

ODYSSEY OF HEROES: THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF
STORYTELLING AND REFLECTIVE WRITING FOR LGBTQ+
INDIVIDUALS

by

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A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of
the California Institute of Integral Studies
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Transformative Studies

California Institute of Integral Studies

San Francisco, CA

2024

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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ABSTRACT

At the heart of this manuscript is storytelling. It demonstrates the power of reflective writing for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) individuals. It celebrates the transformation and liberation that comes from sharing those stories. The research enables every queer person to use storytelling and reflective writing to construct their own personal mythology. It was written for every hero and heroine who has ever faced their metaphorical monsters (traumatic experiences and ordeals) and lived to talk about it. It invites the reader to reflect on their lives, find meaning among disparate events, and discover connection through the art of storytelling and reflective writing. The journey takes time and each step along the path can be a gift of insight, courage, and wisdom.

The purpose of this study is to explore the therapeutic and transformational effects of using personal narrative and reflective writing to become aware of how LGBTQ+ individuals can perpetuate self-victimization and self-abuse as a side effect of experiencing trauma and troubling events. It seeks to answer the question, “How does writing personal narrative perform as a therapeutic process for LGBTQ+ individuals moving through trauma from

perpetuating self-victimization and abuse to integration, forgiveness of self, resilience, and empowerment?”

The study, by using personal narrative, identifies the relationship between isolated events and their meaning within the overall narrative arc and identity of the individual. From there, the individual can deconstruct and reconstruct their narrative and eventually find meaning and value in trauma and troubling experiences (narrative ontology and constructivist ontology). The method for this study is Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) as outlined by Nash and Bradley (2011). SPN utilizes an effective four-phased approach to investigation: pre-search, me-search, re-search, and we-search.

The target audience for this research is primarily the LGBTQ+ community; however, anyone who has experienced trauma and is seeking a path to healing and well-being may find value in it.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my mother. Without her, this dissertation would not exist. My relationship to her had its ups and downs. I can't say we were friends; however, she did give me something that no one else could give me—the courage to be different and to defy the conditioned beliefs and values of the world. Unbeknownst to her, she showed me that radical transformation was required if I wanted to live a life of fulfillment and purpose. She showed me that it was possible to reconstruct my personal narrative and to use traumatic events as a tool for growth and development. Without my mother, I wouldn't be who I am today. While she is no longer with us on the Earth, I still have a relationship with her in my heart and mind. The stories I share about her in this writing are meant to convey the lessons I learned from her even if she never intended them to be catalysts for transformation.

I would also like to thank my friends both old and new who have not only celebrated my accomplishments but have also supported me when I experienced doubts and failure. I especially want to thank Nancy Wagaman and Dakota Atley. Nancy has been more than just a friend for the last 36 years. She has been a mentor, coach, and confidant throughout my best and worst times. She was there when others abandoned or denounced me. Dakota and I have been brothers and best friends since 2004. We have laughed, cried, and screamed together through two decades of experience and relationship. I have no doubt we will be brothers forever.

To the committee members who have wholeheartedly embraced this work and have offered many words of wisdom to point me in the right direction—Dr. Nancy (Ilana) Rowe, Dr. Constance Jones, and Dr. Michael Raffanti. Ilana was the chair of my first graduate program in Transpersonal Psychology at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology (Sofia University). She helped me publish my first academic paper and has always steered me toward my heart and passion. Connie has helped me see the value of self-inquiry, resilience, and understanding my relationship to spiritual philosophies. Michael has modeled a way of life that is carefree, relaxed, and full of wisdom that I only hope I can emulate in the years ahead.

To the feline companions, past and present, who have loved me unconditionally and given the gifts of laughter, delight, and joy. Their gentle purrs have anchored me during the most terrible storms.

And finally, George Lucas. Whether he knows it or not, the original Star Wars films saved my life in many ways. That galaxy far, far away offered me a place of safety and security when the real world around me was at its darkest. May the Force be with you, George.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to all my LGBTQ+ family—past, present, and future.

May your voice be heard over time and space.

May you find joy and peace in your lifetime.

For those that are gone and whose voices are now silenced, I thank you.

For those that are using their voices today, I thank you.

For those that will share their voices in the future, I thank you.

This work is also dedicated to J. Krishnamurti, Eckhart Tolle, and Joseph Campbell who have affected millions of minds with their unique world views and teachings.

—

You must understand the whole of life,
not just one part of it.

That is why you must read,
that is why you must look at the skies,
why you must sing,
dance and write poems,
and suffer, and understand,
for all that is life.

—J. Krishnamurti (2010, p. 26)

When you surrender to what is
And so become fully present,
The past ceases to have any power.
The realm of Being, which had been obscured by
The mind, then opens up.
Suddenly, a great stillness arises within you,
An unfathomable sense of peace.
And within that peace, there is great joy.
And within that joy, there is love.
And at the innermost core, there is the sacred,
The immeasurable, that which cannot be named.

—Eckhart Tolle (1999, p. 102)

The world is a match for us. We are a match for the world.
The first function of mythology is to sanctify the place you are in.
Follow your bliss.

—Joseph Campbell (1995, pp. 293–294)

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CHAPTER 1: PRESENTATION OF INQUIRY

Stories have the power to fundamentally change one's psychological, philosophical, emotional, and spiritual perspectives on life. Writing personal narrative is a tool that enables one to travel through time (Custer, 2014a), albeit metaphorically. When read collectively, the events and experiences of life form the mythic structure of an adventure—a hero's journey (Berkowitz, 2010; Campbell, 2008; Vogler, 2020). This journey takes one from the ordinary world and propels them into the unknown reaches of space and time. Used appropriately, these stories can empower individuals to meet the future with resilience, confidence, and courage. The lessons contained in each chapter of one's life-book have the potential to radically shift their relationship to self and the world.

This inquiry investigates the therapeutic and transformational characteristics of using personal narrative to become aware of perpetuating self-victimization and self-abuse as a side effect of experiencing trauma and troubling events (Crawford, 2010; Méndez-Negrete, 2013). It demonstrates the significance of using reflective writing and self-inquiry to alter one's relationship to the past by ending self-victimization and manifesting alternative pathways to psychological, emotional, and spiritual well-being (Deblasio, 2022; Drozdowski, 2015; Franks, 2016; Harris & Fortney, 2017). Finally, it posits that by undertaking self-reflective writing, individuals can nurture resilience against future difficulties and deconstruct/reconstruct their narrative identity.

This study seeks to answer the question, “How does writing personal narrative perform as a therapeutic process for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ+) individuals moving through trauma from perpetuating self-victimization and abuse to integration, forgiveness of self, resilience, and empowerment?” This analysis uses the following subquestions as a construct for the research process:

- How does writing personal narrative reshape individual identity and psychology?
- How does narrative therapy alter an individual’s relationship to traumatic and troubling events?
- How do my own experiences of spiritual, psychological, emotional, and sexual abuse as an LGBTQ+ individual compare with empirical findings about LGBTQ+ traumas?
- What are the implications of perpetuating self-victimization and self-abuse and how can LGBTQ+ individuals become aware of these issues in their own lives?
- What are the therapeutic benefits of forgiving oneself for perpetuating self-victimization and using traumatic and troubling events as tools for empowerment?

Statement of the Problem and Purpose of the Study

There is a significant difference between the types of traumatic and troubling events LGBTQ+ individuals experience versus their heterosexual counterparts, including psychological and emotional trauma (Gupta, 2022;

Iwasaki & Ristock, 2007; James et al., 2012; Longares et al., 2016; Oransky & Marecek, 2009; Sullivan & Wodarski, 2002), sexual trauma (Batchelder et al., 2021; de Heer et al., 2021; Willie et al., 2016; Wilson et al., 2017), and religious or spiritual trauma (Blosnich et al., 2019; Craig et al., 2017; Dahl & Galliher, 2009; Kubicek et al., 2009; Sowe et al., 2017; Super & Jacobson, 2011). Many of these traumas have their roots in early childhood and can manifest as chronic physical symptoms (Mijas et al., 2021) later in life. There is limited research (Borges, 2022; Galarza, 2013; Gebel, 2022; Kruse, 2016; Landström, 2023; Maeder, 2020; Mountz et al., 2024; Newman, 2020; Steelman, 2016) that addresses the transformation of an LGBTQ+ individual's personal narrative through integrating trauma, overcoming the perpetuation of self-victimization and self-abuse, and manifesting a pathway to well-being and resilience. Ultimately, the purpose of this study is to discern how individuals find meaning in traumatic experiences through reflective writing and restorying the past. The intent of this inquiry is to describe how this process might enable an individual to move out of the field of time and duality toward a state of self-transcendence, immanence, and self-actualization (Kino Lorber, 2022).

Personal Relationship to the Topic

From childhood into adolescence and young adulthood, I experienced numerous traumatic and troubling events including psychological, emotional, spiritual, and sexual abuse by immediate family members. In addition, social and cultural influences impacted my well-being as an LGBTQ+ human being. These complex and layered pressures were overwhelming and eventually led to my

attempt at suicide in 1989. Through various serendipitous events, as espoused by Joseph Campbell's (2008) "Hero's Journey," I was introduced to mentors, monsters (threshold guardians), and the dark caves of my own soul (Campbell, 2008; Vogler, 2020). I overcame my base instinct to cower in fear of the unknown and went on a trek to discover myself through reflective writing and self-inquiry.

It wasn't until 2006, when I was brutally attacked and mugged in San Diego, California, that I came face to face with my inner demons. My consciousness evolved after that traumatic event, and I became aware of how I was perpetuating self-victimization through feelings of anger, revenge, depression, remorse, guilt, sadness, and hate—not just about recent events, but also regarding events that took place in my childhood. I set out to reflect on these events as narratives that I could restory through expressive writing. I was able to reconstruct traumatic events to gain new perspective and eventually found value in forgiving myself for perpetuating self-victimization and abuse. I moved out of time and duality (Kino Lorber, 2022) through writing and was able to see myself *in* the people who had parts in my stories. This evolution of consciousness empowered resilience against future hardship and troubling events. It gave me the courage to accept my life and all that I had experienced as part of one unfolding and enfolding journey. Like the lotus, I found myself emerging and submerging with a fluid-like existence. I became more open to the present moment through an evolved relationship with the past and a new perspective of the future (Custer, 2014a).

Definitions

This inquiry incorporates multiple overlapping domains of knowledge, including psychology, spirituality, sexuality, narrative identity, transpersonal psychology, reflective writing, trauma, resilience, and LGBTQ+ identity/community. Given the extent of these domains, I highlight a handful of the concepts that are relevant.

Forgiveness

Using the American Psychological Association's definition, forgiveness is "willfully putting aside feelings of resentment toward an individual who has committed a wrong, been unfair or hurtful, or otherwise harmed one in some way. It involves a voluntary transformation of one's feelings, attitudes, and behavior" (American Psychological Association, n.d.-b). This inquiry posits that forgiving oneself is just as important as extending it to others.

Gratitude

Using the American Psychological Association's definition, gratitude is "a sense of thankfulness and happiness in response to receiving a gift, either a tangible benefit (e.g., a present, favor) given by someone or a fortunate happenstance (e.g., a beautiful day)" (American Psychological Association, n.d.-c). This inquiry expands the idea of gratitude toward negative or traumatic events to gain meaning from them.

Hero's Journey

According to Vogler (2020), the Hero's Journey is often depicted as an outward, external journey in books, film, stage, and other entertainment domains.

However, it is also

an inward journey, one of the mind, the heart, the spirit. In any good story the hero grows and changes, making a journey from one way of being to the next; from despair to hope, weakness to strength, folly to wisdom, love to hate, and back again. (Vogler, 2020, p. 7)

Based on Joseph Campbell's (2008) explanation of the Hero's Journey, Vogler (2020) explains,

The Hero archetype represents the ego's search for identity and wholeness. In the process of becoming complete, integrated human beings, we are all Heroes facing internal guardians, monsters, and helpers. In the quest to explore our own minds we find teachers, guides, demons, gods, mates, servants, scapegoats, masters, seducers, betrayers, and allies, as separate aspects of our personalities and characters in our dreams. All the villains, tricksters, lovers, friends, and foes of the Hero can be found inside ourselves. The psychological task we all face is to integrate these separate parts into one complete, balanced entity. The ego, the Hero thinking she is separate from all these parts of herself, must incorporate them to become the Self. (p. 32)

This dissertation demonstrates through personal narrative and reflective writing, my own Hero's journey in relationship to traumatic events from childhood into adulthood. My story is a story of integration and becoming whole, but not after first experiencing several dichotomies of spirit, mind, and emotion.

Narrative and Storytelling

This study uses the terms "narrative" and "storytelling" interchangeably. Both indicate an individual's recounting or retelling of events from their personal lives through written and oral media (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Narrative Identity

The theory of narrative identity analyzes how individuals make meaning from their life experiences and construct their identity through narrative (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Narrative identity looks at both the internal narratives that are formed based on exposure to society and culture, and the external narratives that are imposed upon us. This theory argues that an individual's identity is constantly evolving and that past events can be reconstructed to inform the present and future in a more positive way (McAdams & McLean, 2013).

Narrative Psychology

A branch of psychology that focuses on the study of human experiences through the lens of storytelling and narrative. It examines how individuals construct and interpret the stories of their lives, including the roles of memory, language, culture, and personal identity in shaping these narratives. Narrative psychologists explore the ways in which people make sense of their experiences, form their identities, and communicate their understanding of the world through the stories they tell (Bruner, 1987; McAdams, 1993; Polkinghorne, 1988; Sarbin, 1986).

Narrative Therapy

Narrative therapy is the construction and deconstruction of an individual's life stories to "give a frame of reference for understanding and making experiences understandable" (Etchison & Kleist, 2000, p. 61). The point of narrative therapy is to localize and deconstruct/reconstruct experiences to

perceive them in new ways (Etchison & Kleist, 2000). The individual elevates and transcends their perception of traumatic and troubling events by viewing them through a new lens (Saldanha & Barclay, 2021).

Resilience

This inquiry uses the American Psychological Association's (n.d.-d) definition of resilience as "the process and outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences, especially through mental, emotional, and behavioral flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands."

Scholarly Personal Narrative

SPN is a form of academic writing that incorporates and weaves the author's personal narrative and life events with relevant literature and research (Nash & Bradley, 2011). SPN is like autoethnography but does not focus on the cultural and societal implications of personal narrative. Instead, SPN assumes that individual experiences are universalizable in nature and can be generalized to larger audiences (Nash & Bradley, 2011). SPN posits that there is meaning in our individual stories and from that meaning-making comes new ways of perceiving self and the world (Nash & Bradley, 2011).

Self-Actualization

According to Maslow (1943), self-actualization is

self-fulfillment, namely the tendency for [the individual] to become actualized in what [they are] potentially. This tendency might be phrased as the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming. (p. 10)

Self-actualization is an ongoing process that each individual human must experience on their own. It requires that a person first have their basic and

fundamental physiological needs met (food, shelter, etc.), and live in an environment conducive to psychological, emotional, and spiritual development (Maslow, 1971) over time. Not all human beings are fortunate enough to have these requirements met in their lifetimes.

Self-Victimization

This inquiry defines self-victimization as an individual's perpetuation of abuse against themselves after a traumatic or troubling event has ended. For example, self-victimization can take the form of internalized homophobia in LGBTQ+ individuals. This is often the case for individuals who have been conditioned by conservative societies and cultures that do not condone homosexuality or emphasize heteronormativity (Choe et al., 2021; Purnell, 2019; Rubino et al., 2018; Schumann & Walton, 2022; Yolaç & Meriç, 2021).

Shame

Brown (2013) defines shame as “the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging—something we’ve experienced, done, or failed to do makes us unworthy of connection” (para. 2). This inquiry explores how the awareness of shame can be used to build resilience when experiencing new traumatic or negative events.

Trauma

This inquiry uses the American Psychological Association's (n.d.-e) definition of trauma as

an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape, or natural disaster. Immediately after the event, shock and denial are typical. Longer

term reactions include unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, strained relationships, and even physical symptoms like headaches or nausea.

My research looks at LGBTQ+ psychological, emotional, spiritual, and sexual trauma and abuse, and the various ways in which trauma and abuse can be perpetuated long after the event has ended.

Researcher Assumptions

This inquiry assumes that reflective writing and self-inquiry enable individuals to restory traumatic events and experiences to empower themselves.

In addition, through my personal evolution of consciousness, I assume that individuals can achieve self-actualization by (a) becoming *aware* of their own self-victimization and self-abuse, (b) *forgiving* themselves of the self-imposed abuse, and (c) *reconstructing* their perspective of self and others through personal narrative.

I attest that the process of reflective writing and self-inquiry has helped me overcome personal feelings of anger, revenge, depression, remorse, guilt, sadness, and hate, and has enabled me to forgive myself for perpetuating these feelings against myself and others. This process of reflection, self-inquiry, writing, research, and sharing my stories with others emulates the methodology that I have chosen for this inquiry—SPN (Nash & Bradley, 2011).

Finally, it is my hope that through the evolution of consciousness brought about by this study, I may be able to move past the field of duality (right/wrong, good/evil, black/white, I/you) into a state of unity, integration, and wholeness of being as illustrated in numerous mythological anecdotes and stories (Campbell, 2008; Kino Lorber, 2022; Vogler, 2020).

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

My individual life journey is filled with stories and events (positive and negative) that have shaped who and what I am and how I identify myself and others. As a young gay man, I believed that my personal narrative could not be changed and that I was destined to lead a life that was already written for me. Eventually as I developed, I came to the realization that not only could I rewrite my narrative, but I could also reconstruct the past, inform the present, and change the future through storytelling (Custer, 2014a).

My research inquiry is focused on understanding and uncovering how reflective writing and narrative perform as a therapeutic process for LGBTQ+ individuals moving through trauma from perpetuating self-victimization and abuse to integration, forgiveness, and empowerment. I have personally experienced the value of engaging my past, writing about traumatic experiences, achieving self-actualization (Maslow, 1943) through the realization of my potential, and externalizing my stories for the benefit of others.

Theory of Narrative Identity in Relationship to Traumatic and Troubling Experiences

Narrative identity is a relatively new field that found a foothold in the mid-1990s and has been championed by several noted psychologists including Jonathan Adler (Adler & McAdams, 2007), Dan McAdams (McAdams, 2018; McAdams & McLean, 2013), and Kate McLean (2008). Narrative identity posits that humans are storytellers and that we make meaning both from positive and negative experiences and events throughout our lives. The meaning we derive

influences the narrative we construct, and we often identify with selected aspects of the narrative that are deemed valuable or socially acceptable. We may choose to hide or ignore negative events and fill the gaps in our memory with fictional stories. This is a coping mechanism for individuals who have suffered troubling, disturbing, or traumatic events. One must ask themselves if they are being authentic and true to themselves when reflecting on personal narrative (Vannini & Franzese, 2008). Narrative identity addresses several vital concepts including agency, communion, redemption, contamination, and coherency (McAdams & McLean, 2013).

The amount of control an individual has over their life is known as agency. This is a critical characteristic of narrative identity because it helps to identify physical, psychological, emotional, and spiritual boundaries and capacity. The degree to which a person has agency over their past, present, and future is correlated to their ability to reflect on their narrative and willingness to reshape it (Adler, 2012). This agency is both an internal and external act of relationship (McLean, 2008). One must be engaged not only with themselves, but also with others. This requires reciprocal accountability, trust, and vulnerability. Any relationship lacking these features has the potential to negate agency.

Communion is the element of narrative identity that focuses on the level of connectedness an individual has with their internal and external worlds. In my own narrative, communion was lacking throughout my childhood and adolescence. I struggled to understand my identity and connect with other LGBTQ+ individuals. I became accustomed to being alone and inevitably

suffered from feeling excluded from family and the larger world (Hammack & Cohler, 2011). It wasn't until I found a support network in my 20s that I came to realize the benefits of authentic relationships with others. I was able to share my stories with those that would listen and reciprocate (B. Smith & Sparkes, 2008).

Redemption signifies events that are perceived as negative or “bad” at the outset but with positive or “good” outcomes. For example, an individual may be diagnosed with a life-threatening disease. The individual may decide to make the most of their experience by finding little things that make them happy or feel joy. They may become less enamored by the goals they once had and commit themselves to a more purposeful life. A terminal diagnosis may prompt reflection, self-inquiry, and reconstruction of the individual's worldview. The more one can find the “silver lining” of disturbing or troubling events, the more one builds their overall psychological well-being and resilience for future situations (Adler et al., 2008, 2016).

Contamination refers to events in an individual's narrative that start out positive or “good” but have a negative or “bad” outcome. For example, an intimate relationship may begin with good intentions and authentic feelings at the beginning but may slowly unravel if communication and reciprocity break down over time. The outcome of what started as a positive experience ends negatively. If contamination events happen regularly, adults may find themselves more cautious or apprehensive as they enter novel situations or relationships in the future (Adler et al., 2015; McAdams, 2019b).

Coherency implies the ability of an individual to create meaning from both negative and positive experiences (Singer et al., 2013). This meaning-making process promotes healthy ways of dealing with troubling and disturbing events (detoxifying) and positive events that can increase stress like childbirth and marriage (Adler & Hershfield, 2012). One must be careful not to find value or meaning where there is none or to make light of a severe situation as a coping mechanism (American Psychological Association, n.d.-a).

In his book *The Life Story Interview*, Atkinson (1998) writes,

What generally happens when we tell a story from our own life is that we increase our working knowledge of ourselves because we discover deeper meaning in our lives through the process of reflecting and putting the events, experiences, and feelings that we have lived into oral [and written] expression. (p. 1)

The “life story interview” is a direct application of reflective writing and self-inquiry in action.

With the guidance of an experienced interviewer, an individual is prompted to begin the exploration of their lives through the stories they tell about themselves. The process unfolds naturally as the interviewer and the interviewee dialogue and commune with one another. The interviewer takes an empathetic approach by asking open-ended questions and demonstrating active listening. The interviewee reflects on stories and events from their lives and over a series of meetings with the interviewer, uncovers and reveals the meaning of each story as it fits in their life. The goal of the interview process is to assist the interviewee with discovering their narrative identity. The analysis reveals how the interviewee has constructed their life and the multitude of behaviors associated with that construction.

According to Reischer et al. (2021), self-transcendence is

the phenomenon of experiencing one's self as expanding both backward and forward in time; a feeling of connectedness to all of humanity, the earth, and the cosmos; and a turn toward existential concerns such as the meaning of life and future death. (p. 305)

Through constructing, deconstructing, and then reconstructing narrative, individuals can move through time and space to engage with memories and stories from their past. This allows them to better understand the present and shape the future, whatever it may hold. This is not only a therapeutic process, but also a form of self-actualization (Maslow, 1943). It is a transpersonal awareness of being connected to the source of all life. Expressing spirit and mind through stories prepares the individual to effectively deal with future traumatic or troubling events.

Identifying and Defining LGBTQ+ Trauma-Related Stressors

Trauma itself is not unique to LGBTQ+ individuals. It exists across all spectra of humanity regardless of age, race, gender, sexual orientation, etc. However, some unique experiences within the LGBTQ+ community are important to highlight. These stressors include psychological and emotional, sexual, and religious abuse perpetrated by family members, non-family members, and organizations who assert the dominant heterosexual narrative and denounce or limit LGBTQ+ narratives (Isacco et al., 2012; Iwasaki & Ristock, 2007; Longares et al., 2016; Szymanski & Balsam, 2011).

Psychological and emotional trauma and abuse can manifest in several ways—social alienation of adolescents by peers and society (Sullivan & Wodarski, 2002), pressure for children to conform to heterosexist traits (Oransky

& Marecek, 2009), depression and anxiety over the fear of being ostracized (James et al., 2012; Longares et al., 2016), and the need to remain in the closet depending on geographic location and social environment (Gupta, 2022). Many LGBTQ+ individuals who do not conform to heteronormative values and beliefs may experience these distinctive stressors (Iwasaki & Ristock, 2007; Longares et al., 2016).

Along with psychological and emotional stigmas that many LGBTQ+ individuals experience, there are also the chronic physical symptoms that may manifest. A recent study by Mijas et al. (2021) indicates that “gay participants were characterized by significantly higher cortisol levels throughout laboratory visits. Their cortisol levels were predicted by perceived rejection from family due to minority sexual identity, and stigma-related vicarious trauma” (Abstract, para. 3). Therapists and counselors need to maintain a holistic view of LGBTQ+ trauma symptoms as they appear in various forms.

Another key stressor for LGBTQ+ individuals is sexual abuse. There are many studies conducted and books written about sexual abuse in general, but few are focused on the adverse effects on the LGBTQ+ community. Research by Willie et al. (2016) indicates that LGBTQ+ individuals can experience “sexual abuse-related shame and trauma-related emotions [that] could increase anxiety and depressive symptoms” (p. 1609). Compounded with the social stigma of being LGBTQ+ oriented, depression and anxiety may also increase suicide tendencies in adolescents. In addition to anxiety and depressive symptoms found in LGBTQ+ individuals that have experienced sexual abuse trauma, there are also

psychiatric, substance abuse, and sexual risk behaviors to consider. Batchelder et al. (2021) found that “demographic and structural differences interact with sexual orientation in perpetuating mental health and substance use disparities” (p. 2870).

De Heer et al. (2021) indicate that other forms of stress-inducing situations such as sex education, sexual violence, and sexual consent are underrepresented in the literature. They indicate that there is a growing need for more research in this area and that the perspectives of LGBTQ+ individuals need to be taken into greater consideration. de Heer et al. (2021) write that society must recognize

three profound and unique experiences within the LGBTQ+ community: (1) the inherent complexity of defining sex in queer relationships, (2) the trauma and victimization that the LGBTQ+ community experiences and feels collectively, and (3) the erasure and devaluing of LGBTQ+ relationships in sexual education. (p. 714)

Religious and spiritual abuse is yet another trauma-inducing experience that LGBTQ+ individuals must endure. Navigating religious organizations’ conservative and often hostile environments can be challenging, especially for young people. Many LGBTQ+ children and adolescents grow up in religious families and communities with the idea that LGBTQ+ people are sinful in the eyes of their faith. This can lead to lower self-esteem, mental health disorders, feelings of self-hatred and internalized homophobia (Blosnich et al., 2019; Kubicek et al., 2009; Sowe et al., 2017). Dahl and Galliher (2009) indicate that there are positive benefits for LGBTQ+ individuals who can integrate their religious identity with that of their sexual orientation. They found that by restructuring religious teachings and focusing on spirituality proved vital for individuals seeking to integrate their religious and sexual identities. Dahl and Galliher (2009) conclude that “these findings offer valuable ‘steps’ for counselors

to consider when engaging in therapy with conflicted LGBTQ individuals” (p. 110).

