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Helping Students Find Meaning While Finding My Own: A Scholarly Personal Narrative Navigating Single-Motherhood and a Career in Admissions

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HELPING STUDENTS FIND MEANING WHILE FINDING MY OWN: A
SCHOLARLY PERSONAL NARRATIVE NAVIGATING SINGLE- MOTHERHOOD
AND A CAREER IN ADMISSIONS

A Dissertation Presented

by

Amber Rich

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
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ABSTRACT

In this dissertation, I explore my role as an administrator in higher education admissions at a major university and as a working mother who faces many real world challenges. The grueling travel demands, lofty enrollment goals, campus and inter-office politics, as well as the weekend and late night hours required, made it extremely difficult to achieve a healthy work life balance in admissions while also raising a small child. Additionally, “admissions” is increasingly becoming the “hot seat” within institutions of higher education. Gone are the days of an almost tenure like quality to enrollment professionals. If an enrollment director or vice president does not meet his numbers, their position is gone.

Through Scholarly Personal Narrative methodology, I seek to inquire into my experiences and to understand and focus on my resilience and spirituality and how I have come to harness this power in my work with students and their parents in one of the most anticipated and often dreaded parts of individuation— the college admissions process. I share how becoming a working (single) mother in this profession was especially challenging amidst the highest-ranking professional women where I worked, many of whom were not mothers. I could not find a role model at the top that had small children. In this process, I discovered that I could use my experience and education in a more family-friendly role—higher education consulting.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would be remiss if I did not say “thank you” to all those who have inspired, taught, mentored and encouraged me along the way. I must thank my mentor and advisor, Dr. Robert Nash for having created SPN, a genre which has enabled me to tell my story in the way that I wanted. His pep talks and breakfast meetings always made my day! I also appreciate the class space he created for others to share in this (spiritual) scholastic modality. I would also like to thank my committee members, Deb Hunter, Jennifer Prue, Robert Nash, Anthony Quintiliani, Beth Mintz and Stuart Whitney, who without their support, I would not be at this place. I would like to thank the women I met in the HERS Leadership Program at Wellesley College, especially Mary Warner. You motivated and inspired me to start, sustain and finish this dissertation.

To my 2007 Ed.D. Cohort, and to my adopted cohort members that took me in after my maternity leave: I am forever grateful to you and to all of the other SPNers out there. To John O’Connell, Larry Bennett, SGA, Julia Vaughn, Claire Cafaro, Amanda Yonan, Melissa Paradee, Learie Nurse, Jenny Parent, Sha, Dave Marshall, Ian Mortimer, Josephine Churchill, the late Pat Conant, Sarah Andriano, former teachers who ignited my thirst for knowledge and wisdom and so many others of you who have in some way touched and shaped my life. I am thankful to my students and their families that allowed me to be a part of their college admissions process and for their gratitude. I would like to thank my parents, Deborah Vogt and Jackson Fisher, Deb Fisher, brothers and sister, aunts and grandmothers, Helen Fisher and Joanne Pickell for supporting, encouraging, and believing in me. I love you all! To my partner, Vincent Miller, for allowing me the time and support I needed to complete my degree. Love you, baby.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my smart, beautiful, emotionally intelligent, gentle, kind, caring, adventuresome, curious, and wonderfully silly daughter, Emma Mae. When you were born and I got to know you, I felt as though I had known you my whole life. I could not have imagined a child I would have ever loved more than I love you. You give my life inordinate meaning and happiness and I am already more than proud of you and will continue to be proud of you throughout your life, whatever you choose to do. I will always be here for you, cheering you from the sidelines, ready to cuddle or snuggle your hurts, and talk with you about things in your life. I believe in you and am so lucky to call you my daughter.

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INTRODUCTION

Working in college admissions, (which I have done for the past eleven years), one has a keen vantage point into the lives of families with children who are about to enter into the independent phase of young adulthood, of parents about to experience an empty nest, of parents and their children about to make financial decisions that will have long-lasting effects. As a college admissions counselor, it is nearly impossible to separate your own experience in adolescence and higher education. All of our identities impact our work in admissions counseling.

Some facets of my life had a positive effect on my role, such as making it possible for me to relate to students who, like me, were first in their family to attend college. Becoming a mother helped me to more closely identify with the parents of students I was advising. Even the seemingly unfavorable life experiences, such as my divorce and losing loved ones, have made me stronger and more resilient in my life and in my career.

I noticed as I struggled personally to find balance after becoming a working mother and living through a divorce that there were parallels between what my students were experiencing through the admissions process and what I was experiencing in my own life. Transfer students I was working with were moving to a new city, leaving friends behind and giving up a future they had once envisioned. I, too was leaving behind and shedding an image of who I was before becoming a mother— and through my divorce—the path I had chosen at twenty-two. Both my students and I needed faith and hope as we emerged through our change process. My research methodology was a conduit that assisted me with these realizations.

As I harnessed my vulnerability from these losses, this helped me to identify with my students and their families. No matter our riches or fame, none of us are protected from painful experiences—they are part of being human. This is the philosophy with which I counseled students and their families, which I believe made me successful in my role.

Becoming a mother affected me overnight as my priorities shifted and I was no longer just a career woman; I became a working mother. Nothing could have prepared me for this role or change in perspective, other than motherhood itself. I suffered as I returned to work trying to achieve a healthy work-life balance. Due to the experience, I had many insights into the problems and stressors mothers face today in the workplace. I wanted and want things to be different. I wanted to be able to “do it all”—to do a thorough job in my career and my mothering. But, at a given time, I hit the “tipping point” and something had to give.

Writing my dissertation gave me the opportunity to research and analyze how I found meaning in my work in admissions. I shared the insights I had gleaned through my life with the students and families I worked with. Part of my research on working-mothers, I am sharing with hopes that future working-mothers will be able to achieve a healthier work-life balance than I did.

After an eleven-year career in admissions, working on two graduate degrees and a dissertation, circumstances transpired, resulting in a new role for me—higher education consulting. This change of roles has afforded me the best of both worlds in that I have been able to continue to do something I love, which is work in higher education, with

more time for mothering. I now have a healthier work-life balance with more time for my daughter and to pursue other hobbies and interests.

My hope is that through reading this manuscript, others who come after me will find not only comfort and solace in reading my story, but that in illuminating my realizations and experiences a change in work-life policy in higher education will occur that will result in more family-friendly policies. I want women and men reading this, to understand that becoming a working-mother is a challenge and that motherhood forever changes women. For me, becoming a mother, I strove for more satisfaction in life and a healthier balance in work partly because I was forced to. I was now responsible for another living being and not only did she rely on me, but I wanted to be there for her—as she gave my life inordinate meaning that I did not have before she was born.

Seven years ago, when I would share with a family whose son or daughter was going through the admissions process that I had just become a new mother, I was often met with, “Before you know it, your daughter will be this age,” (as they gestured towards their college-ready son or daughter), “ready to leave the nest”. Over and over, I heard, “Savor every minute because before you can blink your eyes, they are leaving you.” As I could become emotional thinking about my daughter heading to kindergarten at that point, my postpartum hormones already going berserk, these premonitions terrified me.

Overview of Manuscript

In Chapter One, I describe my research methodology: Scholarly Personal Narrative, SPN. This description will include: how I discovered the methodology I chose, how it differs from qualitative or quantitative research, and a bit about its founder. I will give my background, describing my upbringing to give the reader an idea of what

shaped me—my motivations, and predilections. This will include my life from high school to an entering freshman in college. I also describe my actions after becoming an undergraduate and the career direction I took and how I became an admissions counselor. In the section on women and leadership will flesh out why women need strong female role models.

In Chapter Two I illustrate what becoming a working mother was like for me. I also exhume the current landscape of higher education from a working mother's perspective, specifically admissions and suggest why a re-examination is necessary.

In Chapter Three, I delve into what it is like to be an admissions counselor and highlight how my personal approach to the role and the meaning making I was doing in my own life through SPN made me a better leader. In Chapter Four, I write about my divorce and how this process influenced my work with students. I discuss how I moved through the emotions of loss to reaching a place of acceptance. I will analyze how I found meaning that I used in my career and how that helped me work more effectively with my students and their families.

Chapter Six includes a narrative interpretation of the literature I selected as scholarship that informs my greater study of the topics. In the conclusion, in Chapter Seven I describe how through SPN I was transformed, going back to my Buddhist and spiritual beliefs that were awakened, as an early scholar when I was growing up and through high school. I end with a section on self-care and discuss my transition into a part-time role, which is a much better fit for me now as a working-mother.

Goals

My goal is to inform other higher-education leaders that want a greater understanding of the benefits, challenges and triumphs of having a career in admissions. I describe through ‘story’ how challenging it can be to achieve a healthy work-life balance as a working mother and someone going through a personal transformation but these experiences can also be used to make you more effective in this profession.

My experiences are definitely filtered through a feminist lens: I have studied feminist literature and theory and pay close attention to present-day societal and equity issues that affect women due to their gender. I tell my story of navigating a career in admissions, helping students to find meaning, while finding my own. I also discuss how SPN writing assisted me in this process and it helped me find strength that led down the path of personal healing and professional change. In the narrative, I move from being an adolescent to frame the manuscript, to first-generation college student. Post-undergraduate, I describe the process of how I became a higher education administrator, somewhat randomly, somewhat serendipitously. In my narrative, I move from being a new college admissions counselor to a young wife, to a career woman and graduate student to a mother, and then finally to a woman going through a divorce and short time as a single mother to finally moving on to a having a new blended family structure and a new career—as a higher education consultant.

I will explore how asking students questions and paying attention to their answers can help students going through transitions, as I honed my later career in working with transfer students who have their own set of needs and challenges that require

understanding. I found through my SPN, which was a conduit for me to make meaning of my own experiences that transfer students also needed some space for meaning making as they transitioned to another college. Scholarly Personal Narrative challenged me to utilize my own story while interpreting other scholarship to substantiate my realizations. I will explore how I made meaning alongside my students, as I sifted through the rubble of my primary relationship with my husband and ultimately made the most difficult decision to divorce and the less difficult decision to move on to a new career. I will also illustrate the plight of working mothers, including my own.

I found that the process of analyzing my own experiences allowed me to become more compassionate, more in touch with human struggle. As I tried to “make sense of the chaos” of my life, I used it to enhance my professional work with students. As I was living through these transitions of becoming a wife and a mother to a divorced and single mom, I counseled, advised and supported my transfer students and their families through their own transitions.

You are a human being, with a unique story to tell, and you have every right. If you speak with passion, many of us will listen. We need stories to live, all of us. Yours enlarges the circle.¹

I am adding my story to the tapestry of ideas that exists within the landscape of higher education with the hope that sharing my story provides wisdom and guidance for my readers as well as illustrates where change is needed.

CHAPTER ONE

Methodology

I selected the methodology of Scholarly Personal Narrative, (SPN), that I was introduced to while at the University of Vermont, UVM, in the Educational Leadership and Policies Studies program. SPN is a methodology that was created over sixteen years ago by my respected friend and mentor, Dr. Robert Nash, philosopher, University Scholar, founder of the Interdisciplinary Master's Degree program at UVM, where he has taught for forty-five years. Nash, in creating this genre, has enabled students and scholars to create accessible scholarship that invites one's personal experience into the research and offers instruction to others in a broad way.

Since its creation, collectively, well over a hundred Master's and Doctoral students have used SPN for theses and dissertations and is growing in popularity across the country, as Dr. Nash has been asked to speak at colleges and universities all over the U.S.

Scholarly Personal Narrative creates the space for students to make meaning of their experiences, or to distill and analyze their truths and to describe them in such a way that others can identify and connect with what is universal in their narrative. To fully understand SPN writing it is helpful to read *Me-Search and Re-Search: A Guide for Writing Scholarly Personal Narrative Manuscripts*.² The text is a roadmap for constructing an SPN, which lauds a writer's ability to identify themes from their lives and construct their manuscript in a way that indiscriminately touches the lives of any reader who engages with their story. SPN writers understand that all of our lives are in some way connected and even in the most scientific of writing, the "I" voice of the writer seeps

into a paper. SPN writing, on the other hand, celebrates the “I” voice and actually invites it in.

.... It is okay, particularly when writing about topics that are vitally important to the author, to be fully engaged and excitable, to be transparent and vulnerable...(SPN), a genre that fully respects the approaches of more traditional research genres, but one that also pushes the boundaries of scholarship by taking some warranted, unorthodox authorial risks whenever possible.³

I first met Nash in 2005 when I was exploring the doctoral program in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, Ed.D. at UVM. I had been planning to continue on to doctoral work after my online master’s degree was complete, so a year before I was finished with my master’s degree in Managing Innovation and Information Technology, I sampled a course at UVM. I cannot remember who gave me the advice, but I believe it was the long-time program Dean, Dr. Susan Hazasi. Susan encouraged me to take a couple of classes prior to applying to get to know the faculty and see what the program was like. Up to six credits taken prior to matriculation into the program were applicable towards the degree.

Prior to enrolling in this first graduate course at UVM, I was hesitant and skeptical about returning to the classroom after being in the online classroom for my master’s degree. I had not taken an on-campus course for six years since I had graduated from UVM as an undergraduate in 1999. Part of me was excited to return to my Alma matter but a part of me was also fretful about being an on campus student again, as an adult. I was now married, owned a home, was working full time, travelled a lot for work as a college admissions counselor and had two energetic dogs to take care of. I had a full life; a busy life and was uncertain how the added pressure of on-campus course work

would be. I took a leap of faith, and followed the advice of Dr. Hasazi and enrolled in my first course, called, “Higher Education in America.”

Dr. Nash, or Robert, as his students call him, was co-teaching the course with a young woman named DeMethra LaSha Bradley (now Dr. LaSha Bradley), students called her Sha. The course was taught in such a fashion that I was unaccustomed to. The topics were much more personal and I was introduced to and asked to write in a style called SPN. At first, writing in this new way felt foreign to me because in college I was taught that the word, “I” was forbidden. Once I started opening up to this way of writing, I found that SPN writing frees you and gives you a deeper sense of inner awareness, as you are able to use examples from your own life. For the reader, SPN promotes understanding another’s plight in life. Understanding another’s struggles tends to alleviate some of our own suffering by acknowledging that the human condition involves suffering and no one of us is absolved from this experience. Here is what other students have said about SPN. One nursing doctoral student said about SPN writing,

Maybe if more of us could write in honest, personal ways about the ups and downs of our work in hospitals, managed care facilities, and private practices, then our dissertations would be something we could look forward to writing. They might even be cathartic exercises for many of us because we would be writing about what’s real in our worlds rather than what presents itself as simply an ‘empirical’ researchable problem.⁴

Another student said,

In school, it was always, ‘keep the I out of it’. It is so refreshing to be encouraged at the graduate and doctoral level to invite the “I” back into my writing. At this professional level of discourse, it makes a lot of sense to me to write about my own experience in a narrative style, while relying on scholarship to inform my narrative.⁵

The benefits of SPN are numerous. People connect with stories; we all live in stories, so having the chance to tell mine, is a chance to connect with other higher

education leaders, as I reflect upon my own life. The goal in SPN is to start with what is personal and then extend outward focusing upon what in your experience is universal—to what others can identify with and learn from.

In a powerful quote, Nelson Mandela states, “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.” If he is correct, then SPN is a powerful “weapon” that can change the world. Since we are all connected, when we tell our stories and craft our narratives, it changes not only our own realities but also those around us, including our families, our students, and other higher education practitioners who read our stories.

Every person is born into life as a blank page—and every person leaves life as a full book. Our lives are story, and our story is our life. Story is the narrative thread of our experience—not what literally happens, what we tell each other and what we remember. This narrative determines much of what we do with the time given us between the opening of the blank page the day we are born and the closing of the book the day we die.⁶

SPN is about stories, which throughout history have connected us as a human species. My sense of power, powerlessness, the narrative I have been telling myself about who I am has been informed by what I have been taught to believe about my place in this world. My gender, family of origin, cultural norms, stereotypes, relationships and our places within these relationships have shaped who I understand myself to be. Robert McKee says, “Stories are the creative conversation of life itself into a more powerful, clearer, more meaningful experience. They are the currency of human contact.”

When selecting a dissertation methodology, numerous faculty members echoed the sentiment, “Let your research be your guide and let your question determine your methodology.” Initially, I thought of conducting a qualitative research study. With the

goal of awareness building, Glesne writes, “qualitative studies are best at contributing to a greater understanding of perceptions, attitude and processes.”⁷

I chose SPN as my research methodology because I knew what my friends and colleagues were experiencing as working mothers and I thought telling my story would be a more effective starting point. I wanted to illustrate through story, the conundrum for working mothers who strive for a healthy work life balance. I also wanted to tell the story of my divorce and how SPN helped me to process my loss and turn it into a positive in my work with transfer students.

In writing this paper, I saw a direct correlation between the student’s losses they were experiencing as they changed colleges and the losses I was experiencing through my divorce and striving for a healthy work-life balance. Through SPN I could offer my narrative, while attempting to lessen the suffering of others reading my manuscript, if they chose to identify with what is universal in my writing.

SPN is for story telling and the inclusion of broad scholarship that is both informative and inspirational. In his own words, “Tell your students a story and you get their attention, draw out their stories and you have made a friend for life.”⁸ Through my SPN, I was able to weave in passages from literature and philosophy that I have been inspired by my whole life: ideas that have shaped my narrative.

Scholarly personal narrative is a research tool that allows the researcher to be one of the experts and then draws on literature and outside scholarship to substantiate its findings. In Nash’s words,

SPN writing is neither quantitative nor qualitative. It is personal narrative writing; writing from the inside out. The major purpose of SPN writing is to tell stories, inspire, deduce themes, point out possible take-aways for the reader, and refer to supportive literature whenever appropriate.

Scholarly personal narrative, SPN, differs from other, more traditional types of scholarly research. When I asked Dr. Nash if qualitative or quantitative research needed to be included in order to validate the research effectiveness of SPN scholarship, his reply via email to me was,

SPN's efficacy is neither qualitative nor quantitative. Check out Chapter two in my book *Liberating Scholarly Writing: The Power of Personal Narrative* and Chapter nine in my book *Me-Search and Re-Search: A Guide for Writing Scholarly Personal Narrative Manuscripts*. As far as I know, there is no "quantitative or qualitative research on the effectiveness/efficacy of SPN." Nor should there be. After all, SPN scholars do not ask whether there is any SPN evidence for the "effectiveness/efficacy of quantitative or qualitative research. The methodologies/genres are very different. The truth criteria are very different. I'm a philosopher with "keen interest in what works for people to improve their lives." My "proof" lies in the stories they tell, the insights they achieve, and the possible implications for other people's lives. SPN scholars don't impose their "truth criteria" on other research methodologies.

The above is helpful when distinguishing among the different research methodologies.

Robert and DeMethra LaSha Bradley call themselves “methodological pluralists.”⁹

Scholarly Personal Narrative, while it respects all other methodologies, is unique and stands on its own efficacy.

Holding a professional role at a college, all the while, suffering silently inside during the demise and deterioration of a ten year marriage, with a child, was difficult, to say the least. Through the SPN process, I embraced the healing nature and power of the experience. I read literature on grief, healing, recovery, and positive psychology to encourage myself through the process. (Positive psychology is a relatively new field of study that examines how ordinary people can become happier and more fulfilled). What I discovered through the process of writing my SPN as I continued to meet with transfer

students on a daily basis was that there was a correlation between the “silent” grief I was experiencing in my own life and the change of becoming a single mom, and the stressors that my students were encountering. These students had a whole host of internal worries around the transfer process that they felt they needed to process.

After having sojourned through the SPN process, analyzing my divorce through the lens of SPN, doing the painstaking work of reflecting, analyzing, and philosophizing, my work as a higher education administrator had been positively impacted. To take the time to document a scholarly personal narrative, to become vulnerable, to go to the depths and return, the hope is that in my work with students, I will be that much more compassionate, able to connect the universals from my narrative with all human suffering, loss, change, perseverance, resilience, change, and identifying those pivotal people in our lives.

In 2010, when I began my initial review of the literature on working mothers, what I found did not include accounts of women working in higher education. When first considering a qualitative study, I planned to interview women to find what the current issues were facing working mothers in institutions of higher education. While I chose to write an SPN instead, I will include my research, as the points on working mothers are salient. I will dissect in the section on *Mommy Wars*, what the post feminist revolution looks like for white, educated, upper and middle-class women and what we experience in the 21st century in the world of work and mothering.

In addition to examining what the post-feminist revolution has resulted in for working women, specifically mothers, through the employ of SPN, I weave in my own experience working in higher education, specifically in admissions. I also write about

how SPN helped me navigate through a divorce and how through the process, I was able to focus on my resilience and spirituality. Thus, I was better able to come to terms with my hardship and use the experience to more honestly connect with my students and their families as they navigated through what can be a dreaded and highly anticipated experience—the college admissions process.

My Upbringing

Life is but a canvas to our imagination.
-Henry David Thoreau

Thoreau's words were always a part of my mantra, my personal governing doctrine and were the words I selected to appear next to my photo in my senior yearbook. Growing up, I believed in having dreams, setting goals and then setting out to achieve them. If only relationships were goals to conquer. Matters of the heart are much more delicate and cannot be controlled or contrived. I have always been a goal setter and achiever but in my human relationships these same traits are not necessarily helpful. To prosper in love, I have learned requires a different skill-set that includes: patience, commitment, having a thick skin and the ability to let some things go, as well as a sense of humor.

