9-19-2013

The Spirituality of Consciousness: From Mindfulness to Faith to the Awakening of Self

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THE SPIRITUALITY OF CONSCIOUSNESS: FROM MINDFULNESS TO
FAITH TO THE A WAKENING OF SELF

A Thesis Presented

by

Monique Simone Swaby

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

The University of Vermont

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Education
Specializing in Interdisciplinary Studies

May, 2011
Accepted by the Faculty of the Graduate College, The University of Vermont, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education, specializing in Interdisciplinary Studies.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is an exploration of the concepts of what the spirituality of consciousness means in several key areas of the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual self. Many students and professionals walk through their educational and professional careers filled with confusion, lack of self-understanding, a yearning for something more but never discovering it in the places we find ourselves for most of our day-to-day interactions. My hope is that this thesis will give insight to how students can overcome obstacles and fears in their lives in order to move forward, and, when necessary, to move past themselves.

As a young, Black, immigrant woman who is a first-generation college student and student affairs professional, the methodology of Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) appeals to me the most in exploring the spirituality of consciousness. Therefore, I will be using SPN to highlight a portion of my journey through three lenses: mindfulness counseling, religo-spirituality, and understanding what it means to unlock our minds and its complexities through a spiritually-enriched education. I will also highlight how we can disseminate the knowledge of self-awareness and self-awakening as life teachers, educators, and learners to those who come after us--the next generation.

The holistic preservation of self and mind is a vital stage in our human existence. As higher education administrators and teachers, we should be able to take the risk and accept the challenge to delve deeper within ourselves to be able to move beyond the curriculum and see the full humanity of our students, hopefully leading to more joyful, productive, loving, creative and brilliant minds. How do we do this? How do we awaken to life, to learning, to each other, in the midst of chaos? This thesis attempts to point the way.
DEDICATION

I dedicate you to anyone that has ever feared to be themselves, doubted the possibilities in ambivalence, but came through it anyway; to the seekers of their humanity!

To my mother, Lilieth Whitley, for always believing I could do anything, even when I didn’t believe it myself, and ultimately to God-the Holy Spirit within me: Here’s to righteous love!
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I acknowledge the fact that I am not alone and who I am now was not created in the singular. I am a part of a collective of my thoughts, actions, decisions; the people who have come and gone in my life. To my supervisor, meaning-making mentor, and friend Beverly Colston: thanks for all our long talks, all the great 1:1’s, for believing in me and helping me to see I could do more than I thought and for always actively listening. Thanks for giving me the space and time to finish this thesis, for making the completion of this writing possible and for that I am truly grateful. You are a gift to me and all those who seek your guidance and company. To Maria Dykema Erb, my writing partner and supporter, meaning-making mentor, colleague and most importantly eternal heavenly friend: you were meant to be in my life. I only hope I have been as good a friend to you as you have been to me. Thanks for helping my spirit soar; you have been such a blessing in my life. To Rey Perez, my #1 fan, thanks for always seeing me for who I am and what I would become; for believing in my true gift and for your unending love.

To Robert Nash, my educational and teaching meaning-making mentor, friend, Co-Teacher and Co-Author: thanks for seeing the teacher in me and trusting my instincts, for your loving validation of me and all your students and colleagues. For giving a little more of your personal “P” the more I get to know you. To Candace Taylor, my best friend and soul sister: we have come a long way, we have been through some storms but the journey is not over and I know brighter days are here and to come as our true life destinies unfold. You will always be a part of me, and I of you. Thank you for listening, for your honesty, love, and being there when I need you. To all my loved ones: family, friends, and acquaintances that have come into my life, I thank you for your presence (present) and love. To my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, who without His love, guidance, and Spirit in my heart, none of this would have been possible: the Author and Finisher of my Faith.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

“If I am not happy, I cannot give you my happiness, if I am not awake, how can I truly be awake to you? It would be a false life.” - Monique Swaby

This is only one thesis, and although it holds multiple theories, all of my thoughts and findings cannot be laid out here, for I only have but so much time to keep your attention. There are some areas, in terms of specific identities, that could slightly shift and change this thesis because of how the concepts soon to be explored may play out in your life or others. For instance, there are many parts of my identity such as race, class, nationality, ethnicity, sex/sexuality, gender, and ability that I will not cover or will only slightly touch on. I know and want to make clear those identities I hold do affect the privileges I have and many that I do not have in order to come to my theory, but I will be writing in the main context of the identity we all have: the human identity. With this in mind I hope you are gentle, kind, and most of all thoughtful in your musings and reflections of this thesis and take it for what it is, a piece of the puzzle, a part of the whole, a chapter in a lifetime story.

I will use the writing methodology of Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) to highlight my findings and the journey which has brought me to my current conclusion. Scholarly Personal Narrative uses both me-search and re-search to extrapolate theories played out in practice. The term scholar means “leisure” or “play,”

Thus, a scholar was someone who had the leisure to explore, and play with, ideas; to develop intellectual arguments; to write and teach…the term ‘philosopher’ literally meant ‘lover of wisdom.’ Philosophers like Socrates used their leisure time to create stories in order to help people to become wise- more virtuous, courageous, reasonable, and prudent in their actions…So what does this have to do with the role of scholarship in SPN writing? It urges us to think of ourselves as wise and loving people who, like the ancients, have stories to tell that might help
others to become wiser. Thus, our personal stories contain within them the germs of many intellectual and experiential truths. At the least, they become the means for conveying our wisdom. At the very most, they can change lives.¹

SPN uses our personal narrative through life stories by empowering our voice, and transforms it into scholarship using other points of research to highlight our own personal truth which confirms the practice to theory model and back again. For most of my life, I have always lived in the “why” state of mind, so “if you want to locate the important whys in your lives, then write an SPN.”² Therefore, using SPN has made sense to me in exploring the context of writing, learning, and teaching. I wished to help change lives, so I started with my own.

Held within the human experience are three main areas which we tend to explore in the present life as the emotional self, the spiritual self, and the intellectual self. Depending upon our circumstance, upbringing, context, history, structured and unstructured education, awareness, identity, pre-disposition, and open nature we tend to glide through three, two, one or none of these areas. I use the term glide because most people do not gain mastery of one, or may not wish to, let alone all parts of the human experience, but can be subject to its knowledge. We explore these parts of the human self consciously, sub-consciously, or simultaneously.

I will not explicitly mention the physical condition, i.e. the body, of the human experience because I am implying it in the use of the term “self” after every area. Because I know when discussing who we are and how we experience the world as humans we forget the physical body most of the time. Although I will not be highlighting in this thesis the full scope of how the body is brought to our awareness, I wish to make clear its importance and that it is not forgotten. It is the primary vehicle in which all three
areas of the emotional, spiritual, and intellectual self run through. The body is where we will experience both the joy and pain of life and where the human condition is made real to our eyes. The majority of what we will encounter in all parts of the “self” are at some point or another touched by trauma, directly or indirectly, even if it is for a moment, and at some point we all experience vicarious trauma, i.e. feeling pain, hurt, or suffering through someone else’s experience and emotions. Our body is affected by this trauma just as much as our emotional, spiritual, and intellectual parts and because the physical is directly tied to these areas, we must remember it as well. We more often than not forget to repair the damage done to the body. So, we should remember not to forget the body in our attempt to discover, heal, and re-discover ourselves in all three parts of our human condition and I am doing so by using the term “self.”

This thesis is an attempt to understand the pain and suffering of our human condition in the day to day, how we can heal, and move on to a conscious, meaningful and joyful life thus contributing fully as a world citizen. I will explore the emotional, spiritual, and intellectual self through three lenses: counseling mindfulness, religion and spirituality, and education. I will do this by highlighting how I have come to understand my human existence and life calling through self-awareness, self-awakening, and consciousness in the context of higher education. I will also share how students, teachers, student services professionals, and higher education administrators can support each other in the process of true education, in and of the world as human beings, and the necessity of creating a more holistic learning experience through reciprocity (giving and receiving).
Self-Awareness, Self-Awakening, and Consciousness

“Our own life has to be our message” – Thich Naht Hanh

In these few chapters ahead, I wish to illuminate to you the findings of my heart; the awakening of self in mind, body and soul. I wish to bring awareness and help awaken those who cannot hear or see, those who cannot find themselves, and those on a journey of the self. In doing so I have found the methodology of Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) which allows for space where the writer can also use their story in relation to texts, concepts and truth within scholarship. I choose my story as a leading point, so you may see and understand that I am not exempt from life’s revelation’s held within the pain, love, joy and suffering. So that I will remain human in your eyes and so you may see some part of your story in mine or at least be able to find a place within these pages to affirm your life’s worth, your journey. Thus I choose to write in a style that has been around in a similar form of oral history as well as written for centuries by people of color but has now been given a framework and context that can translate in many forms of scholarship to be seen as valuable and validated in the academy.

“To be at home again, to be loved by my family, to feel affection without fear or restraint and to feel myself the equal of those that surround me.”

Where do we begin and where do we end? Isn’t this one of the most pivotal questions of our lifetime? Our need to be understood, make meaning, give life, live life, love, dance, play, sing, work, and find that inner purpose for living is essential for most, dare I say, all human beings to live a bountiful life. One that you can look back on and say, I remember those days, I was brilliant, I was beautiful, I was worthwhile, and I am worthwhile; I made a difference that mattered. But how did you get there? How do we
get there? To that place where you knew, you finally recognized your worth, your purpose, your reason to breathe? What made you whole? What made you say you need to be seen and heard and would no longer be silent in the shadows or apologize for your recognition of the power you hold? What allowed you to be free, to not care what others think whilst still caring about humankind? What made you so aware, so alive, so AWAKE?

I was awakened not too long ago. I have come to recognize I was always aware of myself, my essence, in some form or fashion, and self-conscious in the negative sense of the word, which shifted into the positive, increasing in its ebb and flow each time I transitioned but I was not always awake or alive. By now you might be wondering, what does she mean when she says being alive or awake? An online web dictionary source called the free dictionary, defines “alive” as the following, “Having life; living. In existence or operation; active, full of living or moving things; abounding, full of activity or animation; lively…possessing life, full of life and spirit, having existence or being or actuality.” The term “awake” is stated to mean “to rouse from sleep; waken, to stir the interest of; excite, to become alert, not in a state of sleep, watchful.”

For me being alive means true consciousness of the world around me, and all that I embody in my physical and emotional shell allows me to fully feel and sense through touch, sound, taste, smell and sight without censoring, i.e. constant analyzing, putting up walls; it means I can actively go with the flow. It takes the art of walking in patience and forgiveness, as Thich Nhat Hanh says, “We learn that there is no peace walk; that peace is the walk; that there is no happiness walk; that happiness is the walk.”
The concept of self-awakening brings life to an entirely new level. There are stages of being *alive* and *awake*, stages of consciousness; on an individual and on a collective level. One of the leading social thinkers of the present and political philosopher, Roberto Unger, believes these two stages of consciousness come from the first and second awakening of the self. It is not just acknowledging your state of being *alive* but to fully embrace it, “the first awakening of the self is the affirmation of consciousness by entering fully into the experience of conscious life. To enter fully into it is to broaden it, stretching its limits. This stretching gives rise, however, to a contrary experience, of loss of distinct consciousness and identity.” It is when your heart, mind and soul now become open to the world around you.

You begin to see, feel, and envision things you never thought possible for yourself. Your mental capacity to experience life is opened ten-fold thus you begin to feel happier, think happier thoughts, and inhibitions (in the best possible way) may go out the window because you finally begin to understand what life really means for you. You will no longer want to wait to live life and let it happen, you begin to go out and get it for yourself, “the second awakening of the self is the discovery within us of the demand for the infinite, for the absolute. Once discovered, it is irresistible; it must be lived out. Its living out changes the meaning of everything we had experienced before.

The second awakening is therefore a revolution in the experience of consciousness and distinction.” You become empowered to move, feel, think, dream and appreciate your world so much more. You will always have roadblocks in this journey but you will never turn back, that will no longer be an option once you have seen, felt,
and accepted your power, “Horrified, we then step back into the citadel of the conscious self, holding on with new force and clarity to what we had risked losing. The central paradox of the first awakening of the self is that we must risk losing the sense of self—our grip on consciousness, our hold on distinction of personality—the better to reaffirm it.”

Many philosophers allude to self-awareness more in their terms called enlightenment, which is defined in the spiritual as, “a final blessed state free from ignorance, desire, and suffering, the knowledge that we are all cosmically united as a race of humans unrelating to race, creed, or any other man made dividing lines.” But what does being alive and awake mean for you? Do you even see it when it is right in front of your face? How will you get there? How will you reach out and grab it? Self-awareness for some may sound so simple or daunting if one observes others in their walk, but believe me it is not so easy, moreover after one has awoken, it becomes even that much more complex to stay awake, to stay alive.

You see there is so much we do not see, do not say, but all play a role in how we find ourselves. We as human-beings, hosts of this earth, lovers, friends, family members and neighbors hold so much sway in each other’s lives, conscious and sub-conscious and this can be a fatal trap or a beautiful gift if we allow our hearts and minds to appreciate and let go, to learn and to love. Unger states,

The other event that is at the source of the second awakening of the self is our acknowledgment, alongside our estrangement from the natural and social worlds, of the unlimited character of our longing for other people. We demand from them, from some of them, more than any human being can give to another; not just material and moral support, but radical acceptance and assurance that there is a place for us in the world as the embodied spirits and context-transcendent beings.
we really are. Thus, everything we can give one another implies a promise no one can keep. The only solution, we know, is only barely possible: love, understood as the imagination and acceptance of the other person, as who that person both is and might become, not as the projection of our need, love freely given and therefore also freely refused, complete only when not tainted by the benevolence of the protector for the protected, precariously penetrating the routines of a life together and fading as it moves away from the core terrain of personal encounter to the larger life of society…We are estranged from a natural and social world that burdens our efforts to develop ourselves, and to recognize one another, as beings capable of imaging and accepting one another. We demand from one another that which nature and society seem to refuse us.10

There are so many questions that we ask ourselves in awakening through a lifetime.

Many of those crucial questions are seen and experienced in unique developmental states called the Quarter-life. The age of life, between 17-32 or so, where questions heighten such as these gathered by Dr. Robert Nash in 2009,

What might you do to make your life more satisfying at this very moment? Pretend that there are no restrictions on the satisfactions you would like to experience in your life right now. What is preventing you from realizing these satisfactions? ...How would you respond to a dear friend who considers you a trusted confidante and who came to you with these questions: ‘Why am I so sad? Why do I feel so stressed? Why do I get so bored? Why can’t I really love someone? Why is it I don’t feel really loved by anyone?’… Can you think of a time when you refused to compromise a core value in your life, even if compromising this value might have satisfied other needs you had?11

In the process of self-awakening sometimes we choose to answer these questions ourselves or life does it for us whether we like it or not, but wouldn’t you like to make that choice on your own? Do you want to find yourself, again?

“I am unresolved” – Monique Swaby

One’s awareness of your multiple identities is a major player in becoming more

alive and awake. That means learning how to develop and grow in those places we do not
feel secure or that are unresolved. Through the years it has become apparent that my religio-spirituality has been a key factor to my health and well-being, one that I have run away from in some shape or form. All throughout my life my racial identity has been at the forefront of my existence as well, which automatically trumped my ethnic background, being a native of Jamaica, West Indies and then moving to the United States. Although my gender identity is still being worked on, living with a single mother, then living in a house with seven girls for high school, attending an all women’s college, along with the friendships of the beautiful women in my life, has helped me to focus on being a strong and loving woman amongst hard circumstances.

I have examined my racial identity through work environments of helping foster children who were predominantly children of color, as well as working with college students, attending a predominantly white high school whilst living in a pre-dominantly white town, as well as experiencing the same environment during college. So you see, my reality drove me, consciously and sub-consciously to do what I needed to do in order to survive, sustain and maneuver this world, which left little room for part of my core self, my ethnic identity. I did not realize this until later on but this was a part of me that was missing and needed to be nurtured or it would be lost. It was my home, my family and if I did not begin to recognize my need to restore that part of me then I would not be able to pass this on to my family, my heritage would be lost. I needed to find myself again in order to relate to my family once more because they were in another country, in another state, and I would need to build my own where I was.
I used the feeling of happiness before when speaking of initial feelings of self-awareness and self-awakening because it is a temporary emotion; felt through fleeting moments in time, “Needing others for everything from the material sustenance of life to the confirmation of our sense of self but fearing them as threats to our independent existence…Recognizing that the order of society is simply the temporary interruption or containment of a fight that can begin again at any moment—a struggle over the terms of people’s claims upon one another—we seek to uphold the rules, proprieties, and decencies that expunge from social life some of its undercurrent of savagery and danger.”

Happiness is different from joy which is long-lasting, being rooted in peace, and that comes when we seek to move from the stage of self-awakening into consciousness.

We cannot stay in self-awakening for long and expect to stay there without constant renewal, thus we must transcend to the level of consciousness. It is here that we become alive, it is here we find joy which has the foundation of peace. Once you have peace of heart and mind we can have everlasting joy and our consciousness will not be shaken. Consciousness takes continual effort and thus cannot be easily thwarted by the negative forces of the world and this takes passion. Passion comes with consciousness and is what is needed to press forward when the world seems to be closing in on us,

we surrender to a work that quiets for a while all restlessness and anxiety. In surrendering to it, however, we feel no boredom because it seems large enough to occupy the whole of our conscious life so long as we are doing it. Our experience of time changes. We undergo movement and transformation, making real the sense of time. Yet time as an uncontrolled fall toward death is seemingly suspended…And it commands our attention so completely that nothing of this attention is left over, as a residue of doubt, discontent, and suspicion.”
This is where the spirituality of consciousness arises, from the passion to live, to be faithful to the thing that gave us life, to be awake to everything we put in and take out of ourselves thus placing it into the world.

There is a transcending feeling to being conscious, thus it can be spiritual, something we sometimes cannot put into words because it defies all human reason, i.e. many people cannot understand and see how we reached that experience, “We are natural beings. Our powers of transcendence are foreshadowed by our physical characteristics, beginning with the plasticity of the brain…However, nature, which we can know only by a fragile and tentative overreaching of our powers of insight…condemns us to frustration and dissolution.”¹⁴ As for me, myself, and I, along with my fellow human beings, “We have the power to decide the destiny of our planet. If we awaken to our true situation, there will be a change in our collective consciousness. We have to do something to wake people up.”¹⁵

CHAPTER 2: COUNSELING MINDFULNESS AND MOVEMENT: REALIZING OUR SELF-WORTH AND ACTING ON IT

“Not Everything that is faced can be changed, But Nothing can be changed until it is faced.”
-James Baldwin

Emotions and the Search for Contentment

Human beings are ruled by emotions. The emotional self can be explored through self-awareness of our mind; our emotions and thoughts. Housed within us are a plethora and range of emotions that come with the human condition. At the basis of our condition lie these typical understandings: the wish to be loved but the fear of ourselves and the
ever present reality of birth, life, and death. From these come circumstances that are first experienced through emotions. There are six basic emotions, “happiness, sadness, anger, disgust, fear, and surprise.” In addition we experience other emotions such as “love, doubt, aggression, affection, compassion, empathy, boredom, ecstasy, euphoria, gratitude, guilt, hatred, forgiveness, pleasure.”

In this society, the most consistent negative emotions of these that we feel are unfortunately anxiety, frustration, grief, depression, unhappiness, and, fear which culminate to and produce stress; a disease that slowly kills the mind, body, and spirit. So you may be asking, why is it important to become self-aware? We begin with self-awareness and begin to awake so that our emotions do not override our thoughts, and our thoughts do not override our emotions. So we may have balance and not live in the perpetual distress of the mind caused by both the self and the world, thus then leaking back onto the world, but most importantly onto another human being.