Reflective Writing as an Effective Process for Healing Trauma and Troubling Experiences

There is ample research that demonstrates the value of reflective writing as a form of healing and well-being for those who have experienced traumatic or troubling events throughout their lifetime (Bellamy, 2018; Berkowitz, 2010; Crawford, 2010; DeMarco, 2022; Jolly, 2011; Méndez-Negrete, 2013). Campesino (2007) points out, “The employment of narratives, or storytelling, may be an effective strategy for rehumanization among people who have experienced dehumanizing traumas” (p. 552). Specifically, using reflective writing to discover new aspects of one’s life can promote health and well-being among young LGBTQ+ individuals and address mental health issues (Bellamy, 2018).

Reflective writing acts as a catalyst that helps to open an individual’s memory and enables the discovery of new perspectives on the past through the deconstruction and reconstruction of events (Jirek, 2017; Neimeyer & Stewart, 1996; Ortega, 2020). Breaking down events from a nonjudgmental mindset is key to using reflective writing effectively. The value of self-reflection is found in its capacity to open the conscious awareness of the individual and set them apart from their narrative so that they may deconstruct it (Deblasio, 2022; Franks, 2016; Harris & Fortney, 2017; Jaramillo et al., 2019; Karam, 2019; Meyer, 2007). Deconstructing an event allows an individual to isolate actors, emotions, and

thoughts to reshape them into a coherent narrative. This process of deconstructing and reconstructing traumatic and troubling experiences contributes to meaning-making (coherence) and the “restorying” of personal narrative with the purpose of empowerment (Boylorn, 2016; Chawla, 2008; Neimeyer & Stewart, 1996).

There is a need to expand the existing research into reflective writing as a process for healing LGBTQ+ trauma. For example, reflective writing as an intellectual exercise is limited to an individual’s willingness to explore and think about traumatic and troubling events. How far an individual goes depends on their comfort level and ability to cope with potentially retraumatizing themselves. More research is needed in embodied writing and disclosure where the individual uses their body to recall memories in partnership with the mind (Crawford, 2010; DeMarco, 2022; Jolly, 2011). The integration of body and mind fosters a more holistic view of one’s life story and can radically reshape how one feels psychologically, emotionally, spiritually, and physically.

In addition, it is important that an individual be able to situate their narrative within the social and cultural context they may find themselves (at present and historically) while at the same time honoring the personal and subjective nature of their life stories (Crossley, 2000a; Ricks, 2018). When considering the importance of social context, R. G. Jones and Calafell (2012) note the following:

Our narratives often recount being out of place, moments of incongruence, or our marked otherness. Through the sharing of these narratives, we ... demonstrate the possibility for ally building based in affective connections forged through shared queer consciousness, paying particular attention to the ways in which neoliberal ideologies, such as individualism and postracism, may advance and impede such alliances. (p. 957)

The awareness of where an individual shows up in time and space manifests in their reflective writing and can influence how they view traumatic events.

Juxtaposing personal experiences with cultural and social systems can shed new light on one's narrative. "We reflect on our relationship in order to frame and contextualize our discussion of the intersections of culture, identity, critical pedagogy, and narrative" (R. G. Jones & Calafell, 2012, p. 961).

Beyond the personal lies the transpersonal. Berkowitz (2010) argues that trauma can be healed through mythical narrative and collective memory. This moves the individual out of the sphere of localized events from their past into a global ecosystem filled with stories of heroism and courage after traumatic events (Campbell, 2008; Vogler, 2020).

Mythical narratives, by their nature, are carriers of a society's values. So too, collective memory helps connect those timeless stories to a tangible construction of that society's history that converts news events from something generic to something that reflects what a society holds dear. (Berkowitz, 2010, p. 657)

The merging of the personal with the social illustrates that we as human beings do not exist on little islands of our own. We are each interconnected through our stories. The social narrative affects the personal (individual), and the personal affects the social (communal). This is the reciprocal nature of storytelling. Healing from traumatic and troubling events requires a willingness on the part of the individual to expose their narrative locally (internal, personal) and communally (external, social).

Narrative therapy is a reflective process that engages the individual's past in the present. It tasks them to identify events that formed their narrative, write about those situations to gain better understanding and insight, "restory" the

narrative, and engage in the act of relating with self and others from those events. This process externalizes the trauma-related stress and permits the writer to name it, claim it, and reform it. Steelman (2016) suggests using narrative therapy through the lens of queer theory as a mediator between LGBTQ+ individuals and their families to lessen the impact of coming out of the closet.

In addition to externalizing traumatic experiences, narrative therapy can also be utilized as a method for LGBTQ+ individuals to share their stories with others and build community. Draucker and Martsolf (2008) outline the process specifically for victims of childhood sexual abuse as “(a) starting the story: the story-not-yet-told, (b) coming out with the story: the story-first-told, (c) shielding the story: the story-as-secret, (d) revising the story: the story-as-account, and (e) sharing the story: the story-as-message” (p. 1034).

LGBTQ+ stressors are excellent candidates for narrative therapy and can improve LGBTQ+ individuals’ ability to function in a heteronormative world (Pachankis & Goldfried, 2010). Narrative approaches to trauma-related stress can help participants “develop ‘thicker’, more positive narratives about their sexuality” (Elderton et al., 2014, p. 306) and offer “therapeutic interventions that are culturally sensitive and acknowledge the role of power and privilege in socially imaging what it means to be lesbian or gay” (Saltzburg, 2007, p. 57).

There is need for more research on the effects of narrative therapy and reflective writing as tools for helping LGBTQ+ individuals to integrate trauma-related stress and nurture their awareness of self-victimization and self-abusive behaviors within a heterosexist society (Jordan, 2020; McLean & Marini, 2008).

Resolving the Perpetuation of Self-Victimization and Self-Abuse in LGBTQ+ Individuals and Achieving Resilience, Forgiveness, Gratitude, and Self-Actualization

Viktor E. Frankl (2006) wrote, “What matters, therefore, is not the meaning of life in general but rather the specific meaning of a person’s life at a given moment” (p. 108). Frankl’s theory of logotherapy points the individual toward the future by finding meaning in past or present experiences despite the nature of those events. He posited that it is possible to turn unfavorable events into more favorable outcomes— “In other words, what matters most is to make the best of any given situation” (p. 137). This ability to perceive events in a new light gives the individual permission to turn suffering into achievement and accomplishment, change oneself for the better, and take responsible action (Frankl, 2006).

As mentioned earlier, many LGBTQ+ individuals face terrible and traumatic events every day of their lives. As they develop from childhood into adolescence and adulthood, they bring with them the baggage of those experiences. This baggage may take the form of internalized mental health issues stemming from victimization such as depression, self-hatred, and other psychological issues. (Folkierska-Żukowska et al., 2022; Li & Samp, 2019; Ramos et al., 2020; Rubino et al., 2018; Wickham et al., 2021; Woodford et al., 2018; Yolaç & Meriç, 2021). Individuals may willingly or unwillingly perpetuate abuse and trauma in the form of self-victimization (van den Aardweg, 2011; Vollman, 2021). Individuals can become more aware of self-victimization by

isolating events from their lives, deconstructing and reconstructing them through narrative and reflective writing, and reimagining the future to build resilience and go beyond suffering by sharing their stories with others (Akers et al., 2021; Bower et al., 2021; Johns et al., 2019; Parmenter & Galliher, 2023; Robinson & Schmitz, 2021; Saldanha & Barclay, 2021; Schmitz & Tyler, 2019; Wike et al., 2022; Woodford et al., 2018). By “mapping their lives,” an individual can achieve a unique understanding of themselves, build rapport with others, realize they can make different choices, increase empowerment, place traumatic events into perspective, identify areas for further development and attention, and create new strategies for self-change (Robertson, 2020, pp. 229–230).

As an individual learns to control their own narrative through reflective writing and mapping, they may unlock forgiveness as a method for dealing with victimization. Research on trauma psychology strives to understand how an individual’s conceptualization of forgiveness might affect their mental health (Lundahl et al., 2008; Walters & Kim-Spoon, 2014) and self-compassion (Bensimon, 2017). While forgiving self can be more challenging for some people than forgiving others (Stren, 2011), it must be noted that self-hate and internalized judgment can negatively impact one’s ability to nurture self-esteem and positive self-image (Choe et al., 2021; Currin & Hubach, 2018; Greene & Britton, 2013; Purnell, 2019; Schumann & Walton, 2022). Forgiveness is sought not as an act of mercy toward a perpetrator, but to allow the individual to move past self-incrimination to a healthier self-image, improved emotional functioning, and enhanced interpersonal interactions (Wade & Worthington, 2005).

The process of self-actualization or achieving one's potential (Craig et al., 2021; Maslow, 1943, 1965) through reflective writing and self-inquiry can foster a mindset of gratitude in the individual. Gratitude is a positive emotion or virtue that has the potential to alter the course of an individual's life as well as that of society (Merçon-Vargas et al., 2018). It may seem odd to mention gratitude in conjunction with trauma or troubling experiences, however, upon reflection, self-inquiry, and reconstruction of such events, an individual may ultimately benefit. The greater the benefit, the greater the gratitude may be (Forster et al., 2017). Epiphany through reflective writing or mapping one's life can offer invaluable and indispensable potential. Gratitude becomes a form of recognition by the individual for that which they learn through reflective writing about traumatic events (van Hulzen, 2021). In essence, a person shows gratitude to themselves (grace), the events of their lives (traumatic and otherwise), and their future potential (self-actualization).

It should be noted that gratitude does have a shadow side. There are two ways this can manifest: (a) an individual can have gratitude for an object that is intrinsically adverse or bad, and (b) the level of gratitude may be disproportionate to the act that it is responding to (Löschke, 2021). An individual showing gratitude toward a traumatic or troubling event should ask themselves if their gratitude is aligned with the value of the event, if they are putting their gratitude in context (e.g., having gratitude for outcomes or epiphanies versus gratitude for being physically accosted), and if they are exhibiting compensation bias (Zhu et al., 2020). Compensation bias manifests as a need to alter or skew past traumatic

events to make oneself feel better about them or to cope with what happened (American Psychological Association, n.d.-a). Overcompensating for a horrific event with displaced gratitude can impede one's ability to deal with trauma in a healthy way. Ultimately, gratitude does not happen overnight. It takes time for individuals to process their experiences and become aware of and reframe their perspective toward those experiences.

Forgiveness of self and others combined with a felt sense of gratitude nurtures an individual's ability to reach their maximum potential while at the same time, elevating the society in which they live. Staub and Vollhardt (2008) write,

With a great deal of suffering in the world, helping people who have suffered to turn toward others and act altruistically, rather than turn away from or against other people, is an important way to increase both their well-being, and the well-being of the rest of the community. ABS [altruism born of suffering] can improve individual lives and contribute to the creation of caring, harmonious, and peaceful communities. Beyond practical and theoretical benefits, it has moral meaning to show that people who have suffered are not condemned to indifference, passivity, inhumanity, and violence, and that members of the community can make important contributions to the well-being of those who have suffered. (p. 277)

LGBTQ+ people who have overcome self-victimization and abuse by deconstructing and reconstructing their personal narrative not only bring value to themselves, but to society.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Epistemologically, this research attempts to understand how reflective writing and self-inquiry act as therapeutic processes for LGBTQ+ individuals who have suffered traumatic or troubling events. In addition, it seeks to assist individuals with becoming aware of and moving through self-victimization and self-abuse into a state of self-actualization (achieving potential) and manifesting self-empowerment. The study, by using personal narrative and self-inquiry, identifies the relationship between isolated events and their meaning within the overall narrative arc and identity of the individual. From there, the individual can deconstruct and reconstruct their narrative and eventually find meaning and value in trauma and troubling experiences.

This inquiry weaves narrative ontology and constructivist ontology with the epistemological points of view above. Narrative ontology dives into the nature of events that occur in the lives of individuals and how those events are reimagined in narrative (Meretoja, 2014). While there is value in dissecting the factual evidence of an event, it is also important to recognize the meaning that one creates as they interpret an event through narrative. A constructivist ontology argues that subjects construct their reality and identity through experience and form hypotheses and theories from them (Bunge, 2001). This research finds value in discovering more about how an individual constructs their reality from experience and attempts to learn more about how identity can change through reflective writing and self-inquiry.

The method for this study is SPN as outlined by Nash and Bradley (2011). I gathered data through an analysis of my own writing regarding traumatic and troubling experiences and juxtaposed those stories with current literature. The literature review for this study focuses on four domains: (a) theory of narrative identity in relationship to traumatic and troubling experiences, (b) identifying and defining LGBTQ+ trauma-related stressors, (c) reflective writing as an effective process for healing trauma and troubling experiences, and (d) resolving the perpetuation of self-victimization and self-abuse in LGBTQ+ individuals to achieve resilience, forgiveness, gratitude, and self-actualization.

The entirety of the SPN process can be defined as a vigorous, subjective, personal, introspective, universalizable, honest, transparent, authentic, and illustrative experience (Nash & Bradley, 2011). Each phase of the methodology requires the author to express their lives through storytelling while at the same time “integrating supportive background scholarship as it comes up *ad hoc* throughout the writing” (Nash & Bradley, 2011, p. 85).

Pre-Search

The pre-search phase of SPN requires the writer or researcher to answer several questions. Who is the intended audience of the writing? What value will the audience get out of the writing and how will they be able to use it in their own lives? What kind of mindset must the writer have to conjure stories that may be related to traumatic events or situations from the past? Does the author have a safety net of friends, family, or even a therapist to reach out to in case they experience negative thoughts or feelings during the writing process? Does the

writer have a quiet place where they can reflect, meditate, contemplate, and consider the events of their lives and relive them through the process of creating stories? Each of these questions, as well as others, form the crux of the pre-search phase.

During my own writing phase that spanned several weeks, I first had to come to terms with reliving and rehashing negative and often traumatic events from my childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood. I had to prepare the soil of my mind to plant the seeds of stories that would eventually sprout into a fully formed narrative arc. I also had to decide what kind of framework would befit my personal narrative. I eventually chose the Hero's Journey as explained in the next section.

The pre-search phase also required me to find an environment that was conducive to writing—a zone of quiet, calm, and peace. Reflective writing is not an easy task. The process demands constant awareness of emotional reactions and vigilance of the thinking process. It is easy to go down the proverbial rabbit's hole of one's own mind and thoughts. When in doubt, I often found myself taking breaks during the writing process and moving my body. Sometimes this took the form of going on a long walk to clear my mind of thoughts and heart of emotions. Then, returning to my zone of solitude, I was able to sit down and continue the unfolding of my narrative. I am blessed to live alone and for the most part was able to minimize distractions from the outside world by just staying home in solitude. Often, I found myself listening to light jazz in the background while my cat slept beside me. I would look over at her and remind myself that the present

moment was the only moment. The past and the future were things my mind remembers or creates. In the present moment, all I had was my memory and relationship to those events. My perspective and attitude toward those events were critical in the way my writing unfolded and evolved.

I used the pre-search phase to map out a narrative arc and to jot down snippets of stories or events that I wanted to research further. I referenced journal entries, online posts from various websites and discussion forums, unpublished manuscripts, and notes from therapy sessions that I accumulated over the last couple of decades. However, most of the inspiration for my writing came directly from personal memory and perspective on past events. The most challenging of the stories were the ones from my childhood. Those were formed more from feelings about events than they were on facts. I did have documents such as my father's death certificate and childhood photos for reference, however they only told part of a story. They failed to convey the emotions and thoughts I experienced during traumatic moments such as my father's passing. The pre-search process was an opportunity to define which stories would require elaboration. Pre-search is like getting a coloring book as a gift. It is up to the artist to decide what media to use (crayons, color pencils, paint, markers, etc.), which colors will complement the image on the page, and whether to color within the lines or go outside the boundaries.

Me-Search

The me-search phase of SPN is the heart of the exploration into one's psychology and its relationship with and to existing scholarship and social

ecosystems. In other words, it is an opportunity to demonstrate how the individual informs and cocreates the outer world of culture, society, and community while simultaneously illustrating how the outer world informs the individual. This symbiotic relationship is experienced during the me-search phase. The author is tasked with exploring the formation of their identity and belief systems internally, and at the same time recognizing and understanding external influences that have contributed to those values. The me-search phase is a personal journey into the caverns of one's mind and heart to discover treasures buried within.

Nash and Bradley (2011) suggest several questions that a writer or scholar should ask themselves during this phase. Two were of primary concern for me as I began this journey. The first asked, "What exactly is my signature writing voice, and how do I go about identifying or creating it?" and the second was, "Does the larger story I am telling about myself have a narrative arc? A beginning, a middle, and an end? An introduction? Characters, a plot, a problem, a climax, a resolution?" (Nash & Bradley, 2011, pp. 6–7). I found that both questions were related to the other. For example, I used the voice of a poet when writing about my experience of being violently attacked in San Diego. This voice allowed me to emphasize the artistic and mythical quality of the narrative framework I had decided to use—the Hero's Journey. It also gave me the freedom to share my authentic voice in a way that was not burdened by rules or standards.

According to Brené Brown (2020), "authenticity is the daily practice of letting go of who we think we're supposed to be and embracing who we are" (p. 68). My signature writing voice is strongest when I permit it to be authentic and

not tailored to any predefined boundaries. This required being authentic with myself first and foremost. My goal during the me-search phase was to write several pages of personal narrative, pause, reflect, and then come back to the writing with a renewed perspective. Was I being true to my authentic voice and was I allowing my relationship to the past to express itself naturally? It was vital to maintain vulnerability while writing and to be open to aspects of myself that revealed themselves. Adhering to my authentic voice was something I had to practice every day that I devoted to writing my stories.

The second question was far easier to answer as I began the process of reflective storytelling. I was intentional about wanting to offer the audience a narrative arc representing the beginning, middle, and end of my life story thus far. My map coincided with Joseph Campbell's (2008) Hero's Journey. According to Vogler (2020), the Hero's Journey is a psychological process where individuals find meaning from experiences across their lifespan and navigate their way from the ordinary world of the known through the extraordinary world of the unknown, and back again. The me-search phase of SPN was an opportunity to understand how I was conditioned by the ordinary world and through psychological, spiritual, and emotional battles moved through the unknown world. My personal narrative is filled with traumatic experiences that forced me to wear the armor of resilience and fight with the sword of truth—my truth. Reflective writing cast a bright light in the dark corners of my past and gave me permission to grieve and stand with courage in my own power. My relationship to the events of my life have evolved and through the process of me-search revealed new aspects of my personality and

identity. Me-search was a way to describe the process of consciously changing my relationship to trauma and redefine who and what I am in the present moment. The therapeutic benefit of reflective writing helped me externalize and name my demons so that they could no longer hold power over me (Etchison & Kleist, 2000; McAdams & McLean, 2013; Saldanha & Barclay, 2021).

Re-Search

The re-search phase of SPN compares the writer's personal experiences with scholarly literature to find differences and similarities. It is a debate that invites the voice of others into the personal narrative of the author to inform their way of thinking and being (Nash & Bradley, 2011). It asks questions such as "What are the primary and secondary sources that ground my research? What are the central themes that form the core of my writing? In what creative ways does my document re-define, as well as support, conventional understandings of research?" (Nash & Bradley, 2011, p. 7).

After completing the me-search phase, I set out to discover published research and information posited by others in both academic and nonacademic communities. During the re-search phase, the writer begins to understand how historical and contemporary individuals have affected the writer's way of thinking and writing. My process was no different.

Generally, a literature review is a separate chapter in a qualitative dissertation. However, in manuscripts utilizing SPN as their methodology, the literature is often embedded throughout the personal narratives. I decided to include both a brief literature review and to embed citations throughout the

storytelling chapter to emphasize and highlight specific themes and ideas that have influenced my way of thinking. The themes I focused on include, but are not limited to, the theories of narrative identity as they relate to traumatic events, identifying and defining trauma-related stressors unique to LGBTQ+ individuals, reflective writing as an effective process for healing one's relationship to trauma, resolving the perpetuation of self-victimization and self-abuse in LGBTQ+ individuals, and achieving resilience, forgiveness, gratitude, and self-actualization by redefining one's relationship to trauma.

As mentioned earlier, the re-search process of SPN is one of *vigor* instead of rigidity.

Vigor connotes a personal intensity or strength that calls for a writing style that is risk-taking, out of the ordinary, forceful, full of energy, and personal. *Vigorous* research crosses disciplinary boundaries, experiments with innovative writing styles, and is sometimes expressive and emotional. It is both "soft" (heart-driven) and "hard" (scholarly and focused), often at the same time. What it definitely is *not* is "rigid." (Nash & Bradley, 2011, pp. 82–83)

SPN research is transdisciplinary and recognizes systems and domains that overlap, join, and separate in an evolving and living interaction.

We-Search

We-search is the final phase of the SPN process. However, it is not an ending. It is an opportunity for others to continue the research inquiry into the various themes and ideas presented by the author. We-search draws in the audience and invites them to consider how they may apply the knowledge they have gained through the storytelling process and embedded literature citations. The writing should be universalizable and replicable.

Universalizability, unlike other types of replicability, is not measurable in scientific terms. In contrast, the universalizability of thematic motifs, principles, and beliefs is more *felt* by the reader than *counted*, *tested*, *interviewed*, or *measured* by the scientist. Because every SPN writer's stories and experiences are different, what remains universalizable are the common existential themes that underlie these differences and touch all human lives, regardless of the unique empirical differences. (Nash & Bradley, 2011, p. 84)

During the we-search phase, it is important for the author to understand and recognize how their writing may be generalizable. They must ask themselves how their personal narrative mirrors the experiences of the audience, informs other professions and fields of study, and coexists with the audience's stories (Nash & Bradley, 2011). Throughout my narrative and subsequent research, I remained diligent to the needs of the LGBTQ+ community. I considered how my experiences would communicate to other individuals, while at the same time retaining my own authentic and unique perspective and relationship to the events of my past. The we-search phase of SPN is a chance for the author to put themselves in the shoes of their readers and empathize with their situation or circumstances. It is an opportunity to have grace, kindness, and patience for self and others.

The objective of any SPN manuscript or research is to build community through storytelling. The human experience has many similarities across diverse cultures and societies through time and space. Granted, the peripheral world is different for each individual and each journey unique. However, at the core, what personal narrative and mythology illustrates is that humans are more alike than what our surface differences may imply. We all feel. We all believe. We all have a hero's journey to share. Each of us grow, develop, and evolve over time, albeit

some less than others. SPN reminds the author that while they may feel like an island in a sea of cacophony, they are part of a harmonious orchestra. Each of us contributes a special note or melody to the larger score. The SPN researcher goes from a “me” to “we” over the process of writing and sharing their life events.

CHAPTER 4: PERSONAL NARRATIVES

A life “unstoried,” regardless of its length, is, in an undeniable way, stunted. (Stone, 1996, p. 36)

Ordinary World: Early Childhood Trauma

The bubble gum machine sat beside my head. Its large glass bubble dome reflected blue and red lights from outside my childhood bedroom window. The red base mirrored the color of a vehicle parked in front of our driveway. I looked at each piece of gum and saw tiny planets of green, yellow, white, red, orange, and blue. Each sphere waiting to explode in someone’s mouth with a juicy sweet pop. My taste buds could no longer control their desire, and I searched for a copper penny to place in the machine. After two or three twists of the dispenser handle, a small globe of sugar mixed with artificial color and flavoring entered my five-year-old mouth. The explosion of saliva made the back of my inner cheeks tingle with sensation. I smacked the gum as I chewed with my mouth open.

The lights outside continued to flash blue and red, and now a cop car showed up to take a statement from my mother who was outside near the ambulance. She looked tired and stressed from the events that happened today. My young brain was quickly learning to understand its environment and establish context. Early that day, my family had gone to visit one of my dad’s friends who owned a chainsaw repair company in rural south-central Pennsylvania. The year was 1975 and it was bitterly cold. Fresh snow had been the excuse my dad was looking for to load two snowmobiles onto a trailer and haul them out to his

friend's place for a fun day of adventure. The day would quickly unravel though and become a nightmare.

My father had a penchant for alcohol and often crossed the boundary between responsible drinking and abuse. It may be likely that he enjoyed substances even more powerful than alcohol. I'll never know because that day, my father was about to leave the world of the living and join the foggy world of the dead. Having just turned 25 years old, my dad's wayward, carefree personality led him to consume a large quantity of alcohol with his friends in a very short amount of time. Enough to cause confusion, stupor, slowed breathing, aggression, pale blue skin, and an inability to stand or speak clearly. My dad may have appeared to be alive that afternoon as he was assisted into our family vehicle for the ride home, however unbeknownst to the people around him, he was already entering the shadow world of wraiths. He was the walking dead.

During the chaotic last moments of my father's life, he beckoned to his two children to come to him for a hug as he knelt in the stone gravel driveway of his friend's home. The stones were cold and lifeless themselves. The air around my father was icy and the light of the sun was fading away. It was as if the Earth knew this unfortunate soul was dying and like a staged play, adjusted the lighting and atmosphere to fit the mood. My brother slowly walked up to my father, embraced him, and then returned to my mother's side. Then, my father looked me straight in the eyes. I was terrified by what I saw and refused to go to him. He wasn't my father anymore. He was a fragment of the human he once was, and his life force was fading. The moment passed as suddenly as it had emerged, and my

father was lost to his own crazed thoughts about what was happening to him. Perhaps in his mind he was wrapped in a warm blanket, unable and unwilling to recognize his organs beginning to shut down and the breath of life slowly being drawn out of him. I knew. Even as a five-year-old. Somehow, I knew.

My mother was able to drive us home safely, but my father sank further into the cold black waters of death's ocean. He had to be placed into our vehicle by at least three or four men. His dead weight prevented them from positioning him upward in the back seat and instead they opted to slide him in sideways. His erratic movement caused his upper body to slide onto the floor and his head under the front seat. His feet remained on the backseat, and he mumbled his final words before going unconscious.

Once the paramedics had arrived at our home the damage to my father's brain had already been done. He was still alive but hanging by a thin string to this physical world. The "ordinary" world. The world that I took for granted as a child. My father was rushed to the hospital but was unable to be saved. He passed away the next day after going into a coma. His death certificate cites cause due to overdose of alcohol and asphyxiation. There was no autopsy performed. No drug test to see if there were traces of other poisons in his body. It was too late for any of that anyway. I was now a fatherless five-year-old child, and I was about to experience the psychological, emotional, and spiritual impact this would have on me as I grew older.