Genuine love is rarely an emotional space where needs are instantly gratified. To know love we have to invest time and commitment... 'dreaming that love will save us, solve all our problems or provide a steady state of bliss or security only keeps us stuck in wishful fantasy, undermining the real power of the love — which is to transform us.' Many people want love to function like a drug, giving them an immediate and sustained high. They want to do nothing, just passively receive the good feeling.
— bell hooks

I grew up in a rural town in central-Western New Jersey, nestled on the Delaware River, a stone's throw from Eastern Pennsylvania, approximately sixty miles outside of

Philadelphia. Hunterdon County, where I grew up was a conservative Republican town. Favorite pastimes in this town included: hunting, drinking beer, racing dirt bikes, cow tipping, football and cheerleading. Although I was a cheerleader in high school and part of the “in crowd,” I never felt like I fit in. I always felt like the people in my town were anti-environmentalism, diversity, women’s equality, gay rights, and the small town attitude that pervaded was completely contrary to my own inner beliefs which were more open and accepting of people from all faiths, skin colors, sexual-orientations and religions. I also felt strongly about conserving and protecting the environment and had more liberal political leanings.

My parents were young when they married and had me— eighteen and twenty. Apparently, they had chosen the neighborhood I grew up in largely for the good schools. Throughout school, I had been in college preparatory and some honors courses, maintaining a solid A- average throughout school, earning scholastic awards, a first place prize for an invention convention and athletic merits as well. I had participated in community service, taken an SAT prep course, and had taken a foreign language all four years of high school. I also participated in the gifted and talented courses that were invitation-only. My paternal grandmother did attend college but neither of my parents did. Despite this fact, there was never a question that I would.

Growing up in a “police state,” as some refer to New Jersey, (namely, my mother, Deborah), I had the sense growing up that it was a man’s world. The climate in which I grew up in felt very male-dominated. I did not have many strong female role models that held positions of power. Until, that is, I was chosen by my cross-country coach and guidance counselor to attend the ‘Girls Career Institute’ at Rutgers University. As a first-

generation college student, this gave me the opportunity to spend a few days on a college campus and learn about what college life had to offer.

From the time I was fifteen, I was a vegetarian, liked doing yoga, burning incense, hugging trees, chasing butterflies, making others happy, wearing my Birkenstock sandals, working at the local health food and supplements store, hiking, photography. I enjoyed listening to the Grateful Dead, rock climbing, meditating, and spending time with like-minded friends. I started writing about environmental issues and was published in the local newspaper by the time I was in fifth grade. I can recall driving in the car with older friends who had begun driving and scolding them for throwing trash out the windows.

My friends and I would go to “Friendly’s” after seeing a movie together and I would pull a banana out of my hippy purse and proceed to eat it while they ate their chicken fingers and cheese burgers. While I loved my friends and family, I yearned for a different educational experience. I begged my mom to send me to The Pennington School, in Pennington, New Jersey, a prestigious day and boarding school since 1838. There, I felt I could attain the academic preparation and cultural environment I longed for. I wanted to be around other students who were interested in discussing philosophy, religion and politics. I wanted to get away from home and be “away at school”—to have the boarding school experience. Unfortunately, I did not have the opportunity to attend as it was both out of the scope of my parent’s comfort zone as well as price range.

I loved words and learning the origins of words. Being in a library felt like home to me and I wished I could soak in the wisdom and knowledge from the dusty literature on the shelves. Pre-internet and world wide web, in the library I became excited with ideas, ideas that would take me outside of my quiet hometown, abroad and back, where I

could experience a glimpse of what the great big world had to offer. As we had exchange students at our high school from Venezuela I asked my guidance counselor about the process because I wanted to study abroad but he said that no one from our school had done so and he was not sure. Unfortunately, that was discouraging enough that I did not pursue it further until college, when I would study abroad in Belize, Central America, (one of the highlights of my college experience).

My favorite class in my sleepy town's public high school was my honor's English class with Mr. Kitching. Mr. Kitching stood 6'6 and was passionate about Beat literature. He told us that he meditated in the nude every morning. This was certainly not something I wanted to picture, but in his classes, and through the literature we read, I was able to journey, far beyond the small-mindedness of my rural hometown. In my mind's eye, I travelled out West, to England, and the Far East as we learned about other cultures, religion and philosophies.

One experience I had when I was sixteen that was character defining was when my boyfriend at the time was heading out West to college to attend the University of Southern California, (USC), at the end of August. I begged my mom, I pleaded with my mom—to please let me go on this road trip with Rich, his brother, and best friend. I needed to get out of my rural “one horse town” and see the world. I needed this adolescent road trip. As I pleaded my case, I truly believed my argument. Against my dad's better wishes, in Rich's red-Audi, clam-shell on top, trail-mix packed, the four of us headed out West in what was to be one of the most amazing road trips I had ever experienced.

Ahead of time, we had mapped out which states and national parks we would visit and when we would arrive in California for Rich to attend his USC orientation. I vividly remember the feeling of walking down Haight Ashbury, where the Grateful Dead got their start and trolling the local thrift stores for amazing finds. It was such an amazing experience of freedom and inspiration as I walked down the streets of the Berkley College campus, explored street art and vintage record shops where the Grateful Dead got their start and hike mountains and experience the natural beauty of the mid-West and south-West, without my parents for the first time.

I recall how amazing it was to view and photograph Bridal Veil Falls in Yosemite National Park in California and to hike around the cliff dwellings and camp overnight in Mesa Verde National Park in Colorado. Driving down the coast of Route-One we took in the breath-taking sights, waves from the Pacific crashing into the jagged rocks of the West-Coast shoreline.

My mother tells me I was always self-determined. She says she did not have to force me to do homework that I wanted to do it and to do it well. When you are self-motivated you strive to reach goals and never give up until you do—that is determination. I like that the word, “constant” is in the root of the word, determination. In Latin, *Constantia* means: perseverance, steadfastness, steadiness, and firmness. There is a ‘constant’ drive, underneath one’s exterior, which could be soft, (feminine) or hard (masculine), as ancient Chinese philosophers would characterize these subtleties.

Growing up with a mother who suffered from depression, a dad who left her when I was ten, and collectively, parents who did not like each other (and showed it), my entire upbringing, resulted in me having some abandonment issues. When I would

divorce, later in life, I vowed to have an amicable relationship with my former spouse for the sake of my daughter, something I did not have growing up. Despite these circumstances, I persevered.

Perhaps it is because of my birth order (only child), my genetics, or my “nature” but I have always been determined to succeed: determined to get an education, to own my own home, get a good job and then move up the career ladder. My mother, although she never went to college, is very smart and when my dad moved out, my mom bought a “how-to” manual on virtually everything including: “how to fix your own plumbing,” “how to wire your home.” My mom could cook a delicious dinner, wall-paper the house, change a tire or the oil in her car, fix the plumbing or electrical circuits in the house, negotiate a good deal with the electricity company over the phone and then sit down to read all of the many books she would borrow from the library. Growing up in a household where my parents were divorced by the time I was in third grade, having a mother who was remarkably independent, I was raised, as my mom would encourage me to, “never rely on a man.” She also admonished, “Continue with your education. No one can ever take that away from you.”

My mom is an academic in her own right: self-taught, and motivated to learn and expand her knowledge and vocabulary. My love of words was definitely inspired by my mother. She is constantly reading and learning, whether it is the New York Times or the Atlantic. My mom tended to focus on my education and scholarly pursuits. Before being laid off last year, my father (now sixty), worked at the same chemical factory since he was eighteen. He always told me that you had to work hard to be successful. My dad

tended to support my social and athletic pursuits. From my mom, I got my love of education. From my dad, I got my work ethic and social charisma.

My first female leader was my mother. My mom could cook a delicious, warm, comforting meal, re-wallpaper the bathroom, change the oil in her car, re-wire our electrical circuits and fix most plumbing problems. In my mind, there was nothing my mom could not fix or do. She did not adhere to strict “gender rules,” as in just taking care of duties that were deemed by society as “feminine.” She just did it all, even tasks that were deemed “masculine” for many. I found her tenacity and independence both inspiring and yet scary in some ways. For me, I am more of a conformist when it comes to society’s “feminine” gender stereotypes and enjoy that role, and enjoy having someone else take care of other duties for me. I enjoy the companionship of a relationship and don’t believe I would be happy or content in life without a partner.

Growing up, somewhat of a “girly girl,” there were times I wished my mom, like me, was more into fashion and makeup, but the respect I have for her is so great. Most of all although not perfect, she did her very best, and always was and remains my biggest supporter and fan.

I was taught by my mother at an early age that women had to work twice as hard as men to achieve the same end and therefore, it was all the more important for me to hold an advanced degree. My dad, while also praising my good grades, was focused on my athletic abilities and was always there to support me at my track/cross-country meets and football games when I was a cheerleader. I wanted to play field hockey, but being a left-handed person, the coach told me I could not play.

My first job was when I was ten or eleven. I worked every Saturday morning with my grandparents, Helen and (the late) Jack Fisher. My grandparents, being Irish, were married on St. Patrick's Day. This year would have been their sixty-fourth wedding anniversary. I always enjoyed spending time with them. Helen and Jack ran a bowling alley called the Frenchtown Lanes that my aunt and uncle owned. I used to work at the counter, cooking French fries and serving hot dogs while customers sat at the counter eating, drinking coffee, smoking cigarettes, paying me tips, and making small talk with me and my grandparents. It was the 1980s. To this day, the smell of hairspray, bowling-shoe spray, cigarette smoke and French fry grease would create nostalgia from my days working with my grandparents. At the end of the year, when the teams had their award ceremony, my grandfather got me a trophy that had a person bowling on it that said, "Best Waitress," that I still have. Working there was a great way for me to spend time with my grandparents, make some money, and get out of the house so my mom could clean and grocery shop. I worked there until I was old enough to find other jobs that included: babysitter, lifeguard, swim and water aerobics instructor at our local pool, and counter help at our local health food store.

An early experience I had that influenced my move to Vermont, was my best friend from the eighth grade; Elizabeth Kennedy. She decided to go and live with her dad who was a judge, just outside of New York City and attend an expensive private, college-preparatory high school. Liz and I had been such close friends and I was so disappointed when she moved away. This experience certainly added to my desire to want to go to one of the preparatory, private high schools. Liz's family really liked

Burlington, Vermont, which is originally what drew me to visit and apply to the University of Vermont.

There was never any question in my house: I would be the first in my family to go to college. I was extremely self-motivated and near the top of my high school class (among top twenty students), earning straight A's in middle and high school. While I did well in school, I was not super-competitive with other students, just myself.

I remember I envisioned myself in many different careers over the years such as: naturopathic doctor— specializing in women's health issues, dermatologist, lawyer, and businesswoman. After attending a college fair as a junior in high school, and seeing all of the college admissions representatives behind their booths in suits and donning smiles, I thought how professional they looked. I recall thinking what a neat job it would be to admit students to college. This was the first time I considered a career in college admissions.

In addition to having a good career I also knew I wanted to be a mom. I used to nurse my baby dolls, give them names, bathe and generally care for them. Motherhood was always something I was destined for and looked forward to.

My father, half jokingly always told me to marry a doctor, in other words, to marry rich. Believing that women could achieve the same education and financial status as men, I shot back, "I am going to BE the Dr., dad." This is also why it is so exciting to have started out a first generation college student and now be earning my Ed.D. When I told my dad that I wanted to be the doctor, I did not know that I was actually describing a 1970s sentiment expressed by none other than Gloria Steinem, "We're becoming the men we wanted to marry."¹⁰

One of my all-time favorite quotes from the time I was sixteen until now is,

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, and fabulous? Actually, who are you *not* to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.¹¹ Marianne Williamson

As a young woman during my early teen years, I often felt, I had to “shrink” in order to be accepted. I did not have many strong female leaders around me, minus a few teachers I had. As a young woman I did not have much of a voice and had to grow into using my voice as a woman.

This quote by Marianne Williamson reminds me that it is our birthright to acknowledge that we are each a child of God, that each of us is born with a light inside of us and it is up to us to let our light shine. Today, as a leader in higher education, to embrace my own greatness, to let my own inner lighter shine, I encourage my daughter and the student's I worked with to do the same with their light. Actions are the best example over words.

Once I was accepted at the University of Vermont in 1995, I moved to Vermont, graduated in 1999, married a Vermonter in 2001 and have made this my home ever since. When I first arrived in Burlington, Vermont, I felt for the first time like I was finally in my element, and I never looked back. I loved seeing the students in town with dreadlocks, the health food store—Origanum—yoga studios, coffee shops, mountains, Lake Champlain, Phish and Grateful Dead bumper stickers, Slade Hall on UVM's

campus, where vegetarian and vegan students could live in a co-operative living environment.

When I went to college I did not have ‘family money’ or a trust fund as many of my undergraduate friends at UVM had. I knew I was going to have to work for anything I wanted. And I did. I worked from the time I was fourteen onward. Although I now know wealth is not displayed by the car you drive I did not realize that as a timid undergraduate. I felt like I was the only one with a work-study job or receiving financial aid. I joked that half of my classmates at UVM had nicer cars than either of my parents would ever drive. I made friends with other students who had doormen and apartments on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. Some of my classmates drove around Burlington in their BMWs and Lexus’ yet got out and walked around town with their dreadlocks and homemade patchwork pants. It was a juxtaposition I reveled at. Their wealth did not intimidate me and I grew into my cultural capital, which was my education—feeling comfortable in any crowd, irrespective of wealth.

Once I left home for college, at eighteen, I settled in Vermont and never returned home, not even during summer break. College gave me a chance to find a place to live that suited me better and gave me a chance to call home a place that was all my own. I always had my parents support but I was on my own.

My parents would send me some money from time to time, but I always had a job all throughout college. My parents split the cost of my college education with me: I had to pay half and the other half my parents split. Going to UVM, one of the most expensive public schools in the U.S. for students from out-of-state was certainly an economic burden for my family. I had been offered scholarships from my in-state public university,

Rutgers a very good school, but I, like many other students in New Jersey (a state that exports nearly the most students of any state in the U.S.) wanted out of NJ, and so I moved to Burlington, Vermont.

One of the authors that I found inspiring growing up was Parvati—a spiritual midwife and herbalist who practiced yoga and meditation who defines feminism as “...a woman/girl/person who defines themselves by their own experience. A woman identified woman. One who fully chooses to participate in living.”¹² I identify with Parvati’s description of feminism and will raise my daughter to believe this same thing. To be a feminist is not to dislike men, to the contrary, yet it is to embrace the power of being a woman, of being capable of creating life.

According to Taoist principles, it is the “soft” (feminine) that overpowers the “hard” (masculine).

When a man is living, he is soft and supple. When he becomes dead, he becomes hard and rigid. When a plant is living it is soft and tender. When it is dead, it becomes withered and dry. Hence, the hard and rigid belongs to the company of the dead. The soft and supple belongs to the company of the living.¹³

My feminism reveres the soft and supple female power.

This idea of feminine “power” is something that I learned about slowly, over time and in a multitude of ways. During the fall semester of my second undergraduate year I enrolled in an introductory-level history class when it dawned on me, that not only was it a bore for me to memorize a plethora of dates in history, but I also found myself wondering, “Where am I in all of this?” Where are the women, what is “her-story?” Why are women absent from history? Why is the subject of history largely uninteresting to me?

It was before the next history class met on Wednesday, that I dropped the course and replaced it with a women's studies class, entitled "Mothers and Daughters." This course was taught by an amazing faculty person, who was an out of the closet lesbian in her early 60s, (the first I knew), who had a female partner she lived with and had made a home with for many, many years. This course was my introduction to women's studies. I subsequently ended up changing from an "undeclared" major to selecting women's studies as my major.

During the Mother and Daughter's course, exploring the interplay of the relationship-dynamic between a daughter and her mother was complex. A quote from *Women Defined Motherhood* is,

And because all women are thought of as potential mothers, we tend to expect women, like mothers, to meet our needs, and we become enraged when they cannot. Women and men tend, too, to feel thoroughly justified in that rage, because they've believed the myth that mothers are capable of endless nurturing, so they feel betrayed when a woman or a woman's group doesn't provide that endless nurturance: Why didn't she give me her all? How hard could that have been for her, since she's capable of infinite caring and selflessness?¹⁴

The crux of the problem for female leaders is that often they feel as though they must surrender their feminine nature in order to gain the respect of their colleagues and employees. The expectations of a woman to be soft and nurturing often backfire when she is nurturing and potentially loses the respect or control of those who work for her or if she doesn't nurture her team and is termed a "bitch."

Another book I was introduced to early on, by my stepmother was *Women Who Run with the Wolves*. Clarissa Pinkola Estes states,

So often a woman feels then that she lives in an empty place where there is maybe just one cactus with one brilliant red flower on it, and then in every direction, 500 miles of nothing. But for the woman who will go 501

miles, there is something more. A small brave house. An old one. She has been waiting for you.”¹⁵

I love this quote and it so eloquently speaks to motivation, to never giving up on oneself, on one’s quest for happiness, for a better life, on one’s educational goals. This is the perseverance and resilience that I want to model for others—in higher education, for my students and for my daughter. Resilience means picking myself up and dusting myself off, even on days when I do not think I can go on. It means being strong for my daughter and me. Resilience means finding that glimmer of hope to move beyond that 500 miles of nothing, finding something positive about each day and practicing gratitude for all of life’s blessings, despite life’s hardships.

Becoming an Admissions Counselor

Admissions as a profession is interesting in that you are part counselor, part sales force, part educator. At the undergraduate level there is no specific degree to prepare for becoming an admissions professional. I had many colleagues over the years who had varying undergraduate degrees ranging from: history, women’s studies (mine), pre-med (my concentration), communications, pre-law, software engineering, game design, graphic design, education, nutrition (my minor), business, and theatre. Although there is no one major to prepare you, it takes a particular personality to stay in the role. The average tenure of an admissions counselor is three years, the length of time it takes to complete most master’s degrees.

College admissions was my third job out of college. Initially I worked as a community service coordinator, human resource administrator and financial manager. I learned many skills in my financial management position, including taking on-site financial accounting and business French courses, gaining management experience,

learning a lot about credit scores, and having the responsibility for handling large financial accounts. But after three years, a great national tragedy occurred that changed everything.

On September 11, 2001, I went to work, like any other day but that morning, everything changed. I remember hearing vague accounts of what was taking place in New York City and being so distraught and distracted I could not focus on my work. Completely distraught, I left for the day, only to go home to my husband and pets only to be glued to the television set to watch the horrific events of the day unfold. The events that day affected all Americans but they had specific repercussions in my life. Being from the New York/ New Jersey area I had friends and family who would be immediately affected by the great tragedy.

September 11 also had a negative impact on the economy of commercial financial lending. The manufactured housing department where I worked was also devastated by the great tragedy of September 11. Manufactured housing dealers began to lose money as the United States economy began to collapse and customers could no longer pay their bills. Dealers began to have units that were sold out of trust, or "SOT," a word my co-workers and I began to detest and fear. My job turned into a depressing cycle of closing down mom and pop shops and evicting tenants from their mobile homes, when a unit was discovered lived in but not paid for, by company auditors. I began despising Sunday nights dreading returning to work on Monday. A pit in my stomach began to form and a glum feeling would take hold.

One day in September 2002, I decided that I could not do this job another day. I thought about possibly going back to school to gain skills and education in a new area,

possibly healthcare. I took a sick day from work, put on a suit and vowed to make something happen that day. I had already begun looking for jobs. On this day, I somewhat randomly went to (what later became the institution where I worked for eleven years), and met with a lovely woman, who would become my friend, mentor and golfing buddy, (the late) Patricia Conant. She was the associate director of admission at a small, professional oriented college and all total, at the end of her career, had worked at the institution for forty-five years. When we met, I was inquiring about one of the college's day programs, a two-year program in radiography—x-ray technology. I was intrigued by the notion of obtaining a concrete, science-based degree combined hands on technical and medical skills in a sector where there were jobs locally.

After talking with Pat for a while, I realized that since I already had a mortgage, a car payment and student loans to repay, a day-program was not going to work. As I was about to leave, Pat said to me,

“You know what? With your enthusiasm and personality, you would be excellent at admissions. We have a position open in our office, would you consider it?”

I told her, “I actually did see it and had applied for it, but I had not heard back yet.” Pat asked me to wait a minute. She left her office and quickly returned with my resume and placed it at the top of her pile of resumes. The next week, I was asked to come in to meet the director and the rest of the team and a few weeks later, I began my career as an admissions counselor.

From the beginning, I loved my new role. I had enjoyed the relationships I had with my dealers while at the financial company but the majority of my interactions with customers were over the phone. In admissions, I had the ability to meet face-to-face with

prospective students and their families during what was such an exciting time in their lives. I felt that I could be a positive influence to them during this time. Also, my new office was in a beautiful, restored Victorian home with a view of Lake Champlain, on a campus where technology and real-world knowledge were valued. I thrived in an educational setting where global ideas, engagement and experiential learning were top priorities.

