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EDUCATION THROUGH MEANING-MAKING: AN ARTIST'S JOURNEY FROM
QUARTERLIFER TO EDUCATOR

A Thesis Presented

by

Tamara Danielle Brown

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

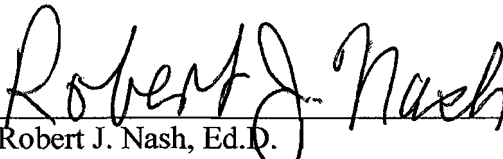
The University of Vermont

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

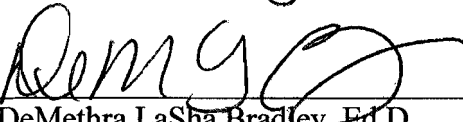
January, 2011

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.

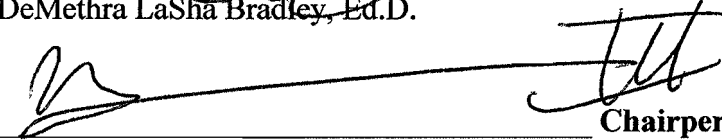
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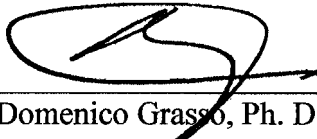
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ABSTRACT

Meaning-making is an important process to the personal and professional development of students in higher education. Today's educators need to acknowledge and encourage the meaning-making process in order for these quarter-life students to enjoy an enriched life of meaning, as well as excel in academia. I challenge educators to apply meaning-making to their own lives in order to gain a deeper understanding of their personal purpose in their lives and as educators on college campuses.

Written within a Scholarly Personal Narrative methodology, my thesis proposes that, through the deep and personal meaning-making process, students and educators can create a more meaningful experience in the classroom on today's higher education campuses.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I'd like to thank my advisor and dear friend, Robert J. Nash, for all of his support and love over the past 3 years; my parents, Helen Joyce Dixon and Thomas Richard Brown, for giving me this wonderful life and their undying love and support; my *brilliant mentor parents*, Cary Dixon and Jo Marie Privitera, for believing in me and reminding my mom and dad that I always make the right choice for myself in my own time; my sister, Monica J. White, for being my hero and my friend; my best friend, Tonia Sine Ellis, for being my artistic comrade in life and for affirming my pedagogical philosophy; and my amazing partner, Daniel T. Shearer, for loving me and never letting me give up.

This thesis is dedicated to all of you. Without all of your love and support my thesis would have never been completed. I love you!

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INTRODUCTION

When I embarked on this project I knew that the process of meaning-making would be the backbone of my thesis. This process has deepened my life as an educator as well as my own personal life experiences. It is only natural and extremely rewarding to bring this process to my students. Meaning-making is the essence of my pedagogical philosophy – it is as much a part of my personal philosophy as well as my professional values.

I have chosen to write my thesis in a Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) writing style. In SPN it is in the author's voice that the writer finds her most power and the most meaning. SPN is personal and scholarly. It takes from the experiences of the writer and applies what she has learned and understood throughout her life to materials explored in her academics. Meaning-making and SPN seamlessly come together for me in this writing, in that, I have used my journey in my own meaning-making process to create this SPN piece of writing. Through SPN writing I have learned more about myself and, as a result, this process has prepared and challenged me to know, understand and guide my students.

CHAPTER 1: MEANING-MAKING

1.1 What is Meaning-Making?

Think about what gets you out of bed in the morning. What makes you get excited? What stimulates an overwhelming surge of joy in your body? What helps you sleep through the night? What charges you to go to work every day? What moves you to write and finish that thesis or dissertation? What motivates you to go to that 7:30am lecture? What inspires you to stay in that relationship when things get hard? What gets you going to run that last mile? What drives you to get the degree, GED, or that promotion? What moves you to breathe that next breath and stay alive? What inspires you to keep on keeping on?

Asking and answering these questions of ourselves is the creation of meaning-making in our lives. There are a plethora of answers to all of these questions and all of these answers are unique to the one answering them. Each human being creates her own meaning and in her own distinctive and beautiful way. I believe that every man and woman – student, philosopher, educator, or parent – has an obligation to create meaning in her own life, and she has a right to create it in her own manner. We all experience the world in different ways – influenced by our upbringing, our temperament, and our individual life journeys – therefore our manner in which we find meaning in life is unique. In Viktor Frankl's book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, he views our human "search for meaning [as]...the primary motivation" in our lives. Each human's search is "unique and specific in that it must and can be fulfilled by him alone; only then does it achieve a significance which will satisfy his own *will* to meaning."¹ I view Frankl's idea of

meaning-making as an innate need for accountability that we all must possess in order to, not only create this meaning in our lives, but also to use it to help guide our lives.

Throughout my life journey I have found that it is in the moments that breathe life into my soul that are the moments that give my life meaning. When we create meaning we learn what we hold dear in our lives. We learn what it is we truly need and desire out of life. What one holds to be meaningful differs from human being to human being, but it is in understanding our overlapping human needs and desires that we find true connection. For me, it is within these connects where we find the most powerful moments of meaning-making.

1.2 The *Me* in Meaning-Making

Creating meaning of my own life has changed the course of my personal journey to a brighter and more grounded path. The art of meaning-making has inspired me so much that I want to share it with others, especially my students. There is a growing need for safe spaces on college campus for students to feel encouraged to making meaning of their lives. I believe it's time for educators and administrators in higher education to fully acknowledge this need and act on nurturing meaning-making on their campuses.

The yearning to make meaning out of life is a primary desire of today's college aged students. The term coined for these generally late-teen to mid-30 year olds is *quarterlifers*. I was first introduced to the term "quarterlifer" in the book *Quarterlife Crisis, the Unique Challenges of Life in Your Twenties (Quarterlife Crisis)* by Abby Wilner and Alexandra Robbins. I picked up the book when I was working on my

undergraduate degree at Niagara University (NU). The title popped out at me and, being a prime quarterlifer myself at the time, I was praying that there was a step-by-step guide to help me graduate and find a fulfilling career and relationship. I found out all too quickly that there is no such exact guide in life, but I did find a wealth of knowledge and some compelling stories in the text. This book opened my eyes to the fact that almost every other college student around me was just as lost as I was. Even more fascinating was the fact that most of them were seeking fulfillment in their lives, too. It was so comforting to discover a name for this stage in my life and to know that I wasn't alone.

Today, the students I come across are experiencing very similar quarterlife issues and emotions that I went through during my days in college. They are asking themselves deep questions similar to the meaning-making question that I opened this chapter with: What do I hold most dear to me? Why am I getting this degree? Will it help me to have a meaningful life and career? What makes me happy? Who should I love? Is this path going to make me happy in five years? What is worth living for? What keeps me keep on going? Who am I?

Quarterlifers are seeking clarity and meaning in their lives. In his article *A Personal Reflection on Educating for Meaning*, Professor Robert Nash observes that:

A growing number of college students are looking to external sources for their sense of worth [believing] that if they can just improve their economic situation, lose weight, or perhaps secure good grades that will lead to an excellent job and promotions, then everything will be okay. Their summa cum laude degrees, toys, travels, stocks and bonds, comprehensive health plans, two cute little children, cars, and homes will make them happy for the rest of their natural lives. But deep down, all is not well with [these] students, and most know it.ⁱⁱ

This observation hits very close to home for me as I remember my own path during my undergraduate years and the 5 or so years that followed. I was one of those “good grades” students with high honors and excellent prospects for my future in mind. I excelled academically in school and financially in the work place after college. But I, too, knew that all was most certainly not well. Nothing held any meaning. Yes, it was true that I had made my family very happy with my top grades, honors, and magna cum laude status at a prestigious university. And it is also true that I landed a solid job at a Fortune 500 financial firm in Manhattan, making more money than my parents had when they were my age. The package seemed to be complete: money, security and *the life* in the big city. But something huge was missing. Just like the students in Professor Nash’s reflection I, too, had come to realize that happiness and a sense of worth was not a part of my life’s equation.

Reading this article makes me recall a very personal letter that I wrote to Professor Nash before I had decided to come to the University of Vermont (UVM) to complete my graduate degree. I was living and working in New York City at the time, and I was in a very dark place in my life. It is an honest reflection of the unhappiness I was experiencing as a quarterlifer on the brink of a huge transition. It echoes the sentiments of so many of the students that he refers to in his article. It is a true testament to the fact that meaning-making is something our young people yearn for in higher education as well as in their early adult lives.

1.2.1 Letter to Nash

Dear Robert,

It's funny, because as I sit here writing to you about why I'm interested in your program I have to laugh to myself when I think about the path I've been walking down for the past 5 years. I've been working in finance for the past 3 years and the simple life of teaching and inspiring young and eager minds would make me the happiest person in the world. Dr. Nash, please allow me to take you through my journey...

I started out as any young college graduate starts out – a dreamer. I immediately found work as an actor in local theatres and found that I could actually support myself on my dreams. I eventually found the courage to move to New York City and found much success as a performer. Perhaps it was too much too soon, or I was too young to really know what I wanted – who knows. But one day I just bolted – crazy, right? It's unfortunate because there I was, living proof that it was possible – live your dreams – but I ignored it and I ran. And I ran fast and with very little thought.

I ran to graduate school – the safety zone – “be a teacher, make mom and dad proud” were the thoughts rolling through my mind. Sadly, while attending my first graduate program, I didn't put much thought into what I actually wanted or cared about achieving. I was raised in a family where it's nice to have hobbies, but the things you love won't pay the bills forever. So I did what I thought would make them happy. I believed that it was time to move on and become an *adult* – whatever that means – and go to school for something that will give me security and good standing with my family. And, boy was I miserable. I hated graduate school, which was odd because I graduated at the top of my class in my undergraduate program at NU. So I spent the next year and a half wasting thousands of dollars and valuable time on a degree I didn't really want –

ouch! One day I literally woke up and realized that I missed my independent life in the city. So, once again, I just up and left – and ran.

I moved back to New York City with \$17 in my pocket. To this day, I'm very proud of that fact. It means that once I decide that I want something, nothing in the world can ever stop me from achieving it. I was finally happy again just breathing familiar air and feeling that sense of independence I had been missing. One week after I moved back to the city I started a temp job for a financial company in Midtown Manhattan. And it was fantastic. I had more money than I knew what to do with and the chance to be stable and successful in the greatest city in the world. *Money has a very funny way of clouding what you really want out of life.* So, I started out as a temp at King Street Capital Management in June of 2005, went full time in no time, and I never left. Promotion after promotion came and I thought that I was living the life. But something was missing. Something was always missing. Here I was making the rich richer – what?! Where's the creativity in that? Where's the part where I inspire and move people? And there it was – in my pay check: false and empty happiness. I had gone from wonderful dreamer, to successful actor, to unhappy graduate student, to an even unhappier money-hungry New Yorker.

When I look back on it now, it is quite clear that I had been lost for some time. But the funny thing is that the same theme ran through this story. Every time I was honest with myself and did what made my soul happy, I was genuinely fulfilled. Every time I was unhappy and my surroundings didn't fit what I wanted out of life, I ran. And I don't

want to run anymore. Running towards idle goals that give quick-fixes are not working for me. I need something stable, yet personally and morally fulfilling.