What developmental paths would I have taken had my father lived? I was left with the images of his dying request to hug me, his fading mumbles in the

backseat of our family car, and the eventual disappearance of the persona who I identified as my “daddy.” My father’s physical body perished, but his memory and the events of that fateful day lived on in my psyche in the form of depression, anger, frustration, and despair well into my early teens. At the age of seven, I attempted to harm myself on the Nancy Grayson Elementary school grounds in Shippensburg, Pennsylvania. My grandfather and grandmother had insisted that my mother live with them for a period until my mother could secure a new home. I was uprooted from one place to another without warning or context. My mother had not fully recovered from my father’s death and her dependance on her parents made her situation more stressful for her and ultimately me.

The second year of elementary school was especially hard for me, and I exhibited signs of a person suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. No one demonstrated how to grieve the loss of my father as a child, and I lashed out at the world the only way I knew how—self-harm and abuse. I would hit my head against brick walls, shove sticks and thorns up my nostrils, and retreat from social activities to sit in a corner. The school counselor and nurse were soon notified about my behavior, and I was forced to go through psychological treatment. I felt helpless and alone in a world that wanted to diagnose and categorize me and shove pills down my throat. Even at the age of seven, I was aware of the futility of the psychologist trying to understand my mind through Rorschach tests. I didn’t have the words to convey my emotions with adults and was repulsed by their behavior further driving me into my own inner world. How does a seven-year-old child share his sadness and grief over the death of his father? How does a

seven-year-old little boy tell an adult that he has “feelings” for another little boy on the playground? How does a seven-year-old child understand any of these things by himself? My “ordinary” world in 1977 was anything but ordinary. I just didn’t know it at the time. Everyone assumed something was wrong with me, including myself, but had no idea how to fix it. My mother attempted to push me toward religion (specifically Christianity). My psychologist offered diagnosis and treatment, but eventually my mother would ignore it and ended my counseling sessions within a few months. My grandparents attempted to convince my mother that discipline was the best solution for a “stubborn” child. Society endeavored to force me, a square peg, into a round hole. Society didn’t care and it certainly didn’t feel like community. It was a culture that demanded contrition and a willingness to be manipulated and conditioned by it. Psychological, emotional, and spiritual freedom were alien to the ecosystem I grew up in, and if anyone crossed its boundaries, they were labeled and ostracized. So much for feeling part of a tribe. I was quick to learn that I was an alien in a foreign land. I was an “other.”

The Limitations of a Parent

My mother began dating men a year or two after my father’s death. I hated them all. Every opportunity that presented itself, I would kick, pinch, scream, and rebel against the imposters that were trying to take my dad’s place. At least that’s what I assumed as a child. The stress and anxiety of losing one parent was a lot to harbor for a small child. This became more challenging as my mother sought to assuage her loneliness and sadness. The sudden realization of being a single

parent with two boys proved to be too much for her to deal with. Social pressure from my grandparents, extended family members, and the community compelled her to find a new male partner. To my young mind, the idea of replacing my dad was incomprehensible. No one could replace him, and I didn't want them to. My mother did wait a few years after my father's death to begin dating again, but she never helped me grieve his death, accept his absence, or heal from the experience. I was forced to bury my feelings deep down along with other emotional and psychological dirty laundry. My mother was compelled to model our new family on an ideal stemming from her own psychological and emotional framework built on the foundation of her conservative social and religious beliefs. She failed to see that her belief system and values had been groomed into her throughout her own childhood.

Among the many challenges my mother faced as an adult including borderline personality disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, and clinical depression, she was also diagnosed with obsessive compulsive disorder. It could be said that her behavior was not so much a disorder as it was a way for her to cope with the hand that life had dealt her. Perhaps knowingly or unknowingly, she never questioned her odd way of being in the world and how this translated to me as a child. I was imprinted with many of my mother's psychological, emotional, and spiritual ethics and principles. In an average week during my early childhood and adolescent years, my mother would exhibit no less than five to ten compulsive behaviors that ultimately affected my development.

Day 1: Each car door must be locked, and the windows closed after exiting the vehicle. Each window must be tapped at the top to confirm that they are closed. Each door handle of the vehicle must be checked to ensure they are locked. This process must happen at least once and possibly more if mother is not satisfied with the results. This is done in public regardless of weather or time of day.

The front door of the house must be checked upon leaving to be sure it is locked and secured. The door handle must be turned at least three times left and right. Pushing the door in and pulling it out should also be attempted although it is not mandatory. This must be done any time leaving the house despite weather or time of day.

Day 2: The lawn must be clear of all debris including stray fallen leaves and objects considered to be litter or garbage. One fallen leaf on the grass must be picked up and disposed of quickly before the neighbors can see it.

Day 3: Toys must remain in the bedroom and lined up in a neat row on the floor. I am not allowed to enter the bedroom without permission. Since no one uses the bedroom, it does not need to be vacuumed, dusted, or cleaned. Toys can be played with in the living room and must be returned to the bedroom by mother when finished. Toys that are moved or out of alignment with the rest of the toys are an indication that someone went into the bedroom without permission. This is cause for punishment.

Day 4: Bathing occurs two times a week, generally on Monday and Wednesday. This avoids having to wash towels or clean the shower more than

once a week. The shower should be dried immediately after use, including the tub and walls. Talcum powder may be used in underwear and shoes to cover body odors. Clothing should be worn more than once a week despite being soiled to cut back on the amount of laundry. Any embarrassment over wearing the same clothes two days in a row is not tolerated.

The kitchen sink is only to be used by mother. The sink must always be clean and dry. Washing dishes should be avoided. Eating out is encouraged. Water in the sink should be taken care of immediately. It must not be allowed to sit in the sink. The kitchen table is only to be used to stack envelopes, papers, and cereal boxes. Do not eat at the table unless necessary. Food should be consumed in the living room.

Day 5: Mother's bedroom is off limits. I may not enter for any reason. All my mother's personal items are laid out on the floor in an order. The bed is not to be slept in. It is made for mother's dolls which are laid across the pillows in a specific order. The dolls must not be touched for any reason.

The sleeping room is communal. Everyone in the house must sleep in the same room despite age or gender. The twin bunk beds can accommodate four people and others may sleep on the floor beside the bed.

Day 6: You must say "I love you" multiple times a day to your mother. This should occur when leaving the house for any reason, before going to bed, and any other occasion that mother justifies. This is especially important during phone calls. Calls cannot end unless mother has heard "I love you" at least three to five times.

Do not ask to join the Boy Scouts, school sports or other extracurricular activities that are outside of school hours. Do not ask to go to a party or sleep over at another child's home unless mother can attend the event. Going outside after school is permitted but you cannot get your clothes dirty or torn in any way. Damaging or soiling clothing was a cause for punishment.

Day 7: Be prepared to walk into any restaurant with the cash that mother has given you and place orders for everyone's meals that evening. This includes anyone that mother may be dating at the time. Once the orders are ready, bring them to the vehicle and eat with everyone else. If an order is not correct, take it back inside and request that it be remade.

Instead of using a vacuum cleaner, lint, dirt, and other debris should be picked up by hand from the floor as mother demands. Do not sit on the rugs around the living room. They are laid out in a specific order and angle. If a plush rug has been walked on or the fabric disturbed in any way, punishment will follow. Rugs are for decoration and not to be played on, sat on, or walked on.

These compulsive policies that my mother enforced were seen as normal from her point of view. She did not question or understand that the restrictions she placed on me in childhood would have a significant impact on my ability to relate to others and function in the world. Ironically however, I must also point out that some of these behaviors translated positively into the type of occupational career I would pursue as an adult. The need for attention to detail, organized and strategic ways of thinking, and the ability to coordinate teams was something that my

mother inadvertently taught me in childhood, albeit in abnormal ways. This begs the question, what is normal?

Between a rotating door of strange new men that my mother dated, the ongoing oversight of my grandparents, the absence of my biological father, and the social stigma of a conservative community, I was trapped in a world of routine, boredom, and psychological, emotional, and spiritual abuse. My identity was shaped and formed by these persistent energies that emanated from all around me. Never did the question arise as to what I, a young child, might want or need, nor was my opinion about the situation ever invited. A child's place was to sit and obey, not to talk back or offer any kind of resistance to the constructed world of my mother, my grandparents, and the world around me. Things would eventually change, but not after my mother experienced another traumatic event of her own in the form of her father's death from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), also known as Lou Gehrig's disease. This event would leave my mother scarred for the rest of her life and further erode what little emotional strength she had raising two children alone.

An Attraction to the Divine

He was my age. I was 10 years old. It was a normal day on the elementary school playground. We found ourselves at the swings. He was a bright, funny, and energetic kid who I had befriended. At that point in my life, I hadn't faced the nasty things that young people could do to you. Not yet any way. I was still young enough to be naïve, innocent, and ignorant about others.

It was my turn to let him on the swing. I had been on it long enough. The sun was bright on a warm spring day, and it highlighted the dark color of the small hairs on his arm. There was something oddly attractive about his arm hair, but I didn't understand what I was feeling. All I knew was that I saw my friend in a different light, literally and figuratively. He had hair where my other male friends had none. I was mesmerized by this early sign of puberty but would never be able to say that in public. I kept my feelings and my emotions to myself lest I be ridiculed or called names. I was confused by my attraction, and I was terrified of what society might do to me if they knew.

Homosexuality in the 1970s was taboo in small, conservative communities like Shippensburg, Pennsylvania, and religion was a powerful and influential force among the population of about 5,000 people. As a child, I was conditioned, compelled, and groomed to deny my authentic feelings toward other males and was pressured to live as a heterosexual. I was frightened into believing gay men were evil, chose to be evil, and would eventually meet a terrible fate as evil men upon their death. This was terrifying for a ten-year-old boy who wanted nothing more than to fit into society. I averted the gaze at my friend's arms and watched the other kids on the swings around us. Did I feel shame? Yes. Did I feel terror? Yes. Did I want to cry? Yes. But I also felt excitement, longing, appeal, and magnetism. These feelings hung over my head like rain clouds ready to drown me in fear and anxiety. I didn't understand that they could also provide life-nourishing water to help me grow.

From a young age, my mother introduced me to an invisible entity. She said its name was “God” and that God had a son named Jesus who interacted and spoke with something called the “Holy Spirit.” The image of “God/Jesus/HolySpirit” that my mother painted was an amalgam of nightmares and dystopia mixed with promises and utopia. She burned this picture into my consciousness through years of mind-fuckery and dragging me to church on Sundays, as well as summer events that occurred at the Roxbury Holiness Camp (The Camp) just outside of Shippensburg. These events, combined with the beliefs my mother injected were twisted and had no tie to reality. They were meant to instill a sense of obedience and dread like the way Santa Claus is used to manipulate and control little kids. The rhetoric influenced me to construct a world of horror, fiction, and fantasy. On bad days, God/Jesus/HolySpirit was a schizophrenic hurricane of energy and force. On good days, it was a loving and benevolent summer breeze offering refreshment and a cool respite from the heat. There were more bad days than good and often I was frightened by my imagination of what this entity might do to me. God/Jesus/HolySpirit was a parental figure, an enforcer, a shepherd, and a monster all rolled into one. It was not to be tested or messed with and yet, at the same time, it could be relied upon for protection, love, and acceptance. This was a paradox to a ten-year-old mind.

I recall the air at The Camp was often filled with the thick scent of pine. It didn't have the same exhilarating potency of evergreens in the winter. It was more like the dry and dusty aroma of a stick of incense. It was the perfect environment for the cedar and fir trees to inform every one of their presences. I would breathe

in the intoxicating scent and smile. It was good to be out with nature and my eyes gleamed with joy. The hot summer breezes of August when the religious conventions would occur were laden with humidity and failed to offer a reprieve from the heat even though The Camp was nestled in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains. The primary building on the site was known as the Tabernacle harkening back to a time when stories were told by the light of a fire on a clear moonlit night. The Tabernacle had large ground-to-ceiling shutters that when opened would allow warm wind to waft through the facility. Many weekday and weekend visitors who attended the two-week event would find themselves napping on the long wooden pews after lunch. Other attendees that had rented cabins would retreat to the nearby stream and shade of the woodland.

The Camp was a physical manifestation of the paradox I lived with as a child. I was always eager to run through the woods, fill my lungs with fresh air, search for crayfish in the water, and walk among the large oak and maple trees. The onsite gift shop was a child's treasure trove. It was filled with religious-themed coloring books, putty that could be blown into bubbles with a tiny straw, cedar pots planted with pine seeds waiting for someone to nurture them into seedlings, Bibles and Christian reference guides of all kinds, and plastic toys of all the animals that entered Noah's ark. It was a magical place for me, and I spent many hours looking and reading. Sometimes, I used my savings to buy something special like a wooden airplane to build and fly.

The cafeteria was the spot to socialize with other like-minded people, but often for me to sit in quiet observation of the adults and children around me. My

mind was absorbing behavior and nuance, body language and innuendo. The cafeteria was where I fell in love with peanut butter and apple butter sandwiches and Neapolitan ice cream. The cafeteria was where I also noticed other boys for the first time as I began the rough journey into puberty. It wasn't necessarily a sexual attraction as much as it was a psychological and emotional attraction to them. I imagined they had a similar love-hate relationship with the God/Jesus/HolySpirit creature that I did, but never had the chance to test that theory since my family were day visitors at The Camp. There was no time to establish friendships with other boys or girls. There was only the laser-focused insistence from adults to learn more about the God/Jesus/HolySpirit myth.

I both loved and loathed The Camp. I loved the chance to be with nature and to explore the wilderness. I loathed the idea of sitting in the Tabernacle listening to old white men preach about fire and brimstone, especially on days when "sinful homosexuals" were mentioned. I loved the colorful biblical stories like Noah, Moses, and David because I wanted to be like them. They were the superheroes of ancient times. I loathed those stories because they were used to groom children into a world of patriarchy, sexism, racism, and homophobia. I loved the chance to experience the world in new ways. I loathed the idea that only one worldview was espoused and accepted. All others were morally wrong. I loved the chance for self-reflection in the Tabernacle, the woods, and while eating Neapolitan ice cream. I loathed the hateful vitriol that would inevitably arise from any number of charismatic preachers and guest speakers. There was no room for self-reflection during those speeches.

As I matured into adolescence, God/Jesus/HolySpirit was manifested through my relationship to nature, animals, and plants. I knew and experienced the presence of a life force that was beyond explanation. I had deep reverence for this life force. The forest became my church and within its confines, God/Jesus/HolySpirit spoke to me through the leaves of trees and the chirps of birds and chipmunks. God/Jesus/HolySpirit was no longer “he.” It was more female energy than male. She was a tempest on winter nights and could deliver ferocious destruction during violent summer storms. She was also gentle and life-giving, showing equal attention to baby rabbits as to acorns in the Fall. As I matured, the old God/Jesus/HolySpirit man I read about in books as a child was no longer something I needed to fear. The new life force I experienced in the world—in nature—was altogether different. This force was a living and breathing reflection of myself. I just didn’t realize it yet.

At the age of ten, it was difficult to comprehend that God/Jesus/HolySpirit was merely a projection of myself in relationship to family and society. The schizophrenic nature of this caricature reflected my broken mind and heart and correlated with a divided personality. On the one hand, I strived to be the “perfect” child who followed the rules, values, and beliefs that my mother and society imposed upon me. On the other hand, I wanted to lash out and rebel against everything I was taught to risk living a more authentic life. Unfortunately, I was still unaware of who and what this other person looked like. That would not happen until later in my teens.

The Mask of Religion

Christianity taught me to hate myself. At least that's what I believed as I grew from childhood into adolescence. What I didn't completely understand was that I had a choice to either adhere to a human-tailored perspective of God/Jesus/HolySpirit or make up my own mind about what this ideology meant to me. The ability to construct my own values and mores was not apparent, and I was torn between the tenets of Christian beliefs as I had been taught them and the desires of my body and heart for other men. I was caught in a duality of personality, and I could not reconcile the two. On the one hand, I clung to my understanding and belief that the God/Jesus/HolySpirit being was my protector and its laws were to be adhered to at all costs. My relationship with it gave me comfort during times of great anxiety, depression, and discomfort. On the other hand, I hated God/Jesus/HolySpirit. How could an all-powerful being love me and at the same time hate me for being attracted to men? Why would the God/Jesus/HolySpirit creature manifest inferior animals to torture them for behavior it deemed sinful? I was unable as a young person to solve this paradox, and therein lies the problem. Paradoxes cannot be solved. There was no wise mentor or parent to lead me out of the wilderness I had been raised in. My psychological, emotional, and spiritual constitutions were at war with one another, and I was not prepared to lead the battle over who and what I would become as I moved into my teenage years.

My devotion to the God/Jesus/HolySpirit idea remained strong from about the age of seven into my early twenties, and there were many events during that period that impacted my relationship to it.

The hospital room is cold and sterile. The smell of disinfectant mixed with freshly laundered bed linens is seductively calming, and yet intensely nauseating. The gown I am wearing is drafty and the cold air pulsating from the overhead vent doesn't make it any better. Hospitals are supposed to be a place of healing. So why do I feel I am at a party with the Grim Reaper? His fingers make the hair on the back of my neck stand on end as they glide across my body. On the wall hangs a poster displaying several cartoonish faces that go from smiling on the left to crying on the right. The captions below the faces read from "0-No hurt" to "10-Hurts worst." I suppose the poster is meant to help children communicate their level of pain to adults, but it only makes me more anxious. There is no amount of succoring that will make me feel better. Both of my hands are clinging to the edge of the bed as if I were on a rollercoaster ride waiting for the ultimate plunge to the bottom. In a glass jar on the counter, little Q-Tip heads watch like tiny onlookers at the scene of a car accident. They are morose and yet quietly curious. Their curly white cotton heads never move, and their gaze is ever vigilant. The starched fabric of the sheet beneath my hands is crisp and crunches like dry oak leaves in the fall. Every time I move, the plastic liner underneath that protects the foam padding of the bed from any unwanted and unexpected liquid gifts, accentuates the sound.

My mother sits in a wooden chair next to the drape pulled across the room and waits impatiently for the doctor to arrive. The room has a sort of familiarity. I was here a few years earlier for another issue and it feels like nothing has changed. Do they ever use the Q-Tips standing in the glass jar? Or the tongue depressors wrapped in their sanitized paper blankets? The *Children's Bible Storybook* isn't new, but the *Highlights* magazines are recent. Ordinarily I like to do the "hidden pictures" puzzles, but here in the hospital I am too preoccupied with fear and anxiety to even pick one up. The little girl flying a kite on one of the covers seems to laugh at me as I sit in my gown.

Without thinking I put pressure on my left arm and icicles shoot up to my shoulder and down into my fingers. Yes, it is broken. Again. The first time happened several weeks ago, but my mother denied the possibility, put ice on it, and concluded that I had sprained my wrist. The bone naturally began to heal itself without any medical evaluation. I broke it a second time falling during an attempt to ride a bicycle today. I almost threw up watching it turn blue. My mother finally admitted that I probably should have a doctor look at it and was taken to the emergency room. So here I sit waiting for a cast. The cast won't correct the slight curve of the

radius near my wrist. That is something I will have for the rest of my life. The doctor also mentioned something about arthritis.

Then, out of the blue, I remember. Tucked into the knee-length sock that I had pugnaciously pushed down to my ankle against my mother's petulant nature, there is a small, plastic figure of Jesus Christ. It is about three inches high and two inches wide with a smooth, flat back. It is a thin wafer that easily slides into any pocket. It rests there causing my skin to sweat in the six square inches it covers on my calf. Jesus is with me, against me, and in me both in the figurative and literal sense. I find great comfort and relief in this little idol and carry it around for protection against malevolent forces. The emergency room and its doctors are shadow beings who attempt to cover their evil with white lab coats—at least that's what I imagine. I reach down and pull Jesus into my hand casting my gaze over his bearded face, long robes, and flowing hair. In his right arm he holds a lamb and in his left hand a shepherd's staff. Another lamb lies at his sandaled feet. (Custer, 2014b, pp. 4–5)

Upon reflection, it is quite evident that the God/Jesus/HolySpirit character that I had constructed as a child served as a replacement father figure after my dad's death. My mother's emotional and psychological challenges impeded my ability to find closure with his death and prevented me from grieving. This intangible parental figure would eventually be supplanted by other types of mentors that I was introduced to later in life. These mentors took many forms from fictional characters in entertainment media and books to real-life human beings who had empathy and compassion for a young wayward man.

The chaotic and oftentimes toxic relationship I had with my mother and deceased father was manifested in my relationship to religion (Christianity), and even more so in my growing spirituality. I was constructing an idea of truth and wisdom based on a false narrative instilled in me by my mother and society. For example, being forced to attend services at the Green Spring Brethren in Christ congregation outside of Newville, Pennsylvania. This branch of Christianity was particularly conservative in its views (Brethren in Christ U.S., 2023); however, I

accepted them unquestioningly for many years. I had no choice. The tenets of this organization became my tenets and God/Jesus/HolySpirit would not be questioned.

Eventually, my point of view on religion changed as I moved into adolescence and young adulthood. The child within evolved and hormones developed. My earlier emotional attraction to other males was supplanted by a sexual urge and desperate need for physical companionship. At this point, one of the most destructive events of my life occurred—childhood sexual abuse. In 1981, at the age of eleven, I became the target of a twisted sexual need by an adult who I was supposed to trust—my mother’s male partner that she had been dating for a few years. The ingredients for a perfect storm were mixed and I was propelled into a foreign world filled with secrets, powerful feelings, mind-breaking confusion, and a desire to escape everything that was happening to me. Unfortunately, I had nowhere to run and nowhere to hide in the real world. So, I escaped into the imaginary worlds of fiction created by people like George Lucas and J. R. R. Tolkien—*Star Wars* and *Lord of the Rings*. The move from the ordinary world to the extraordinary occurred during this pivotal moment. The innocence and ignorance of childhood was replaced by the icy cold fingers of abuse and trauma. I was thrust into the Extraordinary World involuntarily and without warning, left to either tread water or drown.

Extraordinary World: The First Ordeal

The clear and defining delineation between my childhood and adulthood occurred over a period of four years of sexual abuse by a male adult. It began

when I was 11 years old and continued until the age of 14. To my young mind, it was both exciting and terrible at the same time. I was entering puberty, and my body was charged with the electricity of rampant hormones. I was drawn like a moth to a flame wanting to experience the carnal pleasure of the human body. I did not receive sexual education from my mother and even if she did have “the talk” with me, I doubt it would have been helpful. The gay sexual being within me did not want to be educated about the mechanical and scientific aspects of sex. It wanted to explore what physical gratification was like for itself. It wanted to take risks and determine for itself what felt good and what did not.

While my body was telling me one thing, my mind was telling me another. I had been conditioned to believe that I was sinful in the eyes of God/Jesus/HolySpirit and that carnal desires jeopardized the relationship I had with it. The authoritarian rules were strict about homosexuality within the framework of Christianity and my young mind was riddled with guilt and anxiety. Throughout much of my teenage years and into my 20s, I believed I would pay a price for acting on my physical desires for male-to-male intimacy and sexual contact. The drive was overwhelming at times and upon gratification, the remorse and regret were even more formidable. I often found myself crying and begging for the forgiveness of God/Jesus/HolySpirit to avoid the penalty of sinful behavior. I could not reconcile a need for gay sexual contact with that of a conservative psychology influenced by heteronormativity. This dichotomy caused mental and emotional pain, and I found myself at odds not only with the world

and society around me, but with people in my immediate family. The primary target of my anguish was often my mother.

After several years of childhood sexual abuse, my anger slowly boiled until one day it overflowed. I recall the day I not only came out to my mother as a young gay person, but I also revealed that the person she had been dating during the time had been sexually abusing me. My hatred toward the abuser notwithstanding, I felt it was time to expose my mother to the truth of the situation. Her son was gay, and her partner liked to sexually abuse young boys. It was during a heated argument between myself, my mother and her partner that motivated me to come out with it. At the age of 14 I screamed with anger, “He hasn’t told you that he’s been sucking my dick for four years!” There it was. In all its nasty glory, ugliness, and repulsiveness. It was a weapon I chose to use at a point in my life that I greatly needed to strike out at my abuser, my mother, and the world. For so long, I had been hiding in a shadow. A dark corner of the world where my authentic person could not be revealed. This fear was preyed upon by monsters and creatures who wore the skin bags of human beings. Dark thoughts and traumatic experiences within them lived to perpetuate pain, anger, and a need to lash out. These monsters posing as humans were in my family, at church, at school, and in the neighborhood. They were everywhere. Thus began my journey into a dark night of the soul. A proverbial cave lay before my path as I walked through a new and alien world with no map or compass to guide me. I was alone for all intents and purposes not knowing who or where to turn. What I could not and did not realize at the time was that I was meant to be on this path no matter

how dark it may get. I was meant to walk into the cave that was before me no matter how frightening it seemed. I wouldn't understand that until much later in life. For now, the 14-year-old boy was taking his first steps into a larger world, and it would be terrifying and liberating at the same time.

The revelation that her son was being sexually abused did not register with my mother the way I thought it would. She could not comprehend it psychologically or emotionally. She was incapable of making decisions that would benefit her child such as contacting the right authorities to investigate. She closed her mind to those ideas and looked at me with disgust in her eyes. In a twisted way, I would become the scapegoat for her anger instead of the perpetrator. In her mind, I was the one who had started the abuse. I was to blame for the actions of an adult. Why my mother chose to deny what was happening to me I will never know. I can only assume she was terrified of being abandoned again by a man. She had already experienced it once with my father's death, and again with my grandfather's passing in 1980. My grandfather's passing had a powerful impact on my mother's mental health, and she often regressed into childhood memories and events from her own past. Her grip on reality was foggy and the future she imagined was tinged by the apocalyptic visualizations she recited from the Bible. The future for my mother was embedded in the belief of an eternal afterlife in a place where there would be no pain or suffering. The real world was something my mother tried to escape from, and day-to-day living was at best monotonous. She found little to celebrate and any joy she may have experienced was antithetical to her abnormal and warped point of view. She

would turn uplifting or happy events into causes for her to belabor and complain about how sad, depressing, and painful life could be. There was never a cause for celebration as much as there was an opportunity to wallow in grief and despair. It is no wonder that the revelation of her son being sexually abused by her adult male partner was something she could not reconcile. Either she was incapable of having a frame of reference or wanted to protect her own deep secrets. Perhaps skeletons in the closet.