The institution was a private college in New England that had professionally-oriented majors and programs. When I began in 2002, the undergraduate population had fewer than 2,000 students with over 70% of the students coming from out of state. Ninety percent of the first year students lived on campus and the institution also had two campuses abroad, one in Montreal and one in Dublin. The male-to-female ratio was 62% male, 38% female. While a good majority of the faculty served as full-time professors many were adjunct professors within their specialties. The college was a teaching-based institution rather than a research institution which meant that without tenure at the school, and the pressures required for faculty to make tenure, they were able to put their student's needs first.

The position of admissions counselor typically has a lot of turnover, often because it is viewed as a first job out of college, the low pay, few positions at the very top, and the grueling travel requirements. During my eleven-year career, I saw many admissions counselors come and go. When I first started, every year, at least one position would turn over. At a certain point, though the team I was on was fairly seasoned. When vacancies did occur, it was not uncommon for new college graduates, especially those who worked as student ambassadors to apply for one of the vacant positions. From the outside

looking in, to the student ambassador, the role of admissions counselor may look glamorous as they may make travel arrangements for their counselors, pack their bags full of college catalogs, and make reminder calls to their prospective students for them, and even book some of their travel. The counselors have a college credit card, are now donning more professional work-wear and may even have a college car to use.

Admissions offices, particularly at tuition-driven institutions, (institutions that rely on enrollment dollars for their operating budgets), have very high expectations put on them. These goals and targets never decrease, as students expect more amenities, the cost of living rises, faculty, desire higher wages. All of these affect operating budgets. College presidents want better rankings in the *US News and World Report*, which is an annually released publication that causes frenzy among many, especially elite colleges and even some parents who scramble to garner their children entry into these schools. Presidents have pressure from their governing boards for more applications from more qualified students, more wealthy students who are not financial-aid dependent and more diversity. All of these students raise the *U.S. News rankings*. There is a “give it all to me” approach that is the expectation.

Unlike the almost tenure-like nature of admissions professional roles of the past, enrollment officers today have much more pressure and accountability to meet their goals. In 2014, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* published an article entitled, “The Hottest Seat on Campus.” In it, a former vice president of enrollment at a small private college in New York who was recently fired stated, “There are institutions in denial about reality. There aren’t enough students to go around, and colleges need a scapegoat.”¹⁶ It is

not uncommon for a vice president of enrollment to be held accountable for the size of each incoming class, and penalized for not meeting said goals.

The reality of a career in admissions is that the position often requires extensive travel, in not the most desirable locations whether it is random rural towns or over populated suburbia and you are alone often. The benefit to young admissions counselors is that you can meet others on the road like you—young, fresh graduates, which is a fantastic way to make friendships with counselors who may later become associate directors or directors at other institutions, which can be very good networking.

I quickly noticed that on the road, there were many counselors who fell into the category of young, new undergraduates or older counselors, those who were too old to have small children at home. I noticed that there were not many counselors who I would consider to be in their childbearing years.

Personally, I was young, married, and the grueling travel, (about six weeks in the fall and four weeks in the spring) was very difficult on my relationship. Fortunately, I did the majority of my travel prior to becoming a mom. Being from New Jersey, I had the territory that was often the “hot potato” for many of my New England colleagues, which consisted of New York City, Long Island, Pennsylvania and New Jersey. I volunteered to take it as soon as another counselor left and it became available. Not surprisingly, he was also from New Jersey. Typically, as soon as counselors had put in their time they would jettison this territory for a more desirable one. New Jersey was further away from Vermont for a day trip and had a reputation for poor drivers and lots of traffic.

I gladly offered to take over the territory as I had family there and could save the college travel expenses by staying with family. This also provided me with a less lonely travel season. I could eat home cooked meals, sleep in a familiar bed and see out of town family. I was also an online student in one of the college's master degree programs, which cut down on my socialization with the other counselors and kept me focused. If I had a two-hour block of time in between my last high school visit and my evening college fair, I would go work on my projects and catch up on writing assignments.

Often nicknamed "the Gate Keepers," college admissions professionals often hold the power to decide whether or not a student is admitted to a given college. Trying to diffuse stress for families who have children going through the admissions process and letting them know that there is a human being on the other end of the process is reassuring. In 2005, I had the opportunity to meet Jay Mathews, author of *Harvard Schmarvard*, a book in which he talks about college "fit" and getting beyond the hang-ups of just looking toward Ivy League colleges.¹⁷ Mathews tries to demystify the college admissions process, writing about the stress on families during April of the senior year. He writes about how involved parents should be in the admissions process and breaks down the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings. He explains waitlists, early acceptance and college search processes.

Women and Leadership

Women need female leaders. I first became educated on women's issues, issues of equity, motherhood, politics of women's bodies, and women's health issues as an undergraduate and found it challenging as a higher education leader that there were so few women at my institution, at the top, I could look to as mentors, who had children. I

struggled to find a female mentor, as women at the highest echelons of leadership at my institution, largely were not mothers. This made me wonder, was “doing it all,” having a leadership position in admissions and being a mom even possible?

To prevail in the face of violence, homelessness, economic depression, and widespread malaise, we need a vision of leadership rooted in the enduring sense of human wisdom, courage and compassion. We need a generation of seekers—who have the courage to confront their own shadows and embark upon a personal quest for spirit and heart, and who have the commitment to share their learning with others.¹⁸

Who defines what a leader is and who is a leader? They say to lead from wherever you are, from whatever position you hold. You don't just have to be the CEO to have an impact on others around you. Each of us impacts those around us, for better or worse. In the present and future, I know that I enjoy working with students in some capacity. Working with transfer students through the admissions process, gave me some ability to work with students. I really enjoyed these exchanges and dialogues with students and their parents.

Everything I have read on leadership suggests that people can lead in very different ways. For example, you can have the leader who runs the company but you can also have the leader in higher education, like me, who leads from where I am, at the moment within the organization, or at this time, in my own higher education consulting. Ken Blanchard—management and leadership expert wrote, “Because anytime you attempt to influence thinking, beliefs, or development of someone else, you are engaging in leadership.”¹⁹

This Blanchard quote really speaks to me, especially as a woman. I think, all too often, women peg themselves as someone who is not a leader within the institution, because they might not meet the quintessential ideal of what a leader looks like. If you

ask a school child to describe what a leader might look like, they might conjure up the identity of a male, more specifically, a white male. While I think this might be changing, I feel inordinately more empowered as a leader when the lines are blurred in the description of leadership and it extends to a definition such as Blanchard's, to state that anytime one is trying to influence beliefs or development, one is leading. This is something I do each and every day and therefore, I identify myself as a leader.

Just as we administrators and higher education leaders need female role models, those of us with children also need mothers in leadership roles, and our undergraduates need support as young women. They need a place where they can go to feel understood, as women. For me, in college, the women's center and the support of my classmates in the women's studies classes and my advisor in the program served as my support. At the institution where I worked, there were predominantly male students, which is unusual across institutions of higher education today. There were 63% male students at the institution and for years, different female staff, students and faculty had tried to propose a women's center, a safe space where women could go to air grievances or merely get support from other women.

Two years ago, I was on a committee that met twice a month to draft a proposal that was brought before the Provost to recommend a physical center for women. Unfortunately, due to space and financial constraints, the proposal was denied. This caused great upset across campus, specifically for female faculty who have countless stories of young women coming to them for support, something that a women's center, could provide young women. As a result, the college is currently trying to find some space that while it would not be exclusively for use by a women's center, would provide

some time/space to try to meet these needs that many on campus, including me, feel is essential if women are to feel like a valued member of the campus community.

In my eleven years at the institution, I have seen the advent of the blue safety lights installed on campus and nursing rooms and changing tables installed in many of the bathrooms. This women's center space would be another fine addition to supporting the needs of its female students, faculty and staff.

This institution does have a substantial Single Parent's Program, which for over thirty years has been meeting the needs of single parents. And also, for years, students, staff and faculty have been calling for a campus daycare.

Fortunately, I had the opportunity to find women I could look to for support and guidance—women I met at my Higher Education Resource Leadership Seminar at Wellesley College in 2005, who were amazing leaders. These women represented higher educators within each and every campus constituency, from faculty to administration, to student life. This collection of women served to empower, educate and provide a kind of sisterhood and mentorship to one another.

I was also blessed to have met Claire Cafaro, a former guidance counselor and President of the New Jersey Association of College Admissions Counselors who I became friends with, who has become like a second mother to me. Claire is extremely supportive and gracious and warm. She is also a step-mom, which is a role I would also eventually adopt. She is always someone I like to run my personal and professional ideas by for feedback.

During one of the fall weekend sessions on the beautiful, quintessential East Coast Ivy League campus of Wellesley College, our group had the opportunity to hear

from Diana Chapman Walsh, the twelfth president of Wellesley. One of her quotes particularly stuck with me,

What I would argue our students need most from us as we do our improvisational work of managing the complex force fields in which they are learning and growing is an awareness that it is often in the hot and tense-even painful-moments of sharp-elbowed conflict or heartbreaking grief that something that feels like inspiration quietly enters us for a time while we find our bearings.²⁰

This quote by Chapman resonated with me and would especially resonate as I later experienced the grief of my divorce. I have come to learn that happiness is not a place we can live in full-time and that to seek happiness generally means it will elude us, however if we sit quietly in its wake, we may experience it, albeit temporarily. Some of the highs I have experienced are the result of accomplishments, whether physical, professional, or scholastic.

When I learned I was admitted into the doctoral program at UVM, I was ecstatic. I would learn the good news one night in one of my classes. My professor took three of us aside and she shared the good news with us in person. It felt so good to learn that I had been admitted to the program, that others believed in my ability to complete what I had set out to complete.

Before my daughter was born, I was highly career focused, with my eyes set on a seat in a college president's office. I think I was attracted to such a high-powered career that was full of prestige and would make me financially secure. When I think about it, I smile, as it now seems absurd, as the last thing I would want to do is to work more than an eight-hour day. I became a mother because I wanted to raise my daughter and spending time with her is more important to me than any career aspiration. I am still focused on having a career, but one that sustains my role of motherhood first.

By the time I became a mom, well into my admissions career, my marriage was very rocky. By this time, I had been promoted to the role of associate director (a coveted role in admission's offices), and worked largely with transfer students. Often, a benefit of working with transfer students is that counselors do not travel as much, (perfect for mothers). This was, at least how our office operated because it was reasoned by our director, (correctly), that these students would often drop in without appointments throughout the day and needed assistance so someone who worked a nine-to-five, Monday through Friday schedule was ideal for this role.

I experienced many personal and emotional changes during my divorce process and tried the best I could to utilize these lessons in my work with transfer students. To be effective, working with students through the admissions process at a small, private, professional institution who were experiencing a big change, such as transferring institutions, I had to tap into what made me human. These students were going through a change (transferring institutions), and I was going through a change in my marital status, and while different, the situations had many similar ties such as moving, leaving friends or loved ones and starting on a fresh path.

A recent study published in 2012, entitled "Transfer and Mobility: A National View of Pre-Degree Student Movement in Postsecondary Institutions" released by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center revealed that between 2006-2011, one third of students switch institutions prior to matriculating.²¹ It is therefore crucial that administrators who are working with this population understand the experience and know how to best serve this group of individuals. Working with this population for ten years, I understood them, their needs and therefore, was highly successful in my role.

Chapter One introduced the reader to SPN as a methodology and explains why I selected this genre. In addition, I give the manuscript some context in describing my upbringing, the town I grew up in, a bit about my family and some of the literature and ideas that inspired me early on. I explain how I became an admissions counselor and talk of women and leadership, emphasizing how important it is for women to have female leaders that can mentor them. Chapter Two examines how difficult it can be for women to achieve a healthy work-life balance, particularly in admissions.

CHAPTER TWO

Work-Life Balance for Mothers

Having kids — the responsibility of rearing good, kind, ethical, responsible human beings — is the biggest job anyone can embark on. Maria Shriver

When I was first married, my partner and I waited a couple of years and then decided it was time to try to have children. Although he is a Lymphoma cancer survivor, we did not believe we would have any trouble conceiving children; we were wrong. After four years of trying to conceive, we had no luck. I watched countless other couples who were married long after we were, conceive their children, some even having two before we were able to even conceive one. It was painstaking when a friend would lament how she could not believe they conceived the very first time they tried.

Delving into the world of infertility research, literature, and social circles that included other couples struggling with this issue, it was still so painful to suffer largely in silence. This period in my life was the most difficult second to my parent's divorce during adolescence. The heartache could be so distracting that one day while walking my beloved dog, Noah up Mt. Philo, wearing a baseball cap, I did not see a low hanging branch and ran smack into it. I instantly fell to the ground and heard every bone in my neck crack.

Fortunately, I was fine but I definitely had an injury that needed some chiropractic therapy. I surveyed the community at the college where I worked and got a remarkable number of recommendations for Dr. Laura Ramirez in Burlington. Laura was amazing. I had never had a chiropractic adjustment before and was a little afraid at first. Dr. Laura suggested the fertility clinic at the University of Vermont Medical Center to me, where I

met Dr. Peter Casson. He and his team helped my former husband and me to figure out the repercussions of his cancer and what we could do about it.

During this time, after graduating college and prior to conceiving, I was able to immerse myself in my professional work and the pursuit of my post-graduate education. I had been planning on entering the doctoral program for quite some time and wanted to get as much of it completed as possible before I had children. As luck would have it, as soon as I applied and found out I was accepted, I also found out I was pregnant! I was beyond ecstatic. So I began my doctoral endeavors newly pregnant and was in class right up until the week before my daughter was born—the happiest day of my life.

I loved every bit of being pregnant and could not relate to or understand mothers who were hoping for a fast forward button on pregnancy. I reveled in the new life growing inside me and glowed with every bit of my being. Once our daughter was born, having a newborn at home, I happily slipped into “newborn land” with my daughter, happy and falling in love with this miracle baby who had taken so long to conceive.

After just three short months, like most working mothers I had to return to work. A three-month-old baby is just becoming expressive, starting to coo and laugh and exhibit some personality. Going back to work at this juncture was the hardest thing I ever had to do. For the first three months back, I was able to work part-time, three days per week, which gave me the best of both worlds as it does many other part-time working moms. This gave me flexibility to spend more time at home with my daughter yet keep one foot in the professional world.

Little did I know that upon gazing into my daughter’s eyes, many of my former professional dreams would be tempered when I realized that the tradeoff would mean

even less time with my daughter. I found myself feeling terribly alone and experiencing a palpable loss— a grieving. So I began to do some casual research on my own, taking a hiatus from my doctoral studies, little did I know that my research would lead to what I found to be a phenomenon.

Other working mothers in higher education found themselves struggling upon return to their career jobs at institutions they loved, at jobs they used to enjoy, particularly women with children pre-K, (from birth to age five years old). These women, highly educated, had done their homework looking into their sick leave policy, checking on their daycare options, researching pediatricians and obstetricians, signing up for birthing and parenting classes, registering for infant first aid and CPR, going to the local retail baby store and registering for all the supplies (and more) a newborn could need.

These mothers began researching the best brand of car seat, had it inspected at the local police station, began selecting the highest quality breast pump and scouring the internet for tips and blogs on becoming a new mother. Many of these career driven women, myself included presumed that after their maternity leave was up, they would re-enter the workforce, and just like the best laid plans little Ethan or Sophia would fall neatly and nicely into the plan. Little did these women realize how emotions and attachments operate and many were highly unprepared in this one area.

Additionally, many of these women explained to me a feeling of exhaustion, a feeling of not feeling themselves. One woman, described this “juggling” phenomenon as follows, “There are days when I’ve barely slept when I’m wondering how I’m going to

get through it,” she said. “Sometimes I have more peace about it, and other times, I feel like I’m on the verge of a breakdown.”²²

In addition, these women I knew presumed their institutions were “family friendly” because isn’t it a fact that the higher education setting is more supportive and work-life-balanced than corporate America? These women thought (myself included) that everything would run on schedule and according to plan. They did not yet know the complexities of caring for a sick child and still having work demands, navigating the often tenuous relationship with the child’s care giver (especially women who believe in very active parenting even while balancing the demands of paid work), and how much the work of the second shift would exhaust and frazzle even the most energetic woman.

I recall very significantly the day I was at work, my daughter, just shy of her first birthday. I was in a meeting with a student when our front desk assistant came into my office to say that my daughter’s home care provider was on the phone. The woman’s dog had bitten my daughter. I remember feeling a mix of panic and grief that I was not there when my daughter was hurt.

These are women with children from birth to five years old, like myself, who are from the generation that is unwittingly called Generation X (although some could be from the Baby Boomer generation). Gen Xers are women who growing up were told we could ‘do anything’. These women grew up during the post feminist movement, and were encouraged to have a career first, family second and never to rely on a man because as our mother’s generation learned, divorce was likely in 50% of all marriages.

When I began planning for my family, I, like many, presumed that it would be easier than in reality it is. Always career driven, I thought I would take my three months

off (which would feel like an eternity) and then since I had done my research on birthing and parenting classes, child care, and finding the appropriate pediatrician everything would fall miraculously into place. But as many mothers who work know, things do not fall magically into place and that lives with children, working lives with children, requires a continual reevaluation of plans and schedules. And if anything throws the delicate schedule off, everything topples like a house of cards.

In the end though, motherhood is a gender issue that faces all women. The parent problem confronts all parents who want to devote themselves to labors that have been traditionally viewed as 'women's work'. The social trends that since the 1960s and '70s have let more women into the workplace didn't allow us in as mothers. Women have tried different strategies. We've tried the do-it-all approach. We've tried sequencing, doing it all at different times, so to speak. In the end, though the workplace must change to allow us in as mothers and allow men in as fathers, so that they too can take on the shares and joys of child raising that many want.²³

For whatever reason, maybe it was my undergraduate major in women's studies or seeing my mother advocate for herself as I grew up, but from my twenties on, I have rarely been afraid to ask for what I want: I see it as a kind of sport. Some of my friends cringe at the thought of negotiating and would rather pay more for something than negotiate for a lower price or take a lower starting wage than ask for one higher, but I actually enjoy it. In the book, *Women Don't Ask: Negotiation and the Gender Divide* Babcock and Laschever explain that many women have been socialized simply not to ask for a salary increase, or better benefits, for example, where many men expect this type of negotiation.²⁴

Therefore, upon my return to work, after twelve weeks of unpaid leave, I was assertive enough to negotiate a part-time schedule, until my daughter was six months old. This was the only way I could rationalize working; and feel that I was still a good mother. This schedule enabled me to be home with her four days per week, two weekdays and the weekend. During her first year, the three days she went to at-home daycare, I spent my lunches nursing her.

Dropping her off, at three-months old at a home day-care, in someone else's care, broke my heart; it literally ached. In this way, I could identify with the parents of the students I was working with in admissions who needed tissues at the thought of dropping off their son or daughter at college and driving home an empty nester. Suddenly, I could relate in a new way. While I picked her up each evening after work, I still understood the feeling of separation and the visceral pain of that separation.

After all I had carried her in utero for nine months, dreamed about her for years prior to her conception, read her Dr. Seuss to in my womb. I practiced prenatal yoga with and then spent three months with her exclusively while out on maternity leave. Once I returned to work, I immediately did the calculations in my mind to see if I could stay home with her. It just did not seem feasible and we needed both my husband and my salary.

Before my daughter was born, my life had meaning but it was the meaning of the individual—academic, admissions counseling. After she was born, I saw the world through a different set of eyes. My actions no longer effected only me— I was now responsible for another living being who completely depended on me. Choices I made about my life were no longer just about me. Just as in my work with students, being able

to focus on my daughter and her needs gave me a sense of peace and inner strength. I now understood the emotion of love in an entirely new way, and was overcome with love for her. These words from an ancient Sanskrit poem breathe some life into my feelings for my daughter,

Love is the source of life.
If all the world were mine to plunder
I'd be content with just one town,
And in that town, one house alone,
And in that house, one single room,
And in that room, one cot only,
For there, asleep, is the one I love.²⁵

After six months, I had to return to work full time. Still nursing my daughter, this required me to lug my breast pump to work each day and then cart bottles of breast milk home at the end of each day. But I didn't mind pumping at work. I was fortunate enough to have a private office where I could close the door and had a comfortable chair to sit down and relax in for fifteen minutes twice a day. I could actually sit and read a book for the first time in what felt like ages. I would also go and visit my daughter each day at lunchtime to nurse her. I felt good about this; good about the bond I was establishing with her and good about the nutritional benefits including the antibodies I was passing on to her through my breast milk. Infants who are breastfed score up to six points higher on intelligence quotient tests and are also less prone to childhood illnesses including obesity later in life.²⁶ Balancing my full-time job, being a mom, and part-time student, it was not easy to find a sustainable work-life balance and still sleep. I have never been one to sacrifice my sleep, as I trust my body that I need eight hours to remain healthy, physically and mentally. Nursing my daughter helped me with the sleep deprivation that many new mothers face. When she awoke in the night, I would just bring her to bed with me and

nurse her back to sleep, which resulted in both of us getting a better night's sleep.

