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Writing About Writing: One Student's Challenges Producing A Scholarly Personal Narrative Thesis And Applying The Outcomes As A Student Affairs Professional

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WRITING ABOUT WRITING: ONE STUDENT'S CHALLENGES PRODUCING A
SCHOLARLY PERSONAL NARRATIVE THESIS AND APPLYING THE
OUTCOMES AS A STUDENT AFFAIRS PROFESSIONAL

A Thesis Presented

by

Hilary Watson

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

The University of Vermont

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

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores my personal struggle writing a Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) Thesis, what I have learned about this methodology and how I apply the insights I have gained to my work as a Student Affairs Professional.

Topics such as vulnerability, truth, growth, personal liberation, meaning, and education are explored through my personal journey of learning to see myself as an educator through this type of writing. I describe how and why I came to use the SPN methodology for my thesis, some of the challenges that arose for me as I worked to put myself in the writing, some foundational SPN principles, a few struggles that came from sharing personal stories in such formal writing and above all, a deep description of what joys and lessons this type of writing can bring and how the insights influence my work with college students. My hope is that my journey through this process can yield useful information for educators and students alike as they progress through today's academy and work to find meaning in their role and education.

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CHAPTER 1: INITIAL INQUIRY

1.1. Deciding to Go in Rather Than Out

People have always made fun of me because I have a very poor memory. More often than not, I find myself asking *really? That happened? Or, have we been here before?*

Over the years, despite a deep internal anxiety that I will find myself diagnosed with early onset dementia, my partner has given me some solace when he tells me *you remember the strangest things* after I recount—in gross detail—a moment which clearly had no real significance (to him). While I may indeed have a poor memory, I have found that I am not alone in this condition. I have found throughout my life that many people, like me, forget a shocking percentage of what they have learned. Take this predicament from the personal into the scholastic and I might argue that if today's students are forgetting most of what they have been taught, higher education is facing a huge loss of potential.

Almost daily I interact with students who can remember little of their own educational experience. Additionally, I also meet with students who are disconnected from their learning or find themselves moving through the motions of school for extrinsic rather than intrinsic reasons. They want to prove to a parent they can succeed; they want to please the teacher; they want good grades; they want recognition or a job afterward. Finding those external motivators is never challenging for my students, or myself. This outside drive is something I can very much relate to and something that

caught me up, yet again, however many years after my secondary and postsecondary education in the initial stages of this thesis process.

In thinking about writing this thesis my instincts went straight to the professional—straight to my ego—and straight to the vast majority of my educational training. Rather than asking myself questions like: What do I want to write about? What would give me meaning in my educational pursuit? I found myself instead gravitating towards the question of: What could I write or research in my profession that would make a meaningful contribution to my field?

As a Research Assistant, Study Coordinator, Case Manager, Employment Coordinator, Internship Teacher, and general Social Worker, my mind and heart is filled with the stories and faces of those with whom I have worked. Some of these moments can bring me to tears, others make my heart race, many of these moments make me swing my head back and laugh. With their faces in mind the possibilities seemed endless—I could write about poverty, education, interventions, substance use, research, the welfare system, family systems, informal counseling... the list went on. Feeling like I had my pick of topics from the litter, I began to do what all good students and researchers begin to do, I started looking at other's work. As someone who has sought validation from the outside rather than the inside for many years, beginning with other's voices and experiences seemed like a natural starting point. However, after doing a considerable amount of poking around in the literature of my professional realm, I began to feel like a small fish in the sea compared to the Psychology and Social Work greats.

I have been asking myself—all too often lately—who am I to be helping others, really? I do not have it all figured out and yet I walk the line of trying to “help” others everyday. Everyone else has so much more knowledge than I do. This low self-confidence clashed with my desire to produce a professionally “noteworthy” thesis. If I started typing I figured I would just wind up with a paper that left myself, my coworkers, my bosses and those I work with running full speed in the opposite direction, wondering how I got all these positions in the first place. I convinced myself that I did not have enough experience to write about my work with the authority or clarity needed to produce a manuscript I was proud of. If I was not sure of my words how could I expect someone else to be? All I could focus on was protecting my academic ego. McCarty, in her book *How Philosophy Can Save Your Life*, states, “The ego is the problem, a broken compass that uses our own perspectives as the reference point for everything” (12). If I was not willing to go deep into this insecurity, to be vulnerable and share what I do not know for fear of crushing my ego, there is no way my work could—or should—have a profound impact on my profession. I realized in that moment that I needed to switch gears.

After taking a step back and reading Anne Lamott’s book *Bird by Bird* I was reminded that good writing lies in the moments of life. The unflattering, serendipitous, strange, beautiful, raw, painstaking moments of navigating this tumultuous, sometimes repetitive, ever surprising existence. These moments are like my mother’s once beautiful blue and white beaded necklace that I shattered when I was a toddler. Sometimes the beads are perfectly in line with their common thread running through.

Other times connections are snapped and beads fly all over the room in a flurry of disaster. *These* are the moments that make up the essence of a life well lived.

With that held tightly in mind, and my need to produce *something* for my writing class, I began to write a little bit about every moment and topic under the sun: the death of my mom when I was in college, the tenacious students and women with whom I work, my dad's partner, my partner. After finding no hold in any of that, I devolved into writing about how much I did not want to be writing.

Why was it so intense and loaded embarking on this thesis writing experience? Over the years of my education I used to be one who could crank out papers the night before they were due. What was my problem now? Never in my life had I related so closely with this famous Gene Fowler quote, "Writing is easy. All you do is stare at a blank sheet of paper until drops of blood form on your forehead". The droplets were forming, time was ticking, and I was producing nothing of substance. I reached out to my professors for some serious help.

Hi Robert and Sydnee,

I hope this email finds you both well, and Robert, I hope you made a speedy recovery from your cold. I toyed with the idea of sitting down and writing this email since I can't seem to write a thing these days in any sort of eloquent way but here goes...

I know this is late to be reaching out, when our 1st check in is on Wednesday but I assure you I have writing to submit, it is just isolated paragraphs that have no cogent through line. I feel like I am caught in the "squirrel" moments of only being able to write about whatever I am feeling that day or moment. I don't stick with a topic, I can't seem to get jazzed about any one thing for an extended period of time, and I just feel blah about my writing right now.

What do you two suggest I do? Should I send you what I have written, line breaks and all, with the heads up that it does not flow, connect, or really make

much sense? Is this just a discipline issue where I need to just pick a topic and stick with it, bumps and all, or might this be a case of wanting to stand up to live rather than sit down and write? Or have I just paralyzed myself with the word 'thesis' and all that entails? I feel directionless, insecure and a-motivated. I am just not sure what I have to write about that others would benefit from...

Thanks for the guidance and boost. Sorry for such a melancholy email. Looking forward to seeing you both on Wednesday.

Yours in the writing struggle,

Hilary

After talking with my classmates and professors, I knew I was not alone. But where was that getting me? Why was it that all I could focus on was my current struggle with writing? I began to inquire.

I often focus on the negatives I perceive in myself. I do not think of myself as a writer. I often find myself saying I cannot write. I do not have anything to say. I am inarticulate. I have no voice, motivation, confidence, dedication, passion or wisdom. Basically, in so many words, I tell myself that I am unworthy. I am not proud but in the Appreciative Inquiry world of which I was just introduced, I am finding that sometimes it is important to ask if working tirelessly for the plus two when you are starting out at a negative four, recoiling in all that anxiety and self doubt, is really going to get you where you want to go. So with that in mind, perhaps this was my chance to look in rather than out. With the help of my classmates and guiding professors I began to ask myself the essential Appreciative Inquiry Question: What if I shift my focus to what is working well at this moment and how might I expand on that?

What do you do when you have lost your writing way? How do you hop back on the horse when the horse is wobbly, dusty, divisive, or just plain mean? What is it about the written word, furthermore, the Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) written word,

that sometimes leaves us invigorated and at other times high and dry questioning our identity? What is our writing identity? How is it possible that we can write our way into—perhaps so far into—that we unknowingly exit our sense of self? As Robert Nash, the founder of SPN writing, asks so often, how do we write our way into and out of meaning in this form of writing?

Anne Lamott described what I am getting at well in her book *Bird by Bird*. She writes, “Writing can be a pretty desperate endeavor, because it is about some of our deepest needs: our need to be visible, to be heard, our need to make sense of our lives, to wake up and grow and belong. It is no wonder if we sometimes tend to take ourselves too seriously” (19). So is this just it when we are off the horse? Is it not that we have lost our sense of self but perhaps that we have just begun taking ourselves too seriously? Is it that ego again telling us that we do not have a voice worthy enough to share? Does that change anything for getting back into the comforts of the saddle we were once cozy in?

To be a writer, I have learned, is to keep writing. Even when you are in the desert of writing, when nothing is flowing and you hate writing. No one said it is to keep writing *good* writing. Thankfully. A writer must have told us this. In fact, the author Paul Thomas Mann has a famous quote: “A writer is a person for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people” (*Essays of Three Decades*). Despite the difficulty, however, to be a writer is also to have the urge to write. It is to take the time to sit down and write. To check in with your writing... Has it come back yet? Damn.

OK. Let us keep trying. So with that in mind, perhaps it is better to get into it and write about writing.

SPN writing, as I am discovering, is so complex. Perhaps I could continue to explore my resistance and hesitation around writing an SPN thesis. What am I enjoying in this struggle? What learning opportunity does writing an SPN thesis provide me? What am I learning about myself and how am I working with that? What could others learn from my process? While I am genuine in my statement that this is not the most proud I have been in my writing career, I am remarkably impressed that I keep returning to this keyboard. Here I am. Trying to make sense of—and work through—my SPN writing process. Lamott challenges me to think more deeply with her insight “becoming a writer is about becoming conscious. When you’re conscious and writing from a place of insight and simplicity and real caring about truth, you have the ability to throw the lights on for the reader. He or she will recognize his or her life and truth in what you say” (225). The more I write, the more I think there is something here to share with students and educators alike who might benefit from seeing—up close and personal—one student’s process and struggle writing an SPN thesis as well as how I apply what I have learned to my work as a student affairs professional.

In this thesis I am putting forth a number of assertions as to why I have found putting your truth out there in the form of an SPN manuscript to be the most challenging and rewarding writing and, furthermore, how this type of writing can be one tool to enrich and deepen student learning. Just as Irvin Yalom puts forth in the introduction to his book *The Gift of Therapy*, this thesis is not meant to be “a specific procedural

recipe; instead it represents my own perspective and my attempt to reach inside to find my own style and voice” (xxi). As you will see in my stories there are remarkable insights in those terrible, dark, desperate places of writing and literally seeing yourself on the page. In the end, I hope that sharing my experience will show how SPN can enrich academia, create lifelong learners, and unleash untapped education potential within today’s students.

1.2. An Introduction to SPN Writing and the Challenges of Getting Going

I was intensely moved by reading Lamott’s book *Bird by Bird*. This was far more than a writer’s guide for me. It truly was a book with some instructions for life. One of my best girl friends back home in Seattle ended a seven-year relationship, I told her to read *Bird by Bird*. My intern told me she was feeling overwhelmed with school and life, I told her to read *Bird by Bird*. When I sit down to write and nothing happens, I tell *myself* to go read *Bird by Bird*. It has become a sort of users guide—if you will—for my understanding of what it means to be human. And there are few more challenging places to confront what it means to be human than in the process of SPN writing when you are staring at a computer screen, cursor blinking back at you, attempting to look within yourself in order to write something about your experience that others can learn from.