My mother's inability to empathize and her decision to blame me for the sexual abuse broke the thin thread of trust I had in her as a parent, and human being. I truly was alone in every sense of the word and my struggles were only just beginning. I had no one to turn to except for the concept of God/Jesus/Holy Spirit and the fictional characters from the world of *Star Wars*. These personas were what my mind conjured in its time of need and solace. They became a projection of my inner Self building a life raft in turbulent waters. I was weaving a cocoon around Self to protect it and nurture it the best way I knew how. By defending Self, I was creating resilience to other traumatic events that were to take place soon thereafter. All of this was unbeknownst to me as a child. I could not see past the dark shadows of my family's mundane apartment in a tiny redneck town in the middle-of-nowhere, Pennsylvania. Ultimately, the stakes were set against me, but for this small moment in time, I felt liberated and freed from the sexual abuse I had been made to suffer over the last four years. I smiled inwardly at the courage I displayed and used it as armor against people that would do me harm—psychologically, physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

The childhood sexual abuse revealed ways of being and knowing within me that had not existed before. My understanding of gay male sex was informed by this abuse, and I emulated that in the intimate relationships I would have in my early 20s. My mother's psychological and emotional abuse and her denial of my authentic self would inform how I interacted with significant partners. My ongoing relationship to God/Jesus/HolySpirit would continue to inflict feelings of guilt and sadness over my desire to connect with other gay men. For many years, I would be manipulated by my memory of and relationship to these events and belief systems. I would wrestle with each of them over and over. By fighting them, I only empowered them. The idea had not yet occurred to me to accept them as they were and to change my relationship to them. For years, I allowed them to foster contempt, bias, and self-abuse long after they had ended. I became a victim of my own feelings of anger toward those that harmed me as a child.

The Hero's Journey is a movement from the ordinary world to the extraordinary world through a series of events that call a person to adventure (Vogler, 2020). How the hero relates to these events determines their ability to grow and develop as a person. I had a choice to either face my demons head on or succumb to the fiends of my mind. I could thrive in the light or die in the darkness. Eventually, I chose to fight but first had to face my own reflection (a psychological and emotional test) and take personal responsibility for everything that had happened to me. Initially, I refused the call to adventure and by doing so, maintained a relationship with self-victimization. I was both the abused and the abuser of my psyche for many years.

Third Space

I was an impressionable 16-year-old, and the year was 1986. I walked into a local fast-food joint called The Treat. The smells of deep-fried food filled my nostrils. The restaurant was a leftover relic of the 1950s and '60s when waitresses (usually female) would roller skate to your car, take your order, and return with soft drinks, French fries, hamburgers, and milkshakes. Back then, it was called The Tropical Treat and was eventually renamed to its present-day moniker. The walls were yellowish from years of burnt vegetable oil and animal fat, as well as customer cigarette smoke. It was a place of memories and hauntings of a bygone era. It was also the place that introduced me to the Worldwide Church of God (WCG) through a free magazine at the counter called *The Plain Truth* (Boston, 2002).

The 1980s were a time when several Christian organizations were at their peak of utilizing television (televangelists), radio, and print media to spread their idea of God/Jesus/HolySpirit and its beliefs. Some of these organizations offered free mail order courses, print magazines and booklets. One such organization was The WCG was founded by Herbert W. Armstrong of Eugene, Oregon in 1934 via the radio show *The World Tomorrow* and a periodical called *The Plain Truth* (Boston, 2002). The year 1986 would be a critical one for me and for the WCG. I began attending a local congregation of WCG as a closeted gay adolescent and its founder Herbert W. Armstrong died (Boston, 2002). The death of Armstrong was a metaphor for what was happening to me at that time. I was leaving my childhood experiences behind and embracing new ideas and new paradigms. I was

still enamored by the God/Jesus/HolySpirit concept, but I was equally keen on exploring my sexuality with other men. I lived in two worlds—two consciousnesses.

Having two opposing identities means you spend a lot of time and energy trying to deal with the differences between who you really are and how others misunderstand you (Black, 2007). One of my identities wanted to experience the new world of gay male culture and the other wanted to remain in a state of ignorance by acclimating to a predefined conservative way of life within the God/Jesus/HolySpirit tribe. There were numerous conflicts between these identities as I struggled to find balance between the two. For a while, I was successful in walking the narrow path between the two worlds. However, as Black (2007) mentions, I would eventually lose the energy to sustain this dichotomy.

At the age of 16, the formation of a struggle grew between my inherent sexual preferences and conditioned religious beliefs. I was living with a double consciousness (Black, 2007). Anzaldúa (1987) refers to this double consciousness as the borderland between two nations with both nations having equal influence on the mind. The bridge between the two was narrow and treacherous. For my young and inexperienced mind, it was the only way to connect two seemingly opposite paradigms. The world was a black-and-white place as a teenager, and I soon concluded that the only way to accommodate dual identities was to either accept one persona at the cost of the other or deny both. In my late teens, I could not see that there was a third alternative of integration, and I eventually faced an existential crisis because of this shortsightedness. At first, I drifted back and forth

between the two identities with relative ease. However, with time, the stress on the bridge became unbearable.

After a few years of attending the WCG and having anonymous gay sexual relationships, my psyche was screaming to embrace my authentic Self and stop wearing masks. I refused the call to relinquish my childhood need for a father figure found in the God/Jesus/HolySpirit construct. I refused to admit that I would most likely never realize the love and acceptance I craved within the parameters of a conservative Christian organization like the WCG. They had strict tenets that considered homosexuality a sin and gay men an abomination (Boston, 2002). I struggled to find friends in the church with whom I could confide my secrets, so I cultivated superficial relationships. I used my identification with conservative heterosexual values to cage the gay persona that wanted to be free. Jung (1959/1990) states, “But out of this collision of opposites the unconscious psyche always creates a third thing of an irrational nature, which the conscious mind neither expects nor understands” (para. 285).

Over time, I unconsciously tapped into the combined forces of both the feminine and masculine energies of my psyche to manage duality. I used the feminine energy to adhere to the mores and values of childhood and the masculine energy to break the chains of compliance and ignorance. Jung’s (1959/1990) Divine Child archetype, according to many authors (DeVoll & Blazina, 2002; Fortune, 2003; Hopcke, 1989; P. Jones, 2000), manifests this integrated way of being (i.e., hermaphroditic, or androgynous), and is a metaphor for vulnerability, innocence, and the emergence of the new.

It is a striking paradox in all child myths that the “child” is on the one hand delivered helpless into the power of terrible enemies and in continual danger of extinction, while on the other he possesses powers far exceeding those of ordinary humanity. (Jung, 1959/1990, para. 289)

Christian de la Huerta (1999) offers a beautiful translation of this archetype when he writes,

In spiritual terms, the importance of the Divine Child archetype is best illustrated by Jesus’ suggestion to “become like children.” We are being asked to cast off the cynicism, sadness, and disillusionment, the years of conditioning, the lies we’ve been told, the ideas, judgments, and prejudices we’ve formed about life and other people, the rigidity in our thinking, the fear-based defensiveness, and return to a wide-eyed state of innocence and wonderment, an openness to new ideas, a more flexible, playful, and joyful state. We are being asked to return to a realm where we allow ourselves to freely feel our emotions rather than stifling them out of fear of conflict or social recrimination and suffering their festering for years at a time. In so doing, we can more quickly return to a condition of love and forgiveness, no longer bitterly and self-righteously holding on to grudges. (p. 20)

Jung’s (1959/1990) archetype describes an attraction to or evolution toward divinity, which for me began soon after my father died. I embraced an amorous relationship with my concept of God/Jesus/HolySpirit.

God/Jesus/HolySpirit became the father figure I never had growing up. It was an idealization of my father. It was an imaginary parent I didn’t have and a comforter who stood in the place of the numerous boyfriends my mother dated. The Divine Child archetype describes the process of self-realization. It was my trust, faith, and reliance upon God/Jesus/HolySpirit that got me through the experiences of emotional, psychological, and sexual abuse, and eventually nurtured my growing gay identity. The archetype also describes the integration of both the masculine and feminine qualities of being human. Over time, the feelings I had toward God/Jesus/HolySpirit as a father figure matured into devotion, sexual desire, and

an ongoing “marriage” to the Church which eventually ended in divorce in my mid-20s. My relationship to God/Jesus/Holy Spirit changed as my physical and spiritual bodies evolved. I replaced it with other gay humans in the form of lovers, intimate partners, friends, and family. Jung (1959/1990) presents this as an evolution toward self-actualization or self-realization by positing,

The urge and compulsion to self-realization is a law of nature and thus of invincible power, even though its effect, at the start, is insignificant and improbable. Its power is revealed in the miraculous deeds of the child hero, and later in the *athla* (“works”) of the bondsman or thrall (of the Heracles type), where, although the hero has outgrown the impotence of the “child,” he is still in a menial position. The figure of the thrall generally leads up to the real epiphany of the semi-divine hero. (para. 289)

As the two identities within my consciousness competed for dominance, I was often left confused, remorseful, angry, frustrated, and ashamed. I did not have the tools I need to build a resilient personality that could withstand the onslaught of mental energies coming at me from all angles. I had no adult mentor who I could turn to for help and struggled to stay afloat in a tumultuous sea of feelings and desires. One of the greatest ordeals of my life was about to manifest as I moved through the extraordinary world of adulthood. The Ordeal is a necessary step in the Hero’s Journey (Vogler, 2020), and I was destined to experience it. It was a necessary test to gauge my ability to survive and adapt. I was faced with a decision unlike any before. The Ordeal was a metaphor for the psychological, emotional, sexual, and spiritual battle that was warring in my soul.

A dark cave appeared out of the fog of confusion and beckoned me to enter. The forest around my path was filled with the sounds of animals and other creatures of disfigured imagination. The cobwebs at the entrance of the cave told

me that no one had visited this place in a long time. The only options were to move forward or go back—progress or regress.

Crossing the Threshold

“Dwayne, are you sure you’re ‘that way’? You’re not like the ‘gays.’ I thought you were going to marry a nice Christian girl and become a preacher. You said you would do that for your mother. Why are you hurting me?”

“God loves the sinner but hates the sin. You can be gay but not act on your needs or desires. That would be wrong in the eyes of God. Ask for forgiveness and lead a life of celibacy.”

“A new cancer is killing homosexuals and there is no cure. This is God’s retribution. Avoid contact with known gay men that you may work or live with. Just sitting on a toilet seat may infect you with the HIV virus. Finally, perverts and sodomites are paying the cost for their hedonism and indulgence.”

“Faggot! Queer! Fuck you!”

Coming out to my mother and liberating myself from the secret of childhood sexual abuse was a turning point. It revealed who was truly supportive of me as a young person and who was not. I sadly realized that my mother could not handle the truth of what had happened and, in some ways, may have even blamed herself for my sexuality and her abusive partner. However, she never parted ways with my abuser and never took it upon herself to report the victimization to the authorities. Had she done so, perhaps I would have avoided the dark cave of shame, depression, and isolation. My mother had the opportunity to demonstrate that she was my champion and hero but failed to live up to that

responsibility. I don't blame her. I pity her more than anything. She made do with what tools she was given and did her best to raise two children as a single parent. Looking back on the event and the way my mother dealt with it is more of a testament to my own evolution. At the time, I was very angry and hated her for not doing something. I was also demoralized when she would denounce my sexual attraction to men and vilify my identity as a gay person. She could not bring herself to accept my identity because she had a different concept of who and what I was—a concept that was imposed over years of childhood conditioning. I was psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually shaped in her image. When I broke that mold at the age of 14, she may have experienced cognitive dissonance (O'Flynn, 2019). I no longer matched the projected image she had of me. I was a stranger to her.

She wasn't alone. I was a stranger to myself in many ways. I struggled to bridge the gap between my former personhood and the new one that was emerging. A battle within my consciousness was waged between childhood belief systems and those of the adolescent I had become. On the outside, I continued to wear the mask of religion and attended the WCG for a few years into my late teens. I pretended to be someone I knew in my heart that I was not. It was not necessarily living a lie as much as it was denying my authentic self to stand naked to the world without shame or fear. For me, I wanted to please the God/Jesus/HolySpirit being and at the same time, fulfill my need for intimate relationships with other LGBTQ+ individuals. I longed to find a friend or peer in the church who I could confide in and share my deepest secrets. Unfortunately,

that opportunity never presented itself even though I'm certain there were a few younger men who may have also led a dual life.

The battle between two opposing identities in my mind and heart eventually led to the need for defensive armor. I learned to beat down the gay man inside which led to hating other gay men who had found freedom in being themselves. I envied heterosexuals and how they could be open and shameless in a heteronormative society. I was homophobic because I accepted what others believed about me and began to think that maybe I really didn't have a choice. That it would never get better. Slowly, the whisper of belittlement and ridicule from the outside world (my mother, religion, and society in general) grew into a loud scream that I believed to be true. I was not worthy to be alive. God/Jesus/HolySpirit would never forgive me, and I would never find happiness and peace no matter how much I accepted the circumstances of my life. Thoughts of leaving the world behind and finding love and acceptance in a place other than Earth was tempting. Suicide ideation percolated to the surface of my mind after graduating high school.

High school gave me purpose and even though I had a very small group of friends that I socialized with, I still felt balanced. I was getting good grades. I was attending the WCG and an active participant in the congregational events. I had a place in the grand scheme of things, albeit small. The structure that high school and church provided in many ways got me through some dark nights of the soul. It was easy to ignore my authentic Self and embrace the false narratives I wanted others to believe about me. It was no wonder that my own mother was often

confused by my behavior. I lacked a North Star to guide my path (Beck, 2008).
Something to keep me motivated to seek out a life that was waiting for me.
Without a North Star, I was destined to falter and stumble along the path. The first true test of my ability to survive and evolve came on November 5, 1989.

Some of the coldest days of the year are not caused by environmental temperature. The circumstances of a particular day can create a frozen landscape of emotion. Nothing can warm the heart when there seems to be no options. The darkness creeps into the corners of one's mind and encroaches on the light of joy, peace, and purpose. This was how I found myself on a dismal fall day at the age of 19. I was alone and felt abandoned by family and friends. Even God/Jesus/HolySpirit could not comfort me in a time of duress. My mother had left for work early in the day and would not return until early evening. I wanted to go to the local mall but could not find anyone to go with. My friends were off doing other things in preparation for Thanksgiving and Christmas. Psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually, I was tired from attempting to integrate seemingly opposite and hostile identities. I needed one to provide solace and comfort. I needed the other to satisfy carnal desires and needs. Two great warriors fought day and night within my consciousness, but the energy to sustain the battle was waning. I wanted it all to end.

The local drugstore was within walking distance from my mother's apartment. I hesitate to call it "my apartment" or even "home" because it felt like neither of these were true. It was a place for me to sleep and read. Like a temporary hostel for the transient. The place felt alien as I grew older, and I

longed for something to change. At the drugstore, I bought a can of Pepsi, Reese's Peanut Butter cups, and a package of sleeping pills. I wanted my last meal to be something tasty. I wanted it to satisfy the little child inside me. The child who sat chewing bubble gum while watching his father taken away in an ambulance many years prior.

Taking my bag of treasures, I walked to a nearby pond located next to the Shippensburg Community Center. Here I wanted to be with nature and take in the smells and sounds of the Earth. If it was to be my last day on the planet, then I wanted to experience the energy of Gaia. I opened the Pepsi and took a gulp. Then I tore into the Reese's Peanut Butter Cups. One delicious bite at a time prolonged the inevitable. I had time. I had what I needed. I was visited by a young boy who I had befriended several weeks ago that liked to come to the pond to fish. I doubt there were any fish for him to catch, but he still threw his line in the water without any hesitation. We made small talk, and he asked me what I was doing. I honestly cannot recall what I said to him. It seemed just like another day filled with nothing. No objective thing. No subjective purpose. The boy, giving up on the hope of catching a fish, rode his bike off toward another destination filled with more opportunity—he hoped. I was left alone and empty.

I had finished my Reese's cups and only one thing remained in the bag. Little white pills looked at me. Each had a set of eyes that asked, "When?" I removed the pills and popped them out of their aluminum beds one by one. It was a 60-count package. It was going to take a while to swallow them all. Sixty sleeping pills to swallow. One for each painful memory of my young life. It

seemed apropos and ironic at the same time. One down, 59 to go. By the time I had gotten to about half of the package, my stomach couldn't handle any more. The combination of the sickly-sweet soft drink, candy, and pharmaceuticals made me a bit nauseous. I walked back to the small dark box of my mother's apartment and sat in my bedroom like an animal waiting for the hunter. At this point I hesitated. Do I want to take the rest of the pills? Do I have the courage or the cowardice to end my life? I looked around at the artifacts of my youth—Kenner Star Wars toys, a couple Bibles, *The Plain Truth* magazine and correspondence courses sent from the WCG, and photo albums. That was my short life in a nutshell. What little impact I made on the world was restricted to those artifacts. Who would even care if I was no longer alive? The last of the sleeping pills looked at me from the desk. They taunted me to make a choice. I got a glass of water and proceeded. Thirty sleeping pills to swallow.

Once the arduous deed was complete, I sat and waited. I expected results quickly. I didn't get them. What I got was more silence. I laid down in the living room to take a nap. My dreams were filled with images of the past and present. Monsters crawling across the floor and ceiling of my mind. I woke from them with a start. The room was spinning, and I was confused at first. Something or someone was calling to me from a distance. I was hallucinating and I could not move. Was I paralyzed? Fear gripped my heart, and it was then that I realized I had made a terrible choice. What if I lived but ended up becoming a paraplegic? What if in my desire to truncate my future, I inadvertently made it more challenging?

Oh my god! Am I dying?

Terror moved me to act. I looked around. I needed something. What was it? I looked up at the wall. A phone! Yes, I needed a phone. I lifted my arm and somehow was able to dial a friend's house. It was the only phone number I could recall. I don't remember how I was able to push the buttons on the phone, but luckily someone on the other end picked up. The voice was familiar. It was the voice of my friend's mother. I tried to ask for help. I tried screaming. My speech was impaired by a swollen tongue. I couldn't talk.

Oh my god! I'm dying!

The voice at the other end of the phone asked me what happened. The voice was not satisfied with whatever answer I gave and told me to make sure the apartment door was unlocked. She was going to come over and was calling the paramedics. She told me to hold on. Minutes later, the bright white light of the blinding daylight sun poured into the living room like a tidal wave of pure radiance. I heard voices and felt hands and fingers. It was the last thing I remember as I was carried out of my mother's apartment and into the waiting ambulance. I was reliving the death of my father. I was my father at that moment. The world went black.

Oh my god! I'm dead!

Accepting the Call to Adventure

Slowly my eyes opened. Where was I? There were sounds, but they were hard to understand. There were smells, but they were faint memories in my head. There were physical feelings on my skin and around my body, but they were too

delicate to understand. There was a taste in my mouth. Chemical. Dry. Stagnate. There was a fog around me. I could just make out a person sitting next to me. I could not determine if it was male, female, or maybe a ghost. I didn't want to open my eyes again. I didn't want to see what had become of me.

"Dwayne." Someone held my hand. I think it was my hand. It was somehow attached to my body.

I mumbled a response. There was a reply. Slowly I opened my eyes. The space was so damn bright. So white and electric. I could feel some kind of energy in my toes. Then my fingertips. Then my legs and arms. The blurry surroundings came into focus, and I saw my mother sitting beside me. She held my hand. She was crying.

"Dwayne." The name was familiar. Was it my name? Yes, it was. I was known as Dwayne. I looked around more and understood that I was dressed in a hospital gown and was lying on an uncomfortable bed. An IV was inserted in my arm. Drip. Drip. Drip. Vital liquids were entering my blood stream.

"I have to pee." Those were my first words.

"You already are." I looked down and saw a tube running under the blanket and filled with yellow urine. The tube ran to a bag filled with older liquid from the night before. I lifted the blanket and saw the tube entering my penis. They had inserted a catheter into my bladder since I was unable to use the restroom on my own.

First order of business—remove catheter and show the doctor that you're able to stand and walk on your own to the restroom. Second order of business—

ask for food. My stomach was a little upset, but it made hunger noises and growled like an animal. A nurse came into the small white room, and I was reminded of the time when I was younger and had broken my arm. Everyone and everything were sterile. I had to sit up and asked the nurse to raise my bed. I then gave her my list of “to-dos” which she promptly said she would run by the doctor first.

Memory began to flood back into my body, and I could feel the traumatic experience of suicide. My abdominal area hurt from having my stomach pumped. My mouth was dry, and my tongue was still swollen from the poison I had overdosed on. My arm hurt from the needle inserted for who knows how long. How long was I off the game board? Was it hours? Was it days? My mother said it was a little over two days since the attempt at killing myself. I had been rescued by my friend’s mother and an emergency medical crew. I had been rushed to the Chambersburg Hospital over 15 minutes from my mother’s apartment. I had flatlined for a moment during the journey. Did that mean I was clinically dead for a while? I didn’t remember any of the events. Witnesses said the emergency room quickly diagnosed my situation using the information provided by the paramedics and proceeded to vacuum the contents of my stomach. I was given an activated charcoal to absorb the rest of the toxins and polyethylene glycol to flush what had managed to enter my intestinal and urinary tracts. I did not want to know how the nurses managed the excrement while I was unconscious. They were all saints and angels.

My friend's mother arrived in the evening the day I awoke. I was to be moved to a location in the hospital for psychological evaluation. I remained in the ward for several days and engaged in social activities, participated in conversations with a therapist (which ultimately did nothing to address my core issues), and befriended a young male nurse who also happened to be gay. He was one of the first people that openly offered me the space to reveal my authentic self. My friend's mother who had answered my call for help after overdosing was another. My friendship with her evolved into a mentor-mentee relationship and she helped equip me with the tools I needed to reconstruct my psychological and emotional personage. She helped me reshape my relationship to trauma.

There were also people that detracted from the healing process during my time in the hospital. My mother turned the situation into an opportunity to blame herself and draw attention to her own needs. As she had done for so many years, she made the situation all about her. In addition, I was faced with meeting the minister of the local WCG congregation that I had been attending. He thought it was important to inform me that God/Jesus/HolySpirit still loved me and the attempt to take my own life could be forgiven. He also made it clear that God/Jesus/HolySpirit was still not accepting of homosexuality and that any sexual attraction to other men was sinful. This was the point where I began to distance myself from God/Spirit/HolySpirit as a parental figure. I was beginning to define who and what I was in relationship to other humans and nonhumans. This period of my life was the demarcation between the ordinary world filled with psychological, emotional, sexual, and spiritual abuse, and the extraordinary world

of independence, exploration, adventure, self-awareness, and self-actualization. It was the line in the sand amid a war between two identities. My perception of the world changed over the next few years, and I made new friends and mentors along the way.

Mentors and Allies

Vogler (2020) defines the mentor as “an archetype found in dreams, myths, and stories who aids or trains the hero. This archetype is expressed in all those characters who teach and protect heroes and give them gifts” (p. 43). My own mentors came in many forms. Among them, the mother of a high school friend who answered my call for help on the day I attempted suicide, became my closest ally. She would be the catalyst for the slow and often arduous process of psychological and spiritual evolution that I would assume over the next several years. The role of mentor was not easy for her. She had to deal with an adolescent in conflict with his own nature. I was terrified to reveal my attraction to other men and for a while wore the false mask of the heterosexual. However, the experienced person that she was saw through the illusion that I presented to the world. She accepted that I was gay long before I could accept it for myself. Many long nights were spent crying and revealing my deepest fears with her, but she maintained a focus on the outcome. Her goal was to help me to see my authentic self and to embrace it without any fear or anxiety. My frustration and anger often bordered threats of violence, yet she stayed the course and suffered my misplaced emotional outbursts. Eventually, her patience won the day, but not before I was allowed to explore an alternative lifestyle that had been denied for so long.

This new way of living and relating to the world had its pros and cons. After being discharged from the hospital in 1989, I spent a couple years exploring my LGBTQ+ inclinations. I befriended a few gay men in Shippensburg who introduced me to gay clubs and bars, anonymous sex, and other risqué experiences. I was still attending the WCG, however less and less each week. Eventually, I ended my relationship to the WCG temporarily and dived into the deep end of my homosexual needs and desires. I gave into my sexuality and opened myself to a world of brilliant sensation. I danced for hours into the wee hours of the morning at gay clubs where I would have orgasmic reactions to new music by some of my favorite artists like Erasure, Depeche Mode, and Madonna. I let my mind and body merge with the flow of energy and the beat of the music. It was ecstasy. But after the climax, came the crash. I would end up in stranger's beds not knowing where I was or who I was with. I would couch surf from friend to friend because I didn't want to live with my mother. I attempted to go to college, but the magnetic draw of sex and clubbing was overwhelming. I dropped many courses over two terms and failed the others. Eventually, after being homeless for nearly two years, I neared my 21st birthday. The call to adventure led me to consider new places to live where I could shake off the old shell of myself and spread new wings.

One such attempt at relocation found me on a Greyhound bus on my way to Florida to live with my grandparents in St. Petersburg, Florida until I could find my own place. My friend and mentor warned me to really think about this choice. She knew I was not ready for the radical shift in consciousness but allowed me to

make the choice myself. I did end up with cold feet and ended my trek on the bus in Washington, DC. The journey back to Shippensburg was defeating, yet I found comfort in going back to the familiar. I would not be psychologically and emotionally ready to relocate to a new home until a few months later.

One of the allies I had befriended in my early 20s was a gay man who was an undertaker. Reflecting on this friendship now reveals the symbolism in it. My friend was a reference to the death of the person I was and the resurrection of the person I was becoming. He was the embodiment of transition. My friend was from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and his family still resided in the city. I had been living with this friend for a few months and one weekend we went to Pittsburgh together to visit his mother. To my inexperienced eyes, Pittsburgh was a metropolis. It had industrialized gay clubs and bars which I had an affinity for because of my love of Nine Inch Nails, Depeche Mode, Information Society, and other techno bands. It also had parks and places where I could be alone with the wilderness. It was affordable for a guy down and out on his luck. That weekend in Pittsburgh opened doors for me into the extraordinary world. I met a young barback at the Pegasus nightclub on Liberty Avenue and we exchanged numbers. A few months later, my undertaker friend was driving me to Pittsburgh to move in with the barback as a roommate. Roommate became boyfriend, and I was in a relationship literally overnight.

