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Helping Quarterlife Students Make Sense of Anguish: A Personal Examination of How Traumatic Life Events Lead to Growth and Meaning Making

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HELPING QUARTERLIFE STUDENTS MAKE SENSE OF ANGUISH:
A PERSONAL EXAMINATION OF HOW TRAUMATIC LIFE EVENTS LEAD TO
GROWTH AND MEANING MAKING

A Thesis Presented

by

William B. Vitagliano

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of

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ABSTRACT

Making sense of anguish is an important process leading to personal growth, development, and overall meaning making. Today's quarterlife students (students between the ages of 20-25) may face a variety of traumatic life events that influence how they grow as individuals and are able to move forward from these experiences. I examine several topics that many quarterlife students experience during these challenging years. As a gay identified individual, I examine aspects of 'coming out' and the reluctance of blooming into the individual that I wanted to be. I examine the impact of resenting those individuals who may have hurt you and the ultimate growth that results from the pursuit of forgiveness. I then examine the importance of not sacrificing who you are within romantic relationships, and how being in abusive relationships can inhibit one's ability to be happy. Lastly, I close with how despite all of the traumatic experiences one must overcome, we all have the ability to be happy and construct positive meaning from such times of anguish.

Written within a scholarly personal narrative methodology, my thesis examines several generational life events that have the potential to cause anguish, and how one can harness personal growth and meaning making from traumatic past experiences.

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CHAPTER 1: MEANING MAKING

1.1 Introduction

When I began thinking about starting my thesis, I was in a difficult junction in my life that seemed to be inundated with anguish. I reflected on the challenges I was facing and drew parallels with traumatic life events in the past. Writing about these difficult experiences has allowed me to grow as an individual and deepen my connections with others. I believe that it is important to share my stories with others to empower the reader to know their own self-worth and demonstrate that positive outcomes can come from traumatic situations. I believe the reader can grow as an individual and construct new meaning by reflecting on difficult situations. Growth is essential to being an enlightened individual and is the essence to constructing meaning in your own life.

I have chosen to write my thesis in a scholarly personal narrative style because the writer is able to reflect, grow, and make sense of past life experiences through the power of sharing stories and engaging with personal “narrative-grounded, contextual questions” (Nash, 2004). Narrative writing allows the writer to draw parallels between personal experiences and ideas and theories learned in the classroom. I can then connect my experiences together to make seemingly specific situations universal (Witherell & Noddings, 1991). Combining and reflecting upon both personal experiences and the literature, I have begun to understand how I process traumatic life experiences and how I have grown from them. During these times of reflection, I have discovered more facets of my own *self*, and want to help others who have experienced similar traumatic life events by giving them hope that they will continue to grow despite the feeling of being isolated and alone. It is easy to get caught up in difficult life events and forget about the people in

your life who mean the most to you, and from whom you can learn and grow. Rather than dwelling on hardships, it is possible to create new meaning that helps one rise above those challenges and continue to live life on your own path.

1.2 Putting Meaning Making Into Context

Both happy and traumatic experiences shape our lives and have the potential to allow us to grow emotionally stronger. We carry these experiences with us for our entire lives, and reflect on them when we question the path we are traveling. We carry ourselves along life's journey and it is up to us to learn and grow from past experiences in order to tackle the next road bumps thrown our way. When we move through life we might ask ourselves. What does it all mean? How have I grown? How did I feel when experiencing a specific moment or life event? Although much of our human growth can stem from life's happy experiences, I believe that life's traumatic and difficult events can often lead to the greatest amount of growth, understanding, and meaning making.

In Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham's (2002) book, *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, the authors examine how meaning making and spirituality is discovered when it contrasts with immediate perceptions affirming that something occurred and a rejection that there is something to learn beyond what meets the eye. In other words, reflection allows us to learn from the past and plan for the future by embracing more productive habits of thinking and understanding life experiences (Standford-Blair & Dickmann, 2005). When I reflect, I learn from my experiences, which helps guide me when making future decisions. Through reflection, we learn that meaning making and spirituality is found in everything that we do, and it ranges from simple growth to a

complex re-evaluation of how we conduct ourselves or what we expect from others (Kurtz & Ketcham, 2002). When our *self* is challenged and our sense of belonging is not met, discomfort arises and we express feelings of hostility and confusion. We are relational beings and the absence of meaningful relationships causes us discomfort; it breaks us down as a result of trauma (Pitonyak, 2004). Our sense of belonging can appear to be defined, but can be flexible when we face a variety of difficult situations (Ferrucci, 2007). Everyone experiences similar situations in different ways based on the environment that we live in, the people who influenced us, the people we aspire to be, how we identify, the culture we are accustomed to, and the life path we choose to follow.

Throughout my quarterlife (age 20-25) I have experienced several traumatic life events that have caused me personal anguish and anxiety. When I reflect on these events I examined my core values, listened to my gut, and solidified what aspects of my life I valued the most and have shaped the core truths in my life. I have learned that if we want to grow as humans, we first need to understand that our need for validation and belonging is not only unique to us, but also an idea or need that we share with others. Individuals can share a belief and hope for a bright and better future for themselves and create the sense of belonging that may have been previously absent in their life (Pitonyak, 2004). Belonging is being emotionally surrounded by the relationships we have with others and finding fulfillment in a community (McCarty, 2009). Although my exact experiences cannot be replicated, my hope is that you, the reader, can draw parallels from my personal journey and connect it with your own stories. Many of us have been reluctant to be our true selves, which can lead to resentment towards those who have caused us pain,

and we sometimes find ourselves in non-ideal relationships that inhibit us from being happy. Through personal examination, reflection, and creation of meaning about my own personal traumatic events, I hope that I can empower others not to settle, but to be true to themselves, and take the path less traveled – with the hopes of ultimately finding happiness.

When I reflect on what I experienced during my quarterlife, I found that there were two differing stories that I was telling. One reflected how others viewed me based on how I was externally communicating my moods, feelings and thoughts, the second revealed what I was truly feeling on the inside. For years I kept my true thoughts and feelings secluded from others with only a few close friends knowing everything about the true *me*. Externally, I emitted a sense that I was living out my dreams. I was accepted to the University of Vermont, my first choice school, I was performing great academically, I developed a lot of meaningful friendships, had strong connections with my family, and it appeared that I was always in a *happy* relationship. However, what others perceive to be my reality, was often nothing but perception and did not accurately reflect where my mind was and the challenges I was facing. The truth is, I often have internal anguish, but to the people around me I appear to be content.

1.3 Challenges Quarterlifer's Experience

Each generation and age group experiences a unique set of challenges. Specifically, quarterlife individuals think of this period of their adult life as a challenge for several reasons. Typically, they are facing the world for the first time without the securities of living at home (Nash & Murray, 2010). There seems to be added pressure to

find your place in the world; going to the right college, finding the right job, and meeting the right people. Quarterlife students are often obsessed with being successful, meeting the love of their life, living up to their own expectations, and not just the expectations of others. During this time we examine personal relationships through a lens of uncertainty because it is hard to know where we will end up and what commitments we can make at a particular moment in time. We try to make sense of our identities and the educational challenges we want to pursue. We ponder who we identify with in terms of our friends, family, and lovers, as well as our work life (Nash & Murray, 2010).

