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ONE EDUCATOR'S PERSONAL MISSION TO CREATE A BALANCED  
TEACHING PHILOSOPHY AND A FULFILLING CAREER: IMPLICATIONS FOR  
PROFESSIONALS AND STUDENTS K-12

A Thesis Presented

by

Brianne Keefe

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 follows my journey as an educator to find purpose and fulfillment in a career whose demands make it challenging to maintain balance between work and life. The mental, emotional, and physical energy that working in a 'helping' or 'giving' profession demands often poses a threat to valuable personal and family time, as well as a struggle to keep professionals working in these fields.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Without the support of my family, this thesis would not have been possible.

Mom and Dad, you set me up for life with the secure, strong foundation of our family for which I will always be grateful. As is clear by my work here, the importance of education that you both instilled in me has had a lasting and enduring effect. The least I can do to repay you both for the life you have given me is to attempt to pass on our family values of the importance of education and a strong work ethic to the next generation.

Ally, I was always trying to chase you, catch up to you, and do as well as you did...you always set the bar incredibly high. You are naturally talented and intelligent, but you never use that as an excuse – you always give everything you put your mind to your best effort. In recent years, I think we've both come to realize how similar we actually are, which can be both a good and a challenging thing. 😊

Mike, you're proving yourself to be one of the best choices I've made in my life thus far; a choice I've never thought twice about having made. Your patience and calm affect have brought me back down to Earth on numerous occasions, and have helped make me a more balanced person. I will support you in whatever you set out to do, just as you have with me. I'm looking forward to all the years we have ahead of us.

To all my teachers and mentors I've been fortunate to have in my life, thank you for showing me what it looks like and feels like to be an educator. And, of course, to all my students past, present, and future: we're all in this together; it's you that makes me want to show up to school each day!

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

*“Be the change you wish to see in the world.”*

*- Mahatma Gandhi*

Some days my wings are mighty and strong, yet others my roots yearn for depth - my branches and stems needing more support some days than others. Just as soon as I've started to mature and flower, a cold frost comes in and seems to stunt my growth leaving me shocked and confused. I have trained for this flight from the nest, and have had several years of practice. I thought I was ready for the chilling frost, the turbulent flight. Society tells me it's time; that I'm prepared, or at least I should be. As a quarter-lifer, I have found myself dizzied and, at times, knocked over by life. That's it, just l-i-f-e, life. I'm fortunate enough to have been raised in a supportive home. In our home, education was always a priority. We had our needs secured and our wants typically satisfied, and there was never a question about whether or not my sister and I would attend college. We were reminded that 'success is 99% hard work and 1% luck' and that 'it's the player that makes the uniform, not the uniform that makes the player'. It was a loving, yet pick-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps household; however, as I find myself firmly in quarter-life, I'm struggling to find balance between work and life, while questioning how fulfilled and purposeful my work as an educator is.

I recall a card my Uncle Dan and Aunt Carole gave me for my graduation from high school. The front of the card was a beautiful watercolor scene of serenity, and in delicate font it read a quotation from Mahatma Gandhi, "Be the change you wish to see in the world". In retrospect, this may have been one of my first moments when I questioned the meaning of my life as it was, and how I hoped for it to be. Here in my quarter-life, I



find myself asking questions that I very well was subconsciously asking myself over a decade ago upon receiving that card. Who am I? Who do I want to be? What am I doing? What do I want to do with my life? Will I be remembered or forgotten? And if I'm remembered, why will that be so? Who has influenced me to be who I am or who I aspire to be?

Currently in my professional life, I'm asking these questions of myself as an educator. Who am I as a teacher? Who am I in this role and who do I hope to be? Will I ('the player') make my role as an educator what I believe it should be ('the uniform')? Or will the role ('the uniform') determine me ('the player')? If there's a gap between who I am and who I want to be, how big is it? Can I overcome and bridge that gap? If I didn't get paid a cent, would I still show up in my classroom? Is teaching as challenging for everyone else as it is for me? How can I balance all the components of being a public school teacher? How can I manage my work and my life in a way that is a true balance? Is there anything I can do in order to feel more fulfilled by my work?

### **1.1. Why Now?**

*"Life is really simple, but we insist on making it complicated."*

*- Confucius*

Questioning my choice for profession has not been an easy task, but it is one I have mulled over in my mind and in personal conversations with trusted allies over the past year. This mental turmoil, if you will, reminds me of when I was in my first

semester of college and I realized I was not happy at the university I had chosen (and prized as my top-choice school). Both of these experiences are instances where I have made confident 'big life decisions', but then realized when I was fully immersed that it might not have been the right choice. In the case of choosing which university to attend, I did indeed make the change and transfer to a different school where, three and a half years later, I earned my degree. However, in my current situation, I am in the questioning phase and am hoping that through writing I can come to some kind of meaningful conclusion. With the core of my self-searching being personal stories and experiences, I am routinely reminded why I have chosen to write in the SPN format.

Some days I enjoy my work as an educator, and other days I can't wait to find a different job. I often ask myself: What's keeping me in this job? Would moving into a different field, career, or job even help? I've even started to wonder if I'm simply getting in my own way - maybe it's just me, my outlook, and my attitude that's the problem - changing jobs wouldn't necessarily help with that. I'm writing in an attempt to get to the center of myself and to make meaning of my feelings and experiences along the way that are universal to so many others encountering similar circumstances. I truly enjoy Anne Lamott's reference to Mark Twain when speaking about *universalizability*, which I define as a term to describe the common truths and realities among the human experience. Lamott (1994) paraphrased Twain in saying that:

Adam was the only man who, when he said a good thing, knew that nobody had said it before. Life is like a recycling center, where all the concerns and dramas of humankind get recycled back and forth across the universe. But what you have to offer is your own sensibility, maybe your

own sense of humor or insider pathos or meaning. All of us can sing the same song, and there will still be 4 billion different renditions. (p. 181)

I am writing from the inside-out, but I'm also writing to dig deeper and shed light in places that have not yet been exposed. As Lamott (2004) reminds us, "If something inside you is real, we will probably find it interesting, and it will probably be universal. So you must risk placing real emotion at the center of your work. Write straight into the emotional center of things. Write toward vulnerability" (p. 226). I believe having self-doubt, feeling unqualified, or realizing you're unfulfilled by the work you spend hours and hours a week doing is universal. We've all doubted ourselves at some point in our lives, whether it be at work, at home, in a relationship, or some other setting. We've all felt like we're being pulled in more directions than we can balance, leaving us feeling like we're 'not enough' in at least one of our domains (work, life, parenting, marriage, etc.). Then again, maybe Confucius had it right, "Life is really simple, but we insist on making it complicated," maybe we're just trying to do too much. When I feel like I'm trying to 'do too much' and am making life more complicated than it needs to be, I often try to take a step back and observe where my priorities seem to be lying. I do believe priorities can shift, and it's ok to put some parts of my life at the forefront, and push others to the back burner for some time. Every piece of our lives needs its time both at the forefront, and on the back burner - there's not enough room up front for everything. Taking a step back and observing my life is also like dissecting my life, which Anne Lamott (1994) relates to exploring a castle and, "[exposing] the unexposed. If there is one door in the castle you have been told not to go

through, you must. Otherwise, you'll just be rearranging furniture in rooms you've already been in" (p. 198).

In trying to go through different castle doors and go beyond simply rearranging the furniture in rooms already visited, I am trying to look at all the influences and experiences in my life that have brought me to where I am today in work and life, along with what I value. Many of these influences are from my family and my schooling experiences. I highly value education and believe it is the greatest way to give oneself opportunity in life. Learning gives my life meaning. How these views on education and learning contrast with my experiences as a teacher are what confound me the most. How is it that someone who values education so much, struggle to carry out this value as a mission in their daily work? Rumi said, "Everyone has been made for some particular work, and the desire for that work has been put in every heart." I think I am made to be an educator; I think that desire has been put in my heart. But why, then, am I struggling so deeply balancing the demands of the job? Why is the emotional seesaw of this profession so grinding to my stability as a capable young woman? Robert J. Nash's words "hate is not the opposite of love, indifference is" (Nash & Viray, 2014, p. 71), strike an uneasy chord within me. I don't hate my work, but there are days when I don't necessarily love my work either - indifferent and defeated might be more like it at times. So as my mother recommends, 'do something you love', what if I don't love it? What if I feel the opposite of love for my work?

In talking with colleagues, I know I am not the only one who has these struggles, but I must also remind myself that, "All [I] can give...is what life is about from [my] point of view" (Lamott, 1995, p. 55) and "...all I have to do is write down as much as I

can see through a one-inch picture frame” (Lamott, 1995, p. 17). My one-inch picture frame view may be similar to others’ views in some ways, and it may be different, but I bet if we took a collection of all of our one-inch picture frames and put them together, we would tell a similar, interwoven story.

## 1.2. SPN Methodology

*“...the more questions you have, the firmer the footing you are on. The more you know yourself. The more you can map out and set a meaningful path for your future.”*

*- Christopher Phillips (2001, p. 14)*

My understanding about the methodology of SPN writing lives for me in Arthur Polotnik’s words: “You write to communicate to the hearts and minds of others what’s burning inside you. And you edit to let the fire show through the smoke” (Nash & Viray, 2014, p. 56). SPN encourages us to dig into the depths of ourselves to find what we need to say, and provides the methodology to communicate that ‘burn’ inside to be set free on the page. Through editing, reflection, and growth we let the ‘fire show through the smoke’ to shine a light on the universal themes not only in our own stories, but also by connecting to others’ lives, experiences, and personal stories. At this point in my professional and personal life, there’s a lot burning inside me and I feel that if I don’t explore the depths inside and pick apart what I find, I will end up burning at the core. SPN defines itself as writing from the inside out, but where I grow concerned is if the burning from the inside doesn’t get written out, then the “soulache” will turn into a

charred ‘soul-death’ (Nash & Viray, 2014, p. 21). With SPN I am allowed make myself vulnerable, and to ask and answer questions that in other settings I wouldn’t be able - an opportunity that I believe other teaching professionals could benefit from when reflecting on our practice.

I need to discover and tell my story, via SPN, so that I can make meaning of my life as I have experienced it and as I hope to experience it. As an individual, I value learning so deeply that I feel the ‘burn’ to see what that implies for me as a teacher, or maybe what it doesn’t. I currently view my life as a series of somewhat disconnected events, which I’m only now drawing the connections between. And as Nash reassures me, “A story helps us to make connections of the disparate events, and people, that appear in our lives. A story creates order out of chaos. A story entertains. A story teaches. A story elevates. A story inspires” (Nash & Viray, 2014, p. 34). Educators, and many other helping and giving professionals, exist in a career where many events and people appear in our lives. These events and people weave their own stories, yet they find their place in our personal and professional stories as well. Each story, from each individual, may affect others in a variety of ways; however, through all our stories, we have the opportunity for building connections and community, inspiring one another, and fostering empathy.