After a year and my boyfriend's HIV diagnosis, I left the relationship that had brought me to Pittsburgh. I walked through the gateway and now had to deal with new situations. The finality of the relationship was heartbreaking and

looking back, I realize I was a coward. I was terrified of contracting HIV and dying of AIDs. This paranoia was so strong that I became celibate for over a year and began attending the local congregation of the WCG with a hope that their doctrines regarding homosexuality had changed with new organizational leadership. Sadly, I was wrong. After all I had experienced in the years after the suicide attempt, I realized I had outgrown the need for God/Jesus/HolySpirit in my life. A new form of spirituality had arisen, and I found intimacy and family through my LGBTQ+ friends and partners. I was grateful for the time I spent at the Pittsburgh congregation, but the young adult in me wanted more. I was jealous of the couples and families in the church. I wanted my own. I didn't have to wait for long.

Once again, at the Pegasus gay nightclub, I met my second partner. Our relationship was a tumultuous roller coaster ride that survived for about five years. We separated about halfway through the relationship, and he moved back to Philadelphia with his parents. To rekindle what we had, I followed him. I was desperate for his companionship even if it was toxic in many ways. I was terrified to be alone. I hadn't realized it was ok to be single until at turn of the Millennium when the bond with him finally ended for good. It was not just our relationship that ended, it was also my need to have an intimate partner at all. I was dependent on having someone to share my life with and was willing to give up who and what I was to have that relationship. I sacrificed psychological, emotional, and spiritual growth and development for the sake of a boyfriend. The time had come to step into my own power and embrace not only a single life, but also a new perspective

on myself and my goals. My second boyfriend served as a mentor, albeit a dark one. Vogler (2020) writes, “The agent becomes an obstacle in the hero’s path. This is psychologically true to life, for often we must overcome or outgrow the energy of our best teachers in order to move to the next stage of development” (p. 49).

At this time, I began to journal online using a blog website. I would write about my day-to-day life and the events that I went through. I shared my thoughts on previous relationships and eventually explored the traumatic events of my childhood. In 2001, the World Trade Center was attacked. This event was cause for deeper reflection and the experiencing of communal bonding. For a moment in time, I felt part of a larger movement of energy along with friends and colleagues. The World Trade Center was the point where I moved away from writing online reflections (which are now lost to time) and started writing in journals periodically. Journaling was a chance to contemplate thoughts and identity. It was also a way to explore ideas with old and new mentors and friends as they came into and out of my life.

In addition to my original mentor from Shippensburg, Pennsylvania, I encountered many more through various friendships in Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, and eventually San Diego after moving there in 2004. Whether offering their insight and wisdom, providing companionship, or going out to clubs with me, they always provided a sense of home and family. They encouraged my perspectives and shepherded the shifting identities I embraced. Some mentors stayed with me for a few months while others remained with me for decades. For

the most part, their role as mentors has evolved into peer friendships, but their teachings were critical in helping me move from a dualistic way of thinking to a more refined and holistic view. Mentors helped me realize my potential to evolve. Mentors supported me in times of great distress and darkness. Mentors evoked deep awareness of the quiet and peaceful source of life at the center of my body. Mentors encouraged writing because they knew the dialogue I was having with myself was a manifestation of the changes my mind and heart were living through and making sense of. They witnessed and supported the healing process of dialogue, self-reflection, personal narrative, and achieving new ways of knowing and being.

The Second Ordeal

The sun danced in the sky of San Diego,
Blue reflected like the oceans of an archipelago.
Palm trees swayed, veils of a bride,
Warm light touched my skin, and I sighed.

Enya sung an uplifting melody to wed,
Thoughts of the day as they danced in my head.
Children played on the swing sets nearby,
Parents looked after them with an eagle's eye.

My feet carried me across the land, needing to roam,
Back to the little room I called home.

Flickers of scenes played before my eyes,
Artifacts from a film demanding to be theorized.

A lesson, a message, some kind of enlightenment,
Perhaps none and perhaps all bewilderment.
I continued my path not really paying attention,
Unprepared to grasp the unfolding situation.

To my left appeared a white vehicle with two shapes,
My peripheral hearing registering tire scrapes.
Maybe they were heading to the park,
Like the families already there, wanting to leave their mark.

I ignored their presence and thought nothing of it,
Not wanting to assume their motives, I had to admit.
When out of the blue a cannon ball hit my head,
A whump! And a thump! And my skull quickly bled.

An inner voice screamed, “What the hell?!!”
An outer voice whimpered, “Did you hear that bell?”
Warm liquid poured down the nape of my neck,
Trickling sticky gooeyness as it made its trek.

I turned around and before me a young man started to dance,
Back and forth on his feet taking an aggressive stance.
In his hand he held a tool and a weapon of pain,
A hammer for nails and smashing the brain.

That was it! “It was not a cannonball,” I surmised,
Still overwhelmingly shocked and surprised.
He yelled at me to drop my backpack,
I obeyed for fear of receiving another crack or smack.

Would he try to use my face as a board for his hammer?
I did not want to give him time to clamor.
Down to the ground my backpack fell,
Containing a book, *The Peaceful Warrior*, with ethics to tell.

Would the thief read the book, or would he just take the cash?
He chose both and ran off down the sidewalk in a dash.
Awaiting him at the corner of the next street,
A white four-door car with his accomplice to greet.

Off they tore away with my money,
Disappearing behind buildings and leaving me slummy.
My feet dragged me to a church nearby. Ironic I thought,

That here I was again to fight a battle I had already fought.

People surrounded me like shadow demons and faeries,

Asking me if I'm ok and calling for beneficiaries.

I looked to my right and was mesmerized by the intensity of green,

Plants that grew at the base of the church, witnessing the scene.

They enveloped me with their love and bright joy,

Causing me to remember and reflect on the days I was just a boy.

My father as well had played with life, like a gambler,

A rambler who could not escape Death the Strangler.

Again, I was repeating my dad's death as a ballet,

Pirouetting along a two-lane highway.

What unresolved trauma did I contain,

What troubling new experience would I retain?

With whirling lights and screeching siren,

An ambulance arrived like an unsightly Charon.

Its container filled with instruments of healing and death,

Ready to conduct me across the River of Lethe.

"Put him in a neck brace," the attendants proclaimed,

“Box him up, shut him up, and leave nothing unconstrained!”

Off to the hospital we raced,

With eyes closed and mouth laced.

They injected me with morphine, oxycodone or some kind of meme,

Causing me to compliment the male nurse during a delirious dream.

He was cute and kind and I was in a trance.

Never one to give up an opportunity, never one to pass up a chance.

Into the magnetic resonance imaging tube I was slid,

Confined by medical restraints and the images under my own eyelid.

Stitches applied and neck brace removed, I was placed in a cold bed.

And there I would stay overnight to be sure I was not dead.

Intravenous needles pumped drugs and other chemicals into my veins,

Healing the cells, but ignoring the heart, mind, and soul full of chains.

There I stayed contemplating the performance from a stage.

Filled with anger. Filled with sadness. Overflowing with rage.

What would bring a person to the edge of madness?

What would bring a person to the land of badness?

In a cave the monster lurked, deep within my psyche,

Waiting to pounce, to scratch, to claw its way to God almighty.

The cave was within, and I was the monster—an ablation.

I was the culprit who bathed in remorse, regret, and victimization.

I was the criminal with a hammer in his hand,

Beating my victim, myself, over and over again.

After a second trip through the tube, I was deemed fit for release,

To move among the living again and be advised to go in peace.

I wrote my feelings into the discourse, washing away the red.

I weaved my thoughts into the stream of consciousness with thread.

I considered over many days and nights of crying.

I analyzed the events in meditative writing.

Epiphany visited me one bright morning as the sun rose high,

Offering me thoughts of joy, victory, and a powerful ally.

I had a choice to either continue to be harmed,

Or I could surrender the burden and be reformed.

Resurrection and Reward

In my dream, it was dark. I was driving down the road and the headlights of the car barely illuminated the journey ahead. I can't recall if it was raining or dry, but I do recall that the night was completely absent of light. There were no stars or moon to guide my way. I was relying solely on artificial light created by

the vehicle. An overwhelming feeling of fear and anxiety washed over me. At first, I didn't understand what was causing it. Suddenly, the road was twisting and turning. My car accelerated without me. I slammed on the brake pedal repeatedly, only to realize I was not slowing down. Into the gloomy night I sped onward toward a most certain cataclysm.

I woke up with a start. "Just a dream," I tell myself. "Just a dream."

The violent attack in San Diego in 2006 was the climax of my life journey up to that point. It was then that I hit rock bottom. It was where I turned inward for spiritual, psychological, and emotional guidance. No longer was I able to trust the external world—the extraordinary world of which I had been playing a role up to that point. Now, I was forced to recognize another person when I looked in the mirror. This person met me with a black eye, bruised neck, and metal staples in his head. This person, this reflection, was completely new somehow. Not "new" as in a totally different face or physical manifestation, but a psychological one. The night I had been supervised in the hospital was a turning point. I had died to who I was in the past and witnessed the resurrection of a new being. This rebirthed being still had the personality traits of his former self but wore an updated and reconstructed version of his emotional, psychological, and spiritual perspectives. Vogler (2020) writes,

A new self must be created for a new world. Just as heroes had to shed their old selves to enter the Special World, they now must shed the personality of the journey and build a new one that is suitable for the return to the Ordinary World. It should reflect the best parts of the old selves and the lessons learned along the way. (pp. 229–230)

I had died to the old world, the ordinary world, and been reborn to a new one. Vogler (2020) continues, "This is the climax (not the crisis), the last and

most dangerous meeting with death. Heroes must undergo a final purging and purification before re-entering the Ordinary World. Once more they must change” (p. 229). According to Vogler, resurrection serves additional purposes such as cleansing the individual of the cloak of death, demonstrating that the person has learned the lesson of death, relieving anxiety and stress formerly imprisoned in the unconscious mind through catharsis, proving that the experience of death was real, sacrificing or surrendering something valuable that the hero often keeps very close to themselves, incorporating lessons from the old and the new, and changing one’s relationship or perspective to both inner and outer worlds.

The violent mugging that I suffered in San Diego initially left me with feelings of hate and anger. These negative emotions however proved to be unproductive, and their fruits would quickly fall to the ground and rot. The change I experienced was how I perceived the event and the person who brought harm and death to my doorstep. Reflective writing, such as what I am doing at this very moment, gave me the tools with which I was able to restage the event, repurpose the actors, and find new meaning in my relationship to what happened to me. A reshaping of who and what I was had fundamentally allowed me to nurture empathy, compassion, and kindness toward myself, and ultimately the perpetrator of my trauma.

The reward for participating in a second death ordeal was the realization that I was not the person I had been led to believe over years of psychological, spiritual, and emotional conditioning. Just like the criminal who attacked me, I was a complex and multilayered human being. The masks I wore on the outside

were just reflections of who I was or could be. I was acting the part of a young gay adult with a spiritual mindset, but I wasn't really living it. Within a few months of being attacked in San Diego, my performance began to change through reflective writing using an online blogging platform. I reconstructed the traumatic event to gain meaning from it—a coherent understanding. Writing and sharing my personal narratives reshaped the relationships I had to the actors who contributed to them, starting with elementary bonds and working to the more complex.

First, my mother. The process of forgiving my mother of the emotional and psychological pain she caused started by admitting that she was also just a human being trying to do her best with what she was given. It was never her intention to instill her son with the same or similar issues she had dealt with her whole life. It was never her intention to repeat the generational trauma that she experienced in her relationship with her child. Suddenly, my mother was a completely different person in how I wrote her in my mind and on the page. Granted, there were times I could not have a conversation with my mother because as she got older, she became more entrenched in her belief systems and values. Before her death, she never was able to admit that she accepted her gay son and who he had become. She always dreamed of me getting married to a “nice Christian girl, having children, and becoming a preacher.”

Second, my childhood sexual molester. This relationship was by far one of the most challenging that I have ever lived through. On the one hand, I loathed this person for many, many years. I often fantasized about his death and suffering without considering what those types of thoughts were doing to my own

humanity. In conversation with my mother years after the sexual abuse ended, I was informed that the molester had asked for my forgiveness. I was not and would not give it. Ever. I was determined to harbor my hate and detest for this person for the rest of my life. There was no excuse I could possibly imagine for an adult to sexually abuse a child of 11 years old. Even as I'm writing these words, reflecting on the events of my childhood, and still feeling some of the aggression built up over the years, I see that my perspective of what happened has changed. There is no longer a deep hatred, but an acceptance of the circumstances I was given. The true question that faced me for so many decades was what would I do with the lessons I learned from being sexually abused? What would it tell about my character, values, and beliefs years after the molester was dead? Could I recognize how I was perpetuating self-victimization and self-abuse as an adult? And if so, how did this self-inflicted torture keep me from living a more actualized life? My sexual molester kept me imprisoned long after childhood simply by instilling in me a sense of shame and masochism.

Third, God/Jesus/HolySpirit. The concept of God/Jesus/HolySpirit evolved from believing in a creature or being who lived in another dimension and had constant interaction with the human world to one of imagination, myth, and fairy tale. The God/Jesus/HolySpirit story was a manifestation of all the people within the various religious movements I participated in—from the families to the ministers. My trip through the somewhat bizarre and haphazard culture of the WCG was simply a desire to be accepted and loved by other people. At the time, I didn't realize I was joining a cult per se, but an organization that embraced me as

a human. What broke the illusion of love was being told that God/Jesus/HolySpirit did indeed “love” me but hated my sinful behavior. There was no way to reconcile those two concepts, but there was the possibility for integration. I incorporated the best parts of my spiritual relationships with other human beings and God/Jesus/HolySpirit. New neural pathways formed, and I nurtured my love of nature, the Earth, and the cosmos. I began to see that humanity was imperfect and often troubled, yet deserved the same compassion and empathy that I was giving myself.

Fourth, gay intimate partners. I’ve only had two long-term intimate relationships with gay men. The first one lasted about a year. We were both in our early 20s and still very innocent as far as an accumulation of worldly awareness and understanding of our experiences. Our partnership ended abruptly after his diagnosis with HIV. I was the one that was too afraid to risk exposure to AIDS and could not see past my own blinders. In reflection, knowing what I know now, I would have stayed with him. He graciously remained friends with me, but we grew apart and alienated as he dealt with health issues and his own demons. To my knowledge he is still alive today as I sit here in front of my computer remembering our time together. About 15 years after I initiated our breakup, I was able to speak with him. I could tell he was a different person and had grown beyond the past.

My second relationship lasted almost five years to the day. If my first relationship was built on innocence and newness, my second was built on wildness, risk, and adrenaline. From the night I met him, we became a couple. It

was unspoken. We both desired one another in ways we could not put words to. We met on the evening before Thanksgiving in 1994 at the Pegasus nightclub in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He stayed overnight and enjoyed Thanksgiving dinner with me and my roommates. His story was that his parents had disowned him and wanted nothing to do with a gay son. He was living in a college dormitory at the University of Pittsburgh, but it was not home. I wanted to rescue him and within a few weeks, he moved in with me in a small 15-foot by 20-foot bedroom in a house with three other roommates and the landlord. The house was a large Victorian foursquare built in 1906. The owners were an HIV+ gay man and his lover of many years. I learned by living there that it was ok to use the same kitchenware, breathe the same air, and use the same bathrooms as a person with HIV. It was my time in this house that revealed a certain selfishness and cowardice about how I treated my first intimate partner. I aimed to change that in my second relationship and placed him above my own needs and desires. I became dependent on this relationship after a year or two of celibacy. I longed for the touch and love of another man. My second relationship also brought an end to my relationship with the WCG and the concept of God/Jesus/HolySpirit. I had transferred my need for acceptance and love from the God/Jesus/HolySpirit entity and members of the church to my long-term partner. I embraced my authentic self and manifested who I was through love for my boyfriend. My spirituality evolved from traditional Christian beliefs to one of agnosticism and affinity for nature.

The first year of our time together was exciting, fun, and adventurous, but as time wore on, we grew apart. Often, we found ourselves in altercations,

fighting about his need for anonymous sex, alcohol, and attention from strangers. His narcissistic behavior led to us breaking up in 1997 and his moving back to Philadelphia with his parents who had never disowned him in the first place. It appeared to be a fabricated story. His parents showed no ill will toward him and even accepted me for a while. During the summer of 1997, we stayed in touch and agreed to try being together again. Would the second time be better? Could he have changed after being away from me for several months? The answer for both of us was a resounding no. I moved to Philadelphia and for about two years tried to make it work. It was not to be. His need for other sexual partners prevented our relationship from becoming more intimate. I resorted to making new friends and lovers to keep from becoming depressed. On Christmas Day of 1999, he moved in with his new partner who he had been secretly dating for several months. It was an emotional setback, but I was able to recover quickly. I had become an expert at short-term relationships. Our separation was amicable, and we remained friends. The value of his presence in my life (one I continue to learn from) was an understanding that I did not need another person to justify my own existence. I did not need to lose myself to another person and sacrifice my dreams and goals. I could remain independent and strong by nurturing an awareness of dependency through knowledge (e.g., reading books by Dr. Susan Forward [1997, 2002]), being receptive to the wisdom of friends and mentors, and utilizing reflective writing. I did not have to repeat the drive that my mother had to remain in a toxic relationship no matter the cost. I could be a free and independent being able to grow and stretch my wings.

And finally, I began to reconstruct the bond with myself. Of all the relationships I have ever had, the one with myself has been by far the most challenging. Krishnamurti (1973) writes, “Look, Sir, I don’t read any religious, philosophical, psychological books: one can go into oneself at tremendous depths and find out everything. To go into oneself is the problem, how to do it” (p. 25). That is how I approached self-inquiry after the second ordeal of near-death in San Diego. How do I do it? What steps should I follow? Self-inquiry is not a process or list of instructions that can be applied to any circumstance. This type of analytical approach leads to conditioning. To inquire about one’s motives, values, beliefs, and perspectives, one must be free of conditioning or the need to analyze. Self-inquiry is a radical experience of no-thingness. It is the emptying of the mind of thoughts, ideas, and identity. It was through freeform writing that I was able to free myself from thoughts about who and what I was and my point of view on the life events I’d experienced. Krishnamurti (1973) continues, “How do I free myself from my conditioning of the culture in which I was born? First, I must be aware that I am conditioned—not somebody telling me that I am conditioned” (p. 88). Ah ha! The mind is a tricky and slippery thing. My own mind had fooled me many times into believing that I understood how I had been conditioned by culture. I allowed external influences to condition me—my mother, God/Jesus/HolySpirit, friends, society, corporate and academic ecosystems, and even books. As Krishnamurti said, I had to find out for myself that I was conditioned. It literally and figuratively required that I be hit over the head with a hammer to come to the realization of my own constraints.

The awakening of intelligence and awareness did not happen overnight after being mugged. It required months of meditation, reflection, awareness, writing notes, elaborating on notes, redefining beliefs, and restructuring my perspectives on Self. It was an undertaking that demanded great amounts of psychological, emotional, and spiritual energy. It created conflict between long held belief systems and emerging ways of knowing and being. Krishnamurti (1973) writes,

The moment your life is planned according to a pattern then you are not living, you are merely conforming to a certain standard and therefore that conformity leads to contradiction in oneself. The “what is” and the “what should be”, that breeds contradiction and therefore conflict. That very conflict is the source of disorder. (p. 129)

Conflict between what is known (the past) and the unknown (the emerging newness of every present moment) is what held me in chains for so many decades. Conflict between unavailable parents and the needs of a growing child. Conflict with authority and those that wield their power in negative and often evil ways and the innocence of an adolescent hungry for attention and love in any form he could get it. Conflict between the outdated beliefs of religious organizations and a young gay man coming out to the world. Conflict between an old identity that demanded to be recognized and a new awareness of being at one with all. These conflicts caused disorder in my psyche. It was the first ordeal of suicide that demonstrated I did not know how to end the conflict. It was the second ordeal of violence that was the catalyst for radical change. In many ways, the opening of my consciousness can be attributed to a young man on a Sunday afternoon who made the decision to attack another human being with a hammer. Ironically, I came to find gratitude for that event. This may seem strange to the

outside observer, however, in my mind, there was no other way I could have moved closer to self-actualization.

So, through the unfolding and refolding of my personal narrative in written form, I was able to move into my own power. This process took place over several years after being attacked in San Diego. On a weekly basis, I wrote short stories in personal journals and shared many of them on social media platforms such as online forums and blogs, and through academic writing and publishing. Often, I had to pause my engagement with past trauma to process negative emotions and reactions through dialogue with friends, meditation, and even therapy. Many times, I risked re-traumatization through writing. This required great awareness and a willingness to be mindful of my feelings and responses to memory. Eventually, I began to face new situations with more resilient armor. I was able to open myself to each moment of reality and anchor myself in the present. As I evolved my narrative to serve me, I faced new experiences with a different mindset. The conflict that I once harbored evaporated and with it, feelings of anxiety, stress, anger, hate, remorse, and shame. A new person emerged from the cocoon of conditioning. A hero was reborn. It was now my duty to share my understanding and hard-won wisdom with others and at the same time, continue to inquire about myself and my thoughts. Resurrection is a metaphor for awakening. It is symbolic of walking into the dark cave not knowing whether you may come out on the other end alive. Physical death can bring about change in oneself; however, psychological death is more powerful. Psychological death and resurrection transformed my mind fundamentally, and rewired years of

conditioned thinking to create new pathways of behavior. Psychological death awoke a part of me that had been dormant for a long time and was finally free from dependence on the past filled with dead relationships, traumatic events, and inconsequential memories.

Return to the Ordinary World

The process of psychological death and resurrection did not happen overnight. It required a couple years of incubation. During this nesting period, I was steeped in self-awareness, meditation, writing a daily journal, reflecting on the writing, and then writing some more. Slowly I saw within myself a new person emerging from the old. There was a freshness to how I related with other people, memories, past events, and most importantly, the relationship I had to myself. I found myself stopping now and then to drop baggage I had accumulated over many years. It was a time of integration and building bridges between the dichotomous personalities within my psyche. Each coalescence revealed new shame that I could have used against myself. Instead, I used shame as a tool to strengthen resilience and build emotional, psychological, and spiritual muscles. Brené Brown (2015) defines shame as “the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging” (p. 69). Shame for me was believing that I was a sinful queer in the eyes of God/Jesus/HolySpirit. It was not being worthy of an intimate, lifelong relationship. It was not achieving the perfection that society demanded of me and that I demanded of myself. It was hating LGBTQ+ culture and projecting that hate as homophobia, fear, embarrassment, and intolerance of others who I had deemed

“too gay.” Through writing and reconstructing my personal narrative, the relationship I had to shame shifted from one of acceptance to one of resilience. I could recognize shame in my interaction with others and in relationship to the many characters that lived within me. Some of those masked personalities faded over time as they were dealt with one by one and underwent integration. Some are still alive today. It is an ongoing process of transformation.

Brown (2015) says that the best way to deal with shame is to build “shame resilience” and she posits four primary elements of shame resilience (p. 74). The first is recognizing what triggers shame in us. Recognition opens a doorway into one’s inner being. I recognized shame through writing about it. I could see in my personal narrative the moments where I was embarrassed about who I had become and how I related to others. Recognition of shame is like lifting weights at the gym for the first time. I had to start with light weights and work my way up to heavier ones over time.

The second element of shame resistance according to Brown (2015) is practicing awareness and deep observation. What do I mean by deep observation? For me, it was finding time to sit with nature under a tree or out in an open meadow. It was the silent observation of other living organisms like trees, grass, insects, birds, and even the wind and sun. I observed external beings with awareness clear of any judgment, bias, or thought. Just sitting with and listening to the world around me removed the barriers that my mind placed between myself and others. Through awareness and deep observation (self-inquiry), I felt a connection to life not hindered by any philosophy or belief system. I was just

alive. I was just being. I developed an understanding of who I was without labels and identity. I was at once nothing and everything. I was a paradox! How could I be nothing and everything at the same time? I was nothing because my mind had permission to let go of the strings of identity and belief. It was not contained within a cage of conformity and structure. Like the wind, it could be whoever and whatever it chose. I was also everything because my body was open to merging with the soil beneath me, the wind as she blew through me, the sun as it penetrated my skin, and the plants and animals as they manifested around me. I could see the advantages of quieting the mind and dropping defenses. There was no point in creating artificial barriers between myself and everything else. In moments of rare clarity, I understood that I was the world and the world was me. However, my mind was quick to switch back on and set up artificial and arbitrary boundaries.

The third element Brown (2015) shares from her research is reaching out. This can take the form of conversation and sharing our shame with friends and allies. The important aspect of sharing is to move shame from the inside to the outside. I externalized shame in my writing and subsequent relationships with friends. I began to name the things that held me back so that they no longer had the power to control me. By externalizing and naming my shame, trauma, and dark secrets, I cleansed my body and mind of more baggage. I chiseled away at the layers of built-up crust that encased me and gave myself permission to stand naked in front of the world, metaphorically. I imagined throughout this process being an artist chiseling the statue of David out of a raw and unrefined piece of

marble. The exquisite form of David was hidden for thousands upon thousands of years until Michelangelo hammered away the shell David was contained in. The revelation of my authentic personhood came through self-awareness and conversations with friends over dinner, under starlight, and into the quiet hours of the morning. It was through the back-and-forth exchange of ideas and a desire to reveal shame that resilience was built. Resilience to shame in the moment and resilience to troubling experiences in the future. I was building armor to defend against my own mind and the tricks it can play. I was building armor to defend against society and the horrific games it likes to play.

The final element of Brown's (2015) shame resilience is speaking shame out loud. This step requires the individual to be comfortable sharing their feelings with themselves first and foremost, and with others. Sharing feelings in a positive and constructive manner relinquishes us of bottled-up shame. For many years, I kept my feelings as a gay man pent up inside. They often boiled over. I would assuage them through random sexual acts with strangers and then ricochet back to a life of celibacy or religion. I would ignore the need I had for intimacy, friendship, and love because I was taught to believe that being gay was evil and wrong. I did not deserve love or grace. I was tarnished by sexual abuse as a child. I accepted the idea that punishment for being gay meant being ostracized, ridiculed, and demeaned. My mother, God/Jesus/HolySpirit, society, and myself all convinced me that I was a second-class human being only worthy of love if I first earned it. My voice was muffled for many years and saw its freedom through the random act of being violently mugged in San Diego. The cap on my voice

exploded and I screamed in pain, anguish, anger, and sadness. Luckily, I had people there at the right time to share my shame with and through those interactions was able to break the chains of bondage. Writing and reflecting on my personal narrative was the key to unlocking the prison my spirit had been trapped in. Relating and sharing my stories were the tools I used to tear down the prison and build a more resilient structure.