Often when we hear about writing a SPN manuscript, its founder states that it is the most challenging writing to do. But why? One reason, SPN writing involves putting *yourself* in the writing; this is the “P” in the acronym SPN. This can be intimidating. As described in the beginning of this thesis, without your consent, it is as if all of your

insecurities rear their ugly heads when you put your hands on the keyboard and your eyes on the screen. Knowing some of the other great voices that exist out there can make it challenging to look in and explore your own insight. I have come to understand more about SPN writing via buying a house. Let me explain.

My partner and I just completed a life long bucket list item—we bought a project house. After three weeks of prying, cutting, ripping, peeling, unscrewing, lifting and stripping (analogous to my search for a topic in the first pages of this writing), I am starting to see the house’s potential begin to peak through the crevasses we are creating. As my partner and I strip away the veneer of our house, to expose its bones, its heart and soul, we are starting to find the weak points that are calling out to us for attention (the perpetual question of why am I struggling in this writing?). After following the cracks, and with the gentle suggestion of a structural engineer (a good professor), we have come to the realization that before we get to the bells and whistles of making our home beautiful (a stunning manuscript), we must first spend time in the basement (within ourselves). I am finding that when you get down to the root of yourself, your insecurities, hopes and dreams, there is often some material to discover. This is the foundation of sound SPN writing.

The SPN writing methodology invites us to consider ourselves as a starting point by asking questions like: At what point will I feel “knowledgeable” enough to write? At what point will others think I am worthy? At what point will I be willing to let others—including myself—see the real me? If I share X, Y, and Z will people still love me? It is from that point that we then work our way out. The “S”, in SPN, asks us to consider

what other scholars have to say about what we are feeling. What can we learn from them? Lastly, the “N” stands for narrative. This gives us the opportunity to share both our inside and researched knowledge with our readers in the form of a captivating story. Stories are how we share information and learn what is truly important to someone’s existence. By starting with myself, SPN writing has given me the chance to dig deeply into questions that allowed me to find new direction and depth.

SPN writing calls for the writer to be authentic, vulnerable and curious about him or herself in relation to the topic at hand. In this vulnerability and curiosity I have found, and I think most writers and SPN writers have too, that if you get far enough into that exploration of the self, just as can happen with the basement of a house, stuff can come up. It can be hard to chew on. Why do I believe that? What impact did that experience have on my life? Why am I so drawn to that author? What does this writing say about me? As a novice SPN writer, I want you to know that all this is OK. Writing SPN narratives can be raw. For me, each sentence can feel like the small releasing twist of a pressure valve. Every time I write I discover there are some things for me to work out in my basement, and that is what this type of inquiry is all about.

Once I find myself in the basement, my first goal is typically to try not to run. I have found that choosing to write *into* that “stuff”, as opposed to away from, affords us an opportunity to find, just as Lamott explains, connection. She writes, “When people shine a little light on their monster, we find out how similar most of our monsters are” (198).

Sharing your truth and your insight takes courage, heart, and a long haul commitment to self-talk. I say self-talk because it can feel like no matter how many times we cognitively understand that connection can follow vulnerability, the mind plays tricks on us and when another insecurity arises it is easy to believe ourselves alone again in our struggle. Therefore, we must continually return to authors like Anne Lamott and Brené Brown who remind us that insecurity is universal. Brené in her Social Work research has almost proved it. Hopefully then we can take a deep breath, give ourselves a pep talk, and continue letting our heads and our hearts flow out of our hands.

In the introduction to her book *Stay*, Jennifer Michael Hecht pleads to the reader, “Life has always been almost too hard to bear, for a lot of the people, a lot of the time. It’s awful. But it isn’t too hard to bear; it’s only almost too hard to bear” (X). So, if you—like me—are struggling to share your basement with the world, you are not alone. Educators and students alike I beg of you to stay. Stay here and explore, in this writing, my struggle and the depths of where this writing can take you and the vast world of education.

1.3. Unlearning the “re” and embracing the “me” search

I used to love writing research papers. I remember being on a plane with my father years ago when I must have been a sophomore or junior in high school, when you are in the thick of learning how to write research papers. I remember vividly being on page seven or eight of whatever project I was working on at the time nudging my dad to look over at my well-constructed paragraph. Reflecting back now, I see that I just threw

a few of my own words between citations and quotations from other publications. I was beaming with pride over something I hardly wrote. I turned it in and *voila!* I got an A on the assignment. I got an A on the assignment because this is what I had been taught to do.

In my 10th grade honors English class I remember receiving a paper back that I was proud to turn in. It was an assignment I had taken some creative liberties with and I remember smiling as I explored my voice in the writing. When I received it back it was literally covered from top to bottom in red marks. It was handed to me amongst my peers and with one glimpse of the word “Never...” I quickly shoved it away in my binder hoping that no one else saw what was clearly an epic failure. Later, in my room at home, I mustered up the courage to examine my teacher’s feedback. I wanted to learn just how I went so terribly wrong. Her statement read something along the lines of “you should never write from the 2nd person perspective”. In essence, she was saying to me *I am going to fail you for having a voice in your writing*. I took this harsh criticism to heart, clearly, since I still remember it so many years later. Sure enough, as I reverted back to stringing together everyone else’s findings into a paper that, so long as it had all the proper citations, I could call my own, my grade buoyed back up.

This persisted through college. I can recall having twenty page papers due and despite not starting them until the night before I knew I had done enough research to pull the correct findings out, fill up the page with a few of my own place holder words, and turn it in. My work was abstract and all my good grades reinforced my finding that to do well you needed to take yourself out of the writing. For years it seemed my

education conditioned me to believe that my novice voice had no place in academia. I was told *others know better than you, learn from them, not yourself*. The messages of “your insight doesn’t count here” were ample. I internalized this approach for many years.

Please do not get me wrong, I do not wish to discount research or abstract writing. There is absolutely a place for it—a need for it—and it contributes incredible value to our lives. I might even argue that the personal does come through in such writing. Authors are dedicated and in the same way as SPN writing, craft work that holds passion, identity, creativity and scholarship. I might just argue that the process and presentation differs a little.

In SPN writing you are given the chance to, as Lamott writes, “crash or dive below the surface, where life is cold and confusing and hard to see.... writers... plunge through the holes—the holes we try to fill up with all the props. In those holes and in the spaces around them exist all sorts of possibility, including the chance to see who we are and to glimpse the mystery” (197). In this form of writing you are given the chance, if not encouraged, to use *your* voice. To use and share *your* ideas, *your* insights, *your* experience, and to explore how you, as a person *and* writer might have something to share that will be helpful for someone else. I see SPN writing through the quote Anzaldua makes in her book *Borderlands/La Frontera*, “When I write it feels like I’m carving bone. It feels like I’m creating my own face, my own heart...” (as quoted in McCarty 44). Creating this meaning and this identity is hard. It is confusing, gut wrenching, and mind boggling. But, in the end, through SPN writing I believe each

writer has a chance to write into their meaning, into their identity and into their own expertise, no matter how seemingly unimportant.

1.4. Who Really Cares About My Puny Life?

I used to believe that I did not have much worth sharing. Sometimes I still do. Especially when I look to acclaimed authors or those who have lived a little longer. My partner said it well one morning, “When I feel inferior, I compare myself to others”. I do too. It is easy to feel competitive in our search to matter. It is easy to feel different, defensive, and somehow left shivering against the cold, dark, unknown in isolation. Even though we live in what could be called a very self-centered world, many of us feel isolated in the human experience. Yalom has an excerpt that states it well: “Andre Malraux, the French novelist, described a country priest who had taken confession for many decades and summed up what he had learned about human nature in this manner: ‘First of all, people are much more unhappy than one thinks... and there is no such thing as a grown up person’” (6). Many of us look around from time to time and see a vast gap between our experience and *everyone* else. As a result, many of us only show our most vulnerable parts to others bound by confidentiality behind closed office doors. I am starting to see how this keeps us from sharing our experience with the world and keeps us siloed and silenced in our perceived inferiority.

I was talking about my thesis to someone close to me the other day. I was trying to explain what on earth I am writing about. After roughly fifteen minutes of my rambling, she cautiously said “I think I get it...but when I was writing my thesis, the formula was: pick a topic, research findings from experts in the field, then refute or

confirm a hypothesis”. I agreed. That is the traditional format. The lingering questions I have, however, are: At what point do you, the author, become an expert? At what point is your voice valid? At what point do people actually begin to care about a—my—puny life? And are we limiting the voices in academia by always conditioning our students to look outward, to the experts, rather than inward, toward themselves, for answers? Can’t we all be experts on our own experiences? Is there something to be learned by liberating students to share how their personal narratives connect to or disconnect from material in the classroom? I think so, and SPN writing can be a wonderful medium to do so.

Looking back on my writing now, it is not the research papers themselves that I remember. Rather it is the experience or story around creating one that holds in my mind. It is the feeling and struggle that lingers. I have come to see that attaching meaning to my education, and meaning to my experience, has played a vital role in my ability to retain personal and professional knowledge. As I get a little older, and as we all search for meaning and sense in our lives, it becomes more and more challenging to remove the “me” out of my writing. I am the one doing it after all. And after much coaxing, all of us SPN writers begin to embrace that somehow we have been convinced that we have something meaningful to share along with all the other experts in the field.

1.5. What do You Need to Know to Write an SPN?

To write an SPN one needs: Courage, patience, forgiveness, curiosity, and a desire to open one’s self up for growth and understanding.... also maybe a guru or two.

Courage: The word courage comes from the word heart. Somewhere in there is also the root for wound. Therefore, to have courage, one must have the willingness to examine their center—shame, quirks, dreams, wounds and all.

Patience: SPN writing can take time and can sometimes be very confusing or ambiguous. It can be frustrating to accept that sometimes we can only see as far as our headlights when we know we have a 10,000 mile trip ahead. We have to have the patience to write into that ambiguity rather than away from. The process of finding meaning, then translating that meaning into writing, is not so simply established, or linear. Often times we find ourselves in cyclical patterns within these stages of exploration and defining. We must have the patience to embark on the process, over and over again.

Forgiveness: I might argue there is little we can accomplish in this world without forgiveness. SPN writing I find can be particularly difficult without developing the capacity to forgive. If humans are genuine in their interactions and genuine in their inquiry, some level of disagreement or misunderstanding is expected, even within ourselves. Sometimes we write something and we cannot believe we let that side of ourselves show through; however, without being able to go deep like that it is unlikely that our best writing, processing, and understanding will ever take place. So be gentle. Be kind. Forgive generously and graciously.

Curiosity: I think about the common SPN writing prompt *This I believe...* Even though this prompt requires an answer, the process of SPN writing should invite some level of inquiry. Why do I believe that? Have I always and will I always believe that?

What would it take for me to not believe it? Sometimes when we are so set on the prize we miss out on the discovery. Furthermore, if we are set on someone else's expectations, goals or requirements, we miss out on the opportunity to develop our own inner compass.

Openness: Openness to learning from others and learning from yourself. I have no idea where my writing might leave me most of the time. Perhaps I will be more confused then when I started. I have to remind myself that that is OK. I have come to find that while some structure or planning can be nice to guide your writing, by and large, writing with too narrow a focus can limit the insight derived from just letting your thoughts flow.

Some gurus: Just as writers need to fill up when they are empty, writers need to learn from other writers. I have always been a terrible speller and my father always told me that reading is the key to improving one's spelling. Turns out reading is the key to many things. Authors like Brené Brown, Nancy Aronie, Lisa Patel and Sharon Welch inspire me. Sure sometimes I wish I could write like them but more than that, they inspire me to keep writing.