In this thesis, I follow a thread through the events and people of my life thus far, in order to teach and inspire myself for how I will move forward with my life in a meaningful way. I want to live with intention, with balance, and I want to enjoy my life. I want to inspire others, and I want to make positive contributions to the communities and relationships I am a part of. I want to have purpose in my career. I

want to feel fulfilled. I want to tell my SPN story, “...to prove that [I’ve] lived, that [I’m] still alive, and that [I] intend to live into some unknown future” (Nash & Viray, 2014, p. 30).

Over the past two years, I have been learning and working with Scholarly Personal Narrative writing. When my first SPN assignment crossed my path, I was incredibly confused about what the model-authors were doing and what on Earth I was supposed to do, or write about for my first paper. I had the typical thoughts that I’ve heard repeated by many of my peers, that I didn’t think I had a story to tell. And if I did have a story it would be one that no one was interested in hearing. Who would be able to relate to me? Who cares about me and my little problems any how? How would I find the balance between coming off as self-indulgent and complaining, versus digging down deep and telling the true story? It’s not easy, even if some outsiders seem to think it is. That said, I’ve always been a lover of stories. I’m an avid reader of fiction and historical fiction, autobiographies and biographies; I love to listen to and read stories from real people. I find that the texts that engage me most follow somebody and their story. I also love The Moth organization, which hosts public events and records podcasts all for the purpose of sharing individuals’ stories. They describe themselves as, “a celebration of both the raconteur, who breathes fire into true tales of ordinary life, and the storytelling novice, who has lived through something extraordinary and yearns to share it” (Burns, Gopnik, & Green, 2013). I hope to breathe a fire, of sorts, into these ordinary stories of mine and to connect with my audience. I can be affected by stories so deeply that this summer I found myself, on several occasions, out on a long bike ride listening to a Moth story...sobbing. When I read books or listen to stories, I can’t help but to relate to

the story-teller. I'm starting to believe that universalizing is a natural human tendency, because as Maya Angelou (1994) wrote in her poem, "Human Family": "We are more alike, my friends,/ than we are unlike" (p. 224). It is for all these reasons that I believe SPN is the most appropriate methodology for my story. As Nash and Viray (2014) shared, "Story-telling is contagious. Its lure is unavoidable... it is sheer bliss to be able to write both the brokenness and the fullness of our selves into meaning and wholeness by telling our stories" (p. 58).

I write to illustrate my life, including the people and events that have shaped my identity and beliefs to form who I am today. I believe SPN is the methodology I need to tell my story in because as Nash and Viray (2014) state in *How Stories Heal*, SPN writing is, "...writing from the head to the heart...and back again [which] requires a unique set of technical skills that enable both the writer, and the reader, to arrive at the ultimate goals of self-understanding and self-transformation" (p. 2). Currently in my life, I need to work toward both of these 'ultimate goals'. Not only that, but I believe teaching happens from the 'head to the heart and back again', so why not tell my story about teaching and education that way as well?

In Nash's piece about teaching in a public school, I was a bit taken aback when he shared that, "passionate educators always run the risk of oscillating between the extremes of a soaring exhilaration and a grinding depression as a result of what happens in their classrooms" (Nash & Viray, 2014, p. 75). Now, those feelings are no surprise, but upon reading that I questioned myself: Am I actually just passionate about my work? Maybe I don't actually hate it? I have grown so concerned about my relationship with and sentiments towards my work recently that this is a promising perspective. I also need to



remind myself that I am not perfect, and need to take the advice of Robert (via Alcoholic Anonymous) here and accept myself as imperfect, because once I achieve that, I will be able to help myself and attain balance: “the moment they accepted themselves as less than perfect creatures, and resolved to love and forgive themselves despite their imperfections...they were able to *help* themselves” (Nash & Viray, 2014, p. 65). This universal idea of oscillating between two extremes in teaching is a reality for many educators, and I believe some form of reflective SPN writing or discussions as a group of professionals could aid in building stronger educational communities. Many ‘helping’ and ‘giving’ professionals experience these highs and lows, so by sharing our experiences with others in a constructive way (like through SPN conversations, written or verbal) I believe we could create stronger foundations for our professionals, and by extension our students and communities.

The structure of this thesis follows the structure of Robert J. Nash’s Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN), as it addresses the questions ‘What?’, ‘So What?’, and ‘Now What?’. Chapter 2, ‘What?’, presents the personal challenges I encounter in my work as an educator, with universal connections to other educators and professionals working in similar fields. Chapter 3, ‘So What?’, provides background information, including my parental influences and relevant information about my upbringing, to make sense of why a lack of fulfillment, purpose, and balance would pose such a threat to my work. ‘So What?’ also includes a philosophical analysis of the ethical dilemma of whether to stay or leave my work, centered on philosophical theories and my core family values. In Chapter 4, ‘Now What?’, I aim to make sense of both the ‘what’ and the ‘so what’ in an effort to move forward in this mission to finding purpose and fulfillment in my work. While this

thesis is about my work as an educator, it is my hope that other professionals, across various disciplines, find meaning in and connection to my personal stories and experiences.

### **1.3. Identifying my Audience**

*“Never imagine that there will be time later to accomplish something, because that later time will turn out to have been yesterday.”*

*- Karl Pillemer quoting Trudy Jefferson (2011, p. 205)*

While this thesis has been in progress for about six months, I believe it's been living and growing inside of me for longer. I didn't realize I had anything to think about, let alone anything to say or write until I began and my classmates and professors started to ask me questions that pushed me to think deeper and broader than I thought I would ever be able to or would ever want to. Just as Trudy Jefferson is quoted above, the time for me to write and share this thesis is now. This thesis has had multiple lives and phases in its time, and its purpose has also morphed during its lifetime. It began as a self-investigation and self-exploration journey, then entered into a questioning phase where I felt the need to make a decision about staying or leaving my career, and then developed into its (potential) true meaning when it was pointed out to me that this purpose-seeking adventure may actually be about my identity. In reading this thesis, I hope you see this metamorphosis, as I have found it to be a valuable journey.

Throughout this writing piece, I hope to show the highs and lows of my journey as a teacher thus far, while frequently reminding you of my themes, universal connections, and scholarly ideas. I think of SPN writing like a spiral curriculum - as students move through their schooling, they will see similar themes, skills, and content. Hopefully each time the student sees this in their learning, they remember some of what they had learned previously and can build a deeper, more complex layer to the skill or topic. I hope to spiral in this SPN thesis to create and build upon my themes of trying to find balance between work and life while seeking purpose and fulfillment in my career.

I began writing this SPN thesis to explore whether or not the teaching profession is the right place for me, and whether it was time to make the decision to part ways and find something less emotionally and physically exhausting. I write about where I come from and why education and learning are central components of my life, both when I was a child and now as an adult, as well as the influential people in my life that have helped to build this important foundation. The paradox between the physical and emotional exhaustion that teaching brings paired with the importance I, and my family, place on education is also a central theme in this thesis. I write about the challenges I encounter on a daily basis with students and families, and the emotional stress that lingers after the fact. We teachers work in some of the most diverse cross-sections of our communities where the children of all the families in a community come together to learn and work cooperatively, both with wild success and challenge.

The inherent stress and challenges of working as a public school educator are not in isolation - many other 'helping' and 'giving' professions are presented with similar

difficulties. The struggle to maintain balance between being an invested, caring professional as well as an invested, caring partner and family member at home is another central theme to this thesis - and one that I would argue many professionals across many fields struggle with. I write about where I come from and where I stand morally and ethically when it comes to making difficult decisions, like whether or not to continue in this career - exploring, simply, both why would I stay and why would I leave. And finally I write about my dreams and my identity.

I write this thesis not only as a self-discovery journey, but also as a way to hopefully connect with and communicate with my fellow educators. I hope through my personal stories, themes, and scholarly explanations not only will this thesis strike a chord with my identified audience, but hopefully it will also open the 'one-inch picture frame' to show what working in the field of public education is like from one teacher's perspective. To all my readers, I hope you find something you can connect with on some level, whether it be through a universal feeling, common emotion, similar experience, or simple compassion and empathy as a fellow human being.

## CHAPTER 2: WHAT?

In this chapter, ‘What?’, I aim to give insight into the pieces of my work that are the main drains resulting in the lack of balance between my work and my life. These challenges range from feeling unprepared, unfulfilled, and even purposeless, to working in an institution subject to change and reform, to the emotional stressors that arrive in tandem when working with students and their families. The ‘whats’ I share here are the realities of working as an educator or in any other ‘helping’ or ‘giving’ profession. The connections we feel to our work is typically what brought us here in the first place, yet it’s often what makes it so hard to sustain.

### **2.1. On Writing Openly, and Even Bluntly: The Liberating, yet Terrifying Sides of SPN**

*“writing from the head to the heart...and back again requires a unique set of technical skills that enable both the writer, and the reader, to arrive at the ultimate goals of self-understanding and self-transformation. These skills include a willingness to dig deeply in order to discover the truths that lie buried and our pasts and presents, an ability to thematize and universalize these insights for readers, and a profound, almost unyielding commitment to the belief that one's way to healing, meaning, and wholeness is not only possible - it is necessary. All of this leads to wisdom.”*

*- Robert J. Nash and Sydnee Viray (2014, p. 2)*

When I consider this process of writing openly about the work I do and my feelings on it, I feel very exposed. My colleagues have asked me my thesis topic, and I vaguely respond that I'm writing about 'teacher burnout'...which isn't false, but it's not the whole truth either. Their reaction of, "Oh wow, now I bet there's a lot of information and research out there on that topic!", reminds me that not everyone is familiar with SPN writing, since it's not all about the research in the traditional sense. Instead, Scholarly Personal Narrative is about pre-search, me-search, re-search, and we-search. Nash and Bradley (2011) outline the four components of SPN by asking these four framing questions: "How do I get started?"; "What is my personal narrative regarding the ideas emphasized in my writing?"; "What scholars and researchers have informed my writing?"; and "What are the implications for my profession, or field of study, that can be generalized from my scholarly personal narrative?" (p. 6-7).

'Me-search' has allowed me to look within myself to see what stories and experiences I have that can be added to my "evolving and fluid 'me-perspective'" (Nash & Bradley, 2011, xiii). 'Re-search', which in its hyphenated form "[emphasizes] that scholarship is the result of searching over and over again...for truth of some kind" (Nash & Bradley, 2011, xiii), has provided me with a driving force and focus to continue to ruminate over my ideas. And finally, 'we-search' has helped me see the connections between my stories and those of others, particularly with my intended audience, which I have found is both liberating and uniting.

I know I'm writing about universal ideas and sentiments - 'teacher burnout', work-life balance, feeling fulfilled by the work we do - when I see, hear, and feel the reactions to the topic of this thesis. While I write, I explore some uncomfortable places

and more often than not I arrive at strangely settling, grounding thoughts, along with some despair. As I've continued my work, the idea of this being a publicly-available thesis, posted online, and bound in those beautifully enticing thesis-books, I've come to realize how raw, 'ground-zero', and 'from-the-gut' this work truly is. Through my writing and analysis, I go from the head, to the heart, and back to the head - just as my SPN coaches and peers would remind me to do. The head and the heart are at times fierce competitors, while other times loyal friends. They both must be trusted, yet never fully. Listen to both with the other open: listen to your head with an open heart; listen to your heart with an open head. All of this writing, thinking, and exposing has made me feel like I'm taking not only a personal risk by writing so plainly and personally about my career, but it is also starting to feel like a professional risk too. What if other professionals in the field read this and discredit me? What if they don't connect to my universal themes and personal narratives? Or what if they connect, but think, "Yikes! I can't believe she actually said these things out loud and in print...we all know to keep these things to ourselves!"?