1.4 Tackling Challenges by Learning

Deep-meaning learning is a response that individuals make to their own internal quests to learn who they are in relation to the world. It is also important to understand that although we can live in similar worlds, we also live within our own evolving stories of finding personal meaning in everything that we do (Nash & Murray, 2010). Each question that we ask ourselves, and try to answer, provides us as well as others, the opportunity of going deeper into discovering ourselves and overcoming challenges (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2000). Curiosity can be viewed as a sense of learning because quarterlife students are still in the self-discovery phase of life. They may not know exactly what to expect or where they are going in life, so they are curious to discover alternatives if their original plan flops. Being courageous and vulnerable has allowed quarterlife students to reach outside of their comfort zones and experience the world (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2000).

During this time of self-discovery among quarterlifers, and before committing to any particular aspect of your life, it is worthwhile to look at the risks, but more importantly the potential opportunities and rewards for making life-changing decisions. Once a decision is made, the need to continuously examine how those experiences define who you are, shaped who you are, and lay the foundation for who you want to be is critical. I close this chapter with an excerpt from Christopher Phillip's (2001) book, *Socrates Café A Fresh Taste of Philosophy* (p. 135):

Until one is committed, there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness. Concerning all acts of initiative and creation, there is one elementary truth, the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: the moment one definitely commits oneself, then... a whole stream of events issues from the decision, raising in one's favor all manner of unforeseen incidents and meetings and material assistance which no man could have dreamed would have come his way. Whatever you can do, or dream you can do, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it. Begin it now.

CHAPTER 2: INTERCONNECTED TRAUMATIC LIFE EVENTS

2.1 Putting My Traumatic Life Events Into Context

Throughout my thesis I examine several different traumatic life events that I have experienced during my quarterlife. These experiences emanate from family challenges that I have had to deal with, which led me to resent some of my family members and isolate myself from the world around me. In addition, I talk about several events surrounding my ‘coming out’ story, both when I was first forced out of the closet from a former partner, to the time where I forced myself out under difficult circumstances. Lastly, I examine aspects of relationships that inhibited my ability to be an individual and learning what truly makes me happy in life.

Although these events may seem somewhat disconnected, the reality of my situation is that all of these experiences culminated in a single week, which signified a turning point in the way I viewed the world around me. The week started with my coming home from the hospital after an intestinal surgery, only to be followed by a series of events that caused me to show resentment towards my family. During this resentment stage, I was faced with a choice of “coming out” and being able to be who I am or holding onto who others perceived me to be. Ultimately, the events of one night lead to how I viewed relationships and how I felt inhibited to follow my own heart and be with the best person for me.

Although I refer to a set of circumstances that appeared to occur during the space of one week, what I realized was that these events were all interconnected with previous experiences and moments that had continuously shaped my reasoning and understanding of the world around me. I was finally able to recognize and act upon so many years of

built up anguish, angst, and trauma to finally express myself freely and do what was best for me at the time. This one week allowed me to grow more than any other time in my life. So many challenging life events, and the reality of how they had impacted my life, came to fruition that week - subsequently a week that I wish had never happened, yet am grateful that it did.

CHAPTER 3: SHOWING RESENTMENT

3.1 Resentment in the Context of Relationships

Resentment is attributed to having a negative emotion or feeling towards someone, as a result of feeling they have engaged in wrongdoing. A variety of life experiences can breed resentment towards others, leading to anger, contempt, and humiliation. Difficult and challenging life experiences can take an individual on an emotional roller coaster and can temporarily blur the line between allowing forgiveness and holding on to the past. Hardships and heartache are inevitable and will always present themselves during your walk of life (McCarty, 2009). Innately, we try to dodge difficulties rather than dealing with them head-on and this can create resentments and distance between ourselves and the ones we love. Anger often accompanies resentment, and if unchecked it can create a divide between your feelings in the moment, and your true feelings from the heart. When we show resentment, our hearts fall into foreclosure and subsequently lead to tarnished relationships. In an excerpt from McCarty's (2009) book, *How Philosophy Can Save Your Life*, the author describes an individual's struggles with resentment (p. 113):

Joy and pleasure garner their intensity because they are fleeting. Living with this insight instills calm and cool reserve, come what may; on the move, happiness can pass this way again. Sorrow and pain gather their power from our attachment to them.

Resentment is one of the leading offenders for destroying relationships because it forces individuals to hold onto the past, and not let go of the accruing feelings over time. Resentment forces people to revisit an old injury, over and over, and causes them to revisit painful memories on a continuum. We can liken this to almost allowing a scab to

heal, but at the last moment, we pick it off and reopen the experience, to again feel the sense of powerlessness, fear, and rage (Kurtz & Ketcham, 2002). Once we can get past resentment, and begin to forgive, we can continue to grow as an individual and collective community, an idea that is easier said than done.

My life, so far, has already failed to provide any shortcomings of resentment towards others. Whether it is jealousy towards a friend or colleague, or towards my own family, there are lots of things that impact our feelings of resentment, but knowing where these feelings are coming from helps you move forward and make meaning of what happened.

3.2 The Day

June 10th 2010: Many people cannot say where they were on that day, what they had for dinner, or the events that happened that evening. The only concrete memory for most was probably staying inside to keep cool from the hot summer heat, but for me it was a date that impacted the rest of my life, despite my attempts to eliminate it from my memory. After dealing with complications that stemmed from my intestinal surgery, I was finally heading home from Hanover, NH. It felt like it had been months since I had been home, and I couldn't wait until I was able to relax in the comfort of my own bed. I remember taking pain medication at the hospital to allow a comfortable drive home and then being whisked downstairs in a wheelchair for my discharge. I got into to the car and my mother drove me home, just as she had done for numerous trips to and from the hospital. Upon arriving back at home, I was exhausted and insisted on taking a nap. My brother had arranged my room to now include a TV, DVD player, and a stereo system so

that I had all of the comforts of home available to me in my room for the ensuing month of bed rest. I remember that it was a bright sunny day and I found myself staring out the window watching the trees blow in the wind and watch the occasional bird flying to the birdfeeder attached to my window. I was finally home and I was relaxing. As the day went on, however, I began to feel edgy and restless. After all, I had just spent the last several weeks in the confines of the hospital and I was finally ‘free’. I decided that it was time to relocate to the dining room table and begin documenting my experiences before the surgery, my stay at the hospital, recovery, and setbacks. I imagined that I would write everything down so that I could revisit it in the future and remind myself of what I went through at such a young age. So I sat down and began to write. After several hours, I was actually hungry (my appetite had previously been curbed due to the trauma inflicted on my gastro-intestinal tract) and I wanted to order something to eat. It didn’t take me long to decide that I wanted to order a buffalo chicken calzone from my favorite local pizza shop, and have it brought right to my door. At this point it was later in the evening and the pizza shop was surprisingly busy, so they told me that my calzone wouldn’t arrive until around 9:00pm. The next hour passed by pretty quickly when I heard the long anticipated knock on the door. I shouted to my brother to get the door and bring the food. The seemingly normal night would now take a terrible turn and began to take the shape of the traumatic recurring dream that would haunt me for months afterwards.

The time was 9:10pm. Suddenly, the air was filled with dogs barking, men yelling, banging, glass breaking and overall chaos. The first thing I heard was my mother screaming my name. I heard her run up the stairs, and watched her sprint towards my

bedroom. She didn't know I was in the dining room. I sensed the horror and fear in her voice and saw her looking for me frantically, to protect me. The next thing I saw was a black-masked individual tackle my mother from behind bringing her to the ground. As I watched this sick reality unfold before my eyes, I was confused, scared, and enraged. Then I then heard the crashing and shattering of glass followed footsteps of several men hastily running up the stairs to the main level of the house. This indeed was not the pizza man! Instead it was a tactical team of police officers forcing entry into my 'home'. I was greeted not by chocolates and a get-well card, but a gun pointed directly between my eyes and a stern voice yelling, "Get on the fxxxing floor!" I didn't know what to do other than yell back saying, "I can't!" The officer repeated himself. I tried to explain that I had just returned from the hospital and could not move quickly. Ignoring my attempt to explain, he grabbed my arm and threw me to the ground with no concern for my health or wellbeing. I heard my mother yelling both my and my brother's name, a blood curdling yell that would often replay itself in my head.