The traits above are not bought at a store, they are not found via assessments, anyone can write an SPN so long as they are willing to tap into the resource bucket they already have. What I find refreshing about this list is that it encourages learning from a wholesome standpoint—you already have what you need to grow. It flips the common saying “if you aren't at the table you are on the menu” on its head. In SPN you are both

on the menu and at the table. You are the subject of examination and also the one doing the examining. It is outside in and inside out learning.

1.6. Who You are VS What You Know

Let me tell you a story about my first day as a teacher. I can recall it vividly. I was about half a day early dressed in a dark green and grey sleeveless, collared dress and I was terrified. I had no teaching experience, had only been in Vermont for two and a half weeks and, in all honesty, with my crazy new Americorps Member schedule had done very little prep before school started. I could not even recite the presidents to save my life (because that is the sign of a good teacher, right?). I had the internal tape rolling—*You have nothing to teach these students. You aren't cool enough to be up here. You don't know enough about life to preach to anyone else. What happens if they ask you the circumference of the earth, huh? What happens if I have to write on a white board? I am a terrible speller! Ah!* The five-minute passing period bell rang. I was a sitting duck. Oh no, I have not even figured out what they should call me—Hilary, Ms. Watson, Ms. Hilary? Even the most basic of things had slipped my mind.

To this day, I look back, cringe slightly, but mostly marvel at how far I have come. In that moment, I hopped in the ring—sweaty, nervous and shaky—to meet sixteen curious sets of teenage eyes. I chose to let myself in all my vulnerability be seen. I even remember the words “I don't know” and “what I am doing?” and “I'm afraid of public speaking” come out of my mouth, multiple times. In the end, however, I was met with patience, compassion, inspiration, jokes and sure, on rare occasion, a left hook.

I have come to see that in writing, as with teaching, if we only listen to the overwhelming voices that tell us others know better, we will never tune in. That shame in our own voice will just keep us tuning out, searching out, finding validation out, educating out, rather than from within. Brené Brown in her book *I Thought It Was Just Me* states, “Shame forces us to put so much value on what other people think that we lose ourselves in the process of trying to meet everyone else’s expectations” (xvii).

I would never take back that year for it forever altered my life course. A picture of that first class of students sits on my desk. I look at it frequently with the utmost gratitude. Those students taught me so much. The fear of failure was gripping but they gave me the chance to realize one of Brown’s main points from *Daring Greatly* “what we know matters, but who we are matters more” (14). I tell myself often that the reason they were so gentle on me was because I was so honest, so exposed. I was in front of them but also standing shoulder to shoulder with them through a journey. I was living and modeling what I was teaching, learning.

The same goes for my writing. I am realizing that to live the life I want, to write the writing that I want, I must be engaged. I must play an active role. I must have every cell of my body involved. I must continue to put myself—my voice—out there. Sure it might be met with disappointment, heartache, embarrassment, and feeling like I should have kept my mouth shut, but perhaps that risk is worth the chance that my voice could be met with love, energy, validation and joy.

So, I encourage you to let go of those outside pressures and step into this writing vulnerability. I say this because I genuinely think we want to see the human in others.

It gives us validation and a desire to connect more deeply with those that inspire us from afar, those we read about in books, and those we see on movie screens. If you choose to take the plunge you might find friends like myself, and my students, who want to connect on the other side.

1.7. Universalizability

You might be wondering why stories such as the one above are important and how they might assist someone else in their own scholarly or personal pursuit. Let me begin my explanation by asking you, my reader, was there any part of my story above that resonated with you? Did any part of it touch you or rekindle one of your own memories? My hope is that someone reading this might have said yes. This is what we call universalizability.

SPN writing strives for universalizability. It is the *ah-ha* moment in the writing where your reader connects with some element of what you are saying. If you are like me, your first question is: Do I have anything I can say that someone will respond with an *ah-ha* to? Does my experience, at any given moment, resonate with anyone else's or am I way out in left field? Is there such a thing as universalizability since no two people have exactly the same experience? These are all great questions that I continually revisit in order to deepen my understanding of universalizability.

There are many times when I feel like I have a good grasp on universalizability and other times where my understanding is challenged. For example, in college I was mesmerized by a Slavic language class where we learned about Slavic words for emotions that had no English equivalent. I remember wondering, why does English not

have a word for that feeling? I have definitely felt it before. More recently, I had another one of these head scratching moments when a classmate posed the question: Don't all languages reflect the full range of the human experience? My response to her was, "I am not sure if there is one all encompassing, full range human experience that one language alone can capture. Perhaps all the languages and cultures and experiences together, in all their variations, make up the possibilities of the human experience". So while it is true that the differences among us are many, and the tools we use to convey those differences vary, I believe that our own meaning and understanding is deepened with every story. I believe this because, to varying degrees, we all experience the same reality: living out our time on this earth as best we can, while we can. Sure the ways by which we do so may be radically different, but this is our common pursuit and "though we parade about in different bodies, we all know salty tears, anxious hearts, drained spirits, and weary footsteps" (McCarty 134). To this end, no matter what we write about or in what language we write it, chances are some part of our story will connect with another's.

I often think about how the academy pushes the search for "capital T Truth". This would stand for the reliably proven, empirically tested, objective truth. Yet, in SPN, a sort of similar process takes place and that is what we might call universalizability. When we see our "lower case t truths", time and time again in the stories that we and others share, we begin to see the overlap and the "capital T Truths" that our experiences reflect. SPN writing helps students find their many "lowercase t truths" so that together we can see commonalities and find greater, "capital T Truths".

To further illustrate this point, I was in a training the other day and our facilitator's first instruction for our diverse group of 130+ people was to share two stories with the person sitting next to us. One story was to be about a time when we felt included and the other was a time we felt excluded. We were given a few moments to gather our thoughts before sharing. My partner decided to share first and while I had not experienced her story exactly in my own life, a visceral reaction spread over me as she described some of her emotions and reactions in the story. My heart raced and ached. I had been there before. The philosopher, Juvenal's, saying, "I am human; therefore, nothing human is alien to me" rang true and within a few moments I looked around to see the whole room ablaze with heartfelt discussion. This is universalizability.

1.8. Will I Share Too Much?

This is an inevitable question that I have asked many times, and I have heard asked countless times. Someone once told me "do not ever write something you would not want on the front page of the newspaper". I think whoever said this assisted in the creation of writer's block. While there is a part of me that knows this is not true (at least I hope because I have written plenty of things I would never want anyone to read), there is a part of me that still clings tightly to this well-intentioned advice.

I am someone who has incredible anxiety over writing emails that will be sent out to groups of people. I have deliberated for a length of time that would make any supervisor fire me over little emails about lunch get-togethers. It is absurd, I know. I wonder: *Am I being too direct? Am I inviting enough? Will they read this?* It is embarrassing, yet I continue to do it. And I do it because I know that what I write, no

matter what the forum, could wind up, as that well informed person reminded me, on the front page of the newspaper some day. With that, you do not want to risk being in a position saying *oh no, that is so not what I meant*. But we have to. I am beginning to learn that to be a true writer I have to begin taking that chance and writing from the heart.

I know I live a multifaceted life and for much of it I have spent excessive energy trying to compartmentalize my ignorance. I have never wanted any *one* person to know the entirety of what I do not know. I have done this, I believe, because our society idealizes the possession of knowledge, not the acquisition of it. This sets up roadblocks to deepened learning for it is truly amazing what you can find if you go searching within yourself.

Lamott states, “Look within your own heart, at the different facets of your personality. You may find a con man, an orphan, a nurse, a king, a hooker, a preacher, a loser, a child, a crone”. For each of us, she says, there is “a community of people who live in our heart” (46). We all hold within us a cast of many experiences and many characters. Some of them are hurt, some of them are screaming, some of them are shy, but all of them are points for knowledge and connection. When we set out to learn about the many faces of ourselves, the higher the chances we will see one of our own many faces in the eyes and stories of another. Brown states in *I Thought It Was Just Me*, “We can only respond compassionately to someone telling her story if we have embraced our own story—shame and all” (p. xxvi). So write into this shame. Risk saying too much because we risk all connection if we hold ourselves back.

SPN writing is not easy. It is not glossy or shiny on the outside. Rarely does someone emerge flawless. But that is what makes it. That is what gives it the grit that makes you hold on, that makes you take a deep breath when you hear something that resonates so deeply. It is that moment of *oh yeah; this is how it can happen*. SPN writing takes work. It takes being exposed. It takes being willing to open yourself up, in all your imperfection and wrongdoing. But in the end, if we can get through all the barriers of actually writing our way to our truth, sharing it with others can be a beacon of hope for someone else struggling to find their way. And the act of reaching out to another at the expense of your own ego, that is true courage.

This reminds me of a student that came into my office the other day after losing both of his parents within a short time period. He came in angry that others are trying to relate to what he is going through. Angry that people are offering their condolences without having been in touch for years or even knowing the parents. He said they feel fake and phony and their words are meaningless because no one knows what he is going through. While it is true that no one—including myself—knows exactly what he is going through, I wanted so badly to let him know that I can be there for him. That I appreciate, even if it is just in my own minor sense, what it is to lose a parent when you are that young. In my listening I kept wondering, how do you do that? What do I need to say, or better yet, not say in order to convey that? And kept asking myself if it is really any more helpful to disclose personal experience to others when you are helping them.

My mother died when I was a sophomore in college and shortly after my father wound up in the ER twice with life threatening blood clotting in his lungs. He made it, thankfully, but in those lonely hours of sitting in the waiting room, I could not help but question what it would be like if he did not make it. This particular student knows my story and while he is simultaneously telling me that he does not care hearing about other's losses he is intently asking me about my own grieving process.

After a lengthy discussion he thanked me for having those deep conversations with him. He said that I give him hope. I meet with him weekly and cherish our conversations. We come from such different places yet, for at least one hour each week, we find and celebrate our common ground. That is what we hope for in our SPN writing as well. SPN writing in my opinion is as McCarty states, "Bold, nothing-hidden, no manipulation communication, a soulful meeting in which both parties open themselves up to questions and welcome tender investigation into their lives as they experience 'being-through-each other'" (38).

In the end, we are all human. We are all trying to get by as best we can and for some of us, a part of that process is writing. With our writing, "Every room gives us layers of information about our past and present and who we are, our shrines and quirks and hopes and sorrows, our attempts to prove we exist and are more or less okay" (Lamott 74). This is the fundamental underpinning of SPN writing, of universalizability, and the main reason to find your own voice and story.

1.9. Developing Your Inner Five Year Old

I was in a workshop the other day and the presenter mentioned that the best question asker in the whole world—statistically—is a five-year-old girl. That five-year-old girl, the presenter mentioned, is so in touch with exploration and so out of touch with judgment that the result is an exceptionally beautiful inquisitiveness. I pondered this for a long time. What happens after five?

My answer: we pack shades on our inner voice just as we do coats to prepare for winter. We dull it, neglect it, berate it, tell it that it that it does not know anything and is not worthy. At any given moment there are so many voices in society telling me to doubt my instincts as well as myself. While I might be, I do not think I am alone in feeling this pressure to hush up. Lamott states, “You may have gotten into the habit of doubting the voice that was telling you quite clearly what was really going on” (111). When we were kids—more often that not—if we saw something strange, new, or had a feeling something was not right, we explored, we asked, we poked around. We did not care what people thought. Moreover, Brown, in *I Thought It Was Just Me*, writes, “The constant struggle to feel accepted and worthy is unrelenting. We put so much of our time and energy into making sure that we meet everyone else’s expectations and into caring about what other people think of us, that we are often left feeling angry, resentful, and fearful” (xvi). As adults, I think all too often this awareness of others has caused us to shove our voice away in the closet, leaving us to spin on our own in silenced confusion and secluded chaos.