Resilience is “the ability to grow from adverse events and find meaning in them” (Southwick & Charney, 2018, p. 8). The discovery of meaning within the physical and digital pages of my personal narrative was the “elixir” that Vogler (2020) refers to in his discussion of the Hero’s Journey. For me, my return to the ordinary world from the extraordinary required many hardships and trauma. However, the reward for perseverance and courage was love and responsibility. These are the elixirs that I brought back to share with society and the larger world. The meaning that I extracted from traumatic experiences allowed me to love myself, love others more authentically, and take responsibility for shame, hate, sadness, and other feelings that held me back from achieving potential. The return to the ordinary world was not met with fanfare or celebration. It was illustrated in my decision to move to Portland, Oregon where I would walk in ancient forests, connect with the Earth and nature, and reshape the life that I had been blindly living since childhood. I was now awake to the possibilities that lay before me and could see a clear path of growth and development. I had the ability to influence and shape who and what I wanted to be. I was no longer at the mercy of

storms and tempests like a ship at sea. In many ways, I could guide my destiny. I stepped into my power and potential psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually.

According to Vogler (2020), there are two types of return to the ordinary as they are written in stories—the circular and the open-ended. The circular finds the Hero returning to their roots or the starting point of the adventure. This pattern offers a satisfying closure to the narrative and gives the audience a sense of completeness. Everyone lives happily ever after. The open-ended return, which I personally align with, leaves the audience with unanswered questions to the Hero's story. Loose ends are not necessarily a negative outcome for the narrative. They can paint an optimistic picture for the Hero—one that is without boundaries, form, and expectations. This way of returning to the ordinary world is filled with possibility, not scarcity. Openness to what lies ahead and acceptance of what remains behind is a perspective I had to nurture. Not having all the answers required patience and acceptance that I *do not and will not ever* have all the answers. Perfection in that regard is not achievable. However, what is achievable is the way in which meaning from our past informs our present and defines our future. The elixir of love and responsibility was my gift to the ordinary world. Being open-ended, my story illustrates the path I had to take to get to where I am, and the writing is not done. There are still many blank pages to be written.

What Have I Become?

The narrative arc of my life has not come to an end. The story is still being written. It is informed by time and space which is the past, present, and future in relation to the physical, psychological, emotional, and spiritual positions I find

myself in. What has emerged is a new being of sorts. One that has claimed the power of autonomy and freedom from conditioning imposed by society and one's own mind. This freedom is not easily obtained. It must be claimed daily through ongoing meditation, awareness, writing, reflection, and the construction and deconstruction of my personal narrative. Like a lotus flower, freedom is a constant unfolding and refolding of psychological birth, death, and resurrection. It is evolving into and out of self-actualization and empowerment. It requires great resilience in the form of forgiveness and gratitude for the lessons learned, the growth achieved, and the potentiality of each moment. Freedom is the merging of duality within the psyche. Sometimes, there is the temptation to regress into former belief systems and values about myself which requires mindfulness and meditation skills to avoid.

This process necessitated an ongoing understanding and acceptance of what I was projecting into the world and how it could be balanced by a shift in my psychology. For example, I often projected an assertive, controlling, protective, intimidating, and authoritarian personality. The underlying drivers of these traits may have been a fear of being controlled, vulnerability, injustice, or emotional, psychological, and spiritual abuse. Ultimately, the union between outer projection and inner reality required a willingness to let go of everything I had constructed about my identity in relation to the events I experienced in the past. The steps I took to realize this state were not straightforward at the time but have become more crystalized now.

The first step was accepting and finding meaning in the events of my life. I had to identify the value that trauma and other troubling events offered me and embrace the value no matter how difficult. This was accomplished through writing personal stories. E. E. Smith (2017) writes, “By taking the disparate pieces of our lives and placing them together into a narrative, we create a unified whole that allows us to understand our lives as coherent—and coherence, psychologists say, is a key source of meaning” (p. 104). Smith goes on to say that by focusing on the pivotal events of our lives and considering how these events (traumatic and otherwise) form who and what we are leads to constructive meaning-making. When I realized the benefits that traumatic experiences could offer me, I was more willing to engage them in narrative form, including opening old wounds and possibly experiencing traumatization again. It was vitally important to be aware of my emotions and thoughts as I interacted with actors from past events. Meaning came through the process of writing stories, deconstructing them, and then reconstructing or adapting them for a new purpose.

McAdams and McLean (2013) describe meaning-making emerging from life stories in two ways. *Redemption sequences* are stories or “scenes in which a demonstrably ‘bad’ or emotionally negative event or circumstance leads to a demonstrably ‘good’ or emotionally positive outcome. The initial negative state is ‘redeemed’ or salvaged by the good that follows it” (McAdams & McLean, 2013, p. 234). An example of one of my redemptive stories was being mugged and violently attacked in San Diego. The event was traumatic and painful, but led to positive outcomes of awareness, adaptation, and the evolution of my

consciousness. It was imperative during the retelling of my story to remain vigilant and mindful of the negative effects of trauma and engaging with negative emotions and memories about the situation. I was able to avoid re-traumatization and the perpetuation of self-victimization by sharing my stories with others, dialoguing about the experiences, and nurturing self-inquiry skills.

Contamination sequences are stories or “scenes in which a good or positive event turns dramatically bad or negative, such that the negative affect overwhelms, destroys, or erases the effects of the preceding positivity” (McAdams & McLean, 2013, p. 234). Again, an example of this type of story is reflected in coming out to my mother as a gay male. The freedom I experienced in that moment was liberating and intoxicating. However, the story had negative outcomes such as my mother denying my authentic self.

The second step was transforming trauma through gratitude and forgiveness. Gratitude came in the form of meditation, long walks in nature, and writing nonjudgmental reflections about the events of my life.

Gratitude requires a shift in attitude. It sometimes happens in the midst of trauma or just after it’s over—a burst of appreciation for being alive. But if we’re going to move among trauma’s contending claims of fear, grief, anger, agitation, guilt, and shame to live with Gratitude, we must cultivate and attend to it. (Gordon, 2021, p. 268)

Every time I set pen to paper or fingers to keyboard to write a life story, I was cultivating and attending to gratitude. I was shaping the narrative and mining the nuggets of value. I began to realize that the pain and suffering I experienced, no matter how horrible or violent they may have been, were part of what made me who I was and becoming. The pain was only a part of what made up my authentic Self. “As our capacity to let uncomfortable thoughts and feelings come and go

increases, we realize the pain and hurt are part of us, that we can learn from as well as endure” (Gordon, 2021, p. 269).

“Through the experience of positive emotions, individuals can transform themselves, becoming more creative, knowledgeable, resilient, socially integrated, and healthy. Individuals who regularly experience positive emotions, then, are not stagnant. Instead, they continually grow toward optimal functioning” (Fredrickson, 2004, p. 153). As gratitude grew into a blossoming tree, it began to bear fruits in my life. One benefit was the freedom to think about life’s circumstances in a new way and to see multiple possible solutions to problems. Other benefits included reconstructing my identity by writing and sharing stories, building confidence by recognizing strength and courage, and nurturing wisdom through the lessons of trauma. However, of all the gifts of gratitude, forgiveness has proven to be the most powerful.

Forgiveness was a challenging process for me to put into practice. In many respects, it still is. I grew up believing forgiveness made me weak and if I held onto negative emotions, I would somehow become stronger. I mean, how could I possibly forgive someone who sexually abused me as a child? How could I forgive my mother and father for abandonment and psychological, emotional, and spiritual abuse? How could I move past the pain and suffering caused by the actions of others whether willful or not? While those were important questions to consider, none were more paramount than *how could I forgive myself?* I ignored the need to extend grace and kindness toward myself for perpetuating self-victimization in the form of anger, self-hatred, resentment, envy, and pride. The

ego identity I had constructed over time never contemplated the need to forgive myself first before forgiving others. I was defining myself through suffering and perpetuating self-victimization caused by trauma (Gordon, 2021). Once I was able to see myself through the looking glass, I was transformed. A lightbulb went off in my head a few weeks after I experienced the violent mugging in San Diego. I was now free to see myself in a different way. I found myself reveling in suffering and the negative emotions caused by trauma. In a twisted way, my ego celebrated being a victim! It meant that I would be noticed by others if I shared my story, and I could gain approval and validation by society if they took pity on me. I didn't understand at that moment that the attention gained through victimization was fleeting and short-lived. The adrenaline rush I got from those who were magnetized by my story soon wore off. In its place was a void and an emptiness that required fulfillment. It soon dawned on me that validation required an internal source of energy and to find that source, I had to first tear down the veil of deception I had created through lack of self-awareness. As it goes, reflective writing led to self-awareness, reconstructing my relationship to trauma, gratitude, forgiveness of self and others, and eventually self-actualization.

Gordon (2021) writes, "Trauma shows us who we can be, as well as who we really are. And trauma makes it possible to become that person" (p. 287). This in a nutshell is self-actualization—the ability to reach one's potential. It is the ending of the state of duality and utilizing awareness when engaging self and society (Tzu & Bannerman, 2017). I was able to evolve and nurture ways of looking at and perceiving my past, present, and future through self-reflective

writing. This allowed me to manifest who I could be and change who I had become. Bauer (2021) writes,

Authenticity and self-actualization are what happen when a person enters a situation with a quiet ego, nondefensively, not concerned with one's self-image or status, open to new information about that situation and others' points of view, listening and interacting in an engaged manner, self-aware but not thinking about all these things to the point of distraction, flexible to the situation yet self-directed and disposed toward taking action. When such conditions of mind are in place, then the person is in a better position to be "true to oneself," to self-actualize, and to grow. (p. 531)

This approach to achieving potential is an ongoing process. It must be developed, nurtured, and refined over time. The process of writing this narrative is a reminder of how ego often creeps into my stream of consciousness and sets up new biases and dampens authenticity. Each letter I type is an exercise in awareness and actualization. Writing this narrative is a gateway back to the Extraordinary World where I must discover myself beyond stories, belief systems, values, and even thought itself. The journey continues.

CHAPTER 5: DATA ANALYSIS

The framework of SPN spans four phases: pre-search, me-search, re-search, and we-search (Nash & Bradley, 2011). In the pre-search phase, I prepared to write my personal stories by reviewing old journal entries, reflecting on past events, and writing snippets of ideas in a journal. In the me-search phase, I wrote my narrative in the form of short stories that have an arc. This arc includes a beginning, middle, and end, and focuses on inciting incidents, crises, climax, and resolution (Vogler, 2020). In the re-search phase, I incorporated scholarly literature that validates and debates the processes and concepts that I posit. Finally, in the we-search phase, I discuss generalization and universalization for the reading audience.

In addition to SPN, I analyzed the data from my personal narratives through the lens of the life story interview (Atkinson, 1998). In the case of this research, I am both the interviewer and interviewee.

The role of the life story is primarily to pull together the central elements, events, and beliefs in a person's life, integrate them into a whole, make sense of them, learn from them, teach the younger generation, and remind the rest of one's community what is most important in life. (Atkinson, 1998, p. 19)

The life story interview process includes asking probing questions to isolate the primary events of the interviewee's life, and then transcribing and interpreting the responses to discover new ways of viewing the world (Atkinson, 1998). My own personal narrative revealed many discoveries as noted in the following sections.

Some of the questions I asked myself during and after the writing process included the following:

- What are the primary events of my life that had the most impact on me as an adult?
- After writing a narrative and reflecting on it, how did my perspective of the past and present change?
- What value does my personal narrative have for others?
- How can an individual engaged with this research implement reflective writing as a therapeutic process in their own lives?

Using the data from my personal narratives and engaging with the literature, I analyzed and codified themes and patterns that arose during the research process. I focused on themes that were generalizable and repeatable. I also addressed validation and replication for future researchers that may find this work rewarding and want to expand on the existing knowledge.

Validity Procedures

I have considered multiple validity threats and the inevitable ethical concerns that come with them. I have summarized four of the primary threats below and have defined coping strategies for each of them. In addition, I have not discussed generalization and universalization as a validity threat. I believe the evidence from my stories and the subsequent scholarly literature are accessible to many different types of readers, especially those that have experienced similar traumatic or troubling experiences.

Compensation Bias

Compensation bias manifests as a need to alter or skew past traumatic events to make oneself feel better about them or to cope with what happened

(American Psychological Association, n.d.-a). It is a trap that the mind and emotions can fall into, and I had to be careful of how I viewed the traumatic events that occurred in my life. One strategy for dealing with this threat was to share some of my writing with friends and colleagues. These individuals offered a neutral perspective and provided objective feedback.

“Navel Gazing” or Self-Aggrandizement

This threat is egoic in nature. A writer may fall into the trap of only seeing their perspective about an event or situation and close themselves off to the worldview of others. This psychology can lead a writer to believe that their view is the “one” truth, and all other perspectives are false. The author does not take into consideration how the actors in their stories may feel, believe, or react. I utilized reciprocity and empathy to address this issue. I put myself in the shoes of the characters in my stories and attempted to include their voices in the narrative. This required me to be in dialogue with the characters while writing. This strategy was not fool proof. I had to play the part of the other characters to gain a better understanding of their perspective while attempting to remain objective. That was challenging.

Perceived Relationship to Self and Others

The other threat I identified was how I perceived my relationship to self and others. Many of the actors from my past are no longer alive. I could manipulate the relationship I had with them in any way I chose, however this would invalidate my data. It would also be a disservice to myself and the people I have known. How I treated the relationships with the characters in my stories is a

direct reflection of how I treat myself. The relationship with self was vitally important and I had to be mindful of perpetuating self-victimization and self-abuse as I wrote and shared my personal narrative.

Re-Traumatization

Recall of a traumatic event can potentially open the door to re-traumatization. When I say “recall,” I’m referring to the process of writing my memories as stories on paper, and then deconstructing and reconstructing them. It was vital to have a safety net in place to protect myself from being triggered by memories and engaging with the process of transformation. I had to suspend my assumptions about an event so that I could perceive it from multiple perspectives. One strategy to deal with this situation was to set up a regular spiritual practice (short walks in nature). Spending time away from traumatic stories provided necessary psychological and emotional distance.

Delimitations and Limitations

This study is limited to self-data. Given the nature of this type of data, the theories are relative to my own lived experiences and how I interpreted them in the present. In addition, my personal narrative had an impact on the conclusions of the study. How I engaged past events affected the meaning that I give to them in the present. Multiple factors, such as mood, empathy, and self-awareness, radically affected the stories from day-to-day. To address this concern, I sat with and reflected upon each narrative over a period time. I also shared the stories with close friends to gain neutral perspectives.

Given the delimitations of this study, the theories and conclusions may not apply to all people. However, storytelling and narrative are universal tools which humans have used to accomplish goals and achieve objectives for thousands of years (Campbell, 2008). The mythological nature of stories makes them generalizable and universalizable to individuals and larger audiences (Campbell, 2008; Vogler, 2020). Specifically, this research study should appeal to LGBTQ+ individuals and groups, as well as those that have or are currently suffering from traumatic or troubling events.

CHAPTER 6: IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to research and define a therapeutic process that employed reflective writing and self-inquiry as tools to address an individual's relationship to trauma. In addition, it wanted to understand how LGBTQ+ individuals could reconstruct their personal stories to achieve potential (self-actualization) and enable empowerment (resilience, confidence, and adaptation). Utilizing SPN (Nash & Bradley, 2011) and the Hero's Journey framework (Vogler, 2020), I have demonstrated that it is not only possible to alter one's relationship to traumatic events, but it is psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually beneficial. In this chapter, I discuss the implications of this research for myself and other LGBTQ+ individuals.

Implications and Discussion

There is a gap in the literature regarding how LGBTQ+ individuals who have experienced psychological, emotional, spiritual, and sexual abuse within heterosexist/cisgendered societies can utilize personal narrative to heal from these events (Jordan, 2020; McLean & Marini, 2008). Many people internalize and perpetuate trauma in the form of sexual dysfunction, substance abuse, internalized phobias (e.g., homophobia), negative body image, and self-hatred (Folkierska-Żukowska et al., 2022; Li & Samp, 2019; Ramos et al., 2020; Rubino et al., 2018; Wickham et al., 2021; Woodford et al., 2018; Yolaç & Meriç, 2021).

It was the primary goal of this research to demonstrate the practical application of reflective writing and self-inquiry as therapeutic methods for LGBTQ+ individuals who have suffered traumatic or troubling experiences.

Additionally, it set out to define the value of becoming aware of and ending the perpetuation of self-victimization and self-abuse as symptoms of trauma. It posited that this ability could lead an individual to self-actualization (achieving potential) and self-empowerment, while at the same time affecting sociological and psychological landscapes and ecosystems (Bellamy, 2018; Berkowitz, 2010; Crawford, 2010; DeMarco, 2022; Jolly, 2011; Méndez-Negrete, 2013).

Several implications were identified from this research, including changing an LGBTQ+ individual's relationship to time, self, and others; awareness of how identity is constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed over time; utilizing reflective writing to radically transform psychological, emotional, and spiritual belief systems; extending forgiveness and gratitude to self (inward energy flow) and to others (outward energy flow); building and strengthening resilience against future trauma and troubling experiences; and finally, becoming self-actualized through the transformative process of reflective writing.

Reflective Writing as Therapy

The process of writing and reflecting on my personal narrative was therapeutic and rewarding. Over the course of ten weeks, I experienced an unfolding of realization and epiphany, and a subsequent enfolding of beliefs and values. This was like the opening and closing of a lotus flower. My psychological, emotional, and spiritual development in such a short time was significant. As I was writing and reflecting on my narrative, I witnessed changes in how I felt and related to the stories and the actors in them. My evolving perspective on the events of my past revealed new ways of knowing and being.

Having structured my narrative around the Hero's Journey as presented by Vogler (2020), I was able to explore both the ordinary world of my childhood and the extraordinary world of my adolescence and young adulthood. Both worlds with their ordeals, trials, and trauma informed the relationship I have with myself. The therapeutic benefits of writing and reflecting on my narrative arc included intrapersonal intelligence, healing wounds, questioning normality, reclaiming my life by rewriting the past, and integration, coherence, and meaning-making. As Atkinson (1998) points out, "We become fully aware, fully conscious, of our own lives through the process of putting them together in story form. It is through story that we gain context and recognize meaning" (p. 7).

The first therapeutic benefit I recognized through reflective writing was intrapersonal intelligence. According to Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences (Broennimann, 2024; Cherry, 2023; Gardner, 1987, 2021; Gardner & Hatch, 1989; Paulhus et al., 2002) there are at minimum eight types of intelligence that humans demonstrate including visual-spatial, linguistic-verbal, logical-mathematical, body-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalistic. An additional ninth intelligence, experiential, has been promoted recently (Broennimann, 2024; Gardner, 2021; Paulhus et al., 2002). Intrapersonal intelligence is the heart of the Hero's Journey narrative arc.

The core components of intrapersonal intelligence are "access to one's own feelings and the ability to discriminate among them and draw upon them to guide behavior; knowledge of one's own strengths, weaknesses, desires, and intelligences" (Gardner & Hatch, 1989, p. 6). So, an individual capable of self-

awareness utilizes intrapersonal intelligence to gain knowledge and wisdom about their inner world of thought, feelings, and experience. The cycle of reflective writing and reconstructing narrative serves the author's relationship to self. The benefits of intrapersonal intelligence include the ability to analyze strengths and weaknesses, self-awareness, emotional regulation, understanding motivation, desires, belief systems, and values, and introspection (Cherry, 2023).

Intrapersonal intelligence is the beginning of a transformative cycle that occurs when the individual moves out of the ordinary world, into the extraordinary world, and back again (Vogler, 2020). The author manifests their experiences in the form of stories and other art, and subsequently reshapes their perspective on those events and the relationship they have to them.

Eckhart Tolle (1999) beautifully explains intrapersonal intelligence when he writes,

The beginning of freedom is the realization that you are not “the thinker.” The moment you start watching the thinker, a higher level of consciousness becomes activated. You then begin to realize that there is a vast realm of intelligence beyond thought, that thought is only a tiny aspect of that intelligence. You also realize that all the things that truly matter—beauty, love, creativity, joy, inner peace—arise from beyond the mind. You begin to awaken. (p. 5)

Moving beyond thought enables the individual to tap into an energy source beyond the physical and psychological. This source is on a spiritual dimension. This is demonstrated when the heroine utilizes intrapersonal intelligence to slay her demons and emerge from the dark cave through a resurrection of spirit, mind, and body (Vogler, 2020).

The second therapeutic benefit of reflective writing is the potential to heal wounds of the mind, body, and spirit (Bochner, 2014; Brewster, 2022; Nash &

Viray, 2014; Nelson, 2001; Stone, 1996; Weinert, 2023). Annie Brewster (2022) summarizes this quality best when she writes,

For me, telling my own story and sharing it in public has allowed me to accept and integrate my diagnosis of multiple sclerosis into my life and to move forward with strength and hope rather than defeat. It has taught me that my story is valuable—as is yours—and it has taught me that I feel so much better when I tell things as they are, with honesty and compassion for myself. It has given me purpose, greater community, and a new sense of gratitude, as I have seen how my story can help others and encourage them to share. (pp. 22–23)

I have written, shared, and rewritten my stories many times throughout the last three decades. Like rewatching an old movie, reflective writing has helped me discover nuggets of information and truth that shed new light on the events of the past. For example, writing about my mother has allowed me to empathize with her and to be more open-minded about the challenges she faced. The anger and resentment I harbored for many years against her has been transformed through reflection and open-mindedness. Metaphorically, these memories were like open wounds. My stubbornness refused to let them heal and they eventually caused emotional and psychological illness. Reflective writing proved to be the salve that would slowly heal my wounds, but I was still left with scars from allowing the wounds to fester for so long. Ironically, they were unavoidable and have become a positive reminder of recovery (Nash & Viray, 2014; Stone, 1996).

The third therapeutic benefit involves one's willingness to question normality and how much one has conformed to the surrounding cultural and societal norms (Denborough, 2014). Writing and reflecting on my personal narrative was a window into other places and times. It was a gateway to my inner world. It was an opportunity to position myself in time and space and consider the

ramifications of being conditioned by religious, political, and other social organizations. It was a chance to see how influential and powerful people throughout my childhood negatively and positively impacted the direction in which I grew. Seeing myself in juxtaposition to society and other humans proved to be a gift. This frame of mind began to ask questions like, What external narratives have I accepted without question? What can I do to change external narratives if they exist? How have my own belief systems and values influenced my friends and peers? What does it mean to be an individual within the larger society? Is it possible to transform my personal narrative if it goes against the narrative of society?

Denborough (2014) writes,

In our efforts to conform to what it means to be a “real person” in today’s culture, we are encouraged to keep rating and measuring ourselves against so many standards and norms. We can rate ourselves on how normal or abnormal we are, how healthy or unhealthy, how adequate or inadequate, how competent or incompetent, and so on. (pp. 159–160)

As I pointed out in my narrative arc, being a young gay man in rural Pennsylvania during the 1970s and 1980s was a traumatic experience. There were no mentors to confide. There were only other closeted queer people that refused to rock the boat. The narrative from religious and social organizations was one of ignorance, fear, hatred, and intolerance. As a young person, to fit in with the group, there was no other option but to conform to the normalcy of the culture. Otherwise, I risked harm or even death.

Utilizing reflective writing as a therapeutic method I developed the skills to reconstruct my relationship to external narratives and thus, restory my life. I was no longer at the mercy of cultural norms and expectations because I had

become aware of how I had been conditioned by them. The knowledge of this psychological, emotional, and spiritual manipulation gave me the tools to defend myself and build resilience.

This brings us to the fourth therapeutic benefit of reflective writing—reclaiming my life by rewriting the past. As I mentioned earlier, I learned to rescript and restory the events from my past. This was especially helpful with traumatic experiences such as childhood sexual, religious, and psychological abuse. It was not enough to just sit down and write a completely different story. That would have defeated the purpose of rewriting the past. My goal of reconstructing stories was to unbox feelings, thoughts, identification, and relationship to past events and the memories associated with them. A secondary goal was to learn more about causation. I tasked myself with discovering more about what led me to believe certain narratives and how I could change them. Inadvertently, I also learned to view other people differently through the lens of self-reflection and awareness. This process had a healing and transformative effect.

Madigan (2019) defines re-storying as “the possibility that change is always possible. Therefore, any totalized description of a person’s past, present, or future can be reconfigured, recollected, and re-membered differently” (p. 171). Re-storying my personal narrative encouraged me to shift my relationship to traumatic events away from negative, self-defeating behaviors and weave them into a larger narrative of healing and wholeness (Weinert, 2023). Instead of seeing the world through a lens of scarcity, I shifted the paradigm to one of opportunity.

Finally, the fifth therapeutic benefit of reflective writing that I discovered was integration, coherence, and meaning-making. Reconciliation with trauma and more importantly, with those that may have caused it, played a vital role in my transformational journey. This was perhaps the most challenging and rewarding aspect of reconstructing a small sample of my personal narrative. It was challenging to reconcile the evils that had been perpetrated against me. It was rewarding in that I first had to forgive myself for the shame I had embraced and the resentment I held toward others. I discovered that it was impossible to find meaning in horrible events as they occurred. Meaning-making was only possible long after the experience ended and there was distance between it and myself.

Brewster (2022) writes,

In general, we make meaning out of our experiences retrospectively rather than in real time. Most of what we know about the health benefits of storytelling is based on how we reflect on and narrate past events, not what's happening right now. It is hard, if not impossible, to find perspective about a life-changing experience as it actively unfolds. Rather, it is after the fact, looking back, that we may be able to discover meaning. (pp. 186–187)

To reconcile the past can prove overwhelming for many people and they may fail to take the necessary steps to gain a sense of control or agency over their lives and stories (Brewster, 2022). I faced a similar uphill battle in 2006 after contemplating my place in the world after being violently attacked and mugged in San Diego. I felt lost and isolated even though there were friends around me who offered support. The support I required had to come from within myself. I was forced to face an existential crisis head on and find meaning in what had happened to me. Had I not, I may have fallen into the trap of depression, anger, resentment, and a desire for revenge. Writing about the experience helped me

make sense of what happened. I put myself in the attacker's shoes to understand what motivated them to commit such a terrible attack on another human being. I expanded the sphere of my storytelling ecosystem and applied the same exercise to other events from childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood. Eventually, the thread of coherency emerged throughout the narrative arc and connected the dots starting with my father's death through to the present day.