I couldn't help but ask myself, with confusion and anguish, "Why are they here? and What is going on?" I later discovered that the police raided our home on the biased assumption that my African American stepfather was concealing supplies and cash associated with the sale of a controlled substance. This tactical team tore my home apart and left as if nothing had happened, with the exception that they took something with them... my mother. My emotions prevented me from saying anything even if I wanted to. That hour was easily the most traumatic event of my life. After several excruciating hours not knowing what was happening to my mother, I received a phone call saying that we

could take her home from the state police station. We picked her up at roughly three in the morning and brought her back to our now destroyed home.

Once home, we put the living room couch together and began to talk about what had happened. There were so many questions that I had and concerns about what it all meant. My mother explained that my stepfather was arrested for his association with some of his 'friends' who were involved in a distribution operation of a controlled substance. He was also taken to the state police station as well, stripped naked, and left alone in a padded cell. In addition, he was assigned a \$25,000 bail compared to the \$2,000 bail typically given to his white male counterparts. Regardless of this injustice, we had to do what we could to get him out and back home to us. Although we were able to raise the necessary amount of money for a bond, the troubles were just beginning.

3.3 Forgiveness

Almost two years went by before any action was taken in the courts. The media portrayed us as a criminal family. Despite our several requests for the papers to retract false claims, the story stuck. We were forced to live with it. As time went on, I no longer felt part of the family, I felt like I was all alone, a targeted member of society with no support. I felt vulnerable and attacked. After everything that occurred that night and the next few years, I couldn't help but begin to view my life pessimistically. I felt like my life had no meaning or value. I felt insignificant and isolated. I began slowly drifting apart from my family because so much resentment towards my mother and stepfather. I couldn't help focusing on the negative memories, consuming me to the point of wanting nothing to do with them or my home. To this day I will not call it home, I don't want to

associate with it because of too many. I realize that much of the resentment stemmed from being in such a vulnerable state. I could barely walk; I was in extreme pain in addition to the emotions arising from the police raid, and it all was too much to bear. It was easier for me to stay silent and avoid spending time with my mother than to discuss my feelings and how these events impacted my life. My mother didn't know for a long time that almost every night, for a period of 4-5 months, I would have anxiety attacks at around 9:00pm every night and in response to hearing dogs barking. This was not a way that I wanted to live my life, so I did the only thing that I knew I could do... disappear and leave my home behind once the school year started. Anger was present for a long time, but I learned that anger is an important part of the healing process which will ultimately lead to the construction and rediscovery of a spiritual home (Kurtz & Ketcham, 2002). However, not wanting to associate myself with my family only heightened resentment towards my family members. Sadly, this kind of resentment is intently focused on what we perceived caused the hurt. It produced a feeling of being beaten which, in turn, generates a need to self-apply the victim label. As the painful past becomes more imprisoning, isolation is increased by the illusion that the world has stopped moving (Kurtz & Ketcham, 2002).

It has taken me several years to realize that the events that took place on June 10, 2010 do not need to haunt me forever, nor shape the person that I am. I learned that no matter how we see ourselves in a situation, our purpose in life is to navigate through its obstacles. One of these obstacles in my story is resentment, and the opposite of it would be forgiveness. However, this is not mine to give alone; rather it also needs to be received

by the people that I hurt along the way (Kurtz & Ketcham, 2002). During times that we are weak, strength is often discovered in what sometimes appears to be in the abyss of nothingness. It is good to accept that life isn't always perfect and that imperfections are inevitable. It is also good to realize that discoveries about our lives can only be made when we learn from our own success, failures, triumphs, and tragedies. It is then that we can rebuild our own story (Kurtz & Ketcham, 2002). Once we begin to do this, the forgiveness that ensues liberates both the forgiving and the forgiven. A process of mutual forgiveness releases personal resentments. Although the memories of hurt remain, disengagement from the attachment to a negative situation allows one to escape the stinging pain and power the event has over you. Once we free ourselves from this pain we can begin to face true problems (McCarty, 2009). There are always going to be hills to climb, but one should always take pleasure in growing as an individual without entrapment in what has kept you from being happy in the past (Rubin, 2009).

Although it was easy for me to reduce stressors in my life, it is important to learn that you need to be comfortable with being uncomfortable. Nothing is going to change the events that happened that night, but there is no reason for the events to be the defining memory that led to the resentment I used to label my mother.

Rather than focusing on resentment it is important to be open to forgiveness and kindness to others. Kindness is a way to free us from the weight and obstacles that have imprisoned us (Ferrucci, 2007). In Ferrucci's (2007) *The Power of Kindness*, he closes his book by sharing his own philosophy of kindness (p. 274):

Strange perhaps, and paradoxical, but true: The most sensible way to further our own interests, to find *our own* freedom, and to glimpse *our own* happiness, is

often not to pursue these goals directly, but to look after *other* people's interests, to help *other* people be free from fear and pain, to contribute to *their* happiness. Ultimately, it is all very simple. There is no choice between being kind to others and being kind to ourselves. It is the same thing.

I now realize that I held the events of that night above my mother's head and used it as leverage to take advantage of situations. What I failed to do was to acknowledge that this experience happened to both of us and that it is important to acknowledge the reality of other people's feelings, not just my own. It is important not to deny feelings like anger, fear, and irritation because much can be gained from hearing and feeling the other person's point of view and perspective (Rubin, 2009). It is also critical to understand that it is sometimes easy to forget that people's lives are far more complicated than they may appear on the outside. We tend to view other people's actions as reflections of their character and overlook the situations and circumstances that may have influenced their actions. Although it is easy for us to recognize our own pressures of a situation, it can often be difficult to see this in others (Rubin, 2009). For example, Rubin tells us that when we step back and reflect on the people we love and the ones to whom we should be loyal, we begin to understand and honor what counts most and are able to look past resentment and anger despite the obstacles that life may have placed in front of us (Ferrucci, 2007).

When we examine the resentment that we have shown to people in a variety of circumstances, we must remind ourselves that nobody deserves to be treated in a way that puts unwarranted blame on them for personal emotional damage that resulted from an event associated with them. Even if you know that there is no true fault, emotions often get in the way and allow you to give blame where it is not deserved. Resentment can then

become completely unwarranted which can subsequently lead to feeling ashamed for the way you treated someone. In this case, I am ashamed of the way I treated my mother based on that one event, rather than accepting that there is so much more to praise her for than shame her for. Reflecting on the situation, we have grown as individuals as we made it through these difficult times together. Despite the resentment and lack of communication, we stuck together as a family unit to get through the legal battles and we were finally able to find peace after the process was said and done. The person I blamed and ostracized was truly the person who had my back the entire time and supported me throughout. When I recognized this, I knew that I also had her back and our relationship was restored. We will not recover the time and memories lost as a result of my response to a difficult situation; however, it is important that my mother, my family and I are together again moving forward to make new memories.