So, this leads me to you and your program at UVM. I've already been down the road of graduate school and I refuse to make the same mistake twice. There's an unexplainable, extreme pull in my heart leading me back to academia this time around. I think I may have just made some hasty decisions in the past while trying to discover what I really wanted. I know that now. I know that I want to be an educator and bring the creative arts into higher education, but I'm just not sure how to go about it. I don't want to get my masters in theatre because I feel that there aren't enough developed programs for what I specifically want to do. My hero in college was my dramatic literature teacher and she earned her degree in English in order to be the teacher she wanted to be. Well, to be honest with you Dr. Nash, I'd rather not go that route. I want to read what I want to read. And I want to be inspired by different fields of study to find what I'm looking for – to be an *interdisciplinary connoisseur*, if you will. I want to “run” to your Interdisciplinary Program with conviction and with my head held high. I want to use this running urge of mine to my advantage, and one day, by God, I'm going to be the inspiring educator who resides in my soul and is dying to be released.

Thank you so much for allowing me to tell you my story. I believe that simply by telling our stories sometimes it awakens within us what it is that we truly need and desire in life.

Sincerely,

Tamara Brown

1.2.2 Connections

In recent years I have come to read texts other than *Quarterlife Crisis* on meaning-making and the quarterlife generation. I appreciate authors Wilner and Robbins for bringing this *crisis*, as they call it, to the light at a time when my peers and I needed it. I have no doubt that discovering this book had some effect on my path towards wanting to help quarterlifers create meaning in higher education. In my pursuit of finding more texts on meaning-making I have found that books like *Helping College Students Find Purpose*, by Robert Nash and Michelle Murray, speak a very similar language as mine in terms of quarterlife issues on college campuses. Like myself, they “prefer not to think of the quarterlife experience as a *crisis*, but rather a series of exciting, real-life possibilities for students to make meaning.”ⁱⁱⁱ Now, it is clear from my letter that my time spent in New York City did begin to inch towards some very dark places in my heart, and it is true that this experience can be very easily viewed as a crisis, but using the term *crisis* only brings about negative connotations. It victimizes quarterlifers and creates a sense of hopelessness. I can choose to live in that narrative – in fact, we all have that choice – but I’d rather choose to use my experience as a necessary and useful step in my life. In this light, I couldn’t agree more with Nash and Murray that the use of the word crisis is not for me when dealing with quarterlifers.

Looking back at those years I spent in New York City I realize now that at the time I didn’t know that I was creating meaning in my life just by the act of writing the above letter. Merely by asking the right questions of myself I was starting on the path of finding the worth I was missing in my day to day life. By writing this letter I finally

found the courage to start asking myself some of the meaningful questions that had been haunting me. Writing these questions down and honestly facing them gave me the strength to begin to try to answer them for myself. Asking these questions of myself was the first step in facing the challenges of quarterlife. Nash and Murray list 6 challenges in their meaning-making book, but with regard to this letter I'd like to focus on two of these challenges: Work Life and Identity.^{iv}

If anything it is very clear from my letter that my desire to find something more fulfilling in my *work life* was a huge catalyst in my need to find more meaning in my life. Quarterlifers constantly ask the question “Will I always have to choose between doing what I love or making lots of money?”^v Working in the financial realm I felt suffocated. I had gone from my world of meaning and passion in the arts to a world of money and emptiness. This caused my emotional balance to swing way out of gear. Asking myself the above question challenged my sense of worth and inspired me to make a dramatic change: I quit my job very soon after writing this letter and set myself on the path towards real happiness. In this way, meaning-making (asking myself questions and acting upon my answers) lead me to make worthy decisions for myself and move on to a brighter future.

Now, I am not trying to say that all quarterlifers who are unhappy in their careers should quit their jobs. I am simply challenging them to question their desires to be happy and to question their true identities. Leaving finance worked for me, but perhaps looking for a promotion within the realm some quarterlifers already work in may be the proper

choice for them – it all depends on what you find that works for you and what you truly need and want out of life.

Taking the time to explore what I wanted out of life unknowingly got me closer to my current sense of *identity*. Making choices to stand up for what I believed in further developed my convictions, and made me actually start to like myself. It may sound a little childish to word it like that, but so many quarterlifers do not like themselves. Depression and anxiety are on a high among quarterlifers because they are having difficulty facing meaning-making questions like “Why can’t I like who I am? [and] Will I ever be truly happy with myself?”^{vi} I only discovered what my true identity was by being up front with myself about who I really am: by saying no to the career that lacked artistic grounds and made me severely unhappy, and no to the city that banked on indulgence too much for my tastes and beliefs. I had to negate the influences of others around me and find my home within my own soul. As a quarterlifer it was very difficult to block out influences around me. Friends and acquaintances – coworkers in finance, successful friends in the theatre circuit, friends who were functioning alcoholics and the occasional party drug users – had their own agendas and views on life, their own identities, if you will. And sometimes it was so tempting to take on others’ identities for fear of not really knowing or believing in my own. It was especially hard being around those who had strong convictions. Regardless of how unfitting to my own identity, their sense of self was so attractive merely because their convictions *seemed* so overwhelmingly grounded – whether they were grounded or not is another story. A rock band I used to go see perform in New York City, named Mrnorth, has a lyric that moves me for its beautiful calling to

their listeners to stay true to our beliefs: “Walking tall is reserved for those who take with them conviction, and walk through fire and don't look back. No, no.”^{vii} I was done playing the victim to my quarterlife *crisis*. I wanted to be one of those who walk tall in life. Developing and knowing my convictions suddenly helped me begin to love who I am. I was ready to walk through the fires of opposition and finally stand up for what I believed in, to be fully committed and true to my identity. This was the moment I began my journey towards finding out who I truly am.

Writing this letter was my first step in the right direction and I want to encourage my students, as Professor Nash motivated me, to take the first steps to finding out what gives their lives worth and meaning. Changing my work life and seeking my true identity was my journey. I want to be there for my students in their journeys towards the meaning they will make in their own lives. I hope that by sharing my own quarterlife stories that it will inspire them to share theirs and help them to progress through this questioning and beautiful part of life.

1.4 Meaning-Making in Higher Education

During the winter break of my second year in graduate school at UVM I encountered a very jaded, established educator at an informal dinner at a friend's house. My partner had informed me before we arrived that his friend's mother, who is a professor, would be there and that as soon as she finds out that I am pursuing my master's in education she is going to pick me apart. Fantastic, I thought, another negative instructor for me to encounter, who will undoubtedly remind me of the political machine

of higher education that I get to look forward to becoming a part of upon graduation. And he was right. The second she heard that I was a graduate student in the education department, I swear I could hear her fangs immerge. Not only did I take a beating by her pessimistic tenured point of view, but she made sure to publicly humiliate me in front of my partner when I had the courage to admit that my thesis is on making-meaning in the academy. Her claws soon joined her fangs, and it turned into an all out defense on whether or not college students have the maturity or intellectual tools to even begin to be exposed to talks of meaning-making. She felt very strongly about her belief that college students do not possess the accountability it takes to create meaning in their lives. She thinks that students are too young and inexperienced at the college age to really know what's important in life.

I immediately became upset and defensive. To me, an attack on meaning is very similar to an attack on someone's religion. Not only is student/educator meaning-making the vein of my thesis and graduate work, but meaning has become a sort of spirituality to me, and her retorts were deeply wounding me. Her lack of faith in today's college student made me very sad for her students. If their instructor deems them clueless as to the great questions of the world and the personal meaning-making that comes from these questions, then I fear her students are doomed to have little faith in themselves when it comes to facing quarterlife issues.

Unfortunately, I run into a notable amount of opposition in higher education when I speak about the value I place on meaning-making on college campuses. Like the jaded educator, there are many higher educational professionals who are anti-meaning-making

on campuses because they do not believe that college students have the ability to create meaning in their lives. At the same time, these are the same professors who hold their students to a very high level of accountability in the students' own lives as well as in the classroom. To these professionals I propose that they and I are saying the same thing, but using different language. I think we all hold our students up to a certain standard and fully expect them to get intellectual nourishment out of their college experiences. In addition to these expectations we especially want our students to take what they have learned in the classroom and apply what they learn to their lives. With meaning-making I take it a step further. Meaning-making allows the student to explore the things, people, moments, places and experiences in their own lives that they are willing to live and die for. Without having the opportunity to explore these important ideas our students have very little to go on when we ask them to apply what they've learned in school to their own lives. It's like telling our students to reach for the stars without letting them know that they can fly. If they haven't had the opportunity to explore who they are and what is important to them, it is near impossible to apply value to their learning experience in higher education.

My encounter with the jaded professor haunted me. I hear such differing accounts from the student that I have talked to. They *are* yearning for meaning-making, and many of their college campuses are not delivering it. One of Professor Nash's students expresses a hunger for conversations of deep meaning, saying:

Only once in any classroom was I encouraged to talk honestly and openly about the sense of mystery and depth that I frequently experience in my own life...Why can't we ever talk in higher education about what gives our lives real

meaning? Why can't we talk about this everywhere on campus throughout the four years that we spend here?^{viii}

This brief narrative affected me greatly and ignites a flame in me that makes me want to bring meaning to all students. Why are so many educators afraid to talk about meaning with their students? Why are many of these instructors so quick to judge students and haughtily assume they are clueless and incapable of recognizing or discussing meaning-making at this stage in their lives? Is there any truth to their fears and judgments? Will I be jaded one day, too, and lose faith in my students? Will I see the dark side of higher education, not in the political machine of tenured faculty, but more so through my own disappointment in my students' lack of ability to create or acknowledge meaning-making? Or will I rise to greater heights and continue to see the beauty and fulfillment that I find in students and meaning-making today? Perhaps the ability to create and evoke meaning out of students is a character trait or a skill that some educators possess and some do not. If this is so, God I hope I have and keep this gift.

1.4.1 It Takes Two to Tango

While reading *Helping College Students Find Purpose* I found it hard to read this meaning-making guide merely as an educator. I realized that I was reading it much like a quarterlifer. There were many questions that I, too, am still working on as a growing and maturing human being. This feeling actually shocked me briefly. I was concerned that my authority or life knowledge would be challenged by my students during our course this coming fall because I was still struggling with these quarterlife inquiries. But before the

panic of “oh my god have I chosen the wrong career?” could really get rooted in me, I remembered another section of the book that I believe speaks to this exact issue.

In the book one of Professor Nash’s students, Rachel, writes about deep-meaning learning in a reflective paper she wrote for a final assignment. She touches on Stephen R. Covey’s idea of sharpening one’s own saw and the notion of nourishing yourself before attempting to nourish others.^{ix} This section truly spoke to me as an educator, in that, I believe is it not only my students duty to create meaning in their lives, but it is my job as their teacher to continue to create meaning in my own life. Rachel also noted that it is the *consciousness* of her instructors of their own life journeys that speaks to her and draws her in as a student. That it is her professor’s constant search for their own meaning that moves her to create meaning for herself.

Like Rachel I also believe that an effective teacher is one who is still questioning and making meaning out of her own life. As a student, Rachel needs an educator who is willing to admit that they, too, are students of life. Educators need to acknowledge that quarterlife questions face all human beings – students and teachers. Personally, the way I see it, there is a fine line between student and educator. The finer and grayer that space is between student and educator, the better the environment in the classroom. I enjoy classes where both student and teacher are students of each other. Instructors who are impenetrable and pretend to know it all are not true educators to me. The greatest moments occur in a classroom when we are all teaching each other something new about life and ourselves. When we – student and teacher – are able to apply this new found knowledge to the material at hand in the course, it is then that the real magic happens in

the classroom. An effective educator is someone who has the courage to put her own life, knowledge and experiences into question and use this self exploration in her work.