When people ask me "what do you do for work?" I'm always proud to say I'm a teacher. When we talk further and I share that I'm a middle school science teacher, that always opens up a reaction from the other person. The first typically being something along the lines of, "oh my, that's a tough age!", or "I don't know how you do that, middle schoolers are so difficult!". Which is then followed by the person either confessing 'how awful' they were in middle school, or their fond memories of middle school science. When the former is confessed, it's usually behavior I've encountered before. Yet while their stories are no stranger to me, I can't help but think: why did you misbehave like

that? Why were you so impulsive and disrespectful? What did your teacher ever do to you? But I don't say that, because, as they describe it, they were just being typical middle schoolers. If they start to reminisce about how fun middle school science was, what or how much they learned, or the cool projects their past teachers did with them, I start to lose confidence in myself. I don't know if any of my students will ever feel that way about my class. How can it be that over the two years that I have students in class, that I don't feel there's anything they are doing that will be 'cool' or memorable for them decades down the line? I hold onto the hope that, since everyone has different and unique interests, at least something students learn in my class will be memorable or interesting to them. I don't set the expectation that all my students need to become scientists or engineers or inventors, but I do hope that something they learn will prove applicable in their lives. I hope to teach my students how to problem-solve and persevere, to think creatively, critically, and innovatively, and to value their education as one of their greatest assets.

## **2.2. Perpetual Unpreparedness**

*“Success, while satisfying, is momentary. The fear of failure continually haunts us.”*

*- Robert J. Nash and Sydnee Viray (2014, p. 35)*

Although it's gotten better with time, I seem to regularly catch the feeling of perpetual unpreparedness or not-good-enough-ness in my professional life. I wonder if, maybe, it's one of the challenges of having a profession versus having a job. Teaching is



a vocation, like many others, where we professionals are continually trying to accomplish and improve, always seeking, tracking, and maybe even chasing something more and better. Brené Brown (2012) would remind me not to get in my own head and to stay out of my own way, because I am worthy and good enough just as I am. And I'd agree with her to an extent, because as someone who has a strong work ethic and commitment to (what I believe are) respectable moral and ethical beliefs, I do good-enough work and I should recognize that - as should many other hard-working professionals. But I would also argue that part of being a professional, and maybe being passionate about one's work, is that we are always striving for more. This strive and drive for more, this intrinsic motivation, is what maintains our momentum and keeps us showing up for work even when we're exhausted, fed-up, and nearly burnt-out.

In teaching, there's always at least one student I feel like I could have helped just a little bit more, whether it's connecting with them emotionally or supporting them cognitively. Always a better strategy I could have used to engage my students or to motivate my students in their learning. Always a better way I could have handled a behavior challenge or an aggressive parent. This pull of always feeling I could do more or better contributes to feeling unbalanced in my life. I feel like I'm an imposter in this position - do I even know what I'm doing or talking about? Am I qualified in the field of science or in the field of education? Am I making the difference I set out to make in these students' lives and educational careers? Am I finding the fulfillment I dreamt of?

This may be a tendency specific to a particular group of people, maybe it's more common in women than in men, but I don't feel comfortable drawing the line on such gender-defined terms. I think I, as a sensitive, approval-seeking person, beat myself up

over feeling not good enough and get bogged down in the stress of continually trying to improve. I've sometimes cried out, "Why does it always feel like I have something I have to work on to improve myself?! Why can't I just be good enough how I am?! This is exhausting!". It seems I'm always trying to improve physical, mental, and emotional condition; always trying to reach a manageable, enjoyable balance between work and life. Michelle Obama speaks to this truth of beating oneself up versus building oneself up when she had fears about her role, appearance, and impression on the national audience when her husband decided to run for President of the United States. Peter Slevin (2015) quotes Michelle Obama when she stated:

To tell you the truth, I was scared. I was worried that I'd say the wrong thing. I was nervous that someone might ask a question that I didn't know the answer to. And I have a tendency to do that thing a lot of women do, where you get 99 things right, but then you stress and beat yourself up over the one thing you mess up. (p. 202)

Even the former First Lady of the United States, a woman I greatly admire, has doubts about herself. I could have a great day of teaching, but there's always something to be improved upon. I even see students exasperated at times with the amount of feedback and pushing teachers give them, and yet their teachers are also often exhausted for the very same reasons.

### 2.3. Unfulfilled Expectations

*“Try to find something that you love so much that you would do it for free...Because if you don't find that job that feeds your passion, that makes you excited to get up in the morning and give everything you have to your work, then what are you left with?”*

*- Christopher Phillips (2001, p. 66)*

When I first set out to become a teacher, I was motivated by the fact that I respected the profession. I preferred to be around children over adults, and felt that working with kids would keep me feeling refreshed and ‘alive’ in ways that working a desk job wouldn’t be able to provide. This is not to say I don’t like working with adult colleagues, but to work with other adults who also enjoy working with kids is a different kind of environment. While working in schools as a paraeducator, speaking with teachers I knew socially, and shadowing teachers during my student teaching, I saw how rewarding being an educator seemed to be.

These teachers would share stories about exciting or funny things happening in their classrooms, or how special it was to have former students visit to say ‘hello’. These teachers I knew appeared to get a certain sense of pride, pleasure, and fulfillment from working with their students - it appeared as though they loved it so much that they would do it for free, as Phillips recommends. Now three-plus years into the profession, I’m not clear on how fulfilled I am by it; it’s not clear to me what my purpose is. I dread scoring 40+ of the same assessment. I’m nearly bored to tears during in-service days or faculty meetings when we discuss teaching strategies or curriculum work. I get frustrated, and sometimes defiant, when I feel like the school isn’t serving student interests or needs

best. I am overwhelmed when the school administration is asking too much of us as their teachers. Once more, I find myself being pulled in more directions than I can manage, while struggling to meet the physical, mental, and emotional demands of the job. It gets to a point in the year where I feel like I'm not doing my best work, and that I'm in survival-through-the-day mode more often than not.

With the current shifts in Vermont education, and the immediate effects on our school, our departments, and our classrooms, morale and climate seem to be decreasing. It seems I spend more of my time at school *not* working with students than I spend working with students - there's something wrong with that equation. Maybe my visions of becoming an educator were misleading; maybe I only saw the highlights, and none of the negatives or downfalls. The purposeful career I imagined for myself doesn't always seem to be the reality.

I want to feel good about the work I do as a teacher. I want to feel like the education students get in my classroom, and at my school, is one that is worthwhile and will serve them beyond the classroom walls. Education should be a personalized, individualized experience for students, but at this point, it feels more like factory farming. With class sizes of at least twenty students and one teacher, meeting for a prescribed number of minutes a day and classes per week, there is no room for the students who arrive in our classes to be any unique version of themselves. Our students are all individuals, each with their own needs and interests. I guess I should be flattered that someone, somewhere, thinks I, as one teacher, can pull-off meeting the needs of all these students. They are at different levels of academic readiness, have a variety of behavior challenges, and a plethora of interests. The goal is essentially to 'teach to the

middle' and then support the lower and higher achieving students from there. But as one teacher, I haven't mastered how this is possible, or rather how to do this well. Our students, or maybe just my students, are getting short-changed on their education, which in my opinion is one of the most important things our society needs to give them: a public school education. And I can't ignore the fact that Vermont, as a state, has some of the best public schools in our country, not to mention some of the smaller class sizes.

All of these expectations and aspirations conflicting with the realities and challenges of teaching are what have brought me to the point of asking myself, is it all worth it? I've heard the first five years of teaching are the hardest - so should I wait it out and see if it gets better? Or would that just be me waiting it out, and potentially wasting years of my life only settling for 'good enough' or 'maybe it will get better'?

#### **2.4. Educational Reform: "Tinkering Toward Utopia"**

*"...a place for every child and every child in his or her place."*

*- David Tyack and Larry Cuban (1995, p. 20)*

Over the years, experts have developed different efforts to smooth out the apparent problems in public education, whether through segregation or desegregation, tracks or niches or mainstreaming, differentiation or standardization. Regardless of the changes, "Progress to these experts meant a place for every child and every child in his or her place" (Tyack & Cuban, 1995, p. 20). In my view, it is the definition for what the best 'place' is for every child that is morphing, as well as everyone's ideas for how to get

students there. Aside from reform and changes in education, it cannot be forgotten that these are *real live students* we are working with who have parents that care about them deeply, and teachers who work long, patient hours to help them learn. We need to remember the entire narrative, and not just simply look at statistics and financials.

We try to fit all students into the same box - four classes per day, on a rotating schedule of eight classes per semester. Two semesters per year. Four years for a diploma. Yes, things are changing in Vermont education in ways that will hopefully blur the lines of these traditional and rigid expectations and routines. Change in education, in public schools specifically, is incredibly challenging. Schools are a foundation to our society; they are an institution we have all experienced in one way or another, not to mention an institution we all built a different relationship with and attitude toward. In their book, *Tinkering Toward Utopia*, David Tyack and Larry Cuban (1995) discuss the challenges our industrial-era public school system encounters when faced with the prospect of change. They write from the perspective that public schools, society, policy, and so on, are constantly evolving, albeit at a slow rate. Initiative by initiative, school by school, and teacher by teacher, we gradually move in the direction of change - we are always 'tinkering' and toying with new ideas and beliefs for what is best for our schools and our students. I find I am often 'tinkering' myself as well. Constantly trying to improve through self-reflection about how I can be a 'better person' - a better teacher, partner, sibling, daughter, friend, or colleague. How can I be more trustworthy and reliable? Have I really given it my best effort? Can my best effort sometimes be a 'good enough' effort? Can I balance trying to improve in every aspect of my life? Is that even

appropriate or achievable? How do I take feedback when given, both solicited and unsolicited? Do I let ‘my own stuff’ get in the way sometimes?

I’m proud to say I work at a public school in Vermont that I believe has students’ best interests in mind and near the forefront of our mission. We provide students an amazing amount of co-curricular classes (electives), and believe that co-curriculars are essential to a well-rounded education. We provide students with the option for an alternative path to graduation that is self-designed and student-driven, and a relationship with the Central Vermont Career Center, which provides another alternative path to graduation. We have support classes in literacy and mathematics to provide students with remediation services, and we have a well-staffed student services department with well-trained and experienced school counselors.

As with many facets of life, some students will take advantage of the plethora of services and offerings we provide, while others will just do what they need to do to get through high school and out on their own. In my few years teaching, I have seen students flourish, but I have also seen students flounder. When students flourish, it’s incredible to see them beam with pride and have confidence in themselves as capable individuals. As their current or former teacher, it’s those proud moments that feed the fire to want to continue teaching these incredible students. It’s why we, teachers, keep coming back for more. It’s what gives us purpose and fulfillment. Sometimes all it takes is a spark of inspiration to feel renewed and rejuvenated.