Mackenzie and Poltera (2010) submit that,

We constitute (and reconstitute) our self-identities through an ongoing and dynamic process of narrative self-interpretation that brings coherence and psychological intelligibility to the fragmentary nature of lived experience. Our self-narratives function as organizing principles that integrate experience, enabling us to make sense of ourselves, our actions, and the world with which we engage. (p. 32)

The narrative arc presented in this research was also fragmented and disjointed prior to stringing a coherent thread through the disparate pieces. The exercise in reflective writing helped me assemble the puzzle pieces and make sense of the traumatic events I experienced thus far. It is also preparing me for the future.

Relationship to Time

One of the dominant characteristics of narrative therapy, narrative psychology, and narrative identity is reconstructing an individual's relationship to the past, present, and future (Adler, 2012; Adler & McAdams, 2007; Bauer, 2021; Custer, 2014a; Denborough, 2014; Jirek, 2017; Joseph, 2015; McAdams, 2018; Meyer, 2007; Saltzburg, 2007). How one interprets the past can inform their relationship to who they are in the present and the future. The process of reflective writing is an exercise of transformation that occurs in the moment. Deconstructing and reconstructing the stories and scripts of one's life allows them

the opportunity to reshape their relationship to the past, inform the present, and change the future (Custer, 2014a).

In his Time Perspective Theory, Philip Zimbardo recognizes nine types of relationships one can have to time (Stolarski et al., 2015; Van Beek et al., 2011; Zimbardo et al., 2012). These include past-negative, past-positive, present-hedonistic, present-fatalistic, future, future-transcendental, future-negative, future-positive, and expanded-present (Stolarski et al., 2015).

- *Past-negative* views the past from a pessimistic or defeatist lens and often correlates to depression, low self-esteem, and aggression.
- *Past-positive* views the past from a positive or constructive lens and often correlates to high self-esteem, friendliness, and low anxiety.
- *Present-hedonistic* views the present through a pleasure-oriented mindset or attitude and often correlates to risky, low impulse behaviors with little concern for the future.
- *Present-fatalistic* views the present with trepidation and anxiety which may lead to depression and an attitude that one is not in control of the future.
- *Future* has a relative relationship with what may or may not happen and an individual demonstrates this through conscientiousness and a consideration of the consequences of their actions.
- *Future-transcendental* views the future through the lens of receiving a reward after death and can lead to irrational behavior such as suicide and extreme heroism.

- *Future-negative* views the future through the lens of anxiety and avoidance and is often correlated to individuals worrying over what may or may not happen.
- *Future-positive* individuals demonstrating this mindset see the future as unlimited possibility and often have a more rational decision-making style.
- *Expanded-present* balances the past and the future in the present through mindfulness, reflective writing, and meditation. The individual creates temporal coherence among the past events of their lives and the future by using the present as a bridge to communicate their knowledge and wisdom (Stolarski et al., 2015).

Throughout an individual's lifetime, they may experience any one of these mindsets. As I have demonstrated in recounting my own personal narrative, the relationship I have to the past, present, and future has evolved. The goal of reflective writing for LGBTQ+ individuals is to find coherence across the temporal events of life and to balance one's view of the past with that of the future through the present. How one views time can affect one's well-being, motivation, and behaviors (Corral-Verdugo et al., 2006; Kooij et al., 2018; Laghi et al., 2009; McInerney, 2004; Simons et al., 2004; Van Beek et al., 2011).

In this study, I utilized the Hero's Journey as a framework for writing an arc of stories over time and how I found coherence and meaning among those disparate narratives (Vogler, 2020). During much of my youth and adolescence, my relationship to time was future-transcendental or future-negative. My father's death, childhood sexual abuse, psychological and emotional abuse from my

mother, and various religious organizations all impacted my relationship to the past, present, and future in ways that were not constructive (e.g., suicide ideation). It was later, as I evolved and transformed through adulthood, that I began to view time in different ways. As I wrote and reflected on the stories of my life, my attitude toward the past changed. A slow, but steady realization crept upon me, and I soon began to write my narrative with the goal of changing how I felt and reacted to important experiences. It was not long after being violently attacked in San Diego that I realized the power of restorying and rescripting the narrative I was telling myself about victimization and abuse, and the emotions that came with them. I learned to use my stories as a defensive armor to protect myself from thoughts and emotions of self-abuse and self-victimization in the form of depression, anxiety, sadness, anger, self-hatred, and other antisocial behaviors. I used reflective writing and storytelling to create alternative selves who could not only cope with trauma and self-inquiry but use them to their advantage (Biggs & Hinton-Bayre, 2008; Erbes et al., 2014; Esfahani et al., 2015; Gonçalves et al., 2009; Joseph, 2015; Lang & Carstensen, 2002; Merscham, 2000; Milojević, 2014).

Atkinson (1998) writes,

Stories can render a cosmology, an interpretive total image of the universe, that is in accord with the knowledge of the time, a worldview that makes sense of the natural workings of the universe around us. Stories help us to understand the universe we are part of, how we can fit into it, and can provide us with a sharper picture of what our role in the world might be. This worldview that stories offer can be grounded in traditional wisdom or on the latest scientific findings or, even better yet, within both. (p. 10)

The universe is the past, present, and future contained in a moment-to-moment experiential construct that the human body, mind, and spirit interpret (Krishnamurti, 1969, 1973, 1996, 2010). The ways in which individuals interpret this information determines how they behave and interact with themselves and others. When engaged with the process of reflective writing, LGBTQ+ individuals can see their traumatic experiences in a different way. They can externalize these events, name them, and then deconstruct and reconstruct them to build resilience and enable self-actualization. As demonstrated in my own personal narratives, I changed time by reconstructing the events to serve me in more positive ways. The result was empowerment, gratitude, and the emergence of a past-positive, future-positive, and extended-present mindset.

Stone (1996) shares with us:

The past can be reinterpreted at any moment. If there is such a thing as freedom, this may be it. No longer must we be a victim of the stories we tell about our past, forever suffering the emotional and physical pain associated with disturbing childhood events. We can become both a character in our play as well as its author. (p. 23)

Madigan (2019) notes there are several ways to restory an individual's life to gain new understanding, including learning "(a) what it was that was happening in their lives, (b) what it was that had happened, (c) how it had happened, (d) how they had responded, and (e) what this might possibly mean" (p. 48). This requires a willingness on the individual's part to revisit the past to find meaning and coherence among their memories. In so doing, they may also learn how events shaped and constructed their present identity. Going back in time can be a frightening experience for many people and may even trigger re-traumatization if one does not have a support structure in place such as a licensed therapist or

counselor to guide them. I was aware that going back in time could reopen old wounds, so I set up a network of individuals to reach out to if I felt depressed, sad, or upset during the writing process.

Revisiting the past also requires that individuals try to keep an open mind toward the other actors in their stories such as parents, siblings, friends, etc. (Metcalf, 2017). To reap the most benefit from one's past, it is helpful to see others in different ways. One can ask themselves questions such as, what may have motivated other people in our stories? What elements of their lives could have affected their psychological, emotional, and spiritual well-being? Were they capable of dealing with their own pasts? This questioning process can foster empathy toward others, and more importantly, toward self. I want to stress here that empathy does not require forgiveness. Empathy toward a bad actor merely demonstrates an ability to put oneself in their position to better understand their behavior and motivation (Metcalf, 2017). Forgiveness can be an outcome of empathy, but it is not guaranteed or needed for self-inquiry.

Finally, it should be noted here that any form of storytelling such as autoethnography, scholarly personal narrative, narrative ethnography, autobiography, poetry, prose, stage and film script writing, or other creative methods of communication depend on the author's ability to travel through time (T. E. Adams et al., 2021; Bochner, 2014). Whether visiting the deep past or predicting a novel future, storytelling at its heart is the vessel through which psychological time manifests itself.

Relationship to Self

Another implication that arose from this study was relationship to self. In this case, this concept took many forms, including seeing myself across time from childhood through adolescence and into adulthood. As I grew and developed physically, so did my psychological, emotional, and spiritual bodies. I evolved over time and the characteristics of my personality changed accordingly. As I became aware of and accepted being a member of the LGBTQ+ community, I could see aspects of my personality that were disturbing, including self-hatred, narcissism, resentment, irritation, hostility, and intolerance. Often, these traits were directed at the LGBTQ+ community unknowingly. It was not until I began to write and reflect on the stories of my life that I began to see myself in a new way. I developed self-awareness through personal narrative and was able to first identify cynical beliefs and values I held, deconstruct them, and reconstruct them in a way that was more beneficial to my mental health and social interactions. I was also able to correlate my behavior with past traumatic events that influenced my development. This simple process of reflective writing allowed me to externalize an issue, deconstruct it, and then reconstruct or restory it. McAdams (2001) refers to this process as personal agency and redemption (moving from bad to good).

Personal agency is

the degree to which protagonists are able to affect change in their own lives or influence others in their environment, often through demonstrations of self-mastery, empowerment, achievement, or status. Highly agentic stories privilege accomplishment and the ability to control one's fate. (McAdams & McLean, 2013, p. 234)

It was not until after I discovered and began utilizing journaling and reflective writing that I realized how much control I had over what I believed and thought about myself and the world. I had blindly accepted false narratives imposed on me by my mother, individuals outside of my immediate family, and religious, political, and social organizations. I was groomed to believe that as an LGBTQ+ person, I was a second-hand human. I did not deserve the same privileges and rights of my heterosexual counterparts and peers. Thus, my perspective on life and myself was contained in a small box devoid of windows or doors. I felt trapped by the limitations inflicted upon me and that I in turn, inflicted on myself out of habit. This fatalistic and pessimistic worldview led me to attempt suicide in 1989 and contributed to my cynicism and resentment of other LGBTQ+ people. Through reflective writing and awareness of myself, I began to reconstruct the narrative I was telling myself. This inevitably led to changing my identity as a gay man and as a human being.

The key to personal agency was discovering that I had more control over my fate than I was led to believe. This began when I realized that I could change my thoughts about the past, the present, and even the future. I could change the way I perceived myself. I manifested agency over what I believed and valued through self-awareness in the form of storytelling. This newfound awareness became a meditation in self-efficacy, self-esteem, and self-actualization. I became a new person literally by changing my narrative (Bruner, 1987; Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McLean et al., 2007).

In addition to mastering my own destiny through self-awareness, I learned to reshape traumatic events from my past into agents of power, resilience, and defense. Through reflective writing and reconstructing my personal narrative, I realized the positive outcomes of having experienced negative and sometimes horrific events throughout my childhood and young adulthood. These stories were redemptive and my relationship to trauma had redeeming value.

McAdams and McLean (2013) define redemption within the context of narrative identity as “scenes in which a demonstrably ‘bad’ or emotionally negative event or circumstance leads to a demonstrably ‘good’ or emotionally positive outcome. The initial negative state is ‘redeemed’ or salvaged by the good that follows it” (p. 234). This may seem like a strange way to view traumatic events such as childhood sexual abuse, suicide, or violent attacks. Naturally, my first reaction to these types of traumas in my own life was anger, hatred, sadness, and depression. I wanted to bring justice to the bad actors from my past in any form I could get it. This desire to get revenge was often frustratingly redirected toward myself and others. My attitude and behavior perpetuated self-abuse and self-victimization. I did not have the resources or tools to get closure and the energy was internalized in the form of negative psychological and emotional perspectives of myself. It was not until I discovered storytelling in the form of poetry and prose that I had the chance to reconsider the circumstances of my life and unearth golden nuggets of treasure from the dark caves of my personal history. In an ironic and twisted way, positive attributes of negative experiences began to surface throughout my stories. I could see over the course of several

years, that my narrative arc—my life journey—was all connected. The picture at first was blurry and unrecognizable, however eventually it became clearer to me that everything I had ever experienced formed the foundation of who and what I identified as up to that point. With each new story I wrote, unique elements emerged that allowed me to construct a more positive view of the event and reshape it into a narrative filled with redemption.

It is important to note here that finding redemptive qualities within my personal narrative does not mean I have forgiven those that wronged me in some way. I found the restorying process for me was about demonstrating grace, kindness, and forgiveness to myself for perpetuating negative experiences long after they ended. I freed myself from enslavement to traumatic events and no longer used them as an excuse not to become a more resilient, grateful, and patient human being. This change in my psychological, emotional, and spiritual personas has had significant social, cultural, and contextual influences demonstrated in my relationship to self and others (Bruner, 1987; Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McAdams, 2001; McAdams & McLean, 2013; McLean et al., 2007).

Habermas and Bluck (2000) write about multiple types of coherence an individual may use to find meaning from their life story. The two that are predominant in this research are causal and thematic.

“Causal coherence is used not only to link the episodes within a life phase, or to relate life phases, but also to explain changes in the narrator’s values or personality as a result of events over time” (Habermas & Bluck, 2000, p. 756).

Initially, I found meaning in many of the traumatic experiences of my childhood through the process of connecting them to one another in a cause-and-effect linear timeline starting with my father's death. Each successive event after my father's death was seemingly caused by the previous. This simplistic and deductive way of viewing my past removed any personal responsibility I had to change my values and beliefs. I could blame the bad actors in my life story as the primary cause for my present psychological, emotional, and spiritual issues. Causal coherence gave way to an evolved form of meaning-making called thematic coherence.

“Thematic coherence is created by establishing thematic similarity between various elements of a life” (Habermas & Bluck, 2000, p. 758).

Identifying the relationship between events of my life and interpreting the patterns among those events was both an implicit (life was imposed on me) and explicit (life was what I imagined it to be) act (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). When I was younger, I viewed life through the lens of external actors who imposed their values, beliefs, and actions on me. I had no perceivable control over what was done to me physically, psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually. Life happened to me; I didn't make life happen. As I developed, I explicitly grasped the wheel of control and consciously reshaped my narrative identity through reflective writing. I learned to become the captain of my own destiny and abandoned the external narratives I had been habituated to accept (Frankl, 2006). Thematic coherence exhibited in reflective writing not only altered the relationship I have with myself as an LGBTQ+ individual, but it has also changed how I interact with others.

Relationship to Others

Reflective writing and personal narrative not only serve as therapeutic processes for healing individual trauma (Besley, 2002; Combs & Freedman, 2012; Custer, 2022; Madigan, 2019; Morgan, 2000; Rowe, 2020; White & Epston, 1990), they can also change the relationship one has to others (family, friends, etc.). Reconstructing and restorying our perspective of the principle actors that influenced our lives (both living and dead) can reduce emotional burden, enhance healing, promote forgiveness, improve present and future relationships, and break the cycle of trauma (Custer, 2022; Keck et al., 2017; López-Zerón & Blow, 2017; Madigan, 2019; Maercker & Hecker, 2016; McAdams, 2019a; Mitchell, 2011; Schröder-Abé & Schütz, 2011; Schwartz, 2020).

Reducing Emotional Burden

Holding onto resentment, anger, or hatred toward someone who has harmed us can be emotionally exhausting. By shifting perspective, one can release themselves from the burden of carrying these negative emotions, leading to a greater sense of inner peace and emotional freedom. Pennebaker and Seagal (1999) write,

The act of constructing stories is a natural human process that helps individuals to understand their experiences and themselves. This process allows one to organize and remember events in a coherent fashion while integrating thoughts and feelings. In essence, this gives individuals a sense of predictability and control over their lives. Once an experience has structure and meaning, it would follow that the emotional effects of that experience are more manageable. (p. 1243)

In this study, the stories I have presented have been told many times and in many ways. However, it was only through the reflective writing process that I was able to realize the connection between powerful events that occurred

throughout my life and form a sense of cohesion and meaning among them. The ability to deconstruct and reconstruct the narrative gave me the freedom to safely release negative emotions such as resentment, anger, sadness, and depression. The retelling and restorying of my personal narrative radically altered my perspective on the actors who participated in and influenced the most traumatic events of my life, including parental abandonment (father's death), emotional and psychological abuse from family and society (heterosexism), spiritual abuse (imposition of conservative Christian beliefs and values), and childhood sexual abuse which elicited homophobic and self-victimizing behavior as an adult. For example, the relationship I had to my mother prior to her death was often filled with conflict and frustration due to an inability to see her own suffering and pain. I lacked the empathy that was required to move from a self-interested and self-motivated mindset to one of forgiveness, understanding, and selflessness. Throughout the process of writing about my mother, this perspective evolved and with it, the negative emotional burden I have carried with me for so many years. I began to understand that my mother's capability as a parent was limited to the tools she was given as a child. I realized through writing that she was inflicted by her own personal demons and trauma which may have been inherited over generations of her family. I learned that she did the best she could as a mother with what she had. While my mother may have left this temporal dimension, my relationship to her continues in mind, body, and spirit. I have asked her for forgiveness and allowed the negative emotional burden I've carried with me for so long to dissipate.

Enhancing Healing

Changing perspective through reflective writing allows one to approach the healing process from a place of compassion and understanding, rather than from a position of resentment or vengeance. This can facilitate a faster and more complete recovery from the emotional and psychological wounds inflicted by traumatic experiences. Once we have constructed healthy stories, they “need to be sustained with the same care given to creating them. They too need to be fed to flourish. We sustain and strengthen re-visioned stories by sharing them with others who need them, too” (Mullet et al., 2013, p. 77).

By writing and sharing my personal narrative in this study, I am not only enabling my own healing process, but am indirectly affecting the reading audience and their own journey of healing. My exposition demonstrates a willingness to be transparent and authentic to myself first, and then to others secondly. Any individual that truly wants to find healing through reflective writing must be ready to journey into the deepest and darkest caves of their mind and heart. In these caves, they may be met with monsters and shadows. The outcome of the struggle with these forces determines our ever-evolving relationship with ourselves and others.

Promoting Forgiveness

Adopting a new perspective through reflective writing can make it easier to forgive those who have hurt us. Forgiveness does not mean condoning or excusing harmful behavior; rather, it involves letting go of the desire for revenge and choosing to release ourselves from the grip of resentment. Forgiveness has

been linked to lower levels of stress, anxiety, and depression, as well as improved physical health (Kalayjian & Paloutzian, 2009; Lawler et al., 2005; Worthington, 2007).

What became apparent through the process of reflective writing was a realization that I was reconstructing the relationship I had to myself. In other words, I understood that the only way to move through trauma was to first forgive myself of perpetuating self-victimization in the form of negative behavior and self-narrative (i.e., my story was not good enough to share with others) and secondly, to forgive others (i.e., empathize with bad actors that perpetrated negative behavior against me). This was not an easy task. It has required years of self-inquiry, reflective writing, meditation, deconstructing and reconstructing my narrative, and eventually finding meaning and coherence among the chaos. It was only through this journey was I able to reshape and reforge my perspective on myself and others.

Improving Relationships

Letting go of negative feelings toward others can improve one's relationship with them, as well as with others in their lives. By approaching interactions with a more open and compassionate mindset, individuals can foster greater understanding, empathy, and connection with those around them.

Krishnamurti (1996) writes, "Relationship is life; to be is to be related. Only in the mirror of relationship is the mind to be understood, and you have to begin to see yourself in that mirror" (p. 74). Self-awareness is essential for understanding and improving relationships an individual has with themselves and

with others. By first evaluating how one perceives, projects, and imagines themselves to be in the world, they can come to a clearer point of view of their interaction with other beings. Self-inquiry and self-awareness generated through reflective writing, prepares the soil in which one can plant the seeds of relationship. This process helps individuals see their own biases, beliefs, values, and ways of being and identifying.

In the personal narrative section of this research, I write about being attacked and mugged in San Diego. It was a painful and traumatic experience that caused me to fall into a state of depression, sadness, resentment, anger, and grief. After the event, I felt confused and without purpose. Eventually, through meditative writing and sharing my story with others, I was able to evolve my perspective from one of victimization to one of empowerment. I used grace and kindness as tools to accelerate emotional, psychological, physical, and spiritual healing. Only by first connecting to the relationship I had with myself was I able to change my relationship to other people—both the good and bad actors, living and dead.

Krishnamurti (1996) goes on to share,

Relationship is never narrow or small. With the one or with the many, relationship is a complex process, and you can approach it pettily, or freely and openly. Again, the approach is dependent on the state of the mind. If you do not begin with yourself, where else will you begin? Even if you begin with some peripheral activity, you are in relationship with it, the mind is the center of it. Whether you begin near or far, you are there. Without understanding yourself, whatever you do will inevitably bring about confusion and sorrow. (p. 74).

As human beings, no matter who or what we interact with (people, animals, inanimate objects, thoughts, beliefs, or values), relationships cannot be improved

unless we are ready and willing to refine the relationship with ourselves. This is paramount for healing trauma.

Breaking the Cycle of Trauma

Changing perspective through reflective writing allows one to break free from the cycle of harm and retaliation. Instead of perpetuating negativity and conflict, individuals can choose to respond with compassion and understanding, thereby contributing to a more peaceful and harmonious world—both internal and external.

Gretchen Schmelzer (2018) writes about the “Cycle of Healing Repeated Trauma” and lays out the five phases of this process—preparation, unintegration, identification, integration, and consolidation. Preparing is about getting ready and cultivating the ground in which to plant the seeds of healing. In SPN, this is the “pre-search” stage. In the Hero’s Journey, this is the ordinary world that a person experiences prior to moving into the extraordinary. It is here that one increases one’s capacity to be more self-aware and in tune with one’s thoughts and feelings.

Unintegration is when aspects of trauma come to the surface once an individual becomes more self-aware (Schmelzer, 2018). These artifacts percolate through the soil like weeds in a garden. Sometimes one may not be expecting them but must deal with them regardless. In SPN, this is the me-search phase and in the Hero’s Journey this is the call to adventure. This is an opportunity to write about each story that arises.

Identification is an iterative stage in which an individual begins to sort, name, and identify the artifacts that arise (Schmelzer, 2018). Reflective writing

fosters this phase by creating a tangible record of thoughts, feelings, and ideas. Through stories, one begins to visualize the relationship they have with themselves and make better sense of the dynamic interaction they have with others. In SPN this is still the me-search phase and in the Hero's Journey, these are the tests and ordeals that must be overcome.

Integration is the stage in which a person finds meaning from their experiences and creates a coherent narrative arc from disparate artifacts (Schmelzer, 2018). This is one's opportunity to bring in outside knowledge and wisdom about trauma, the healing process, and ways in which one can change one's perspective. It is a chance to connect the dots and gain a holistic view of one's internal and external worlds. This corresponds to the re-search phase of SPN and earning the reward in the Hero's Journey.

Finally, consolidation is the stage where everything comes together, and a person experiences healing and actualization (Schmelzer, 2018). The individual awakens to a new reality through the transformation of trauma. At this point, harnessing the power of wisdom gained through reflective writing forges resilience and empathy. This last phase of the Cycle of Healing Repeated Trauma is comparable to the we-search phase of SPN, as well as resurrection and returning with the elixir of the Hero's Journey. Sharing one's stories of victory over trauma with others contributes to stronger and more wholesome communities and systems.

Identity Construction, Deconstruction, and Reconstruction

As human beings, the stories we tell ourselves or that are imposed upon us often contribute to the construction of our identity, beliefs, and values (Andrus, 2019; Ergün, 2020; Eriksen & Hoeck, 2022; Higgins & Sandhu, 2014; McAdams & McLean, 2013; Nunan & Choi, 2010; J. A. Taylor, 2008). How we integrate those stories can determine our behavior toward ourselves and others. One of the goals of this research was to explore the correlation between personal narrative and the construction of identity, and the deconstruction and reconstruction (re-storying) of individual stories as a method to change one's belief system and relationship to the past, present, and future. Crossley (2000b) highlights the importance of language in how we shape and reshape our identity through the telling and retelling of our personal narrative, and subsequently, the narrative of the culture we belong. This process is both an internal experience (reflective writing) and an external reality as we interact with others and socialize our stories.

Identity construction is a complex and multilayered concept that begins in early childhood through the influence of parents, family, and community, and continues to evolve throughout adulthood (Burke & Stets, 2022). In the personal narratives presented in this research, there is evidence to show how parents, immediate family members, and community influenced and shaped my identity from a young age (the death of my father) into adolescence and adulthood (the emergence of my LGBTQ+ persona coupled with psychological, emotional, spiritual, and sexual abuse). Identity formation was an unconscious process where I was often influenced by external factors and belief systems of people (e.g., my

mother) and organizations (e.g., WCG). It was not until I began to write stories about my life experiences in journals and online blogs that I realized the power of externalizing a traumatic event or memory to analyze and reshape it (McAdams & McLean, 2013). I manifested a container for the words that I wrote where the events and memories of my past could be observed and manipulated to serve a greater purpose. Inexorably, each word that was written became an opportunity to evaluate the beliefs, ideas, and values I had constructed over time. Atkinson (1998) writes,

What generally happens when we tell a story from our own life is that we increase our working knowledge of ourselves because we discover deeper meaning in our lives through the process of reflecting and putting the events, experiences, and feelings that we have lived into oral expression. (p. 1)

I would start the writing process by asking myself a set of simple, open-ended questions such as, “What meaning does this memory have for me?” This exchange is often facilitated by a professional counselor or therapist in a clinical setting. However, there is also great benefit if an individual is capable of a dialogic exchange with themselves (Atkinson, 1998). By forming a set of questions before writing, I created a foundation from which to build the stories I wanted to tell, and then subsequently during the writing generated answers to each question. Each stage of the writing process would present new questions to be answered, as well as new ways of thinking about the past, present, and future. Atkinson (1998) continues by saying,

the act of constructing a narrative of a life could very well be the means by which that life comes together for the first time, or flows smoothly from one thing to the next, to be seen as a meaningful whole. For some people, telling one’s story can be a way of becoming who one really is. (p. 12)

Codifying the events of my life in short stories and poetry over a period of many years not only helped me identify the beliefs and values I had constructed since childhood, but it also contributed to the process of deconstructing and reconstructing those events in a purposeful way.

Quan-zhi (2015) reveals that “identity is at the same time the object of real-time discursive deconstruction and the product of real-time discursive reconstruction” (p. 182). Brison (2022) confirms the idea of talking or writing about a difficult memory or event to deconstruct it and help ease the negative impact it may have on an individual. The writing process takes away its power and turns it into a story that can be woven into one’s life story as they reconstruct their identity (empowerment).

In this research, the act of reflective writing is the method I used to analyze my relationship to past traumatic events (deconstruction) and reshape those stories to serve me in more positive ways (reconstruction). I used the opportunity to gain insight into the beliefs, values, and ideas that I had come to identify with, as well as to determine their origin (i.e., intrinsic versus extrinsic). Many of the personal narratives I share in this study had extrinsic origins, and thus, were imposed upon me by others through various types of psychological, emotional, spiritual, and sexual abuse. In addition, those external influences also shaped some of the intrinsic values I held such as self-hatred and resentment. The discourse between my present identity and the life events of my past within the storytelling process nurtured a safe and creative way to dismantle and decode who I was, and regenerate and rehabilitate who I could be in the future.