As I continued to read Rachel's reflection the panic that I felt about still seeking answers to quarterlife questions, suddenly subsided. Not only is it ok that I still ask myself these questions, I believe that it is a necessity of an educator. I must continue to nourish myself or, in this case, ask myself these vital questions in order to be more susceptible and helpful for my students. I must be ok with acknowledging that I am still in my mid to late quarter life and also rejoice in this fact. It is a necessary process in my life journey as an educator and as a maturing young woman. Furthermore, it is important to continue to find the balance between being an *educator* and being a *student of life*. It is good to keep these two in check with one another. I must be able to fluctuate back and forth from these two places – be a student when it is time to listen and ask for clarification, be an educator when it is time to help guide, illuminate and support.

When it comes to being an effective and inspiring teacher I believe it is those educators who honestly acknowledge that, like their quarterlife students, they too are going through a meaning-making journey. As an educator, it is not easy admitting that we are in the process of creating meaning right along with our students. For centuries the academic set-up has been one authority figure (the educator) and the students below her. The interaction between student and teacher must change and evolve. Educators have an amazing opportunity to learn valuable meaning-making skills from their students as much as the student has to learn from their educator.

Educators need to ask their students powerful questions that inspire their students' meaning-making process. College students are at such an insightful stage in their lives and they have the ability to create profound meaning in their lives. As higher education professionals it is our responsibility to inspire and nurture this meaning-making process in our students. We have the tools and life experience to help these already brilliant minds excel in the academy.

In the following chapters I will explore my own meaning-making process within the context of my passion and identity as an artist. On my quest to become an educator I found that my strengths lay in the experiences that hold meaning in my life. Using my life as an artist propelled me into the realm of higher education. Meaning-making brought me to this clear path and it allowed me to develop the convictions of my identity as an artist.

CHAPTER 2: AN EDUCATOR'S QUEST FOR MEANING

2.1 First Identity: I Am an Artist

I cannot write this thesis about my quest for meaning making without exploring my own life as an artist. Making meaning in one's life is about getting to the roots of what is most important to her. The performing arts are one of my deepest passions. Art moves me in a way like nothing else on this earth. I apply everything in life to art. I see my own life as an art form and I act and react to my life and other people from a place of art. It is who I am and it is how I create my deepest meaning in my life.

Because art is the vehicle in which I create meaning, I do not see my life as an educator or my life as an artist as separate. The two will always be the same. As a promoter of meaning-making I had to find this deep place of meaning before I could move on in my life as an educator. Finding what is most meaningful to me gave my vocation as an educator worth and gave my life a deeper value. To find this meaning I had to dig very far into my past and my life experiences. I found many moments that touched and opened me. I am proud of this search and grateful that meaning-making gave me this gift.

2.1.1 Performing for the Little Me

When I was in graduate school (that is, the first time I took a crack at getting a master's), I was an actor in a local children's theatre company called Theatre IV. We would travel all over the state of Virginia and perform historical and educational shows for students grades K-12. I remember being welcomed and appreciated by many audiences of young people, but there were several times when we did not feel very valued

by some of the students. The students who thought that it was more amusing to make fun of the visiting troop and the performance were very cruel, indeed. I remember coming off stage once after being laughed at right in the middle of a monologue. I instantly felt ashamed, hurt and angry. I didn't want to go back out there and perform for those brats. *Who do they think they are? Don't they know who I am? Oh, I'll show them, alright!* I thought to myself.

Their cruelty clearly struck a chord with me. But before I'd let the immaturity of teenagers at least 10 years my junior take my professionalism and pride down with them, I'd stop myself and take a deep breath. I would return on stage with this one single thought: I need to do my best performance for the *little me* that is out there dying to hear what I have to say. Yes, there is always a younger *me* out in every audience who, unlike his or her taunting peers, is actually interested in learning, or in theatre, or maybe even just sees me as a positive role model – a young woman in her mid-20s going after her goals and doing what she loves for a living.

As soon as that image of myself at that age comes into my head all the hurt and anger at the kids disappears and I'm left with compassion and a fire that pushes me to perform even stronger for the audience.

The same emotion goes for my feelings on education and meaning-making. I needed to write this thesis for me – the *little me* in the classroom who needs to see a role model who says, *Hey there early quarterlifer, it's ok to be an artist. I am. Or It's ok to be an athlete, or a doctor, or a teacher (or whatever your dream is); I did. I went after my goals and dreams, and you will too.*

In the Broadway musical *Ragtime* there is a moment in the song *Make Them Hear You*, song by the character Coalhouse Walker, Jr., where he calls out to all men and women to tell their stories and to use those stories to ensure the future of our young people. The lyrics and melody of this song comfort me when I am clouded with doubt about my vocation in education. In the musical Coalhouse is a black man struggling for equality at the turn of the century. It is the first decade of the 20th century and Henry Ford's Model-T has made *freedom* more accessible for middle-class Americans who had previously had little availability to mobility. I put the word freedom in italics because this theme follows Coalhouse during the whole play. Although he is a free man constitutionally, he still suffers prejudices and racial slander in his life. His new Model-T is vandalized by local white men who want to ensure that Coalhouse stays in his place as a middle-class black man. As a result of the combination of this event and the unfortunate death of his wife, a raging anger builds in him and he embarks on a champion to fight injustices. Unfortunately his efforts eventually become very violent and he is killed as a result. But before his death he acknowledges that violence may not have been the best option, but he has no regrets. He felt that his fight was a worthy cause and he was willing to die for it. He sings *Make Them Hear You* just before he dies. As the song progresses he has a realization that his fight was not in vane and that there is something to be gained from making sure that his story lives on. The moment he sings, "Go out and tell our story to your daughters and your sons/Make them hear you.../Proclaim it from your pulpit, in your classroom, with your pen/Teach every child to raise his voice and then, my brothers, then/Will Justice be demanded by ten million righteous men"^x ignites my heart with

pride. It reminds me that I have a purpose and a responsibility to these young people. My fight may not be for justice, as it was Coalhouse's, but I think there is something very unifying between what he was fighting for and my own journey in higher education. Those words inspire me to, in fact, *teach every child to raise her voice* for the purpose of finding her voice, her calling, her meaning in life. A large part of creating meaning in one's life is finding her voice in order to use that voice and stand up for her convictions.

Experiencing musical moments like these taught me to seek my own voice and create my own meaning. My meaning-making process has pushed me to want to bring meaning to students and help them to seek their voices and their meaning. My calling is to perform – or teach – for the *little me* that's out there in the audience and in my classroom.

2.2 To be Human is to be an Artist

“The little Shakespeare in the maiden's heart/Makes Romeo of a plough-boy on his cart.” ~Ralph Waldo Emerson^{xi}

“However deeply buried, there is an artist in every man...The little Shakespeare is the poet in each of us. Without that Little Shakespeare the Great Shakespeare will remain forever imprisoned in a book.” ~Harold C. Goddard^{xii}

I believe that all human beings are artists and we have a duty to make our lives as beautifully fitting to our own character as we are able. The word artist has several different meanings to many people. To me art is a very powerful word. The simplest way to define the word artist is: *one who creates*. When put so simply it's easier to apply this

word to virtually every human being. Perhaps it's even easier to apply the title to all women, in that we create human life. Therefore we women are natural artist because of our beautiful ability to have children. To take it a step further, perhaps it is also seamless to apply the word artist to an educator, for we provide the stage on which we guide the creation and inception of ideas – new and old. But I believe that this gift of being an artist is readily available to all human beings. There is a need to break the limited mold that has surrounded the term *artist* for far too long. I don't merely limit art or calling one's self an artist to those of us who paint, draw, act or sing. I think all people have the ability to create art in their lives, and not just on an easel or stage.

William Shakespeare brilliantly proclaims: "All the world's a stage,/And all the men and women merely players./They have their exits and their entrances,/And one man in his time plays many parts."^{xiii} Like Shakespeare, I see life itself is an art – each breath a beat, every word a lyric, and all conversation a scene. Every step and motion in our lives is a choreographed dance that each of us creates as we go along. Many of us unconsciously map each movement and word to fit our own particular needs and wants. We intuitively have the sense and control to consciously write our own life scripts. Each one of us is, as Emerson puts it, a maiden or a plough-boy with a little Shakespeare in our hearts. I think Emerson is getting at the simplicity it takes to be an artist.

Now, although I am an actor I do not believe that I am any better at this *life-play* as the next human being. I don't consider performing to be my greatest strength in art-making. It is a wonderful trade and talent, but it is not solely where all of my passion lies. My strengths are in relating to people and moving others with my stories and how I view

the world. Being an actor definitely helped with my personal development to becoming a relational person, but this artistic skill is not only limited to we *artists types*. Art is in all of us. Art is life.

A man walks down the street holding the hand of a woman. It's freezing outside and he is only wearing one glove – the bare hand being the one holding her similarly uncovered fingers. As I get closer I see that they are both carrying the missing gloves in their opposite hands. I am startled back into my own walking bubble when they suddenly turn to look at one other, as if reacting to the same invisible thing, and giggle to each other as they continue to stroll.

This will seem to be a casual scene to most. To me this is art. This is stories and life – the very thing that art comes from. Without people living their lives, or taking strolls with their loved ones, we don't have art. Art is life. On the performing arts stage it is the imitation of life, but in our case as regular human beings it *is* life. In the story I just shared I can feel the lover's hands and sense their laughter. I may not know the joke, but I am touched the same way I would be if I were watching the climactic first-act finale of *One Day More* while at a performance of *Les Miserables (Les Miz)* on Broadway. Ok well, maybe that's just me. But I encourage my readers to think about something that gets you out of bed in the morning. This is life – simply put. But the intentions and passions that actually get you up are what make life the ultimate art. Try to compare those places or moments of passion in your own life to my view of *Life as Art*. For me it's *Les Miz* or the simplicity and magic of relating to those around me. But what is it for you? It can be

teaching a class. It can be taking your children to school. It can be kissing your partner good morning before work. All of these scenarios are art.

In the book, *Art and Fear*, authors David Bayles and Ted Orland explore the notion that “art is made by ordinary people.”^{xiv} They state that “art [does not] rest fundamentally upon talent, and talent is [not] a gift randomly built into some people and not into others...In large measure becoming an artist consists of learning to accept yourself, which makes your work personal, and in following your own voice, which makes your work distinctive.”^{xv} Bayles and Orland’s idea of ordinary people being artists makes the activity of taking your children to school an artistic form in itself. To live an artistic life we must be passionate about something or someone and keep making our passions or the things around us as beautiful, functional and as happy as they can be. If your passion is bringing your children to school or kissing your lover good morning, the act in itself is not solely where the art of it lies. It is in our intentions and the way we feel about our lovers or children where the art finds its home. *Intention* is a term we use in theatre to refer to our objective or why we do the things we do on stage. The great Constantine Stanislavski calls it “living the part”^{xvi} in his groundbreaking acting guide *An Actor Prepares*. Stanislavski is known in many acting circles as the grandfather of what we know today as the Stanislavski Method (method acting). The method acting philosophy upholds that the actor is a servant to the script and her character – a living, breathing and true representation of the human condition. She uses her senses and personal experiences to “adapt...to the spiritual and physical life of the person [she is] representing.”^{xvii} The actor is a true embodiment of the soul of her character. Applying

this notion to the idea that ordinary people create art merely by living their lives seems seamless to me. Just by having human desires, or *intentions*, and the will to live and create meaning is living life artistically. Acting out your intentions – or meaningful desires – is art. Ordinary people don't need to consider themselves or be known as traditional artist to create art, they only need the desires and emotions that they naturally possess.