This fear of judgment is ever present in SPN writing. How do we keep people from saying *well, duh, you should have seen that coming*, or *I see a different meaning in that*. Unfortunately, the truth is, we cannot. It is a risk we just have to take. “I don’t think you have enough time to waste not writing because you are afraid you won’t be good enough at it, and I don’t think you have time to waste on someone who does not respond to you with kindness and respect. You don’t want to spend your time around people who make you hold your breath” (Lamott 170).

Sometimes we catch ourselves saying how nice it would be to fly with someone else’s eyes and not just your own, but rather, as Frankl states, each person’s “unique opportunity lies in the way in which he bears his burden” (78). Writing is a struggle. Conveying our, what can feel like half baked, insides to the world requires sloughing off so much of the adult conditioning to be a perfect “know it all”. I am realizing as I embark on my own writing journey that that five-year-old girl is my writing voice. It is my vulnerable, exposed unabashed self. And that is the self that makes for the most authentic and connected writing and learning—or so I am finding.

1.10. Do I Need A Map?

As you can see from the start of my writing, my answer to this question is *not really*. Let me explain.

Sometimes I wish there was a formula for life (and Scholarly Personal Narrative Writing). I think back on when I was a child, even a late teen, picturing myself at the moment I am currently living in. I dreamt of what it would be like to be twenty-eight years old. I thought I would have been married. I thought I would have a dedicated

profession, a house, and started a family. I thought a perma-grin would be plastered to my face and that people looking at me would think about how well I had my life together. Perhaps I just thought I would be settled, or happy, or a blend of the two—whatever those two words mean. Apparently life does not happen like that, or at least mine has not.

“What people somehow (inadvertently, I’m sure) forgot to mention when we were children was that we need to make messes in order to find out who we are and why we are here—and, by extension, what we’re supposed to be writing” (Lamott 32).

Never in a million years did I think I would still be “figuring it out” at this stage in my life. A few months ago I was on the telephone with one of my best friends and we were talking about how ill prepared we felt for our twenties. There is a TED talk out there about career advancement and the speaker tells all of us “angsty” youngsters to just use this time to try “meaningful” things, to explore in a “meaningful” way. What they do not share is that that simple direction, which I am living, feels like this:

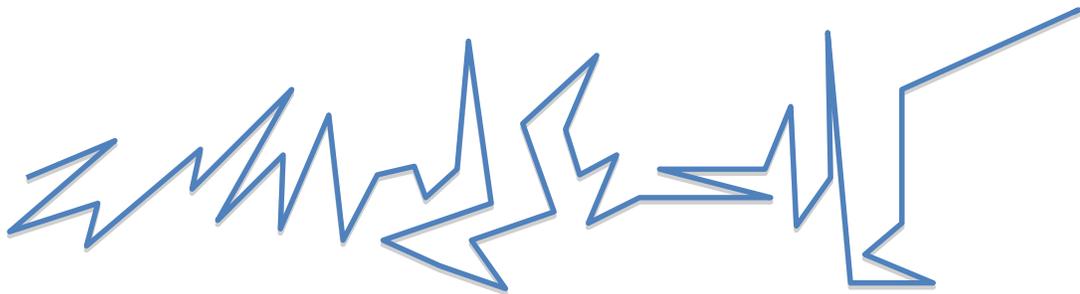


Fig. 1. Life

It feels crazy. It feels non-linear. It feels hazy, unsettling, confusing and directionless. Sometimes it feels like you want to give up. Meaning making is hard. It is

the work of a lifetime—not just your twenties. And, surely, we cannot wait a lifetime to begin our writing.

I sat with a student a few days ago who exposed this truth in us all so eloquently. She is a student who has overcome immense challenges, doggedly pursuing her major in Social Work. At one point in our conversation, she looked at me so earnestly and with pleading eyes said, “Sometimes I wonder, is my life too messed up (she used other words) to help other people”? We had a laugh about which chair we should each be sitting in and came to the conclusion that perhaps we live our lives switching back and forth, between advisee and advisor. Perhaps therein lies the beauty, struggle, and challenge of SPN writing.

Brown in her book, *Daring Greatly*, states: “I have found that the most difficult and most rewarding challenge... is how to be both a map maker and a traveler” (16). Unfortunately, there is no order to those two actions. Sometimes you travel blind. You get somewhere and you start furiously scribbling a section of the map as you remember it with your moment of clarity. Then you travel some more. Other times you switch it up. You try to create the map, in all its meticulous glory with golden trees and perfect trails and you start to travel. Inevitably, things go very awry and you lose the path, or perhaps you were never on it to begin with. After succumbing to the fact that you have no idea where you are, you come to the realization that you have to go back and adjust the map as—obviously—you would not want someone else to find themselves in your current state. Sometimes you think your map is leading you one way and it deceives you. Or you decide that is not the right way at all. It is a messy process that people do

not tell you about when you are a child. Erasing sections and visions of your map brings with it all the heartache that is redirecting and repaving a dream. The same happens in SPN writing.

You share what you live. You share what you think. You share the past, the future, the present. Sometimes you share it in the moment. Sometimes you share it years after, but the opportunity to share all is always there. Creating an SPN manuscript is living both as mapmaker and map traveler. Inevitably, one must accept in SPN writing that they, just like the writing, are a work in progress. Material is subject to change.

There is no map for life or for SPN writing. You just have to engage head, heart and gut, and... well... begin. McCarty sums it up well, “We all show up on the playing field of life, not having asked to be here and not knowing how to play the game. Alone, we make the rules courageously, living with gusto until the game is over” (170). To write in SPN is to take the risk. To take the risk that what you are living, either in, with, or through could possibly serve as a map for someone else. That is a challenging thing to accept when you feel like your writing—your map-in-progress—is all messy and weird and incomplete. Trying to accept that and move on is the only way we will continue to learn, grow and write our way into new meaning. And to begin new maps.

1.11. Finding Meaning

When I set out to write this thesis, I wanted to express the pinnacle of my meaning. I wanted to write the summation of meaning in my life as I know it today. Sadly, or brilliantly, all I have wound up with is some sort of circular representation of meaning →pursuit → meaning. I say pursuit as in the willingness to keep trying for

things. I think humans search for meaning. There is a reason that so many people believe in destiny, serendipity, luck, reincarnation, heaven, hell, etc. That reason I do not know but I do know that we want to find meaning in ourselves, meaning with each other and meaning in our surroundings. The challenging part is that if our meaning changes, our pursuit changes, and sometimes we wind up crumpled on the floor chasing our tails wondering what we are working towards. This pursuit tends to come out in SPN writing as well.

In SPN writing I have found that I write my way into meaning. “Writing a novel is like driving a car at night. You can see only as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way” (Lamott 18). There are many times I have sat down at the computer and not known where to begin, what stance to take, or what point to make. Case in point, this thesis. Just because you cannot see all the ramifications the writing might have, all the way down the road, is no reason to not give in to the crappy, dim, yellow headlights and begin.

In an ethics class last year, for example, our task was essentially to write a paper answering the statement I introduced earlier “this I believe...”. I toiled for days about *this I believe...* This I believe what? Finishing that statement requires that you take a stab at sharing something meaningful to you. It requires putting a little of yourself out there. In the end, I decided to write about suicide, a challenging topic that I did not know what I really felt about. Lo and behold as I started writing, my meaning started to take shape. The words gave my meaning structure, substance and, sure, plenty of caveats. Nonetheless, writing became a way for me to make sense of my ideas about

suicide. In essence, writing helped me develop just what that topic meant to me in my life.

I think what I am getting at here is something pivotal to SPN writing and writing at large. Writing is the process of conveying your identity on the page no matter what the page, no matter what the forum. Ultimately every written word is a reflection of who you are because an inseparable part of who you are is what you believe—what is meaningful to you at any given moment. I say at any given moment because meaning, just like identity, is not static.

I just bought a house with the person I intend to spend my life with. Upon receiving word that the sellers accepted our offer, I shared the news with my father, via text. His reply was “you can be happy and satisfied that your life is full”. While I know his words were congratulatory, my mind wondered if somehow this also meant that perhaps my life was not satisfying or full before? My reply was “always is!” It always is, but satisfaction and meaning are not always achieved with the same thing every time. “The meaning of life differs from man to man, from day to day and from hour to hour. What matters, therefore, is not the meaning of life in general but rather the specific meaning of a person’s life at a given moment” (Frankl 108).

In *How Stories Heal*, Robert and Sydnee state, “There is no escape, no easy way out, no blessed exit from our responsibility to live the authentic life, and to create, and re-create, ourselves with every choice we make each and every day” (31). I might say the same about writing an SPN. There is no escape once you have experienced living through your writing. If you are someone who has reaped the rewards, there is nothing

left for you besides development, revelation, deeper understanding, passion and struggle, so long as you keep coming back to write. In the end, it is you, in any way you choose, learning from others and crafting yourself on the page.

CHAPTER 2: SOME CHALLENGES POST SPN WRITING

2.1. Looking at Your Writing

Many months ago I was at a professional development training with my then team. The topic was *How to be an Engaging Public Speaker* or something of the like. The opening activity was an introduction of the presenter, via a game of telephone. After a quick refresher on how to play, directions being: listen and repeat, our dynamic presenter came over to me and whispered what felt like the most outrageously long life story to my left ear. The longer he went on, the larger my eyes grew. It was a *long* introduction. When he finished, he looked at me and coyly smiled as if to say *ha! Remember that!* Slightly embarrassed I turned to the ear of the person on my right and regurgitated—at best—ten percent of what he bestowed on me, all in the wrong order. When the last person in our line of eight recited what she heard, our presenter's thoughtful, two minute long introduction had been boiled down into one line about an event we had coming up.

I find safety, and a little bit of humor, in this human condition. There have been many presentations I have delivered where things did not go quite as well as I had rehearsed and I always glean just a little bit of comfort knowing that people really only remember a fraction of what they heard (as we discussed in the opening chapters of this thesis). Writing on the other hand is different.

I find that there is something particularly striking about seeing the written word in front of you. Once those words go from in your head, to decorating the page, to back in your head by way of your eyes, it is easy to bombard yourself with shame, disgrace

and embarrassment. Much of the time you are asking yourself in shock: I wrote that? That is garbage. Delete. But then there are also those times when you are surprised by your words, surprised by your insight. You ask yourself in an intrigued tone *I wrote that? Nooo*. Smiley face. So keep writing. Stop editing while you write and just write. Let it flow. Edit later.

2.2. Sharing Your Writing

Assertiveness is on my mind after a particularly enlightening experience I had at work the other day. As part of the on boarding process at my job, new employees as well as all existing employees, are asked to complete the Emergenetics Assessment. This is an assessment similar to a Myers Briggs Type Indicator test that tells you about how you see and operate in the world around you. They do not call it an assessment because they do not want you to feel like one end of the scale is better than the other; however, I still felt a twinge of shame reviewing my results in front of the team. I opened the colorful folder to find myself ranked in the bottom five percent for assertiveness. That is low. This means that I, in Emergenetics language, have a large committee in my head that tells me all sorts of things about what it might mean to put my ideas out into a group. People might judge, they might question, be impressed, be enlightened, cringe, never talk to me again—many options are available on the spectrum of possible reactions. Being in the lower five percent, I hear them all. Take this into the writing realm and sometimes it feels like a stacked deck for sharing *any* of my truths. I am basically my own worst enemy for sharing my ideas.