My personal experience can be generalized to a variety of situations that have caused individuals to feel resentment towards someone who is near and dear to their heart. When hurt is a result of a traumatic experience, it is essential to have an area of refuge, whether there is a special place or a special person in your life. It may take time and several positive experiences to repair the damage that one critical or destructive act can do on your mind. A consequence of this negativity bias is that when people's minds are unoccupied, it is easy to drift to anxious and angry thoughts and unpleasant encounters rather than the positives one has in their life (Rubin, 2009). When we begin to seek personal restoration of relationships rather than unhealthy isolation, we become better grounded and centered which will subsequently allow one to reach out to the world

and move forward (McCarty, 2009). I close this section with a quote from Rubin's (2009) book, *The Happiness Project*... where she explains how anxiety and resentment are common human characteristics that can be suppressed by being positive and trying to relate to the joyous people in our lives (p. 270):

I began to understand how much happiness I look from the joyous ones in my life – how much effort it must take for them to be consistently good-tempered and positive. *It is easy to be heavy; hard to be light.* ... we rely on them to buoy us with their good spirit and to cushion our agitation and anxiety. At the same time, because of a dark element of human nature, we're sometimes provoked to try to shake the enthusiastic, cheery folk out of their fog of illusion – to make them see that the play was stupid, the money was wasted, the meeting was pointless. Instead of shielding their joy, we blast it. Why is this? I have no idea. But the impulse is there.

CHAPTER 4: BEING RELUCTANT

4.1 Being an Individual

Individuality is having all of your self-posessions and identities pieced together to shape something that is unique, yet ever changing (McCarty, 2009). However, being an individual can create complications in everyday life when your own personal philosophy does not align with those of others. We often experience many moments in our lives when we are reluctant to express the person we are, or want to be, because we either dwell on what others will think, whether or not it is in our best interest, or whether it might lead to harm by others. Society, from early in our lives, has strongly influenced our lives and provides a kind of road map that we are supposed to follow (Kurtz & Ketcham, 2002). When we jump off the path laid before us, society can view us as being different or having weaknesses. This can lead to feelings of marginalization and isolation, feelings of not “fitting in” with the status quo. However, weakness can also create a community and bond with others who share your values and direction. We learn to appreciate that society may see us as flawed, yet we shouldn’t resent the status quo because they themselves know they are flawed and imperfect in their own ways (Kurtz & Ketcham, 2002). When I examine the ideas of fitting in, how society views a group of individuals, and how my own personal philosophy has guided my life, the topic of coming out as a gay man instantly comes to my mind.

Reflecting on my coming out experience, I first need to interpret what constitutes my “coming out” experience versus when friends and family first learned that I am gay. The two life events that are very different, yet both caused me anguish, anxiety, and a feeling of being uncomfortable in my own skin. The first experience is when I first came

to the realization that it was okay to be gay, and subsequently started to explore the world of being a gay man in Burlington, Vermont. My second experience connects to the previous chapter on resentment; that is, coming out as a result of a traumatic life event that forced me to prematurely divulge my secret in order to be comforted in a time of need. Although these experiences are very different, they can be generalized to the overall struggles that many quarterlife gay men experience when they are first learning to accept themselves in a world filled with adversity and strong beliefs. The heterosexual culture has long exhibited a cultural mind set to make gay culture invisible while on the other hand the act of “coming out” has been a way for the gay community to combat this mindset and create visibility in order to achieve social justice (Rhoads, 1994).

Growing up in a relatively conservative Vermont town, I quickly learned that it was not a safe environment to come out by showing your true colors. I went to a high school where being gay meant you were an outlier, an oddity, and worse. Frankly people didn't understand that gay identifying individuals are people too. We had that ‘one’ gay kid that was actually comfortable being himself, despite the constant ridicule, harassment, snickering, and the occasional physical altercation. Despite all of these traumatic experiences, he remained true to himself and did not let it get in the way of living. I wish I was strong enough to do the same. However, I saw the way that he was treated and I knew that it would not be in my interest to come out. I knew it could have been social suicide among my “friend” group. So I remained locked, concealed, and alone in the closet for several years before going to the University of Vermont.

In the fall of 2008, I embarked on one of the best journeys of my life. I was free to make my own decisions, stay up past midnight, and truly begin to discover my individuality. I remember like it was yesterday, getting into my dad's 15-passenger van with one of my great friends, Andy, and heading 90 minutes north. We arrived, frazzled as could be, and began to settle into our residence halls. I was fortunate that I was not the only person living on my floor when I moved in. Little did I know that the first person I met would turn out to be one of my best friends and the person I confided in the most. My first semester of college began like any other typical teenager out on their own for the first time... freaking out if college is right for you, worrying that I might be in the wrong major, or will I get into all of my desired courses in the spring. Despite all of the ups and downs, I established a great group of friends, and with their assistance, began to grow. As the first semester ended, I found myself with more confidence than I have ever had before. I was happy. I felt like I was fitting in, and more importantly I was growing to accept being gay. Accepting that I am gay has allowed me become more self-confident in social settings and celebrate because I can finally be free, empowered, and challenged (Rhoads, 1994).

During my holiday break at home, however, I found myself back in a place where I was forced to go back into my shell and continue to pretend that I am the heterosexual male that everyone knew, before heading off to college. When I was home, I kept in touch with all of my college friends, and it was at that time that I started to more fully embrace my sexuality. That was when I decided that I wanted to try the whole dating *thing*. I returned to school with a new outlook on life; I was ready to find someone that

appreciated me for me, made me happy, and treated me with respect. Before doing so, I needed to come out to my closest friends. I am fortunate to say that when I told my closest friends that I am gay, they were all very accepting and indicated that they had known for a while. Soon after this conversation, I began down the dating path.

4.2 Anguish at an Individual's Expense

I did not exactly know what to expect, but dating seemed all right. I met someone and spent a lot of time with him during the month of February in 2009. During this time, I was still growing into my own skin and wanted to take it slow, rather than jump right into a relationship with someone. I shared my concerns with the individual who I was seeing at the time, but he wasn't willing to see the situation from my perspective and did not recognize that coming out was still a process for me. I was out to my friends, but I was not yet out to my family, something that he didn't understand and as he thought, demonstrated weakness on my end. The dating relationship only lasted a few weeks longer until he said that my not "being out" was a "red flag." He thought that I needed to come to terms with my sexuality before he would ever support any type of relationship in the future. Unfortunately for him, I chose what was best for me at the time and decided that I needed to continue to move forward, but without him. Rather than being supportive of my decision, he became infuriated and irate. Once I was able to remove him from my room, I began over analyzing everything that had just occurred and what it all meant. I spent the next several days in solitude with very limited interactions with friends outside of class. Then I received a phone call that I wasn't intending on receiving.

I looked down at my phone; it was an unknown number. I answered anyway and found my aunt on the other end. She had told me that the night before she had received a phone call from someone saying that they had been in a relationship with me. When I asked who they said they were, my aunt responded with *his* name. She then proceeded to ask me if there was anything that I wanted to tell her. I froze. I panicked. I started shaking.

Once I had fully comprehended the words that came out of her mouth, all I could do was to go on the defense. I quickly respond by saying that I had no idea who that individual was and defaulted by saying that I had a girlfriend. I denied everything. I was not ready to come out to anyone in my family, not even my mother, let alone an aunt that I barely spoke with.

At that moment, I felt like I was forced out of the closet. I had tried so hard for so long to keep my secret away from my family until I was ready, but someone did it for me against my will. I became so infuriated, something so personal to me was shared with someone (regardless of the relationship) when I wasn't ready to discuss it, as I was still trying to figure it all out on my own. That was a feeling that I had not been expecting to feel. How could this have happened? I now felt even more vulnerable than before coming out.