It is imperative to explore so that our stress does not become someone else’s anxiety or trauma, so we may still share our burdens thoughtfully and that our pain does not consume us. So we may come to know ourselves better, not walking around blind to our reality,

The problem is not repetition and habit, unavoidable and indispensable features of our experience. The problem is the failure to sustain our godliness—the quality of context-transcending spirit—in the midst of repetition; the failure to embody spirit in the routine. As a result, we live out much of our lives in a daze, as if we are acting out a script someone else had written. The someone else, however, is not an individual or even a group; it is the impersonal, crushing collective authority of the others who set our terms of reference and who exercise power, or suffer servitude, in the world we inhabit. We become them, but they do not become each of us. The flickering of the life force is a little bit of dying, or dying by steps. It comes with its own solace: the narcoleptic state of diminished consciousness into which we descend prevents us from focusing on the enormity of the loss or from
confronting our situation. And the pressures of material need and economic scarcity keep us chained to our practical responsibilities.¹⁸

Thus the recognition of our emotional self is extremely important. No matter what the social context or emotion is that emotion, because of the human condition, must be expressed before getting to the deeper issue of thoughts and actions or else it will be a waste of time and severely delay resolving a person’s issue, i.e. through the change process. For instance, if you think of the parent-child relationship when there is an issue, how the two communicate is necessary for a healthy functioning household. If the child has an issue or gets in trouble and the parent only responds or commands without listening first, there is a smaller chance of a positive outcome and typically much more strife in the home. This is the same if the parent has the issue and the child does not listen and communicate effectively.

One of the leading clinical psychologists in effective communication and conflict resolution, Thomas Gordon, states that there are typical ways adults/parents usually respond, “ordering, directing, commanding, warning, admonishing, threatening, advising, giving solutions or suggestions, teaching, giving logical arguments, lecturing, judging, praising, agreeing, moralizing, analyzing, consoling, questioning, humoring, withdrawing, diverting, and shaming”¹⁹ to name a few. All of these Gordon illustrates are door closers because first we need to actively listen and then reframe the feeling- i.e. you really sound sad or frustrated. We should listen to the feeling, because the person needs to get the emotions out first. It is not until the feeling is totally out that we can fully engage with them to try to achieve a solution. So, if we are to help and not harm, we need to give freedom to expression. Because we are so inclined to express and feel our
emotions first, we ultimately tend to seek one that will be pleasing to us, opposite emotions to fear and unhappiness, rightfully so.

Those emotions are happiness and joy. But Western society has sold the emotion of happiness as a concept, and the seeking of it to the highest bidder, thus we do not acknowledge the relevance of joy to the same degree,

But paradise comes with its own inherent pressures. It screams: ‘Be happy, God damn it!’ I remember driving by a billboard on the way to work one day. There was a photo of a yellow convertible VW Beetle and, underneath, the words, ‘Woe isn’t you. Dare to be happy.’ What is that ad saying? …happiness is there for the taking. All we need is enough willpower to summon it, enough gumption to try it in the first place, and of course enough cash to afford a convertible VW Beetle with optional satellite radio and leather interior. America’s current fixation with finding happiness coincides with an era of unprecedented material prosperity.

Yes, happiness is real, it is an emotion, and there is nothing wrong with it in and of itself, but it is not one that can be everlasting because of its nature. For example, we use the term “enjoy life” for good reason, which is usually our goal and what we live to experience; enjoy life, enjoy love, enjoy the people in our lives. What is at the core of the word enjoy; joy. There is no word in our vocabulary that says “enhappy” there is only the term, “unhappy.” Most of us are seeking something that is everlasting in our lives, at least until we die.

I believe we need to examine what makes us content, and then redefine what we are truly seeking. Is it happiness or joy, which is long-lasting because it has a basis of peace, or is it both. To me even though joy is an emotion, it is the evolution of an emotion because it is sustained by our thoughts; it does not need any outside force to feed it. Meaning even when we do not always get what we want or see it in front of us, we can hold our state of mind, to be calm and know that in peace and in time the things we want
will come, whether we purse it or not; to be unshaken with the concept of loss, a reality humans cannot change. I believe our downfall as a society is that we only seek and stop at “happiness” and we do so in the things that are not everlasting, we put too much trust in things, concepts, dreams that once removed from ourselves will leave us with a void. We have placed those things on a pedestal that once we no longer see them we cannot seem to breathe, get out of bed, put a smile on our face, see the person next to us, or even see our own selves anymore because we have been removed and replaced with these things, with other desires, “it’s turned us inward just when we should be looking outward. Not to money but to other people, to community and to the kind of human bonds that so clearly are the sources of our happiness.”

The constant thought of, if I can just get this next new thing, or this big promotion, or if I can get this person to love me, I will be happy,

Americans work longer hours and commute greater distances than virtually any other people in the world. Commuting, in particular, has been found to be detrimental to our happiness, as well as our physical health. Every minute spent on the road is one less minute that we spend with family and friends-the kind of activities, in other words, that make us happy…we spend less time visiting family and friends; we belong to fewer community groups. Increasingly, we lead fragmented lives. The Internet and other technologies may salve our loneliness, but they have not, I believe, eliminated it.

Yet, “We remain a profoundly optimistic nation. Two thirds of Americans say they are hopeful about the future. Hopeful, I guess, that we will be happier. When it comes to thinking about happiness, pondering it, worrying about it, cogitating over it, bemoaning our lack of it, and, of course, pursuing it, the United States is indeed a superpower. Eight out of ten Americans say they think about their happiness at least once a week…One way Americans pursue happiness is by physically moving. Indeed, ours is a nation founded on
restlessness.” I know this because I have been there right along with you, I too once sought the affection of people, goals to make me happy, a new geographical destination, but deep down I always knew it would not be enough, deep down I knew I had to stop seeking happiness but I didn’t realize the difference until now.

Do not misunderstand me, it is not bad to want or seek to be fulfilled but we are setting ourselves up for a trap if we make those things we seek rule our minds, hearts, and actions. We all seek some form of “happiness”, whether it is in an educational goal, a career goal, the attainment of human love, money, fame, responsibility, praise from others, or material things, and once we have it the more we want from it, and if not, we worry about how to keep it and then begin to fear losing it; it becomes a vicious cycle,

As early as the 1840s, Alexis de Tocqueville observed that America was populated by ‘so many men, restless in the midst of their abundance.’…. ‘All talk of paradise only starts when something has been lost.’ What have we lost? I wonder. America’s place on the happiness spectrum is not as high as you might think, given our superpower status…One study, by Adrian White at the University of Leicester in Britain, ranked the United States as the world’s twenty-third happiest nation, behind countries such as Costa Rica, Malta, and Malaysia. True, most Americans-84 percent, according to one study-describes themselves as either ‘very’ or ‘pretty’ happy, but it’s safe to say that the United States is not as happy as it is wealthy…Wealthier Americans are, on average, (slightly) happier than poorer ones…As a nation, we are three times richer than we were in 1950 yet no happier. What is going on? 24

I believe we have moved far from what our human condition asks of us to what the world places on us and transplants in our minds, “Clearly, one dynamic at work is rising expectations…We give lip service to the notion that money can’t buy happiness but act as if it does. When we asked what would improve the quality of their lives, Americans’ number one answer was money, according to a University of Michigan study.” 25 Many counselors, psychologists and scientists who have examined the concept
of what truly makes a human being fulfilled and there is not much, but we have lost that focus. There are essentially three core things humans need to be fulfilled: “power (sovereignty) i.e. to have a sense of balance in ourselves, to love and be loved, capable and connection, i.e. to feel a sense of capability and competency.”

These three components become displaced when we are distressed and filled with anxiety, thus we feel a lack of power/control in our sense of self. I have examined what happiness means through my own internal processes of reflective thinking, but I have also actively sought knowledge from those who have studied this area, by taking a few counseling courses; a few that reviewed or directly focused on happiness as well as how the mind functions as a whole. This was a great coupling because much of what was learned confirmed some of the things I already knew within myself from practice; I just needed more concrete theory.

Self-Worth and Self-Love: Exploring Me from the Start

“The person who has seen everything empty itself is close to knowing what everything is filled with.” - Antonio Porchia

I believe most people spend their lifetime searching for and redefining their self-worth and self-love. What does that even mean anyway? I realized during my early twenties approaching mid-twenties, how could I truly love someone else if I didn’t begin to think good things about myself and really mean and believe it? How could I really love myself even when I was alone or felt lonely? So, I made a conscious decision to change my thought process and really begin to think intentionally about my contentment in life. But wait, how did I even get here, this place of discontent even when life seemed to be going well by some people’s standards?
It’s funny because most of the time, I thought I was now thinking positively, or I didn’t fully recognize the extent to which I had negative self-talk i.e. those “chattering monkeys” that put you down, until my best friend would mention it to me, and she didn’t like it. I knew deep down I didn’t either, and that I had to stop fooling myself to think I had completely gotten rid of them or at least dealt with it. This negative self-talk came from three things, what was outside of me in the world that I saw not reflected in me, thus I questioned myself. Being lost in confusion of who I should be, even though I didn’t care what other people thought, right? Or did I?

I tried my best not to care, but when a majority of people talk negatively even in the slightest way, gossip, or look to other things than themselves to make them fulfilled, i.e. clothes, cars, shallow and abusive love relationships, well it starts to seep it, you know, the negative caring. The third aspect was that somewhere along the lines of my life I thought, “I do not want to think too highly of myself,” in order to remain humble but as a result I ended up at times not recognizing my talents and beauty. I did not develop enough in the identity of myself to take in the positive with the negative and not let one overtake the other. I needed to develop a sense of balance with my mind and the outside world in order to remain humble but still see myself as a light in the world.

This negative self-talk was also perpetuated by my silence. I was a shy little girl and for most of my teenage years stayed that way so I became a high internal processor of my thoughts and emotions. I turned everything inside, never letting much out, even though I loved the world and those around me. I honed my listening skills during those years, but I damaged my internal voice. I was very very private about my personal thoughts and feelings, my personal life, because I needed to feel safe in order to truly
share. I had to learn to use my voice and tested myself to do just that as I went through the end of my high school years and college, in and outside the classroom, participating in clubs and trying out leadership positions. But then this negative self-talk, which was being repaired and not so loud anymore, came in the form of lack of self-love, perpetuated by a short series of bad relationships (or lack thereof). I lost my trust in one of the things I wanted most as a young adult and never had as a teenager, an intimate relationship of affection. Romance movies can do that to you. I realized my pattern in those times became; worry, worry, worry, love, love, love, and then it would repeat itself.

This was the breaking point I believe for me. What lead me to say, enough was enough. I liked being alone in the past, I could do it again and I really needed me, not anyone else. I needed my single freedom to be real this time, one without thought of having someone else fill me up when I knew only I could do that for myself. I made a change first by, forgiving. Then I slowly began to see the best in others again so that I could see the best in myself. I began to work on the self; mind, body and spirit. I removed myself from the places that made me too conscious of the self in a materialistic and superficial way, which I never fully embraced anyway, and began to spend more time with myself and those who saw me for my worth and not by what I had, how I dressed, talked, thought, or where I was going.

I went to the movies by myself, took care of my health more, did things that I loved to do and figured out what they were intentionally. I began to breathe when I decided to let go. I knew deep down that “worry can rob you of happiness, but kind words will cheer you up.”²⁹ All I needed was an encouraging word from me, my friends, and my God. After those days, whenever I would hear myself talk negatively I would
stop and correct my words and thinking. I began to try to listen intentionally for those clues. Looking back I realized what was enveloped behind my negative self-talk, self-worth, and self-love: fear, doubt, and ambivalence.

**Fear, Doubt, and Ambivalence in the Mind**

> “Love casts out all fear, fear is only torment.” - *1st John 4:18*

Do you really know who you are? Did you always know what you could do? What you were made to do? I didn’t. I thought I did, but I really didn’t have a clue and I didn’t know then what I know now. I would say many people in this world walk around with a hazy picture as well. Some people eventually answer these questions but many never find out. Why is that? FEAR. DOUBT. AMBIVALENCE (i.e. *unbelief*). Three monsters that come to paralyze, as the devil came to lie, steal, cheat, rob and kill.

No matter how cliché it may sound, *and by the way that’s part of the trick for us to forget about the truth because it doesn’t “sound cool”*, we as individuals need to start the process of healing our world, first within (*it is possible*). It may not be seen by our generation but it will come to pass, for MLK Jr. didn’t live to see the fruit of the Civil Rights movement but it came into existence by searching, fighting, and defining who we were first within ourselves. It is not about blame, or shame, or who holds truth but that we do awaken to what is right, before it’s too late. I cannot as a human being tell you to examine yourself or even suggest it without having done so myself, that would be hypocrisy of the highest form.

We need to engage with our fear, doubt, and ambivalence. All human beings have parts of us that scream for help, we all have issues that are produced from negative thoughts whether it’s: I’m too fat, I’m too thin, I’m ugly, I’m not pretty enough, I’m not
tall enough. Or parts of us that remind us of our short comings; I’m addicted to drugs, alcohol, sex, my own image or analytical thinking and thought, I’m depressed, I’m lonely, I’m lost, I’m confused, I’m not worthy, I’m not smart enough, no one understands me, I’m worthless, I’m not lovable, why is that? And the list of “I’m not’s” go on. Each of these forms of negative thought is experienced through heavy emotions such as sadness, shame, anxiety, etc. The three monsters of emotion as I call them: fear, doubt, and ambivalence, do their job well of holding us back from knowing who are really are and what we are really meant to become.

William Blake showed us the dichotomy between opposites. He wrote that two opposing emotions such as fear and joy expand and contract in direct relation to the presence of the other. We cannot feel total joy and total fear at the same time. This is why real joy is the absence of fear. Happiness happens when things go well. Joy on the other hand comes from a swell of emotion within us and sometimes has to be learned. Developing the ability to recognize and feel joy as opposed to continually feeling fear is a freeing experience. As we come to recognize that joy does not depend on more money, bigger cars, or longer holidays then we begin to recognize the strength of this emotion as part of our daily lives, as part of our psyche, and as part of who we are and how we view the world.  

The danger with fear above all other emotions, is that it paralyzes, so we cannot move in either direction; neither forward nor sometimes backwards to where we began. We cease to exist anymore. This is why we have nothing to fear but fear itself (not people, places, or things), it is powerful, but why we should not give in to that emotion because we can control it by thinking and speaking in the positive.

Fear and doubt leads to ambivalence. For the most part, humans have all experienced the realm of doubt at some point. We tend to live in and out of this state. It is the very thing that makes us question, which can be a good thing, but when we allow it to
become a tape in our mind it becomes more than an emotion but a weapon against ourselves. Ambivalence is essentially confusion in the mind which stems from doubt. It is when we question so much, we begin to question ourselves. Many people walk around confused about themselves and the world because the world sends us multiple mixed messages and we do not recognize or remember our core self to use as a gauge to mark and interact with those mixed messages.

As a result we are then lost in our ambivalence, i.e. confusion, and seek to understand everything and take everything in without filter, which can be dangerous and an overload for the mind, body, and spirit. We are then in danger of taking in what is not good for us, what can actually harm us more than it can help us. We lose focus of the positive nature of our human existence because something that seems good in the short term may actually not be in the long term, but we can no longer distinguish and only want to gratify the pain we feel in the present. True that short term fix (whatever that may be) gives us pleasure and eases our ambivalence, but it will not last and we will once again be lost in our fear and doubt; those things we were running from. Along the journey to really begin to process my true emotional place these were some of the thoughts/feelings that came up for me, around late 2009,

I don’t know what to think. I don’t know what to feel. Sometimes I feel everything at once then I cannot move, I cannot act, I am never in the right place sometimes. I have thoughts, too many at times that I wish or need or want to write down but I don’t, partly because I don’t feel like it, or don’t think I’ll have much to say. Yet when I am in a place I can’t write something down it seems the moment I wish to do so occurs. It is becoming overwhelming sometimes to keep it all inside, suppress and then my thoughts haunt me again, but I’m not sure what they are because now they are all over the place. It is everything, too much at once, nothing I can’t get over but just some thing’s I need to process in order to move through.
Our thoughts and emotions become entwined in a vicious cycle and so you begin to mistrust yourself, as you may have once before, so then we put trust in something else. We begin to place trust in the outside world more than our own heart and left unexamined becomes extremely harmful because we do not know what may be happening to us, how we even got to where we currently are, or how to fix the problem. We have only learned to put on a bandage, not heal the wound. If we cannot fix the wound, I believe we need to learn how to remove ourselves from the things that perpetually cut us until we can figure out how to heal the pain.

For example, the most prevalent wound for women is body image, and more and more men experience this and are talking about it. We all know it’s a major problem and one that is more prevalent in Western society. We all know it is perpetuated by the media, magazines, music, TV, and movie industries; what we see, buy, say and thus do. So why do we continue to allow these things which we feel we can’t change or may not be able to stop, rule us? If we feel we cannot change what is shown on television or printed in most magazines, why do we continue to self medicate on them? Knowing full well that media is not the only issue but remembering we can remove ourselves from a major part of the problem.

For instance, reading magazines once a month or twice a month versus every week; if we can help getting down to none as well as watching less videos and shows that perpetuate self and materialistic negative motivations and behaviors. In the beginning, it is not to remove these things from our lives completely, as most people will tell you going cold turkey doesn’t work, but it is to create a moment and space in our lives that is protected where one can begin to work on self before introducing those things back in the
full dose. Afterwards, you may actually realize you will not need or want some of those same things in the same way because your pain or that need is being filled by you, something more positive. It is about adopting a process of thinking and learning to regulate our emotions and then walking away from the things that harm us. It is the first step in the preservation of our mental health. If the mind isn’t whole, the body and spirit will not be whole. Our emotional self is a starting point to repairing and building the spiritual and intellectual self.

This moment in one’s change of thinking and life choices are important to recognize, and to begin one must first see where you are on the change spectrum. There is a wheel that many counselors use to gauge where we are at in the change process of any issue to heighten our self-awareness. This is where fear may also come in because it will try to stop you from thinking you can make positive changes in your own life. The Stages of Change\(^3\) which most people experience begins with the first stage of “pre-contemplation,” where you look for signs of awareness of an issue but have no expectations of change, and such there is still ambivalence. In this stage you will also find a person who thinks they do not have a problem with a certain issue.

Stage two in the change wheel is “contemplation,” where a person recognizes and thinks about change in the short term but is also getting ready for long term change; this is where you get prepared, i.e. ready to act. Stage three is “preparation determination” where you may be getting into your action steps for change, i.e. getting your running shoes on, even though you may still have ambivalence and anxiety. Stage four of the change process is “action,” where you literally make a change, you are doing it. Some people start with a plan or goal of 30-60 days and checking in with yourself about how
you are doing or asking someone else to check in with you. The final stage in the change process is “maintenance,” where you have hit the 60 day mark or gone beyond. In this stage it’s important to note that you may take one step back but keep moving forward. In the core of the change process is what is called, “relapse,” which is normal but has its consequences, therefore knowing that at any point in the changes you may step back.

It is imperative here that, when and if we relapse from the change process, we do not blame or shame ourselves and remember to isolate the negative self talk. You have to be patient and forgiving with yourself and the process of change. It can take years, months, weeks, or days; it all depends on you as an individual. This is one way to begin moving from negative talk to positive talk and take action. After locating ourselves then we must listen for our own change talk and reward ourselves, giving loving and kindness to our soul. I began to recognize where I was in the change process depending on the issue I was focusing on. This change process can be used with any issue we have. I now understand there were times in my life where I would “overdose” on television and movies as well as music videos because I never had access to them when I was younger.