One of the only things that helped me feel better about my decision to work was to talk with other moms about their decision to work. Feeling that sense of connection with other working moms was cathartic and soothing. Without the camaraderie of other working mothers, it would be nearly impossible to work, not being there to put my daughter down for her daily nap, and to experience many of her "firsts."

Beyond the fact of knowing that my daughter was in excellent, quality and loving care while I was at work, getting photo text updates of her throughout the day and spending quality time with her when I was with her were all ways I would cope with being away from her. But the feeling of real loss, was pervasive, some days harder than others, and was always with me. Author, Elizabeth Stone, says, "Making the decision to have a child is momentous. It is to decide forever to have your heart go walking around outside your body." Being away from my daughter while I have to work, especially since she is younger than school age, oftentimes creates a feeling of sadness/loss/loneliness. During the day, I would sit at my desk in my office and get a sudden pang of hurt, as I looked at the clock and realized it was five hours or more before I would see my daughter again. I have talked to other working mothers who also experienced these emotions.

While we hear so much about how corporate jobs, high finance jobs and law are so unfriendly to working mothers, forcing women to choose between their careers and motherhood, the truth is that many career fields put women in the same position, including institutions of higher education. My experience of being a working mom in college admissions was that it was very difficult to have a healthy work-life balance, even in higher education administration. The reality of women's experiences (both my own

and women I spoke to) is that it is a constant struggle to balance the demands of careers with home lives.

I knew I wanted to write about balancing a career as a leader in college admissions with motherhood. By this time in my career, I was in a leadership position, as associate director. When I began my literature review on working mothers in higher education administration, not much existed. Most of the literature focused on the challenges of female faculty trying to secure tenure while having babies, (also tremendously difficult), but not much has been written on leaders in higher education administration trying to balance the demands of family life with their professional lives, let alone while also pursuing their own educational goals.

One day, while selecting research for a Qualitative Research Class, I kept hoping for that “swept off my feet feeling” if I chose to write about something I was passionate about. I went off to yoga on campus and finally had that “aha” moment. I could write about what I was living. I could research the realities of working mothers in higher education; how their institutions had been supportive or otherwise, as they became new moms. How could institutions support this group of women, particularly new mothers with young children? Through my observations and experience, I felt that this was a group that needed much more support in balancing the demands and challenges of both working and raising a family than they were receiving.

I knew I was not the only mother to feel unsupported and frustrated since I talked with other mothers who worked in higher education. I know that this need for support also arises later on in life for women who become the primary caregivers for their aging parents. However, I wanted to focus my research on new moms. I felt that there was a

real opportunity for institutions to make working a more positive experience for new moms. My belief is that these are valuable employees who if given some flexibility and support early on, who will repay their institutions with loyalty, dedication and hard work.

There are specific challenges and benefits, as well as cultural realities that shape the day-to-day lives of these workingwomen and their families. It was this experience that I wanted to research. I wanted to focus on three higher education institutions in New England, each with their own unique cultures, to determine how women—working mothers specifically with children between the ages of birth to age five—were being supported in their roles as both mother and employee.

Given that even today when more families are sharing the child-rearing responsibilities more equally than ever before, there are still domestic responsibilities that rest largely on women's shoulders. In Arlie Hochschild's classic, *Second Shift*, born in 1940, a professor emerita of sociology at the University of California Berkeley coined the phrase, "second shift," the unpaid shift of work that women took on in their homes after they completed their first shift for their paid work.²⁷ In disproportionate numbers, women do more of the unpaid work at home to keep the household running even while employed for paid labor outside of the home.

Furthermore, for the first time in history since the 1960s, due to unfriendly work climates women's participation in the workforce is on the decline, especially white, middle-class, highly educated women. What can institutions do, if they would like to retain these women as they enter their child bearing years?

Today's women's movement is no longer the women's movement of the 40s and 50s, or of the 60s and 70s. Today's women's movement is about mothers/mothering,

working mothers, who still are saddled with the second shift. Andrea O'Reilly writes about this in her book *Feminist Mothering*,

O'Reilly makes a distinction between motherhood as an institution filled with tradition that can possibly lead women to a sense of isolation and feminist mothering that recognizes 'that mothers and children benefit when the mother lives her life, and practices mothering, from a position of agency, authority, authenticity, and autonomy.'²⁸

When women are silenced or become invisible, as often happens with women and especially mothers, women lose power. Their plight becomes unknown to others. When united for a common cause, a movement or change can occur. "During the next decades, the percentage of mothers in the labor force increased from 45% (in 1965) to an astonishing 78% in 2000."²⁹ However, this is the first time since the 1960s that women's participation in paid labor outside the home is actually decreasing. More women are leaving the boardroom, classroom, office, and the operating room and heading home. According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1998 marked the first year since 1976 in which the number of women in the workplace declined.³⁰

The financial impact of this on women is deleterious for many reasons including: loss of retirement income, financial reliance on their working partner, which may cause an imbalance of power, and oftentimes loss of raised income over time that women who remain working will earn. It can also be difficult for women to reenter the workforce.

A Center for Work-Life Policy found that, overall, employed women who took time off suffered an 18% wage penalty, (what a woman experiences from taking time out of the paid workforce).....the wage penalties are severe and the longer the women are away from their jobs the more draconian the penalty. Across job sectors women who take a year off or less from work suffer only an 11% penalty, but if the break lasts for three or more years that number rises to 37%. These penalties would be even more drastic if they included lost retirement contributions.³¹

Mothering is a women's issue and it affects all women who have or will have children. If you are a woman and you do not already have children or you have children and you might want to add to your family you could be "mommy tracked." "The gap between men's and women's earnings is ten to fifteen percent larger for mothers than for women without children; in fact, the wage gap between mothers and nonmothers is larger than that between men and women."³²

What sets admissions aside from other departments within higher education administration, is that in addition to the weekend and evening hours required (similar to student life and residential life roles), and the demanding travel schedule (similar to the development role) is the additional time spent counseling students and their parents.

In *Opting Out* by Pamela Stone, the author finds that contrary to media hype about women making a choice to "opt out," many of these highly motivated career women are being driven out of their jobs, or nudged out by circumstances because they burn out.³³ It is this phenomenon that I find most interesting because it highlights how women are a group at risk that require extra support, (without being stigmatized and marginalized) especially women with children under five. To keep these educated women in the workplace, institutions should invest in supporting this group with flexible schedules and social networks to help them ease back into the workforce. Managers of this group and human resource professionals need to be sensitive to their needs and find ways to truly be family-friendly.

Women in Stone's study— women with high-powered careers who become mothers and decide to leave the workforce to stay home with children, do not point to structural reasons why they are "opting out" of the workforce. Many women in her study

cite reasons including family, children, supporting husband's high-powered career, but very few cite a lack of family-friendly workplace options as a reason for leaving. However, when reading their stories, many of these women tried to hold onto their careers, arranging for a part-time schedule and were turned down or tried working that schedule and were simply not successful given the actual demands of the position that often times, were part-time in pay and status but not in actuality. The workloads were generally more than twenty to thirty-hour per week jobs. Many were actually full-time positions, forty plus hour per week jobs masquerading as part-time opportunities. Stone theorizes that women may have wanted to part ways with employers in good standing, leaving the door open in case they ever wanted to return, rather than citing the actual dissatisfaction they expressed during their interviews with her where they felt they could be more candid, in that the demands placed on them were what resulted in their option to quit. Most of these women genuinely lacked role models of women who had made it work as part-time employees. I experienced this within higher education administration, particularly in admissions where there were no part-time employees.

For women who worked in the corporate setting where mergers were the norm, it became particularly challenging for women who were frequently reporting to different bosses at the conclusion of a merger only to have to establish rapport and bargaining all over again. A lot of this negotiating for a part-time schedule or modified work arrangement goes on behind closed doors with women holding their breaths that their plans for juggling it all will work out. Even if their offer is accepted, it leaves them subject to a whole host of other issues. Some of these include co-workers who might treat them differently given their special accommodations, the perception that they are not as

serious as they once used to be (before becoming a mother), sick children on their part-time days when they are supposed to be working. Or, as in with frequent mergers, the changing of a boss with whom she has the agreement, the demands of home pulling more strongly than the job, or vice versa and the constant feeling that she is not doing her best at either mothering or her form of paid employment.

In tough economic times, employees are squeezed into spending more hours at work—more weekends, more evenings and more time away from their families. For working mothers who are already making a difficult choice, these demands make it even harder for women to juggle both. It is my hope that higher education leaders will read this dissertation and will see the ways in which their current “family-friendly policies” actually *do not* support these women and to realize that a one-size-fits all approach is ineffective when considering these policies.

In the United States, the most maternity leave women are offered by law is twelve weeks of unpaid leave. At my institution, I was able to take twelve weeks of leave, but had to use all of my vacation and deplete my sick time bank in order to receive pay for this time off. Upon return to work, if my daughter was sick, I potentially would have to wait to take a day off to stay home with her until my sick time replenished itself. Individual attention must be paid to this group if institutions value them and want to retain them and keep them healthy, happy, and productive and help them to achieve a healthy work-life balance.

What the literature reveals about women “opting out” is that in addition to their leaving the workforce because they want to be home with children to raise them as primary caregiver, they are also driven out by employers who are less than accepting of

working mothers. Weekend hours, low pay compared to the expense of child care costs, compulsory social activities outside of normal working hours, travel, poor maternity leave options, unfit nursing/pumping lounges, a lack of mothering groups and parenting classes and a general lack of acknowledgement of a family first attitude, in addition to “mommy tracking” employees, giving them less upward mobility and opportunities for advancement are all reasons why women leave careers to raise their families.

All of the current literature references Lisa Belkin’s 2003 *New York Times Magazine*, “The Opt Out Revolution” about, high-powered women leaving their careers for staying home to raise children.³⁴ In this book, Neil Gilbert, *A Mother’s Work: How Feminism, the Market, and Policy Shape Family Life*, agrees with most of the literature that states that the media pays close attention to what a few elite women are doing, thus trumpeting the opt-out phenomenon as if women in droves were leaving work to stay at home. He suggests that even more significant is the number of women today who are not having children at all. He believes this is an even larger phenomenon, as women are choosing to focus on their careers instead of becoming mothers.³⁵

Most people today are aware that the size of the American family has been shrinking since the 1960s when reproductive control became legal. Also noteworthy, Neil points out in 2002, almost one in five women in their early forties were childless, close to double the proportion of childless women in 1976. In addition families having three or more children declined by fifty percent.³⁶

In *Glass Ceilings & 100 Hour Couples: What the Opt out Phenomena Can Teach Us About Work and Family*, Moe and Shandy purport that women who opt out of the workforce to stay home to raise children are not making a 100% voluntarily choice to

step out of high paying careers or careers that through higher education/graduate degrees women invested a lot of time, energy and resources.³⁷

Moe and Shandy point out that there is a significant wage penalty that women suffer when trying to re-engage in their careers after taking time off to stay home with their families. In *Opting Out*, their research showed that women—even successful women—encounter obstacles of all sorts, that the workplace can be hostile and chilly, but especially to mothers.³⁸ American women also express feeling that they are ‘mommy tracked’ by some tacit or unwritten set of norms about women, especially married women with children. This case can be relevant to any profession and exemplifies the need for those responsible for the creation of policies to truly understand the needs of women and families.

Examining the opt-out phenomena is crucial to their research as it highlights the pressures faced by women who remain in the workforce. Although this specific text does not focus on working mothers in higher education, it is important to note this research because written in 2010, consists of hundreds of interviews, survey research, and national labor force data. It is a current look at how women combine work and family life. From their research, the authors suggest that women are more often pushed out of a workforce that is less than supportive and conducive to working mothers. As one woman said, “I feel like not being available to work late, come in early, and work weekends every weekend has ‘mommy tracked me’. It is no longer enough to work nine to five, you have to commit every hour of your life to the job in order to be recognized and get ahead.³⁹ I could relate to this being in admissions. In order to recruit students, there were mandatory weekend events. Students and their families would sometimes ask us to meet

them on a Friday evening if they were driving in from out of town. All admitted student events and open houses were held on the weekends. All events had preceding social events accompanying them, which as a mom were difficult to attend, especially after being away from my family the entire workday. Not being able to attend or to readily volunteer to attend, gave the impression in the office that you were not a “team player.” Those of us trying for balance are often perceived as slackers by co-workers or bosses without young children. I was unprepared for this.

In 1979 Congress passed a law that pregnant women could not be discriminated against in hiring or in the workplace. According to the Family Medical Leave Act (1993) of the United States Department of Labor, covered employers must grant an eligible employee up to a total of twelve workweeks of unpaid leave during any twelve-month period for one or more of the following reasons: for the birth and care of the newborn child of the employee; for placement with the employee of a son or daughter for adoption or foster care; to care for an immediate family member (spouse, child, or parent) with a serious health condition; or to take medical leave when the employee is unable to work because of a serious health condition.⁴⁰

Women in the United States in 2010 are not by law, granted any rights to be paid for maternity leave. They are allowed twelve weeks of unpaid leave, which many women feel is not nearly enough time. And unpaid labor is not realistic for all women. Single women, women living in poverty, and even many middle-class women are not all able to take a twelve-week hiatus from the labor force after giving birth.

In Canada, women get seventeen weeks of maternity leave and thirty-five weeks of parental leave that can be shared with their spouses, which works out to one year out

of the labor force (although it is at 55% of salary). In Norway, parents get fifty-four weeks with 80% of salary or forty-four weeks off with 100% of salary. Oftentimes, too the mother will stay home longer than a year because they get support from the state if they have children at home under the age of three. Many infants begin daycare around one year or later in contrast to the US, where children enter daycare either at home with a caregiver or off-site at three months of age.⁴¹ The United States ranks dead last of any of the wealthy nations when it comes to paid time off with infants.

As far as the FMLA has advanced women in the American workplace, discrimination in the workplace still exists against women and mothers. Women are still paid less than their male counterparts, although the numbers are slowly improving. According to the US Department of Labor, in 2009 white women earned \$.78 for every dollar a man earned, up from \$.63 in 1975.⁴²

I was interested, as I began my research, to see how these issues affect women particularly those who may not have a very long history at the institution, who have not had the benefit of longevity in their positions, giving them the opportunity to build the trust and rapport that often go hand in hand with the cultural capital for bargaining. Institutions of higher education are generally seen as softer touch organizations than corporate America, for example, so how will the family-friendly rhetoric compare to the realities women face on the job when they become mothers. Do these women feel mommy tracked? If working full time, do they experience guilt, and if so, how much does the weight of the guilt affect their abilities on the job?

Responsibilities that working mothers in higher education most often take on in addition to the full time job, and the second shift is managing the relationship with the

caregivers. A lot of effort goes into balancing these relationships. Communication not only in scheduling but also in the growth and development, both physical and emotional of the child is required.

Another reason Stone asserts that intensive mothering norms also account for women leaving the workforce for home. Motherhood and all that it connotes is shaped by culture. Most parenting today is mothering even though we speak of it in gender-neutral terms as in 'parenting'. Cultural values and norms revolving around motherhood are changing to include this notion of 'intensive mothering', something that our mothers typically did not practice.

Expectations on mothers have increased dramatically over the years. The "professionalization" of motherhood where women need to follow the suggestions of experts that include a frenzy of activities geared at creating and/or maintaining cultural capital, helping to develop and encourage early language and motor skill development. Turn on any cartoon and watch the television commercials that come on between shows and one will find products geared towards parents who want to give their toddlers a leg up on their peers. There are flash cards and programs designed to teach toddlers how to read.

With more professional women leaving the workforce and entering the home, they are bringing with them their professional identities and skills that most likely will be cultivated in their mothering, hence further these principals and expectations on all mothers, including those mothers who retain paid employment.⁴³

Understanding this framework and pressure on all women is something that people need to be aware of. These issues do not stand in isolation. Working mothers in

higher education, especially given the educational context in which they work, are naturally people who value education for themselves and their families. Therefore, learning about the societal expectations placed on mothers needs to also be factored into the discussions when determining how much paid time off mothers will receive.

Women, unlike men, are still shouldering more of the domestic responsibilities that extend beyond the “dreaded schedule” that working parents usually navigate and negotiate as they go. If something should go awry with the “dreaded schedule,” like your child comes down with an ear infection or stomach bug, it is oftentimes the woman’s employment responsibilities that will have to give if it is perceived that men are the primary bread winners in the household; thus the woman’s job is usually seen as more expendable, even if the couple’s education and years of service might be comparable. Men still earn more than women and reach the higher levels within institutions of higher education (as well as other fields) than women.

While Joan Williams, professor of law at American University and the director of the school’s Program on Work life Law, didn’t invent the phrase, she has given it new life in describing what happens to mothers in the workplace. The glass ceiling, where you can see the leadership roles and the upstairs executive suites but you just can’t get there comes paired with a sister concept of what stops women at work: the maternal wall, the stiff and unbending barriers to workers who are mothers.⁴⁴

Peskowitz points to the fact that what individual women and families are experiencing within their own homes and work lives are not isolated incidents but rather a socio-cultural phenomenon. The fact that institutions expect more from individual employees than realistically can be accomplished for those who have children and are primarily responsible for young children needs to be retooled. She argues that in the eyes of employers, the ideal worker does not have children or aging parents, can dedicate

themselves to their careers and be available at all times. I certainly felt that this was true where I worked.

A woman shouldn't have to give up a career entirely for want of some time off, a year or two, or even more. She shouldn't lose wages for the rest of her life because she dared to take a few years off for her family. That's what we're talking about: a few years off, a few less hours of work each day. What can this mean in the context of careers and work lives that begin in our twenties and last until we turn sixty-five?⁴⁵

One response from women making the choice to "opt out" is often that they are not shunning feminism but they are exercising their own rights as feminists in many cases to "choice feminism." They feel that as women and feminists they have choices about values, work, and family and if they have the means to stay home then they should be respected for their "choice."

There are accounts of women who lived through the 60s and 70s feminist revolution who admonish other women for making the choice to opt out of their careers in exchange for turning to the more traditional home fronts. These women remember all too well the struggles and battles that they and women before them fought to earn an equal seat at the boardroom table or to become admitted to prestigious institutions of higher education. These women also lived through the passing of the Equal Opportunity Act that served to protect them and those who followed them from unfair hiring practices. Some of these women take a personal affront when women "opt out," seeing their choice as a step in the wrong direction for women who fought hard to attain the current level of achievement.⁴⁶

At a societal level, the sheer lack of family-friendly policies coupled with the increasing demands on motherhood make it exceedingly difficult if not impossible for women, especially high-achieving women to 'do it all.' An image seared into my mind of the 1980s is of the supermom in her business suit and sneakers able to run over any challenge. And that was at a time when this notion of intensive mothering had not yet come to the fore.

Sociologist Sharon Hays describes the prevailing set of cultural beliefs about motherhood as an 'ideology of intensive mothering' that advises mothers to spend a tremendous amount of time, energy, and money in raising their children. To be a good mother is to pay close attention to your children's development, especially during early childhood, and to nurture that development at every stage of the child's life so as to build his or her self-esteem, autonomy, and self-reliance.⁴⁷

At the same time that societal pressures on mothering have grown over the years, so have the expectations of workers, whose hours and requirement to be available at all times, which technology has made possible, have also increased. Thus, the bubble has burst for some and the ability to effectively navigate working and motherhood especially when a couple has more than one child or if one is a single mom.

However, all is not doomsday. Support from institutions could be offered in a variety of ways including creating policies that support women and families including but not limited to: sufficient paid leave time (without requiring women to forego vacation and sick time), flexible schedules upon return to work, parenting and infant CPR/first aid classes, placing working mothers in leadership positions to serve as role models, reduced travel, on-campus daycare, work-from home days when appropriate, sponsored new mother lunches for networking and support, comfortable, private spaces on campus for nursing or pumping, infant changing tables in the rest rooms.⁴⁸

There are actually many things that institutions could do to make these mothers feel less alienated and more supported. These examples are just some of the ways in which institutions can support new moms in their transitions back to work. Across campuses, men and women in formal or informal positions of power can contribute to the positive experiences of working mothers in higher education by promoting agendas that favor women and families. In addition, human resource departments as well as all

managers can learn what the issues are for working mothers in higher education and help to develop creative solutions to support them in their efforts.

Colleges and universities can create their own policies when it comes to working mothers. Employment law in the U.S. does not guarantee women any paid time off. Usually, any bargaining a woman does is solely at the discretion of her boss. It is therefore up to individuals throughout the institution to take a stance on the side of women, men, children and families and create and enforce more family-friendly policies. However, support from the top and a culture that honors work-life balance is paramount.

Women (and men who want to take active roles in child raising) need flexibility in their work roles to accommodate their family lives, but largely just for a few years of their work lives. For employers not to recognize this or honor this is where the real problem lies.

In Chapter Two, I begin with some descriptions of how it felt to become a working mother and how nothing had prepared me for the role. Before I became a mother, I simply could not fathom the experience. I delve into some research on literature and studies that were conducted that assess how the workplace can be a particularly hostile environment to mothers.

CHAPTER THREE

Admissions “Counselor”

“Faith is taking the first step even when you don’t see the whole staircase.” Martin Luther King, Jr.