This experience was traumatic for me. I had grown so much as an individual to finally begin to accept the person I am. But when forced out of my comfort zone, by someone else, I became vulnerable and afraid of the possible repercussions. I felt truly

objectified by him, like I was an object at show and tell. I had lost all control in regards to be ability to share my life on my own terms.

It can be equally difficult to manage rapidly unfolding events over which you feel you have no control regardless of whether someone else divulges information against your will, or you yourself feel like you are being forced to tell a secret. Recalling back to the disturbing and personally devastating police in June of 2010, there was another wrench thrown into the situation. My mother was taken to the police station. I couldn't comprehend any of what happened in my post-surgical recovery state. I was so confused and hurt. I needed to be comforted. My family still had no idea of my sexual identity, which make the situation complicated. But my partner at the time was coming to visit the following day to spend a few days with me.

With everything that had just occurred, my mother said after she returned home that it was not a good idea at all to have my *friend* visit because there was so much going on. She insisted that I call him in the morning and cancel the plans that we had established and offer to pay for the bus ticket he had purchased to travel from Massachusetts to Vermont. Inside I was screaming! "Nooo!" I needed to be comforted and I needed him there with me to get me through this difficult time. I had to tell my mother I was gay.

I felt like I didn't have a choice. I either kept quiet and canceled his trip up to Vermont, or say something to ensure that he would be allowed to come up. I started off by saying, "Mom, I know this is not the best time to say this, nor the ideal situation..." and I took a long pause, "I'm gay and [he] is my partner and I need him to be here." This

was not when I wanted to tell her, not under these circumstances or, under pressure, and certainly not in a last minute attempt for comfort. It felt forced, but it had to be done.

I was beyond reluctant to say anything, but knew that I had to in order to take care of myself. I finally broke down the wall that kept me back for so long. Despite being *forced* out, and the anguish and anxiety produced during both events, I was able to look back on the situations and grow from them.

4.3 Growth Through Community and Perseverance

McCarty (2009) states that there is no single descriptor that can capture an individual, because we are much more than a single word. We, as individuals, are a unique mix of many components that are defined by the spirit in which we carry ourselves along the path of life. These characteristics help describe how we view the world around us, how we love, what we love, and what we value (McCarty, 2009).

McCarty describes that when we encircle ourselves with others who share our own values, we are forever tied to a place we call home, a comfort we share, where we feel safe, and ultimately build trust and security (p. 200). The sense of belonging is a basic need that helps answer your own internal questions of, “who am I,” and helps give us a reason for existing (Ferrucci, 2007). Throughout all of these experiences, I also learned the importance of embracing the community that you belong to and bringing people together who have a shared set of core values and who support you along your journey. Finding the courage to walk away from comfort and security can be downright terrifying and very difficult for people to do. However, are you willing to live your life wondering, “What if?” It is important not to settle for any situation that inhibits you from being

yourself and ones that hold you back (Garafola, personal communication, 2014). The moment you let go of fears and anguish, you will be able to embrace your own personal journey. And although these journeys may also be filled with traumatic life events, it is important not to settle for the cards that you have been dealt and to continue to challenge what you take out of every situation. When something works out in your favor, don't expect praise or a gold star, because although the vanity of it sounds great, it uncovers an insecurity about who you are and shows your need to be soothed (Rubin, 2009). Although I was fortunate that my family and friends were supportive of me, a harsh reality is that not everyone is accepted for being who they are. Robert Rhoads, in his (1994) book, *Coming out in college: The struggle for a queer identity*, shared (p.77):

Coming out is not chiefly a means to happiness. It is a conscious giving up of power, a subjection to an increased prospect of discrimination, and an opening to a heightened awareness of the ways by which society despises gays – these are not the near occasions of happiness. Yet coming out – even in the face of social interdict – gives people a sense of self, a sense that for better or worse their lives are their own, that their lives have a ground (Mohr, 1992).

CHAPTER 5: RELATIONSHIPS

5.1 The Essence of Relationships

Relationships form main cornerstones of meaningful life. Specifically, personal relationships with a partner can help determine the level of happiness in your life and help paint the picture of what gives you meaning. Everybody hopes to find that special person: compatible, appreciative of both strengths and flaws, and life-long friend and confidant. It is said that a great relationship should come easy and that the greatest relationships develop when you are least expecting them. I have experienced a variety of different relationships that range from casually meeting someone at a bar, to being set up through a friend, and even using a dating website to see who was out there, none of which amounted to anything substantial and usually ended in disappointment. Although these experiences have resulted in some fun memories, the relationships that developed spontaneously, flourished into some of the greatest memories.

In my life I believe I have experienced a fair number of happy memories with a partner, as well as plenty of memories that I wish I could erase forever. Sometimes one makes sacrifices in a relationship and compromises that challenge who you are at the core, and thereby forcing you to evaluate what aspects of 'you', are you happy with and what aspects of 'you' are you willing to change for others. These decisions can jeopardize who you are as a person and may cause you to lose some of your true self. Making sacrifices and compromises may seem natural in a relationship, but one should always remember not to internally suffocate yourself in order to be more desirable to your partner. You must ask yourself what are the risks of losing some of who you are?

Are you being your authentic self or are you putting up a façade to appease someone else? Are you happy in the relationship you are in being a person you are not?

We all have made changes to ourselves that may not be ideal, yet we often make these sacrifices to try and make a relationship work. However, a relationship with the wrong person, and for the wrong reasons, can make maintaining a happy relationship a lot of work perhaps at a price not worth paying. Yet, sometimes what is perceived as love keeps people together for the wrong reasons, even when the signs are constantly there telling you to “get out while you still can.” Although relationships exist on a spectrum of being meaningful to unfulfilling, they shape who we are and allow us to grow as individuals (Kurtz & Ketcham, 2002). Often, I have found that the most difficult relationships have allowed me to grow the most, by shaping the way I view the world and subsequently enhancing what gives me meaning. When trying to make sense of traumatic life events and how they have led to personal growth, I have learned that it is important to reflect on personal situations experiences over the years to gradually understand how these difficult life events foster individual growth. Lastly, it is important to be able to make existential connections among isolated situations as a means of growing and confronting similar life events in the future.

5.2 Learning from Past Relationships

I have spent a lot of time reflecting on previous relationships and how each affected my life and how I grew from the experiences. There have been several individuals who have helped shape my view on relationships. In doing so, I will share a little about several personal relationships with individuals from Vermont and

Massachusetts. Combined together, they create the “him” that caused me so much anguish and eventual personal growth. What follows is a rather detailed account, but important to this story and what I learned in the process.

To gain a greater sense of what I learned from my brief time within an important relationship, it is valuable to start from the beginning of the relationship and examine it to its end. Only with deep reflection can I extract the greatest amount of meaning and growth.