Writing means putting yourself out there to others. SPN writing means really putting yourself out there. To be published, even in the thesis or dissertation realm, inherently means that you are asserting your ideas to the world. You are standing for something and you are sharing it with others. That last part is really important. I have many ideas but I also have a high reluctance to push them into a group space. Therein lies the beauty of writing for me.

In class the other day my professor mentioned that my writing often sounds like I am talking to myself. It had never occurred to me that way but—for better or worse—I can see its truth. When we tell our stories for others to read, when we stand up for something, when we recount something, the hope and the pitfall is that other's lives are touched. Seeing yourself on the page is hard and gives you that uneasy feeling in your stomach. However, at the end of a really good SPN, you are reminded that self-worth is not tied to what we own or what others think of us but how we deal with ourselves. We must let go of arduous distractions and misconceptions and focus on telling the story we need to about our personal truths.

2.3. One Take on “Truth” and “truth”

I was particularly struck when reading Nash's chapter on “Truths vs Facts” in *Liberating Scholarly Writing: The Power of Personal Narrative*. If you are someone who struggles with assertiveness, confidence, vulnerability or exposing yourself, this part is for you. Before we begin this section, just to be clear, I am not letting anyone off the hook. We always have to write honestly and respectfully no matter the realm or

content. But in the end the stories we tell the world and ourselves are our truths and our truths alone—unless we are writing fiction.

A number of months ago someone approached me about using a deeply personal piece I had written about a loved one. This piece was my take on their actions violating one of my moral codes. My first reaction was, I am not sure I want the world to read that. What would that person think? Then I spiraled into a land many writers know: Is every line of that writing indisputable? Would the person I wrote about come forth with a different storyline? Am I a fraud? I even asked myself *did this really happen* before I snapped out of it and came to.

Of course it happened. Of course I wrote as authentically and honestly as possible, and yes, of course others involved would probably come forward with a different take on the situation if given the chance. I might even come forth with a slightly different account if asked to write the story again so many years later. This is because the SPNs that we write, the stories that we tell, represent a truth as it is perceived or understood at that moment. Sometimes, as Nancy Aronie describes, that moment is tainted. She uses the analogy of soup to shed light on how our writing can be influenced at any given moment by our recent history. “Sometimes the soup is too sweet because you’re afraid to feel your darkness; sometimes it’s too heavy because you just yelled at your kid and you’re feeling guilty; sometimes it’s too spicy because of the things you didn’t say to your husband that are stuck in your throat and are manifesting themselves in your soup pot” (15). She goes on to mention that this should

not keep us from writing, however, it should remind us to go back and reread what we wrote before we hit submit.

So after reflecting on my writing and the offer at hand for a few days, belly aching over what I should do, I did what I felt best. I called the person I wrote about. It was not the peachiest conversation we have ever had but it was an important one. Paul John Eakin has a quote “because our own lives never stand free of the lives of others, we are faced with our responsibility to those others whenever we write about ourselves” (as quoted in Nash *Liberating Scholarly Writing: The Power of Personal Narrative* 130). This responsibility beckons the question *did I represent every one involved in the most respectable way possible?* Answering this question to my liking required me to work through some things with the other party. We decided together that anonymity was best in this case but that our story could in fact be meaningful to others and that we should put it out there. “If something inside you is real, we will probably find it interesting, and it will probably be universal. So you might risk placing real emotion at the center of your work. Write straight into the emotional center of things. Write toward vulnerability. Don’t worry about being unavailable; worry about being absent or fraudulent. Risk being unliked. Tell the truth as you understand it” (Lamott 226).

It is unlikely that the antagonist and I will ever have the same storyline but, at the end of the day, I believe the most important thing is that we try to share our truths, even if they clash or miss another’s. While—physically—I am only able to see the world through my own eyes, hearing other’s truths will shape what I see and how I see myself. “Even our mistakes and short comings are part of life; we can stop berating

ourselves and open the way for improvement” (McCarty 245). By learning from each other and our pasts we are at least given the chance to learn about a way different than our own. This is the way we grow. If we are too scared to share our perspective and our values we will miss out on many opportunities to think deeply about our truths, to think deeply about where we stand, to think deeply about other’s perspectives and, furthermore, miss the chance to ask the types of questions about ourselves and others that allow us to grow and find meaning. Variation in narratives is the only way we can figure out who we are and what we stand for.

2.4. Those Pesky Retrospective Looks

A while ago I encountered one of the most challenging situations of my life. For the first time, I turned on the television and knew the person on the screen being accused of the crime being reported on. It was a shock to my system. For weeks I stayed glued to every screen I could get my hands on, following every chapter of the story, heart palpitating. It still flips my stomach to this day to think about the power of words, the power of story and the power of perspective, especially in the media.

As I watched the news unravel, the light in which my former acquaintance was cast horrified me. Confirmation bias, when you reflect on the past after knowing the end result, is real. When something happens, we retrace the past looking for clues as to how something could have been missed that seems so evident now. This often involves connecting and creating a pattern from previously isolated dots. I, too, am guilty of having listened to whatever prime time story about someone and asking: how could people have missed those warning signs? As a former acquaintance of someone whose

life was being retrospectively picked apart on the screen, I was left feeling like the media gave me two options for how to feel: a) totally incompetent that I had not seen this coming; or b) totally naïve that this person was capable of even thinking about completing such an act. It was awful. I could not let myself off the hook for not digging deeper or knowing more about what was going on. I was devastated.

A friend at the time saw me agonizing over what happened. She gently reminded me—over and over—that the only way to accurately judge something is to ask yourself: knowing what we knew at the time, would we have done anything differently? The answer was always no but it took time to assuage the hurt. After much painful processing I have tried to come to the conclusion that Robert Nash shares in *Liberating Scholarly Writing: The Power of Personal Narrative*, “I am convinced that the achievement of ethical perfection in writing SPNs comes only in hindsight. This is because I believe we live ethics mostly backward, not forward. We make the moral leap, and then we spend the aftermath agonizing over whether we did the right thing” (135). I had made the leap to see that person in a certain light with the information that I had and, unfortunately, sometimes our pictures are incomplete at the time, both in life and in our writing.

In writing, sometimes we want to go back and change things because after all the pieces fall we see what we wrote or what we did differently. We have a different perspective that we did not have in that previous moment. This is something that, however painful, must be continually accepted. Part of signing up in the game of life is

the disclaimer that we do not know how things will play out in the end. Our story could be radically different than ever predicted. Or at least I think so.

Now, every time I watch the news I think about the families, friends, and acquaintances of those accused. There are many stories, many perspectives, and more often than not we simply cannot tell what will happen in the future, or even what did happen in the past. We all have filters on our eyes, biases that we arrive at the story with. This is part of what makes the world a terrifyingly magical place. The only part that we can control is the unwavering dedication to keeping our eyes open; to understand that there are so many ways something could play out. “It takes time to get used to the sunlight and to admit that we mistook the shadows for reality. Awareness of new ideas shocks complacency. Rediscovering our mental mobility is the work of a lifetime, and we never quite regain perfect understanding; we can never know the pure concepts with absolute certainty so we must keep seeking. But it’s the process, the struggle, the small and larger versions of true meaning that matter” (McCarty 107).

Who knows what tomorrow will bring—for our loved ones or ourselves—and who knows how we will feel about it in twenty years if we are given the chance. Here in the moment we live our lives believing in possibility. We do this by waking up each day, by choosing to not end our lives, and by accepting that tomorrow could bring something delightful, or something too difficult to imagine, but either way, something meaningful. And something to write about at that.

2.5. How They Might See You

Connection. This is ultimately why we write. Why we communicate at all, right? We want to connect, and part of connecting is seeing where there is divergence or convergence of your story with another's. There is also the possibility that the reader will create an image of you that is entirely different than how you see yourself. Reading someone else's work, especially when they are not present or we do not know them, affords the reader a chance to make up the narrator, to create a life for the author, a picture of what they look like, where they live, and whom they love. Sometimes this picture is right in line and sometimes it is wildly different from the face we see in the mirror.

I grew up listening to sports broadcasters. My father, having played football and hockey, combined with a brother who played baseball and an extended family that put male athletes on a pedestal, meant that sports were on more often than not in our little chicken coup (I grew up in a renovated chicken coup). I remember being quite young and attending a Mariners game with my father. This was a special occasion and I loved when I could go to a game with my dad. We left our nosebleed seats one time to meander about and forage for food when my dad bent down and pointed outward. "Look," he said. "That is Dave Niehaus, the guy you hear on the radio". I looked at my dad with clear confusion. He looked *totally* different than I pictured. This reality is sometimes a shock for the reader and we, as writers I hate to say, might just have to learn how to live with that.

Other people will attach their personal stories to the words that you write (if we are lucky). People will create your alter ego in their heads as they read. Folks might even describe your writing to someone else in a way that makes you cringe because it made them think about some part of their own life they had tried diligently to hide. A while ago in class, one writer shared parts of her paper written about mindfulness. There were whole years of her life she felt like she could not remember. While simultaneously being relieved that I am not the only one struggling to recount the days of 2009, I did find myself groaning as she shared her writing with us. Every word reminded me of my own failing ability to nurture mindfulness in my own life. Sometimes we read something on a page and conjure up images of human gods when in reality the author winds up being someone remarkably like our neighbor. This is life. This is the human mind.

The wonderful thing about SPN writing is you are not just doing the writing for others, you are also doing it for yourself. You, too, have a chance to shock your own perceptions of yourself. “Who would expect that any collection of fallible, eccentric, imperfect human beings, putting all of our energy into living well and living fully would produce anything but surprise after surprise?” (Welch 9). This is just what writing an SPN affords us, the chance to surprise and be surprised over and over again by our reading and our writing.

2.6. It May Never be Done...

Have you ever asked yourself if after someone dies they are really gone? I have thought about this for years, since the passing of my mother when I was in college many years ago.

The idea of only having a past with someone is strange. You may only have a physical past with that person but I believe an emotional and mental connection persists. After someone dies you have seemingly endless reign to relive, reanalyze, and revisit old memories of that person. In this way then, do they still have a future?

I like to think that my mother, who passed away almost eight years ago, lives on in the moments I have stored away of her. I hold such vivid images of certain interactions that at times I have a visceral response. It is ironic because when I try really hard I can never conjure up the sound of her voice or the details of her face. In my recall, it is almost as if I have to use my peripherals, or my unconscious, to access her.

I think about how this applies to SPN writing. Robert Nash always encourages us to end our writing with an ellipsis rather than a period. Thank goodness for punctuation because without it, writing would be even *more* challenging than it already is. Punctuation at least gives us a chance to put some of the written equivalent of inflection into our writing. An ellipsis, those trailing three dots, is sort of like the awkward trailing off when you are saying something aloud that all of a sudden you are not sure you know how to finish. This ellipsis allows us to convey to our reader that the story is only done for now. Not forever.

“The talk does not stop when the two people part. Both people think about their exchange and independently add to it and uncover new truths. The original conversation expands in this ‘afterglow’. Embers Burn” (McCarty 40). This applies to writing but also to where the story will go after the writing, the impact it will have, the life the story will go on to live. In the end, who knows what will become of your writing. Perhaps it will be in someone’s trash someday, or perhaps one line will change someone’s life. With that, I think we all have a responsibility to try to see the best possible truth in people’s writing, knowing that what they are expressing at that moment is always subject to change.