On the flip side, when students are struggling, it’s heartbreaking. For me, it’s most especially heart-wrenching when it feels as though it’s the system itself that holds a student back from reaching their full potential. As a professional in this current system, I

find myself wondering if I'm swimming against the tide: are my visions for an educational system I believe in just a pipedream? Is it a feasible reality to try to provide students with a more personalized, student-centered education? If I'm functioning on an island in my classroom, will my beliefs and efforts make any difference? Or will my island be prone to harsh weather and erosion, eventually becoming uninhabitable or even nonexistent? Is all this worth the imbalance and stress it brings to my life? When discussing change initiatives with a friend once, they provided me with some insight that I believe I must move forward with in embarking on the beginnings of making change. When I asked my friend if it was worth it swimming against the tide, or if our efforts and energy were better saved leaving us to simply float along, he responded with a paradigm shift: he suggested I think of it not as 'swimming against the tide', but instead as 'making waves'.

Tyack and Cuban (1995) continually suggest how cyclical ideas and potential reform can be, and how they spiral and build on one another, hence 'tinkering'. Since I am still relatively new to the field of teaching, I can't say I've seen many initiatives, but from what I have observed, I believe that although ideas for change and reform do come and go, we're generally moving in a consistent direction with common motives. ('We' here being society as a whole, or the portions of society that are directly involved with and impacted by public education). As Tyack and Cuban (1995) stated, "the belief that better schools make a better society - the deeply ingrained utopian conviction about the importance of schooling - is alive and well" (p. 14). I believe this ideal is still held onto by many citizens - sometimes coming across as passionate support for public schools and educators, and other times coming across as a debate for where we should point the finger



for the problems in our society. It is this reality that makes it so challenging to work in a profession that is so often in the spotlight and under public scrutiny.

Tyack and Cuban (1995) present the concept of ‘the grammar of schooling’, which they describe as all the aspects, traditions, and norms that are, “just the way schools are” (p. 86). Through their analysis and discussion about the history of school reform, they conclude that, “The standard grammar of schooling has proven remarkably durable” (Tyack & Cuban, 1995, p. 87). The various school reforms they discuss remind me of current initiatives in Vermont, and a concern of mine is that the time, effort, and resources that go into implementing current reforms will in essence be wasted, because the system seems to always revert back to the way schools ‘just are’ or ‘are supposed to be’. This attitude is not meant to be apathetic, but instead to highlight how discouraging some aspects of public education, particularly reform initiatives, are, because it seems as though nothing is ever ‘good enough’ - whether that be the current conditions or the potential change.

Being in a profession that is often under the public spotlight, making progress toward meaningful change sometimes feels impossible, especially because of how attached our society is to our current system and structure. Yet, while we may be getting closer to a public school model that best fits the needs of all Vermont students individually - without burning out educators and garnering public support - we must remember that, “It is the *departure* from customary school practice [the grammar of schooling] that attracts attention” (Tyack & Cuban, 1995, p. 85). I believe we will need to find the balance that respects our values that built our public education system, but we

need to confront that fact that it is still stuck in the same industrialized system of the past.

In the mid-1800s the concept of the ‘graded school’, as a way to organize students, became the norm in public education, and in 1906 the Carnegie Unit was developed. In graded schools, “At the end of the year, the pupils took tests to determine whether they were ready to move to the next level: success meant moving up to the next grade; failure meant staying in place” (Tyack & Cuban, 1995, p. 89). The Carnegie Unit is essentially based on how many hours a student sits in class, where that student acquires credits, which equals progress. Even in its infancy, the Carnegie Unit had opponents who, as Tyack and Cuban (1995) state,

argued that it had frozen schedules, separated knowledge into discrete boxes, and created an accounting mentality better suited to a bank than to a school. Learning was becoming institutionally defined as serving seat time...while the reward at the end of the rigid progression was merely a ‘credit’. (p. 93)

These are the same criticisms we hear today from change advocates, like me, which has resulted in some policy shifts toward a more personalized, interdisciplinary, proficiency-based learning system in Vermont.

The factory-like mentality of acquiring credits and moving through grade levels, where upward and forward mobility automatically equals progress reminds me of my dad’s idea of what it means to be successful in a career. He pushes my sister and I to

seek out leadership opportunities or promotions, maybe because his view aligns with the idea that ‘failure meant staying in place’. I agree with his idea that I should always seek ways to improve, but I also would need to add the idea that, sometimes, improvement may be in the form of finding more purpose and fulfillment, because that is progress all on its own. In addition, finding ways to achieve and maintain a sustainable work-life balance will help me, and I believe many other educators, to stay this profession I feel so passionately about.

I believe we, educators, also must work with our students to try to help them find meaning in their education, and to help them find investment in their learning. Students enter classrooms across the country with their own unique set of experiences and their own story to tell, just as their teachers do. Despite the rigidity with which I discuss educational reform, I believe that both impetus and resistance to change are both part of the human experience. All in all, in society, in my family, and in myself, conditions are bound to change and I believe nothing is ever permanent. These shifts may be philosophical, cultural, political, or financial, and with the globalized society we currently live in, international issues also play a role. All of these components, on both a micro- and macroscale, have an influence on education and on educational reform. Our public school system is one of the foundations of our society, and I believe can serve the greatest good to our country, and maybe even our world.

## 2.5. Applying the SPN ‘Code of Ethics’ to Challenging Situations

*“...the responsibility to tell the truth – not only the writer’s obligation to be honest about past and present events, but also to keep in mind the fact that, sometimes, telling one’s truth in an authentic manner can harm others.”*

*- Robert J. Nash & DeMethra LaSha Bradley (2011, p. 189)*

When writing about my experiences with students and their families, I will focus on the personal impact their stories had on me while trying to honor both their truths and their anonymity. This is not to be selfish, but instead to focus on the purpose of Scholarly Personal Narrative writing as reminded by Nash and Bradley (2011) in this section’s opening epigraph. I would also like to remind the reader that I am telling my side of the story, through my ‘one-inch picture frame’, on the foundation of my personal experiences. With one of my goals of this thesis being to provide insight into the realities and challenges of being a public school educator, I do believe these stories are integral pieces to the fabric of my reality. In their chapter on ‘Creating an SPN Code of Ethics’, Nash and Bradley (2011) suggest several pieces of “practical ethical advice” (p. 195) that I will try to follow through sharing these stories of the lives of others’:

- “Avoid using judgmental, accusatory, and angry language.”
- “Don’t use irony, humor, or sarcasm to put people down or to make light of serious situations.”
- “Instead of exposing and criticizing the assumptions of others, have the courage to expose your own assumptions and biases, and when necessary, do an honest critique of them.”

- “Don’t use your SPN to indoctrinate, induce guilt, bully, preach, propagandize, convert, or threaten.”

### **2.5.1. Maintaining Empathy and Compassion in Times of Frustration**

When I think about the importance of compassion and empathy in our schools, I must note that they are not always the easiest route to take. ‘Rising above’ or ‘taking the higher road’, I’ll admit, are not always the path I take, but more recently I have made the vow to myself that I will try to do that whenever possible. Not only have I made this vow in my professional life, but also in my personal life. As a teacher, it is not unusual to get a finger pointed at you, along with or accompanied by inflammatory remarks suggesting - or openly saying - that it’s your fault that a particular student isn’t successful. And as a sensitive, emotional person, I unfortunately sometimes let my self-confidence erode and start to believe these accusations are true. A great challenge in the field of teaching is that we could work all hours of the day and night and there would still be room to improve and work to do. That said, we have several students each year who struggle academically, emotionally, and/or behaviorally and some of their families are supportive of the work our school does and others are not. Regardless of their level of support, their level of anger with, or amount of blame they place on the school, I remind myself as frequently as I can - it’s almost become a mantra in my head - that meeting all parents with understanding kindness and compassion will have the most neutral or beneficial outcome, and approaching them with anything less will most likely yield a negative result. However, getting reprimanded and told you’re essentially not doing your job well enough is infuriating.

As tempting as it is to come back with insults to their parenting skills, that wouldn't be appropriate for a multitude of reasons. Pointing fingers and looking for a person to blame would be counterproductive; it would be forgetting the fact that the only reason we are all around the table is to support a student because we all care about their well-being and success. There are other times when we meet with parents and instead of being angry with us, the teachers or the school, they are angry with their child and seem to have exhausted all their patience - it's scenarios like this that truly concern me. We have other parents who are at their wits-end because they just don't know what to do anymore; they feel like they've tried everything, but haven't seen any improvements or gotten any 'answers' yet. Then again, there are other parents who - over the course of two years having their student in our classrooms - we never meet. All of these scenarios are emotionally draining, resulting in yet another tip to the balance between work and life.

I operate on the assumption that all parents love their children, and dearly hope that assumption is true. Parents are people too, with their own set of stories, experiences, and complexities. The realities of their stories and the reality of their suffering is real and true; suffering and hardship are universally part of the human condition. Yet while we do not have the same experiences or set of experiences in our lifetimes, we can make connections as the foundation for empathy. In my professional life, some connections are appropriate and other are not. The families we work with deal with issues ranging from the busy lives of overcommitted schedules and activities, to recent home burglaries, to financial uncertainty or unemployment. They are coping with substance abuse, altercations with law enforcement, the death of a beloved pet, or are caring for an ill or

elderly relative; many of our students may lose a grandparent, and the impact on the student as well as their parent, must not be ignored. These are the stories of our students and their families, some of these are my stories, some of these are my colleagues' stories - they are our stories.

When I lose sight of my goals to be empathetic and compassionate, I begin to doubt whether or not I can handle this taxing work. Once after an exceptionally challenging parent meeting, I arrived home upset and frustrated after brewing on these emotions all day. Add an angry, belligerent parent on to the normal stresses of teaching and it was enough to push me over the edge. I verbally spewed all over my partner and dumped all my negative emotions out, without even considering him, or how his day was. I was so revved up about this parent, and I just wanted him to see my point-of-view and take my side. After my angry rant, I asked him what he thought, and he compassionately responded, "Well, it sounds like she might have some other stuff going on in her life and took it out on you". That didn't go over well; I was imbalanced emotionally and cognitively. It got to the point where I told him that all I wanted was for him to call her a "bitch" and that would make me feel better - he refused. He wouldn't let another person (neither me nor the parent) compromise his compassionate nature. "I don't even know this woman, so why would I call her that?", he argued. The way I saw it was that it wasn't doing him or her any harm, but that in order for me to know he was on my side, he needed to say that. After more back-and-forth about who was right and who was wrong (and some time crying alone in a dark room), I realized that it was because I wanted him fiercely defending me and loyally in my corner. I thought the way for him to show me that was to stoop to my level. In retrospect, he was already in my corner by

standing firmly where I want to be - taking the moral highroad and viewing the situation and person with empathy and compassion. He was holding me accountable, he was staying in my corner, he was supporting me. I was the one who had strayed away from myself, and I was compromising my character. This is why teaching can be such a challenging career to balance.