In early October 2014, I stopped dating an individual because only after a few short months, the relationship exposed that we had less in common than either of us thought. I believed it would be best to end what we had started, because it seemed that I was wasting time and losing out on other life opportunities. Once that brief relationship ended, I knew that I wanted to have someone in my life that shared similar values, interests, and life experiences. A few weeks went by casually meeting individuals through friends and using electronic dating sources to try and land a perfect date with someone that I would be excited about. It was slow at first but then it happened. I saw him... rather his dating profile. I thought to myself that we had a lot of interests in common; we enjoyed being outdoors, eating great food, traveling, and worked in education. Was this person someone that I could be with? I finally mustered up the courage to send him a message to begin to get to know this mystery individual that seemed too good to be true. He did not answer right away, a few hours went by, and finally I heard the signal from my phone. He messaged me back saying that he “read over my dating profile and thought that I seemed like a great guy and that we should get to

know each other more”. This was the first time for quite a while that I actually had somewhat of a connection (as great as a phone connection could be) with someone. We continued to talk for a few days, but in the back of my head I was second-guessing whether or not he was who he said he was, and whether or not I was ready to jump back into a serious relationship. I felt that I had my own emotional “baggage” and wasn’t ready to carry his. I constantly questioned if this individual could be faithful in a committed relationship. What was the real *him*? Was his profile a facade? After a week or so of talking, he asked me whether or not I wanted to go out to dinner with him. I was timid at first to say yes, but I finally did. Next, we had to figure out a date and time to meet. This is where my “second-guessing” intuition took control. He continuously asked to go to dinner, but for some reason I kept coming up with bogus excuses why I could not meet with him. I told him that I had a lot of school work to do (I wasn’t even taking classes) and that I had so much laundry to do that I didn’t think I could make it, even though all of my laundry was clean and neatly folded in my dresser. I still cannot explain why I was delaying meeting up. Was I not ready to date? Did something not feel right? I wasn’t sure, yet I continued to talk to him over the phone, via text, and on the computer. I was finally opening up to someone who I felt comfortable with. The only issue was that, till then, our relationship was based on a technology bridge, but we still had not met in person. Finally I felt that it was time to get together for dinner.

It was a warm and busy summer evening in downtown Burlington, Vermont. We decided that we were going to meet on Church Street and figure out where we wanted to go from there. I remember being early so I stopped in a local store to look around and

then I received a text message from him saying that he was only a minute away. I left the store promptly and waited for him on the street. I saw him approaching me and felt butterflies inside my chest that could not be contained. He came up to me and said hello and instead of giving him a handshake, I went right in for a hug. He reciprocated the hug and embraced me for longer than a normal hug. The night went on and after having dinner we went down to Lake Champlain and walked along the bike path for a few hours. We talked about our interests, life, what we do for work, and a variety of other typical first date topics. The night was drawing to a close and we headed back up to our respective cars and said goodnight. By the time I returned home, I had already received several text messages about getting together for a second date.

Everything seemed to be coming together. We had a wonderful time together and I was anxiously waiting till the next time we were together. We officially started a relationship on June 10th and the first month was absolutely amazing. We learned so much about each other and began to develop a bond that seemed unbreakable. I was staying with him almost every night during the week, taking turns driving to northern Vermont and staying in Essex. Looking back I was developing a dependence on his company, something that eventually lead to the downward spiral within our relationship. The second month came and we continued to grow together. We took weekend visits to Montreal to enjoy great food and shows, and went to Maine for the 4th of July to get away from Vermont and to enjoy the sun, beach, and food. This vacation was one of the best that I had ever taken, and only significant vacation I had ever taken with a partner.

Everything seemed perfect and we had the times of our lives. When we got home, however, things began to change within our relationship.

As time went on stress and anxieties began to overwhelmingly take over the time we shared together. There was a sense that something was wrong; there was an “elephant in the room” that nobody was talking about. Finally, after he spent the previous night at my house, I woke up early to make him pumpkin chocolate chip pancakes for breakfast. We ate them, slowly and with a deafening silence. After breakfast was over, he went to take a shower and was gone for a very long time. I didn’t directly notice at the time, but he was in there for 45 minutes. When he came out, I was sitting on my bed listening to music and he came over to me and said, “We need to talk.” Instantly my heart sank and I became very anxious about what he was about to say. Millions of thoughts were racing through my head. Was he going to break up with me? Did I do something wrong? Is everything okay with his family?... I didn’t know. He started saying that something didn’t feel right. He said that he thought he needed some space from me, for both of us to think about our relationship and where we wanted to go. Taking time off may sound simple and straight forward, but the next week was one of the most difficult weeks of the relationship.

Days went by without communication between us. I tried to give him the space that he wanted, but I thought it was hard not talking to the person that you love. After each time that we talked, we seemed to grow increasingly more upset with one another. Even though I was driving us apart, there was something that made it so hard not trying to make things better. During this time I was fortunate to have some amazing friends in

my life that helped coach me through this difficult time, and filled up the sudden amount of increased free time. These were people that were there for me despite having drifted apart from them, as a result of my new love relationship. By the end of the week we had finally come to a point where we could go out to dinner and talk. The dinner was great but nothing was mentioned during it. The bill came and we split it, something that we never did before. As we were heading towards our cars, he got into his. Instead of going to my car, I went up to his car to speak with him. I felt that I needed to capitalize on the opportunity and talk to him, not knowing the next time I would see him. I sat in his car and we began the uncomfortable conversation about what was going on. Rather than taking ownership of anything, I felt that everything was my fault. He indicated that he felt he was “doing all the work” in our relationship – that I was not trying in his view. I responded by listing things that I would do to try and make things work... he did not make a list himself.

The following several weeks were the true turning point in the relationship. As a result, it was a period of strong personal growth and opportunity to make meaning out of the relationship, retrospectively of course. He came to see me one night and mentioned that his discomfort with my ties and connections to people that I had previously dated. Specifically, I had remained friends with people on a social media website and he thought that it was “inappropriate that I maintained those relationships” and told me that I needed to “remove them as friends.” The first thought that crossed my mind was that I needed to do this. I continued to feel that I was the person that needed to make changes to the relationship in order for it to work, so I needed to do what I could to make him happy. I

obliged and deleted some of my closest friends from high school and college; people who helped me grow into the person I am and people with whom I have shared amazing memories. All gone in an instant. Next, he stated that it was important to him that he have his friends and that I have my friends. Of course, I agreed that this was important in a relationship and fully supported although this clearly contradicted what he asked me to do previously. However, he became very secretive about the people with whom he was socializing and even prohibited me from contacting one of 'his' friends after they had contacted me to simply ask how my day went. Again, I didn't want to upset him so I continued to slowly cut people out of my life against what I truly wanted to do. Sometimes people do crazy things for the ones they love. Even when life appears to be in disparate pieces, love or perceived love, binds us internally and externally to individuals that have captured our *self* (McCarty, 2009).

Our third month anniversary came and rather than wishing me a happy anniversary, the text simply said, "We survived three months," I did not hear anything from him for the rest of the day. This is when I began to realize that my feelings for him may not be fully reciprocated. Whenever I would say I love you, he would respond, "That's nice," or "I know," or something along the lines of, "You know how I feel about you," but he would never say those words to me. When I would greet him, I would go to give him a kiss, but he would simply smile and give me a hug. I would ask him how his day was and he would respond by saying, "You ask me that all of the time and it's annoying." Clearly I felt that I was doing something wrong. I believe that a strong relationship is comprised of physical connections and emotional connections, and at the

time I was not receiving anything from him. He soon disclosed to me that this is because, as he said, “I do not find you physically attractive,” despite being 6 feet tall and only 175lbs. He told me that I was bigger than all of the men he had dated and that not having a lot of hair was an issue for him. I had lost over 80lbs within the last year and I was not planning to lose any more, I was finally happy with my appearance. In addition, losing my hair to an autoimmune disease was not going to reverse itself. Put down after put down, I just dealt with it. I was staying in a relationship because it was better than being alone. So I would take insult after insult trying not to let it bother me.