I realized that I would end up living in those worlds instead of my own, living vicariously through others, which for some can be fine, but when it paralyzes us from living our own lives it becomes an issue. When it increases our level of fear, doubt, and ambivalence, it’s time to let go. After I realized my thought and emotion process I would limit myself and then become tired of certain activities. It is important to remember that it’s not about removing things we may like or enjoy but recognizing when those things are becoming harmful to us. Thinking about the reasons why we do what we do.
**Drunk With The Wine Of The World**

“The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation...and go to the grave with the song still in them.”--Henry David Thoreau

There are a plethora of things human beings do to numb ourselves to the world, but more importantly to our pain and suffering. Some circumstances of numbing are coping mechanisms for our mind and body which is necessary and built internally by our human nature, but, when do some of our man-made coping tools become an excuse? At what point does that mechanism now become more harmful than helpful? Particularly in the Western World, we have become an overdose country. The pervasiveness of drugs, alcohol abuse and other things are at the highest and more visible and ignored than ever before.

Most youth and young adults, including college students use these tools of coping to placate their hurt and loneliness. Then there is the other side of the coin which occurs through our self created hypervisibility, and some would say narcissism, by using web portals such as Myspace, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc to be a poster board for our lives, a way to observe others and can become another form of vicariously living through people. These tools can also be a roaming group for things such as stalking and a doorway for many other forms of violence. In March 2011, a news report was given about a young woman who committed suicide on her webcam and taped it to be aired on one of these web portals for the world to see.

It was then posted and people began to share this around the country. Another report showed that a teen committed suicide online while others watched it live. Other reports given in 2008, 2009, and 2010, show increased rates of teens committing suicide.
after being bullied on Facebook, or after a status update was posted that was disturbing to a teen. More and more of these incidents are happening. How does this bring any positivity to our world? It’s like inviting trouble into your home when you don’t know how to defend yourself. Yes, I do use Facebook, but again such internet vehicles are intensely growing and becoming more of separation tool in ways we are not even noticing and a way to harm our emotional and intellectual self when used in excess.

These vehicles of seduction are useful at first glance, but in particular I was never comfortable in broadcasting my life, and once I realized I was getting sucked in I knew I needed to remove myself, to slow down. Deep down, it never felt right that while a majority of the world was suffering, I was giving myself sedatives to ignore that pain or my perhaps my own. Furthermore, there are so many other forms of medication that our society uses, which most of us know of, such as the sedative of lust, envy, jealousy, gossip, all which if left unattended lead to hatred and bigotry.

Once we have hidden ourselves in these coping mechanisms we sometimes find that it is not enough, the issue we were trying to hide/ignore begins to bubble over and we use other methods to put on yet another bandage. For instance, just think of the pharmaceutical industry alone. The sheer size of product movement and wealth that is produced in that industry via the U.S. alone can be astounding. It is no surprise that the media and companies pushing pharmaceuticals are in a special relationship together. One industry feeds us constant daily messages of paranoia, pleasure, lust, the unending nature of more, more, more and when we can’t have it, we sniff a sense of losing something we never even wanted in the first place.
Thus the concepts of “want and more” become disguised as emotions which turn to anxiety, doubt, and fear. Together the feeling of lose and fear breeds hatred at its core. One industry helps feed our depression, oppression and anxiety with its instantaneous shots and quick visuals going frame by frame ever so slightly right past the levels of our consciousness, therefore we do not have time to slow down and think about what we just saw; what we just allowed and welcomed to be placed in our minds.

I highlight these two industries because although they may help us cope at times, I believe it mainly serves as a tool, whether conscious or not, to allow our minds to stay asleep. To continue to be blind to our self and social ignorance of the world while atrocities are going on right in our own back yard, as well as afar on our own time and dime. One article reported by MSN Health listed the top “attention sappers,” five reasons you can’t concentrate. Here they are: “too little exercise” or “if you’re self-medicating by exercising too much”—say, two to three hours a day—just to keep your restlessness at bay”…technology overload,

“Your BlackBerry, computer, cell phone, and iPod all compete for your attention—no wonder you're distracted! To a certain point, your brain can act as secretary, keeping you organized and helping with time management. But the more multitasking you try to do, the harder it is for you to stay focused on any single task, research shows. Learning basic organizational skills, like writing down responsibilities and maintaining a day planner, can help alleviate these problems. So can taking a break from constant television, Internet, and email inundation—or setting house rules about technology-free times after dinner or before bed, for example.”… Too much stress, “It
competes with your cognitive centers—the areas in the brain that are responsible for quick, sharp thoughts—so being anxious or stressed drags focus down even further.”…"Job satisfaction, “Sure, everyone’s unhappy at work from time to time—maybe your client presentation flopped or your boss gave you a poor performance review. And if a disorganized work environment or a boring project make it difficult to focus, that's completely normal. But if you find that you consistently can't complete projects—to the extent that you're missing deadlines or getting in trouble for it—you probably need medical attention. Or a new job.”…"Not getting enough sleep, “If you’re missing out on sufficient shut-eye—most likely seven to eight hours a night—you’re probably irritable, dealing with mind fog, and have difficulty managing daily tasks. That’s a normal reaction, says Dr. Wilens. “By getting adequate rest, like hitting the sack earlier, you should get your focus back,” he says.”33 Once we have been induced by different forms of media the industry that lays claim to aiding pain and suffering seeps its way into those corners of our pain; the pharmaceutical corporations that push its product to camouflage, diverge, redirect and numb our addictions and pain, but guess what, most of the time the pain is still there. Think about it, we need to take two to three Advil’s, or Motrin’s, or Valium, Ritalin, morphine, or whatever to just numb us. Have we ever really thought about what the perpetual intake of our pharmaceuticals do to our minds and bodies?

Not to mention all the outrageous side effects that many medications can have despite the so called benefits and are sometimes worst than our actual afflictions, such as internal bleeding, vomiting, nausea, leaking bladder, etc. We all know this but we see and
hear them in isolated moments, in isolated incidents so it’s easier for us to ignore them. We become hopeless to changing anything, or just become too comfortable in our own shell to make different life choices. It is clear to me that the benefits of medicating ourselves are not outweighing the cost to the American people as well as the rest of the world; our bodies as well as our minds.

In March 2010, data was collected on the twelve largest pharmaceutical corporations in the world, here are their highest grossing sales: #1-Johnson and Johnson (U.S.)- $61,90 Billion, #2- Pfizer (U.S.)- $50,01 Billion, #3-Roche (Switzerland)-$47,35 Billion, #4-GlaxoSmithKline (UK)- $45,83 Billion, #5-Novartis (Switzerland)-$44,27 Billion, #6-Sanofi-Aventis (France)- $41,99 Billion, #7-AstraZeneca (UK)- $32,81 Billion, #8-Abbott Laboratories (U.S.)- $30,76 Billion, #9-Merck & Co. (U.S.)- $27,43 Billion, #10- Bayer HealthCare (Germany)- $22,30 Billion, #11-Eli Lilly (U.S)- $21,84 Billion, #12 Bristol-Meyers Squibb (U.S.)- $18,81 Billion. The United States is the generator of six out of the twelve of these corporations. Since these corporations are so well endowed then why isn’t the American peoples’ health well endowed as well? And we think and believe they are doing us a favor, the service of saving us? Perhaps we need to think again and take a second look at reality. There is an understanding and I do agree that there is need for some forms of medication when our personal psyches and physical bodies cannot handle themselves, i.e. regarding certain mental disabilities, but we have used this sector of society to pedal our own wants and instant gratification to cover the truth. When will we become self-aware as a nation? Is this ever really possible in a nation of sleepers? Who will wake the other one up?
Know Thyself So No One Can Fool You Or Tell You Who You Are

“Your heart is my heart, Your pain is my pain, Your love is my love, Your world is my world....but where am I?” —Monique Swaby

I learned to regulate my emotions them without hindering them and then acting on the things I wanted most to make a more fulfilling life for myself. I decided I was no longer going to wait for something else, or someone else to come and find me, fix me, love me, give me the things I desired. I was tired of waiting so I decided to move. I began to move using counseling mindfulness as one of my tools and listening to what I really needed and wanted which limited my doubting. I began to limit the things in my life that prevented me from getting to where I needed to be. I began with learning about the mind, and my mind more in detail but also putting it into practice.

Mindfulness is a way to seek knowledge of our thoughts but I also used other tools which I will discuss later on. You typically see the term Mindfulness Counseling but I reversed the use here to counseling mindfulness as it is a means of understanding who we are and actively counseling the best in being present, being aware, and doing something once we get to that understanding. This is my way of saying, it is not enough just to be present and aware, we must do something, engaging fully in our awareness to make change happen in our lives.

One way is through meditation, “Researchers at the University of Wisconsin-Madison found that the relaxation technique can increase your ability to block out distractions. Another study, from researchers at UCLA, suggests that in adults with ADHD, meditation improves attention and eases symptoms of anxiety and depression.”

We have to be self-aware before we can become awakened. The mindfulness technique is
one key to beginning this process, “Mindfulness is at the heart of awakening, of enlightenment. We practice breathing to be able to be here in the present moment so that we can recognize what is happening in us and around us. If what’s happening inside us is despair, we have to recognize that and act right away. We may not want to confront that mental formation, but it’s a reality, and we have to recognize it in order to transform it.”

There is typically a specific language used to guide in this form of meditation but it can vary.

The one thing that is central is the breathe, “Let the attention rest on the breath, in and out, rising and falling. Watch the breath. Focus the mind on the sensation of the breath in the nostrils, in the chest, or in the abdomen. When the mind wanders, as it surely will within a few minutes, bring it back to the breath. It is not that the breath is so inherently fascinating, but the breath is always with us. As a focus of meditation, it is indeed a portable, invisible icon of the Spirit. Returning attention to the breath in meditation practice is a way of learning, slowly, to stabilize one’s attention.”

Focusing is not an easy task in a world that is constantly vying for our attention. How do we give ourselves that space to really understand what is going on for us, what emotions are we feeling and why?, why are you acting and thinking the way you do?, and how can you make positive changes? You see, most of us, most of the time, are not fully awake. The purpose of meditation is not to remove us from the space and time of the world into some otherworldly abstraction. Rather, it is the practice of wakefulness, of mindfulness. Through the practice of meditation, the rambling mind is gradually enabled to pay attention. It is not a doctrine but a practice-cultivating the ability to be fully present, not only in hours of sitting, or meditation, or prayer, but in working and acting. And to be fully wakeful in those times when we are called not to action but to presence.
Perhaps some, if not many of us, fear being aware or awakened because we feel that once we are we must and have to act, make a move, and that action (on a large scale) is the only way to make a change which can be scary. We must remember that just as much as there are a vast array of silent leaders and followers, so are there silent wakeful present people; those whom are needed to hold history and time. The scary thing is when we do not even realize we need to be woken up, when we are in a perpetual sleep which feels like living. We have to take a risk to truly know ourselves at some point in our lives because the world is ever changing and we will get lost without self-awareness.

I wanted to know myself to the best of my present ability so that I could not be easily persuaded by the world around me both intellectually, emotionally, or spiritually. Knowing yourself is an act of love, a gift only you can give yourself. So my wish was to come to truly know and love me even more than I had in the past. I learned about mindfulness and began to ask myself questions intentionally through many different courses in my graduate career which used Scholarly Personal Narrative but also counseling courses that spoke to our human disposition around happiness, communication, trauma, building character and self-esteem in and outside the classroom, etc. I also took a course around religio-spirituality which I will discuss later on in this thesis.

I chose to think about learning and understanding myself as more than just the student, the professional, the friend, the daughter, the lover, the sibling; more than just the roles I play in life but who was I in the dark, who was I by myself and all alone. I began to stay present and more open to my reality through practicing mindfulness so that
I could truly begin to enjoy my experiences and surroundings in life without the constant hope of wishing to wiz through this chapter so I could move on to the next. I dared to ask myself the question, how can I be open to the moment I was living in, bring myself some joy and peace of mind as well as learn to love myself thus sustaining my love for others?

One of the courses I took to know myself a little better and assist with the work I do at the ALANA Student Center was called, “Mindfulness, Happiness, and Health Promotion,” which I took with one of my co-workers. We ended up working on our final research project together and here is one key finding we used,

Some of the mindfulness and happiness skills that we learned and practiced in class could be utilized when we go through the nine choices.

1. **Intention:** Teach the students about mindfulness practices using breath and mindfulness meditations like loving kindness for self and others, being in the “now” without evaluation or judgment, or setting the intention to expect at least one good thing each day.

2. **Accountability:** Practice disputation skills through positive self-talk, utilize meta-cognition to become the observer of one’s emotions, or write a formal letter for empowerment.

3. **Identification:** Create a list of the 10 things or memories you like most in your life.

4. **Centrality:** Create a pleasurable events schedule and plan to act upon them.
5. Recasting: Through mindfulness meditation, reframe a negative memory into a more neutral or positive event or use dialectic moderation.

6. Options: Write down one or two negative experiences and then brainstorm positive alternative outcomes to those experiences.

7. Appreciation: Create a happiness journal—the students could decorate their own.

8. Giving: Encourage the students to practice several random acts of kindness in one day every week or two for a maximum effect of happiness. Have the students brainstorm random acts of kindness they could do.

9. Truthfulness: Have the students write a list of their own personal “truths.” To wrap up the workshop, have the students draw symbols for how these 9 choices fit together (the book gives an example of a solar system) in the larger scheme of their lives, and how it will create synergy to lead to happiness. By the end of the workshop, the students will have been exposed to a variety of mindfulness and happiness skills to practice.

I understood that the old cliché of learning from our negative experiences and reframing them, taking a negative and turning it into a positive was not a cliché at all. We spend too much time not truly thinking and acting out what we say versus criticizing and critiquing each other and our own words. As Jonathon Haidt states, anyone, therefore, can benefit from adversity, although a pessimist will have to take extra steps, some conscious, rider-initiated steps, to guide the elephant gently in the right direction. The first step is to do what you can, before adversity strikes, to change your cognitive style…the second step is to cherish and build your social support network.” Utilizing what you know and moving forward from
where you are is important in mindfulness and happiness practices. Finding that happiness comes from the between is another important factor, “happiness is not something that you can find, acquire, or achieve directly. You have to get the conditions right and then wait. Some of those conditions are within you, such as coherence among the parts and levels of your personality. Other conditions require relationships to things beyond you: Just as plants need sun, water, and good soil to thrive, people need love, work and a connection to something larger. It is worth striving to get the right relationships between yourself and others, between yourself and your work, and between yourself and something larger than yourself. If you get these relationships right, sense of purpose and meaning with emerge.  

My sense of meaning and purpose was beginning to emerge in a way I never expected, at least not at this point in my life, and what I discovered at the end of this journey as a result i.e. coming close to the ending of my graduate career, is more than my heart’s joy can contain. I took some many risks in stepping out of my shell, out of my box and my comfort level, in using my voice when I found my voice, and it has been the best decision of my life for I know who I am, right now, in this present moment, without anyone else telling me who I am or who I need to be. I am me and I am not lost.

Student Services Professional, Informal Counselor, and Teacher: Using All of You To Discover Your Courage

So I found myself not just doing the work of a student services professional in a higher education institution, not just attending graduate courses and learning about myself and how to use my knowledge better in the work I do, but also teaching in the literal sense of the word, in a classroom, in a graduate classroom. I never really knew if I would teach or if that was what I really wanted in the past but I was always open to it, as scary as it may seem. At a young age, there was an inner voice within me that held a deep excitement for knowledge and being in a classroom. I remember playing “school” with
my little brother, me being the teacher and my brother the pupil and having a tiny chalkboard and chalk playing the role.

As a young girl it seemed like so much fun to be able to help children learn about the world and themselves, I also just loved to hold the chalk in my hands and use the eraser to clean the board, I don’t know why? But that dream was lost to playtime and to my reality as I allowed my fears and the world to come in on my way to discovering something else. Who was I as an immigrant, low income, little black girl to be a teacher? Would I ever be able to get a Ph. D to become a teacher? How would I pay for my education? Would I even get into college? Did I even need a Ph. D to teach? What would I teach? Did I have to know everything about the subject matter? Am I smart enough?

Isn’t it boring to be a teacher? You don’t make enough money to make a living. Does money even matter if I am happy? I decided I was not interested in teaching, at the time only thinking about my limited understanding of the profession only being in the classroom, and that there were so many other things I could do. I had a passion for law, the medical profession, sociology, biology, psychology, for so many things, so I explored my options through learning, but my deep playful dream of being a teacher was hidden still within me, soon to be uncovered unexpectedly.

Even though I enrolled in the Masters in Education program, I decided to go the Interdisciplinary Studies route because I wanted to cater my degree to fit my urging to learn about multiple areas of study. I opened myself up to the fact that I probably wouldn’t teach but would work in and with education in some capacity; little did I know I would get a chance to explore that playful moment in my present reality.
After just a year of taking courses in the graduate program and along with all my experience working in the ALANA Student Center, I was asked to co-teach with Dr. Robert Nash of the Interdisciplinary Studies Program, the same program I was in as a graduate student. I was both extremely honored and surprised. Again I thought, who was I to teach? Did I have to know everything? But this time my thinking had changed, what teacher really knows everything about what they are teaching and about the world? I am passionate about the subject matter and that is important.

I had to calm my own fears and it also helped to talk to Professor Nash. It helped that he had complete faith in my abilities, ones I did not even begin to see for myself as I began my new teaching journey. I knew that he would be there right along with me in this teaching experience. After my first semester of teaching and stepping out of my comfort zone, I reflected on where I had come and what I went through. Here is a little vignette into that moment:

It is a rare gift that one has the opportunity to explore a passion they have in life without first having a vast number of life’s years’ experience to go along with it, but nonetheless I had that honor this semester. My passion was and is to learn, to grow with and from others, to help advocate and pass on what little knowledge I hold presently to those in search of it thus enhancing myself as well. That gift was the ability to explore what talents I may have, one that I am discovering may be teaching. I must admit, I was filled with many emotions when I first learned I would be given this occasion.

I could not believe I was being given this gift, this type of responsibility, that someone had hope in my abilities to help aid others in their educational journey whilst
still continuing my own. From reading the students’ evaluation from class, EDHI: 360-Higher Education in America, this has clearly been a journey for them; something new, revolutionary, challenging and wonderful in their life meaning, but it was a journey for me in so many ways as well, one that I have not yet fully processed but will continue to do so in the future. I remember the stress and excitement all rolled into one that I felt thinking about what books to add to the class syllabus or right before my co-teacher and I met to review the class agenda for the semester.

That quickly abated for me as I realized I did have opinions worth hearing, ideas, knowledge and goals to offer and this would be a fun experience as well as a life growth opportunity. I remember the first day of class; I felt so nervous, perhaps a little nauseous. So many thoughts and emotions were running through my mind and body. Would the students like me, does that even matter? Will they think I’m smart and know what I’m talking about? Will I make sense? Will I challenge them? Will they respect me as much as they will the real faculty member in the room? What assumptions will they place on me and perhaps I on them? I was so excited to finally begin the semester and walk through that door but I was also filled with anxiety. I felt hot and cold at the same time, a little jittery I suppose, but that mostly subsided as we reviewed the first day before class began.

I also remembered the words of my boss helping me to get over my fear of performance in another situation, she said, “It is not about you, it is about the information you hold and are there to give to others.” That’s all that truly mattered, no? If I made this out to be too much about myself, I would forget what I came there to do, no? But then I
thought if I removed myself too much perhaps I would lose my purpose and goal. I quickly realized I would have to find a balance but I didn’t know how and what that would look like. So with that in mind, I walked through the doors and took a deep breath, with my Co-Teacher by my side, always there with kind words of affirmation and assurance, he always had everyone’s best interest at heart.