We all have art in our hearts – parents, loved ones, children, educators, and students alike. It is with the intentions we uphold and act upon that create this art, this *meaning*, in our lives. I invite you, the reader, to think deeply about this notion and seek the places and moments in your life that you find meaning in. I promise you will soon find your art there in those profound spaces.

2.3 Teaching is Art at its Finest

At an early age I discovered that art is my vehicle to being an educator. When I participated in productions they were usually educationally based, whether it was being in school musicals, singing in my high school show choir or singing in my church choir. Performing in order to teach something or uphold a truth is true art – it's *my* art.

Teaching is part of the process of being an artist. The corollary here is that the greatest gift you have to offer your students is the example of your own life as a working artist... Your experiences provide as affirmation to younger artists that the path they have chosen does lead somewhere... What good teachers offer their students is something akin to the vulnerability found in a personal relationship – a kind of artistic and intellectual intimacy that lets others see *how* they [the educator] reached a specific point, not simply that they did reach it. It is the willingness to lay open the line that runs between their life and their art.^{xviii}

This statement affirms my progression from calling myself an artist to the place I am now: calling myself an artistic educator. It mirrors my own philosophy of education. As an educator I strive to use the example of my own life as a meaning-making human being to help guide my student to their own places of meaning. This quote helped me realize that my passion of art is the key to my vocation as an educator. When I am true to my identity of artistry it strengthens my skills in higher education. In the following section I will explore how I have used my art to enrich my work as an educator. I will discuss a specific educational example I recently experienced. Although the story centers around my work as a director of a production, the example holds universal values and resource that are strikingly similar to teaching in a classroom.

Using my life as an artist to teach and inspire young minds is one of the most meaningful convictions that I hold dear to my heart. It is my truth. It is what I live for. It is my identity. Education and artistry are one in the same for me, and the two can never be parted.

CHAPTER 3: ARTIST AS EDUCATOR

3.1 Telling Our Stories

Art is stories in another language – a sacred language. I use my art to tell my stories. I tell my stories to relate, to connect, to understand, to try to find the overlap between human beings. This creates human connection and can be a vital gift and tool in the educational venue.

During my graduate studies I had the wonderful opportunity to direct a production of *The Vagina Monologues* for the 2009-2010 V-Day Campaign at UVM. It wasn't surprising once I discovered the undeniable connection between my art and my love of education that my life naturally gravitated towards directing. My experiences with this cast of students and staff at the university deepened my notions of what being a true artist and educator entails. The interpersonal skills I gained and the stories I learned were so profound and useful towards my quest to be an educator.

3.1.1 A Director's Reflection

Journal Entry: Sept. 16, 2009:

So, here it is, I'm a director. Well, I guess I always have been one. Dating back to my college years and quite possibly before then, I was a director then just as I am now. This still doesn't exactly make me feel that much less nervous about the endeavor, but I will say that I am excited and the idea of this upcoming experience does ignite a sort of all consuming flame in me.

Theatre and the arts are my passion. I feel so honored to be a part of a team that not only will take on a very challenging script, but we are going to make a difference in

our community. I feel like my hero William Shakespeare when I say “ah, now there’s the rub,” for I believe that art is most valuable when it is used or directed at helping and changing a community or individual for the better. When I am a part of an artistic project that exists in order to create change and ignite learning I am in my happy place of personal meaning-making.

Robert Nash introduced me to the idea of “getting in a flow.” When one is engaged in an act or thought that is so encompassing that time and space disappear, this is flow. There is no stronger and more effective flow for me than creating art. It’s funny to me that directing “The Vagina Monologues” is an independent study for me. I find humor in this because despite all the hours and work I will put into this project, I find that it is not work at all to me. It is my flow.

My mother once said, “If you do what you love for a living, you’ll never work a day in your life.” I feel that this is another way of getting into one’s flow and using it to make your career a place of meaning. I hold my mother’s word very close to my heart, for I couldn’t agree with her more. When I get into my flow – whether it be art or writing or mentoring – it isn’t work. It is passion and creativity and fun. So here’s to Robert’s idea of “flow”, my mother’s profound words of wisdom, and here’s to me never working a day in my life.

3.1.2 Tell Us Your Stories: Who Are These Brilliant Women?

Directing The Vagina Monologues taught me so much about students, my own capabilities, and what makes me passionate. I remember standing in the back of the audience at the first performance when it finally dawned on me: *Wow, I did this* – the

coaching, the staging, the notes, the long chats about life at 9pm on a weekend night at the UVM Women's Center, the tears, the hugs... Then it dawned on me, *We all did this together*. Yes, that cast and crew and I went through a lot together, and we all came out better, braver and more brilliant than before.

To me collaborative expressions of art are the most unique experiences. I believe that human beings are on this earth in order to connect and create with each other. Being an artist, in its simplest form, merely means someone who creates something, and when we have deep connections with one another we create a beautiful spark of art.

Connection is all about telling our stories. In order to have a true connection both parties must come to the table willing to share pieces of themselves and, possibly more importantly, willing to be open to another's own story without judgment. When the production team and I first started meeting about auditions back in early September I remember it being extremely important to us that we really got to know these women who were coming to audition for us. We set up a worksheet with interview questions. I wanted these auditions to be more of a chat to get to know these women, not so much to see how talented they were at auditioning. When the production team and I revised the audition materials from the year before we got rid of several questions on our interview sheet that had to do with the actual audition, and we filled the sheet with questions that got to the core of who this person who was auditioning for us was. I wanted to take the auditions from a different angle than a traditional audition because *The Vagina Monologues* is not a traditional show. This production is about stories, pain, happiness, love, self-love. It also deals with triggering issues like rape and violence. I needed to

make sure our audition space and rehearsals were safe spaces where these women could feel secure and be open. I wasn't going to be able to create a safe space on stage if we didn't start creating it at step one: the auditions. I wanted to relax these young women and engage their trust. What the production team and I didn't want was a dragging audition weekend full of hearing the same monologues over and over again where all the women start to appear and sound the same. We wanted stories.

When they first came into the audition room many of them walked directly to the center of the room and either asked if they could begin their monologue or they simply just started reciting it. We had to guide many of them to the comfy couch that we placed across from us for our initial chat with each young woman. I think the first question that we asked the women surprised many of them: *How are you today?* Normally when one goes into an audition space the auditors generally don't care how she is, let alone ask her in a sincere manner. A lot of the young women looked visibly relieved once they realized that we just wanted to talk to them first. We told them that we really wanted to get to know each of them before jumping into audition mode. I had assumed that in the past, women who had auditioned for the production were generally nervous and would then completely blow through their audition piece without much thought to what or how they were presenting their monologue. During pre-production I assured my fellow production team, as a formally professional performer myself, that finding out who these women were *first* is one sure way to get a solid, amazing audition out of them. And we did.

3.1.3 The One on One's: "Getting to Know You is More Important to Me Than This Monologue"

When I started my one-on-one rehearsals with individual monologues I carried my feelings about getting to the core of the actor into these meetings, as well. For the entire first week of rehearsals I tried to let the women talk and explore their connections with their pieces. I knew that jumping right into these monologues was not the way to go with this particular show. *The Vagina Monologues* is a very sensitive, insightful and reflective script. Diving into a piece like this could cause negative triggers to those who have experienced violence or sexual abuse in their lives. I felt that it was safe to assume that if these women were interested in getting involved in this production that either they had experienced some form of violence, they knew someone that has, or they simply had very strong feelings towards stopping violence against women and spreading awareness. Regardless of their reasons for their involvement with this show, this topic needed to be handled very delicately.

Aside from the subject matter being of a sensitive matter, these are real live human beings with invaluable emotions and experiences. I needed to affirm their great abilities to perform these powerful pieces. Acting is too often misconstrued as *pretending* to be something or someone you are not. This is not the case. In the Stanislavsky Method, which is the acting method I was trained in, the actor gathers all of her own experiences and emotions and then channels them into a character. Characters written in plays are merely reflections of the human condition – there should be no pretending on stage.^{xix} When some of my actors confided in me that their particular monologue will be extremely hard for them to do, as they have never had such specific experiences, I tried to get many of them to think about the emotions behind the monologue, not the specific

situation the monologue was describing. For instance, one monologue was about birth and my actor had never given or witnessed a birth before. I had her focus on the emotion of creation. In my opinion the actual event of a birth, although it is a painful and intense experience, wasn't the only idea or image that this monologue was getting at. To my 19 year old actor she had a lot of fears around understanding what this monologue was all about, let alone explaining it to an audience. She and I had a lot of talks about *creating something from nothing*. We had chats about events or people who place her in a state of awe. Those key emotions (and some imagery exercises) were what got her through that monologue and the process.

During the rehearsal process I found that the women and I were having more talks than monologue work, but to me that was the work: the talking. *Who are you? How is this piece connected to you? What parts of your own life does this monologue conjure up for you?* These are the questions and conversations we would have and I feel that we gained so much more from this project by connecting on a deep level than we would have had we merely jumped into the work.

3.1.4 Bringing My Story to the Table

I began this reflection talking about the importance of stories and how each party much come to the table open and ready to tell their story. I remember when the production opened and Candace asked each cast and audience member to raise their hand if they had ever experienced violence. I raised my hand. I remember going home that evening and feeling more reflective than I've been since the show opened. I think the open admittance of the fact that I had once been a victim shock me a bit. I felt this

overwhelming need to tell my story. When I tried to tell some people who I believed I could trust, I didn't get the response that I needed so I closed it up inside. I started to feel ashamed all over again. I started to close off from intimacy. I didn't want to talk at all.

I couldn't believe that this was happening to me. Me: the director of *The Vagina Monologues*. One of the women who just finished proclaiming how important it is to love yourself as women, to tell your story, to find people who you trust and let them help you carry your baggage if you need help. I just couldn't do it.

Maybe I say this as a warning to those who are lucky enough to have someone trust you to tell you their story. This is a gift. Please don't close people off who need to tell their stories. I need to tell my story...

When I was born my father had already left my mother for another life. I'm not too sure of the exact details, but it became pretty evident to me that I had been abandoned. My first introduction to men was: *Men leave*, which translated to: *You're not good enough*, which changed to: *Don't trust men*, and so on. My mother literally became my mother and father, and my sister became an extra mother to me. My mom worked an extra Sunday shift at Bingo so she could afford to send me and my sister to private middle and high schools. I felt a deep compassion for her. Although she gracefully kept her pain to herself and I was too young to tangibly recognize it, I could feel her sadness through our close mother/daughter relationship.

When I was in the 3rd grade I was sexually abused by a boy almost twice my age. I didn't tell anyone for 11 years. I remember tucking this secret away in a deep place in my memory where I told myself that events and things don't exist. When I finally told

my college roommate I remember feeling a load lifted off of me – she listened without judgment, and that meant the world to me.