## **2.6. Letter-Writing to Speak the Truth: Why eSPN?**

*“The letter’s informality just might free you from the tyranny of perfectionism.”*

*- Anne Lamott (1995, p. 172)*

Letter writing is one of the oldest forms of communication, and along with storytelling it is what has bounded individuals and communities together for centuries. Letter writing allows individuals to communicate genuinely and to expose vulnerable thoughts and feelings. These are the reasons I have chosen to construct parts of this next section in the eSPN format: Epistolary Scholarly Personal Narrative. Although I am not one to regularly write letters, when I do, I find myself agreeing with Christian L. Berry, ‘eSPN pioneer’, as quoted by Nash and Bradley (2011):

Letter writing has always provided me a level of autonomy which has allowed me to be more vulnerable, to open up more, and explore different depths of myself that are not always easy to explore or acknowledge in



other forms of communication, especially face-to-face contact. (p. 137-138)

The letters I have written are to my students who I feel need to know that they are not the only one experiencing what they are - these emotions and struggles are universal, even while the situation or cause may be different. I chose to write about and to my students in the form of letters, using the eSPN style, not only for the relationship- and community-building history, but also because I realized that writing a letter was the way I could communicate most truthfully and freely with my students, and as Anne Lamott (1995) shared, “The letter’s informality just might free you from the tyranny of perfectionism” (p. 172). In addition, with the added layer of autonomy in my salutations, I was also ‘set free’ in a way, to approach some of these boundaries of the teacher-student relationship that I may not be able to do face-to-face, yet I have respectfully followed the SPN Code of Ethics in each piece. Finally, the fact that I have addressed each of these letters so broadly goes to show how universal these adolescent experiences are.

### **2.6.1. Emotional Imbalance and ‘Hangovers’**

Upon joining our team in the seventh grade, we ask all students to write us a letter of introduction. We provide students guidelines and ideas for what we would generally like them to include in the letter, but we also leave plenty of room for creativity and sharing. Students can take the invitation however they want; some students simply tell us about their siblings, pets, and house, while others give us a glimpse into their dreams and aspirations, and yet others provide some insight on their personal lives and struggles they have or are currently facing at 12 years old. These letters give us, their teachers, not only

an introduction to their writing skills and basic information (name, rank, and serial number, to some degree), but also to the complexities of each individual student, both in their suffering and achievement. I often admire their youthful ability to dream - they want to travel the world, save lives, be parents, and some even mention their goals of finding attractive partners (little do they know, there's typically more to a good partner than what meets the eye!).

As their teacher, I want to help make their middle school dreams come true, I want to help them achieve the small goals they have set for themselves during these years, and I want to be a constant support and encouraging voice when for some of our students there seems to be no one. Although some critics may say, "middle school is only a couple short years" or "middle school doesn't really count", I would argue that the developmental shifts that occur during this short time are monumental. These years feel much longer to the adolescent students in our care, and as their teacher, I intend to honor their reality.

Through these letters or at some other point during the year, most of our students struggle or are vulnerable in some way. In my work as a teacher, I try to be as present and supportive for my students as I can be. The challenge and flip-side to this, however, is that it can be emotionally draining. Teachers are often known for bringing their work home with them. While it often looks like a tote bag full of papers, notebooks, or their digital equivalent, it often also looks like an emotional and mental 'hangover' at the end of a day or week.

It is not unusual for teachers to go home and continue to think about their classrooms or curriculum, but more likely their students. When I get home I think about

the varying home lives of students, their parents, their demanding after school activities. I wonder if they will get enough sleep, if they have enough to eat, if they are warm enough in their homes, if there is hot water, or in some instances, any water. I wonder if the amount of time and the content of their time on screens is monitored. I wonder if they are in a healthy home environment, one with healthy foods and well-rounded meals, and free from environmental hazards, cigarette smoke, and alcohol or drug abuse. I wonder if each and every student felt valued at school that day, if they felt seen and heard. Did they eat lunch alone? Did they feel ignored and invisible? Like an outcast? Did anyone say hello to them with a smile? Are they keeping up in their classes or do they feel stupid and inadequate? Do they believe they have true friends and trusted peers?

This emotional drain has been one of the main challenges for me being a teacher, because it often doesn't leave me with much left to give when I get home. The imbalance this can leave me and other teachers feeling is unsustainable. This lack of work-life balance that somehow develops is harmful and detrimental to the pieces of my personal life that fill me back up.

Nash and Jang (2015) paraphrased Freud on his theory that love and work are the “cornerstones” of life and meaning-making in a way that spoke to me and my work as an educator: “The secret to success in teaching is a combination of building good relationships in the classroom and encouraging a commitment on everyone’s part to do exceptional work, both together and separately” (p. 114). In middle school many students struggle with their developing identities and seemingly uncontrollable emotional (and hormonal) roller coasters. Adolescents are at the stage where they begin to question

their parents (along with their parents rules, ideals, morals, etc.) in a mission to develop autonomy and individual identity. Often times as much as adolescents push away, the more they need supportive relationships and structure (they might push back on this idea too). As Mother Teresa is quoted by Nash and Jang (2015), “There is more hunger for love and appreciation in this world than for bread” (p. 71), and I believe as an educator I need to bring love, care, and appreciation to my classroom each day, regardless of personal or professional struggles.

Another characteristic trait of adolescents at one point or another is an apathetic attitude and outlook. Author and holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl (2006) writes about his quest for meaning through his years of suffering in his book *Man’s Search for Meaning*. Although his experience (and that of the other prisoners at Nazi concentration camps) is remarkably different from anything I, or my students, have ever and hopefully will ever experience, some of the ideas about human existence, survival, and suffering can be applied universally to some extent. If taken from Frankl’s (2006) perspective, this adolescent apathy could be viewed as “...a necessary mechanism of self-defense” (p. 28). Although the root of the apathy that concentration camp prisoners experienced was far more brutal, many adolescents experience their own emotional and psychological turmoil, which is its own form of human suffering. As Frankl (2006) discussed the deteriorating effect of apathy on his fellow prisoners, I might also say that any human who loses hope in their future subjects themselves to a downward spiral of lost hope. “The prisoner who has lost faith in the future - his future - was doomed. With his loss of belief in the future, he also lost his spiritual hold; he let himself decline and became subject to mental and physical decay” (Frankl, 2006, p. 74). When students

begin to give up on themselves, they are selling themselves short on what they are capable of.

As their teacher, one of my goals is not only to keep students engaged and motivated, but also to continually help them develop a positive view of and outlook for themselves. While encouraging students gives me purpose, it also requires emotional strength and resilience. As Frankl (2006) reminds us, “everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms - to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way” (p. 66). Or as Buddha says, “We are shaped by our thoughts; we become what we think. When the mind is pure, joy follows like a shadow that never leaves.” If I can build meaningful relationships with my students built on true care, appreciation, and compassion, it is my hope that I may help them navigate their adolescent years with a more constructive attitude about themselves, their capabilities, and their future. In turn, I believe this would be progress toward helping me to have the meaningful career I hope for.

### **2.6.2. Adolescent Suffering: An Unfortunate Reality**

Each and every year, I have multiple students in my classroom who have or are experiencing some kind of trauma in their lives. Not only have some of these students encountered hardship that no person should ever have to endure, but more often our adolescent students are dumped with ‘adult problems’ when they are only pre-teens or teens. In our middle school, our staff does an impressive job of decorating the hallways and even the bathroom stalls with informational and inspirational quotations, readings, and images. One that has stuck with me in particular is, “Don’t judge my story by the

chapter you walked in on” (author unknown). This idea resonates with me not only for the ‘don’t judge a book by its cover’ undertones, but also because of the connection to Scholarly Personal Narrative writing and the intricacies an individual’s story can have. Everyone has a story - many stories - to tell, and just like everyone else, some of the chapters are more pleasant and some more raw and revealing than others.

I believe there is a unique relationship between students and their teachers at this age, because while adolescents are typically trying to find independence from their parents, they often times find comfort and meaning in their relationships with their teachers who, I believe, truly understand who they are and what they are going through as typical adolescents. Over the course of their middle school years, I see my students undergo incredible change and growth, and unfortunately I also see them endure trauma. We, as their teachers, support them as best we can, but there also exists boundaries where we should and should not be involved, or things we should or should not say. Fostering meaningful relationships with my students gives me great purpose and fulfillment as an educator.

*Dear ‘You are not the only one’,*

*I see you are struggling with something, and first and foremost I want you to know that you are not the only one. You are not alone now, you never have been, and you never will be. I do not share this with you to diminish you, your experiences, or your emotions, but instead to shed light on the fact that human suffering is part of each life, in one way or another. We are human: we endure, we survive. Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl (2006) once said, “the ‘size’ of human suffering is absolutely relative” (p. 44), and by this he means that we cannot, and should not, compare our struggles and*

*sufferings to others' in an attempt to keep score. However, acknowledging that trauma and suffering is a universal experience of the human race provides, at least me, some comfort. I once heard a quotation that gave me some perspective, "If we all threw our problems into a pile and saw everyone else's, we'd grab ours back" (Regina Brett). Life will throw things at us that send us so close to our breaking points, it may seem like there is no possibility for recovery - but you can do it. Be flexible and resilient in your mind, body, and soul, and you can find ways to bend, not break. And if you do break, which is also human, there are people (including me) who will help you put yourself back together even stronger than you were before. Trust me, 'you are not the only one' - yes, you may experience suffering and trauma that does not necessarily mirror that of your peers, but the emotions that result are universal. My heart goes out to you, for I too have had these universal emotions of suffering.*

*Like you...many of your classmates have parents who are divorced, leaving them to split their life between two households, often which have different rules, routines, and expectations.*

*Like you...many of your classmates find themselves on various points on the gender spectrum or questioning their sexual orientation. And might I make a blanket-statement that all your classmates are curious about the new, different, and confusing sexual urges and interests that develop in middle school.*

*Like you...many of your classmates struggle with the loss of a parent either physically or mentally, and some may even feel guilty that they're even around - feeling like such an impediment or intrusion on their parents' lives. You and some of your classmates have even lost a sibling, or have come terrifyingly close.*

*Like you...some of your classmates have battled or are battling life-threatening or chronic illnesses. Feeling like you're always missing school for another doctor's appointment, or having to sit on the sidelines of physical education class or recess because your body can't take the strain that day, or you're too scared to risk it.*

*Like you...many of your classmates are perfectionists and are so driven by grades and having the 'right answer' that hearing a teacher preach 'learning for learning's sake' or 'mistakes are learning opportunities' makes you cringe, grow short of breath, and want to burst out in a tantrum. Sometimes you do break down at school, but other times you hold it in until you get home and you come undone. You always seem to hold it together at school so well that we (your teachers) are surprised when your parents inform us, "You don't even know how bad it is at home." It's OK, you don't need to hold your anxious, stressed feelings in, but please, please, please know that we truly believe that learning is a process; remember - we are all human. Writer Anne Lamott (1995) lends some wisdom on perfectionism:*

*Perfectionism means that you try desperately not to leave so much mess to clean up. But clutter and mess show us that life is being lived. Clutter is wonderfully fertile ground - you can still discover new treasures under all those piles...Tidiness suggests that something is as good as it's going to get. Tidiness makes me think of held breath, of suspended animation. (p. 28)*

*Life and learning are about making new discoveries and growing as an individual; we all always have ways we want to improve, it's what make life fun (and yes,*



*sometimes stressful). It's OK to want to tidy up the clutter of life sometimes, but it's also OK to lay that clutter out and see what's under the piles. You will have your achievements and your hardships in life, but please remember we all have clutter we're trying to tuck away before the company shows up.*

*Truthfully yours,*

*Brie*

This quotation from Anne Lamott (1995) about the symbolism behind clutter and tidiness immediately resonates with me. Not only am I reminded of students in my classroom who strive for perfectionism, but I am also reminded of myself and in how challenging I make it to live up to my own expectations. My parents always set high expectations for me, as I have for myself as well. More recently in young adulthood, however, I've found that I either set too many expectations or those that are too high. I take after my dad in that I find it very hard to sit and relax, because there always seems to be another task to be completed. I could always spend more time at work catching up on grading or improving my practice, or there's always another room, nook, or cranny to clean at home, or a weed to pull from the garden.