Holding on too tightly to a certain version of our story prevents us from moving forward in our writing and our learning. Brené Brown finds in her research that shame is the ultimate way to silence someone. Unfortunately, I would argue in today’s academy that the judgment around stating something that you believe in your writing, and the pressure that is attached to that, is so great that more often than not in the classroom and in the conference room conversation is stifled because people are afraid, including myself, to say what they are thinking about. The stakes are just too high. However, Nash confirms in *Liberating Scholarly Writing: The Power of Personal Narrative* that, “We need to tell our stories in all their ugliness, as well as in all their glory, if we are to discover the truth in ourselves, and if we want to get others to do the same. Telling our whole story, without putting on blinkers, often requires an act of courage” (134).

I have come to foster this courage by seeing that just as my mom lives on in my memory, writing lives on because we are not static individuals. While writing a manuscript, however long or short, does require that we say *something*, it does not necessitate that we be perfect or that we have the final word. To share the analogy of a classmate: submitting your writing feels like having guests arrive at your door before the dinner party is ready. It is that sense of urgency to scan the room for dirty laundry and reach up blindly out of fear to check if your shirt is even buttoned. After all the anxious hellos and frantic glances and grabs at those strings that were not tucked, you come to realize that you were in-fact ready for your wonderful guests to arrive. Sure, perhaps the edge of some dirty, raggedy pair of underwear is peering out over the top of the hamper but, in all, you whipped it together and people probably did not notice the items on your to-do list that you never got to. This is because, as writers, we must learn to write for good enough, not best enough.

Acclaimed author, Michael Crichton, reassures us that, “Books aren’t written – they’re rewritten. Including your own. It is one of the hardest things to accept, especially after the seventh rewrite hasn’t quite done it” (web). For this reason, I wish we could always have an ellipsis at the end, or at least a warning sign...

CHAPTER 3: CONCLUSIONS

3.1. Implications for Me

As I write about writing, and my process of reassuring myself through the challenges I have faced in this thesis, I realize that this narrative is providing me with a much greater opportunity to think about education at large. While I have used this process of writing to discuss the challenges and liberation that SPN can bring about, I think the implications of my experience extend far beyond the physical act of writing. In my current role, I do not often have the chance to actually write with my students. Much of my work is conversation based, yet daily I draw upon what the practice of SPN writing has taught me.

This SPN writing and thesis process has made me want to keep digging, learning and sharing—in all aspects of my life. It has motivated me to never settle in my desire to connect, my desire to love my partner and my hope to inspire those I work with. It has made me both restless and humbled by my journey. It has kindled my love for the pursuit of knowledge and my belief in growth versus just the acquisition and possession of wisdom—important as I think about my role in the field of education.

This process has allowed me to write into my understanding of what it means to be a great educator. The words here are my attempt to write my way into seeing *myself* as one of those educators. The writing is my work in progress as I try to convince myself that all this—that my stories—could contain something meaningful for someone else so long as I continue exploring them. My reflection work will never be done. DiAngelo and Sensoy confirm in their article *Ok, I get it! Now tell me how to do it!*:

Why we can't just tell you how to do critical multicultural education that “starting with oneself takes a lifetime of practice, reflection, and personal courage”. A great educator, I now see, is also a great learner, and learning is the work of a lifetime.

Writing about so many struggles, and so many I do not know for my culminating manuscript has been both grounding and encouraging. The combination of scholarly and personal has allowed me to pull insights from experts in the fields of psychology, sociology, education, and philosophy and examine them in light of my own history, personal narrative, strengths, style, meaning, experiences and aspirations as I think deeply about the type of educator I am, and the type I want to be.

3.2. Benefits of SPN Practices in My Profession

In my current role, I serve as the Case Manager for a small college in New England. I work with the majority of the College's special populations including very low—or no—income single parents, first generation college going students, Pell Grant recipients, commuter students, some of which also identify as low-income or New American, and students working with Counseling and Accommodation Services. I love my job.

Situated in the Counseling Center, I get to work with students facing a variety of barriers to accessing their education. At any given moment I advocate for, talk through issues with, celebrate and sigh alongside my students. Many times when introducing myself to a new student I have to clarify what *exactly* a Case Manager does. Are you a counselor? Are you involved with academics? My answer is along the lines of: you can come to me with anything under the sun and I will help you get what you need, whether

it be a place to live or a swift nudge to get to class. I find that this ambiguity can be challenging for students at first as they may not have any experience with a “catch all” support person. However, over time, I have found that my students usually do come around to taking me up on my offer. On any given day I field inquiries ranging from financial aid questions to trouble with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

I serve many different purposes for many different students. My role is dynamic and for all those reasons much of my heart and soul lies in these daily interactions. The times when my students are absent from campus, or my office, I miss them dearly. They teach and guide me. They make me laugh and think. They give me meaning in my life. And as we sit there together in my lamp lit office, I am always drawing from the roots of my SPN based Interdisciplinary Studies, Masters of Education program.

While we do not actually write together as a means of problem solving, I try hard to solicit from my students their personal stories about why and how issues manifest in their lives. Endlessly I ask them: Why is that important to you? Where do you want to go? What gives you meaning?

I try hard to encourage my students to see themselves in roles they may not have previously. I encourage them to draw upon their wisdom and share it with others. I have found this framework to be tremendously rewarding in my work with students. To follow are several specific examples of how I have incorporated SPN practices into my Case Manager role and the benefits I see they bring.

3.2.1. Building Connection

Quarter lifers, as my professors often call them, individuals ranging in age from eighteen to thirty-five years old, crave chances to think deeply about where they are and where they want to go. I know because not only do I work with this population, I am a part of this population. Daily, I find that the framework of SPN inquiry provides me with a set of tools to connect with and assist my students in this exploration.

College can be a time of intense introspection. For some, it is the first time being away from home, friends and family. For others, it might be the first time being thrust into a new culture of people all coming from different backgrounds. I know, personally, when I left my small, little island in Washington State to attend college in Boulder, Colorado I was shell shocked at first. My roommate was conservative and intensely religious, whereas I had not experienced a drop of religion in my life. It was a time to ask myself *who am I? What makes me unique?*

I think this type of questioning comes naturally. The intense competition in today's society has begun to condition Millennials and later generations to figure out what makes them stand out so that they have the greatest access to resources like professors, jobs, programs, etc. However, amidst all this time of seeing and striving for separation, I have appreciated and wish to pass along to my students, SPN's inherent ability to connect us.

One summer, a coworker and I facilitated a summer pre-orientation program. Students who indicate that they are the first in their family to attend college are invited to participate in a three-day program where they have the chance to meet other students and acquaint themselves with the campus before the school year begins. One of my

fondest memories from that program was circling the students up at the top of a mountain after a hike on the second day to share a “chapter” of their high school story with the group. Drawing on the foundations of SPN, as both my co-facilitator and myself had experience guiding students through sharing their stories, we went around the circle and heard stories from the depths of these students’ hearts. Here we were connecting the personal narratives with the impending scholastic journey of these eighteen students. We absorbed accounts of bullying, eating disorders, trouble balancing schedules, and strained relationships with parents and friends as the wind whipped around us on that clear, sunny day. We learned both the unique experience of each student as well as the overlap between us all. More over, we learned some important information that would help us support each student in the four rigorous academic years to come.

At the end of the summer program, I was sifting through student evaluations and I got to one that read, “At the top of the mountain, I realized I found my people. I was home”. I just about cried. Students want connection. They want to see that they belong. They want to know that they are not whirling about in no-man’s land experiencing things that no one has any basis for, and that is just what SPN provides.

I check in with this group regularly and am pleased to report that many of them will be in top academic standing going into their next scholastic year. I firmly believe this is largely because of the close bonds they cultivated through sharing personal stories about what they need to do their best.

3.2.2. Fostering Empathy

I was learning the other day about an empathy training that is done with volunteers wanting to work on a crisis line. When listening to the description of the activity all I could think about was: do you have experience with SPN writing? The parallels were ever present to some of the challenges I described before in my “seeing it on the page” section.

In the training, participants are instructed to write down on a scrap of paper a personal secret. After folding it they sit there and hold it in their hand, feeling the terror that comes from the secret’s concreteness. When written, it is out in the world. You literally *feel* its existence. You are then instructed to hand this piece of paper to the person on your left. This person will not read your secret but will instead safe keep it for you. They will hold it in their hands and feel the weight of it. You feel the separation from it. After a few moments of sitting in that space, with another person you hardly know possessing intensely personal information about you in their hands, the papers are shredded. This is the experience one can feel when writing and sharing an SPN paper.

Personal story telling, I have experienced, is one of the fastest ways to build a common connection amongst a group of strangers. For each person to simultaneously feel the power and powerlessness that comes from sharing and listening to someone’s truth is a privileged and fearsome position to be. It demands respect from all parties and I have found that more often than not, students are up for this challenge. In fact, I might argue they crave it because without it, or when it is superficial, I have seen how students disconnect from their peers, learning, and leaders.

I find myself striving to incorporate these empathy practices into my work with students. I believe Brown when she states in *I Thought It Was Just Me*, “You can only respond empathetically to another’s story if you have embraced your own” (xxvi) and I think this is a critical part of learning life skills. I tell my students that I trust them to tell me what is important to them and in return I try to be as exposed and authentic in our interactions as possible as well.

To hear another’s story is not enough; they, too, must experience what it is to entrust their story with another. This reciprocity is how we begin to understand the importance of our actions and the power we have to help or harm someone else. It is also how we find realistic and resilient role models. When my students walk in my door and ask me personal questions, I answer them. To a reasonable extent, I am willing to share bits of my life with them. More than I ever would have prior to this program. Sometimes I even ask them for their help on things. This thesis for example, I mentioned to my students that I struggled through it. I also mentioned that I stuck with it. I want to show them, not just tell them, that life for me, too, has its ups and downs. They encourage me. I encourage them. This mutual respect experienced through storytelling I feel leads to a deeper connection and more motivation to be collaborators in finding solutions. Neither one of us will have all the answers but learning from each other gives us greater strength. It allows both people to hold power and responsibility and that investment makes my work far more rewarding.

3.2.3. Learning and not just “Schooling”

In my opinion, none have quite articulated the difference between schooling and learning as well as Lisa Patel in her book, *Youth Held at the Border*. She describes in beautiful detail the often marginalized students with whom she works and their experiences with these two processes. Schooling is the ability to demonstrate the skills another party (e.g., teacher, supervisor) wants to see. Schooling is largely what systems in our society are based on. Examples would be developing the ability to do well on standardized tests or looking at a writing prompt assigned by a teacher and understanding what they want to read in your response. Schooling really has nothing to do with the individual's growth. It has more to do with understanding and being able to navigate "the system". Most of us, at one point or another, have learned how to school growing up, especially if we have made it to higher education.

Learning, on the other hand, is far more difficult to assess via measurable criteria. Learning involves being able to adapt new information and ideas to different contexts. It is the difference between learning to show versus learning to grow. Learning involves dissonance and internal struggle. It involves genuine pursuit of understanding because you are internally compelled to move through something.

When we think about how our current education system is set up we see a conflict amongst these two different skills. Patel in her book writes, "One of the many challenges that education faces, particularly in a time when greater incentives and sharper negative consequences are tied to students' test scores, is disambiguating school defined student-ing and genuinely arduous learning that makes a person grow in

confidence and skill” (56). The process of SPN writing is far more in line with learning, as opposed to schooling.