During the first class, I quickly felt I found my footing as my Co-Teacher and I strategized that I would run the first class and we would alternate every other as the semester went on. I think in the beginning this was a scary thought for me to think I would run an entire class agenda every other week, but I came to be very grateful for this option and wanted to challenge myself so I accepted, a part of me also knew I could do this. It was a great idea for me to head the first class in order to gain the respect of what was mostly my peer group, even though I was a year or two older than most students. I found myself in the beginning all about business, very open to everyone but also focused on our open agenda and getting things done in order to appease everyone.

I realized soon enough I could not do this, it was impossible. I learned to go with the flow of how discussions were taken, I was always open to change but as the semester went on I grew to expect it and be ready for it. Planning ahead for having lots of time, creating multiple activities/discussion time for the class but also realizing we might not get to it all and that was ok. I wanted to be able to listen, observe and frame the class to the students needs because after all it was mostly about their learning experience.
My hope and passion was to be able to make sure every student got the best out of this class, out of their learning experience and so I placed perhaps an unattainable goal/expectation on myself and soon realized I was not the only one (as an instructor) who could/should frame their experience, actually I wasn’t the one at all, the students would be the ones who made their own meaning of this class no matter what I did or did not do. Thus I was constructing my balance. The semester went on and I saw the group come together and open up a little more about their experiences.

Overall, in the beginning and mostly to the end of the semester, this was a challenging teaching experience for me, not only because this was my first “formal” teaching role but because it was so unconventional in the realm of what students expect in the classroom, thus trying to express the importance and help them to open their mind and heart to this process was a journey. That is why this style of teaching in SPN and Moral Conversation is all the more appealing for me and I believe so many others including our students. It allowed for everyone in the learning process to be human, to bring their experiences and true voice forward, to apply theory to practice, to see the relevance in what is learned in the classroom and what they experience in the world, but with that like all things comes critique, negative and positive moods; essentially the push and pull of change, of growth and understanding, which is all a part of life.

I believe I gave all I could in this teaching process as well as having a full time occupation and other obligations. Through this experience I have come to realize even more how passionate I am for learning and teaching. My entire life has been surrounded by my education and I always knew and hoped I would one day have the opportunity to
explore the other side of the classroom. I am happy with my efforts to give the best feedback possible to students with their writing (spending an hour per paper and assignment on each student assigned), discussions in class, presentations and progress in general. I believe I helped structure each class time well, with creating agendas and helping my Co-Teacher to form the class as a whole.

I would give myself an A for this independent study but this was not just an independent study for me, this was a life goal, gift and wonderful learning moment in my life. I have learned so much about what teachers, professors, and instructors may go through in and outside of the classroom through their facilitation process of the educational experience. For me, it was a mental, physical, spiritual and emotional process. I have always believed teaching was one of, if not, the most important profession in the world, to be an educator of life, but now I am certain.  

Once I began to find out what I was made of, I wanted to continue to test myself, to take more risks to learn more about what I could and could not do. I began to take on roles or requests that interested me in my professional world, some due to job requirements but others out of the love of helping others, which was the guiding force for my development. Through my work at the ALANA Student Center, I was given a chance to develop even more through my public speaking skills, my presentation style, facilitating, activism for self and others, and becoming more vocal about my passions in life.
I used a lot of what I learned at the Center in my role of empowering others to empower myself in and outside the classroom. I learned to love the good, the bad, and the mysterious. I learned to name it, to (re)discover what it means to be real, because that makes it me. I discovered I could be both a counselor and a teacher. I could cope, I could process even through pain, I could filter. I used my passion because I used my heart. My next task was to learn how to stay in this place, to keep what I had found, to find peace in each moment and opportunity that was given to me. I needed to learn how to control the ego. When most people hear the word “ego” they think about cockiness, over-confidence, self-absorption, selfishness, priorities out of whack, etc.

But what we must come to understand is that the “ego” encompasses both the highs and the lows of our humanity in our emotions. When I refer to “ego” in my story I am mainly talking about those emotions of the “ego” that tear us down, that makes us think we are crazy, that fill us with anxiety and wants to let in those words that distract us and stop us. I had to learn how to control my ego so I could be at peace in both my student affairs role as well as my new teaching role; to balance my ego was to find my peace. There is power in naming things and power came from naming what my “ego” was doing to me.

Just as I realized from my first teaching experience the anxiety and doubt I first felt, I would feel that same feeling in my work spaces where I had to give presentations in front of large groups of people, etc. I used these words that my boss gave to me one day to help guide me in the beginning, she said “It is not about you, it is about the information
you hold, the information people are coming there to hear, that takes the pressure off of you.” That did take the pressure off of me, to understand and to really think about it, it wasn’t about me, so why am I getting so nervous, if I make a mistake, so what, we all make mistakes, and besides they might not even know because I am giving them the information. Once I could name my ego was at play, I could name my fears, and I could move past it, beyond myself and my mind. It is just the same as when a child hears their name called, they tend to smile and light up, just as we as older human beings hear our names it brings recognition to ourselves by hearing, our self-esteem is built up just a little more.

Many teachers learn to say a child’s name in the classroom multiple times and it has proven to uplift them, they listen more, it is a powerful self-esteem building tool, calling someone by their true name. Just think about what names can do, for instance, we all know the famous Shakespeare quote, “what’s in a name?” from the play Romeo and Juliet, it says it all. Those names, their last names, led to the death of two young souls in love; I believe names and words are powerful for that reason. They can bring life and they can bring death so we need to be careful with the things we speak, things we say, and the things we do with and in our name. Jesus knows the power in a name. He called things by name and they appeared. He called things by name and they left.

That is why He said just to call on His name; it’s that simple, because it is by belief in His name that can save. It is by use of a name that Jesus also calls out evil spirits, just by saying a word, i.e. “go” or “walk” and it happened. What we want, we
must call it by name, it comes to because we will it into existence by its name, because it
is made real; things of this world and of our minds cannot hide when we call it by its true
name because now it is in our awareness, in our presence. So I called on my “ego” to let
me go essentially by recognizing it and moving on. If and when it came I would
acknowledge it and let it go.

On the other spectrum of our “ego” is the “I am more than you are feeling,” which
we see all too well in every part of the world and in our journey, and is birthed especially
in schools and in the work place; in societies and spaces where we have too much and
others have too little. I had learned from a young age to temper this feeling, one because
at the time I never really felt this way because of my place in the social ladder, two
because I had an appreciation for people as individuals of both pain and love i.e. we all
suffer and love at some point, and three because I always worked to never feel or gloat in
it, but if I did even for a little, I remembered to humble myself.

That thought and the feeling that comes with, “I am better than you are,” can
come when we get too excited about who and where we are. It is good and important to
appreciate our self-love and hard work but it can overtake us if we do not place our “ego”
in balance. These two sides of our ego cannot be removed from us, they are within us but
we can use it and choose to do what is right. Reverend Martin Luther King Jr.’s speech
entitled the Drum Major Instinct is a phenomenal example of this,

But that isn't what Jesus did; he did something altogether different. He said in
substance, "Oh, I see, you want to be first. You want to be great. You want to be
important. You want to be significant. Well, you ought to be. If you're going to be
my disciple, you must be." But he reordered priorities. And he said, "Yes, don't
give up this instinct. It's a good instinct if you use it right. (Yes) It's a good
instinct if you don't distort it and pervert it. Don't give it up. Keep feeling the need for being important. Keep feeling the need for being first. But I want you to be first in love. (Amen) I want you to be first in moral excellence. I want you to be first in generosity. That is what I want you to do.”... And he transformed the situation by giving a new definition of greatness. And you know how he said it? He said, "Now brethren, I can't give you greatness. And really, I can't make you first." This is what Jesus said to James and John. "You must earn it. True greatness comes not by favoritism, but by fitness. And the right hand and the left are not mine to give, they belong to those who are prepared." (Amen) ...And so Jesus gave us a new norm of greatness. If you want to be important—wonderful. If you want to be recognized—wonderful. If you want to be great—wonderful. But recognize that he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. (Amen) That's a new definition of greatness...And this morning, the thing that I like about it: by giving that definition of greatness, it means that everybody can be great, (Everybody) because everybody can serve. (Amen) You don't have to have a college degree to serve. (All right) You don't have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve. You don't have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve. You don't have to know Einstein's theory of relativity to serve. You don't have to know the second theory of thermodynamics in physics to serve. (Amen) You only need a heart full of grace, (Yes, sir, Amen) a soul generated by love.

Indeed I am a servant to others because I love wholeheartedly, and that is what I have always wanted to be, the helper to those who need it most, those who are just like me, human.

I learned that self-awareness of my emotional self and the self-awakening of my spiritual self can occur simultaneously. Your awakening can begin, when you are at a certain point of the self-awareness journey. Being aware of my minds’ state through counseling and mindfulness I also began to be truly intentional about my spiritual awakening and it took an act of faith (trust) to fully wake up.

All of us know that our beautiful green planet is in danger...Yet we act as if our daily lives have nothing to do with the condition of the world. We are like sleepwalkers, not knowing what we are doing or where we are heading. Whether we can wake up or not depends on whether we can walk mindfully on our Mother Earth. The future of all life, including our own, depends on our mindful steps. We have to hear the bells of mindfulness that are sounding all across our planet...We need a collective awakening. There are among us men and women who are awakened, but it’s not enough; most people are still sleeping. We have
constructed a system we can’t control. It imposes itself on us, and we become its slaves and victims.  

CHAPTER 3: AN ACT OF FAITH: ALLOWING THE LOVE OF THE SPIRIT TO TAKE OVER

“God is my core, love is my core, God is love. Angels are God’s heavenly hosts and we His earthly. Angels are here to help guide us.” - Monique Swaby

Towards the ending of my first teaching experience in 2009 my self-awareness transformed into my self-awakening by my decision to really seek what spirituality meant and what it meant to me. The “first awakening of the self can happen anywhere and anytime, in any society and culture. The second awakening of the self is a discovery that is also a disturbance- the discovery of the secret of our infinity and the disturbance of the arrangements and beliefs that conceal or repress it. Although it maybe prefigured anywhere and anytime as prophecy, its regular occurrence in human life is a collective as well as an individual achievement.”

This time the awakening of my spiritual self was both collective and individual. It occurred out of choice in a group but most importantly individually, in the quiet, with myself and my spirit,

The day my co-worker asked if I would like to attend a “Ladies Retreat” that her church was having was one day in the life of Monique Swaby that I will never forget, as it led to a weekend that has changed my life for the better. For over a year, I wanted to find a church in my new hometown of Burlington, VT but I never really made the effort and with limited travel resources I didn’t have many options but I had to find a way, as I knew this was part of the reason I came to Vermont. Don’t ask me how I know, I just knew, but I think it was my intuition. I’ve been trying to understand and listen to what that means, ya know. So I explored a church located a block away from my home and attended three services, which served their own purposes and took
sometime getting used to, but I still wasn’t sure if this church would be the place I rediscovered my religio-spiritual path. When my co-worker asked me to attend the retreat I jumped at the chance but I was worried I may not be able to afford the entire trip. My colleague said she would ask if there would be a way and somehow there was. It wouldn’t be long before I realized that this “Ladies Retreat” would open that religio-spiritual door for me once again in a way I never saw coming. We arrived at the quaint and upscale Stowehoff Inn. My co-worker and I shared a room and when we entered we found chocolate on our beds with a retreat packet. Inside held our weekend schedule, a small book, a pen and a pack of tissues. When I saw tissues in my packet, tears did not register to me. I didn’t think I was gonna cry, which is ironic. I actually thought to myself “oh that’s sweet, they have tissues in case anyone has a cold.” Maybe I was in deep denial but I think I just left my expectations at the door. I had none, no idea what amazing revelations were about to unfold, what immense energy I would experience that weekend. It was a weekend full of hope, love, renewal, tears, music, good food, beautiful lush mountain scenery and most importantly, awakening. There was a moment during the retreat where I took a walk alone, our quiet time to reflect. I went outside. Outside where the sun was midlevel to half the sky with clear autumn mountains on one side and on the other, snow capped mountains. Suddenly the wind touched my cheeks, as I cried, as if God was wiping away my tears, I heard what I believe to be God say, “Don't worry child,” the wind touching my cheeks as I prayed for forgiveness, “I have forsaken you once again and can no longer feel you as I once did, no more will I, no more,” but I didn’t really, I was just lost in my questioning. I felt so alive then! It was a weekend that saved me and has given me moments that continue to do so every time I reflect on it. You could say there are many beliefs in my story and I feel there are because as I write this I see and feel them clearly. I believe in the power of asking, of friendship, of love, angels, sacrifice, but there is only one that I wish to make clear for myself and in these words I write. I believe in God.

After the retreat I was infused with a new sense of self; self-confidence increased and the anxiety I felt in spaces where I was asked to be a public face faded. My spiritual self calmed my ego; it took almost a year to get to that place once I began this journey. The year before I believe was a test, my trial to fully understand what I believed and why; to test the tides that will come, to prepare me for my future, my calling.
Waking Up From the Dream

“This is your last chance. After this, there is no turning back. You take the blue pill - the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill - you stay in Wonderland and I show you how deep the rabbit-hole goes.”

Being asleep can be dangerous to our spirits. It is like living in the world and having that feeling you may get sometimes when you are at a place or in a situation where time is flying by and you don’t know why or how. When you are awakened, it seems as if you on Earth have slowed down, while the rest of the world continues to move at its fast pace, and you are now moving with the slow flow of the Earth’s rotation as the clouds do. You are ever present and more aware and awake to the things around you. It is like you were given eyes for the first time.

Self-awareness is to awake from the dream of a sleeper. It is the merging of the emotional self with the spiritual self all at once. It is where we experience something bigger than ourselves. We are now free to think and choose how we wish to live, no longer under the spell of the world, we no longer fear. Freedom from fear comes with self-awareness because now you know yourself and what you can do. The awakening of the spiritual self is the revelation of passion through pain. It was a way to my own consciousness. When we can find our passion we become alive. I was once dead but now I am alive, this is what Jesus has done for me. My faith has made me whole.

The self-awareness of the spiritual self begins for many people with a religion or spirituality. Religion. Spirituality. Religio-Spirituality. What does that even mean? How do we live that out? Why do we need it? Why do some people seem to exist with it and others without, at least for a certain point in one’s life? The Latin definition of the word religion means to bind. Essentially that is what religion is meant to do, as it is an
institutional man-made structure, bind people; to cultures, to laws, and societies together through customs, rituals, and certain practices. Spirituality is based on a more super and natural thought process and experience, something we cannot see so much as feel, even though both are possible,

_Spirituality_ is a term much in use in the 1990s. For many, the word _religion_ is too thing-ish, too static, too exterior and institutional in its present connotations. The term _spirituality_ has come to the rescue, designating the vibrant ‘inner dimension of the person called by certain traditions ‘the spirit.’ Clearly, for many people ‘spirituality’ has a more positive connotation than “religion.” Spirituality as the inner dimension of religiousness has always been an integral part of Christian life, and indeed of all religious life in virtually every tradition. In the past decade, however, the use of the term has mushroomed and has taken over much of the verbal domain of the term _religion_. I am quite sure that Brother Van in frontier Montana did not use the word _spirituality_ and would have associated it with spiritualism, séances, and the occult. Today, however, the term seems to connote ‘real religiousness’ or ‘religion that really means something.’ The popular fascination with this term is an important fact of our time.

It has come to the attention of many that “spirituality is not simply a matter of belief or a warm feeling of intention. It is a ‘practice,’ a ‘how,’ a ‘technique,’ ‘a way,’ a spiritual _discipline_. It is experimental. ‘Come and see’ was the invitation of the Buddha. Don’t believe in me or in what I have to say, but try it out for yourself. The experimental nature of the practice has appealed to many in the West.” Therefore, religion and spirituality are both separate whilst being the same entity all in itself, it cannot be fully separated,

“I do not underrate the importance of the intellectual side of religion, but all who do personal religious work know that the real hunger among the laity is not for halting attempts to reconcile theology and physical science, but for deep things of the Spirit…We look to the clergy to help and direct our spiritual growth. We are seldom satisfied, because with a few noble exceptions, they are so lacking in spiritual realism, so ignorant
of the laws and experiences of the life of prayer. Their Christianity as a whole is humanitarian rather than theocentric…God is the interesting thing about religion, and people are hungry for God.\textsuperscript{50} I believe these questions are relevant to everyone including non-believers.

We all search for something and even a belief in nothing is a belief in something. This is why Secular Humanism is a religion just the same,

In the broader sense, religion is any belief system of ultimate values that shapes our pursuit of a particular kind of life in the world. This is the reason that it is quite fair to call secularism a religion, and Christianity as well. However, virtually all religions require to one degree or another a form self-salvation through merit. They require that people approach God and become worthy through various rites, observances, and behaviors. This is also what most people think of when they think of religion, and in this sense Christianity as presented in the New Testament is radically distinct. That is why for the purposes of this chapter we will speak of Christianity as distinct from “religion.”\textsuperscript{51}

Because in the New Testament of the Bible, one does not have to do anything to merit God’s love for salvation, it just is, and because it is only received through faith not works or laws i.e. rituals or practices, which I will discuss later on.

Some religions may not have a deity defined as “God,” but there are other forms in which salvation comes through what is referred to as “god substitutes.” But “if we use Kierkegaard’s definition we can categorize various ‘god substitutes’ and the particular kinds of brokenness and damage that each one brings into a life. So we could discern some of the following:

- If you center your life and identity on your spouse or partner, you will be emotionally dependent, jealous, and controlling. The other person’s problems will be overwhelming to you.
• If you center your life and identity on your family and children, you will try to live your life through your children until they resent you or have no self of their own. At worst, you may abuse them when they displease you.

• If you center your life and identity on your work and career, you will be a driven alcoholic and a boring, shallow person. At worst you will lose family and friends and, if your career goes poorly, develop deep depression.

• If you center your life and identity on money and possessions, you’ll be eaten up by worry or jealousy about money. You’ll be willing to do unethical things to maintain your lifestyle, which will eventually blow up in your life.

• If you center you life and identity on pleasure, gratification, and comfort, you will find yourself getting addicted to something. You will become chained to the ‘escape strategies’ by which you avoid the hardness of life.

• If you center your life and identity on relationships and approval, you will be constantly overtly hurt by criticism and thus always losing friends. You will fear confronting others and therefore will be a useless friend.

• If you center your life and identity on a ‘noble cause,’ you will divide the world into ‘good’ and ‘bad’ and demonize your opponents. Ironically, you will be controlled by your enemies. Without them, you have no purpose.

• If you center your life and identity on religion and morality, you will, if you are living up to your moral standards, be proud, self-righteous, and cruel. If you don’t live up to your standards, your guilt will be utterly devastating.” 52
Many things in our world do not last. The problem is not having these things, for many of them are used and some necessary for the practices and rituals of life, but the issue is that all of these things are not permanent, so how can we save ourselves in our darkest hour when the things of this world are gone, with the fact in mind that, most people want to be saved to live out their lives and only a small portion wish to die. For me all those other things, “god substitutes” were only temporary fixes to my human disposition i.e. nothing lasts long or has made my joy permanent than my belief in a higher power.

Not music, partying, dancing, eating, fashion, art, spending the high and low moments with friends and family. The relational things experienced with people are the most constant moments, but all those will also go away. It does not mean I do not enjoy them, want them or need them, but it is not enough. The love we give each other as human beings does not compare to the love I receive from God. If you believe that God is within you then that equates to the love I give myself. For me, the true self awakening of my spiritual self has come through faith not religio-spirituality. It began with it, because I used religio-spirituality as a pathway but it was and is ultimately not my goal or end path.