Not only have I found that I use this busy-bodyness as an avoidance strategy, but I also find that I have been able to use it as an indicator for how anxious I am. The more busy, the more tasks I'm trying to multitask, the more anxious I am. I'll check locks, doors, windows, stove tops, and lights more often. Did I blow out that candle in the living room? Did I leave the iron on? Was the freezer actually open a crack? Is the lid on my coffee mug tight enough? Check, check, check. I waste so much time trying to

make sure everything is in its place that I revv myself up so much and can't focus on the task at hand. When I start to get in these unhealthy rhythms, I remind myself the importance of being present when I'm living and completing these tasks the first time through, that way I can move on with my day. Easier said than done sometimes.

I've come to realize that I'm often 'revved up' when I'm out of balance. There is an energy coursing through my body that needs to find a way out, and if I don't get this energy out in a healthy way, then it will continue to build and eventually spill out in ways that are embarrassing, since they resemble more of a child's tantrum than a coherent young woman. I open these vulnerable windows to myself because of the striking similarities I see with some of my students - these universal feelings of imbalance know no gender or age. I tell my students, 'you are not alone' because I believe that none of us are ever alone, but it takes courage to open up to see the connections.

### **2.6.3. Masks, Armor, and Other Uncomfortable Defenses**

Another student I currently have under my care is beginning to flounder. Now, I don't intend to suggest that this student is doomed to fail, but I'm concerned about the direction his education might be going in his first year of high school and what that implicates for the next several years. Although it is an individual student who prompted my thinking to write this letter, this student's situation is true and universal for many of my students, past and present. In the following letter, I will do my best to respect student anonymity and want to be clear that I am writing from my perspective, with the knowledge that I have, without judgment of situation or circumstance.

*Dear 'student who doesn't fit in the academic box',*

*When you arrived at our school you appeared shy and quiet, yet I think you were also excited. So many new people our regional school has to offer to so many students like you coming from rural central Vermont small towns and small schools. I think your excitement may have worn off quickly when you remembered how you really feel about most of school: afraid. From what I can see in you, and a handful of other students like you, you're afraid of learning, you're afraid of reading, most especially reading out loud. You're afraid of being seen in a classroom because you struggle. Academics have never come easy to you, but I want you to know that you are not alone. Yes, middle school is a time when everyone would rather 'not be seen', and it's a time when you and your classmates are feeling so insecure about yourselves that you all try to mask it with some sort of defense. A favorite author of mine, Brené Brown (2012), calls these defenses 'vulnerability armor', which she defines as,*

*masks and armor...[as] metaphors for how we protect ourselves from the discomfort of vulnerability. Masks make us feel safer even when they become suffocating. Armor makes us feel stronger even when we grow weary from dragging the extra weight around. (p. 113)*

*I don't tell you this because I'm trying to diminish your struggles, but because I want you to know that you are not alone. So many of your classmates wear their own armor, and while it may look different on the outside, you are all in the same army of trying to hide what you believe are imperfections. Many adults do this too, for it's easier to hide out in*

*the armor and the cave, than it is to come face-to-face with our insecurities and uncertainties.*

*Brené Brown (2012) speaks to this armor in adolescence as a time when most people “[start] to try on new and different forms of protection. [Yet] At this tender age, the armor is still awkward and ill fitting” (p. 114). I see, and you probably do as well, that your classmates try on different forms of protection based on the clothes they wear, how they style their hair, the brands they advertise, the way they walk and carry themselves, the comments they make, or any other outward, obvious claims they try to make about themselves and their ‘image’. You may like some of these people and you may not like some of these people, but I bet if you were able to see through their protective armor, you would see a different person. So much of middle school ‘clout’ is dependent on how others see you - I know, I was in middle school once too (we all were). In fact, while I was training become a teacher, I declared that I wanted to teach at the middle level to ‘help make middle school suck just a little bit less for kids’. Now that might not be the most noble aspiration (or ‘teacherly-thing’ to say), but to me it’s a true one. In hindsight, although I found success in school, I remember how awkward and self-conscious I felt **all the time**.*

*Now your situation is different: your family is not financially well-off (and maybe not even comfortable), your academic skill set is quite low, and your parents’ own negative memories or experiences in school have all left you in a position where you feel like you’ve been set-up and dealt a certain hand of cards. In saying all this I in no way mean to demean or criticize you or your family, but instead I feel it is right to honor your truths and your story, albeit from my perspective. You are sitting in the same classroom,*

*collaborating on the same projects, and expected to graduate with the same diploma as students whose situations are much different from yours. But guess what? Despite your hardships, I believe in you. I believe you are capable of much more than you give yourself credit for (another very common trait of adolescents and adults, alike). You have strengths that those other students, the 'haves', actually don't have; you may have been born into a life and family of 'have nots', but please don't dismiss yourself as a 'have nothing'. That vulnerability armor you put on each day hides insecurities, but it can also get in your way, and as Brené Brown (2012) would argue, "most kids have yet to be convinced that the heaviness of the armor or the suffocating nature of a mask is worth the effort" (p. 114). The armor is weighing you down, just as it weighs us all down. The difference is that some people in the world have more supports in place to help pick them up and hold them steady once the armor is shed.*

*You, student who does not fit in the academic box, are unique. As much as I try to tell you 'there are other students just like you, who feel as you do', I must remember that you are an individual and you are uniquely you. Well, so then too are your challenges and your defenses. As Brené Brown (2012) states:*

*our armor and our masks are as individualized and unique as the personal vulnerability, discomfort, and pain we're trying to minimize...Our armor may be custom-made, but certain parts of it are interchangeable. By prying open the doors of the armory, we can expose to daylight the more universal bits and pieces. (p. 114-115)*

*We, humans, all face our own combination of struggles and failures in life, but what often gets forgotten is, “the simple idea that we have a stake in one another, and that what binds us together is greater than what drives us apart” (Obama, 2006, p. 2). We are all hiding something, somewhere, but what might surprise us is how similar we all really are.*

*Please take time to consider what I mentioned to you earlier, that no matter one’s age we all have our own struggles and all wear our own armor to defend ourselves from both our own emotions and truths, and from other people. So I leave you here with my understanding that we all face very different lives, yet our emotions can be universal, even if the scope and weight of our suffering is relative. Finally, in our short time knowing one another, I’d like you to know that you’ve had a great influence on me as an individual and as a student; “No matter who the persons are in our circle of near or far contacts...their influence - their ‘stain’ - will leave its indelible mark on every single one of us...and ours on them” (Nash & Jang, 2015, p. 72).*

*Influenced and stained,*

*Brie*

President Barack Obama’s (2006) concept of the ‘ties that bind us as a human society’ is one of the fundamental components to the value I place on education, and particularly in our public school system in the United States. In our country, and in our world for that matter, we are all connected. We live in a global society. Our public schools are some of the only places in society where people from all walks of life, from

all socioeconomic groups in our communities come together. Our classrooms, our hallways, and school buses are how are children and youth connect with one another, learn about the world both near and far, and develop their own identities. Our children and their education are an investment in our future; therefore, I believe passionately that every student must feel like they have a place in our schools and that their school is the right place for them. This idea brings about another excruciating challenge I've faced with my current profession: I don't feel as though our schools are meeting the needs of all our students. This drive I have to try to meet the needs of all students and to approach challenging situations with empathy, while maintaining and improving my professional practice in an ever-changing institution, is what has brought me here to this thesis.

### CHAPTER 3: SO WHAT?

For some, and even for me some days, there is so little hope in humanity. Who would want to live in the world that it seems like ours is becoming? Our youth are an investment in our future. They will be the ones who determine how our world will evolve and what our world will become; we will be the ones who educate and influence them. I believe we must impart knowledge and understanding of the world, past and present, in order to give hope and inspiration to the future. We teach our students content knowledge and skills, but we also teach and show them how to treat one another. In working as a paraeducator, before becoming a teacher, I slowly came to realize these beliefs. What I wanted to ‘do with my life’ was to connect with people in ways that I could maybe help them improve their lives in ways they wanted to. I wanted to help others find what interests and what motivates them, to help them uncover and discover what gives their life meaning. I wanted to be an educator, a teacher. I wanted to inspire, just as my parents, former teachers and mentors had done for me.

In this chapter, ‘So What?’, I aim to provide insight into the reasons I entered this profession. Beginning with my upbringing, I share the contrasting messages from my parents which has led me into an ethical dilemma. Although I present conflicting stories, I must also highlight that the priority my family placed on education was, and continues to be, the resounding message in my family. It is one of our most common values. This foundational value bundled with the emotional strains of working with adolescents and the challenges of working in a public, evolving institution, as discussed in the previous chapter, are what have brought imbalance to my life. I analyze my current dilemma of trying to find purpose and fulfillment in my career by looking to my family’s core values



and approaching the situation from multiple philosophical perspectives. All in an effort to answer a simple question - 'so what?'.

### **3.1. My Foundation: My Family**

#### **3.1.1. On Loving Your Work: TGIF or TGIM?**

*“Choose a job you love and you’ll never have to work a day in your life.”*

*- Confucius*

For as long as I can remember, my mom has always encouraged me and my sister to find work that we enjoy. She has nearly convinced me that what you do for work should be no other way, and if it’s not bringing you joy, intellectual stimulation, purpose, and intrinsic reward then find something that does. It seems as though she has taken the advice of Confucius in that if you love your work, then it won’t feel much like work. This message from my mom is one I’ve ruminated on in connection to how fulfilled I am by my work. At 32 years old, my mom graduated from nursing school pregnant with my sister. She was embarking on a second career; her first career was as a police officer. I admire her courage in that she was one of the first three women to serve as an officer for the Federal Reserve Bank and Amtrak National Railroad. To this day, she still has pride in her work as a police officer for these two institutions. Upon entering her second career as a nurse, she was a working mom while my sister was young, and loved her work on the orthopedics floor at New England Baptist Hospital and Tufts New

England Medical Hospital in Boston so much that she worked until shortly before I was born. After taking a few years off to be home with me and my sister, she returned to work as a nurse - everything from the Visiting Nurses Association (VNA) doing home visits, to being the school nurse in my middle school. The fact that my mom had the courage to change careers, at about my current age, has given me some food for thought.