During the summer before my senior year of college, I had an amazing opportunity to go to London to study Shakespearian Theatre. My father worked 3 jobs just to send me money each week. I don't remember feeling sorry for him, though. I thought he owed it to me. I mean, where was he when mom was raising me and my sister?

When I was in my mid 20s I was raped by my ex-boyfriend. I was extremely inebriated and high. I remember blaming myself for years because I was drunk, I was high. It didn't occur to me that any of this event was *his* fault at first. I thought it was the right thing to do by being the mature one and taking responsibility for my own actions. To this day I still struggle with the weight of blame for what happened to me.

Despite all of these events I honestly consider myself a survivor, not a victim. I also believe that telling my story is more than half the battle. Of course I experienced pain and trauma, but opening up and admitting that these things happened helps me to begin the process of healing and moving on.

I'm an artist and a performer – telling stories is how I cope with life. Telling stories makes things real, it makes me feel validated. Telling our story to others makes them feel like they're aren't in this alone. The production of *The Vagina Monologues* gave the cast, crew and audience a chance to feel and reflect in a safe space. I have a deep belief that if my own participating in this production helped to trigger these emotions and

healing for me, that there are others who had similar transformation and healing experiences through watching or participating in this production.

3.2 Connecting the Dots: Director as Educator

Directing this production provided a wealth of knowledge for me in the educational realm. I had so many hands-on experiences that have given me practical skills for being an educator. The amazing thing is that I didn't learn these skills from a book or a particular teacher, being an educator came so naturally to me. It shocked me how innate it was in me. I excelled at this position because I honored my meaning-making process up to that point in my life. Directing this production was the culmination – and in effect the answers – to my quarterlife meaning-making questions that I explored in Chapter 1 (*identity* and *work life*). I conquered those challenges Nash and Murray list in *Helping College Students Find Purpose*. In directing this show I challenged my beliefs of what fulfilling work life should be in my life and I *came out* of my identity shell when I took on this project. My earlier career in finance lacked artistic grounds and made me severely depressed – this wasn't my art. I was determined to go find it. So I asked myself the right meaning-making questions, I challenged myself to find purpose, and I successfully found my work and identity in directing – in educating. I was ready to stand up for my convictions and take on my true identity – with or without the approval of others. I learned from my early quarterlife questions: *Will I always have to choose between doing what I love or making lots of money? What's important to me and why? What am I willing to live for? What do I stand for?* The answers to these starts with the

strong, grounded conviction I state very early on in this chapter. I clearly proclaim: *I believe that human beings are on this earth in order to connect and create with each other.* Even now as I write this I get chills when I think about the quarterlifer who started this journey with a questioning letter to Professor Nash. I was a young woman who knew that there was something better for her out there. It was her true dreams waiting for her to be ready to pursue them. I was a young woman who was almost afraid to even think of her convictions, let alone proclaim them and act sternly upon them. And here it was: I am a director. And here it is now: I am an educator.

CHAPTER 4: RESOURCES FOR MAKING MEANING: A SET OF PERSONAL EXAMPLES

4.1 Start from A: ME-Search

When I embark on any journey I believe that it is important that I start from Point A. I must know where I am coming from in order to figure out where I am going.

Whenever I am in the darkest of times it is extremely resourceful to stop, take a breath, and find my current footing. It is only then that my path and my destination become clear and evermore present in my life. This journey from Point A to my destination can be as simple as using a map to find my way in an area I know little of. Knowing where you are or where you're coming from is always the first point of information one needs in order to find where she is headed.

This notion can also be applied to being in the education field. When my students are having difficulty or issues in school I use this simple idea to help them get to a clearer place in their lives. I ask them questions like: Where are you in your life right now? What is it you ultimately want to accomplish? I try to take things back to the path they were on in the first place.

This skill is invaluable when it is brought into the classroom. I believe an effective educator can take this idea a step further and try to find the place where she and her students can equally meet. This place of universal grounding can be an intellectual space, an emotional moment or even a common sense of humor between student and teacher.. In order to find this mutual place of understanding the educator must mark her own place in life in order to clearly see her own destination. When students and educators

seek their own Point A's and find a mutual meeting ground, this is called the overlap. I have found that finding any overlap in a classroom setting creates a very powerful moment with a wealth of meaning.

The meaning-making process is the best way to go about finding this starting point. I use a few writing techniques that help me find my footing in my life. Professor Nash and his co-author and colleague, DeMethra LaSha Bradley, coined this process the “me-search” in writing stages. Me-Search is very similar to what we think of as research. It’s an unconventional and less traditional manner in which to do research. In me-search the writer, or for my terms and purposes, the meaning-maker, uses experiences and memories that hold meaning in order to come to profoundly validating grounds. It “starts with the *writer’s* life rather than with the lives, thoughts, and activities of others.”^{xx} SPN writing is one of the best genres to use while conduct me-search writing. Chapter 2 of this thesis, my section exploring my identity as an artist, was completed as a result of me-search techniques. I had to dig deep into my own experience and knowledge of my world in order to convey my passions and thoughts on the performing arts. I had to understand where my passion comes from in order to connect them to my current vocation in higher education. I want to encourage my students that “their personal stories count” and that “the search for meaning is very difficult unless they can write personally about their quests...and, when done well, it can even lead to *we*-search writing as others read and respond to it.”^{xxi} Me-search, as you will see in the following sections of personal examples, is not very effective without the *we*-search. When writing SPN the writer must keep in mind that her writing should appeal to the greater masses. This kind of writing

needs to have universal themes that relate to the reader. My reflections about my quarterlife issues are universal simply because I am so honest and open about my fears and convictions. All human beings have fears and convictions – it's when I am at my most vulnerable in my writing when I hit on the bigger picture and others can draw meaning from my writing as a result. The universals are “the key. SPN writing starts with the me, reaches out to the you, and ends up with universalizable themes that connect with the larger we.”^{xxiii} Me-search is a very power tool when it comes to meaning-making process and finding one's direction. It has been the best type of research for me when developing and trying to understand where I've been, where I am, and where I am going.

In the following sections I will discuss some of the writing reflections I have used to help me with my meaning-making process. I will give specific personal writing samples that guided me to the path that I am on today. I have found that these reflective exercises have started me on my path to finding out what I value most in life and I believe that they will help students and educators alike through their own meaning-making process.

4.2 A Letter to Myself

I wrote the following piece during my first semester at UVM as a graduate student. I was taking a class called Religion and Spirituality with Professor Robert Nash, and as part of the course's assignments he required his students to write a series of letters. These letters could be to anyone we chose – living or deceased, fictional or real. The letter must reflect some insight we have gained with regards to the book we were reading

for the class at the time. We were reading Eboo Patel's *Acts of Faith*. I had never read such a book for a class before. This book brought up insights in my life that I had just begun to develop as meaningful to me.

The letter I wrote to Professor Nash that I used in the first chapter of this thesis was really the first time that I'd ever explored these ideas of meaning-making. Taking this course let me expand on those thoughts originally expressed in the first letter. The assigned reflection helped me get to the depths of what is really meaningful in my life. I had just moved to Vermont from New York City in search of purpose and worth in my life. I was in a reflective place in my heart, and I was ready to take a close look at where I had been and where I wanted to go path. This letter was one of my first academic steps on my meaning-making journey.

4.2.1 Thick and Thin

Dear Thin Me,

There's a war going on inside of me and I fear that the good guys could lose. I wish that it were as simple as Good against Evil. If it were it'd be easier to deal with. Good and Evil have easy, clean-cut answers. Of course Good should win, but in this case it's *deep* against *shallow*, *thick* against *thin*, *surging bliss* against *just good enough*, *ultimate gnosis* against *complacency*, *a symphony* against *a single and lonely note*. It's the difference between when a sales clerk asks you how you are today, and your answer can vary anywhere from "ok" to "wonderful, thanks! And you?!" But for all intents and purposes I'd like to use the terms Thick and Thin. I'm writing to you Thin Me because we need to talk – Now. I'm tired of avoiding this conversation and ultimate change in

myself, and you are the molded, yet sturdy, wall between me and my true, evolved self – Thick Me. A small paragraph in Eboo Patel’s *Acts of Faith* moved me to finally face and write about this struggle within me. Patel writes:

It was in Islam that I found the clearest articulation of this inner struggle. The story goes like this: As a victorious Muslim army was celebrating its triumph in battle, the Prophet Muhammad told the men they had won only the “lesser jihad.” Now, he said, they had to move on to the “greater jihad” – the *jihad al-nafs*, the struggle against their lower selves. The first time I read that, I felt as if the Prophet was speaking directly to me, as if he could see the thousands of times in my life that my lower self had won, as if he was personally returning Islam to my consciousness.^{xxiii}

Thin Me, or as Patel would put it, “lesser” me, I need you to take the back seat in my life or else I’m going to turn into you and Thick Me will never reach fulfillment and overall Me will never be truly happy. Thin Me, we’ve been through drugs, boys, drinking, partying, gaming, sex, make-up, cars, bars, rock and roll, and all the fronts one can put up in order to avoid herself. I recall the lowest time in my life back in early 2004 when I thought I was worth nothing and all I could live up to was this fake girl I was embodying and quickly becoming. Back then I used to get all dolled-up, get into mom’s car, drive down to the Old Pink, meet up with Sarah and my loser boyfriend Niko, drink everyone under the table and do lines of blow until the sun came up – most days longer than that. I was the social butterfly, I was beautiful, everyone loved me and I was in ultimate party girl heaven. Coming right out of my straight and narrow college years I thought I was finally becoming someone. And I was – just not who the brilliantly balanced universe intend me to ultimately become. And when you go against the

universe, boy does it bit you in the ass. I was absolutely miserable. In my deep and very personal poetry journal in the wee hours of the morning of February 2, 2004 I wrote:

*I see the Barbie doll
I've always wanted to be
staring back at me in the
mirror
and it scares me to think
of the girl I used to be and
the Fake I've become.
I can see why some have no
Sympathy
for my "beautiful pain.
They don't know what it's
like to become everything
you thought you ever
wanted
and hate every aspect of your
soul for selling it.*

*Needleless pain
Beer, shots, boys, sex, lies,
Attention
and now the pain of white powder
What next?
Do I want to change?
Sometimes.
I just need something to
Control.
Him, me, drugs, snort, shots
Cheers!*

I know now that I had to go through all of that to become a better and more aware being. I don't regret anything that I did during those years, I'm actually proud to have pulled myself out of that situation and that I pushed to find real happiness in my life. After countless nights of soaking my green and white pillows with black liquid eyeliner stains dripping in pain and depression, I went up and down and came in and out of my addiction. I'd love to say that the addiction was merely to drugs and alcohol, but as all

recovering addicts will tell you, the battle was far deeper and less tangible. I was having an all out battle with my “lesser self” – in fact with you, Thin Me. And the beauty of that story is that I won. Thick Me won, and we learned (thick and thin) how to co-exist, but with Thick Me at the wheel.

I actually want to start off by thanking you, Thin Me. I know, weird, right? Well, not so much when you really think about it. As much as I’d love to push you out of my life, you are very important and as much a part of me as Thick Me is. If it weren’t for you I really wouldn’t be who I am today, and I want to make it clear that casting you off is not only impossible, but it’s impractical as well. We are our own narratives, and although I’d sometimes love to be rid of you all together, in order to learn from my past I’d rather take the experiences and energy that I’ve received from you and use them to create a richer and deeper present narrative.