In this chapter I will explore some of the counseling I did in my admissions career. When I worked with prospective transfer students I was not only trying to get them to transfer to my institution, but I was also trying to understand where the student was coming from, where they were looking to go and how badly they wanted to make it happen. I would ask the students questions and listen carefully to their answers. I would try to ask questions that elicited a response in them that was thoughtful. I also asked about their family: did they have siblings? What did their parents think about them transferring? This would help me to better understand their entire picture. These two questions, typically told me the most important information during our interview and time together as I learned about the people who influence them and thus, about what motivates them in general and also how likely they were to transfer.

Without my own life experiences, both trials and tribulations, without tapping into what made me human, I would not be as good at what I did. Much like a good professor, I would become vulnerable and learn alongside the student and their family. I was open to their experience. I would ask thoughtful questions that would provoke them, while gently encouraging them in their dreams and hopes for their college experience. I could identify with my students as they experienced hardship and encourage them along their journey; attempting to lessen the isolation they were experiencing as they tried to attain their goal of higher education. As the Dali Lama states, “Education is the path through which suffering can be lessened.”

I was told by some students that I provided them the spark they needed to return to their current college and do well; talking to me about their plans and goals was the carrot they needed in order to bring their grades up. I often got a feeling mid-way through an interview a lightening of the energy in the room and the student would get really excited. I could see them imagining themselves at my institution or imagining themselves having success at the community college so that they could gain admission to my institution. When this happened, it felt magical.

Whether it is a traditional undergraduate or transfer student, a student needs to know she is not alone on her academic journey. She needs to know that someone cares that she is there. Attainment of a higher education degree in today's world, so full of "noise" and chaos, requires faith, perseverance and hope for the future. She needs to make human connections and see the interconnectedness of her journey with those around her. Without connections, students are more likely not to matriculate.

Most, if not all college students will encounter at least one personal crisis during their academic career. Students need the tools to comprehend the chaos and feel supported both personally and academically. During their studies, some students will join a sport, engage in a club or activity, or get a job that will bring their lives meaning outside the classroom. Usually it is due to the connections they establish during these experiences that makes all the difference as to whether or not they persevere to the finish line and receive their diploma. Given that one third of students will transfer, this population require special support in obtaining their educational goals.

In my role as director of transfer admission, I would often fulfill the role of the missing advisor from the student's former institution. I would make every effort to give

the student the space to process and make meaning of her experience. I would then provide support and encouragement to the student and his family through the transfer process. I definitely used my compassion and nurturing abilities in my role of working with students and their parents.

Painting a mental picture for the students before they could “see the whole staircase,” definitely helped. If a student had sub-optimal grades and was hoping to gain admission, I would say, “You need to prove it to yourself that you can do well here. You just need to show me. But, first, you must believe you can be successful.” Students I said this to would generally nod their head in understanding and I could see them process the information.

The personal approach was not a requirement of my position, which could have taken on a more procedural style of simply directing students to fill out an application, (as others in my position have been known to do), giving them facts and explaining the process. Instead, I took the time to add the caring, support, encouragement and space to make meaning of their transfer experience, many sorely needed.

Many of these students just didn’t find a helpful advisor at their prior institution and so I would try to fill that role for them, giving them a sense of a connection to a place they knew they wanted to attend. I would encourage them to invite their parents to call me, if they were not in attendance at the meeting. I would be sure to find out who the stakeholders or the people of influence were in the decision making process (a parent, grandparent, counselor) and be sure to invite that person to reach out to me to answer further questions or to address concerns. I spoke with many parents who just needed

someone to listen to them about their child, to listen to their concerns or fears. It was not uncommon for me to listen to parents or students in tears.

“There is great opportunity for all of us to learn, including the teacher, in the emptiness and silence of a classroom space.”⁴⁹ I used this same Taoist approach in advising transfer students. I would invite a student’s parents to contact me, a gesture that was highly valued and utilized. I would argue that the degree to which I was successful in my role could be directly attributed to this approach. I received many accolades and thank you cards from families highlighting their appreciation for the kindness, thoughtfulness, and support I provided them during the admissions process, which is often fraught with stress and angst. I also repeatedly met my lofty admissions goals each semester, which I believe was also due to my approach.

Even though my role was that of “admissions” counselor, I feel that I was able to exercise the “counselor” role in my position in working with transfer students, which was extremely gratifying. The heartfelt emails, calls and cards from parents and students thanking me for my friendliness and helpfulness meant a lot to me in my work because I know that I made a difference to them, personally, and made a process that can often be very stressful, less so. I had families tell me that they called a number of institutions and that I was the only one to call them back, which already separated us from these other institutions, indicating to them that we were interested in them.

For the size institution where I was employed, there were 2,000 undergraduate students on our main campus. In the fall, I would typically enroll 110 transfer students and in the spring, between 50 to 60 students. Some schools of comparable size enroll between 30 to 50 transfer students each year. This required a lot of outreach, taking walk-

in appointments, phone calls, interviews, emails and text messaging. It was not uncommon for students and their families to contact me multiple times a week over several weeks or even months.

In “Helping College Students Find Purpose,” it is said that twenty-something’s experience the “quarterlife crisis.”⁵⁰ This is a tumultuous experience for students and if they do not have support from home to complete their degree, life’s roadblocks can prevent them from “making sense of the chaos” and persevering when that which appears to be absolute, suddenly is not. Often the roadblocks and difficulties that college students encounter on their way towards degree attainment are mostly their personal and interpersonal struggles. We, as higher educators have a responsibility to assist students in making meaning of their experiences.

The meaning of life’s ceaseless ebb and flow is not for Dr. So-What-Now-What to assert for his students, of course. Nor is it for any of us to declare. This is each quarterlifer’s task to discover for him-or herself. Therefore, as meaning-making educators, we must ask ourselves: how can we help each of our quarterlifers to understand and respond to such a large question, given where each might reside in their unique narratives of meaning?⁵¹

A quarterlifer as defined by Robbins & Wilner is between the ages of twenty to thirty-five, with significant developmental overlaps for both late teens to mid-lifers.⁵² Thus, the quarterlife generation includes most undergraduates and graduate students. The ways in which SPN has helped me with my own exploration of meaning-making, I tried to help the students I worked with as I searched for meaning in my own life, both personally as well as professionally. Thus, I was able to more readily identify with the “quarterlife crisis,” college students go through.

If I am actively exploring these questions and concepts in my own life and am open with my students, I may share that I am also in the process of figuring things out. I am not the expert and there are no definitive answers when it comes to meaning making. One thing that DeMethra LaSha Bradley shared in her dissertation was,

Through this dissertation, others will have the ability to hear my story and my voice, and perhaps be able to find their voices in my narrative and know that their ‘invisible’ experiences are becoming ‘visible’.⁵³

How do students today make meaning in their lives? How can stories help with meaning making? Making meaning out of our own lives first, invites our students to do the same. Doing the oft difficult job of lifting the corners and peering down into the frequently messy, always scary, sometimes funny, undoubtedly sad, rich and full tapestry that comprises our lives encourages meaning making from our students within their own lives. As a leader, forging ahead and doing the uncomfortable work in our lives can encourage our students to reflect, meaningfully within theirs.

Thus what makes our purposes worthwhile or justifiable (or both) depends on those meanings that we attach to them and that drive our behaviors. Unfortunately, too often in the academy, we insist that our students pursue and achieve a whole host of academic and career purposes without first helping them to formulate systems of meanings to inform these purposes.⁵⁴

College students, during their education might experience love lost, love found, changes in family structure, addiction, either personally or of a loved one as well as confusion and dismay at living in a world where grand scale tragedies occur. Specifically transfer students have the added stress of jumping through the hoops of the college admissions process a second time, or navigating the process for the first time if she is first attending an open enrollment institution such as a community college.

One of the ways to tackle this in our lives is by being honest with ourselves about our own struggles and working through them so that we can experience our own academic and personal successes (however we identify this). In this way, we can serve to support our students as best we can, by also being an example for them. Whatever our roles, if we engage with students or if we are engaged in policy making that affects students, we can exhibit empathy and understand the plight of quarterlifers so that we support them in identifying their own purpose and reaching their goals.

College should be a place where inquiry is encouraged and students are encouraged to ask great questions and seek their own answers to develop critical thinking. As administrators and faculty, we need to be accessible to students, to step out of our “official” roles occasionally to a place where we relate to students on a human level and sometimes, just listen as students process what they are experiencing.

Students need to feel that they have a “safe place” where they can reveal their feelings without fear of shame, or recourse. There is so much happening during the pursuit of a college degree and arguably, we are more sensitive or heightened to inquiry during this process, where we are living in a “learning lab.”

As educators, our role is to make meaning alongside our students and give them encouragement to reach their goals, both personally and professionally. The admissions process is often fraught with so much anticipation, hope and sometimes fear. This is the ultimate process of individuation, a time of breaking from one’s parents, of separating and taking that physical step into adulthood.

Students in college, the quarterlifers, have so many things to figure out: their own identities, how to function when away from their safety net for the first time, the ideals

and values that they learned from their families, choosing which to retain and which to abandon. This is all a scary and exciting process. Also, during college, you do not generally have the constant support of your parents and you must learn to seek out other inspirational and supportive people in your life, such as staff, faculty, coaches, friends, boyfriends, and girlfriends. You must make decisions in your social life, decisions about your physical and mental health. All of these decisions greatly affect who you will become, as you mature and come into your own during your college years.

I often had students whom I counseled through the admissions process who would return to my office each time they needed something that was nothing admissions-related. Some of my favorite students were young men from Saudi Arabia. I guided them through the international admissions and transfer process and they would come and bring me small gifts around Ramadan and check in about their schedules or just simply to say hello.

Through my work in counseling students, especially during the hardest moments of my divorce, I did find a sense of inner peace that helped me to, if temporarily forget about my own struggles. I was thankful to have a role where I could employ my empathy, which on many days is what kept me focused on my students rather than on my own problems. My inspiration came from being able to feel that I was helping others to make positive changes in their lives, to attain their goals for education.

Ernest Hemingway said, “There is nothing to writing. You just sit down at the typewriter and bleed.”⁵⁵ In my case sitting down at the computer to write often means the tears will stream. As I sit and try to center myself on how I am feeling, there it comes, the emotion, it comes up and tells me that I am on the right track. It is not that I am

overwhelmed or overrun with emotion to the point that I cannot write, but hitting on that emotional center tells me that, this is where my story is.

This is the epi-center, where what I have to share is the place where I am human, the place where others can connect with me, and the place where I am vulnerable, where my walls are down. This is also the place, within these walls where I often hide, feeling safe, where others cannot hurt me: at least, that is my distorted perception. But then, when I lift the veil, I become vulnerable.

My students and their families become vulnerable with me, in my office. I always keep a box of Kleenex nearby as at times, I hear very painful stories. I recall the day, *Richie, a tall, baby-faced student came into my office in tears.⁵⁶ His mother had just passed away and he came to me for comfort. It was a profound experience for me and I felt a tremendous amount of responsibility as I realized how much he felt connected to me. I also felt happy that I had been conveyed kindness and caring enough that he learning this news—he sought me out for comfort. I was forever changed that day, realizing what an impact as leaders we can have on students. I put aside my other work for the day to be there for my student. This is not the usual job of an admissions counselor and I did refer him our counseling office, but I also took the time for the student who felt connected to me.

A young female student named *Genevieve who was transferring institutions because she was assaulted at her former school, explained that she never again felt safe on her campus, within her campus community, and she had hoped that in transferring, she might again feel trust, might again experience happiness in life and in college.

There was *Brian, a student who suffered a serious medical condition that required him to receive frequent, weekly treatments and being near a Trauma-Level One facility was necessary. It was also important to his family, as his mother was also in treatment, chemotherapy for breast cancer. These families did not just need instruction on how to transfer from one college to another. They needed someone to connect with, someone they could be human with—someone who cared. They would soon learn that someone was me.

One of my students, *Charmane had fled her war-torn country without her family, only to be reunited with them in South Carolina, before they moved to Vermont for work and for a better life. The torture and violence that she had endured, involved her and her aunt being stowed away in their home, hiding from insurgent fighters who would kill anyone they found, women or children, no exception. She shared all of this with me in her admissions essay.

I also worked with numerous students who had fought in Iraq and were members of the school's "Yellow Ribbon" program, a scholarship program for students who served in the military or whose parents did. These students, some of them had varying levels of trauma, from post-traumatic stress syndrome to brain injuries from the experiences of war. There was a rehabilitation process that some of these students were involved in and these students needed special support and comfort through the admissions process, which I provided them with.

Hearing the stories of my students and their families as I was experiencing my own grief enabled me to flex my emotional intelligence. New research surrounding leadership and emotional intelligence demonstrates that EI is the ability to understand and

manage our emotions and those around us, and is crucial for leaders in today's workplace for the following reasons:⁵⁷

- 1) Self-awareness
- 2) Emotional management
- 3) Effective communications
- 4) Social awareness
- 5) Conflict resolution

Just as my work with students helped me cope with my divorce, my writing process also helped me to become more in touch with my own vulnerability and resilience. Resilience to me does not mean always being strong and unyielding. For me, I have adapted and consider myself strong because I know when to be vulnerable, when to open myself up, when to ask for help.

Over and over in my work with transfer students, I heard similar stories about their selecting colleges that in the end just didn't suit them; that were not a good match. Many were hesitant to make a change, even if they were very unhappy because of roommates or friends that they had made but cited many reasons why they felt that this school of choice wasn't what admissions professionals coin as a "good fit." I heard stories of bad roommates, accounts of crime against students including bullying, theft, sexual assault, and homicides in the surrounding town or city, which felt increasingly unsafe. I heard stories of students feeling that their new school's state or city had a culture much too different from where they grew up and no matter how hard they tried, they just didn't feel that they fit in and so were transferring back to be part of this unique town.

A good number of my transfer students who were originally from Vermont and decided to pursue college out of state began to realize how special a place Burlington, Vermont was and why it was a destination for so many other college students.

“What do we live for; if it is not to make life less difficult for each other?”⁵⁸ For me, working with students, I try to listen, to really listen to their stories, find out their reasons for wanting to make the change (to transfer) and then if I feel that they are now or at a later date, a good fit academically/socially, I encourage them and support them through the transfer admissions process.

In my work with transfer students through the admissions process I found that some of the struggles I had in my own life, the difficult decisions I had to make were similar to decisions that students faced with whether or not to transfer colleges. Deciding to transfer to a new college can be difficult from a financial, emotional, physical and psychological standpoint. Coming to terms with this fact that they either made the wrong choice in school or that a different choice at this point would be better suited for them is not always easy. There might be resistance by parents, peers or even an internal struggle.

For students transferring to a four-year institution from a community college where they were living at home, is it better to continue to live with their families or is it perhaps time to gain some independence, to make the leap, that next step towards adulthood outside of their parent’s home? These are just some of the questions the students ask themselves.

Each student brings something unique, something special. The admissions process can be stressful and parents and students just need someone on the other end of the process who says that, “It is okay, I understand.” And, “You will be okay.” I would often receive accolades from parents and students alike that would simply say, “Thank you for being you and for being so helpful and friendly and down to earth.” I think this

makes a tremendous difference in someone's day and life to have a human being on the other end of the process that understands their own frailties.

People who work in education or social service or directly with people in some capacity need to understand the profound impact we have on others. Choosing kindness and humanity when dealing with parents and students and treating them with dignity and respect is so important. The work we do spreads, whether it is kindness or hatred. So, we ought to choose kindness. Sometimes drawing on the strength of others or reading another's journey can inform us, console us and serve as a guide.

In working with students, each student life professional must be sensitive to losses our students may have experienced or may be experiencing. In working predominantly with transfer students through the admissions process, I have read thousands of admissions essays and heard stories of homelessness, addiction (student or parent), violence in the form of bullying, poverty, death of a loved one, suicide of a loved one, fears about coming out, mental illness, break ups, trouble with the law, academic or behavioral dismissals from college, becoming a single parent, divorce, subtle losses that still significantly impact the student such as the loss of financial aid or scholarship. Many also are afraid at some level of the changes inherent in transferring to a new college.

Supporting students, as higher education leaders, giving them real life examples of challenges, taking enormous risks, making strides towards self-improvement at all levels, and showing students the result of these actions, hopefully happier, healthier, and more alive, is encouraging and gives hope/faith to our students. Administrators who are willing to inspect their own lives, and reflect along with their students are teaching

students to have courage, something that they will need in life, beyond the pursuit of their degree.

As I had the courage to admit that I was not living my life to my fullest happiness potential and that with some faith and courage and the willingness to take a risk, the door to new possibilities existed—not all prospective transfer students have this hope and need someone to aid them through this process. I used my own experiences to become a more effective and empathetic higher education leader as I coached students and their families through the transfer admissions process.

For students who were not doing well academically, they might have needed some preparatory work before enrolling or applying for admission and I would assist them in developing a plan that would set them up for success. If they were still undeclared about a major, or even if they had a major in mind, I would be sure to suggest a schedule that included at least one or even two of the courses in an area they thought they wanted to pursue, in addition to some of the other required courses such as English and math. Even if the students or their parents called me once a day for a month (which had been known to happen), I would always patiently and kindly answer their questions and encourage them.

“If you can’t figure out your purpose, figure out your passion. For your passion will lead you right into your purpose,” Bishop T.D. Jakes. I loved helping students formulate a plan, get excited to start anew, begin a new school, to find that fit, to become more engaged, to realize their dreams and the dreams their parents have for them, and help them to distinguish when these two are in conflict with one another.

When I went to speak at a master's level higher education and student affairs class, one of the things I was asked by the professor to speak about was the work-life balance once becoming a mother working in admissions. I was happy to have one of the forward-thinking students reach out to me after class to request a Skype meeting with me. She was already considering how she would balance her career with the family she wanted in the future. As higher education leaders, we need to have these conversations with our students.

I have walked that long road to freedom. I have tried not to falter; I have made missteps along the way. But I have discovered the secret that after climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb. I have taken a moment here to rest, to steal a view of the glorious vista that surrounds me, to look back on the distance I have come. But I can only rest for a moment, for with freedom come responsibilities, and I dare not linger, for my long walk is not ended.⁵⁹

Part of being a college administrator is assisting college students, not only in the rote "administrative tasks," but also in finding meaning, understanding their point in time, their realities, motivations, fears, hopes and dreams. I love working with college students because at eighteen to twenty two, is such a time in life when one is poised on the precipice of life, with so much promise ahead, typically not yet jaded, but also having lived quite a bit, at the quarter life where most of their experiences have been while living with their parents. Now, they are on the brink of freedom, about to experience life without the protective, watchful eyes of their parents. I am amazed whenever I read a student's essay, some of the themes that emerge, the experiences that have most often transformed them, usually a grandparent, parent, sibling or close friend or service experience.

Travel frequently arises as an essay topic, particularly when students witness extreme poverty and have the opportunity to acknowledge their own privilege. Some of the students wrote about tragedies they had experienced and when I read their essays, I learned more about what motivated these students, what their dreams and hopes were, and I was given insight into how to better do my job, which was to assist transfer students through the admissions process. Now, my leadership has morphed and expanded, in my consulting role. I am now able to assist other higher education leaders to recruit students through the admissions process.

Nelson Mandela says, “Courage is not the absence of fear — it is inspiring others to move beyond it.” What was very gratifying in my professional role was making the last eleven years of my career, working predominantly with transfer students. I loved working with this population through the admissions process and seeing each one with their own unique story and experience. Many have suffered losses of their own, have had to admit that their first choice in a college might not have been the best or worse yet; they did not do well, and had to find the strength and drive within themselves to do better. At a human level, we all experience loss, and as we get older, life could be described as a “small series of funerals”, which means that we are continually experiencing small losses we need to move on from.

“Swirlers” are defined as students who transfer colleges more than once before finding the school they will matriculate from.⁶⁰ My only hope is that much like the “swirlers,” students who take a while before they find the right fit, educationally, as in love, it can take a process sometimes, a while before you find the right fit in love. Just as my students were taking a leap of faith in order to transfer, in my own life, I was taking a

leap of faith as I chose to divorce and begin a new life for myself; both of which take tremendous courage and trust that positive things lie ahead.

As a transfer advisor, besides being simply a “recruiter” advisors have the ability to counsel students and have an impact on their lives, as we assist them in formulating a plan to transfer, by believing in them, by giving them a shot, by inspiring them and sharing in their excitement, by giving them advice or information, by caring, by talking to their mother or father about something that is important to them in their decision making or to assuage their fears.

Some people come into our lives at the moment we need them. I have found this to be true on a number of occasions throughout my lifetime. I find that for these pivotal people to make an impact is if we are open to their influence. Some pivotal people are mentors, friends, mentees, children, family, teacher, and a lover. This has certainly been the case for me with advisors, mentors, friends, lovers, my daughter, colleagues, professors and yes, even people who started out as strangers. As a higher educational leader, I had the privilege to serve as one of these pivotal leaders, having the ability to positively impact the lives of others.

In 2012, I was honored to be the alumni graduation speaker for Champlain College’s Masters Degree students and the following speech is what I wrote and delivered to the graduates on their commencement day:

I am delighted to congratulate you, Class of 2012, Master’s Degree Graduates of Champlain College. According to the U.S. Census Bureau’s Report on Educational Attainment for 2011, less than 8% of the U.S. population possesses a master’s degree. You are now a member of this elite population. Now what?

