear link to my own and the discoveries that I have made about myself.

Believing that your qualities are carved in stone—the *fixed mindset*—creates an urgency to prove yourself over and over. If you have only a certain amount of intelligence, a certain personality, and a certain moral character—well, then you'd better prove that you have a healthy dose of them. Every situation is evaluated: *Will I succeed or fail? Will I look smart or dumb? Will I be accepted or rejected? Will I feel like a winner or a loser?* (p. 6)

There is another mindset, a growth mindset, in which these traits are not simply a hand you're dealt and have to live with, always trying to convince yourself and others that you have a royal flush when you're secretly worried it's a pair of tens. In this mindset, the hand you're dealt is just the starting point for development. This *growth mindset* is based on the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts. Although people may differ in every which way—in their initial talents and aptitudes, interests, or temperaments—everyone can change and grow through application and experience. (p. 7)

When you enter a mindset, you enter a new world. In one world—the world of fixed traits—success is about proving you’re smart or talented. Validating yourself. In the other—the world of changing qualities—it’s about stretching yourself to learn something new. Developing yourself. (pp. 15-16)

What I was hearing was blowing my mind; quite literally, the learning I was experiencing was explosive neuronal growth. I remember thinking, “Finally the last piece of the puzzle, the link I had yet to make. I knew all along that something significant was occurring within me for the past few years, but I still, after all this time could not put my finger on it. And here in a somewhat typical staff meeting my life is forever changed. I am a fixed mindset person struggling with the idea of growth” and as such, I feel that my ability to succeed has been just out of my reach. What I later thought was that perhaps I am a growth mindset person who struggled under a fixed framework, which is why during certain opportunities for growth and potential success, where my path began to verge from the fixed one I found myself on, I could articulate my discomfort with my static life, for example, every spring wanting something “new,” a job, new home, and so on.

Driving Blindly

What have I learned? From the experience of these years of telling, retelling, and reliving my stories, I can say that I have learned how to learn. I recognize that having grown up with a fixed mindset I was under the impression that I carried with me all that I would ever know (Dweck, 2006); that when I “learned” new concepts in school I was really only committing to memory words and phrases that lacked meaning and purpose. I was simply practicing my fine-tuned skill of memorization.

bell hooks (2003) described this very common educational practice as learned helplessness created by the dominator culture, where the principle of the culture is the reliance on rote memory and teacher-pleasing practices. I consider myself a product of the dominator culture, and as such, I think now that as part of a more progressive student-centered education system, I, as a memorization-focused teenager, would not see the same success today as I did then. In school I submerged myself in the comfort of the dominator culture, where I could safely de-humanize my learning and then be free of feeling.

There, in school, I could be successful without a significant connection to my self and was praised for it; my ability to compartmentalize and not let the issues of my life prevent me from moving forward academically was admired. I realize now that all the while it was stunting my emotional development, which was not a concern of the dominator culture school system I attended.

By not allowing myself to confront and understand the world around me, I promoted the fixed ideals preset for me: You are a smart, confident leader. Not once was I told I was a good learner; that would have implied some sense of something lacking, which I would have taken as a personal affront. I believe now that this perpetual lack of attention to learning and continuous support and praise for being smart rather than needing to learn, limited my growth and potential for growth.

However, at the time, I feel that my acquiescence to the dominant culture was necessary for me to survive and get through an environment surrounded by others who saw academic achievement in the same way. Perhaps if there had been a caring and trusted adult to whom I could have turned for encouragement to tap into my more creative self, my story of high school would have been different.

Leaving my small town after high school and moving on to university, I encountered new people with different viewpoints on learning and experience. With a select few, I developed personal, trusting relationships, which encouraged me to experience and learn a more “feeling” way of living. Through their guidance, I learned to value myself more and was able to begin the process of self-love. I feel that up until that point in my life, I could see my value only through the eyes of others, personally as well as academically, which led to self-loathing and debasing activities. Fortunately, the select few happenstance floormates at university saw things differently, and my journey to today and tomorrow began.

I look back on those years now with great fondness. I think that although they were tumultuously emotional times filled with doubt and insecurity, they were necessary in my growth process. As Clandinin and Connelly (1991) write reflecting Dewey (1938), I am reminded that “doubt and uncertainty are the hallmarks of any meaningful inquiry” (p. 263), in this case my self-study inquiry into who I am. I was experiencing life differently but at the time, I did not have the tools to reflect on the difference. I do now.

Each journey begins with a step, and perhaps that time at university was a baby step or grand leap in my evolution. Either way, I see, looking back, that it was a necessary beginning and is now a much-welcomed memory to which I attribute great respect and love.