So why am I writing you? Well, you’ve somehow found yourself in the front seat again, and although Thick Me is clearly driving you started distracting me again. And unfortunately it’s not as simple as an annoying backseat driver distraction. I’m finding my, now blue, pillows marked with similar black smudges in the early hours of the morning and a painfully familiar scent of Irish whiskey in the air. I can physically feel the gray clouds of depression, anxiety and desperation slowly creating a cloud over my bed and seeping into my daily life. This battle is scarier and it will be much hard to fight. It is no longer about being the popular girl in the flashy bar scene. It’s not about material evils like drugs, men and alcohol this time. It’s about me, facing my true self and where I fit in this life. Patel struck a chord with me when he quoted one of his dissertation advisors,

Azim, saying: “So many of us begin our careers by studying our history and then locating ourselves within it.”^{xxiv} Again, I am not ashamed of my past choices. I believe that I began this letter with flashes of my past because of my solid yearning not to recreate it. I refuse to relive the negative aspects of it. I have this overwhelming desire to learn from my past and use it to guide my future. The good thing is that I doubt that I’ll venture down a path quite as destructive as the one that I once traveled in order to avoid myself back in 2004. My fears actually lies in the fact that because I have had the experience of leading such a self-destructive life, I now have no excuse for some of the choices that I have recently made in reaction to this inner war. A warrior woman like me must learn from her experiences and do her best not to resort back to the dangerous comfort zones of bars and male attention and affection. But like I said in my first line, I fear that the good guys could lose. I’m slipping but the good news is that I don’t want to fall.

Recently I moved here to Vermont to attend and finally finish graduate school. Something bigger than me was pulling at my soul and making sure that Burlington, VT was my next home and that, more importantly, UVM was my next institution and bases for a more fitting career path. You see Thin Me, something stronger than anything I’ve ever known was ready for Thick Me to become the real and complete Me. I yearned for a deeper connection to my surroundings, new people, unique ideas, and a clearer and non-toxic environment. I needed to be here and meet all of these new people and ideas in order to fulfill and become the Thick Me that is surging within my soul. Shortly after moving here I wrote in my journal:

Every now and then I see her. She’s extremely beautiful, confident, and like no other woman I’ve ever known. She’s brilliant and giving and tries extra

hard to never let misfortune, fear or doubt get her down. She's the amazing friend that many people search their lives for and sometimes never find, but she's especially wonderful because she's looking for those people in particular to be friends with. She'll never wish anyone ill-will and will be the first to cry tears for someone in pain. She gives more than most people believe they have to offer and she is the embodiment of a team player. She's spiritual in a way that hasn't been labeled and she likes to learn more about other's views and feelings in that realm. She wakes up every day with an overwhelming burn to tell people her story and to hear theirs. She loves with few conditions and is sad when she is not loved in return. But she'd give anything and everything a second chance no matter what – especially love. She loves people. She loves learning. She especially loves unconventional learning. She wants to be loved for who she is, the life she has led, and for the woman she wants to grow to become. She'll never give up on love and will always love all those who have come into her life no matter how they parted – good or bad. She doesn't want to believe that there is a balance of good and bad in the world because she believes that if we all just took a tiny step outside of ourselves and looked at what others were going through, we might be able to change this world for good. She believes that all people are instinctively good and have some reason for doing, saying and feeling the way that they do. She's scared to be herself. She's scared to start over. As she ages she has become a little afraid of change. She wants to fall in love. She wants to love someone who is the right fit. She's also afraid to fall in love again...but in her true form, that's not going to let her stop it from happening.

As beautiful and strong of a conviction that is, Thin Me, you, knowing my weaknesses, fought back – hard. You used my strong, and yet potentially weak, virtue of placing love and relationships higher than anything else in the world as a weapon against me. You knew that a large void had recently been carved out in my heart in the form of my ex-partner, Brian. Thin Me, you also knew all too well how much I've been fighting with myself over the past 10 years or so over addictions in my life, and how I've used romantic relationships to attempt to falsely attain these addictions. A few months after moving here I started to become distracted with romantic relationships that offered my favorite addictions to false feelings of “stability”, “attention”, and “control”. These themes were extremely vivid in the poetry that I had written during my years as an addict

and it started to scare me that I could relapse. But the setback wouldn't be to cocaine or other dark places like the type of depression I felt in my past. No, it would be into a far scarier place in my soul – into a place called unfulfilling thinness. Filling my recently wounded heart with empty and unfulfilling relationships only put me back on the road to you, Thin Me, and I don't feel right allowing that to happen.

In *Acts of Faith* Patel, who was born and raised a Muslim, tells of his relationship with Nivita, a beautifully spirited Hindu woman he dated in his 20s. He tells of how the two loved to pray together, she in Sanskrit and he in Arabic. He then goes on to reflect on what he believes that he needs out of a partnership. He says: “I realized that I loved Sanskrit prayer, that I considered it beautiful, even holy. But it wasn't *my* holy language, not my way of connecting with God. And I understood somewhere in my soul that, ultimately, I needed to be with someone who shared the same language of prayer.”^{xxv} Although the words “prayer” and “God” personally do not resonate with me, something about this paragraph really moved me and I see something incredibly universal in his situation and how he states it. I, too, need to be with a partner who expresses and connects with what I would call the universe in the same manner as I do. This partnership must also connect with me in such a profound way that they will compliment and help to feed the Thick part of my soul. I must stop filling my heart's void with men who clearly do not do this. This sounds oh so simple, but for me it is one of the hardest things for me to face and follow through on in my life. Throughout my entire life I've thrown many a man into the void that I've created with my additions in order to stop feeling the pain of my heart and soul's loss. I've only recently seen my romantically destructive cycle for

what it is and have tried to overcome it with my writing and consistent meditation. I recently wrote in my journal an entry about Brian and explored the outcome of our broken partnership on a more spiritual level. I recall thinking that if only he felt some of the pain that I was feeling as a result of our break up that I would then feel much better and whole again. Boy, was I wrong. In another journal entry I wrote:

Since writing [several of my past journal entries], Brian has in fact openly admitted to me that he still loves me and has come clean on other issues in our relationship. But nothing's changed. I don't exactly feel "better" or "worse". It just is. And now I feel like there's nothing to be said to each other anymore on the subject. Great, Brian loves me, but he seems to have no intention of being with me and he now lives on the other side of the country. What's there to talk about, really? Nothing. It's over I guess. And now we must be friends or nothing. And because we're both the kind of people we are, we're of course going to choose to be friends. But we need time. As much as I hate that, the fact of the matter is that it's true and more needed now than ever. So why am I thinking or writing about him, then, if there's nothing to say? Perhaps I need closure, too... I guess I'm just uncomfortable with my relationship with him being on the line between in or out. Brian, for me, does not exist in either realm of thick or thin. Yes it is true that he has ventured deeply into both on several occasions during the dance we called our relationship. Over the past year I've struggled to pin him down in both homes of thick and thin, sometimes trying to make him fit in both at the same time. But that's just it – he doesn't fit in either right now and only time and personal growth are going to tell us where we both fit in each other's lives. I love him, too, but right now he just doesn't fit and I'm tired of trying to make it so. I need to just accept the fact that I know nothing, can plan nothing and Time and Tami are my best friends right now.

Through the ending of this relationship I've discovered that relationships are my religion. I guess it's as simple as that. I'm not exactly sure how this all plays out with you, Thin Me, but basically I need you to just take the back seat again. You can even get out of the car if you'd like. I have no use for you right now. I'm not going to be able to find inner peace and true fulfillment if you're constantly putting false road blocks in my path. I need to heal myself right now and sit silently so that when the answers do start to

come I can hear them. I believe that I'm ready to hear Islam's notion of submission. Submission to what I believe is the true Me. I don't exactly know what this notion is telling me, but I'm ready to finally listen.

Sincerely,

Tami

4.2.2 Pedagogical Applications for Helping Quarterlifers to Make Meaning: Writing Personal Letters

Meaning-making is hard, honest work. Students and Educators must be ready to look deep into their experiences and past to find those moments that created the most meaning in their lives. I had to be in a place that I was ready to truthfully deal with myself – the real me, the whole me. I believe that many students in higher education are ready to take that plunge. Writing this reflection helped to change my way of looking at learning in higher education. By taking a personal approach, the assignment uses a different, more effective, way of learning. It challenged me to look deep and hold the *truth mirror* up to myself. Not only was it pain to be so up front with myself and write the above letter, but it was truly difficult to make the decision to expose this part of my life in my writing. But I was on my quarterlife quest, and writing and exposing this piece was necessary for my growth. Telling my story is part of the search for meaning in my life. Quarterlifers are naturally on this quest in their lives. They are yearning to ask themselves these kinds of questions and reflect on the answers. They want to understand and develop what they find meaningful in their lives. They want to explore all of the same issues that I was exploring in the above letter. I hit on so many quarterlife tasks that

I discussed earlier in the first chapter: relationships, addiction, religious exploration, worth and the value of self. I demonstrated my deep need to forgive myself for my past, without regret, and to move on to the next stages of my life.

4.3 This I Believe

This I Believe is a collection of essays based off of a 1950s National Public Radio (NPR) series in which listeners submitted essays stating their deepest belief. Essayists were from all walks of life and submitted works that hit on a spectrum of beliefs – religion, love, friendship, humanity, etc. The rules are very simple. Writers must develop a statement “expressing the core principles that guide”^{xxvi} his or her life with a limit of only 500 words. The editors invite readers to write their own *This I Believe* statement and suggest that writers “tell a story”^{xxvii} that reflects their belief. Telling a story in which the writer has experienced her belief in her life often gives the writer solid grounding in which to develop her idea. Editors advise the writer to “be brief” in her statement, as she only has 500 words to work with and stating such a conviction in so few words gives the essay power and concise meaning. Also, naming the belief within the first two sentences gives the statement a “to the point” theme. A *This I Believe* statement should not be focused so much on what the writer “does not believe,” but rather it should “be positive...and personal” to the writer. Being personal in this essay is probably the most important factor. Focusing the theme on your own life and “speaking in the first person” will push the belief into a place of personal truth.

When writing about what gives your life grounds and personal belief, the content leads the writing to the path of meaning-making. Coming up with such a strong conviction is hard enough, but to write a succinct thought in an essay of only 500 words is quite a feat. Such a limit of words forces the writer to really think about her belief and put it into a compact package. The word limit helps the writer to stay on task and keep a solid focus on her one belief. The exercise is invaluable when trying to unearth a concrete belief that creates meaning in one's life; "the attempt alone has value"^{xxviii} and can add to personal growth in one's meaning-making process. It gives writers who are searching for meaning an open space to explore a "statement considered enough to stand up for"^{xxix} – something she lives for or would even die for.

During my first year of graduate school at UVM my professor challenged my class to write our own *This I Believe* essay. The following section is the original text of my essay. It took a lot of deep seeking in my heart to come up with my statement. It's easy to have beliefs and thoughts, but to state them with conviction is a whole other beast. The assignment challenged me to hold my convictions as close to my heart and morals as I could. But when it was all said and done, I found such a firm grounding in my soul. I discovered what I held dearest to my life. Knowing and stating what I believe helped me to decipher what I will and will not compromise in my life.