Right after our four month anniversary, I accepted that things should not continue and that in order to be happy, I needed to remove him from my life. We met for dinner in Winooski, Vermont and had a seemingly normal dinner conversation. I talked about my life and professional goals, and mentioned that some universities contacted me about job opportunities. He said that I should take those opportunities and see what happens. This response was not exactly what I was expecting, compared to previous conversations that focused around staying in the same area together to be with one another.

At the conclusion of dinner, I asked him if he would come to my car to discuss something that was bothering me. When we got to my car, there was an awkward silence. Finally, I started talking about my unhappiness that had now lasted for a long time. I expressed the need to go in another direction in order to live my life the way I wanted to. I told him that I felt controlled and forced to be submissive when I was around him out of fear that he would become upset. I explained to him that I felt like I was always walking on egg shells around him because I never knew what things I said or did would trigger

him to start a verbal fight. Despite saying these things, I still wanted to have some type of contact with him because regardless of the difficult previous months, there were many great memories that we shared. I said that because of those shared memories that we should at least remain friends. This sentiment was shared during our conversation, but within a few weeks the tone changed. He told me that he no longer wanted to be friends; he said he no longer wanted to know what I am doing with my life. I responded that I respected that decision and understood that he believe this was best for him. Further, I acknowledged that he made it clear that he wanted to end the friendship and that I think I agreed it would be best for the both of us. I told him that I was able to move on to a better place without his control over my life. We wished each other well and I have barely heard from him since.

5.3 Growing from Hardships

I believe that this experience can be generalized and shared with many people in different walks of life. You love someone unconditionally, but something overtime brings you apart. You think about aspects of your relationship that you are happy with and aspects that are not so great. There eventually comes the time that you have to ask yourself if you think it will get better. I have gained support through my friends, family, and relationships and I learned to deal with challenging times effectively. Without these support systems, I do not believe I would have the ability to deal with hardships (Seifert, 2013).

Reflecting back on this single relationship, I have grown as an individual with respect to learning aspects of a relationship that are important to me, as well as being able

to identify relationship characteristics that may be areas of concern. As a result, I chose to examine my self-worth, self-esteem and how negative relationships impact one's identity and value as a person. Each relationship is a learning opportunity allowing you to grow as an individual as you learn what types of people with whom to surround yourself and what to avoid in future relationships. I learned that you can tell a great deal about someone based on your first impression and how they carry themselves. I used to think that you shouldn't judge a book by its cover, but sometimes in a relationship it's a critical first step. I learned that when a relationship is one-sided and lacking mutual validation, it may mean the other person has internal struggles that may not interfere with the healthy development of mutual care and concern (Rhoads, 1994).

Looking back at past relationships, there are several themes that continued to be prevalent in my own life; anxiety and control. Anxiety, for me, stems from uncertainty of the future. Sometimes life appears to be moving fast and the uncertainty of my future intensifies my anxiety. So many questions run through my head, to the point that they don't stop and they become consuming. When my anxiety gets to the point that I feel like I am not in control, I seek out my friends and family to guide me through difficult times. Once I am able to open up to them, the insight and different perspectives they offer are what I need to see the reality of the situation, and I often find that life isn't that bad. It is hard not to diminish the reality of it, but sometimes I feel that I am at the age of high vulnerability for anxieties and stresses to take control of my life. Love always produces anxiety and all of the thoughts and assumptions that I am making go along with the anxiety associated with love. We often question ourselves when love is unfolding and

sometimes I feel that I am not good enough for someone. Often I feel so head over heels in love; it seems similar to being on a rollercoaster. I continuously go up and down with happy and anxious times, going in circles on a monotonous track.

Control is good in moderation, when you hold it in your own hands. In relationships, giving up control can help strengthen the connection with your partner. The point is to develop mutuality, a give and take approach to resolving differences, but if an imbalance develops instead, problems ensue. You may believe that giving up some control will lead to more enjoyment, that you will be a happier person. But if the cost is too high, the result can lead to an unhealthy level of self-sacrifice. Control was a toxic characteristic of the relationship I described earlier. I was unable to communicate with my friends, not permitted to voice my opinions or concerns, and more importantly lost my identity as an individual. Rather than express my individuality, I yielded when confronted by yelling, insults or rejection. In retrospect, I clearly was in an emotionally abusive relationship. As Marietta McCarty (2009) stated, “It is important to ask yourself what makes you the person you are and nobody else? How are you different from others? And what makes me an individual” (p. 166)? I would ask myself these questions, and challenge myself on what individuality means. I tried defining myself as a partner, albeit a submissive one, who was content in a relationship. However, achieving an accurate definition requires more depth. I am not just a partner. I am a friend, a confidant, a lover, and an individual. All these definition qualified should develop as relationships mature. Both members in a relationship should be able to develop together and as individuals. This was not the case in the unhealthy relationship I experienced earlier. The imbalanced

control within that relationship disengaged me from my true self; I wasn't the person I wanted to be. I was hiding behind a shadow. I lost my connections to my friends, had no separate life that complimented and connected to the relationship I was in. Rather, I was strictly a part of his world... 'our' world. The life I was living seemed to be good at the beginning, but reflecting back this wasn't my world, this was his world. As McCarty (2009) shared, sometimes you feel that you have given up on yourself; you accept the notion that you are just playing a character in someone's world rather than controlling your own, watching your own life from the outside paying the price for inner peace (p. 140). As a close friend once shared with me, people who allow themselves to be controlled, willingly give up their power to others. When people with high control motivation successfully manipulates others, they are rewarded which leads to more controlling behavior. However, high-control needing people also disengage from others who do not allow themselves to be manipulated. My former partner knew this. He would also say that no one can take your power unless you let them. I didn't realize at the time that he was justifying his control need by externalizing the responsibility to me. I learned that no one on this earth can control you once you've empowered yourself with courage, discipline, responsibility, and most importantly, self-respect.

It is important to remember that happiness is a gift. We all should remind ourselves that each of us can be a gift to someone else. I know that I am, but often I can't always see it when overcome by love in its early stages. Basically, a loving relationship requires hard work. The old adage is that it is better to have loved and lost than to never have loved at all. I agree. It is sometimes difficult to remember that nobody is more

worthy of being happy than yourself. Each one of us will experience our life's journey differently but we all share in the desire to be happy. It may not be apparent at first, but there are always blood, sweat, and tears behind the scenes of any relationship. Looking at relationships, it is essential to never put anyone on a higher pedestal than yourself, it is important to know your worth and to believe in it whole heartedly.

CHAPTER 6: FINDING HAPPINESS

6.1 From Trauma to Happiness

When we overcome challenges overcome painful life events, we nevertheless must remember that there will be more challenges ahead. There is always another battle to face, challenges to tackle, and continuous growth needed in order to accomplish goals, while living in the present. Although it is hard to anticipate what is coming in the future, there is no reason to count on the happiness that is or isn't going to be waiting there in the future, so we should focus on the present (Rubin, 2009). When traumatic life events occur, we learn from past experiences to meet the challenges as best we can and continue pursuing happiness. We have to embrace our journeys, as they are presented to us, and make the best sense of a situation no matter how daunting it may seem, because this journey is where the real reward lies (Garafola, personal communication, 2014).

We have all caught ourselves looking into a mirror, gazing out a window, or talking to ourselves, asking what we want from life. The answer could vary from being a ballerina to being a wrestler, but deep down all of these things meet an internal desire... to be happy. Unfortunately, we often do not take the time to reflect on what truly makes us happy nor how to become happier (Rubin, 2009). In Viktor Frankl's (1959) book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, he explains that there are several aspects of human existence which comprise "tragic optimism." He points to the tendency that humans have to remain optimistic in spite of tragic life events such as pain, guilt, and suffering. Although we can remain optimistic that the future will be better, happiness cannot be pursued, rather it must be ensued because we have to have a reason to become happy. Once we have a reason why we want to be happy, we then become happy automatically (Frankl, 1959).