I believe my faith has helped me begin the journey to become my higher human self. When one believes, when I believe, it is not because or out of belief in something else or out of guilt, or pain, or fear but out of an act of love, an act of strength, courage, and ultimately faith. Finding one’s religio-spirituality will eventually frame and help create a self-awakened being through faith. As humans we have faith in many things of this world. We have learned at home and at school, essentially socialized by this world, to believe and live out our true selves. It takes an act of faith to believe our parents, to
believe our teachers, our doctors, our partner and spouses, our friends, our accountants, our banks, our government, our employers.

If I can believe all these things, many of which I really can’t see its true nature, prove, or without a doubt say won’t hurt or fail me one day in life, then why would I not have faith in a Creator whom I have always felt, deep down, right by my side living as my conscience within me, as my inspiration, my compass, my intuition; that thing inside that has always steered me from harm when I choose to LISTEN! In reality, isn’t that the only thing we can count on, the thing that exists inside us?

**Religio-Spirituality Transcended to Faith**

“I forgot myself in order to become myself; I ended so I could begin again.” - Monique Swaby

Before I came to faith I went back and forth, rightfully so in my questioning because I resided in the religio-spiritual state where, “No religion is without ugliness, perversion, and distortion, for religious traditions, especially religious institutions, are not dropped from heaven, but are our human creations as we struggle to respond to our sense of the Transcendent. Many of the people who have dropped out of churches in disgust or boredom are truly interested in religious questions and intrigued to discover that some people like myself, who call themselves Christians, wrestle with the implications of Hindu philosophy, practice “Buddhist” meditation, and think that Christianity is not over, but still in the process of becoming.”

This is why the process of self-awakening needs its own space and time for us to think about where this journey might take us, to experience the true meaning of living a full life, stepping outside the dream covering our eyes. In the beginning, I went back and forth, “This going out and coming back, this broadening and narrowing, this endless
movement among the different levels of consciousness is the first awakening of the self: an awakening to the experience of distinct personality and embodied spirit. It takes place under a double shadow: the shadow of the need to reckon with other people and the shadow of the need to come to terms with the organized structure of the society in which we find ourselves.”

For me this is a journey I am still trying to unfold at the age of only twenty-six which began so long ago, seemingly my entire life. It took many things and many layers for my awakening to begin, but for the lack of time and your eyes, I will only address a portion of my faith path that have brought about this life altering shift. This has been central to my soul’s development, compass, and joy and thus has made its way back into my life, time and time again, even when I have run away knowingly from its grip. The journey to self-awakening isn’t easy but it’s so worth the wait, the time and you are worth it. So let me tell you a story, you have a story don’t you? Well this is part of mine, one that began the path that awoke the heart and soul within. This is a letter I wrote to a kindred spirit who I’ve come to love more and more throughout the years:

Dear Dash,

I cannot write this letter without first putting things into context with my truth, my foundation in some sense, what I have found to be my religion at this moment in time, Christianity. It is ironic that I can reveal this to you when I know that compared to some, my knowledge of Christianity is not as deep rooted. To be honest, even though I do not and have never belonged to a church for an extensive period of time, I have always believed in God and Jesus Christ, so in essence this would make me a Christian. It took me awhile to really own up to this and at times I believe I still struggle with claiming this
label because I never really thought of myself within the definition of how some may define Christianity as I do not practice the religion word for word.

I also find myself running away from the term because where I stand, many people believe this religion to be vile and filled with hate and I am not these things and do not believe that is how I am practicing this faith. I only see what I believe God and Jesus Christ meant this to be and how life is hoped to be lived, with love and acceptance. I yearn to belong to a community where I can truly find fellowship with others who believe in the same things I do in order to relate my real life issues, on a day to day basis, and find support through my faith. To that end, I have been searching for the past two years, while back home in New York City after my return from college, to truly search for that human connection because I have always felt some relationship to the divine but I am cognizant that I need both.

I have chosen to believe in a specific religion's deity, even though I have never followed all its laws to the letter but I try to live my life through its lens because it makes sense to me. I realize that my entire life thus far has been blessed, that God and Jesus Christ have given me this gift through their love, yet my life is not perfect and has been filled with pain that some have or may never feel, “that moment with Lisa taught me a lasting lesson about the sociology of religion: the heart of even the most ardent religious believer will provide more accurate clues to his or her behavior than the theology of his or her faith.”

56
This is one of the only things I have ever known to be a truth in my life. My belief and faith nurtured by God and His sons’ love is the lens in which I see the world, thus with which I analyze, feel and try to live my life. Don't get me wrong, I am familiar to a certain extent with other religions or faiths, so I have thought about but not practiced other alternatives because in my heart there was always something that kept me glued to God and Jesus Christ, thus linking me with Christianity.

I realize now, as I am writing this, because I understand one cannot truly have a valid argument until you experience that thing you are trying to defend or reject for yourself, that I cannot begin to practice an alternative religion or to believe in anything other than God and Jesus Christ until I have fully immersed myself in the rituals of the Christian religion,

Remain in me, and I will remain in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it remains in the vine, so neither can you unless you remain in me…. I am the vine; you are the branches. The one who remains in me- and I in him- bears much fruit, because apart from me you can accomplish nothing… My commandment is this – to love one another just as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this – that one lays down his life for his friends….You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that remains, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name he will give you. This I command you – to love one another (John 15: 4-17).

Perhaps I was chosen to believe in this faith through divine intervention. This is not to say that I do not respect or understand others who believe in something else, this is just my truth at this point in my life.

In my eyes, no one has the right to take away another’s beliefs and freedom to choose. Judgment, suffocation, and bondage by one another are not things I know my
Divine guider would want for this world, thus the reason why I believe He allows me the power to choose. I must determine whether or not Christianity is something I wish to believe in at all, as a whole or will I be at peace with taking from parts of this faith and making it my own.

It provokes me and once again is ironic at times that I feel I must defend my choice to others for stating what I choose to believe in when I am not truly immersed in the rituals of this religion but because of the choice I make to still believe, “My father had always been lukewarm about religion. He had been slow to come to prayers…For him, faith is about service, not rituals.” Unfortunately I have never been consistent at praying myself and perhaps I saw the generosity of helping others and giving love as the real truth in Christianity because some of its doctrine I learned or heard from Christians did not seem to fit my theory of love. I am also disturbed that at times I want to escape labeling myself as a Christian because of the negativity that others see with that religion yet I still want to believe that Jesus truly exists.

I know if I choose to believe in Jesus then others will categorize me yet my fundamental nature does not care what others think of me because I try to take what I see as the true meaning of Christianity and apply it to my life in the most positive light. That is what I feel God intended “religion”, as we humans have labeled it to be, simply a guide. Please allow me to explain how I have come to my present ideology whose core is never wavering but walls are permeable and ever evolving, fragments of light will always seep through me because I will always be open to change and knowledge.
You see, when I was in Jamaica, I was christened in the Anglican Christian church, I still remember my first communion and went to church for a short time with my family. Soon thereafter pain and suffering came in the form of domestic violence in the home. There were moments when I thought my childhood in Jamaica was a good one because I don’t remember seeing much of the violence just moments in time although I know it happened before and after my birth and there are others where I remember differently. Perhaps my mind has chosen to block it out or after my birth this act was done mainly in silence, not as overtly violent but afflicted upon my mother in more of a controlling manipulative way.

At that age, my mind could not fully conceptualize what was happening but I do remember my heart growing scared as it began to fill with fear for my mother; I felt confused. I cannot remember much of what happened that year I spent with my grandparents away from my mother’s side while she left the country to prepare my sister and my arrival into the U.S., but I do know that it was one of the happiest times in my life. My grandfather would always tell my sister and me the most amazing Anansy stories, the tales of a spider, before going to bed, which were always funny and comforting.

My grandmother getting my sister and I ready for school every morning, sitting on the kitchen stoop, combing our thick long curly hair into a bun, and my uncles who loved me and I them but there was one in particular, Phillip, who would always playfully pinch my nose until it was red. I wasn’t taken to the church in town that year but I knew my grandparents did believe in God. I don’t remember saying goodbye to my mother but
I do remember the last time I saw my father as a child, at my grandfather’s funeral. My mother’s father died unexpectedly that year just before I was to leave for North America. I remember seeing my grandfather in the casket at the funeral surrounded by beautiful flowers near my grandparents’ genep tree and my father as he grabbed me before I jumped into my grandfather’s grave as they were throwing dirt on the coffin.

I have seen my father twice since then and I believe I have forgiven him for the pain he caused my family and our mother because I know deep down he is a good man, and he has changed. I didn’t have the courage to talk about that life with my mother, but soon, in time that will come. In my heart, I love my father because he is a part of me and I believe at the core people are not bad, it is their actions and choices that make them so, thus I must forgive them because it is the only thing my heart tells me to do and so that negativity does not continue with my anger and resentment. It is what Jesus and God do every day.

Thus alone at age six I flew on Air Jamaica to the U.S. with my ten year old sister to live with my mother, who had decided once and for all that despite the life she knew and her success, she would rather start a strange and new journey in order to survive and keep her children safe. My mother left Jamaica for the U.S. to start anew, I was young and I could see she had lost hope in the divine, understandably. Yet she still sent my sister and me to church on Sundays while staying at home and working two jobs at the time. She allowed me to make a choice for myself.
To that end, my faith in God and Jesus began to grow deeper as I grew and attended a small Episcopalian Sunday school and then its church services with my sister and our two friends who were also siblings, not truly understanding the sermons in full but listening, feeling, and singing the glory and beauty that was God. Eventually, my sister stopped attending church services as she grew into the teenage years, “adolescent identities can shift in an instant. I went from being a bad boy to a goofball to a Class A nerd.” My sister found other things to occupy her time. This left me without the connection of a sisterly relationship because she was gone most of the time. So after school, I was alone during the afternoons until my mother came home from work and then my baby brother came along; he became my company.

I still attended church but Pentecostal services now with my only real friend at the time, Tashian. Her sister became absent as well, so it was Tashi and I, that’s what everyone calls her for short, going to church every Sunday during Junior High, but now we would sit in the back of this huge gothic-styled edifice with stained glass windows where it was always quiet, chewing gum and falling asleep from time to time. We still participated in the service and listened to the pastor but it didn’t feel the same. Perhaps it was the size of the building or the quiet almost lifeless ceremony that detached, bored or couldn’t capture me, or perhaps it was a feeling that I was in school being lectured.

I could not hear God as humans hear one another but yet I would feel happy when I left and glad that I came; at times I believed and realized, that warmth I felt was God, I was there for a reason. I went away to Ridgefield, CT for high school and during those four years I attended church services only three times in three different churches,
one being Catholic, “Religious ritual did not so much fade into the background as it got
elbowed aside by another faith, a force both glittering and suffocating: American
achievement.”59 I became caught in the race to uncover who I was through what I wanted
to achieve from attending college and having a career all the while knowing that this
alone would not fulfill me.

The third time I attended church was during my senior year of high school. My
housemate and sister in spirit, Aileen, had participated in as well as helped organize a
religious retreat called Emmaus and thought it would be a great idea for me to partake in
during my first year of high school, she was a senior at this time. I was a little skeptical,
which had nothing to do with my trust in her, and gave it little thought after she
graduated. All through high school I would hear students talk about this retreat as if it
was a cult, while never having experienced it for themselves. I decided that this retreat
may be just what I needed during my senior year, as I began to thirst again for that
warmth, that tangible connection to God and Jesus.

The Emmaus retreat was an amazing moment in time for me, because although I
did not hear the voice of God or witness a miracle as humans wish to define it, it was a
timeless event. I spent a weekend with a group of students who I had passed in the
hallway of school, had a conversation with a few times or never knew at all. We shared in
the experience of wonderful activities to affirm our love for one another as humans and
shared our stories. We washed each other’s hands as Jesus did to all, laughed, and ate
together as well as trusted one another. I left there feeling love without fear and
oppression. I felt comfortable even though I was the only Black participant in a sea of White.

We ended the retreat by saying phrases of affirmation to one another in the church and celebrating love and community without formal ceremony. I took a chance and experienced for myself what others saw from the outside as a cult and I left with that warmth restored in my heart, that glow renewed so much it lasted through my college years. During my first year at college, I participated in a student-led Christian Fellowship Group but my time there did not last long, as the “American Achievement” seeped back in. My senior year was marked from the beginning with the worst news, the tragedy and murder of my innocent fourteen year old cousin. News my mother traveled with unbeknownst to me, to my dorm room to inform me.

As soon as I saw her at my door, I immediately knew something terrible had happened, she had called me earlier in the week to tell me my cousin was in the hospital but that he would be ok because she did not want to worry me during my exams, as he was already gone and upsetting me now would not help; she waited to tell me out of love. I sat on my bed and could not contain my tears any longer as my mother consoled me and held me in her arms. When I finally composed myself, she told me to pack and we left ten minutes later for NYC; to face my family, to see what words cannot describe tear at their hearts and put to rest one of the most loving gifts God had placed in our lives, Andre Fredrick Anderson.
I believe this tragedy brought me closer to God even though I could have blamed Him but somehow something I cannot describe wrapped me in a cocoon of love. That cocoon secured my heart from enacting that excruciating pain where one may never pick themselves up again. Perhaps it was the fact that I knew we could not all fall apart at the same moment because some of us needed to be functional to help organize his burial and ceremonies. I could only let my pain out in brief moments or when I could not control it, such as when I read the Eulogy I wrote for Andre.

I returned to Smith the following week filled with pain and confusion but also thoughts of the Divine which was illuminated in my conversations with friends but that didn’t last long. I retreated to the silent conversations in my mind and for the rest of the year tried my best to function. I attended three church services during the end of my senior year in a community which I was open to bonding with, but my time at Smith College had ended and I had to return to NYC where my search continued.

There I took the first of a few Biblical classes I wanted to gain knowledge around in order to strengthen my belief and perhaps answer a few questions. The first and only class I had the opportunity to take was called the “Doctrine of Hell”, based solely on Revelations in the Holy Bible. It was a great way for me to decipher some of my concerns but I don’t know if that helped me find clarity or thrust my confusion to the forefront of my mind, the place I was avoiding. That class and a few choices thereafter hurled me to a religion class in Vermont and my continued soul search.
The questions I have to find an answer must begin with my relationship to Christ in order to find a resolution to maintain my faith and fully exist to experience another. In essence Dash, this sums up where my life is, the culmination of moments, thoughts, feelings, love, pain, anger, and joy in my life thus far which are all based in the reality of my religio-spiritual existence. I am still working this thing out. I’ll keep you posted.

Sincerely,

Your Hopeful, Confounded, but always Loving One

P.S. I addressed my letter to you Dash (-) that entity that connects, where my journey is played out, representing my life from the reality of my beginning to its end, whenever that may be.

My religio-spirituality was beginning to transcend into faith as it came through much hardships and moments in time where one could have left a life of belief, running towards resentment and pain but something sustained even in the doubt. A sense of awareness of the universe, of something higher than oneself, awakened in me. I chose my own happiness but I was not the only player in that game.

**How Do We Find Our Spirit in the Midst of Chaos?**

“In any case, our, ‘interfaith dialogue’ does not usually begin with philosophy or theory, but with experience and relationships.” –Diana Eck

We can find awakening through love, kindness, and understanding. And for awakening to occur at some point we must find a quiet place to rest, reflect, and listen. When the world is loud you have to shout louder to be heard, to block out the noise of ridicule and objection. Once you are awake you can never forget, you will always know
and you will always want to be in this place. I highlight this P.O.D song, an American alternative metal/rap metal band formed in 1992, which is a testament to how I felt in the first moments of the self-awakening of my spirit,

Everyday is a new day, I’m thankful for every breath I take, I won’t take it for granted, So I learn from my mistakes, It’s beyond my control, sometimes it’s best to let go, Whatever happens in this lifetime, So I trust in love, You have given me peace of mind, chorus: I feel so alive for the very first time, I can’t deny you, I feel so alive, I feel so alive for the very first time, And I think I can fly, Sunshine upon my face, A new song for me to sing, Tell the world how I feel inside, Even though it might cost me everything
Now that I know this, so beyond, I can’t hold this, I can never turn my back away
Now that I’ve seen you, I can never look away

.bridge: Now that I know you (I could never turn my back away), Now that I see you (I could never look away), Now that I know you (I could never turn my back away), Now that I see you (I believe no matter what they say.)

The feeling is indescribable, you just know, all your senses are alive, all your dreams seem so possible, even if some of them to others may seem so silly. You will want to love again, you will want to live again, you will know that you can and will. You will know you can be and make home wherever you choose. Once you are awake, you will never turn back. I reflected on my faith journey up until that point in my life.
I wrote that letter to Dash in a course called *Religion, Spirituality, and Education* and received feedback from the course instructor, which helped to reveal more of my thought process around my faith. Below I have included the dialogue thread that unfolded:

*Robert to Me:*

Dear Monique,

I loved reading your epistolary SPN. Thank you for allowing me to know your better. The strength of your Christian faith is inspiring to me. Your faith seems to be non-doctrinal, more heart- than head-based. Whenever I hear Jesus stories, I am inclined to think that he was more heart than head. In the end, I wonder if his kind of heart-love is far more enduring and meaningful than head-love.

For what it's worth (and it may be worth nothing), I am moved by your heart-felt Christian love and charism. Your interchange with Candace that amazing evening in our class will be in my memory forever. You, the non-dogmatic, caring Christian having a conversation with a wonderful woman who at this time in her life is questioning everything about her own Christian upbringing. You are, indeed, a Christian, in the most wonderful sense. I hope you don't read this as my wanting to reduce your religio-spirituality to a secular meaning. This is far from my intention.

I get the sense that, for you, as for Eboo Patel, your life is a continual searching for religio-spiritual meaning. You are open to anything and everything on your journey. I know that "Dash" understands. Dash knows that you will be "working this thing out" as long as you live.

I do have a few questions that I hope come across as open-ended, the way I intend them to. Do you agree with Eboo that in order to be a religio-spiritual pluralist, one first needs to be rooted in a particular faith tradition? Diana Eck, the great comparative religions scholar at Harvard, believes this to be true. Do you think that, for you, Christianity is the most perfect personification of religion? Would it ever be possible for you to believe in another narrative conception of God or church? When your life is at its lowest point, do you pray to Jesus? Is it possible to make profound connections with other outside of a faith tradition? How does one maintain one's faith commitment when all around everything seems to be falling apart (my grandson asked me this the other day)? Could you ever get close to an out-atheist who was loving, generous, and supportive of you? I
I have met many Christians, as well as believers in other religious traditions, who think that atheists are nothing more than vile pagans. This doesn't at all appear to be your signature essence.

My Response to Robert:

Dear Robert,

First and foremost, I would like to thank you for always taking the time to read and interpret my letter. You seem to always be able to capture what I mean which is wonderful. I truly appreciate and respect your interpretation and reflection on my letters. You are wonderful at validating what others see as important in their lives and that is giving meaning to others, which is rare and what we want and need the most as you know, so thank you! For the second time, as this is my second letter, I am honored by your praises and it fills my heart with gratitude.

I am delighted that you see hope and love in my meaning as this is what I feel and wish to express because that is what is in my heart. I do believe and always have that it is the heart-love that is everlasting and not the head-love because it gives us more purpose and connection through our senses as we are human and this is what we are born with and die with when all other over things go out. The fact that you are moved, as an Atheist/Secular Humanist, by my faith does move me and is worth something to me. I was surprised myself with the conversation I had with Candace during our second class, not because this was out of the ordinary but because it was in public and I can be painfully shy sometimes, but I felt as if Candace and I were in a bubble protected and free to speak because that is what our relationship is, free from boundaries and walls, filled with love.