I am amazed that it took as long as it did for me to recognize, identify, and now crave the exhilaration that I receive from learning. As I look back, I can see now, clear as day . . . fleeting moments where I challenged my thinking and allowed myself the freedom to not be in control and know now that they provided me with the pleasure of learning. I now treasure those morning moments journaling while everyone sleeps or moments of insightful solitude reading on my front porch. I alluded to such feelings in a number of my field text stories but did not make the

connection to what those feelings actually were until given the opportunity to reflect and make connections here. I have come to understand this feeling to be love for learning and growth and self and others and joy and pain (Atkinson, 1995; Bolton, 2010).

Looking back on the data I have used to compile my research text focusing on searching for my own authenticity, I see stories dealing with mental illness, divorce, the fixed mindset, struggles with feeling important, unique, and loved. I see tales of surviving, thriving, and finding it easier to feel in control when I didn't allow myself to be pushed or challenged to stray out of the box. Looking back, I feel I placed a lot of blame on my parents and life situations for cheating me out of opportunities in life. However, regardless of the stories that brought me to present day, this self-study marks my opportunity to make a significant change in my mindset. I find myself in a place similar to what Shields and Patton (2004) described as being

the work of mid-life where the work of identifying and modifying or re-
interpreting pivotal childhood experiences, [and] unmasking the roles which we
have played and the false selves we have created to please those around us [is
upon me]. (p. 972)

There appears to have always been a part of me that sought out growth and change and in those moments where I found excitement and joy. For reasons that are complex and layered with years of experience and fixed perspectives, I see that I allowed the moments of growth to be only short lived. Change can happen only as soon as it can and no sooner. I could not adopt a growth mindset fully until I was ready to do so, and in order to be ready, I had to understand what had prevented me from doing so.

I am grateful for the opportunity to reflect on my life experiences and give them the time and space needed in order to gain a better understanding of who I am. I realize that I grew up

with parents who were troubled by their own experiences and that at the time no harm was ever done to me purposefully. As parents and leaders, we can do only the best we can with the knowledge that we have in that moment, and I harbor no anger or resentment for the choices made by those around me or by me when I was young—I believe we all did what was necessary to get us to the next day.

As I look back on the stories told here, I can't help but recognize the role my mother has taken throughout this entire study. I am reminded of Atkinson's (1995) statement that whatever we emphasize the most in our stories shows us what is most important to us, what our greatest struggles are, what our greatest triumphs are, where our deepest values lie. They show us what our quest has been, where we have been broken, where we are whole and where we are most authentically us. (p. 11)

I believe now that the relationship with my mother and the experiences that I have described have a connecting thread in that they all lead to my desire for understanding of and dream for a positive relationship with my daughter. It is as if I have been trying to ask myself, "What does my relationship with my mother say about me as a parent?" The knowledge I feel that I have gained from telling and reliving my stories is that I am not destined to repeat her patterns and behaviours, that her story dictated her actions and not my own. I think that mine is the story of change, and using the power of naming my experiences as an opportunity for learning and growth gives light and hope to my vision of myself as a parent.

I feel that the knowledge and understanding that I have gained from the reinterpreting, retelling, and reliving of my life stories as part of this thesis process is simple but profound. Every moment can and should be reflected upon, and the power of sharing my stories has

deepened my understanding of my self and resolved conflict that I had allowed to prevent me from moving forward. As Atkinson (1995) notes:

The particular circumstances of our lives may not matter as much as how we see them. A change of perception can come at any time we are ready to accept what has happened to us as okay. The only thing we can change about our past is the way we look at it. This can be a creative response that enables us to understand the flow of our lives and to accept it. (p. 16)

Amen to that!

What now? I believe that the road does not end here, that all stories start and end in the middle of themselves. Personal growth is a forever journey, and although my fixed mindset has been named and identified, it does not simply disappear with the desire to change. Change is work, and I will, for a long time, be cognizant that my roads need to merge and become undivided. The power I have now that I did not have when I began this work is in the knowledge of their existence. Knowing that I have multiple life experiences that have given me different interpretations of my self allows my reflections and stories to become more accurate representations of the past and ultimately, I hope, more authentic going forward into the future.

I believe authenticity in leadership and life is built upon one's understanding of self. For me this understanding has come from and is built upon my quest for an undivided life; a life where the roads weave and bend around challenges but always bring about inspiration and growth. Learning, like the roads in life, are not unidirectional. I know I will get turned around, go back down each road I take, evaluate where I have come from, the mistakes that I have made and joys I have relished, and see them with fresh eyes and new perspective.

I have come to believe that all learning stems from learning about oneself. I was not completely static, fixed, and closed to learning prior to this journey; however, what I have come to understand is that by allowing growth to be at the core of my experiences, I am more aware and open to learning as a leader, teacher, parent, and human being.