Atkinson (1998) shares four primary functions of writing and sharing life stories as a tool to analyze, deconstruct, and reconstruct personal identity—psychological, social, mystical-religious, and cosmological-philosophical. In the psychological function, life stories nurture the growth of our identity, guiding us to find balance and coherence within ourselves by illuminating our experiences, emotions, and their significance. They offer structure to our journey, allowing us to perceive our existence from both subjective and objective perspectives simultaneously. This is clearly demonstrated in my personal narrative as the duality of my psyche in childhood and adolescence. I was caught between the mindset of heterosexist beliefs and values (objective), and those of an emerging homosexual attraction to other men (subjective)—the “borderlands” paradigm as posited by Anzaldúa (1987).

In the social function, “stories affirm, validate, and support our own experience in relation to those around us. They enforce the norms of a moral order and shape the individual to the requirements of the society” (Atkinson, 1998, p. 10). In this research study, I point out the type of conditioning I experienced as a young person exposed to psychological, emotional, spiritual, and sexual abuse. These events negatively informed my social identity by nurturing self-hatred and self-victimization long after the trauma had ended. It was through the process of deconstructing and reconstructing my life stories that I was able to see the characteristics of the relationships I have had to family primarily, and then friends (community), and organizations (society/culture). These characteristics include power and control dynamics, perspective on imposed belief systems and values,

perpetuation of abusive behavior toward self and others, and both internal and external reflective observation (Forward, 1997, 2002; Gibson, 2015; Lobel, 2019; Ruppert, 2008; Wolynn, 2016).

Personal narratives in the mystical-religious function “can bring us face to face with an ultimate mystery. Stories awaken feelings of awe, wonder, humility, respect, and gratitude in recognition of those mysteries around us. These feelings help us participate in the mystery of being” (Atkinson, 1998, p. 10). The narratives in this study illustrated my connection to the mystical after being violently attacked in 2006 and the way in which my psychology changed regarding empathy, compassion, kindness, forgiveness, resilience, and peaceful acceptance that everything I had experienced up to that point served a purpose. It was this traumatic attack that nurtured a desire to write my stories and share them with others. In addition, I learned that I was in control of the narrative that I had been telling myself for decades.

Finally, in the cosmological-philosophical function “stories can render a cosmology, an interpretive total image of the universe, that is in accord with the knowledge of time, a worldview that makes sense of the natural workings of the universe around us” (Atkinson, 1998, p. 10). This function is ongoing for me personally and it began many years ago when I first wandered into the woods and communed with nature. My love of the Earth, nature, and the universe became more pronounced as I grew older, but I will always remember asking my mother why we didn’t have church services in the forests near Roxbury Holiness Camp back in 1980 when I was a child of 10 years old. The affinity I have for nature,

animals, and plants often surpasses any relationship I have with humanity. I have found that the unconditional acceptance of nature is far preferable to me than the judgmental and often hateful behavior of other people. I would be remiss if I did not count my own judgment and negative behavior that I have exhibited toward myself and others over the years. This is the gift of reflective writing.

Transformative Qualities of Reflective Writing

It is important to discuss the quality of personal transformation that LGBTQ+ individuals may experience through reflective writing and the deconstruction/reconstruction of their narrative identity. Of note, several valuable characteristics include, exploring identity (mentioned earlier), reframing personal narrative, affirming self-expression, building community, honoring intersectionality, and cultivating support through relationship with others (Denborough, 2014; Grant et al., 2011; Heppner et al., 1999; Mio & Iwamasa, 2003; Scott-Dixon, 2006; Yarhouse, 2008).

Narrative therapy encourages individuals to re-author or reframe their life stories in ways that empower them and challenge dominant narratives of victimhood (Besley, 2002; Denborough, 2014; Jordan, 2020; Madigan, 2019; Merscham, 2000; Milojević, 2014; Saltzburg, 2007; Steelman, 2016). LGBTQ+ individuals can use reflective writing to reinterpret their experiences of trauma through a lens of resilience, strength, and authenticity, emphasizing moments of empowerment and personal growth.

In this study, I utilized personal narrative to demonstrate the radical transformative aspects of reflective writing. My narrative arc emulates Joseph

Campbell's the Hero's Journey by illustrating the evolution I underwent from childhood into adulthood and moving from the ordinary world to the extraordinary, and back again (Campbell, 2008; Vogler, 2020). This metamorphosis radically altered my perspective on the past, present, and future with each successive retelling, reshaping, and re-storying of experiences and the relationships I had to the actors in each story. My psychological, emotional, and spiritual personalities evolved with the reframing of traumatic events and externalizing, naming, and controlling issues that I had come to associate with my identity.

I decided to use the word "radical" to describe the kind of extreme transformative effects that reflective writing and self-awareness has had on my personality and being. It captures the 180-degree shift that I underwent upon realizing that I had the power to control both internal and external narratives. By isolating traumatic events, naming them, and ultimately claiming them, I was no longer at their mercy. I was able to see some positive qualities of the negative experiences I went through. For example, from my mother's emotional and psychological abuse, I learned skills that have been helpful as an adult, such as attention to detail, critical and strategic thinking, identifying the root cause of an issue and manifesting solutions, and seeing the world through a lens of opportunity instead of scarcity. Most importantly, I could finally recognize and end self-imposed abuse and victimization perpetuated by habit and memory.

Writing about and reframing trauma also allows LGBTQ+ individuals to express themselves authentically and assert their truths. By documenting their

thoughts, feelings, and experiences, individuals can validate their identities and experiences, fostering a sense of self-acceptance and self-compassion (Grant et al., 2011; Heppner et al., 1999; Scott-Dixon, 2006; Yarhouse, 2008).

Personal narrative, whether told through the written word or shared with others orally, is a transport for expression and authenticity. Creative arts, in addition to writing, such as painting, sculpting, acting, dancing, and singing, can also invigorate individuals to communicate their true selves (Cameron, 2022; De Witte et al., 2021; Shafir et al., 2020). Julia Cameron (2016) shares,

Creativity is the natural order of life. Life is energy: pure creative energy. When we open ourselves to our creativity, we open ourselves to the creator's creativity within us and our lives. The refusal to be creative is self-will and is counter to our true nature. As we open our creative channel to the creator, many gentle but powerful changes are to be expected. (p. 3)

Cameron refers to a “creator” often throughout her writing. This creator can take any form depending on one’s own connection to life. The point that Cameron is making is that creative expression is within everyone and can be tapped at any moment to use as a tool for radical transformation.

Another transformative effect of reflective writing for LGBTQ+ individuals is building connections within the community. Sharing stories of resilience, survival, and empowerment can foster solidarity and mutual support, creating a sense of belonging and validation for individuals who have experienced trauma (R. B. Adams & Ellithorpe, 2024; Chioneso et al., 2020; Coleman, 2023; Denborough, 2014; Luo et al., 2022; Morris et al., 2022; Weststrate et al., 2024).

Denborough (2014) talks about community as a two-way relationship—it is not just about finding an audience for our own life stories, but also being an

accountable audience or witness to others. He writes that there are two types of witnesses, critical and acknowledging.

A critical witness can do profound damage if they side with the problem's view of a person. If a critical person sides with the "The Voice of Abuse" or "Self-Hate," for instance, they can make The Voice of Abuse or Self-Hate so much more devastating in a person's life. On the other hand, an *acknowledging witness* can make a huge contribution in enabling someone to restore their life. Being an acknowledging witness is different from simply offering praise or applause. (Denborough, 2014, p. 67)

While it is important to be aware of when one may be acting as a critical or acknowledging witness for others, they must be even more in tune with how they witness to themselves. The process of reflective writing can trigger the inner critic as the individual processes and reengages with traumatic experiences. If not careful, the writer through habitual thinking could allow their inner critic to guide their emotions and thoughts. Having a support network through family, friends, or organizations can alleviate re-traumatization. These individuals can serve as acknowledging witnesses with the goal of helping the reflective writer strengthen their own inner acknowledging witness.

Reflective writing and narrative therapy provide space for LGBTQ+ individuals to explore the intersectionality of their identities and experiences. By acknowledging the complexities of their lived experiences, individuals can develop more nuanced narratives that honor the multiple facets of their identity and promote healing and transformation on multiple levels (Evans & Lépinard, 2020; Grooms, 2020; Moreau et al., 2019; Nichols, 2021; Tamagawa, 2022; D. Y. Taylor et al., 2010).

Personal narrative is a complex, multilayered matrix like that of an onion. It can take years to strip away one storied event only to find a new one buried

beneath it. To add to this complexity, it must be noted that LGBTQ+ individuals have additional and often unique facets of their identity that create a three-dimensional ecosystem. One story easily blends into another and soon the lines are blurred between different periods of time and space. D. Y. Taylor et al. (2010) vividly write,

Gender is about race is about class is about sexuality is about age is about nationality is about an entire range of social relations. Why should it be otherwise? In a society where these terms matter, people cannot check identities at the door. In a society where standing on the “wrong side” of one of these terms can get your head bashed in, people ignore identities at their peril. (p. 15)

Within the personal narrative presented in this research, there are overlapping domains and identities that can also be viewed as isolated topics of their own. LGBTQ+ individuals who are prepared to address the intersections of their sexuality, spirituality, psychology, sociology, race, politics, philosophy, and more will be better equipped to understand their unique personalities and characteristics. Through self-awareness and reflective writing transformation can occur.

Finally, reflective writing can be used as an effective tool for transformation in therapeutic interventions with trained professionals who specialize in trauma-informed care and LGBTQ+ affirmative therapy. Working with a therapist or counselor who understands the unique challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals can provide additional support and guidance on their journey of healing and evolution (Ginicola et al., 2017; Lund et al.; 2021, Wagner et al., 2021).

Self-Forgiveness and Gratitude

In reflective writing and narrative therapy, both self-forgiveness and gratitude can play significant roles in promoting psychological well-being and facilitating personal growth. According to Emmons and McCullough (2004), forgiveness is a prerequisite for gratitude and the individual who is capable of relinquishing superiority over a person, including themselves, or a thing such as an event or memory, has the capacity to forgive and experience gratitude.

Self-forgiveness has multiple benefits for the LGBTQ+ individual seeking healing from trauma. These include (a) facilitating emotional healing by releasing anger, resentment, and bitterness associated with past hurts or transgressions, (b) empowering the individual to take control of their emotional responses and break free from the grip of negative emotion, (c) paving the way for reconciliation and restored relationships, promoting greater harmony and connection, (d) reducing stress levels and promoting overall well-being, and (e) fostering self-compassion and self-acceptance, leading to greater psychological resilience (Cleare et al., 2019; Cornish et al., 2020; Emmons & McCullough, 2004; Hourigan, 2019; Mróz & Sornat, 2022; Schmelzer, 2018; Woodyatt et al., 2017; Worthington, 2007, 2020).

While forgiveness of self does have its value and place within reflective writing and narrative therapy, it also has its own set of challenges (Peetz et al., 2021; Sicilia, 2024; Squires et al., 2012; Wohl & Thompson, 2011). Self-forgiveness can be a complex process that may involve navigating difficult emotions and confronting past traumas. As mentioned earlier, this can be

addressed if the individual forms a support network to deal with trauma that may resurface due to engaging with memories through reflective writing.

Forgiveness does not necessarily mean condoning or excusing harmful behavior. Setting and maintaining healthy boundaries is essential. It is not a criterion to forgive perpetrators of horrendous or violent crimes. On the contrary, this research focuses on the individual becoming aware of their own self-victimization and finding the strength to forgive themselves. Also, self-forgiveness may not always be immediate and may require time and reflection to fully process and achieve. As demonstrated in the personal narrative of this study, transformation can take years and even decades.

Individuals may struggle with reluctance or resistance to forgive themselves of perpetuating self-victimization and self-abuse. This is often accompanied by shame and guilt. Brené Brown's (2013, 2015, 2020) research in this area has had a significant impact on thousands of people. She defines shame as "the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging—something we've experienced, done, or failed to do makes us unworthy of connection" (Brown, 2013, para. 2). Prior to forgiving self or others, an individual must first face the obstacle that shame can represent.

In addition, there may be societal or cultural pressure to forgive, which can add additional stress to the process and undermine authentic forgiveness. In this research study, I was often faced with the pressure from my mother to forgive the perpetrator who sexually abused me when I was 11 to 14 years old. She failed

to see that the anger and resentment I had toward the molester prevented me from ever forgiving him. What was more important was addressing my own shame and guilt from that experience and learning to forgive myself of the emotions and ill will I harbored.

Along with self-forgiveness, gratitude plays a key role in our ability to end self-imposed negative behavior and increase psychological, emotional, and spiritual well-being. “It turns out that the practice of gratitude, like the practice of mindfulness, is serious medicine for our hearts and our outlook on life” (Schmelzer, 2018, p. 99).

Fitzgerald (1998) describes gratitude as

an emotion or a set of feelings. One *feels* grateful. This emotion has three components. Gratitude is (1) a warm sense of appreciation for somebody or something, (2) a sense of goodwill toward that individual or thing, and (3) a disposition to act which flows from appreciation and goodwill. Gratitude is not merely an emotion; however, we describe it as a virtue when it contributes to living one’s life well. (p. 120)

In this research, gratitude is demonstrated toward traumatic events, as well as some of the actors that participated in those events. This may seem like an odd perspective. However, there is evidence that having gratitude for past events even if troubling can lead to increased well-being. Fitzgerald (1998) writes, “Gratitude can be an antidote to a mental state that causes suffering in ourselves and those around us” (p. 132). Cultivating gratitude can increase one’s awareness of perpetuating self-hatred, self-victimization, and self-abuse.

Through reflective writing, individuals can isolate and externalize personal issues and trauma and subsequently transform the power these events have by deconstructing and reconstructing them. In this research, the narrative

demonstrates this process and goes further by illustrating how the psychological, emotional, and spiritual benefits of those events led to gratitude for the lessons learned from them. I was able to change my perspective of past trauma and see the value they had in my present life.

Referring to her clients and assigning them gratitude practice as homework, therapist Gretchen Schmelzer (2018) writes,

their eyes, ears, and hearts were now on the lookout for gratitude, not disappointment. Their brains were rewiring themselves for the good things in their lives. It's much easier to find or resurrect hope in the feeling of abundance that gratitude provides. (p. 101)

Intrinsically, reflective writing and self-awareness are gratitude practices in action.

Like self-forgiveness, gratitude has many benefits, including shifting focus away from negativity and promoting a more positive outlook on life; increasing emotional resilience and psychological well-being, even in the face of adversity; strengthening relationships by fostering appreciation and mutual respect; encouraging mindfulness and present moment awareness, leading to greater overall satisfaction with life; and improving physical health outcomes, such as better sleep quality and reduced symptoms of illness (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Fredrickson, 2004; Kashdan et al., 2006; Sansone & Sansone, 2010; Wood et al., 2010).

Some things individuals should consider when addressing gratitude include the dismissal or suppression of negative emotions (which are also important for psychological processing) constantly comparing oneself with others' situations or achievements which may lead to feelings of inadequacy,

pressure to constantly express gratitude which may lead to feelings of guilt or obligation, and relying too heavily on external sources of gratitude (e.g., material possessions) that may hinder the development of intrinsic sources of satisfaction and well-being.

In reflective writing and narrative therapy, both forgiveness and gratitude can be valuable tools for exploring and reframing personal narratives and building resilience. However, it's important for LGBTQ+ individuals to approach these processes with self-awareness, authenticity, and sensitivity to their own needs and boundaries.

Resilience

Earlier, resilience was defined as “the process and outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences, especially through mental, emotional, and behavioral flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands” (American Psychological Association, n.d.-d). This study focused on resilience through three contextual lenses, including narrative identity, narrative therapy, and narrative psychology. Resilience plays a crucial role in all three of these domains, especially for individuals who have experienced trauma and are seeking healing through reflective writing (Fraile-Marcos, 2020; Selhub, 2021; Southwick & Charney, 2018). “If we can learn to harness stress it can serve as a catalyst for developing greater strength and even greater wisdom” (Southwick & Charney, 2018, p. 25).

Among LGBTQ+ individuals and communities, resilience is particularly unique in that it is often the result of discrimination, stigmatization, and minority

stress (Bratt et al., 2023). Resilience is also a product of traumatic events such as the AIDS and COVID epidemics (Gonzalez et al., 2021), as well racial injustices against LGBTQ+ people of color (Aguilera & Barrita, 2021). This study empowers LGBTQ+ individuals to move beyond a mindset of scarcity and insufficiency to a place of abundance and opportunity (Peel et al., 2023; Weinhardt et al., 2021) and beyond (Robinson & Schmitz, 2021).

From their research, Southwick and Charney (2018) have defined a list of ten resilience factors most commonly arising from their data, including realistic optimism, facing fear, moral compass, religion and spirituality, social support, resilient role models, physical fitness, brain fitness, cognitive and emotional flexibility, and meaning and purpose (pp. 15–16). These ten factors align with Joseph Campbell's the Hero's Journey as a psychological, emotional, and spiritual development process (Campbell, 2008; Vogler, 2020). Each of these factors also play a role in narrative identity, narrative therapy, and narrative psychology.

McLean and Pratt (2006) write, "Identity statuses reflect broad dimensions of exploration and commitment in specific and objective domains and across many experiences in our lives. The stories we live by reflect subjectively recalled, specific, and vivid experiences, drawn together into a life narrative" (p. 721). The theory of narrative identity analyzes how individuals make meaning from their life experiences and construct their identity through narrative (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Resilience originates in the formation and reconstruction of narrative identity through integration of trauma and creating a sense of continuity,

as well as coherence (meaning-making) out of an individual's personal narrative (McAdams, 2001; McLean & Pratt, 2006).

Resilience allows LGBTQ+ individuals to integrate traumatic experiences into their life stories in a way that acknowledges the impact of the trauma while also highlighting strengths and adaptive responses. It enables them to perceive themselves as agents of their own stories, capable of overcoming adversity and allows them to construct narratives that emphasize empowerment, transformation, and growth.

Narrative therapy is the construction and deconstruction of an individual's life stories to "give a frame of reference for understanding and making experiences understandable" (Etchison & Kleist, 2000, p. 61). Resilience is central to the therapeutic process in a few ways—re-authoring stories, externalizing problems, and reclaiming identity (Herman, 1997; White & Epston, 1990).

By encouraging individuals to re-author their life stories in ways that emphasize their resilience and agency in the face of trauma, they can explore alternative narratives that challenge dominant, problem-saturated stories. Externalizing the effects of trauma encourages the separation of one's identity from the traumatic events they have experienced. This process helps them regain a sense of control and agency over their lives. Finally, individuals can reclaim their sense of identity and agency by highlighting their strengths, values, and aspirations. Reflective writing allows individuals to articulate their preferred

selves and construct narratives that align with their desired identities, all the while creating the tools necessary to address future trauma.

The core theory of narrative psychology, as articulated by Michele Crossley (2000b), emphasizes the centrality of narrative in shaping human experience and identity. According to Crossley (2000b), individuals construct their sense of self and make sense of the world around them through storytelling and the creation of personal narratives. These narratives are not just a means of communication but are essential for understanding and organizing one's life experiences.

Crossley (2000b) also suggests that narratives are inherently social and cultural constructs, shaped by societal norms, values, and belief systems. They not only reflect individual experiences but also convey broader cultural ideologies and norms.

Resilience is a central theme in narrative psychology (Crossley, 2000b; Sarbin, 1986; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). It recognizes the role of resilience narratives in shaping individuals' self-concepts and well-being and emphasizing their ability to overcome adversity and thrive in the face of challenges. It also allows individuals to engage in the process of narrative reconstruction, where they reinterpret past experiences. This process facilitates psychological healing and transformation. Through reflective writing, individuals can explore and redefine aspects of their identity that may have been compromised by trauma, ultimately fostering a sense of empowerment and self-determination.

In summary, resilience plays a foundational role in narrative identity, narrative therapy, and narrative psychology for individuals seeking healing from trauma through reflective writing. It enables individuals to integrate trauma into their life stories, reclaim their identities, and construct narratives of growth and transformation. Through the process of reflective writing, individuals can cultivate resilience and resilience narratives that support their journey toward healing and well-being.

Self-Actualization

According to Maslow (1943), self-actualization is

self-fulfillment, namely the tendency for [the individual] to become actualized in what [they are] potentially. This tendency might be phrased as the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming. (p. 10)

Self-actualization is a movement toward growth and facing fears of growth and requires that individuals must first have their physiological needs met (food, shelter, etc.) and live within an environment conducive to psychological, emotional, and spiritual growth (Maslow, 1943, 1961, 1965, 1971). Maslow (1971) writes,

Self-actualization is an ongoing process; it means making each of the many single choices about whether to lie or be honest, whether to steal or not to steal at a particular point, and it means to make each of these choices as a growth choice. (p. 44)

The concept of self-actualization mirrors that of Joseph Campbell's the Hero's Journey as the act of moving from the ordinary world, into the extraordinary, and then back again (Campbell, 2008; Vogler, 2020). Each stage of the hero's dramatic experience illustrates growth and development, and the shedding of the old and the birth of the new. Through reflective writing,

individuals evolve their perspective of the past, inform the present, and change the future. Like a lotus, a person's inner world opens and closes with each story written and rewritten. Self-actualization through reflective writing is the ongoing death and rebirth of an individual's psychological, emotional, and spiritual constructs. It is a mapping of who a person is and what they can achieve (Robertson, 2020). It is finding meaning in traumatic events and using that meaning to add value to one's life and society (Frankl, 2006; Infurna & Jayawickreme, 2021).

Like narration itself, the connections one makes between the past and present are up for revision and repetition as new opportunities for narration arise. In other words, as individuals engage in a process of recalling past events, considering them in relation to other important experiences, sharing them with others, and reflecting on their meaning, the opportunities arise for both solidifying self-views and revising ways of understanding oneself. (Infurna & Jayawickreme, 2021, p. 248)

Reflective writing and narrative therapy can be powerful tools for facilitating self-actualization by helping individuals explore their innermost thoughts, feelings, and experiences, and by providing a framework for understanding and transforming their narratives of self (Maslow, 1965; McAdams, 1993; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; White & Epston, 1990; Wright, 2018).

This research has identified several ways in which reflective writing contributes to the process of self-actualization:

- By encouraging individuals to engage in deep introspection and self-reflection, exploring their values, beliefs, strengths, and areas for growth. By examining their thoughts and experiences on paper,

individuals gain insights into their inner workings and develop a deeper understanding of themselves.

- By creating a platform for individuals to explore and reconstruct their life stories, including their sense of identity and purpose. Through storytelling, individuals can uncover hidden patterns, themes, and meanings in their lives, leading to a greater sense of coherence and self-understanding.
- By clarifying values and priorities, allowing individuals to align their actions and decisions with what truly matters to them. By articulating their values through writing and storytelling, individuals gain clarity about their goals and aspirations, facilitating the pursuit of self-actualization.
- By empowering individuals to take ownership of their narratives and rewrite their stories in ways that reflect their authentic selves and aspirations. By reframing past experiences and envisioning new possibilities, individuals reclaim agency over their lives and become active participants in their own self-actualization journey.
- By motivating individuals to tap into their creativity and express themselves freely without judgment. Through the process of creative expression, individuals can explore alternative perspectives, challenge limiting beliefs, and unleash their creative potential, fostering self-actualization.

- By helping individuals make sense of their experiences and find meaning in their lives. By constructing narratives that integrate past, present, and future, individuals create a sense of purpose and direction that fuels their journey toward self-actualization.

Beyond self-actualization is self-transcendence or the desire to help others achieve their potential and psychological, emotional, and spiritual well-being (Maslow, 1971). This dissertation is a representation of transcendence. Its primary goal was to define a path or process for LGBTQ+ individuals to reconstruct their relationship to trauma through reflective writing, transform self-victimization, and share their achievements with others.

Overall, reflective writing provides individuals with powerful tools for self-exploration, empowerment, and growth, facilitating the process of self-actualization by fostering self-awareness, authenticity, and personal fulfillment. Through reflective writing and storytelling, individuals can unlock their potential, embrace their uniqueness, and live more fully aligned with their deepest values and aspirations.

Conclusion

There is demonstrable evidence that indicates the therapeutic and healing power of reflective writing for individuals who have experienced traumatic events. However, there is minimal literature that analyzes and discusses the particular and often unique types of traumas that LGBTQ+ individuals experience from childhood into adulthood. This may be due to conservative cultures,

heterosexist values and belief systems, individual family dynamics inherited generation after generation, or all the above.

There are multiple types of stressors that LGBTQ+ individuals can experience throughout their lifetime, including psycho-emotional, sexual, and religious or spiritual. It is important to identify and define trauma disparity between LGBTQ+ individuals and heterosexuals to enable positive mental, emotional, and spiritual health. This can be achieved through narrative therapy, self-inquiry, and reflective writing. These therapeutic processes are shown to be curative solutions for LGBTQ+ individuals who struggle to integrate trauma (Draucker & Martsolf, 2008; Elderton et al., 2014; Jordan, 2020; McLean & Marini, 2008; Pachankis & Goldfried, 2010; Steelman, 2016). By reflecting on and engaging the past, LGBTQ+ individuals can end self-victimization and abuse, reconstruct their narrative identity, nurture the integration of traumatic and troubling events by finding meaning in them, develop forgiveness and gratitude of self and others, and achieve their maximum potential (self-actualization).

Ultimately, as Atkinson (1998) states in *The Life Story Interview*, more LGBTQ+ stories need to be written and shared with the world to broaden the landscape of data and to give voice to disenfranchised communities. These stories can begin to fill the intersectional gaps that are currently missing from human knowledge. I was recently in a local used bookstore and found myself wandering to the LGBTQ+ section. I was happy to see different genre of writing but was disappointed that I could only find one book, *Headcase: LGBTQ Writers and*

Artists on Mental Health and Wellness (Schroeder & Theophano, 2019), that brings real life stories of LGBTQ+ people to the world.

Hicks (2019) writes,

Your story is important, and without you, who would tell it? However you do it—in a journal, through painting, in photographs, in late-night phone calls—find your voice. Talk about what has happened to you, who you are, where you are going, and what you need. You deserve to be heard. (p. 86)

The world needs more LGBTQ+ stories! Modern society needs individuals who are ready to go on their own Hero's Journey into the extraordinary world of their lives and celebrate their resilience, strength, and transformation by sharing their personal narratives with others.

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