There is no perfect way to “ace” an SPN writing project other than feeling like you represented yourself well and addressed all three components of: what, so what, now what and “S”, “P” and “N” in some universalizable way. There is no point system. There is no way to not learn. In my experience you often play creator, writer, editor and publisher all at the same time. I heard something the other day that hit a note for me about SPN writing: it is the process of going in, so that we can go out, and then back in again. It is this never-ending interlocking of in and out that helps tie us as people to our knowledge. It is a way to share our learning with the world as well as understand it for ourselves.

In my work with students there are many times when we could find a quick solution to an immediate “schooling” process; however, I rarely find that fulfilling. As a Case Manager and educator, I care far more that my students learn to develop the tools they need to build *themselves* a meaningful, sustainable life. I must help them cultivate the inner motivation to work hard for what they want, not what I, or the school, wants for them. This is not always easy, and sometimes tests my patience.

I am working with a student who is on academic probation for receiving less than a 2.0 GPA last semester. He is a first generation college student who has every bit of wherewithal to school, yet has absolutely no desire to learn. He holds a job at a fast food chain, which I might argue is one of the main culprits to his poor academic performance. He spends far more time working a job that he claims to not care very

much about than studying, completing homework, or even showing up for class. He “schools” for work all the time, yet never “schools” for actual school. In our discussions I try to get at why he is able to complete menial tasks for his job and not for the college. What is it about this job that holds enough meaning for him that he is willing to stay there until 4 a.m. at the sacrifice of school, personal time and his own health and wellbeing? He knows that if he is to do well in school, the job would likely have to go. Yet he is not ready to make that leap.

DiAngelo and Sensoy state how important it is for us to “understand that how we respond to the world (actions/practices/solutions) comes from how we see the world (perspective/theory/consciousness). When we see more complexity, we have more complex responses, therefore we must never consider our learning to be finished” (98). In this case with my student, a simple “schooling” solution will not work. There is a complex network of reasons propelling him to make the decisions he is making that I as an educator need to keep thinking about. One practical way I try to keep this in mind when working with my students is to keep my own behavior oddities and complexities in mind as well. I do this through my own SPN process.

This type of inquiry allows me to remind myself over and over again why I learn, how I learn, what my failure or insecurity feels like, and the struggles of sharing that with the world. Drawing on the self-compassion I am developing through my SPN writing allows me to better gather from my students the intricacies of why they want to learn, what they want to learn, and what they might be most afraid of in their pursuit.

3.2.4. Students As Drivers

In my first year teaching I dreaded the thought of losing control in the classroom. I would over-plan every lesson for fear of not having anything to do with the students. The panic of not having a next agenda item kept me up at night and it also kept my students from really diving deep into their learning.

I have carried this panic with me for years, like a well-worn backpack, and if I were to be completely honest, I know some of it still exists within me. I easily fall into the trap of feeling like I always have to have the answers, and lots of activities to go along with them, for my students. I can still fall prey, if you will, to today's wheeling and dealing education system. To use Robert Nash's words from *Our Stories Matter*, I know what it is to perpetuate the teaching template of "knowledge in....knowledge out.... knowledge forgotten" (26) simply because in the past I have been almost obsessed with controlling the learning environment for my students. I would set the pace and I would dictate what knowledge my students were exposed to.

Now, after two years of studying education at the direction of some truly gifted professors, I have come to see that some—many—of my greatest educational moments have come from times when the instructor allowed our group conversation to take on a (constructive) life of its own. There is something special about communal musing that is particularly indicative of powerful learning. In those moments, students grow into educators too.

This is the model I now strive for in my work with students. I do not have scripted answers for the problems they bring me. Just like Nancy Aronie articulates,

“We want the narrator to write herself into freedom” (56), I want to help my students define and find their own freedom.

3.2.5. Sharing without the Shame

A student walked into my office the other day to rent a locker. Per usual, I used the opportunity to check in with her about how things were going. As she settled into her stories of college life I began to gather that things were really not going all that well. Adjusting to school was bringing with it some challenges that, to no surprise, she felt like she was experiencing alone. As she began to talk and I began to validate and normalize what she was going through, her whole demeanor lifted. Just as Brown has found in her *I Thought It Was Just Me* research, I find daily in my work with young adults that “the most effective way to overcome feelings of inadequacy is to share our experiences” (xxiii). In that moment my student just needed a compassionate sounding board. She wanted an advocate and for someone to say *I hear you, this can be tough and in some way I can relate*. In my opinion, these listening skills do not have to just be utilized by counselors. If we have been a friend, sibling, parent, child or co-worker, we know the power of listening and compassion when it comes to helping someone else.

I have come to see that many of my students are not quite ready to share their experience in the confines of the counseling center and I have come to a place where I am not sure I want to *only* encourage them to do so. Of course, if there was something more serious going on or a student wanted a confidential resource I would absolutely connect them to the appropriate person; however, I am growing into an educator that does not necessarily want to send the message to my students that in order to talk about

being human, they *must* see a counselor. Many students come to college with an array of understandings as to what “counseling” means. I know for some, my referral or diversion to a counselor perpetuates a certain silence and stigma.

So with the help of my locker-renting student who articulated beautifully the need on our campus for student stories to be liberated, and my own personal classroom experiences with the transformative power of personal narrative sharing, we have decided to test run the development of a student drop-in group. This will just be a place on campus where I will be for a number of hours each week where students can come and share whatever is on their mind. As I think more deeply about this opportunity my student and I are providing, I am connected even more to my belief that these opportunities to share should be readily available for students. When you start thinking about the development of programs like Active Minds, you see that college students want to break down the walls that keep people from talking about mental health, and sometimes they want to do it outside of accessing counseling services. What a powerful message it could send if we made this opportunity an actual class they could take for credit like I have had the opportunity to do in graduate school. Maybe someday.

3.2.6. It Heals

Ray Bradbury is quoted in the book *Our Stories Matter* when he states, “The objective of the learning process is to liberate the participants from their internal and external oppression; to make them capable of changing their realities, their lives, and the society that they live in” (as quoted in Nash 33). I love this quote because it represents the process and ultimate goal of SPN inquiry. Bradbury states that the first

step to changing the world is healing one's self. I believe, in the end, SPN is a powerful tool because it promotes this healing. It provides the chance to pay attention to whatever your heart, body, soul or mind is pleading for from you *before* you look outward. In our society we do not often lead with the weak yet it is often the strongest within us when it has not been given any chance to breathe. Furthermore, sometimes it is only when we work through whatever is beaconing our attention within that we are even able to learn anything new anyways. Our brains can be far too occupied and, to use one of my favorite analogies from the book *Scarcity*, we only have so much bandwidth.

To exemplify this in my work, I would like to share about a student I met with a while ago who came into my office to inquire about setting up some accommodations for a class he was struggling in. We got to talking about what was going on in the math class and what type of accommodations might help yet something was nagging at me. There was a disconnect somewhere in his story and he was clearly very upset about something. All of a sudden he crumbled into tears and said, "I just really miss my father". At first I was slightly caught off guard as our conversation had been so technical up until that point yet when we got to the root of the matter, it turns out that he had really failed his quiz because September 11th was approaching and his father had died in the tragedy. This student did not need accommodations, he needed to talk about his dad.

We spent almost an hour and a half sharing stories of our late parents, how we celebrate their lives, how we remember them, how hard it is to remember them sometimes, and what we wish they saw us doing. It was a beautiful interaction and one

that I will always remember. The next day, I emailed the student to check in and this was part of his reply: “Thank you for all your help yesterday. I really appreciated our talk and it really helped me relax, calm down and focus for my last class. I spoke with my mom last night and she saw a noticeable difference in how I was talking and wanted me to thank you on her behalf as well. I’m glad I have someone to talk to about this stuff”. He never sought out accommodations.

I feel very strongly that we have all created and continue to perpetuate a culture of fearing and hiding the very thoughts that, I might argue, make us human, i.e., Am I capable of hitting that person? What would it be like if that person were dead? Why should I live? What would happen if I died? From my point of view, these thoughts are normal. It is only when we are unable to talk about them that they become problematic. Sharing these stories can free up some bandwidth. This type of interaction can be liberating. We all carry our stories around with us our whole lives. We all have experienced varying degrees of trauma, which for many of us, at one point or another, have obstructed our ability to learn. This is universal and I think it is time to start liberating our students from holding these burdens alone so that they can begin to change the world.

3.3. Implications for Education and Final Thoughts

Reflecting back on what I have gleaned over the last two years in the Interdisciplinary Studies program, despite my challenges with this thesis, and perhaps because of them, I can say with certainty that the SPN process has allowed me to retain and grow my knowledge in a new and profound way.

Scholarly Personal Narrative writing is not meant to, nor will it ever, threaten other, more traditional, styles of writing or learning in education. At its heart, SPN writing and inquiry is about pluralism. It is about adding as many voices to the realm of scholarship as possible, not subtracting or maintaining the select few that are already heard. It is about each student's ability to let *themselves* contribute to the pool of available resources. It is about shedding light on each student's *ability* to be a scholar. I have come to realize one of the central strengths of the SPN process is that it helps students overcome the mental limitations that keep them from seeing themselves as the person or student they want to be. To use the words of Wind Paz-Amor, from the *Foreword of Our Stories Matter*, "You are the scholar we have been waiting for" (xiii). You, too, can be an educator with your stories and wisdom.

SPN writing is not about exhibitionism, venting, or navel gazing. It is about balancing all three of the elements that go into it: the "S", the "P" and the "N". The narrative needs to be strengthened by both the personal and the available scholarship so that a reader can connect and learn something from the story. "A writer always tries, I think, to be a part of the solution, to understand a little about life and to pass this on" (Lamott 107). This is what we hope for in all SPN writing and story sharing.

The word scholarship, at its core as I mentioned before, is about playing with ideas. SPN makes room for those ideas. It is about asking yourself: could anyone benefit from what I have been through here? Why is that? How is that? These questions make room for the development of a voice—a voice we can learn from. After all, how

are we going to hear new ideas if we do not validate and empower people to use their voice and to share the passion and story behind its creation?

Going back to the introduction of this chapter, and looking at why students disconnect from or forget parts of their education, I believe it is largely because the personal is often removed from the traditional classroom content. Most of the time it is strictly “S” content being delivered. The personal should not be something that we tend to with our students only after or sporadically in between the more “rigorous” material. In my own experience, my learning through SPN writing and conversation has not faded away. In fact it has contributed greatly to my work and personal life.

When I was thinking about going to graduate school, people kept telling me that the material studied would be so different but no one could really tell me how it would be different. They just said I would love it. Now, as I see the distant finish line, this thesis is giving me yet another chance to reflect on how this experience truly *has* been different and just why I loved it so much.

For one of the first times in my education, I felt like a person first and a student second. As I think back on my high school experience there are two teachers that come to mind. Two teachers yet one reason I think of them both. They cared about me as a developing young woman. They took time, energy and sensitivity to get to know me and how I learned, *why* I learned.

These two teachers were ones that listened to me patiently, guided me gently and brainstormed with me graciously. These two people were beyond teachers. They were advocates, supporters, mentors and fantastic thought provokers. They cared not

only about my performance in their class but the type of adult I might grow to become. They wanted to educate me for life, not just the semester. I would argue that today's students are hungry for this type of connection in their lives.

The late teen to early twenty years are important and I remember clearly my own endless days of commuting to class and then commuting right back home. I had no tie to my education beyond attending class and getting my homework done. Sadly, I cannot remember the name of a single one of my college professors. I can remember few class titles (mainly because they are fairly generic across institutions and I look at student schedules so often), some of the material I learned, and I might be able to pick one or two lecturers out of a line up. In all honesty, though, I did not interact on a personal level with any one of my professors—or much of my education—at that time. As a result, my personal development and my education experienced a huge rift.