1) Your educational success and degree attainment has likely not come without blood, sweat and tears, aka known as sacrifice. Each and every one of you got to this place of educational accomplishment due in part to the loving support and encouragement from at least one or more people in your life. Now that your goal has been achieved and your success conferred, I encourage you to take this time to **celebrate** your achievement and express **gratitude** to those who supported you on your educational journey.

2) Be **open**. Doors will open for you now that you have your master's degree.

Possibilities that may not immediately present themselves or that appear in places not previously expected will avail themselves to you. Sometimes, we find a circuitous path to finding our dharma, which in Sanskrit terminology means, the path that is in accordance with destiny and with the laws of nature. But you must be **present** in life to see these opportunities. A wise teacher once told me, "If you love your work, you will never 'work a day in your life'."

3) Don't be afraid to **change** what you are doing mid-stream if things don't feel right. It is best to trust in the universe when all signals are telling us that we are on the wrong path. Usually these roadblocks are there for a reason. Sometimes, they are to test our will and strength but other times, they are indicating to us what we are doing is not working; so don't be afraid to change directions when this occurs.

4) Utilize all of your **resources**. As a graduate of Champlain College, you have access to the Career Services staff as well as a new network of colleagues that includes your faculty and fellow classmates and graduates. We all know, it is often who you know, so leverage all of the resources available to you.

5) Volunteer—Either in your workplace or within your community. New skill building and networking, in addition to the positive feelings you get from sharing your gifts are often the result of volunteerism.

Your presence at this graduation ceremony is a testament to the fact that you can accomplish your goals. So celebrate, express gratitude, embrace change, and be open to all possibilities. Be alive in the present moment and you will continue to find success and happiness and your true path in life.

I would like to leave you with a Mary Oliver poem called “The Journey.”⁶¹

The Journey

One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice —
though the whole house
began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles.
"Mend my life!"
each voice cried.
But you didn't stop.
You knew what you had to do,
though the wind pried
with its stiff fingers
at the very foundations,
though their melancholy
was terrible.
It was already late
enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen
branches and stones.
But little by little,
as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice
which you slowly

recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do —
determined to save
the only life you could save.

Being able to continue to have a positive impact on my student's lives, that is why I went to work every day, why I enjoyed my work and why I loved working with college students, especially transfer students, who each have a unique and sometimes complex story. Instead of trying to run from the pain, I was honest with myself about it. Thus, the smile on my face was not a phony one it was there because I was living a human experience and moving through it, one step at a time. This openness enabled me to connect with my students and their families, none of whom were exempt from their own suffering.

“Don't fake being okay. You only hurt yourself. Be real with what you are going through. Just don't let it consume you. Balance.”⁶² One of the other students in my SPN class, who was currently pursuing her master's degree in an educational interdisciplinary degree, told me the positive impact I had on her when she transferred to my institution and met with me. Previously, she was not really a motivated student, and in working with me, I gave her the motivation and helped her formulate “her plan,” and she finally was admitted to the College and she thrived, and had the best experience possible.

On a more personal level, students need to make sense of the turmoil that results when their personal relationships get turned upside down, or their work grows tedious and unsatisfying, or they become disillusioned by a sense of being unfulfilled; or when they face a life-altering decision, or they learn that the person who means the most to them in the world no longer loves them; or especially on the dreaded occasion when they hear

that someone they love suffers from the ravages of metastatic malignancy.⁶³

Leadership in higher education should recognize the uniqueness of students and understand their need to tell their story, which is what SPN fosters.

We all have a need to tell our stories in our own special ways and to have others tell theirs as well. What binds us all together is the universality of our questions, the overlaps in our stories of meaning, and the commonality of our psychobiological needs. What sometimes separates us, though, are the unique, age-and sequence-related stories we fashion in order to deal with our particular cries for meaning. But this separation need not resign us to a life of isolation and loneliness. We tell our stories of meaning, as do most other quarterlifers, to reach across the terrifying chasm of meaninglessness and separation to make contact with others.⁶⁴

Higher education administrators, in whatever our roles can make ourselves accessible to students so that they can tell their stories in a safe space. This is essential for sorting through the chaos. And in turn, we need to carve out the space in our own lives for this same meaning making, in order to best support our students. If we are not in touch with making meaning in our own lives, or are living lives devoid of meaning and not making an effort to try to make sense of the chaos, how are we supposed to do so for and with our students? In my opinion, this is part of the unwritten job description of a higher education administrator.

Don't ask yourself what the world needs; ask yourself what makes you come alive. And then go and do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive. Harold Whitman

Just as I had to ask myself if the life I was living was the path I wanted to be on, students also question their path during their college experience. Living one's life to its fullest, admitting when the path one is on, might not be the path one is supposed to remain on takes true dedication, true faith and belief in oneself and/or a higher power that

all will be okay. Paying attention to the signs that signal that a colossal change needs to be made, albeit a painful one is the risk and leap of faith we sometimes needs to make.

Making meaning out of the chaos, sorting through the “noise” is how we learn to understand how to deal with life’s tragedies. We don’t only go to college to educate our minds but also our hearts and spirits, to be a community of kindred spirits, to learn how to positively contribute and impact our future communities we will be a part of. As leaders in higher education, we can challenge our students to perhaps not always seek the path of least resistance, but the path that will bring the truest happiness and gain. The following vignette from a Robert Frost poem so eloquently encapsulates this notion. “Two roads diverged in a yellow wood and I, took the road less travelled by,” Robert Frost. Even through the process of starting, sustaining and finishing my dissertation, I have relearned the lesson that seeking a path other than the path of least resistance is where you seek success and personal satisfaction.

In working with transfer students, I saw the depths of universal emotions that are experienced when one is going through a life change, and there were parallels to what I was experiencing in my own life. By sharing in my manuscript my own experience of living and working through a divorce, of becoming a single mom, and ultimately building a new blended family, I am hopeful that other higher education leaders will find some solace and be able to identify on a human level with what I have experienced and continue to experience. I also believe that in bringing voice or bringing visibility to otherwise invisible struggles, we are also able to help our students in achieving their goals of higher education, as we understand that from time to time, life throws hurdles our way and pose challenges for us. No one can have smooth sailing all the time.

By identifying our own human struggles, we shed light on the fact that reaching our goals is not going to be easy but nothing worth pursuing ever is. Some say leaders are those who guide or direct others. With this definition, many of us who serve as higher education administrators are leaders, whether in a direct or indirect way. It is the silent struggles that separate us as humans and those we exhume, light that connect us.

Just as we administrators and higher education leaders need female role models, those of us with children also need mothers in leadership roles, and our undergraduates need support as young women. They need a place where they can go to feel understood, as a woman. For me, in college, the women's center and the support of my classmates in the women's studies classes and my advisor in the program served as my support. For years, different female staff, students and faculty have tried to propose a women's center, a safe space where women can go to air grievances or merely get support from other women.

There is a place for the "human touch" in higher education. I was part of a committee that drafted the original strategic plan at the college. Staff and faculty deliberated omitting or keeping the phrase, "the human touch" in the document. The context is, the college values the "human touch" and treating every student as the unique person he is. In the end, we kept it, purposefully, and I believe that for the majority of us who worked at the college, we embraced and internalized the phrase.

This institution does have a substantial Single Parent's Program, which for over thirty years has been meeting the needs of single parents. And also, for years, students, staff and faculty have been calling for a campus daycare.

I would argue, that it is impossible to separate your own journey and experiences from your role of counselor. And, I would argue that to be the best counselor, these roles should not be separate. To best immerse yourself in this role, if you do not rely on your own experiences, and share them with your families and students, the whole “college admissions” debacle can be scary and mysterious.

Building community and helping students to build community is especially important for single parents within the academy. As they say, raising children “takes a village.” When pursuing undergraduate or graduate studies or working within higher education, any parent will tell you that you need a community around you of friends and for support even it is just to take your child to play for an hour or two while mommy works on her paper or a fellow mother to commiserate about how few hours there are in a day, or a fellow student to just get you through the process and cheer you to the finish line.

For single parents, this is particularly important as you lack the other half of the person who is most vested in your child, their other parent. Having the entire burden for your child’s physical and emotional wellbeing is extremely stressful, even when the best co-parenting situation exists. As a single parent, ultimately, you have yourself to rely on to wake up each day and provide your child with the love, support and encouragement that he/she needs to thrive, grow and be a healthy and happy young adult.

Having friends, neighbors, fellow students and colleagues to rely on for advice, an ear or shoulder to cry on, a fill-in babysitter, someone to borrow some butter or textbook from or someone to quiz you for an exam or give career advice, these and many more are the reasons that a single parent needs a community around herself and her children.

For other higher education administrators like me, determination is a common characteristic, since generally; to hold these positions you must be a college graduate, if not have a master's degree to obtain a leadership position within an institution of higher education. It is important to model this determination for the students we work with. During the college years navigating life's decisions when at times, it all feels so intense can be a challenge. Sometimes it is just a matter of refocusing the lens with which we identify and view our experiences.

Chapter Three summarizes how I relate to students in their "quarterlife crisis" and describes the way that I counseled and advised the students I worked with over the years. I include the graduation speech I was honored to give to the graduating master's degree class of 2012 from Champlain College and the accompanying words of inspiration I shared with them.

CHAPTER FOUR

Loss and Resilience

The origins of divorce have been recorded as early as 1760 B.C. in Babylon, in the code of Hammurabi, the earliest known written code of law. Hammurabi, a ruler of ancient Babylon was believed to be chosen by God to deliver laws to his people and according to the Code, a man could divorce his wife if she went out of doors uncovered, persisted in acting foolishly or belittled her husband.⁶⁵

Even though divorce has been around for a thousand plus years, it has been socially frowned upon for the vast majority of these years and that shapes peoples' views and experiences of it today. Even though it is more "socially acceptable" to come from a family of divorce today, it is still one of the most stressful experiences one will endure in a lifetime, right up there with losing a loved one to death, topping building a home, losing a job, or moving. I wrote the following on loss:

Loss, to me is what occurs when something you once held dear, and perhaps defined yourself by is threatened to go away, or actually goes away. Loss is tied into perception, as we sometimes cling to an image, an idea about the ways things are, a person, a job, a home, etc. As human beings we place associations onto those people around us, what we do (as in our careers), who we are, relative to those around us, as in, I am a wife, I am a mother, sister, daughter, higher education professional, mentor, former-wife, girlfriend, partner. When we are no longer in association with "other," this other person, we can lose that piece of our identity and how we relate to others in this world.

Having more administrators who understand loss and are willing and able to relate to students and their own losses, the more likely students will feel understood and feel supported in their own healing. All of this is helpful in helping students to persist and achieve their goals of obtaining higher education.

For administrators in higher education who work with transfer students, it is important to understand and honor their change process. Each student has her unique experience and at a certain point, had to accept that her current school is not the right fit. Once she embraces this “loss,” and accepts that when we lose, we often gain but only we sift through the sediment, get over the grief and move into the acceptance period of the healing process.

Neil Young Lyrics- “From Hank to Hendrix”

I always expected
That you should see me through
I never believed in much
But I believed in you.⁶⁶

Having something or someone to believe in can assist us as we move through our change process. Since becoming a mother, I have become even more determined in life because my daughter gives me so much meaning in my life. For example, I was in an unhappy marriage and once my daughter was born, I was even more determined to build a new life for myself, for my daughter.

I wondered if the decision that was best for me, leaving my marriage, was also the best thing for her, and ultimately I decided that yes, it was. I realized that if I were happy, it would be healthier for her. I had to be a model for her. You teach others by your actions, not your words. Frankl, who survived a Nazi concentration camp, wanted so desperately to survive, not only for himself, but also for his family, for his friends. When you have a “why,” you can endure almost any “how.”⁶⁷ Teaching our students this has a much greater impact if we have lived through hardships and have a good story to tell.

Often during the SPN class, which I have taken several times now, the last few

times as a writing guest, you look at all of the faces and have no idea of the stories behind the faces. From fresh-faced undergraduates to students of all ages, each student sitting in the classroom has experienced a loss. Often the stories I would hear would surprise me, as they were heavier and contained more hardship than I could have imagined. You just never know looking around the classroom at the faces what kind of problems people have encountered.

I am often amazed at the amount of pain my divorce caused and then recall hearing a story of a young lady whose mother was raped and murdered or another student who suffered chronic health problems or another young lady whose father lived in a mental hospital and would try to hurt her when she visited. Each one of us in the classroom had experienced pain and loss and was there to share our stories with the world in an attempt to heal our hurts and help others feel a connection with our stories.

I wrote this reflection after attending a yoga/surf retreat in Ogunquit Maine, a few months after my divorce:

Just being here in Ogunquit, my emotions swell. During Shavasana, the tears flow, like the ocean waves swell and recede, running down the sides of my temples. The last time I was here was with my husband and daughter, just last year. I lie on my mat, look to my left and recall the spot in the sand where we built a “sand potty” together. My three-year old daughter laughed and thought it was funny. Her bright eyes and cherub face would light up as her toes touched the shore’s cold waters. It is too raw, too fresh. I feel like my innards are being ripped out and discarded like fish heads in a stinky alley in the city of Chinatown. I want my little family back. I miss them terribly.

Resilience to me is what you do when you fall, but you keep getting up, when you lose your smile but you somehow, find it again. Resilient is what you become when you endure hardship and you “bounce back,” you continue to have faith and you are an example for others. When those around you often say, “I don’t know how you do it,” that

could mean that you are resilient. When you emerge out of a broken state and you pick up the pieces and accept the glued version of yourself until eventually the glue dries and you can no longer see the imperfections in the surface, until you feel more whole.

“Getting over a painful experience is much like crossing the monkey bars. You have to let go at some point in order to move forward.” C.S. Lewis

I have shown resilience in my life by becoming the first person in my family to go to college and then to earn a doctoral degree. Resilience for me is being the woman and single mother that I am. Resilience for me is the fact that I endured an unhappy marriage, and I found the strength to file for divorce, to find a better life for my daughter and myself. Resilience to me means that I am a fighter and I will demand respect and will fight for happiness, well being, and peace in my life. I am strong as nails, and yet I am a “sensitive flower” when it comes to my emotional life. Deep down to my core, I am resilient, like a strain of mold. I can maintain my softness and my femininity that I hold dear.

Resilience is a core premise for students completing their educational goals, from undergraduate, graduate to doctoral. Life will get in the way it will throw up road - blocks. Like a child having a tantrum, life will scream and shout at you. There will be days where schoolwork is the last thing on your mind, when wondering how you are going to pull yourself through the day is your biggest focus.

Understanding that students need support in order to be resilient, there have been people along the way who have helped me along my path of life, along my educational journey. And now, as a higher education leader, it is my role to serve as an example and to finish my doctoral work. Serving as a role model by leading by example shows that I

can walk the walk and talk the talk. Actions do speak louder than words. And from my own life's example, I can support other students along in their journey of obtaining their educational goals.

Higher education administrators work with students who have endured grave hardships in their lives. I read about them in their college essays, students whose parents were drug addicts, their only support and yet died at too young an age, students who were homeless, those who suffered from addiction, endured a parent's ugly divorce, the loss of a dear grandparent (parent), students who suffered abuse, or who had to come out to their friends and family, students who have been bullied, students who have lived in extreme poverty.

“Never let a stumble in the road be the end of the journey,” Unknown. Living through a hardship, and staying strong; resilient is important for professionals like me, who can serve as an example to the students we serve. To support, understand and accept these students, warts and all is what is going to get them through their educational goals, help them to persevere. Heading out on a yoga-surf retreat inspired me to write the following poem:

Will you stay?
You keep looking at me while I sit on my yoga mat, gazing out at the ocean.
Your beady little eyes—
You look perfectly content just to join our class.
We start class and you are still there, looking at me.
I continue my movements, downward dog.
I look back and you are gone.
A twist, I look over my shoulder and there an old man and his wife, who have bags of bread, are seducing you.
You left, but you didn't go far. I see why you left—food.

Losing a loved one can have a profound impact on our view of the world, whether to death or to divorce. In the past three months, there have been five deaths of friends/acquaintances under the age of forty-eight, in my life. These are important reminders of just how precarious and fleeting our lives on earth can be. One of these losses was a colleague and friend. *Priscilla was forty-two, leaving behind her a nine-year-old son and sixty-five year old husband.

Our relationship with those who have passed and the way that we deal with their passing profoundly impacts our lives and the outlook we have on life. I was asked to do a reading at Priscilla's Catholic funeral, which I will share. As I looked out at the many people gathered in the church, I read slowly and with heartfelt emotion,

Lamentations. 3:17-26
My soul is deprived of peace,
I have forgotten what happiness is;
I tell myself my future is lost,
All that I hoped for from the Lord.

The thought of my homeless poverty
Is wormwood and gall;
Remembering it over and over
Leaves my soul downcast within me.
But I will call this to mind,
As my reason to have hope:

.....Good is the Lord to the one who waits for him,
To the soul that seeks him;
It is good to hope in silence
For the saving help of the Lord—
The Word of the Lord.

Reading this passage at the front of the Catholic Church to a packed audience of co-workers, friends, and others, I tried to be strong, as I choked back my tears. The words were a comfort to me and I had hoped that they would be also to the loved ones and friends in the church on that day. With each loss we encounter the only choice is in

how we respond to the event. Connecting with others during periods of loss, reading others' stories can help comfort and support us.

Going through the five stages of grief, once I got to the tears, I was grateful for the emotion and figured it was the grieving I needed; albeit painful. As a higher education leader, for me to exemplify self-care, I am setting an example for the students I work with. They see me heading off to a yoga class or coming back from a run or they encounter me and I am more at peace with myself because of my self-care efforts. The work of healing is messy, a process, has stages that have no linear order, is different for everyone, but is essential to moving on to the next stages of life, with peace and happiness.

In 1969, Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, in her book *On Death and Dying* describes five stages of grief: denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance.⁶⁸ Many people who have been through a divorce describe the grieving process similar to losing a loved one to death.⁶⁹

Through the admissions process, one of the main questions students have when ascertaining the college that will be the right "fit" for them, is "Will I belong?" Similarly, in my new roles in my personal and professional life, I have had to seek out new supports such as a step-parenting network, therapist, massage therapist, yoga studio and teachers as well as other friends who have been through a divorce.

I am convinced that most people do not grow up ... our real selves, the children inside, are still innocent and shy as magnolias. We may act sophisticated and worldly but I believe we feel safest when we go inside ourselves and find home, a place where we belong and maybe the only place we really do. Maya Angelou.⁷⁰

What gives us peace in our hearts is to have peace and safety in our relationships, to make choices that lead us on the path of the least suffering. Everyone has an innate need for belonging, in college, in a marriage, in your community, at work, in your family, with yourself.

By sharing my own experience of living and working through a divorce, of being a single mom in the world of college admissions, I am hopeful that other higher education administrators will find some consolation and be able to identify on a human level with what I have experienced. I also believe that in bringing voice and visibility to otherwise invisible struggles that people experience, we administrators can help our students in achieving their goals of higher education because we understand that life throws hurdles in our way and challenges us. We can shed light on the fact that it is not going to be easy, especially for adult students who also may have families, full-time jobs and other life responsibilities that many undergraduates do not have yet.

A classic subject of poetry and music is love and lost love. In August 1962, the song entitled, "Breaking Up is Hard to Do," by Neil Sedaka, Hit #1 on the Billboard Hot 100 charts, and was a hit all over the world, even being translated into Italian as "Tu non lo sai" ("You Don't Know").⁷¹ Breaking up is indeed 'hard to do', something that many writers over time have equated to being as stressful as death. Another popular musician, Billie Holiday, wrote a song entitled, "Good Morning, Heartache". She captures in a song grieving the loss of love, the desire to avoid the pain and the impossibility of eluding it, "Stop haunting me now, can't take it no how. Just leave me alone. I got those Monday blues, straight through Sunday blues."⁷²

Breaking up in fact is hard to do especially something as complex as a ten-year marriage with a shared child. When love does not last, we must process and deal with the hurt. Sometimes making the decision to step outside of our comfort zone can be scary, uncertain, like walking for the first time, on a new set of legs. We will be faced with determining: Who am I? Where am I going? Why am I making this decision? All of these can be uncomfortable and challenging. However, these are all also opportunities for growth and change.

Don't forget me, I begged, I remember you said
Sometimes it lasts in love, but sometimes it hurts instead
Sometimes it lasts in love, but sometimes it hurts instead⁷³

Last year, during one of my classes, a classmate shared with us that her mother always told her that within the pain, there was always a gift but you just had to find it, which was the hard part. Each day out from my divorce, my faith is restored more and more that this is true. I am still searching for the gift. “There is light in darkness, you just have to find it,” bell hooks.

When I can draw the parallels within my own story of healing through the grief, loss and divorce, I can capitalize on the human experience of my journey to find a place where I can relate to others and find the seeds of joy and fragments of wisdom that will enable me to inspire those around me. The students I work with and other higher education leaders can also learn to work through their transitions, accept of loss, healing and find their path of happiness just as I am learning to do.