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March 26, 2014

Dionne Thomson
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Dear Dionne:

Re: REB File # **14-03-01** (Please quote on all correspondence)
Project Entitled: Stories of Personal Experience and New Direction: Changing Perspectives on the Road to Authenticity

It is our pleasure to advise you that the Research Ethics Board at Nipissing University has granted ethical approval for your research project noted above. **Ethics approval is valid for one (1) year and will expire on March 31, 2015.** It is your responsibility as a researcher to keep track of the expiry date.

Annual Renewal: If you require additional time or an extension you are required to complete a *Request for Renewal of an Approved Protocol form* prior to the anniversary of your expiry date.

Modifications: If there are any modifications/changes to the approved project you are required to submit a *Request for Modifications to an Approved Protocol form*.

Final Report: According to the Tri-Council Policy Statement (TCPS) you are required to submit a Final Report. A Final Report is due once you are no longer actively involved with participants/data collection.

Please note that all forms are located on the Research Ethics Board website at <http://www.nipissingu.ca/academics/research-services/reb/Pages/Protocol-Forms.aspx>

At any time during your research should any participant(s) suffer adversely you are required to advise the Research Ethics Board at Nipissing University, (705) 474-3450 ext. 4055 within 24 hours of the event.

We wish you all the success in completion of your research.

Sincerely yours,
[REDACTED]

Dr. Dana R. Murphy, Chair
Research Ethics Board

cc: Secretary, Graduate Studies in Education
Dr. Carmen Shields, Schulich School of Education



RESEARCH ETHICS BOARD FINAL REPORT OF AN APPROVED PROTOCOL

For Administrative Use Only

Date Received: OCT. 7.14	Completion Date: SEPT. 12.14	Original Approval: MAY 26.14	PROTOCOL # 14.03.01
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...ched documents may ...
...lated protocols on or ...
...familiarize themselves

Any personal information collected on this form will form part of the records held in the Research Services Office and will be used to assist in the administration of your research program. A copy of this form may be reviewed by external parties in order to meet legislative, audit and/or regulatory requirements. If you have any questions or concerns about the information collected please contact the Ethics Coordinator at 705-474-3450 ext 4055

1.0 APPLICANT (Principal Investigator)

Please provide your permanent mailing address (including postal code):	Department /Faculty Education
Name: Dianne Thomson	
Address: [REDACTED]	
E-mail Address: [REDACTED]	
Telephone Number (daytime): [REDACTED]	

1.1

Title of Research Project: Stories of personal experience and new direction: Changing perspectives on the road to authenticity	
Protocol Number: 14-03-01	Start Date of Research: Mar 31 2014 Completion Date of Research: Sept 12 2014

1.2

	NAME AND CONTACT INFORMATION	Department
Faculty Co-Investigator(s)		
Faculty Supervisor (in the case of student research)	Dr. Carmen Shields	Education

2.0 PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

- Total number of participants that have completed the study SELF STUDY
- Number of participants that have withdrawn from the study

If the withdrawal rate was higher than anticipated please describe any known circumstances.

RESEARCH ETHICS BOARD FINAL REPORT OF AN APPROVED PROTOCOL

3.0 PROJECT INFORMATION

- Have any research participants suffered any serious or unexpected harm? Yes No
- Have any ethical concerns arisen while conducting this research? Yes No
- Since the original ethics approval was granted, have there been any unidentified risks or benefits to participants? Yes No

If you answered Yes to any of the above questions, please provide details and what safeguards were provided to participants.

4.0 RECORD RETENTION

Please provide specific details as to the disposal of data collected in this project (records, video, audio, data, etc.) and/or the time frame for record retention?

All data has been deleted from the non-networked electronic device and all hard copies have been shredded.



RESEARCH ETHICS BOARD FINAL REPORT OF AN APPROVED PROTOCOL

SIGNATURES:

Principal Investigator:

I certify that the information provided in this Final Report is complete and accurate. I understand that I had the ultimate responsibility for the conduct of the study, the ethics performance of the project, and the protection of the rights and welfare of research participants. I have complied with the Tri-Council Policy Statement and Nipissing University policies and procedures governing the protection of human participants in research.

____ Signature of Principal Investigator

____ Date Oct 6, 2014



Faculty Supervisor Assurance: For student applications

I have read this Final Report and deem it to be complete. I understand if this report is incomplete it will be returned to me and I will be responsible for ensuring its completion

____ Signature of Faculty Supervisor

____ Date October 7, 2014



Student Research:

I understand that for the purposes of thesis and Major Research Papers that a copy of this Final Report, endorsed by the Ethics Coordinator, will become part of the bound submission of my thesis.

____ Signature of REB Ethics Coordinator

10.8.14

Please complete and submit one (1) signed original and one (1) electronic version of the Final Report to

Ethics Coordinator
Room F309
ethics@nipissingu.ca
Fax: (705) 474-5875