I often wonder why this was. Was I too scared to put myself out there? Was I not smart enough for them to take an interest in? Were the classes just too large and I was another little fish in the sea? Who knows the reason why but in all my pondering, I went back to the essay I wrote for graduate school. I dug up this excerpt from my writing sample: “For the first time in a long time, or perhaps ever, I feel like I have carved out a space for myself to explore who I am and what I want.... This is one of the reasons why I am thrilled to be pursuing my Masters Degree in your program at this time”. I am left asking why we must wait until graduate school to have this kind of an opportunity in our education. Why is the personal so disconnected from the academic in that sense?

So many of us come to the helping professions because we have been through something and want to give back. But in the helping professions, just as many would ask in academia, is there any room for this type of personal expression? I can relate to mental health challenges, feelings of angst, depression, anxiety, even cutting and suicide, but rarely do I share these life experiences with my clients. So by extension, even though I make the argument for it above for my students, when it comes to my own life I continue to ask myself *is the academy the best place to work through all this vulnerability?*

All I have to do is re-read the initial chapters of this thesis to see that I still struggle with the question I just posed. I was unsure at first; hence my initial urges to write about something ‘more professional’. And I still struggle with feeling like I have not written a scholarly *enough*, or prestigious *enough*, or worthy *enough* thesis. Should I not be writing about molecular biology instead? Would that not earn me a Masters degree? However, in my pining for a quote to represent what I am trying to express, I stumbled upon this one: “There is nothing like wholeness for bringing greatness into the world” (Aronie 93). It struck me. Wholeness is something we all strive for and is what occupies our thoughts when we feel disconnected from it. It is hard to feel creative when we do not feel whole. And I might argue that in order to have wholeness, we need to have a chance to explore our stories. Borba’s Building Blocks of Education continue to remind me that in order to grow competence, we need to first tend to security, selfhood, affiliation and mission, as defined below in my words (modified from Whitworth):

- Security: I can guarantee that you have power here and often times, power is security. You have the right to speak up. You have the right to be heard and you have the right to advocate for yourself and others.
- Selfhood: You are a worthwhile person. You have potential. You have strengths and you have struggles. We are here to help you cultivate your strengths and overcome your struggles.
- Affiliation: You belong here. What you have to say is important to the group. You make our group better and we want to hold you accountable to that when you are here.
- Mission: Together let's clarify our goals. Why are we here? What do we want to learn?
- Competency: We can learn here. From our foundation, this is a space to explore and grow.

Like SPN writing, education in the end is about connection. Connection to material, connection to something new, connection to inspiration, connection to something existing...whatever it may be. For learning to take place, a connection must be made. In order to learn, no matter whether student or teacher, I have come to appreciate that most individuals in a group need trust, inspiration, personal connection and a little courage. My students crave connection—authentic connection—and more often than not, they wonder, just as I continue to: how did you get to where you are? Is this a struggle in any way for you too? How do you know which class, major, school, state, partner, paper topic, etc., is the right one? For me, SPN writing has been a liberating and deeply insightful way to explore these questions, and persist in my education.

A high school student I taught a number of years back exemplified this for me in his final internship presentation. I felt compelled to remember the moment and wrote the following reflection after seeing him on stage:

My student stood on stage calm, quirky, witty as he always was but this time the words he strung together to meet our ears were sincere, from the heart, personal and telling of the journey he travel through his two month long internship.

Weeks prior I remember writing feedback on his homework asking him if, just once, he could take our assignments seriously. Frustrated, sometimes at my wits end, I would ask him why he deserved an internship. After all, he hadn't shown me that he was professional enough to complete a task without carefully crafting it into an elaborate joke.

I made the decision, however, to place him. Perhaps it was an act of good faith, that deep down I trusted he would succeed, flourish and dare I say it, grow up, outside of the school's walls. And sure enough, I was right. That student, on our final presentation night, was responsible for one of my proudest moments.

Listening to my student talk about what the internship opportunity gave him made me realize why education has become my passion. He talked about his initial anxieties around navigating the professional world, his vulnerabilities and, ultimately, his growth derived from realizing the importance of five things: positivity, courage, being willing, assisting others, and making connections.

For me, hearing my student so earnestly share those five guiding principles solidified why I want to be an educator. Inspired teaching reminds us of the impact we can make, the positivity we can spread, the courage we can foster, and the connections we can build so that as our journeys continue, each one of us can realize our full, perhaps previously unknown, potential.

Just as my student had trouble sitting through my classes (that was back when I was a control freak educator), I cannot say with certainty that I could have made it through a purely scholarly thesis. I am just not sure there would have been enough struggle to keep me engaged so deeply in my own learning process. It is this seemingly simple intertwining of the head and the heart that makes for an all-parts-of-the-body-on-deck, cohesive and lasting learning experience that keeps students seeking answers to

their own questions. In the process, we often find there is something that others can find helpful.

The famous saying in any motivational training is: if you don't know where you are going, how are you going to get there? I might argue that if you don't know who you are, why does it matter where you are going, and how would you even begin to know where you want to go, never-the-less, how to go about getting there? While I think there are many ways to get at the who you are part, I do not think that our traditional education system presents enough opportunity to do so.

The challenges of SPN writing, as discussed in this thesis, allow students to grapple with their identity and grapple with their education in a truly liberating and enlightening way. This form of inquiry, and learning about authors and researchers in the field who have taken the leap of faith to share both head and heart with us, have helped me bridge the gap between scholarly and personal. It has also given me a venue to develop confidence in my voice, confidence in my knowledge. It has made me feel, for one of the first times in my education, that I can look inward for answers, and that I, too, can share my insights with others who might benefit.

I have realized through SPN focused classes and writing that it is not always about how much knowledge we possess at any given moment. Sure it is easy to fall into the dichotomy of I am smart, or I am not smart, but SPN has opened my eyes to another reality: "To be a meaning mentor one needs only life experience, self-knowledge, and an interest in others and their journeys" (Nash, *Helping College Students Find Purpose*, 217). Education, for me, is becoming less and less about the possession of knowledge

and more and more about the courage to ask questions—questions of others and questions of myself. I am convinced that if we learn to ask good questions, hopefully, we can learn to seek out soul satisfying, multiple angle including, interdisciplinary answers.

I have noticed going back through all the books I have read over the past year and a half that I underline and highlight the parts where authors and philosophers alike share a little of themselves in the narrative. I have seen that more often than not, this personal touch gives me something I can relate to. It is the platform from which my learning is able to take place. This is because I believe these authors and scholars, just like myself, struggle to live life simply, meaningfully, always questioning, and in the moment.

Confrontation with self is hard, for all of us. Am I doing things right, am I who I want to be? These questions require examining and that is not always a pleasant process nor does it promise to yield desired results. Articulating is hard. Analysis can be tiresome. Standing by what you believe requires you expose yourself. Sometimes it just makes us want to crawl in a hole and hide. Or better yet, go back to living our lives with the comforting eye masks still on. But in the end, it is so worth it, for it is the only way we begin to change and grow.

To return to my house metaphor from the beginning of this thesis, SPN is building from the basement up. If you want a sound house, you have to start deep and work your way up and out. The process of SPN inquiry is educating from the inside out, rather than from the outside to the out. Our stories, just like our basement, matter

because they are our foundation and they dictate every choice we make moving forward. Our stories, just like our foundation, are always with us. Jullian Treasure, in his TED talk *How to Speak so that People want to Listen*, mentions the seven sins of speaking that are ever present in today's settings: gossip, judgment, negativity, complaining, excuses, exaggeration, dogmatism (facts vs. opinions). I might argue that SPN fosters at least part of what he mentions as the antidote: honesty, authenticity, integrity and love. He states in his TED talk that if you want to carry weight with your audience, speak from your chest. We associate depth with power and authority. The depth within our stories is how we get people to listen.

The more I learn about you, the more I learn about myself. We find ourselves sometimes in the words of others. The author, Susan Shaughnessy, has a famous quote I dug up online saying, "Your characters change you. In coming to know them, you come to know and acknowledge part of yourself. In working out their destinies in the pages of your writing, your characters work out something within you, too". Our characters are all around us, not just on the page. I learned that from my struggle could come insight, even inspiration, for myself and others. I have gifts within that I never even knew existed. I learned that if we show our heart, others might too, and that from a place of vulnerability and depth, we can begin to construct truly sound learning.

I have realized strength in my flexibility and that if I remain open to the unknown and give my students the space, time, trust and creativity to think about issues deeply and from multiple angles, they too will be encouraged to explore and call upon their internal compass for insight and direction. Rather than seeking to be the one who

tries to always provide answers, I seek to be the one that asks good questions to get them thinking and talking. Just as DiAngelo and Sensoy talk about in their teacher training programs “teachers do not impart knowledge on their students, they co-produce it...” (98). In this program I have grown into a contemporary with my students through the journey of life by helping them uncover meaning in hidden aspects of their educational experience.

SPN writing can lead to a process in education of allowing students to become conscious rather than self-conscious about their wisdom and pursuit for meaning, knowledge and personal satisfaction. SPN, in my experience, combats the shame and judgment found in our traditional education system, which shuts one down to learning and personal connection, and paves the way for being proud of your exploration, curiosity, inquisitiveness and personal narrative. When people are coming at their education from a place of worth, rather than shame or deficiency, greater, more enriched learning and connection are able to take place.

For many of us, compartmentalizing is challenging. I might also ask, is it productive? I am not so sure. SPN becomes a way for educators to help their students develop their own meaning in their learning. My professor says time and time again that we revisit these pivotal development questions throughout our lives and I might argue that if we get accustomed to asking these questions of ourselves early on, we will be better able to navigate whatever life may throw at us as we progress through it.

Just as a student cannot come to class hungry, I believe they cannot learn, or at least not well, when their head and heart are disconnected. Holding on to the insecurity

of *not* knowing will inevitably lead to greater suffering and quite possibly, a decrease in mental functioning. When one holds on to the shame and guilt of not knowing something perceived as something that should have been known, the entire sense of self gets absorbed and solidified in that perception, shame and doubt.

I remember time and time again, telling myself how challenging and unproductive it is to try to listen to someone when the insecure voices in your head are screaming and demanding attention. For years it seemed that before someone even asked me a question it was as if I sat there trying to predict his or her request so that I could maximize my time crafting the perfect response. I was in my head far more than I was in theirs, and that to me is not the helpful habit of a sound educator.

Shedding this conditioning of seeking validation from the outside has been a process, a process of looking inward at what it truly is that gives me purpose and meaning. The questions I address in my thesis have forced me to think deeply about what I feel is most important to share with others about my experience. How can I, as an educator, mentor, advocate, or supporter, offer students a helpful, alternate narrative to the ever-present pressure to seek validation from the outside?

Life is a struggle. Writing about life is a struggle. Writing about your life and your struggle, well, it can make your head explode ten thousand ways. However, this whole meaning-making quest, I have come to realize, is not a race but rather a marathon and being given the chance to share with and learn from other people throughout writing this thesis has been a privilege. Daily I work with students who have been marginalized and degraded in society yet they enter my office with their heads held high

proudly declaring that they are writing their books, their stories. I always smile and encourage them when they share this with me. I think they do this because it is something that gives them ownership and control over the situation that is their life. It is an opportunity for them to reclaim their narrative, and that is a powerful thing.

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