She left her work as a police officer because it was no longer practical for her in her life; it wouldn't provide her the lifestyle and balance she sought. When I asked her about this career change recently, she reflected that she had always wanted to be a nurse. I admire her brave decision to change careers; it's not one I'm sure I could make, yet it's one I've considered lately, due to the imbalance I've been experiencing. In the years she was a nurse, I always remember her loving her work. With the VNA she enjoyed connecting with elderly patients through hearing their stories and providing them care and compassionate company while they were mostly homebound. While working in the middle school, she found it exhausting, but regarded it as some of the most rewarding work she had ever done. She connected with her students in ways I, and I'd imagine other school staff as well, always hope to connect with kids. She loved her work; she lived her advice through and through. She is now retired and when I ask her about what she misses most, she is sure to note that she does not miss the early mornings but she absolutely misses the kids. Isn't that the ideal for people who work with our youth? Employees of schools who love the students and all the energy that comes with working in a school environment? If it's why I got into the teaching profession, then why is this career seeming to cause so much imbalance and tension in my life?

### 3.1.2. The True Value of Education

*“Education is something you can always put in your back pocket, that no one can ever take away from you.”*

*- Dan Keefe, my dad*

According to my dad’s philosophy, the route to and definition of success is climbing the ladder of education and career. Based on my research, the noun *career* has only been found to be used as we do today dating back to the 19th century, and before that, in the mid-17th century, it was used as a verb meaning to ‘go fast’ (Merriam Webster, 2016). It even may have roots in Middle French from the 1530s from the word *carriere*, meaning ‘road, racecourse’ (Harper, 2016). His definition of career fits those etymological roots, which in a way contradicts my mom’s. This is not to paint my dad as a non-emotional father, he is very caring and generous with his love. When he inquires about my work, it’s not unusual for him to ask about salary scales, benefits, retirement accounts, and so on. He is logical, and those are the logical pieces of a job; while my mom asks about how I’m enjoying my work, she is emotional, and those are the emotional pieces of a job. They seem to have found themselves on opposite sides of a seesaw, but remember when playing on a seesaw you can only play when the other side balances you out.

My dad is a logical Bostonian. Things are cut and dry, black and white. He’s also a businessman, and there’s no room for emotions when making business decisions. Well, one day he and I applied this strategy to my future, since at the time I was a fresh college graduate. We sat down at our pre-scheduled time at the kitchen table

and went for it. We had a focus and a purpose - there were to be no interruptions; my future was a priority. *Here's a recommendation of mine to any struggling quarter-lifer out there: if your parents are driving you nuts asking you constantly 'what you're doing with your life', request to schedule a meeting with them. Set an agenda or goal for the meeting, along with a time and a place. This helped me separate challenging discussions and comments about my future from my everyday life, and also gave me (and them) time to prepare my thoughts. When it came time to meet I was ready to have the conversation and we were both in a better place emotionally and mentally.*

In retrospect, this process was simple. I still have the half-sheet of paper with my dad's handwriting on it. We made a list of all the possible places I was thinking of moving. There were six locations. We analyzed and ranked them based on various categories including employment, housing, and transportation opportunities; overall appeal and comfort; and skiing. Burlington, Vermont (home of my alma mater) was the winner with, "job - maybe", "housing - maybe", and "comfort zone and affordability - check". It scored 3 stars, while the competing locations earned anything from zero to one and a half stars. This process my dad and I went through to figure out my next steps was a window into his logic for how he seems to make most of his decisions. As I said, he's cut and dry, black and white. Decisions are almost always logical, and emotional factors are quantified.

In my current case, purpose and fulfillment would be considered 'emotional factors'. In terms of work and career, he reminds me on occasion that he pushed the importance of education on me and my sister because he didn't want us to have to work as hard as he has his whole life. He preached that 'education is something you can

always put in your back pocket, that no one can ever take away from you'. I have to laugh at the fact that I sometimes find myself reciting this quote to my students. This dad-ism (which my mom is also a supporter of) has shaped how I view not only my education, but also the importance of education for all - this probably explains why I became a teacher. However, in this moment of questioning my purpose and level of fulfillment I get from my work as an educator, I'm stuck between two of the greatest influences of my life - my parents. The toxic combination of having unfulfilled expectations, feeling unqualified, and experiencing emotional, mental, and physical draining have brought me to a place where I felt compelled to analyze my dilemma of 'should I stay or should I go?'.

### **3.2. Avoiding the “Difficult Dance”**

*“Some days will be passed by putting one foot in front of the other to get through, but others will be filled with joy, every moment worth celebrating.”*

*- Karl Pillemer quoting Jane Hilliard (2011, p. 198)*

I have found myself in a place of transition as a quarter-lifer, and one who is questioning my choice of career. Nancy Slonim Aronie (1998) speaks of transitions in her book *Writing from the Heart*. In her chapter on writing for change, I agree with her that the writing process has made it easier (and harder at times) to examine this transition stage I'm in. Aronie (1998) said, “Transitions are teachers, and yet look how much energy we spend struggling to avoid this difficult dance” (p. 164). I think I've been

putting a lot of energy into avoiding the prospect of transition to a different career, but I have also put a lot of time and energy into thinking about this transition. It has been a process, but change is hard especially when I'm in control. Then again, that brings to mind another piece of wisdom Aronie (1998) brought to us: "control isn't power; it's fear. Real power is letting go" (p. 172). But how do I let go in my current dilemma? In some ways I think 'letting go' would be to truly close my eyes, sit back and imagine the happiest life for myself: What am I doing for work? How am I feeling fulfilled and purpose-filled? Maybe letting go would be making that life a reality as soon as possible. Then again, maybe me trying to control every emotion and stressor in my life is actually the fear that I'm not doing 'life' right. Maybe these are just the ramifications of living in a scarcity culture, as Brené Brown (2012) would call it, that I'm constantly trying to be more and do more, but nothing is ever enough.

Aronie (1998) brings up a good point though, when she said, "*I'm always planning the future. If I'm not fantasizing about the future, I'm commiserating with myself over the past...I'm never here. I'm never now*" (p. 85). And that's something I'm trying to work on: how can I be more present each day, so that I'm present in my life? With SPN writing we focus on the universalizability of the human condition, and I believe this feeling of 'not enough' and these habits of dreaming of the future and dwelling on the past are universal. When we interact with one another are we actually present? Is anyone listening to one another or are we all so focused on the voices and thoughts inside our own heads that we end up drowning each other out? Nancy Slonim Aronie (1998) hit universalizability of the human condition on the head when she said:

All most of us really want is to be loved, to be validated, to be held, to be heard. Maybe our costumes are different, maybe our interests are different, maybe our tortures were different. But the human condition is always the same. We want recognition. We want to be able to be who we are. We want to be real. (p. 98)

This is what we all crave as humans. We crave this from one another, yet why do we sell ourselves and our fellow humans short?

### **3.3. Decision Making through Philosophy**

*“How do you ever know for certain that you are doing the right thing?”*

*- Anthony Doerr (2014, p. 76)*

My first introduction to SPN writing was in a course with Robert J. Nash and Jennifer J.J. Jang titled, ‘Ethics of Helping Relationships’, and in reality it was also what felt like my first true introduction to ethics and philosophy in my career. Through reading Nash’s (2002) book, *“Real-World” Ethics: Frameworks for Educators and Human Service Professionals*, discovering and sharing our ‘moral languages’, and presenting our own ethical dilemmas to the class, we were able to dissect and analyze various dilemmas and philosophical viewpoints in order to gain a more holistic, understanding perspective.

Nash (2002) has identified three moral languages: the first is based on our background beliefs (my family and upbringing), the second is grounded in our character

(who I have become as an adult shaped by my influential communities), and the third stands on the principles of our institutions (ethical framework of the public education system). As Nash (2002) shares, moral languages can be used, “to show students that they can employ at least three distinct and cumulative vocabularies...when discussing controversial ethical issues and dilemmas and that each vocabulary provides a unique, and valuable, model for investigating, and resolving, ethical conflicts” (p. 28). While we may never know with certainty that we are ‘doing the right thing’, through ethical and philosophical analysis I believe I can at least gain a deeper understanding of who I am and where I stand as a moral and ethical person and professional.

The ethical dilemma I present here is whether I should stay in the teaching profession or leave. Each of the moral languages are present in my analysis as I look through several philosophical lenses. It is not only the core dilemma (stay or leave) that makes this challenging, but also the inherent conflicts that exist between my moral languages. These inherent conflicts, however, are within all of us and they are what make us complex, real human beings. I agree with Nash (2002) in that, “ethical dilemmas are objectively present to us - outside us - in the sense that they always involve others...[but] ethical conflicts are also subjective - inside us - in that we each bring a unique center of reference” (p. 37). As an educator, much of the work we do involves this braided intricacy of trying to balance the interpersonal ‘outside us’ reality with intrapersonal ‘inside us’ reality. Through my ethical and philosophical analysis that follows, I aim to provide personal and professional insight into my dilemma of whether to stay or leave my career, all in an effort to find fulfillment, purpose, and balance.



### 3.3.1. Balance and Egoism

As I've begun to analyze my work and my life and the balance that exists, or doesn't exist, between the two, I approach this analysis from multiple perspectives, all of which I will try to explain and play with here. When I think about things I like about my job and things I don't like about my job, it can be hard to tell which list is longer. Attempting to quantify factors that are 'unquantifiable' is challenging, especially when emotions are at play, since emotions fluctuate and are complex. Yes, there are some things that are just a part of life: waking up early, having people to report to, and work to do. Those things are just part of being employed in the working world. How I would love to spend each minute of every day doing just as I wanted...doing whatever struck my mood. But isn't that what vacation is for? Are weekends and vacations savored and valued so dearly because of their inherent wonderfulness? Is it because they provide the necessary balance to the work week? If I could always read, cook, lounge, exercise, garden, and be creative wouldn't that get old after a while? I think it would. Would I be living by the rules of egoism in choosing to live my life this way?

The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy defines the philosophical theory of *egoism* as, "the theory that one's self is, or should be, the motivation and the goal of one's own action." If by choosing to spend my days acting in my own, and only in, my self-interests, how far could I really get? By the same token, I also aim to live a comfortable lifestyle and being unemployed to serve my own self-interests wouldn't support that, for obvious reasons. When taking egoism to analyze whether or not to stay in my current job, I think egoism would lead me in the direction of leaving my job and seeking a profession in which I found more pleasure. But where I get confused is when I

question: what would my condition be if I didn't have the security of my current employment? How would or could that affect my egoistic, self-pleasure-seeking mission? This idea of maximizing good outcomes and results plays into utilitarian ideas as well.