Like Eboo, I too will always be on a continuing journey because life with all its wonderful "messiness" will always find someway to challenge me and help me grow, there will always be something new to discover because my heart is open so Dash understands and will have to understand in order for me to exist and be happy.

I believe it is easier to be a religio-spiritual pluralist if you are first rooted in a particular faith tradition because you have some context to draw from whilst on the otherhand this can make it even more challenging; it may depend on the context and/or the personal narrative. It is easier but I don't think it is impossible and necessary to be rooted in a religio-spiritual experience. One can gain as much clarity and meaning from starting with a blank slate as from having that foundation partly because if you have nothing to begin with you may not have any expectations, hopes or visions of what your end should be, you only live to experience that journey in the here and now, as long as you are
inspired to continue to search. In addition, that "blank slate" has a narrative to refer from even if it is not a traditional faith therefore there may be something to draw from indeed.

The remaining questions are truly open-ended for me because it is something I have been discussing, conflicted with and reforming for most of my young adult life. I have never seen Christianity as the most perfect personification of religion because nothing is perfect in my eyes or in my God's eyes and I believe the way humans see "religion" is not what He created, but for me because Christianity represents believing in Jesus Christ I do see it as a personification of Him who was said to be perfect but not of the religion, meaning better than anything else or above all things. I do think that it may be possible for me to believe in another conception of Church but not perhaps God...for me..God is everything and everywhere so there is no limit to that even though I will personify God a certain way in order to identify God to others. Church for me as well can be a community in general not just an edifice but a fellowship as the relationship between friends because God is there. I do not pray as I should or want to, I realize I talk with Jesus and God more than I pray in my mind. I always thank Jesus and will always be grateful but the ritual of prayer is one of the something’s I need to work on. I can always make profound connections with others outside my faith and with other faith traditions because I see many intersections especially around the necessities of humanity such as wanting or needing a purpose, hope, love. I believe for myself and perhaps for many others that when all else is falling apart, your faith is the only thing you can hold on to, it is hope. It's funny though that the one thing, faith, that is not tangible is the thing people hold on to the most when the real world tangibles are taken away, I guess hope is transferred from one thing to another. It is the only way to survive, if you have nothing what is the point of living and who really wants to die when the prospect of death for most is unthinkable because it is truly the unknown. I do believe I have gotten close with out-athiest and I try to live my life and be open to all because that is true love, that is what I am and was born to do, give and represent love whether or not in turn I will receive love.

Robert’s last response to me:

Monique,

Your response to my response is extremely helpful to me. I learn more about you each time you write.

In some ways, I think of you as a spiritual Christian, not a denominational one--except for the faith that you have in Jesus Christ. I also appreciate your faith as a "continuing journey." A great thinker once said this about faith: "The opposite of faith is not atheism; it's fear." What do you think of this?
I also appreciate your comment that while a particular faith tradition is important to pluralism, sometimes the personal narrative can be a substitute for that tradition.

Finally, your faith is also open-ended, to use your term. This is the faith of others that speaks to me most powerfully. It is non-judgmental, non-possessive, and non-punitive. I was interested in your musings on faith, hope, love, the three major theological virtues in the western world. Hope seems central to you in many ways. Do you think hope would matter, if we never died? Do you think love would take on a whole new meaning and sense of importance?

Just one last question, and I have much to learn from you on this: how have you gotten to the place in your life where you can "give and represent love whether or not in turn I will receive love." This is what the Ancients called _agape_ love--the unconditional, unqualified love of others, without _quid pro quos_ of any kind.62

Robert highlighted a section of my findings in his response that day; faith is the opposite of fear. If we learn to have faith and find something to hold on to at the core of our self-awakening, our spiritual self, we do not need to fear the loss of ourselves. The replacement of us with the world’s possessions and desires cannot occur even whilst we are in the midst of it all, if we learn to understand and merge our emotional and spiritual natures to better understand who we are and what we can be in this life. Your Spirit is knocking to be awaked, it is asleep, some call it intuition but it is more than that, it’s waiting for you to see and recognize it’s there.

We don’t have to look outside to the world to figure out what is right inside of us, what is wrong and what is right. We have been given a roadmap to follow, so we have to choose if we want to just go for the ride wondrously aiming at nothing, or do we want to reach for that destination; our destiny. If you listen to your Spirit, it will tell you and you will have to make that choice, we all have freedom in that choice. There is freedom and power in hope which comes from a sense of positivity. There is the power of hope to heal
the fear that damages the spirit. It is essential to hold on to in those dark moments of our lives; the hope of something better.

**The Road Least Traveled**

For most of our existence we as a society have been comfortable with the discussion of our intellect and our brilliance and have opened ourselves to aspects of dealing with the emotional self in discussions particularly around emotional intelligence and how important it is to incorporate that aspect of ourselves in society and in the work we do. If we did not we would be leaving out a vast majority of our population who primarily use their emotions as a form of coping with life problems as well as solving them. In the same vein, I believe we need to open ourselves and our society, especially in the Western World, to those who use their spiritual intelligence and aspect of their humanity to navigate the world.

I believe that there are many of us who live in this world but because of society and the censure of public vs. private we have been made to close ourselves off from our primary reality when we are in public, which is a majority of the time. The spiritually inclined dare to travel the road least traveled by exploring our spiritual self and trying to live them out in reality but it has become increasingly hard to do so. I myself have been one who has discovered from a young age that my spiritual self was extremely important to me but never really got a chance to walk with that in the many spaces I found myself; always having to dismiss that part of me until I felt safe enough to talk about who and what I believed.
I had a hard time coming to terms with the misconceptions around my faith, the role I played and where I should be. I had to learn to come to terms with my questions in a world that was just as backwards as the one whom others thought I belonged to. Out of my first graduate course in 2009 around spirituality I found a heightened moment to explore some of my questions and my wondering:

Monique’s Personal Quest

For as long as I can remember, religion and spirituality have been a part of my existence. I was baptized as an Anglican Christian a few months after my birth in Jamaica, West Indies, and I received communion during my first years. After coming to the United States at age six, my mother would send my sister and me to a local church in Far-Rockaway, New York with our best friends. We attended an Episcopalian church for a few years, then a Pentecostal church for another few where I attended some Sunday school classes. I was still young and didn’t fully understand the teachings.

Even at a young age, however, I believed in Jesus Christ. As the years passed, I began to learn more and more about his life through church sermons, talks with friends and family, but these were never consistent or long lasting. I had now and then read a few passages in the Bible. You could say I held close to my faith due to small and large life outcomes that I believed would not have happened if it weren’t for divine intervention. My faith was in my heart, in how I saw the world with love, in how I treated others, and in the hope I felt for change in human nature’s worst tendencies.

I left home and New York City for high school in Ridgefield, Connecticut and for college at Smith in Northampton, Massachusetts. During those years I attended but a
handful of church services. Because I could not find a church that fit my needs, I grew comfortable with the idea that I did not need a church community; I had a personal relationship with God, and, besides, I never really had an ongoing fellowship before, so this wasn’t too foreign to me. I also convinced myself that I did not have the time to figure out my sense of self, maintaining friendships, my identity, self-worth, getting into college, and graduating if I added the responsibility of joining a church community. I spent most of my time in the classroom, and discussions around spirituality certainly did not occur there. I was always intrigued with divinity, and things that were bigger than me. Thus, my yearning to learn more about my chosen path of Christianity did not cease. It was only subdued temporarily by my surroundings.

To Smith’s credit, I did have the chance to take one class called “Religion and Film,” which was fascinating to me, because this was my first opportunity to begin to explore several different religious faiths. We also had a religion department, which was rare for a secular liberal arts college, but because I had already set my major, nothing could be added to include my personal interests. During the beginning of fall semester in my senior year at college, my cousin’s death at the age of fourteen motivated me to delve back into my faith. Due to the nature of his death at such a young age, one would think I’d have turned to blame and despair. But I didn’t, because God gave my family and me comfort during those times when no one else understood, or even knew, what we felt. My spirituality had become somewhat dormant until this traumatic moment, but once I graduated I decided I would find a place to fellowship. I could no longer do this alone, because it was hard to hear God’s voice.
After graduation I returned to New York City to work and look for a spiritual home. My prayers for fellowship, as well as the pursuit of other life goals, led me eventually to Vermont. I realized everything that led up to my Vermont move was no coincidence. I was searching in New York City for some time, but I still could not find what I was looking for. My heart began to tell me that my life’s meaning and purpose was in Vermont. In my new home, I would strengthen my faith in Jesus. The first year there was a trial for me, and I searched once more for what I felt was right. During my first semester working at the University of Vermont, I enrolled in Robert’s religion class. To this date, that was one of the best, most challenging, and rewarding classes of my educational career.

Robert’s course challenged me like no other, but I came out stronger and happier in my faith, because I realized that what I really needed was the opportunity to recraft my beliefs while still being truly open to others’ beliefs. This became a continual conscious and sub-conscious struggle. Religion and spirituality were not ethereal abstractions for me; they were the way to understand the very essence of my being. During Robert’s class, I also learned what others needed in order to be true to themselves, to survive with dignity and integrity, and to make lasting meaning in their own unique ways—whether or not that mirrored my particular religio-spiritual identity. I can honestly say that everyone left that class transformed in some way, including, if I may say, Robert.

The following year, I went on to attend a religious retreat with my friend and colleague that helped set me on my way to faith in practice. This is not to say that I am now immune to questioning, because we must always question. Instead, I have found
peace in my questioning, and I know that this is a life-long process—a journey that my God is guiding me through. Being able to test my limits in Robert’s religion and spirituality class allowed me to go places I feared to venture. I learned that religio-spiritual meaning-making was not about getting hurt or hurting others, either intentionally or unintentionally. Rather, it was about recognizing when I was feeling hurt, or when I was hurting someone else, and striving always to give respect and understanding to everyone, regardless of how different their beliefs were from mine.

Robert’s class, among other meaning-making lessons and conversations, has allowed me to navigate my life with less fear of misunderstanding, hurt, shame, and ignorance from strangers, friends, and loved ones. I know now that these things may come, but it is all worth the journey. The consequences that await us if we do not begin to talk to one another about our deepest beliefs will be dire. It will not always be easy, but the meaning we grasp in the end is a bridge everyone should be allowed to cross. Now my faith is not just in my heart but in my mind as well. Through this holistic head-heart understanding, I can fully engage the students I teach to practice having the same conversations I have had and continue to have. I can use the ebb and flow of my spiritual experience as a navigation tool for those who wish to explore the sea of meaning.  

Don’t Stop, Even When the World Is Against You

“Looking for Truth is not some kind of spazzy free-for-all, not even during this, the great age of the spazzy free-for-all.” –Elizabeth Gilbert  

Many may think it is easy and pain free to believe in God, that to believe in God is to take the easy way out of life, but I tell you my fellow knowledge seekers, it is not, because the world has not made it so. It is one of, if not the most challenging things I
have done in my life but also the most rewarding and enlightening. Being real and honest with oneself and the world in which you live does not come “down to comfort; if comfort, security, and easy living are what you seek, authenticity is not for you. Authenticity demands vigilance and critical evaluation of the messages we receive on a daily basis. The trap of comfort always awaits, but that comfort will be harder to stomach the farther down the rabbit hole one goes.”

It is not easy to live and reveal what you believe in a world that hates what you believe, that may and will hate you for what you say or what they perceive you to believe. It is not easy to be the only one, to then be a minority in the majority or to be a minority among minorities because, you see my friend, as hard as it is to hear, that is exactly how I felt and what I feared coming to my self-awakening; what I believe so many students feel who are trying to think and understand their unveiled spiritual self but have no one to talk to or share with. It takes courage to believe and act on that belief, to reveal the true self despite of the world.

For instance, when people talk about others, i.e. gossip, and in regular conversation, among other things, in stating they should not or they don’t like when people speak of their faith, religion, spirituality, whatever you want to call it, that is refuting their right to be free human beings. When others speak of directly or indirectly to me and other believers in a faith that they cannot talk or be spiritually who they are in a certain space, it is just the same as someone saying to me, that as a person of color, as a black, young, immigrant, temporarily able bodied, heterosexual woman who is a first generation college student, straddling the economic line (once working class now due to education middle class) that, I cannot be me!
In addition, when you silence my faith in and outside the classroom, it is limiting and restricting me from being and living my full life. If you ask me not to speak or talk or learn or walk in my faith so the world can see, then you are saying the same thing as the world has and do tell me as a black woman living in all those identities, that I cannot have and live a life that I know is rightfully mine, as it is every other human beings. It is saying that you do not see me.

I am a black young woman and I am a follower of Jesus and all my identities are encompassed in my spiritual being therefore nothing can or will take that away from me, even if the world rejects me. We, as people of color, were once told we cannot and will never be part of civilized society but today many of us are living a different reality. I know this to be true, and I hope that we as students, educators, family members, loving human beings can allow the same respect and freedom to all those who believe in something and at least the space for everyone to explore a belief if they so choose, “The problem is that today’s youths-Catholic, Muslim, Jewish, or whatever-no longer live in the so-called ‘banquet hall’ of their faith communities,’ I said. ‘They are coming into contact with kids from different backgrounds all the time. If they don’t have a way of understanding how their faith relates to the Jews, Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, Evangelicals, and others that they spend most of their lives around, then there’s a good chance that their religious identities will atrophy.’

In higher education, as in many other social arenas, we, including myself, love to discuss and talk about extremes and people we call “extremists” and see these things in a negative manner. So in that lens of extremes and “extremists”, let us take a look at our educational system. Our world has gone from one extreme to another but we do not
realize it and those who do are being silenced. Our educational system used to be one where the religious rulers of society had power and control over all forms of learning and systems of gaining knowledge, thus there was a stronger influence from that lens, i.e. there were more faith based school institutions. In present day the ruling power and control has been given, i.e. democratically voted to secular and popular power, thus most of our educational systems have a lens without faith and excluding the practice or full exploration of religions and faith based knowledge of the world.

So what do we have, two extremes and in our present day we are living in the Secular extreme. I believe neither religious nor secular power should have full reign in our educational system from K-terminal degrees. It is one of the most detrimental things we have done, are doing and can do to ourselves, children and the future generations to come. We came from an educational age where society did not allow for diverse exploration of faiths, and we now live in an age where we are suffocating our students by limiting their freedom of religious, faith, and spiritual expression and exploration in and outside the classroom. I do not think either of these extremes is positive for our growth as human beings and as a nation.

Currently there are thousands of students suffering because they are lost. They are not lost only because they do not have direction in a faith, their spiritual life, or the opportunity to explore one but because, they also are lost in the realm of what they will do vocationally and who will be the loved ones in their life. They dream as we all have what is to become of their lives, but their generation have less to refocus them and more to distract, so they turn to other forms of comfort to soothe their pain, anxiety, fear, and misdirection with drugs, sex, alcohol, self-inflected pain and death. Yet I believe that this
generation more than ever is searching for something more. They are looking for purpose that no one is giving them today, no one in main stream forums are addressing and helping them to reflect on, who they are as a spiritual human being. We are losing our youth and ourselves to a world of self-illusion and deprivation, a world of constant pleasure and instant gratification without cause or pause, without reflection, without care for one another. This breeds constant pain, both internally and externally, through many forms such as gossip, lies, cheating, narcissism and self-idolatry.

Do not mistake me, it is right to have love and love of self, I am a big advocate for taking care of ourselves, giving ourselves what we need and ultimately what we want because we are all deserving human beings of the “good life,” but when that love of self overrides the love of others and the universe, we fall into the danger of ruining our mental and physical health. I truly believe this will be the world’s downfall and it saddens me to know it is already here, but the good news is that we can change. We as human beings were made to change the world and to change our minds once we make a choice, each of us most importantly individually and then collectively,

“Movements re-create the world. A movement is a growing group of people who believe so deeply in a new possibility that they participate in making it a reality. They won’t all meet. They won’t even know everybody else’s names. But somehow, they all have the feeling that people on the other side of the city or country or the world believe in the same idea, burn with the same passion, and are taking risks for the same dream.”

Proponents and all involved in the higher education engine must have courage to teach what is right, to teach in a more holistic manner, to move from the extremes into a place
of balance in all levels of education and especially in higher education where we have the most resources right now to do so.

Our greatest achievement as a nation can be that we decided to use education in its purest form for good, for the purpose it was created to manifest. We as a nation can move towards living and learning in a system that actively allows for both, binaries of faith and secular world views of education, to be open in the classroom, in the residential halls, in our student service offices, in the faculty offices, and in the administration. At the University of Vermont we “preach” social justice, yes we preach it! So I hope we can practice what we truly preach with allowing faith talks and action in and outside the classroom, giving the space for our students to fully realize who they are and give them something to look forward to in this life, a place for peace and reconciliation with their spiritual identity.

Courage means that you do what is right without knowing the end result of your actions; you do it because you must, because your conscious will not rest without its action. I know it takes courage to stand in your mind, in your family, in a room, in a university, in a state, in a country and a world that no longer listens but only wishes to see what is pleasing to the eyes and ears. We have lost our love for human beings and reached only for our own comforts. My hope is that you will have the courage to listen and to speak in order to act for the truth with love; the truth in your deepest of hearts even when the world is against you.
Listen, If You Have Ears, Listen
“This was my moment to look for the kind of healing and peace that can only come from solitude.”—Elizabeth Gilbert

After almost two and a half years of my conscious and sub-conscious journey of self-exploration with my humanity, I felt as if I finally made the choice to listen, to truly listen, to stay awake, when I was in silence, “Staying awake and keeping watch is a serious and difficult spiritual discipline, especially for people of action. ‘Could you not watch with me one hour?’ asked Jesus. ‘Watch and pray that you may-not enter into temptation; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.’…He was asking them to watch with him- to wait and be awake with him in the hour of crisis. Twice he asked them, and twice he returned to find them sleeping…But he was not calling them to heroic action; he was not asking them to ‘do’ anything at all. He was calling them to simple attention, watchfulness, and that was infinitely more difficult. Keeping watch is one of the hardest things. Watching with someone who is troubled, grieving, or perhaps dying requires that we be wakeful, present, and engaged, but it does not permit us the exercise of our restless, goal-oriented instinct to do something.” I stayed awake this time and I found my spiritual self and something I never really knew was possible for me was brought to my awareness, into my being. I discovered what it meant to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

The night I stayed awake I was the only one there, in my room, all alone, in silence. There were no outside influences, no people to disturb me, no one to persuade me or tell me a lie, to make me believe otherwise, that I was crazy, or to even convince me of the truth I found. I discovered it all on my own, without any human impression or
persuasion. It was the moment I decided to let go and ultimately to let God. I had been seeking Him for some time now in my life, but always haphazardly and never continuously as I let the world come in too much at times with all its stresses and temptations to appease that stress.

You know how some people say they can clearly hear a voice, the voice of God, such as “Then I heard a voice... an Old Testament Hollywood Charlton Heston voice... a voice telling me I must build a baseball field in my backyard,”70 that is not what I heard but something more softly, inside and outside of me. In the past, I didn’t know if what I heard was me, but this time I knew. It was in January 2011, when I was writing this very thesis that I renewed my faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. I had done this once or twice before when I was younger, during the altar call in two church services I attended, you know just in case God didn’t hear me the first time and because I didn’t really listen, of course I learned later on there really was no need for this.