4.3.1 My Personal "This I Believe": Living a Positive Life

I believe in living a positive life of love, humility and meaning. I love the power of a smile or a kind act or word, and I am moved by the profound ability they have to change hearts and minds. I choose to live my life like this not only because of the gift it

gives to other human beings, but because in all honesty it just feels good. And the more positive light I give to the world or a small community, the more I generate more positive emotions and the more I want to give it out.

When I was 23 years old the early beginnings of my break with the Catholic Church had begun in my heart. I was still a very active person in my church, but the dark clouds of an ending relationship were forming silently in my soul. One Sunday morning as I took my usual stance at the vocal microphone in the choir loft, I sang so deeply through my heart that tears of confusion, pain and change came streaming down my face. I had never felt that amount of emotion in the choir stand – and it killed me to be a visible figure of a *good Christian*, and yet the biggest *Doubting Thomas*¹ in the church.

After Mass one of the elders in our parish approached me with watery eyelashes. She was a sturdy, grounding, aged black woman with an obviously powerful story to tell behind her tearful eyes. I had no memorable history with this woman except for the fact that we attended the same Black Catholic Church, yet her strong presence alone stopped me dead in my tracks. She looked me straight in the eye and I'll never forget what she said to me that morning: "Whenever I see you sing, I see God in you."

Her words were not only extremely moving to me but the way in which she said them with such hope and honesty changed me in that very moment. All the questioning and fear of losing my faith in my church suddenly seemed like a worthy and positive

¹ This term refers to the biblical story of Thomas, one of the Apostles of Jesus. Thomas doubted that Jesus had resurrected from the dead and insisted that he would not believe that the event occurred until he could put his own fingers into Jesus' wounds (John 20:24-29). The term is now used to describe people who are skeptics or those who don't believe in something until they have physical proof.

cause. It was then that I realized that God hadn't left me alone in the face of my genuine questioning; He actually had never been more present. This woman's words had been a positive act that brought to light the fact that my faith and love of the universe will never leave me and shines brightest in me even in the face of fear and doubt. This moment brought tangible meaning to my life and I am grateful for it.

I'm sure that wonderful woman has no idea how much that moment changed and moved me. Little did she know that while in the same moment I may have been changing her life, she profoundly touched mine. That moment truly verifies to me my belief that the simplest of positive words or actions can profoundly change people. I will forever use my gifts of living a positive life to bring love and meaning to others.

4.3.2 Connections

This exercise is groundbreaking when students use it to help them find their convictions in life. It helped me answer quarterlife questions like, *What gives my life meaning? What do I stand for? What religion, if any, gives my life the most meaning? How can I best define my identity?* During the time in my life when I wrote the above *This I Believe* statement I was having major issues with the religion that I was raised in. Religious identity is a major challenge to quarterlifers. Some are experiencing the world by themselves for the first time in their lives. Many are in their first year of college or breaking away from the close-knit household that they've lived under since birth. For many this is the first time that they've been allowed to have religious identity exploration. The story I share in my essay allowed for that exploration and, in writing it, it guided me from a place of panic (feeling like a *Doubting Thomas*) to a place of self-

acceptance (realizing that God never left me). Quarterlifers need a safe space to explore these, oftentimes scary, challenges in their lives. Having the opportunity to write an exercise like this gave me that space, and it will give that same space to quarterlifers and students in higher education.

As a quarterlifer I am responsible for determining what gives my life worth. Meaning-making makes me accountable for why I live my life the way that I do. This exercise helped me to find my truth. It gave me the opportunity to explore my beliefs and write one of them in a very limited statement – a brief declaration of what gives life to my identity.

4.4 Second Moral Language

During the first year of my graduate program at UVM I took an ethics class with Professor Nash. To be honest I had a sour taste in my mouth for what I thought an ethics course entailed. This prejudice towards ethics came from a semester during my years as an undergraduate at NU when my ethics teacher used his authority as our professor to cram his own religious ideologies down his students' throats. This, if you'll allow me to demonstrate my wit, was highly unethical. All kidding aside, I did not walk into Professor Nash's course with an air of excited for learning. But Professor Nash, being one of the pioneers of bringing meaning-making into higher education, brought ethics to a profoundly spiritual and narrative place. His approach to ethics "doesn't tell us exactly what to do as much as it evokes important information in order to help us think more deeply and expansively about ethical issues."^{xxx} Professor Nash was not there to preach

his own ethical views as my previous professor had. He inspired his students to look deeply into our own personal lives for answers to our moral dilemmas.

Professor Nash proposes that ethics can be discussed through what he calls “moral languages” and that there are “three overlapping moral worlds.”^{xxxix} He calls these interweaving worlds “The Three Moral Languages.”^{xxxix} First moral language is what he “call[s] the “zero-level” of meaning,” and it is “expressed in *a language of background beliefs*.”^{xxxix} To find one’s first moral language she must ask herself questions similar to quarterlife questions: “What do I believe? Why? and How do these beliefs influence my thinking about particular ethical issues?”^{xxxix} Answering these questions for ourselves gets us to our basement beliefs – the deep morals that we believe to be unbreakable. These beliefs are what we stand for. They are what we live and die for. Second moral language is “the space where we actually develop our language of background beliefs.”^{xxxv} This moral language comes out of the communities that we come from, such as family and churches. I look at second moral language as kind of *why* of my first moral language. For example, I believe that it is best to treat people with the same respect that I would like to be treated with in return (first moral language) because my mother has always acted in this manner and she taught me to do the same (second moral language). I especially enjoy second moral language because it “speak[s] *a language of moral character*” and in the “language of personal narrative.”^{xxxvi} Third moral language is used in the professional setting. It is a “formal philosophical language that diverse professionals can employ in order to” converse respectfully when dealing with “ethical conflicts”^{xxxvii} I see this moral language as a logical and appropriate way to re-narrate

statements that start with the words *I feel* while communicating in a profession forum. It's a *thin* manner in expressing one's morals, to use my previously discussed *thin and thick* terminology. Third moral language is "quasi-legal and lucid" and "somewhat abstract and procedural."^{xxxviii}

I was assigned three major papers during my ethics course with Professor Nash on each moral language, respectively. In the following section I chose to present my second moral language paper because it reflects the process that quarterlifers experience. This reflection also moves me because it is true to the rules of second moral language, in that, it "is not afraid to speak of feelings, intuitions, personal and communal stories, concrete communities, and desirable virtues."^{xxxix}

4.4.1 My Second Moral Language Reflection

I believe my ethical dilemma is a mixture of a personal issue and my professional life spinning its wheels. I've always been raised to follow my dreams and pursue activities and careers that catered to my happiness. I was also raised in a very musical household where music and the arts quickly became my passions at an early age. My mother and I were in 8 different choirs at one point in time when I was at the ripe old age of 12. My high school swing choir, where I learned how to sing, act and dance, was and still is a huge part of my life. And performing and creating art on stage to entertain, but more importantly to teach, is and always will be the rub that will make my soul sing forever.

Sometimes when I look at this part of my life, there doesn't appear to be an ethical dilemma at all at the surface. No, it's hidden much deeper. So deep, that even

when I try to explain it to people who are close to me like my mother or my boyfriend, they just can't seem to grasp it. What normal, healthy, privileged young woman turns away from her dreams? And not just any dream – a dream so deep that it feels as close and nourishing to my soul as a breath of life.

Growing up my fondest memories were those in my church choir and in my high school swing choir. My church choir gave me a passion for singing, but swing choir ignited an internal commitment to my life's vocation. It wasn't just a high school choir. My director molded his students into moral, loving and compassionate human beings. Yes, we sang and we danced our butts off, but we did it with purpose and usually for kids with special needs or for those who were less fortunate than we were. This 4 year period in my life has stuck with me throughout my adult life. I have an overwhelming desire to not only create and teach in a similar environment, but, more importantly, to give art to those less fortunate than myself. It's never been about fame or glory or being the next American Idol. It's always been about, using my talents and skills to [1] create art, [2] give back to my community, and [3] have fun. Fortunately for me numbers one and two automatically make number three just happen without any help.

So what's the dilemma, then? Well, I'm nowhere near actually doing anything that even remotely looks like this dream. I'm in graduate school. Fantastic. But every day I feel more and more out of character in my life. The arts have always been a part of my life, but for about 7 years now, I've been denying my love for this life source. I've been so ashamed of it. And the more I push it away the harsher it pushes back. On another side of this dilemma, it also hurts because I feel like loving theatre and the arts is a curse. It's

like the adult version of not being in the cool kids group. I imagine that my peers think I'm weird for loving this stuff, but it's so overwhelming that I know I'm being unauthentic if I denied how much I love it and how much a part of my soul it truly is. I feel like I've been denying my heart and soul the simplest necessity of water by ignoring how much I need it. But loving and needing it makes me feel weak and ashamed in my current adult life. I've just always felt that people thought that I was silly for wanting to pursue such a life. But I can't help it anymore. It hurts so much that I need to stop pretending that it's nothing.

A brief passage in *Real World Ethics* struck me really hard when I was reading Professor Robert Nash's book:

To act in character is to act in a way that fulfills particular virtues that are important to me. To act in character is to act consistent with my very best motives, intentions, and dispositions. [When I act out of character] I have abandoned my "true" ethical self. I have turned my back on those communities, stories, and virtues that have nourished and transformed me throughout my life. I am a character in moral exile because I have lost my rightful ethical identity.^{x1}

It hurts me to read that because it's so true applicable to my current dilemma. Professor Nash himself has made several comments of concern about my denial of my true self. While discussing possible paths that I will eventually take when writing my thesis, he commented on my consistent denial and neglect of my artistic past. Like the caring friend he is, he questioned why I have been pushing it away for so long, especially in the face of something so monumental in my life – my thesis. Instantly the tears came and I was reminded of my life's constant cycles. I always pick such exciting and *cool* paths (i.e. paths that will result in pats on the back from parents and jealous looks from

old friends and acquaintances), only to find myself fearfully looking in the mirror at my true artistic reflection. I would try to convince myself that my dream of performing is a pipedream and that I need to be more realistic. I'd tell myself: *Let's go become an assistant in finance! No, no let's go start our own business, or not-for-profit, or better yet, Tami, let's just hop on the grad school train and see what happens.* But every time I started a new exciting path it was always: *Theatre, who? I'm sorry that part of me died like a hundred years ago.* So once again down a path that saw no art in sight.

“Stop denying who you are, Tamara,” my good friend, Professor Nash would say.

I start and never finish huge life changing projects in life. This is my tragic flaw. I call it *The Tami Cycle*. Every 3 years or so, I pick up and leave a job, a city, a relationship – one time I even left the country on this hot pursuit of the next new *it* thing in my life. I don't regret these adventures in my life. I believe that they've helped to make me a well-rounded and unique individual. But I believe that there comes a time in one's life when she needs to stop the cycles that start to become harmful to her growth. I can't keep picking up and leaving when things get hard or even when I get bored.

I'm starting to wonder if this cycle is such a bad thing. It's quite possible that I could use my intuition from this cycle in a good and healthy manner. Let me get specific: graduate school. Why am I here? Am I here because I think getting my degree will make my parents happy? Am I here because I'd love to have a career to fall back if theatre falls apart as an option? Am I here because I once started graduate school about 5 years ago and I don't want to face the failure of dropping out again? Do I need this degree to arrive

at point B of my master plan? Am I here because I found an amazing friend in my advisor and mentor, Professor Robert Nash, and I wouldn't want to disappoint him? Am I here because I fell in love with Burlington, and graduate school is never a bad idea, right? OR I'm here to continue *The Tami Cycle* of strategically avoiding my true character by choosing a path that fits comfortably in the minds of my family and social expectations?