“...Breaking up requires change...your standard of living may need to change; your identity may need reexamining; your dreams for the future may have to be totally

rewritten. Change becomes easier when you look at your past, present, and future from a different perspective.”⁷⁴

Higher education administrators need to understand that single parents, whether students or colleagues, have more than likely experienced a great loss in their lives. For myself, personally, I lost my partner to whom I was married for ten years, the person I was with for thirteen years—from the time I was in college until the time I was thirty-five years old. I also lost my nuclear family, the family I had invested in and created for my daughter and myself.

This loss brought back a prior loss, the black hole that I experienced at age twelve when own parents divorced. All this time, having a husband, this wound was plugged and when he re-married three weeks ago, a year after our divorce that hole came gushing open with nothing to dam the floodwaters. I was not expecting to feel this loss so prominently since it was I, who had initiated the divorce.

Becoming a single parent, the individual is automatically forced to bear all of the emotional burdens of parenting without someone to share the joys and hurts with. Without the support of a partner, single parents are often marginalized, even within institutions of higher education. Professors might not understand why an assignment might need to get turned in after its due date or managers might not understand when someone going through a divorce might need more mental health days during this tumultuous time.

Sadness gives us depth. Happiness gives us height. Sadness gives roots. Happiness gives branches. Happiness is like the tree going into the sky and sadness is like the roots going down into the womb of the earth. Both are needed, and the higher a tree goes, the deeper it goes, simultaneously. The bigger the tree, the bigger will be its roots. In fact, it is always in proportion. That’s its balance.”⁷⁵

In narrating my own SPN through divorce, I believe truths and realizations have been unearthed that are generally human in nature, topics such as: authenticity, work-life balance, resiliency, happiness, love, and fulfillment. There are implications for leadership and empowering college students to find their own authentic voices and try to make sense of the seeming chaos, to find the glimmer of hope amidst the hardships.

I have always been inspired by ancient wisdom and philosophy, traditions of yoga and Reiki, as well as other traditional healing arts and have tried to rely on these originating principles during times of great hardship for balance, healing and strength. “There is endless potential in the space between breaths...” -Amber Rich.⁷⁶

When I was newly divorced, I ran into a prior colleague of mine in a fashionable clothing store in town, where I was eyeing up an overly expensive but extremely form-flattering cocktail dress in hopes that one day soon I would have an occasion to don this dress.

This woman had twins when she was very young, ended up a single mom for many years and had since remarried. Now one of these young ladies sat next to her very young looking mother, who told me, after hearing about my recent divorce said to me, “Just wait, first it will get better and then it will become great.” Through my pain and sorrow in the coming months after running into this woman, I kept asking myself, when, when will it get better and when will it become great?

How was I able to sustain my leadership during this time of extreme emotional turmoil, on certain days where I felt I was simply getting by? How has going through this process strengthened my abilities as a leader? How, without making this change could I have a positive impact on the students I work with on a daily basis? How does

this experience encourage and invite them to tap into their true selves even when it means making decisions that require extreme amounts of faith and perseverance?

One of Liz's friends in *Eat, Pray, Love*, states that divorce is like an amputation. "When you get married, you are sewn together and when you get divorced, it's like an amputation."⁷⁷ When you marry someone you become a part of each other, one another's happiness or sadness directly impacting your own. When you divorce, you lose that contact with the other person, of knowing what transpires in their daily lives, of their hurts and joys. In this way, their loss is very much like losing a loved one to death. I can relate to this visual that expresses a physical uniting of the two married people.

When you get divorced, you feel like you are constantly missing something. I did. And any activity that I had once done with my spouse, which in thirteen years encompassed a lot, nearly everything would conjure up memories. I couldn't walk through the grocery store, hear a song on the radio, visit a beloved vacation town, buy a pair of sneakers, and frequent a restaurant without thinking about my little family.

I want to know if you can live with failure
yours and mine
and still stand on the edge of the lake
and shout to the silver of the full moon,
"Yes."⁷⁸

Being divorced, there are times when I feel that I failed. I think about my marriage, about the vows I took, the promises, the sealing of two families, of birthing a daughter and building a family within a home, within a neighborhood. I think about the mistakes I made, the hurtful words I uttered, and wonder if I tried as hard as I could have.

Shouting, "Yes," says I will risk it again; I will love, with an open heart. They say, "Tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved before."⁷⁹ Love as if

you've never lost before, and that is what I am doing. Like a hurt little girl whose tripped, fallen and scraped her knee or had the wind knocked out of her, I am picking myself up, dusting myself off, breathing and looking ahead with a peaceful smile on my lips. Yes, I've been hurt and I have hurt another and I've failed and I will fail again, but I'm willing to live with failure, embracing it as an enriching experience.

Would I choose all of the hurt again? No, but without it, would I be the same person? No. And what choice do I have? We are all going to experience loss, failure and hurt. So, my choice is how I choose to view past events. To fully experience this sensation of failure will enable me to more fully experience joy. "We cannot selectively numb emotions, when we numb the painful emotions; we also numb the positive emotions."⁸⁰

Working with transfer students and advising them while I was experiencing the dissolution of a ten-year marriage was interesting. I found that there were many similarities and juxtapositions to what I was experiencing and stages of change that were in alignment with what my students were experiencing. I was inspired by the following poem I encountered while going through this difficult period.

Where do I go from here?
Plans:
Next month:
Find something new.
This month
Get over you.
This week
Get you back.
Today
Survive.

Theodore Roosevelt said, "It is only through labor and painful effort, by grim energy and resolute courage that we move on to better things." I found that going through

my divorce and working in the role of admissions where I was supposed to be cheery and helpful, I did my best by not avoiding the pain I was in, but by experiencing it, by embracing it and gracefully moving through it. I had to commit to having faith that by persevering through the pain, that there would one day be more peace and happiness in my life.

Leaders who exhibit empathy are more attuned to the words of others. “If you wish to know the mind of a man, listen to his words,” Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.

As I took the steps to divorce after a ten-year marriage, with a small child at home and no immediate family, closer than a six-hour drive takes extreme courage and faith that everything will work out for the best. Students daring to become transfer students and make a change in their educational experience also require risks to some degree. Both require the person to make a decision with all of the information they have at the time, without knowing what the result will be.

I often wished for a crystal ball so that I could see into the future, then and only then would I be able to make the best decision about which alternative to choose. But since this was impossible, I had to make the best decision I could with the information I had at the moment, as well as historical information. Much like my transfer students, I took a leap of faith—the most difficult decision I have ever had to make. Although divorce and deciding to transfer colleges/universities are different scenarios, at very a human level I can identify with what my students are going through. “Nobody cares how much you know, until they know how much you care,” Theodore Roosevelt.

There are hidden treasures under the fragments of your divorce. ...TAO, or the way, of divorce is a process that works through you. At this stage of your development, the unresolved challenges between you and your former partner may look like the rocky sediment at the end of a receding

glacier. But in fact, when you put light on what seemed like debris, you'll be able to see the glimmer of insight. The blessings and revelations from your former relationship are immeasurably valuable in forming your Take. When you observe past through a different lens, you will be able to see how you want to structure your future.⁸¹

I ask myself, as a higher education leader and administrator to change the lens with which I view my breakup, my divorce as a failure, in order to retell the story I tell myself and others; to a place where I can express gratitude for the lessons learned, the years loved and the family created. It is challenging to heal and overcome a break up, but utilizing SPN to write and reflect and work through the "sediment," in order to glean the pearls of wisdom is the goal have been helpful. To consider how my leadership in working as student affairs professional is affected by the work that I am undertaking and find the universals in my narrative will be the conclusion of this manuscript.

When you experience a divorce, workload demands do not decrease during or after a divorce, nor do expectations change. When you lose a loved one to death, there are marked events, a wake, a funeral, a memorial service, but for divorce, there is no publicly sanctioned, socially acceptable grieving process or event, and in fact, there is often a stigma associated with this loss.

No one in the academy is exempt from the human experience of loss. Allowing students and colleagues to grieve their losses in a more publicly supported way, in a more open way, a socially sanctioned way, is necessary for expedited healing. The more understanding the student or administrator has regarding his/her loss, the more grounded in one's community he/she will feel and the more productive one will be without feeling alone.

Being emotionally independent does not mean accepting that you are condemned to live your life alone, but that you are able to reach for love and connectedness with self-reliance and emotional wisdom.⁸²

After experiencing the “black hole,” feeling exposed and alone, I understand this Anderson quote means what my therapist calls, “growing your own grass.” She said I needed to find it and be my own source of happiness instead of searching for it outside of myself.

Write subtly and softly. Be willing to surrender your truth to a better truth, if only for a moment, or maybe even for a longer while. Wisdom begins in all that is gentle and generous in you. In order to convince others of your truth, you need first to overcome your writer’s hard and stubborn ego to declare your truth as The Truth. When and if you do this, you might even change the world. Or in the ironic words of both Lao Tzu and the Buddha, you only get to keep what you are willing to give away.⁸³

In this manuscript I challenged myself to stretch my own ideas of what I call my truth as well as my “Truth.” I had also hoped to become more compassionate through this journey, be able to “surrender,” to “be soft” and tap into my own inner wisdom where my ego is less prominent. I sought to feel less that I had to prove my worthiness in the academy and personally to a place where I continued to make a positive difference for the students I served in my work as well as finding my own true inner happiness and contentedness. The idea is that all of us experience suffering and it is what we do with that suffering as leaders, that makes all the difference to our students.

The hope is that by reading this journey of a higher education leader’s experience, you will find the strength to make those oft difficult decisions, whether in a relationship or your work-life or in general and understand that connecting with

someone else's life story summons the humanity in each of us. This is how I interact and connect with each of the students I work with through the admissions process. I treat him or her and her parents as an individual full of hopes and dreams, just like myself.

Being able to reveal my own losses in telling my story helps me in my leadership role, while still maintaining my professional nature and composure but letting the student, parent or family know that I too, am figuring things out. It gives me more credibility and allows families to feel more of a connection with me.

The secret gift of abandonment is that it has helped you find your way to old wounds from traumatic events you may not even recall. Finally you can address unresolved feelings. Shattering has accomplished what many psychoanalysts strive for in years of therapy—bringing you to the seat of your unconscious conflicts.⁸⁴

Becoming a single parent, while it was a relatively short time in my life, as I am now in a new family structure, it was a significant loss for me. The family that I had created over thirteen years, the ability to find joy on another's face that you know loves your daughter as much as you do. Marriage, with all of its imperfections provides a modicum of stability, of security. Divorce shatters all of that. Any amount of certainty you once had for your future, for the future of your family, are gone. I used to manage the Single Parents Program within the admissions office, a program for students that includes a full financial scholarship, as well as some social supports through the process of attaining one's higher education goals.

Never, did I imagine I would join the cadre of mostly women I often wondered how they did it. I often gave them so much credit given the inordinate amount of pressure and stress for one's children, when you lose your partner, your family. And

now, I am among this group of single parents. Each day, I awake and have a large amount of responsibility and think to myself, "How do I assure my own and my daughter happiness and healthiness?" This amount of self-reliance is something I have never experienced before. Having responsibility for not only me but also my daughter is a huge amount of pressure.

One of the reasons for persisting with my own goals of higher education is to ensure some modicum of stability and achievement for my daughter and myself. I understand that simply attaining my educational goals does not ensure that we will prosper, as much as it is intrinsic and representative of our future success and happiness outcomes. Nothing can replace hard work when it comes to achieving success. Divorce has many negative societal connotations and it can be difficult to shake the 'failure' of it. Persevering towards the completion of my educational goals is one way for me to experience success in another way, to feel a sense of being a winner, rather than a quitter.

One famous quotation by Terence reads: "*Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto,*" or "I am a human being, I consider nothing that is human alien to me."⁸⁵

Trying to seek and speak your truth when dealing with loss is very important. Doing so encourages others to do as well. The following is a reflection I wrote about truth during an SPN in a September 2012 course,

What is truth?

Truth is something that you feel in your gut.

You can hide from the truth but it will eventually emerge.

Truth is something you should share with others.

It takes strength to speak your truth.

You must be silent sometimes in order to hear your truth.

Truth is the way....but truth can change.

The truth can be scary, but the result of ignoring your truth is abysmal....

Sometimes you have to let go, to know the truth.

Chapter four describes my experience through divorce and what literature and poetry inspired me during that time. The loss of divorce is what are universal and the grief and healing process one must go through. In our human condition, we can all relate to these processes and emotions. As I worked through these challenges and hardships, I used the SPN process to better understand and describe what I was enduring in order to connect with those around me, including the students and their parents I was working with through the admissions process.

CHAPTER FIVE

On Change and Buddhism

Explored in Buddhist tenets, we are invited to be fully present within each moment. Losing loved ones, adapting to new life circumstances, we come to realize that the present moment is all that is certain. Buddhists believe that the source of pain is not fully living in the present moment. “Do not dwell in the past, do not dream of the future, concentrate the mind on the present moment.” Buddha

Most of us build our identity around our knowledge and competence in employing certain known techniques or abilities. Making a deep change involves abandoning both and ‘walking naked into the land of uncertainty.’ This is usually a terrifying choice, often a ‘dark night of the soul’. It is therefore natural for each of us to deny that there is any need for deep change.⁸⁶

In order to accept the changes in your life that result from decisions you make, or from circumstances that you do not choose, you need to some degree to, embrace change and it is scary and can feel uncertain. Life is full of change—our lives constantly in-flux. Each moment we are changing and are never the same person twice, due to new experiences and life occurrences. While we may take comfort in routines within our daily lives, the world around us is in a constant state of change. If we cannot to some degree, embrace this change, we will not be able to adapt to new life possibilities. Being open to new possibilities is something we owe it ourselves to do. But first, we must be awake and aware.

When we have losses in our lives such as the recent deaths in my own life of friends and family, it is a reminder that nothing is certain but the present moment. Dwelling on the past holds us back and is fraught with illusion. Focusing too much on the future, robs us of enjoying the here, the now, the only true reality. Thich Nat Hanh, a

Vietnamese Buddhist monk writes a book entitled, *Present Moment, Wonderful Moment*, which contains mindfulness verses, reminding us to slow down and enjoy each moment of our lives.⁸⁷

People going through the anguish of love loss often feel that their lives have been permanently altered, that they will never be the same, will never love again. I'm writing to assure you that as devastated as you may be right now, your feelings of hopelessness are in fact temporary, and they are a normal part of grieving over a relationship. In fact, only by grappling with the feeling that your life is over can you begin to rebuild.⁸⁸

Change is never easy and can be extremely uncomfortable. Losing a love means also losing all of the hopes and dreams that accompany that love. If you have children and you lose your spouse, you lose that integral family center. Despite what your relationship is like with your partner with whom you have a child, you still form a family unit with them, that is irreplaceable.

However, over time, you may come to create a new family, a blended family, as I have, and your definition of family, if you are lucky, may change and grow. Your new family might include stepchildren.

Over time, I have learned to expand my definition of family. Students today, more than ever have all sorts of family units that differ from the traditional nuclear families of the past, which consisted largely of 'mom, dad, brother or sister'. In my daughter's elementary school, her counseling office provides a "changing families" support group of other students whose family dynamics are changing or have changed. In her classroom, alone, there are four children with divorced parents. Our college students are no exception. Once we realize the variety of "family" units, we can expand our language to be more inclusive and to make all students feel welcome. For example, as we craft policy, we have the ability to broaden language, such that perhaps we include

grandparents or step-parents to the table, as students may have many supports that do not meet the stereo typical ‘mom’ or ‘dad.’

My partner, knowing of my interest in philosophy gave me a copy of the required reading for University of Vermont Medical College, anesthesia residents, *The Happiness Hypothesis—Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom*. In it, I found the following,

Human beings, however, take adaptation to cognitive extremes. We don’t just habituate, we recalibrate. We create for ourselves a world of targets, and each time we hit one we replace it with another. After a string of successes we aim higher; after a massive setback, such as a broken neck, we aim lower. Instead of following Buddhist and Stoic advice to surrender attachments and let events happen, we surround ourselves with goals, hopes, and expectations, and then feel pleasure and pain in relation to our progress.⁸⁹

In my experience with working in admissions, I found similarities in the type of dynamic perspective shift that must occur when a student decides to transfer colleges, as a person experiencing a break up—a recalibration—such as giving up some of their friends and social life, embracing a new living environment, and altering the path that they were on in order to envision a new path, a leap of faith that a new educational experience will afford them.

When an individual experiences a break-up her sense of self is often shaken—that grounding, rootedness and all that she once believed to be true about the direction of her life automatically changes. There might be a physical move, a change in standard of living, a new direction her life will take.

When I am “mindful,” I can become delirious with joy about the little things around me. I can more fully appreciate a gesture of love I see in my daughter, a sunset, the sound of a beautiful song. Being mindful brings joy, summons forth light, leaving me feeling enveloped in love, peace and serenity. Without mindfulness, I cannot fully

appreciate these things. I must slow down in order to be mindful, to be fully present, to experience delight.

I would assert that my spiritual beliefs have helped me through this academic journey as I researched ancient traditions including Buddhism, Shambala, and Taoism.

Breathing in, I know I am breathing in.
Breathing out, I know as the in-breath grows deep,
The out breath grows slow.
Breathing in makes me calm.
Breathing out brings me ease.
With the in breath, I smile.
With the out breath, I release.
Breathing in, there is only the present moment.
Breathing out, it is a wonderful moment. ⁹⁰

When life gets you down and out and your experience of being human is more than you can bear, it is helpful to consult ancient religious/philosophical wisdom through texts that can bring comfort and understanding. Today, reading the Bhagavad-Gita, a gift from one of my favorite yoga teachers who inscribed it, “Amber, Something to help you always follows your path. Thanks for being such a wonderful student. -John ⁹¹

He shuns external objects,
Fixes his gaze between his brows,
And regulates his vital breaths
As they pass through his nostrils.

Truly free is the sage who controls
His senses, mind and understanding,
Who focuses on freedom
And dispels desire, fear and anger.

Knowing me as the enjoyer
Of sacrifices and penances, lord of all worlds,
And friend of all creatures,
He finds peace.
-The Fifth Teaching, Renunciation of Action
Bhagavad-Gita ⁹²

Nourishing Self-Care

Love, Love, Love
Just love yourself like no one else
Love, it's enough
They can say what they like
But they still can't take that
-The Sundays: Love Lyrics⁹³

Self-care to me means taking care of myself in the ways that no one else is going to take care of me, once I am an adult. Our parents serve us well if they teach us coping mechanisms, not always protecting us from every obstacle, difficult emotion, or experience (tough lesson for parents, I know, I am one). I have learned how to care for myself and can list off a variety of ways in which I do this for myself: finding a fabulous massage therapist who can help me to heal emotionally. I believe healing starts in the body. Finding a caring yoga instructor who is positive and present has been extremely nourishing for me.

Making time to work out and keep my body as active as my mind is crucial for my wellbeing. When I don't work out for a few days, my mood begins to deteriorate. If I can move and be active, climb a mountain, take an exercise class, go to yoga, going out for a walk, my mood and my mind are infinitely better off. Finding a suitable therapist when I needed to sort through emotions and problems I was encountering was immensely important for me. I know from an educator's standpoint, determining what supports are in place for students in these areas are immensely important.

Keeping a strong social network of friends has been important in my self-care as I know that I can not only reach out and lean on a friend, or have someone to go out to eat

with, but equally as important to me is fulfilling the role of a friend. I feel most nourished when I am a friend to others fulfills my need to give to those around me, and to love.

My mantras for the yoga practice,

Strength-Be strong
Truth-speak my truth
Be open to healing.⁹⁴

“There is no passion to be found playing small - in settling for a life that is less than the one you are capable of living.”⁹⁵ The fact that I place nourishing self-care as a huge priority in my life means that for the students I work with and for others who are in my same position, I can be a role model and mentor. I know what works. I know how to care for myself and to recommend that others care for themselves.

This I believe: 10/21/13⁹⁶

I know that I can love another person deeply, to their core and commit to them for an eternity if they are loyal and loving to me.
I know that I can care for my daughter and myself in a manner where we will both thrive.
I know that even if I haven't found it yet, that I can find true happiness.
I know that I can experience true inner piece.
I know that once I am stronger, I can be a pillar of strength for others.

My therapist told me, there is no one else who is going to look out for your own needs like you. Not a new concept. But going through a divorce is one of the most stressful events a person can go through, a severing of a life; a family. Self-care means different things to different people. For me, it meant investing in a good therapist, lots of YOGA, some me-time, time to re-focus, a healthy diet, water, fresh air daily, plenty of exercise, time with girlfriends, quality time with my daughter, lots of phone calls with my mom, reading about divorce, loss and grief, writing my SPN.

I also found some relief through body- work, specifically by finding a great massage therapist. There, on the table, I am brought back into my body, where at times, through the emotional pain, I would rather not be. Massage, invites me back to my body. Sometimes there are tears, right there on the massage table. A particular pressure point is activated and it triggers a stream or release of emotion and tears begin to stream down my face. Also, during yoga, right on my mat during Shavasana, (corpse pose), I can become overwhelmed with a flood of emotional, triggered by some memory or thought.