The first two times I did it out of fear and guilt as well as pain in my heart. This time, in the privacy of my bedroom feeling free, love, and open to the moment, I took up my bible, which I rarely read, if at all, and began to read. I read for hours until the early morning and my eyes were opened, because I was now listening. Listening to the words as they sprang from the page and became life in my mind; the words were so clear to me this time, as if I was reading some of this with new eyes. I had known in the past that a lot of what is shared in the Bible is how the world really works, in terms of human nature, and what plays out in reality but now it became even more visible as I read the book of the Gospel according to Luke.
It was then that I decided in my mind that I would renew my faith in Jesus. I knew deep down in my heart I wanted to be just like Him, as I wanted to in the past. To be truly kind, loving, peaceful, mindful and open to everyone without judgment and without fear; I couldn’t always do that in the past and I wasn’t ready to give up the things that really were not positive to my emotional, intellectual or spiritual self because the temptations were too strong for me at a time when I was more needy, “The Lord reached down from above and took hold of me; He pulled me out of the deep waters. He rescued me from my powerful enemies and from all those who hate me-they were too strong for me. When I was in trouble, they attacked me, but the Lord protected me. He helped me out of danger; he saved me because he was pleased with me”71 the NIV text says “delighted in me”….“For we are not fighting against human beings but against the wicked spiritual forces in the heavenly world, the rulers, authorities, and cosmic powers of this dark age.”72

This time though I knew, I knew and believed deep in my soul that I could be just like Jesus, that I wanted to be; I was tired of arguing with myself or others or the constant moaning and groaning that comes with life, with the stress and the chaos I saw in the world. I wanted to learn how to truly have peace of mind, body, and spirit and how to move to action in helping others with a free and joyful heart. I wanted to try to live each day to walk just like He did. I may not be successful always because I am still human but my quest now was to consciously try and act in a way that would be pleasing to Him and myself in my true human heart.

This time I had faith in both myself and Jesus, that He would help guide me and He did. I said a simple prayer and I asked God again to let His will be done in my life,
that my life was His to guide for I know He only wants the best for me. And besides I always knew He was good to me, he led me this far in my educational career, work and family life, He would not leave me alone now, for He said “I will not forsake you, nor will I leave you” because God does not forget. I believe many people including myself confuse this part about God all the time, but I have learned through my awakening that He never said you would not go through any pain and suffering but He said He would always be there, that He would never leave nor forsake you. If you had to go through the storm, He would lead you out, through it, and for some parts in my life that is exactly what He did. Sometimes I had a good ride, and other times I had to experience pain and loss but I always knew I would be okay, that I would make it through.

God was and is my sustainer, for He is the Author and Finisher of my Faith; I make the choices in my life and so it may take me a little longer to where I need to be, to find my true gifts and path in the “good life” but I will get there at the end of it all. So I said a simple prayer, read some more and went to bed. Because of that moment and that choice, my life has and will never be the same. The next day or so I would try to make quiet time to read the Bible and say a simple prayer to God. After this it became a necessity for me to renew myself each day; that became my meditation with God.

I was delighted and happy that I was beginning to find my place, renewed. In doing so I knew I needed to sacrifice something I loved dearly, a personal love relationship and something I had wanted for a while. I knew what the outcome would be because of my sacrifice and even though I wanted this relationship, for some reason, with God in my heart, it didn’t hurt to let go. It was as if deep down I knew I had to make a choice for my wellbeing. I did and it was returned to me because I listened and God knew
I wanted it, and He always promises to fulfill our needs, we just have to be patient,
“When God leads you to the edge of the cliff, trust Him fully and let go, only 1 of 2 things will happen, either He'll catch you when you fall, or He'll teach you how to fly!”

I also began to listen to more music that was filled with love and praise for Jesus and God because it was just another form of meditation and there are so many areas in which to find it such as, alternative, rock, rap, contemporary, pop, and gospel music. It was a way to keep me connected and joyful. I had listened to similar music in the past here and there but this time it made my heart sing higher because I truly knew what I was singing and listening to and it felt amazing to be so in love with the one that gave me love without limit, the one who loved me first.

After a few days of quality time and listening I received a gift I had no idea was coming, no idea that it would be even possible in my life. The part that also amazed me was that I was not even searching for this gift, it found me. One night as I continued to listen and read the Word of God, I received the Holy Spirit; all alone in my room. It was the most amazing feeling and I didn’t know what it was at first. I was filled with love and warmth. My entire body radiated warmth and I could feel my heart warmer than ever before. It felt as if there was a hand holding my heart, keeping it safe and my blood circulated through my body as never before.

I was filled with so much love I didn’t know what to do with myself. It was an indescribable feeling. I had heard and seen people say they were filled with the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ and I believed in the Trinity, the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit but I didn’t truly know what the Holy Spirit experience felt or looked like. I did not need to run up or down an aisle of a church, I had no need, although there were moments of such
excitement where I can see why some people do, because it’s just so amazing. I just had a permanent smile on my heart. That night I received a gift and that was just the beginning of my awakening.

I realized how easy and simple the path to God was, the true understanding, untainted by the world, all the politics, all the hatred, the running away, the skepticism; I finally understood and could name what the true message and love of God was. I wanted to share it with the world, but really with my loved ones and they could take it or leave it. I knew though that only the world itself could step into that space and listen if it chooses to; it was and is not my wish to take on such a burden as to convince anyone of anything, faith does not need to be convinced, it’s actually an impossible task and it cannot be. To convince someone of something is actually exhausting and not the way I wish to live my life, to disturb my new found peace.

But it was like I found the best restaurant or travel spot on Earth and I wanted to let people know so they could check it out. Through my new revelation of God and being filled with the Holy Spirit I began to write down a few things I had learned in the few days I began my new practice of faith. I wrote down a few notes and got ready to lie down in bed. As soon as I thought I would go to sleep, another thought would spring into my mind and I would have to write it down. I wrote a little and then again decided I would go to sleep. At the third time this occurred I just continued to write, I no longer stopped my train of thought and what was coming to me.

At the end of my writing, really without a pause, it seemed I needed more than a piece of paper and pen as I wasn’t sure if I could write as fast as I was thinking. At the end of it, an hour and a half later (3 sets of 30mins), on 2/3/11 (2 +3+1+1= 7), one of
God’s Divine numbers, I found my calling, my life vocation. I had created a teaching center, the next chapter in my life was revealed to me, the gift God had given me through my talents all enclosed into one dream everything I had learned, everything I created or used or was taught. It will be called the *Trinity of Love Center (The TLC)*. I put down my pen and went to bed, with a smile on my face and content in my heart still beating with warmth and love. A few days later as I was watching television, I heard a voice so clear to me. It was as, “Jesus said to her, ‘My daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace.’” You see, I could have missed this gift, I could have missed my moment with God, all I had to do was, listen.

**CHAPTER 4: THE CONSCIOUSNESS OF EDUCATION: WAKING UP TO THE TRUTH**

“No problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it. We must learn to see the world anew.”

- *Albert Einstein*

Indeed, consciousness cannot be brought about by living, doing, teaching, learning, speaking, and listening to the same thing we always have. The intellectual self (our minds entwined with our thoughts and emotional processes) calls for constant change and renewal, if we wish to move forward, beyond ourselves in new and innovative visions of our world and our personal lives. We all know this world is not stagnant and will move without us, so we have to make a choice, do we want to move with it, change it, or stay the same; in the same vision of yesterday.

Our intellectual selves call for us to be conscious; for us to be *alive*, *awake* and *aware* all at the same time. Don’t we all want to be *alive* with joy, love, purpose, peace,
dreams, goals, visions, meaning? I believe we can no longer address the minds of our students and ourselves without recognizing and addressing our humanity. Theirs and our emotional, spiritual, and physical self is just as important and a part of our being as our intellectual self. Our students as well as all those who participate in the functioning and creation of the higher educated of the world do not live in a vacuum of the mind and cannot move beyond it into the real world into vocations and lives, the world in which we are preparing to launch students, without understanding and learning about who they really are in all of their being, or at least beginning to discover that process in our institutions of learning.

Our students spend a majority of their time in our classes, in our residential halls, in our offices, with each other, on our campuses, so I believe it is our responsibility to at least give them the conscious space to learn about themselves and their humanity. The world will only be the better for it and so will you, “I thought about what the young religious extremists we read about in the news every day could have been if different influences had gotten to them first. I thought about the meaning of pluralism in a world where the forces that seek to divide us are strong. I came to one conclusion: We have to save each other. It’s the only way to save ourselves.”

**The World vs. Reality**

How many people are in hiding of their true selves, their true shell because they fear what the world tells them, or what people will say, think, act or do to them? This fear and worry can make the heart sick and if the heart is sick then so is the entire body, mind and soul. There is and are many battles in this world, but the present day battle is the one
for our hearts but it uses our minds to get there and to trick us into thinking we know what we are doing, that we are making choices and that we are really free. It is both conscious and unconscious. It is the matrix of the mind. It is the war within, the war of what is right and what is wrong, it will ask what do you believe and how will you be brave when the world is against you. Are you prepared?

In a world where there is war constantly being waged amongst the beauty of the hills, sky, and sea, what makes me, us, you think we will not have to give up something in order to get something? We have become too comfortable with the familiar and with chancing nothing, so we will change nothing, but now I know I must take a risk to be my true self, “Despite the turmoil that may ensue from these current questions, I know that I want to be authentic to myself and those around me. I want to be an active participant in my own life and know I want to look back with no regrets with the understanding that I questioned my assumptions and even the things I took as solid or constant.”

You see the world is our playground, but are we playing nicely? The world can influence you to think and act one way while your spirit is telling you to do another thing and you don’t listen because you are lost. We only follow what we are told to do and what you see and what we see is what we have become victims to, our own creations. There are so many ways when taken to an extreme and induced with daily or weekly or monthly doses produce only a temporary fix and a permanent pain, some I have highlighted in this thesis: media, drugs, sex, alcohol, which infused with violence and suffering revolves into another kind of pain and suffering against humanity.

But all these things were learned, just as we sit in our classrooms and learn about Socrates and chemistry. When we educate, we influence, when we teach we infuse, and
really what are we infusing? I believe it is time for teachers and professor’s to break out of the mold of their influences before it’s too late for the next generation. We must understand that our choices will determine the reality of our students in more ways than we think in and outside the classroom; in the real world.

But the world will not have to deal with your personal consequences and triumphs, you will, so be careful what you take in, listen to, what you let influence your thinking in words, thoughts, and actions. It is simply, the theory to practice principle, we can learn about the world and create concepts and beautiful worlds that describe, analyze, classify, build, make money and success but when it comes down to it none of that matters except what our actions do to reality; what we will do in the real space of time and in our lives, what it does to those people in this world who cannot change their reality presently.

As educators we need to put theory to practice and learn to become good at it because without practice the theory cannot exist, it does not make sense, and it means nothing because there is no one or no experience or human being to put life to it, to put blood and tears, hopes and joys into that world! We make practice through our stories. The generation before this one we call millennials, had the same question and the same downfall, how long will it continue? The generation of baby boomers, the one that came before and began in the mid to late sixties,

“were called the generation who believed in nothing, raised on post-modernist thought and exploration. We tore apart and reassembled iconography to meet our own needs. It was no wonder that the religious tradition that I was raised on would not suffice for me and that I would turn away from the ideals of my family of origin and search for
something my own and more personal. It was beyond a youth revolt, it was a struggle for survival by any means possible in a hostile environment." The problem is that a generation that believes in nothing, can and will produce nothing, at least nothing worth passing on to the generation after it.

The beauty, life, creativity, vision and ingenuity of a people and potentially a civilization will be lost in the future, in essence we could propel ourselves on the verge of extinction by our lack of care and unbelief in something and in ourselves. We are producing a generation that believes in nothing, not even our own stories because we are not allowing them to be heard and validated, to be made real,

Good teaching, good helping, and good leadership are, in one sense, all about storytelling and story-evoking. It is in the mutual sharing of our personal stories, particularly in the willingness of professionals to listen to the stories of others, that we make the deepest connections with those we are serving. It is in our stories that we, as professionals, and they, as students, can actually profess what we believe and hear what others profess to believe. Our stories get us closer to knowing who we are and who they are. Our stories are symbols for God, ethics, morality, justice, wisdom, truth, love, hope, trust, suffering and, most of all, what constitutes personal and professional meaning for all of us. From both a personal and a professional standpoint, I have found that personal narrative writing helps us all to understand our histories, shape our destinies, develop our moral imaginations, and give us something truly worth living and dying for. Certainly, our students want competence, fairness, compassion, intellectual stimulation, and enthusiasm from us as educators. In my own opinion, though, they want something else equally as important. They want to be understood, and to be heard, from the nucleus of the stories they are living. They want to make a claim for some uncharted time to engage in honest, heartfelt narrative dialogue with us and with one another. Writing personal narratives in a scholarly setting is one way to achieve this desire. When done in an intellectually and emotionally respectable way, personal narrative writing can result in stunning self-insights. And I am here to testify, after spending over 35 years in the academy, that these are the learnings that stay with students, and with educators like myself, for the longest time."

Nothing works better than a story; nothing can be proven without one. When a police officer or investigator comes to your door after a crime has been committed
against you, the first thing they ask is, “What’s the story?” As an educator I am sure you would want your story to be heard in the court of law, so why can’t we allow ourselves and our students to hear the stories of our realities in the real world? And in higher education? It is putting theory to practice; it is putting the evidence to the crime and solving the case so that justice can be done.

**The Benefits and Breakdowns of Traditional Education**

“The truth is that spirituality matters a great deal to millennial students in America today. In fact, we would argue that along with the internet, the social media, friendships, physical and emotional intimacy, credit cards, and sports, nothing else matters as much. We believe that, in the name of liberal education, fairness, and multiculturalism, the study (not necessarily the practice) of spirituality needs to find a permanent place in college curricula.”—Robert Nash & Monique Swaby

Higher education has the ability to cocoon you with love and to cocoon you with hate, fear, anxiety, and confusion. We all know that college was a moment in our lives to become something greater. A moment of pause and temporarily reflect and learn more but it does not always support reflection. It can support and suggest constant overload of information and your time, lack of sleep, plies of responsibility; do this, do that, be this, be that; the constant message of suck it up, you will and can do better, be more than you are, without the support of helping you or showing you how to do that or get there, without asking you what you want. It can be a place which asks you to be independent, great, become a world citizen, great, pull yourself up by your boot straps, great, but all the while it is shoving you down and ignoring your voice, what a contradiction we have become. Let’s move to another level.
How Education Unravels You

“How Education Unravels You

“Vanguard your soul- for it is at risk for drying up with time and man’s values of and on you.”- Monique Swaby

The intellectual self’s within our minds in higher education scream for breath. For a moment to breathe and be human, to feel our emotions and come to learn who we are spiritually, “I’m not really religious,’ a high school junior in Mercersburg, Pennsylvania, told me, ‘but I want to be a part of this.’ ‘We need you,’ I said. The question of the faith line cannot be answered by drawing a line between the religious and the nonreligious. Pluralism-even religious pluralism- is everybody’s business, for both the obvious pragmatic reasons and the more poetic ones. After all, there are many places where people hear the music of transcendence…We need spaces where we can each state that we are proud of where we came from and all point to the place we are going to. I fear the road is long. I rejoice that we travel together.”

We must learn to travel in this moment when youth are yearning for something to fill the gap,

Nash and Murray invite all who work in higher education to recognize that in every era the college years are a critical time in life span for examining, testing, and re-creating the stories we live by. University students are ripe for discerning a narrative that is worthy of the potential of a young adult life and for doing so in ways that enable them to see themselves as an integral part of a larger communal reality- a shared dialogue at the heart of the human enterprise, a disciplined dialogue that must necessarily embrace both the wonderful and the terrible-a hard-headed, open-hearted, and difficult practice that has consequences for both self and world. Providing persuasive evidence that too many of our students are bored, angry, driven, and mere consumers of courses and credentials without access to a worthy, ‘Why?’, Nash and Murray offer this compelling descriptions of student’s hunger for meaning and clear, practical approaches from their own teaching experience about how to respond as “meaning constructivist” educators. They make vivid the significance of the ‘quarter-life crises’ in the lifelong journey of meaning-making, and illuminate the power of the interdependent roles of faculty, administrators, and student affairs professionals who serve by intention or default as ‘meaning mentors’.

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We can first begin by truly acknowledging the emotions and the emotional self of our students in a major transition period in their lives. The section of a paper I co-authored during one of my counseling courses highlights the data and issues that come with avoiding the emotional intelligence of our students.

I highlight in this paper entitled “Learn to Live, Not Just Survive: Deflecting Expressive Suppression in the College Transition Using Resiliency, Mindfulness, and Happiness to Live A Meaningful Life” the following: As developing young adults, society is constantly sending conflicting messages of how one should experience their emotions via media, community, familial and cultural practices, peer pressure, and the ever ticking internal clock. Unfortunately, this can be a tumultuous time in a young person’s life to discover who they are, what they want and what they should think and feel. Learning to swim through all the clutter and make meaning of what will truly make one happy is essential to the positive growth and development from the adolescent into the adult stage.

For some, this may mean subduing their emotional compass altogether in order to function, but everything comes with a price. Of course, there is no clear path to balancing one’s emotions entirely but there are ways in which to ease the discomfort in one’s mind ebbed with confusion. In an attempt to examine the consequences of what is called “expressive suppression” of emotions in young adults, we will explore one of the most highly charged moments in one’s life, i.e. the college transition, its health risks and factors, and endeavor to harness some of the positive ways to transform this particular
moment in life through mindfulness. In addition we will illuminate how some young adults use resiliency and happiness to deflect “expressive suppression” and create positive emotional regulation during these critical years as well as present a curriculum outline for a mindfulness and happiness workshop.

The time prior to, during, and after the college transition can either be an uphill battle, smooth sailing, or a roller coaster for students, all dependent on their disposition to introversion, extraversion, life experiences in social situations, level of resiliency and tendency towards happiness. There is no guaranteed set of events that a student will encounter except for the assurance that this can be a stressful, demanding, yet fun time, in one’s life i.e. through social and extracurricular interactions, meeting new people, getting acquainted with the environment, classroom and residential experience. Young adults tend to “experience a mix of excitement and dread as they prepare to enter the unknown…given the intense emotions that are part of this transition, one critical factor should be the way individuals regulate their emotions. Recent work has shown that one common way that individuals regulate emotions is through expressive suppression—that is, by attempting to inhibit their emotion-expressive behavior (pg. 833, Gross, John, McGonigal, Srivastava, & Tamir, 2009).”

This can be seen as negative conditioning of the mind as it sends the message that illustrating some or a certain kind of emotion may be inappropriate altogether. As humans we need to express and feel our emotions at some point, that is apart of how we experience and negotiate the world, therefore neglecting that action could “have substantial and important consequences for social functioning (pg. 833, Gross et. al,
It seems commonplace for many entering first year students, and those whom do not reflect on this behavior later in the college years, expressive suppression becomes a way of coping, i.e. surviving the college transition.

In the research presented by Gross, John, McGonigal, Srivastava, & Tamir, (2009) entitled, *The Social Costs of Emotional Suppression: A Prospective Study of the Transition to College*, humans begin with the evaluation of inner and outer signals to illicit a response in our emotions that is specific to an individual. They explored two specific process models for emotion regulation that students utilize which is *antecedent-focused*—things we do consciously or unconsciously before emotions are triggered and *response-focused*—normative actions created due to our present emotions. Expressive suppression is a dominant form of response-focused emotion regulation because it restricts in the moment emotion-expressive behavior. For instance, “one might try to look composed while feeling devastated inside, or one might try to look calm while feeling angry or resentful. From a theoretical perspective, several things are noteworthy about suppression. First, it occurs relatively late in the emotion process, potentially after affective experience has already been generated.

Second, it targets a component of emotion-expressive behavior—that is potentially visible to others and that serves a communicative function (Gross, John, McGonigal, Srivastava, & Tamir, 2009).” As communication is essential to interacting with the world we live in, this can result in negative feedback and emotions as a result. Students who use suppression frequently use it to deal with stressful situations by hiding their inner emotions and misconstruing their external display (Gross et. al, 2009). This can be
somewhat effective for deflecting negative experiences, i.e. coping in the moment, and does not mean that students are less likeable or agreeable than those who do not use expressive suppression.