Once we discover why we want to be happy and begin to pursue it, which is when we can begin to make meaning and grow from previous traumatic events. For example, if you find yourself showing resentment towards others, allowing yourself to forgive will be a better path to happiness because forgiveness removes strains on personal relationships. In addition, when we embrace who we are as individuals, we free ourselves to continue to travel down the route of discovery, acceptance, and happiness. Lastly, when we experience difficult relationships that inhibited our abilities to be ourselves, we learn what we value in others and what we need in a relationship in order to be validated as a partner. Once we are validated and accept that we are not always at fault for failed relationships, we can reflect on past events that have caused us anguish. Reflection fosters opportunity to learn and grow from our trials and tribulations; we are better able to confront life's challenges and discover what we want and need in our life to be happy.

6.2 My Road to Happiness

When I take a step back from the present, and reflect on the past, there are several practices that I use to reflect on difficult situations. I ask myself questions about what I have learned from these situations, and how I can try to avoid similar situations in the future. For example, during my quarterlife, I have grown to appreciate the sport of running and discovered the therapy of cooking.

I used to avoid running at all costs. It wasn't fun for me and it used to drain all of my energy. As a previous romantic relationship was ending, I was told that I was "fat," and "ugly," and that nobody would ever want to date me because of it. My self-esteem was low so I took this person's comments very personally. Then I started to contemplate

whether or not I liked the person I was on the outside. I decided that I needed to do something, not because he told me that I was fat, but because *I* wanted to become happier with my appearance. I first began eating a better diet. I cut out all of the processed foods I used to eat, incorporated more vegetables into my diet, and started counting calories. In addition to my nutrition habits, I decided that I should do some exercise, too. I had just graduated from college when I began this journey. I didn't have much money saved up so I decided to do what some recent grads would do ... take the free option and go running. I picked up my dust-covered running shoes and set off on my first run since high school. I was only able to run a whole half mile without stopping! Clearly, I had plenty of work to do. As I continued running, I thought to myself, "I should sign up for a race." I did just that and I registered for a half marathon that coming October, giving me 4 months to get ready for it. I slowly began to add miles and became with additional miles. What I really learned to enjoy about running is that it was a place for me to free my thoughts, reflect, talk to myself, and let go. While I was running all of the stresses in my life temporarily disappeared and nothing else mattered. Rather than having to-do lists rattling off in my mind, all I could hear my shoes hitting the pavement.

I was able to find happiness in running and it ultimately turned into a regular part of my life. I set a goal of running a half marathon in 2013 and completed it in a better time than I had expected. For my New Year's Resolution for 2014, I set my eye on a bigger prize... running a full marathon. I set my running plan and started to slowly count the miles. I was able to finish my first marathon only 12 minutes over my original goal. I wanted to do another, and that's exactly what I did. All-in-all I was able to run just over

1000 miles in 2014 and was happy every single mile along the way. Although I made these physical accomplishments, through use of fitness therapy, there was more to it than just running. The act of running allowed me to be in control and eliminate anxiety along the way. Instead of responding to resentment from someone's harsh words, I was able to motivate myself to become a better version of myself. Now, when I go through difficult life events that cause anguish, I just get up off of the couch and put on my running shoes. My inspiration came from watching people around me courageously deal with their own "imperfections" without fear of humiliation, and understanding that we all fight similar battles to find our own happiness (Garafola, personal communication, 2014).

Sometimes it is easy for us to forget that we are always in control of our lives, even though it sometimes feel that we are not. When I go through difficult life experiences where it seems like I am alone, lacking control, and have nobody to turn to, I start cooking. I have found that cooking brings me happiness for several reasons. First, an amazing aspect of cooking and baking is the sense of having control over an outcome. I know that when I combine flour with eggs, sugar, and butter I can make a sugar cookie. If only life was this predictable, we would always make sure to never run out of the ingredients. Unfortunately life isn't so simple and may call for an ingredient that you don't have. But being able to adapt to the situation, perhaps find a different ingredient, will allow one to complete the recipe and grow. Throughout life we have expectations that we are going to be happy and doing something you enjoy is going to make you happy. However, the arrival fallacy states that because we anticipate happiness upon achieving something, we actually find that it rarely makes you as happy as you would

have imagined (Rubin, 2009). Rubin proposes that this occurs because we fail to appreciate the process that gets us to the goal, thereby weakening and possibly eliminating the enjoyment of the outcome. Although the arrival fallacy has merit in many situations, I find that when I cook, I do appreciate the process in anticipation of receiving an edible creation, the goal. I finally am in control of my life.

CHAPTER 7: SELF WORTH

7.1 In Closing

We have all experienced trauma and anguish in our lives, and we all cope with it differently. Some of us choose to accept defeat and live a life of regret, resentment, animosity, and loss of compassion for yourself and others. There are several key pieces to growing and making sense of anguish; as discussed in previous sections, these include learning to forgive, being true to yourself, not living in fear of rejection, and ensuring that relationships are built on mutuality. However, self-worth is essential in order to be able to cope and grow, you first need to have self-worth for yourself. Self-worth is an individual possession, and is a combination of the spirit within us (McCarty, 2009).

A dear friend of mine has told me repeatedly that we should never put anyone on a higher pedestal than ourselves, because we know our own worth and we need to believe in our worth. We possess the ability to be happy, yet we learn that pain comes from the belief that our sources of happiness are existential. The hardest thing for people to accept is that we need to believe that as worthy as anyone else, and although our journeys may be different, we share in the realization that we all are striving for happiness. Once we accept this, we then begin to understand that we are put on earth for reasons other than ourselves, we are here to help others going down similar paths that may need assistance (Garafola, personal communication, 2014).

Most importantly, when self-discovering your worth, we cannot overlook the people and things that undermine our sense of self, value, and well-being. It is important to follow your intuition, to compromise when it fits the situation, and to make choices that reflect what is best for *you*. Most importantly, we all need a support system. We do

this by surrounding ourselves with the people that believe in us, support us, and that bring out the best in us and, likewise, we return the same. It is essential to let go of people who can't or won't share in mutual support. When we are faced with a difficult life event, we cannot afford to settle for a situation that breaks our spirit and holds us back from pursuing happiness. So continue to live your life, treat everything as a learning opportunity, and never stop growing or finding meaning. I close with a passage composed by Viktor Frankl (1959) from his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, that demonstrates how our sufferings and experience lead us to the liberation of our *self* and eliminating the traumatic life experiences that caused us anguish (p. 92):

We all said to each other in camps that there could be no earthly happiness which could compensate for all we had suffered. We were not hoping for happiness – it was not that which gave us courage and gave meaning to our suffering, our sacrifices and our dying. And yet we were not prepared for unhappiness. This disillusionment, which awaited not a small number of prisoners, was an experience which these men have found very hard to get over and which, for a psychiatrist, is also very difficult to help them overcome. But this must not be a discouragement to him; on the contrary, it should provide an added stimulus. But for every one of the liberated prisoners, the day comes when, looking back on his camp experiences, he can no longer understand how he endured it all. As the day of his liberation eventually came, when everything seemed to him like a beautiful dream, so also the day comes when all his camp experiences seem to him nothing but a nightmare. The crowning experience of all, for the homecoming man, is the wonderful feeling that, after all he has suffered, there is nothing he need fear any more – except his God.

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