I'm absolutely positive that it's a combination of all of the above, but it has the most to do with the last question. Over the past few months I have acted so out of character that I hardly even recognize myself. In my entire academic career I have never shrugged off important assignments, nor have I made it a habit to miss classes as I have been doing lately. I value education at such a high level that behavior like this is very uncharacteristic of me. I graduated at the top of my class at NU. I was constantly teased for loving to write papers and for being so attentive in undergraduate courses and during my first attempt at graduate school. Why am I acting like this now? I'm beginning to have very strong convictions attached to the idea that one's own happiness is carefully intertwined with being true to one's character. I am not happy.

But what to do?

Do I stay in school and continue to act like an ungrateful and unfit graduate student, continuing to deny how I feel about art? In this scenario I fear that I could end up unhappier than I am now. I love to write and I do love school, but I hate doing it for a purpose that doesn't seem to fit with what end I want to pursue.

Or do I drop out of graduate school (again...sigh...) and jump head first into pursuing my dreams of starting my own performing arts studio? This scenario seems

even more frightening. It's scarier to follow my heart than it is to just keep doing what looks good to everyone else – even at the risk of my own happiness. Do I find a common ground for both? How?

It is so hard for me to re-read the beginning of this paper without becoming instantly sad. I mourn the death of my dreams. It's all too easy to just keep going with what is *easier* than to figure out a way to incorporate my art into my work. But Professor Nash's notion of losing "my rightful ethical identity" frightens me even more and helps to nudge me closer to finding a way to my art and dreams. I don't want to lose my character in the dust of what looks good to my parents and friends. I want to live a true moral life that fits and compliments my real character. But I have a true fear of these convictions and a long path to go until I can realize these dreams.

4.4.2 Quarterlife Cycles

The ethical dilemma I explore in this piece focuses on my fear of acting against my *moral character*. This reflection resembles my quarterlife meaning-making questions about quality work life that I explored in both Chapter 1 and the section on directing *The Vagina Monologues*. Sadly, compared to these two previous sections, my tone is a bit more somber in the above piece. I used this example in my resources chapter to show one of the many sides of the meaning-making process: doubt and fear. I realize that I have a strong tendency to be overtly positive and, as a result, I can be unrealistic. The above reflection represents a time in my life when I had some serious doubts about balancing what is meaningful in my life against the reality of my life. Quarterlifers hit this place of doubt and fear more often than not, and it is important that educators and quarterlifers

acknowledge this reality. Life cannot all be rainbows and butterflies. It is going to be rough at times, and it is best that educators and students prepare themselves for those times.

In *Helping College Students Find Purpose*, Nash and Murray suggest that many quarterlifers experience five cycles while exploring the challenges of meaning-making.^{xli} My second moral language paper reflects how quarterlifers revisit and sometimes repeat some of these cycles – I even playfully coin my own quarterlife struggles, *The Tami Cycle*. Many of the emotions and fears I express in my paper mirror three of the cycles Nash and Murray explore. In the book’s first cycle, “*I choose myself*,” quarterlifers confidently proclaim “Only I can live for myself” and “I’m the one who has to make sense of my life.”^{xlii} In my second moral language paper this proclamation that comes with cycle one hasn’t yet grown to its full fruition. Out of fear of my peers’ opinions, I don’t exactly declare my convictions or my independent accountability for my life; however, the mere act of questioning where my life is going with regard to meaning-making is a sign that I am on a gradual path to choosing myself. Nash and Murray comment that this cycle can be a progression and that “this moment of existential awareness may happen suddenly or gradually.”^{xliii} In the second cycle quarterlifers realize that “*choosing myself is scary*,”^{xliv} and, like me, they question whether the things they hold meaningful can stand up to the reality of their actual lives. In my paper I am overwhelmingly tempted to just continue with the *easier* life that doesn’t involve what is actually important to me. In hindsight it hurts me to read my second moral language reflection. It makes me sad to revisit those emotions that moved me to be willing to give

up on my dreams. I even go to the extent of mourn the death of my dreams, but, again, I feel that it is important to examine all sides of the meaning-making process – even the dark stages. I find that exploring the negative stages of life sometimes brings the positive aspects of meaning into the light. It was a *scary* time in my life, but much like the writing process of my *thin and thick* letter to myself there will always be times when quarterlififers need to hold that dirty mirror up to themselves in order to differentiate what is meaningful and important in their lives and what can take a hike. During the fourth cycle quarterlififers realize that they are “becoming more, not less, cautious”^{xlv} in the choices they make. As I mentioned earlier, the sober tone I use in the second moral language paper is strikingly different from both my letter to Professor Nash and my section on my experiences with *The Vagina Monologues*. Instead of challenging my beliefs of what a fulfilling career should be in my life, I approach my dreams and convictions with alarming caution. I make it very clear that the approval of others is important to me, and, to an extent, I let it hold me back.

Educators need to gain the trust of quarterlififers before they can even begin to help their students. By affirming our students that we acknowledge the realities and complexities of these cycle we are better equipped “to present meaning-making opportunities”^{xlvi} to quarterlififers. As educators, acknowledging these cycles helps us to recognize these signs in quarterlififers and makes us more in tune with recognizing when to intervene and offer help in our students’ lives. Using this type of writing exercise in teaching or advising may be helpful help an educator discovers that their students need guidance on how to ask themselves the right meaning-making questions. As a

quarterlifer, exploring my second moral language challenged me to try to seek some sort of meaning. Even though I came out of this writing exercise with doubts and fears, the simple act of writing out those emotions started me on the path to healing and meaning. I may not have been ready to stand up for my convictions just yet, but I learned from these quarterlife questions.

CONCLUSION: THIS I BELIEVE

I believe in the power of joy and inner peace. Even during the darkest of times, my innately joyful temperament has always brought me through. It has guided me throughout my life and given me the strength to go on. It is a true source of meaning to me and a gift. It reminds me that no matter what circumstance I am facing, my journey will prevail and everything will be alright in the end.

When I embarked on the journey of my graduate thesis hundreds of ideas swarmed recklessly in my head, keeping me up at night haunted by the fear that I might never finish. I was an intellectual and emotional mess after sleepless, idea filled, nights. I experienced this turmoil at several points in time on my journey to my master's degree. Just before I handed in my thesis I had a panic filled anxiety attack outside of the library. I sat next to my partner crying helplessly when he cautiously and quietly murmured, "I miss happy Tami. I think her positive outlook on life is the only thing that's going to get you through this thesis."

I went for a walk. I listened to the silence around me. I realized through my partner's comment that at times like these I need to take a step back and reconnect with myself. In the midst of all the thesis-born chaos I had lost touch with who I am. In that silent moment I returned to my most spiritual core: *I have a rare joyful soul*. The essence of my entire being believes that everything in life will work out. When I remind myself of this most basic trait of mine, I find solace in my soul. I know that I can go on because in my heart I have the gift of inner peace.

The joy I experience in my soul is very similar to what religion is to my mother. She fervently believes that if she is a good person that she will go to heaven. Like my mother's faith, my inner joy is my internal compass. Perhaps my joyful personality isn't just my temperament; perhaps it's genetic. My mother's faith is such a part of her own being that it would be near impossible for me to avoid inheriting her goodness. Regardless of where this inner joy comes from it is a blessing and a powerful resource in my life. It brings me peace of mind and reminds me that I'm heading in the right direction on my journey.

After my walk I returned home and sat down and passionately continued to write my thesis. All of the ideas that previously haunted me during those sleepless nights came pouring out of my heart and landed beautifully on the pages. I have never been so proud of any project that I have worked on in my life as I am of my thesis. I fought my fear and anxiety with joy and peace and I won.

An Invitation to my Readers

This thesis was a journey – my own meaning-making, quarterlife to educator journey. I invite you all to take your own meaning-making journey. But please trust me when I say that it takes time, energy, and a belief in yourself that *it will all work out in the end*.

ⁱ Victor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1959), 99.

ⁱⁱ Robert J. Nash, "A Personal Reflection on Educating for Meaning," *About Campus* (May-June 2008): 18.

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- ⁱⁱⁱ Robert J. Nash and Michele C. Murray, *Helping College Students Find Purpose: The Campus Guide to Meaning-Making* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 5.
- ^{iv} *Ibid.*, 4-8.
- ^v *Ibid.*, 6.
- ^{vi} *Ibid.*, 7.
- ^{vii} Mrnorth, "So Long, Love."
- ^{viii} *Ibid.*, 38.
- ^{ix} *Ibid.*, 90.
- ^x *Ragtime the Musical*, "Make Them Hear You."
- ^{xi} Harold C. Goddard, *The Meaning of Shakespeare: Volume One* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951), 6.
- ^{xii} *Ibid.*
- ^{xiii} Richard Proudfoot, Ann Thompson, and David Scott Kastan, eds., *The Arden Shakespeare Complete Works Revised Edition* (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2001), 173.
- ^{xiv} David Bayles and Ted Orland, *Art and Fear: Observations on the Perils (and Rewards) of Artmaking* (Minneapolis: Image Continuum Press, 1993), 4.
- ^{xv} *Ibid.*, 2-3.
- ^{xvi} Constantin Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares* (New York: Routledge, 1964), 15.
- ^{xvii} *Ibid.*
- ^{xviii} David Bayles and Ted Orland, *Art and Fear: Observations on the Perils (and Rewards) of Artmaking* (Minneapolis: Image Continuum Press, 1993), 83-84.
- ^{xix} Constantin Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares* (New York: Routledge, 1964), 15.
- ^{xx} Robert Nash and Demethra LaShe Bradley, *Me-Search and Re-Search: A Guide for Writing Scholarly Personal Narrative Manuscripts* (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2010), 9.
- ^{xxi} *Ibid.*, 8-11.
- ^{xxii} *Ibid.*, 11.
- ^{xxiii} Eboo Patel, *Acts of Faith: The Story of an American Muslim, in the Struggle for the Soul of a Generation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007), 137.

^{xxiv} Ibid., 105.

^{xxv} Ibid., 122.

^{xxvi} Jay Allison et al., eds., *This I Believe: The Personal Philosophies of Remarkable Men and Women* (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2006), 1.

^{xxvii} Ibid., 272-273.

^{xxviii} Ibid., 2.

^{xxix} Ibid., 4.

^{xxx} Robert J. Nash, “Real-World Ethics: The Three Moral Languages” excerpted from *Spirituality, Ethics, Religion, and Teaching: A Professor’s Journey* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), 1.

^{xxxi} Ibid.

^{xxxii} Ibid.

^{xxxiii} Ibid.

^{xxxiv} Ibid., 2.

^{xxxv} Ibid.

^{xxxvi} Ibid.

^{xxxvii} Ibid., 4.

^{xxxviii} Ibid., 5.

^{xxxix} Ibid., 2.

^{xl} Robert J. Nash, “Real World” Ethics: Frameworks for Educators and Human Service Professionals (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002), 72.

^{xli} Robert J. Nash and Michele C. Murray, *Helping College Students Find Purpose: The Campus Guide to Meaning-Making* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 8-12.

^{xlii} Ibid., 9.

^{xliii} Ibid.

^{xliv} Ibid., 10.

^{xlv} Ibid., 11.

^{xlvi} Ibid., 8.

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