Yet researchers warn that “by disrupting the give and take of emotional communication, suppression has the potential to undermine social functioning to a significant degree (pg. 884, Gross et. al, 2009)” i.e. being expressive can be more helpful to others as they can better understand what one may be going through therefore support more effectively. The authors highlight that humans need to develop and maintain close relationships for healthy, happy, social functioning and emotional expressive behavior is key in that process. Gross et. al, (2009) hypothesized that a higher use of expressive suppression by students in their everyday lives would disrupt the normal flow of emotion-based communication and impede social functioning as a result.

A lack of awareness and expression of our emotions and our student’s emotions contributes to the high rates of other forms in which they have to find means to do so, but in more violent ways. Their emotions thus come out in forms of confused cries for emotional and intellectual needs, cries of being seen and being listen to as a child cries when it needs food or to be held, but educators do not listen to our children’s cry. We continue to suffocate their emotions and their stories. It is no wonder that rates of bullying and violence have gone through the roof; that rates of bias and disturbance are bubbling to the surface of our schools and our realities each and every day.
Just in 2010 alone we saw a spike in the horrific outcomes of what bullying and lack of expression can do to a specific community. But unfortunately this is not new. A news article written in October 2010 from USA Live Headlines stated that, 50% of High School students admitted to violence, bullying, or being bullied, 50%,

A study released today by Josephson Institute of Ethics in Los Angeles showed that more than 50% of high schoolers have been bullied or have bullied. The survey has been given since 1992, but this is the first year that it included questions about bullying. Researchers surveyed 43,321 teens aged between 15 to 18 from 78 different public schools and 22 private schools about bullying. Frightfully, around 24% feared school and find school unsafe and an unhappy place to be. While 28% of students (37 percent of boys and 19 percent of girls) felt violence was ok in school. The problem is, violence isn’t just limited to verbal threats anymore. The study found that 52% had physical reaction of anger in the past year. The study doesn’t get any better either. The bully study showed that 10% of students studied had carried a weapon to school. Then there’s that 16% of students that came to school under the influence of alcohol at least once in the past year. It’s been shown that teens who are the victim of bullying are more inclined to the use of tobacco, alcohol, drugs and indulge in reckless sexual behavior. The reason being, being a victim of bullying can typically lead to the following: being anxious, insecure, depressed, sad, low self-esteem, lack social skills, experience loneliness, sleeplessness and sometimes suicidal thoughts. Suicides, unfortunately, have become more prominent this year.83

The article goes on to note that, ‘If the saying ‘sticks and stones will break my bones but names will never harm me’ was ever true, it certainly is not so today. The difference between the impacts of bullying today versus 20 years ago is the difference between getting into a fistfight and using a gun.’84

When students get to college, or higher education, these issues or the effects of them do not just disappear, so why are we kidding ourselves? Why are we continuing to ignore the signs and cries for change? “When the narrative becomes too think or sketchy to stand up to the task of everyday meaning-making and begins to unravel, we drift into
meaninglessness and grow vulnerable to isolation and desolation— or mere unthinking busyness. On the other hand, the story may be fiercely defended, yet if it is simply too tightly woven to embrace the fullness of a larger truth, it may constrain the potential of our lives and even become dangerous to others and ourselves.*

We are dangerously close to destroying ourselves; this world of being higher may not be so for much longer if we continue to remain unconscious to the needs of our students and our own inner self,

Mental health continues to be a major issue on college campuses. The tragic Virginia Tech shootings in 2007 garnered national attention and shed light on the many complex issues involved in student psychological services…The Virginia Tech tragedy is an extreme case of what could occur when a student does not obtain needed support. Still mental health issues affect students’ daily lives in a variety of ways, from experiencing high anxiety due to juggling multiple responsibilities to taking medication for depression. In the annual American College Health Association (2009) assessment, 29.4% of students reported having felt so depressed that it was difficult to function over the past year, and 6.1% reported having seriously considered attempting suicide at least once in the last year. Although campuses have played greater roles in supporting students’ mental well-being in recent years, universities must become even better equipped to understand the unique mental health concerns of diverse populations.*

When thinking about the student of color population, administrators have to keep in mind the cultural and social aspects of their identity and the other forms of cultivation that they bring with them to a college campus. In particular many students of color come or have at least some experience with a religious or spiritual background or base.

It is the responsibility of the educational administration to keep this in mind when thinking about the mental health and well being of our students who do not in many cases participate in all the same activities as the majority of other students,

In a study of midlife adults and older adolescents, both spiritual wellness and high
levels of meaning and purpose in life were inversely related to depression (Briggs & Shoffner, 2006). College students who integrated spirituality into their decision-making processes about alcohol and tobacco use, physical health maintenance, and other health attitudes and behaviors experienced more positive health outcomes (Nelms, Hutchins, Hutchins, & Pursley, 2007). Some studies point to positive effects of religious engagement on PWB. One study found that frequency of church attendance and belief in eternal life positively predicted mental wellness, whereas church-based social support was nonsignificant (Ellison, Boardman, Williams, & Jackson, 2001). Dating back to Durkheim, scholars have suggested that religious bodies or denominations with strong social cohesiveness, normative expectations, and clearly articulated beliefs may work as a protective buffer against feelings of distress, confusion, or anomie (Pargament et al., 1987).

What I am stating is not that students must go to church or that it’s the educators job to help students find their spirituality, but as Higher Education Institutions we need to provide more options to all students of multiple faiths especially to the least known faiths or spiritualities, as the internal well-being of our students and future policy makers depends on the ability to continually seek growth and exploration on all levels of their identity. We need to provide spaces for this kind of dialogue as well as options for more choices. Freedom of speech in this country has been withheld in many ways in the classroom and work place when it comes to one’s right to a spiritual life, to another part of their identity. In fact, it seems educators and administrators do not see the need but the cry for equity is getting louder, “As you will see it takes reflection, self policing, discipline, suffering, constant questioning, and risk taking. If you are doing it right, those around you and in society will make you feel like you are crazy, naive, a dreamer, revolutionary, or many other words we have in our language to label people outside of the norm.”

There are two other areas in which the education system has been unraveled and what aids in our own unraveling as students and learners, two major themes in the
educational system, an area of improvement and an area in which we can use to increase student-teacher and administrator learning and interaction. I will touch on the broken nature of the educational pipeline. Below highlights part of a paper I wrote during the *Ethics of Helping Relationships* course I took in 2009, where I truly began to take a second look at the issues within education but primarily within Higher Education. It is a statement of my concern:

*Title: The Degradation of the American Educational System*

My entire life and the decisions I have made has been surrounded by and based on my education and specifically the attainment of quality education, which I believe we are all entitled to. Every child has the right to explore and recognize their racial identity, religious, ethnic identity, gender, socioeconomic status, call for activism, volunteering and most of all attainment of an education if they wish it. Education was the one thing no one could take away from me and what better gift to give to someone than that. I believe a teacher who educates with good intentions is as much a mentor and counselor and should be valued as much as a doctor or a priest. Their leadership skills, thirst for knowledge and passion should be able to be shared with all who are present in the classroom and willing to listen and engage. I believe we are all entitled to the same quality education, the chance that I was given and I hope to be a part of a system that someday children will not need to leave their families and homes in order to gain something that should be universal in order to get ahead in this life.

While I cannot predict the future, I think this can be possible with enthusiasm, commitment, and drive to move forward in life. I believe the ethics of truth, goodness, equality for all, compassion, the right to choose, love and an earnest right to an education will help produce a new generation of leaders and people that will only illuminate the best qualities of the human race. We need to revive the hope of believing you can truly do anything you want in this life and one’s education, knowledge and mentoring will be the key to inspiring such hope. Education is one of the most important human rights, the ability to learn and evolve through knowledge is key and I wish to be a participant as well as a facilitator of that endeavor. It is a basic human need; it is our right as well as our children’s right, quality education.

American society talks about incompetence of social groups, “sub” groups and the lack of knowledge and education of masses of people, yet the American government
continues to cut billions of dollars each year from the educational system. This to me is an undermining and blinding from our government and corporations. How can such statements be made when the most logical answer to these questions are being removed, withheld, erased from people’s reality? How can this country justify that a few years ago, the U.S. was in the 1st and 2nd tiers of education and now sink to the 11th and 12th tier in the world, as quoted by Juanita Gandara- Social Psychologist from Santa Cruz University at the 2010 NASPA Conference. It seems we may be our own ruin.

We are collapsing from within and we can’t even see it. It is the internal collapse of a democracy yet we have the solution as a people to fix it. The first resolution would be to stop cutting funds in the educational system. Education is our most prized possession and yet it is what has been withheld from many marginalized populations for centuries. What will happen when two thirds of our country do not make it to college?, what will occur within the economy?, who will be able to run this country effectively? 89

How Education Heals You

Education gives us access, to everything; we just have to know how to use it.

What more power is there in the world? It can break you down; everything you have ever known, but it can also build you up in ways you never thought possible. In your educational and intellectual journey you will get to a point where it all makes sense, the aha moment will come. This life you are living had and has a purpose, what you do in school, work will not and cannot define you as a human being, unless you let it, and you can be free to make choices, if you pay attention.

I have used my knowledge of biology, psychology, sociology, counseling, chemistry, theology, and so much more to heal and recognize what has occurred in my life and what has occurred in the world. I have used it as a tool, not a roadmap, so I suggest you also use your heart as well as your mind, in and outside the classroom. And don’t forget to make sense of your education; think big first, then think small. It has been
one of the most eye opening, soul searching, exciting, and unbelievable occasions of my life. The intertwining of social education with structured education merged to combine into a holistic world view on life and humanity.

Because of it I came to see the truth, came to accept and move on with my life in peace and joy. It has healed me to know myself and now I can truly know the world, therefore I can affect it effectively, changing things only for the good of others and not just myself; for the collective which in turn presents a gift to the individual. For some of you here is a note I found to highlight some tips:

**Pick a career path that stirs your soul.** Trust what comes from inside. Don't let the opinions and actions of others hinder your success and happiness. After all, it does happen to be your life—not theirs!

**Realize that any path you choose will involve trade-offs.** Understand the trade-offs and accept the price that comes with any career decision.

**Make peace with your own humanity.** Do the best you can, but don't feel like you have to be a role model for all of the women and African Americans who have ever lived. Don't be afraid to make mistakes and ask for help when you need it. Give to yourself as much as you give to others. That's all anyone should be expected to do.

**Recognize that you have your own unique genius.** That is, your special blend of values, passions, and strengths that can significantly affect your company's success. Take risks and seek out opportunities to best utilize your skills and talents.

### The Call of Duty: for Teachers, Educators, Professors, Student Services Professionals, and Higher Education Administration

“One of the hardest things we must do sometimes is to be present to another person’s pain without trying to “fix” it, to simply stand respectfully at the edge of that person’s mystery and misery... The poet Rainer Maria Rilke says, “love...consists in this, that two solitudes protect and border and salute each other...” By standing respectfully and faithfully at the borders of another’s solitude, we may mediate the love of God to a person who needs something deeper than any human being can give.”
There needs to be reciprocity of creating true learning experience, the give and take from student to teacher and back again which can be done in simple ways from the first day the class begins. By learning the student’s name, making everyone aware of who is in the room, if it is a big class, break into groups, pair and share with general interests to open the group to different topics, deeper opinions. Bring a smile and a humorous laughter. Do not allow the fear of, “once I open that door it cannot be closed and the responsibility and fear of what will be exposed by students” come into play.

As a teacher it is your duty to be alert, to any student having issues, or with a question, even if you cannot answer it and most of life’s questions we cannot answer for each other eitherway, so relax. Just use your perspective, your story. We cannot close the door on the heart of our students, what are we really teaching them then? Yes you may think it is not your responsibility to help students find themselves,

Too many arts and sciences professors I know consider what I and my colleagues do in teacher education seminars, and in our research, to be trivial and anti-intellectual. To them, the thrust of our work lies somewhere between training nursery school teachers to changing diapers and brainwashing public school teachers to make their students feel good, in spite of how much or how little these students actually achieve academically. ‘Educationalists,’ the intellectual rigorists will sometimes snarl, ‘don’t belong in a university. What they do to further the self-esteem of students and coddle them is inferior, and what we do to further rigorous scholarship and in-depth knowledge of the disciplines is superior.’…We tend to talk past, through, over, and under one another. 92

But says who? The awards on your wall, the papers you publish; those things should not matter; they will not matter when we all leave this Earth, so why does it matter now over the people in front of you? It takes more strength to muster up the courage to live the truth, to change the plan, to “go with it” and have real, honest, open, and sincere
conversations than to read a rule book. But really think about it, why wouldn’t we want to allow for truth and reality to come into the classroom?

Students who come to know themselves come to know the world, if they do not know themselves how will they be able to use what you are trying to teach, i.e. in cell biology, in engineering, in politics, in athletics, etc. How will they learn how to communicate and engage with other people in those areas, because as you know, there will be more people outside of the University. If we think of the University of Vermont’s common grounds and strategic goals and mission, what does it say to you? Why did you come to work here or in any educational system?

Even if it was by chance, at some point you must have thought a little deeper about your motivations as a teacher and higher education administrator? Where did your passion go? As we hope that the goal of the University is to bring awareness and learn about all the diverse realities of our students, so is it then all our responsibilities on our campus to learn about who those students are living in the reality we are creating for them. Must hold faculty accountable for what it states it wants the university to become! Think about it, most if not many students are afflicted by lack of motivation, distractions and addictions, chronic stress, confusion; students do not pay attention in class anymore because they are bored and aren’t really learning even if they seem to be paying attention.

What they learn does not go with them when they leave these walls, so all your work has been done in vein, at least most of it, because we have failed to make it relevant to their lives, but it can be! We need more engagement, empowerment, dialogue, listening, and stories in the classroom; the reciprocity of teaching and learning.

A Poem of Plea: An Acknowledgement to those who learn and those who teach!
I know that fear you fear, the fear of opening that door; the doubt of your abilities to even go there. The ambivalence to your responsibility and the lack of resources, time, and courage you think you do have. I know that fear you fear. But it is not who you are, who you were made to be. It is not what you dreamed you would be, fear. It is not who you are. You are bright morning stars in this world, what made you lose your sparkle? Your students need you to shine, so they may shine too. Someone needs you, the old you, or the new you waiting to be unveiled, eitherway someone needs you. I know that fear you fear. I felt it once too. You (Pro)fess the truth, so profess reality; don’t run away.

CONCLUSION

“If we just sign a petition and forget about it, it won’t help much. Urgent action must be taken at the individual and the collective levels. We all have a great desire to be able to live in peace and to have environmental sustainability. What most of us don’t yet have are concrete ways of making our commitment to sustainable living a reality in our daily lives. We haven’t organized ourselves. We can’t only blame our governments and corporations for the chemicals that pollute our drinking water, for the violence in our neighborhoods, for the wars that destroy so many lives. It’s time for each of us to wake and take action in our own lives.”- Thich Nhat Hahn

Life Isn’t A Coincidence, Don’t Fall Asleep!

When a baby is born, it isn’t a coincidence. When a sperm is deposited in the womb of a woman, it didn’t just happen, a physical actual act of two people whether consensual or not have to touch, have to see each other for this to occur, even if those two people are a doctor injecting the mother with a donors’ sperm. As such, in all the situations known to human beings of a baby’s birth, once a mother see’s another human being come out of her body, there is no claim that can be made that the baby was a coincide, that it came from thin air. The existence of that little human being cannot be denied when it is staring you right in the face. As such I believe that life, with all its circumstances, is no coincidence. It happens for a reason, even if that reason was just for it to be, even if we can’t figure out or make purpose of a specific event or thing in our
life- we just haven’t discovered it yet or perhaps the meaning was not for us but we served a purpose in that meaning for something or someone else.

Aren’t we all looking for purpose in life? I believe life can’t be a coincidence because it happens and once something happens you cannot change it, you can correct it but you cannot change that original event because it has already become real. As such everything in my life has been a link on a chain, the chain to my destiny, and all the pieces I now realize have fit perfectly; mindfulness, faith and my education, all in love and with patience, learned from others and from myself. It has made me see and appreciate the world and the people in it for who they are, not what they are labeled or assigned. This journey thus far has made me a better professional, better teacher, better family member, better human being.

So, with all that’s been said in this thesis, what do I mean by the spirituality of consciousness? The spirituality of consciousness comes to life when you become awake to life; when we become alive and become unplugged to the matrix. It is when you can no longer deny what you now know. The thing you perhaps always knew deep down, which has now been brought to the forefront of your mind because we stopped denying reality. It is when we wake up to what our spirit is telling us, when we finally LISTEN! It’s LISTENING to all our being- our mind, body, heart, soul, and all encapsulating spirit. We become conscious to ourselves and the world around us. We are now passionately alive because of that Spirit and as a result, we begin to live in truth, peace, and ultimately joy; we become our higher selves. And in that is faith; in that awakening of consciousness is the power of the Spirit which becomes our spirituality.
We must remember that teachers are the most influential people in our lives because you mold our minds. You shape who we may become in a real way; you can mold us for good or for bad. As teachers and as a system of instituting and manufacturing education by molding children, youth, young adults and adults, we must remember and consider the whole self— the whole human being. The intellectual self, the physical self, the emotional self, and the spiritually self; all these four components create a dynamic identity and fuse our compartmentalized emotions and thoughts, our walled thoughts and feelings, our irresponsibility to move, to act, to love into love is action. We must not forget ourselves lest we lose ourselves. I am not here to persuade you, only to prove to you that this works, it has for me and thousands if not millions of others. I believe we must not allow fear of institution, of ridicule, of ostracizing to move our deepest thoughts and instincts in and outside of the classroom nor in and outside of the world. As Rev. Al Sharpton stated during the MLK Celebration in Burlington, VT on 1/16/11 which I viewed on the taped program aired 2/19/11 on Channel 17, and I paraphrase, we need to find our purpose in life. Our purpose is the gauge in which we live our lives; it is the thing we use to focus our destination.

I believe once we finally know our purpose we can begin to see ourselves as full and whole human beings. Once we have come to that wisdom, we can look back to see where we began and as Rev. Al Sharpton stated we will know our destination. It is from this lens that I have found I live my life and in writing my thesis began to see my purpose awakened. The writing of both my comprehensive paper and my thesis has been the closing of one chapter of my life and the passing into another. I am thus fulfilling my life’s purpose continually in my learning and teaching experience. I believe it is the
greatest gift we can all share in with one another; it is love and love with wisdom and purpose in our lives.

I believe there are three levels of our purpose, the intellectual (which encompasses both emotional and wisdom), the physical, and the spiritual. I believe that the spiritual is the highest form and the ruling form of these three purposes that drive our lives. It is the realm in which all things originate, the space where we cannot see but are called to listen and to have faith as we do in the things we see in this world. Our spiritual purpose guides all areas of our human selves if we recognize its power and use it to gauge our reality. Meaning that when all else fades, when we are alone, in the darkness of death and dying, what will be there to guide you, what will you feel about the life you have lived, who will you have in your life to maintain peace, joy and love. We must not be fooled into limited our life to this reality because it will be the human races biggest downfall. We must awaken to the spirituality of our conscious, making it our reality, it is one of the best things I have ever done in my life and I know that it will be for you as well.

*We cannot have freedom for ourselves unless there is freedom for all. --Shared by Rev. Al Sharpton from the words of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. on 1/16/11*

♥ ♥ ♥ to my fellow human beings!!! A shout out to the special human beings you are- Be safe, be joyful, be loved because you are loved eternally!!!--Monique Swaby 😊
Notes

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