Shawn Achor of Harvard University, researcher and motivational speaker asserts that we can change our level of happiness by changing our perception of our own reality. He states, “People think our external world is predictive of our happiness, when in reality, only 10% predicts your long-term happiness. Approximately 90% is predicted by the way in which your brain processes the world. If we can change it, our formula for happiness and success we can change the way we can affect reality.”⁹⁷

The thoughts we think as well as our perception of reality are what will determine our happiness, not necessarily our external environment. There is power in this kind of thinking or positive psychology. Achor also states, “It is not necessarily the reality that shapes us but the lens through which your brain views the world that shapes your reality. If we can change the lens, you can change your own happiness.”⁹⁸

When I really think about it, my own experience and hear stories of others, it is no wonder that people turn to philosophy and religion for some sort of understanding, some sort of universal strength, light, pillar, rock. When the internal winds within us shift, we must find our own rock, our own pillar, that unyielding light and positivity that anchor that keeps us from bending and breaking. One of my yoga instructors has used the

analogy that illustrates how life and trying to find balance within it, is akin to being a sailor and attempting to find calm waters as a catamaran.

Life will shake us, our boat will rock this way and that, keeping our center, keeping our gaze fixed upon that that keeps us grounded, rooted and yet continuing to reach for the light. The yoga posture of tree is the perfect example of this. As we stand tall, our legs ground us and our foot roots us, keeping us firmly planted. And yet, arms outstretched over our heads, reaching for the light. And yet, our heart and mind is still, with our focus on our third eye, keeping us peaceful and calm. We can return to this state at any point to remember our center, to find the grounding, rootedness and reaching also for the light.

My spiritual beliefs and self-care helped me to have faith and be resilient. Happiness psychology explains what motivates people, students and professionals. “As humans, we actually require a sense of meaning to thrive. Lives that seem pointless leave us despondent and listless. We do not operate simply on instinct. We need to have values that we care about and outcomes that are worth working for.”⁹⁹

During the end of high school and early on in college, I had a less than healthy relationship with food, which is likely how I handled my struggles, my adversity. I can appreciate what the years of wisdom and experience have added to my perspective. During my latter years in high school and into college, my relationship with food was not the healthiest. Realizing that the one thing in my life I could have control over, was my food; what I consumed, I ate very little and over-exercised, running seven miles a day. I was burning more calories than I was consuming, always underweight anyway; I was very skinny, but worse, unhealthy; making efforts to restrict my calories.

Through a process of maturity, self-acceptance and beginning to love my body as it is, rather than trying to exert control, I learned to have a healthier relationship with food. My self-care routine now includes cooking and baking, which I enjoy. I now also enjoy consuming the food that I make, as well as communal meals with friends and loved ones. Louise Hay's *Love Your Body* is a beautiful reminder to us all as she goes through our entire body system with a simple meditation and appreciation for each body part. My mom gifted the book to me. One of my favorites is her affirmation on breath:

I love my breath

My breath is so precious to me. It is a treasure and a life-giving substance. I know it is safe for me to live. I love life. I breathe in life deeply and fully. I breathe in and out in perfect harmony. I choose the thoughts that create a loving and sweet breath. I am a joy to be around. I flow with the breath of life. I love and appreciate my beautiful breath!¹⁰⁰

CHAPTER SIX

Narrative Interpretation of the Literature

When conducting my literature review, all of the texts and articles I chose, had specific meaning to me as author. I gathered as many books as I could on the subject of divorce, loss, healing, and abandonment. I felt that steeping myself in this literature from past authors would give me some solace. As I read manuscript after manuscript from other writers about their own experiences with losing love, I felt held and comforted, no longer alone with my sadness. I needed to do this to process my experiences, to turn what I was experiencing into something more positive, something I could use in my leadership. But, the first step was feeling the pain and surrounding myself with stories from others, like me who had lived to tell their stories. This proved to be a huge comfort.

Some of these works were, *A Return to Love: Reflections on the Principles of a Course in Miracles*, *Thriving after Divorce: Transforming your life when a relationship ends*, *Getting Past Your Breakup: How to Turn a Devastating Loss Into the Best Thing That Ever Happened To You*, *How to Survive the Loss of a Love*; *The Journey from Abandonment to Healing: Surviving Through-and Recovering From-The Five Stages That Accompany the Loss of Love*.

Getting in touch with how I was feeling throughout my healing process was accelerated through writing my SPN. Getting to know myself over the past thirty-six years and how I function, I like to research and use academia to help process and explain my own feelings. When I lost my partner, I realized that I felt that my “roots” were severed, some of them. To use an arborist analogy, I felt that I was being transplanted,

uprooted. I realized through the divorce that I had still had unresolved childhood issues with my parent's own divorce. I seized the opportunity to heal an old hurt, or to begin to.

How to Survive the Loss of a Love was a very helpful and straightforward book that would be appropriate for anyone who loses love, to death, a separation or divorce. Reading it was a true comfort and was one that I eventually passed on to many friends who found themselves in a similar situation. In it, the authors help the reader move from a place of sadness, to a place of connection with all of those who have lost love, and finally to a place of acceptance of the grief and a new reality.

Within the new reality, new hope and possibilities are born. I have had feedback from readers of my SPN who said that they could identify with the hurt I experienced through divorce, the same as one who had lost a spouse to death. While I would not wish the hurt on anyone, I was glad to have connected with this individual in the way that SPN was designed to bring people together in the human condition, to lessen our human suffering and let us know that we are not alone in our grief.

Before determining that my research would best be elucidated by the SPN methodology, I used Glesne and Patton's works to better understand both qualitative and quantitative research genres. The first I had heard about SPN was in Nash and Bradley's course. One of the reading assignments for the course was, *Liberating Scholarly Writing: The Power of Personal Narrative*, where Nash describes scholarly personal narrative writing, writing that is personal, from the inside out. "SPN starts with the writer's life rather than with the lives and activities of others. It is up to the writer to make sense of the 'raw material of life' by looking inward, not outward, at least initially."¹⁰¹ I also read *Me-Search and Re-Search: A Guide for Writing Scholarly Personal Narrative*

Manuscripts, which was inordinately as Nash and Bradley describe via a step-by-step process the methodology of using SPN for a thesis or dissertation.

The other phenomenon I wanted to learn more about for my manuscript was “story.” Our lives are built on the stories that we tell ourselves. I wondered, could we change those stories, what influences them, how are they created, how true are they? In Baldwin’s “Story Catcher,” she captures the essence of the importance of stories. “From prehistoric times to modern times, the stories we tell ourselves impact the stories we tell others. The stories we tell others is one of the ways we connect with others. A story could be an actual story, song, dance or lover’s dance.”¹⁰²

Wanting to surround myself with grief literature, I found drawn to Elizabeth Edward’s story, *Resilience*. In it, she writes about her live experience, where early on, she lived quite a blessed existence, came from a well-off family, attended law school, met John Edwards, who came from a similar upbringing and the two were wed. They bore two children and then suddenly, when their oldest son Wade was sixteen, his Jeep blew off the road while he was on the way to the family’s beach house and he died.

When I think about the greatest pain a person can go through, to me, it would be losing a child. It is just one of those devastating losses that I do not know how people recover from it. While I was in the midst of despair, I turned to a story of someone whom I felt was experiencing a grief even greater than mine to see how she coped, as perhaps I would gain some insights on how to heal.

Elizabeth chronicled her grief in her story. One of the interesting pieces to the story I found most interesting was that the degree of suffering is held up against one’s previous experiences. Up until this point, she describes her life as rather blessed and

positive and then out of the blue, one day, she describes it all changed and seemingly changed the trajectory of her happy life. From there her happiness awash, she loses her first-born son, later, her husband and finally, her own life to cancer. In the book, she describes how she needed to steep herself in constant memories of her son, keeping his room exactly the same, which I think, any mother can understand. What I found from experiencing my own loss of love is that whether or not you want it to, your losses do make you stronger and more resilient.

Connecting with Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat, Pray, Love*, which is the story of a woman who gets married and then leaves her conventional life to sojourn by herself around the world, visiting Italy, Indonesia and India. This was a way for me to imagine life anew, much the same way SPN research is a way for readers to connect and grow through one's journey. I also followed up her best seller, with her subsequent work, entitled, *Committed—A Skeptic Makes Peace with Marriage*. I had enjoyed her first book and of course the subject matter of marriage and divorce was of interest to me. Trying to imagine a new institution for marriage, at this time, I also picked up, *Love Between Equals: How Peer Marriage Really Works*.

Reading the divorce statistics was something I wanted to do because it was astounding to me, the degree of pain I was experiencing, that I was not alone; how many others had also experienced the same thing. I was also increasingly interested in those marriages that do succeed, what is their secret? Are people whose relationships last happier than those who divorce or do they just have better coping mechanisms, better communication, different role models, stronger religious convictions, good marriage therapy, secrets they keep from their partners, or open marriages? I also understand that

the more I understand about human relationships, in general, the better higher educator and admissions leader I will be.

Viktor Frankl's novel, *Man's Search for Meaning* was read to better understand how a man living in such dire circumstances as a concentration camp could still exhibit some hope and have such a deep understanding of life from living in such extreme conditions. "When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves."¹⁰³

Don't aim at success. The more you aim at it and make it a target, the more you are going to miss it. For success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must ensue, and it only does so as the unintended side effect of one's personal dedication to a cause greater than oneself or as the by-product of one's surrender to a person other than oneself. Happiness must happen, and the same holds for success: you have to let it happen by not caring about it. I want you to listen to what your conscience commands you to do and go on to carry it out to the best of your knowledge. Then you will live to see that in the long run—in the long run, I say!—success will follow you precisely because you had forgotten to think about it.¹⁰⁴

When I read and distill literature, I look for themes and a common theme from Frankl to the Dalai Lama to Diener, is that "happiness" is found when one turns himself over to find a cause greater than oneself. I can find no greater example of this in my own life as becoming a parent and the inordinate amount of joy I get from the role.

Mandela's life and teachings have always spoken to me, which is why I have included them in my manuscript. They have always inspired me, mostly his resolute optimism. His teachings can be seen much in the same way that Frankl's words resonate. Authoring this manuscript was an opportunity for me to get re-acquainted with some of the philosophers and authors I had explored when I was in my twenties, including: the Bhagavad-Gita, Buddha, Thich Nhat Hanh, Thoreau, the Tao to Ching, Welwood and Clarissa Pinkola Estes.

SPN encourages scholars to turn a variety of written words. While writing this dissertation, one of the places I found inspiration and wisdom and gravitated towards naturally was music. In my daily life, I find so much meaning in music, from the poetry of it—the words, to the beat, to the music itself. My favorite yoga instructor uses music in his classes. I also listen while working out, running, while I am in my car, if I do not have the radio tuned to Vermont Public Radio, I am listening to music. While I am cooking or just relaxing at home, I surround myself with music. I even use music as a tool for inspiration while I am writing.

During my separation and divorce, I tended to listen to songs about sadness, despair, darkness and break ups. I listened to the lyrics to soothe me, to feel the hurt, to illicit feelings and bring them to the surface. I also wanted to know what other writers had experienced in love and love lost. These songs are often called, “emo,” short for emotional. Emo music has been described as “a style of rock music resembling punk but having more complex arrangements and lyrics that deal with more emotional subjects.”¹⁰⁵

“No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it’s not the same river and he’s not the same man,” Heraclitus. Listening to those same sad songs do not have the same effect they had for me at an earlier time, as I am not the same person I was at that time. Once I began feeling stronger, my musical choices shifted to include less emotional music and included more folk and funk music. My musical choices began to be more upbeat and less full of sadness. Adele had an entire album where she sang about her break up, although she is by far not the only artist to lament musically about break ups. In her song, “Someone Like You”, she sings about her once lover finding and marrying

someone new. Listening to this and other songs definitely helped me to move on, emotionally from my separation.

Different artists and poets, writers and musical genres mark my healing and in hindsight, I can see the healing process through the music I chose to listen to. Each time I listen, I have a different experience on a different day as I have new experiences in each moment and therefore, cannot have the exact experience twice. I tried to “wash out” my emotions, to listen to the artists that were stuck in my memory and imprint a new memory.

For example, I went to a couple of concerts with my new partner, something I had enjoyed doing with my former spouse and went to the same vacation spots as I had when I was married. I wanted to retrain my brain and insert a positive association for a memory, rather than a sad one. To some extent, this strategy worked. I felt like I was tricking my brain using the mind over matter principle.

I turned to specific literature when I was researching work-life balance for women, specifically for mothers and the added pressure they experience, including: *Opting Out? Why Women Really Quit Careers and Head Home*, *The Truth behind the Mommy Wars: Who Decides What Makes a Good Mother*, *Glass Ceilings & 100-Hour Couples: What the Opt Out Phenomenon Can Teach Us About Work and Family*, *Woman-defined Motherhood*, *The Second Shift: Working Parents and the Revolution at Home*, *A Mother's Work: How Feminism, the Market, and Policy Shape Family Life*, *Changing Rhythms of American Family Life*, and *Women Don't Ask: Negotiation and the Gender Divide*.

While I was working on my manuscript, I also picked up as many works on writing that I could, including *Eats, Shoots and Leaves* and *Bird by Bird*, just to name a couple. Reading the trials and tribulations, rules, advice and humor from other writers was extremely helpful as I morphed into someone who now describes myself as a writer. Re-reading the work of Diana Chapman-Walsh, the former President of Wellesley College was inspiring as I reflected on the leadership of my position in admissions, as I worked with students and told of that narrative.

Steeping myself in the richness of other writers was tremendously helpful as I searched and found scholarship that informed my thoughts and my actions as I moved through the dissertation writing process. I even allowed myself to deviate from my research literature and begin reading again for pleasure outside of my writing process, even forming a mother's book club within my neighborhood community, given other moms and myself an opportunity for enhancing and expanding our social circle as well as the ability for scholarship and academia right in our own homes, something that I am looking forward to continuing after my "formal" education.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Conclusion

Cultivating care and concern for others gives rise to a kind of inner strength. No matter what difficulties or problems you face, in this wider context they'll seem less significant and troubling to you. The inner strength, self-confidence and courage you gain by focusing on others' needs instead of your own, brings with it a deep, calm sense of satisfaction. –Dalai Lama

Through my work in counseling students, especially during the hardest moments of my divorce, I found a sense of inner peace that helped me to, if temporarily forget about my own struggles. I was thankful to have a role where I could employ my empathy that on many days is what kept me focused on my students rather than my own set of problems. My inspiration came from feeling that I was helping others make positive changes in their lives, to attain their goals for higher education.

I had a successful eleven-year career in admissions and was one of the top recruiters at my institution, I believe because of my counseling philosophy: I vested myself with the families with whom I worked. They knew I cared about them.

However, after ten years in my professional role, and well into my doctoral program, once my daughter began kindergarten, I decided I needed to make a professional change if I was going to complete my degree. Being a mom, going through a divorce, being an admissions professional and doctoral student became too much and something had to give in order for me to be there for my daughter and for me to complete my degree.

No longer paying the high (but worth it), private pre-school school tuition, post-divorce and just shy of the deadline for time to complete my degree, I decided now was the time to opt-out (switch to part-time work). Having proven myself as a worthy and

competent employee over the years and having managerial support, I was able to secure a part-time position at the college where I worked and was overjoyed to begin a new chapter in my life, to finally finish my degree I started and to have more time to volunteer in my daughter's classroom, to be with her after school and pursue my other areas of interest, including children's yoga instruction and private-practice massage therapy. I was overjoyed to have the opportunity to have a healthier work-life balance and no longer feel like I was doing all of my jobs: both that of mom and employee, as half-hearted.

I spent about a year in a part-time role at my institution. Halfway through the year, my vice president asked me if I would like to switch into the graduate admissions office to assist them with their goals. Happy to try something different and be of help where I was needed, I changed roles and departments, the first change in my ten-year career.

What worked particularly well for me working in graduate admissions were the hours, which were 8:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m., which enabled me to be home to get my daughter after school. I brought fresh ideas and enthusiasm to the department and my experience of being a graduate from one of their master's degree-programs.

In my new role, it was originally agreed that I would work to mentor and advise graduate students, which I was most excited about. I had spent years working with adult students at the undergraduate level and also spent many years as an adult graduate student, one that was married, with a full time job and child, so I felt keenly vested in this population and able to relate to their concerns.

One of the first things I did as I envisioned this new role was to research the top reasons online graduate students are not retained. Much of it had to do with making

connections/advising and feeling isolated in the online environment. I sketched out several scenarios where I could assist the department with building community in the online environment for students.

A couple of weeks before the position was approved, there were some political maneuverings, (not something that was new to me), that resulted in my position being more of a graduate recruitment specialist. What I learned about this experience was that advising and working more closely with students, at this point in my career was more exciting to me than simply recruiting them for one institution, this particular institution.

Nonetheless, because what was the most important to me was cutting back to a part-time position, I made the best of the position and spent the next five months coming up with new solutions for the graduate admissions office to recruit students. I thrive in a supportive role or function where I can encourage others, one reason I was so successful in transfer recruitment. At the same time, I am also goal driven, which is why increasing retention, which has a measurable outcome, would have been the perfect role for me. However, at that time, it was not meant to be.

One of the first projects I tackled was the creation of an online portal for graduate students that would serve as more of a retention resource, giving them all of the information they needed at their fingertips, as well as to create a new system whereby we would ask students if they would like to be texted instead of called to remind them that they had registered for an online information session.

One Friday afternoon, the Director called me into his office and asked me to shut the door. My part-time and one other full-time position were being eliminated due to budget constraints. Initially a surprise, gave way to another career endeavor for me,

which was something I had wanted to transition into but was not sure how to—higher education consulting.

The following week, I had a message in my inbox from the founder of the company that we had been using in my role in the graduate admissions office. He had Linked In with me and asked where I had gone since we had just started to implement the texting program for prospective graduate students. I explained to him what had happened and ended the call with, “Hey, I noticed that you are CEO of your company. Do you have a position for me,” I asked half jokingly. He laughed and said at the time he did not but if I needed a reference, he would be more than happy to provide me with one. We hung up the phone.

Two days later, I had a message in my inbox and it was the CEO of the small company and he said that my name had come up with another client of his, who happened to be a former boss of mine, who told him that he should hire me. This is how I began my role in higher education consulting.

Now What?

I was recently asked why I am pursuing a doctoral degree and my answers were as follows, 1) because I started it and I intend on finishing it 2) for myself, my daughter and family 3) because I love the consulting I do and would one day like to travel and live abroad. Having the credentials, plus the experience will enable me to be all the more credible and marketable. 4) The unknown possibilities that I don’t know exist yet.

Overnight, I became a higher education consultant, helping other institutions to market themselves to prospective students. I had always dreamed about being a consultant but had no idea how to get started and just like that, I had done it. The best

part to me about consulting is that I get to do I love, be creative and talk to people who were once colleagues, in admissions.

And, I am home for my daughter; for my family and get to exercise my inner “domestic diva” with flair. I feel very fortunate that I am also able to pursue other passions, such as teaching yoga to children, launching a home massage business as well as volunteering at my daughter’s and step-daughters’ schools. I feel that I now have time, (and will certainly have more of it once I graduate) to pursue things on my bucket list such as re-learning guitar. I just got a guitar for my birthday and enrolled in a pottery-making course at the University.

In “Helping Students To Find Meaning While Finding My Own: A Scholarly Personal Narrative Navigating Single Motherhood and a Career In Admissions,” I have been able to capture my educational journey, and share with other higher education administrators and those seeking a career in higher education, the pearls of wisdom I have learned throughout the process.

The “Now What” phase begins for me now. The end of my dissertation and obtaining my doctoral degree is just the beginning of the next phase of my educational sojourn. I am enjoying the consulting and look forward to doing much more of it, in addition to finding some time to also enjoy some artistic hobbies, as well as spending plenty more time with my friends and family.

This manuscript will be a success if it has given hope to at least one higher education leader who has also experienced grief due to a break up, death, divorce or other loss. This manuscript will also be a success if it challenges its author to stretch outside my own ideas of what I call my truth as well as my “Truth.”

The hope is that by reading this story of one higher education leader's experience, the reader will find the strength to make those oft difficult decisions, whether in a relationship, mothering, or life in general and understand that connecting with someone else's life story summons the humanity in each of us and use it to better connect with the college students through their own journey. This is how I interacted and connected with each of the students I work with through the admissions process. I treated him or her and their parents as an individual full of hopes and dreams, just like myself. Each student brings something unique, something special. Leaders in education will appreciate the personal growth opportunities where mutual learning can occur with the sharing of personal stories.

I went through a life-changing, challenging event and had to trust in the process and go through some hard times. Not every transfer student has a "hard" story but many do. I had to make the decision to "show up every day" and keep working, having faith towards the future. I had to have resilience, after experiencing my loss. I encountered pivotal people and now through my leadership and education, I have the opportunity to be one of those pivotal people for others who are experiencing changes, loss and who need to be resilient.

As the Dali Lama states, "Education is the path through which suffering can be lessened." Sharing this story, the hope is that it will be a journey of compassion for both the reader as well as the author. Finally, after all of these years of education, after completing all my required course work and passing my comprehensive exam, and perhaps most importantly, living, I finally feel ready to write this, to share my story.

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