### **3.3.2. Utilitarianism**

*Utilitarianism* is "...concerned primarily with the results or purposes of an activity" (Nash, 2002, p. 113), and thus, it is a form of *consequentialism*, meaning it focuses on the results and/or outcomes of a decision (the consequences). Utilitarians seek to maximize good and pleasurable effects or outcomes over bad, unpleasurable ones, to produce "the greatest balance of good over evil" (Nash, 2002, p. 113). When using utilitarianism to assess a scenario or decision, it can be used both with self-interest in mind and with the interests of a group in mind. In looking at my work as a teacher from a utilitarian perspective I consider my choice of staying in the profession or leaving the profession based on its consequences to me and my partner (self-interest) versus the consequences to my students and colleagues (the group). Before I dive into these ideas, I do want to point out a big flaw I see in this theory: the future is unpredictable, and in my situation I'm not convinced I have a full understanding of the consequences or outcomes.

First I will analyze my situation with my own self-interests (and by proxy my partner's interests) in mind. If I choose to stay in the profession of teaching, I may continue to be unsatisfied and frustrated with my work, leaving me feeling unfulfilled and unbalanced. This has a negative effect on my personal relationships, especially my relationship with my partner (future husband). However, if I choose to stay in the

profession of teaching, I will maintain a schedule and lifestyle that fits my current needs and desires - I have a predictable schedule, including generous vacation time, and a respectable salary. Staying will also meet my potential future needs and desires, since I plan on having children and a schoolteacher's schedule lends itself well to having time with family. In addition, continuing in this profession will allow me to stay in a field my family and I believe in at its core; I believe an equal education is a right to all citizens. In regards to the emotional impact on my personal life, this could be remedied by continuing my attempts to separate work life and home life to maintain a healthy balance.

However, the idea of feeling unfulfilled by my work is a larger challenge in my view. I hunger for a meaningful and purposeful career. I wonder if by staying in this profession I'll be able to work toward finding meaning and purpose, yet I also fear the unknown...what if I change careers and end up still feeling unfulfilled? This is not to discount the fact that I do feel satisfied and motivated by my work, but it just seems like there should be more. From a utilitarian perspective, if I stay in my current position the benefits of the known outweigh the benefits of the unknown. I fear that if I in fact leave my current position, then the consequences might leave me worse off than if I stayed. If I leave, the potential consequences could range from: a less ideal schedule and salary for my lifestyle, unknown emotional stress on me and my partner, and unknown fulfillment and purpose.

To analyze my situation with the interests of the 'group' in mind, I have decided to define the group as the people who I work with at school, both students and colleagues. To keep with the utilitarian view, I should make my decisions based on

producing the ‘maximum benefit for the group.’ If I choose to stay in my current position, then my colleagues and students would continue to benefit from, what I believe, to be a relatively good teacher. Yes, there are many days when I doubt this, but overall I believe I am a reliable, trustworthy, intelligent educator who works hard and has a sound moral compass. I also hold onto the hope that once I gain more confidence in my work, then I will have more mental energy and time to explore new approaches and strategies to teaching that could make my work more purposeful, rewarding, and exciting, not to mention better meet the needs of all students. Colleagues and students would continue to benefit from my dedication to education, which may not be the case with whoever I am replaced with - but that’s an unknown consequence, which can’t be analyzed any further, and that would be out of my control regardless. On the direct teams of teachers I work with, we all typically work well together, and for them, I believe me staying is a benefit. Again, an unknown consequence is who would replace me (maybe this person would be better or worse), but in the end, hiring a new employee requires time and effort from many people, which I would categorize as a negative to the group. All that said, I think the maximum benefit to the group would be me staying in my current position, that is, unless my work and commitment begins to suffer due to feeling unfulfilled and unbalanced. Yet on the upside, by staying in my current position I could gain skills and motivation, hopefully along with respect from my administration and colleagues to make meaningful adjustments in my classroom or on the teams I work with. Maximizing the group benefit in a utilitarian sense, also reminds me of a deontological perspective.

### 3.3.3. Deontology: Duty and Service

*Deontology*, also known as ‘duty-based ethics’ is grounded in the idea of what is right versus what is wrong, and as Nash (2002) writes, “for [deontologists], right and wrong are known or perceived apart from any consideration of their consequences” (p. 112). Contrary to utilitarianism, since deontology does not take into account consequences or outcomes that result from a decision or action, it is a form of *non-consequentialism*. While I think a benefit of deontology is that it understands the future is unpredictable, seeing as it doesn’t consider outcomes or consequences, I also see that as a drawback because deontologists are *absolutists*. According to Nash (2002), “Deontologists appeal to certain rules and principles as being good in themselves...[which] are valid independently of whether or not they produce benefits or maximize good consequences” (p. 112). Therefore, deontologists make decisions based on their absolute moral and ethical views, even if it could produce a less favorable result.

To take the deontologist perspective, one of my absolute beliefs is that education is one of the greatest assets a person can have; education opens more doors than anything else. This belief also leans on a maxim my dad instilled in me, in that education is something you can ‘put in your back pocket’ and take anywhere. To continue with my current career I would be continuing to promote these views in my work with students. Since I believe education, and working hard at that education, has such a powerful role in succeeding in life and in our society, one of the best places I can put those ideas to work is in a classroom. Whether my work has an effect on individual students or not, it is my duty to do this work because I believe in it so strongly. Since deontology is a non-consequentialist theory, whether or not students take this view on

education and run with it should not affect my decision. Another, and in this case conflicting, belief I have is one instilled in me by my mom, ‘love what you do for work.’ If I were to make decisions about my career based on this value, then I think I would need to proclaim ‘TGIM!’ (Thank God it’s Monday!) more often than ‘TGIF!’ (Thank God it’s Friday!). If I had to place bets, TGIM is a phrase I have never uttered...TGIF, on the other hand, I declare as a weekly ritual. Therefore, from a deontological perspective, I’m caught in the middle of my dilemma once again.

As a young woman, I frequently look for strong females leaders in my life, the world, or in history for motivation and encouragement. In *The Autobiography of Eleanor Roosevelt* (1961), I find a bulk of inspiration. Since this work was originally published in 1961, there are some pieces I don’t relate to, courtesy of the shift in gender norms and roles in our society over the past 50-plus years. However, more often than not, I find her personal narratives intriguing and her fierce determination and leadership admirable. Roosevelt (1961) shared that:

duty was perhaps the motivating force of my life, often excluding what might have been joy or pleasure. I looked at everything from the point of view of what I ought to do, rarely from the standpoint of what I wanted to do. There were times when I almost forgot that there was such a thing as wanting anything. (p. 66)

I believe this quotation captures one of the large themes of her life’s work; she worked tirelessly for decades for others and with the well-being of others at the forefront. In this sense, I believe many of Eleanor Roosevelt’s views and decisions were

made from the perspective of deontology and altruism. She was a deontologist in the sense that her commitment to her duty guided her life, and she was an altruist in that she often sought to help others and their condition over helping herself.

The duty I feel I have to educate young people also aligns with the fulfillment I get from serving others. Just as Eleanor Roosevelt felt purposeful by leading a life of duty and service, I do as well. Working in a 'helping' or 'giving' profession is its own form of public service. While this service can be what results in feeling unbalanced between work and life, it is also what give us purpose in these fields. Following is a brief anecdote about one of my first experiences serving others. On these service trips, my needs for purpose and fulfillment were met and exceeded through community-building and teamwork.

*I first tasted Lima beans in Nashville, Tennessee. I discovered what the geographic form of an isthmus is in Madison, Wisconsin. I felt the impact of service on these two Alternative Spring Break trips during my junior and senior years of college. Me, my co-leader, and eight undergraduate participants all squished in a twelve-passenger van and embarked on two days of driving - one trip to the south, and one trip to the west. In Nashville, I saw what racial and socioeconomic divisions looked like in a city that might as well have been foreign to me. The Cumberland River separated the glitz and grooves of downtown Nashville from the Martha O'Brien Center (located in the middle of a sprawling, low-income housing neighborhood) where we did our service work each day. This community center found work for us wide-eyed Vermont students to do for*

*the short week we were there. Although they most likely had a tight budget, they fed us lunch each day - that's when I tried those Lima beans for the first time.*

*We stayed in a church outside the city, where the 'boys' were instructed to stay in one room and the 'girls' in another. We only had one male on our trip, my co-leader, so instead of ostracizing him we broke that one rule. Our first day on the job at the community center, the staff advised us to make sure we left each evening before dusk, as they did not want us in the area once it was dark out. That rule, we did not break. One evening at the church, we helped the parishioners prepare cots for dozens of homeless men who were offered a warm place to sleep once a week in the wintertime. We assisted in the preparation and serving of the meal, and then ate as a large community.*

*In Madison, we bonded as a team by walking out on the frozen lake and by exiting the circular state house out the wrong door - to walk in the direction of the lake to guide you back to your lodging when staying on an isthmus is not the most reliable method. We volunteered with Habitat for Humanity, where I learned the challenging work of putting up drywall (especially with a group of unskilled laborers). However, meeting the family whose house you're helping to build - now that's pretty neat.*



## CHAPTER 4: NOW WHAT?

As I look forward and address the ‘Now What?’ question, I focus on the future and what I can do to achieve purpose and fulfillment in my work. First, I outline what I believe are the elements of a foundational learning community by reflecting on an influential community of mine, examining Daniel Pink’s (2009) theory on intrinsic motivation, and highlighting the importance of fostering a love for learning in our students. Then, I address practices and beliefs that I believe are essential to building strong communities, as well as key to helping me balance my work and life to provide me with fulfillment and purpose in both.

### 4.1. Elements of a Foundational Learning Community

*“If you cut corners now, you’ll cut corners the rest of your life.”*

*- Duane Ford, Director of Leadership at Holderness School*

In high school, I can remember feeling like I had purpose as a student. I was a contributing member to my school community, that I not only valued but felt like it also valued me in return. I was fortunate to be able to attend a private boarding school in north-central New Hampshire called Holderness School. My four years there gave me tenets, morals, and experiences that still guide me today. Some of the beliefs of the school community that continue to shape my work and life today are, ‘do what you know is right, even if no one is looking’, and ‘if you cut corners now, you’ll cut corners the rest

of your life'. (The latter started as a way to keep students from wearing away at the grass on the edges and corners of the pathways, but turned into a metaphor for life.)

There were also the expectations of work-ethic and respect instilled in us: we were expected to hold a 'job' and we were expected to treat each human being with dignity and respect. We had to find balance between our student-job, our studies, and our athletics - we learned how to work hard and have self-discipline by living our reality. We treated one another with respect by saying 'hello' when we crossed paths with one another - not only just saying 'hi', but actually looking at one another and addressing the person by their name. As small a detail as using someone's name is, it is a huge step for community building and belonging. I remember feeling both invisible as a first-year student and simply known as "Ally's little sister". If I could just make it to class on time, with everything I needed, that would be a good day. But then a teacher or older student would say, "Good morning, Brie!" and suddenly I mattered just a little bit more. There was no hiding among the 270 students. I felt like I was an important member of our community, just as I saw everyone else as important. I was a partner in my community and my education.

My four years at Holderness not only helped shape my individual character, but it also showed me what it looked like to be an invested educator. Yes, most of my teachers (who were also advisors, coaches, dorm parents, etc.) lived on campus, but even still they worked excruciating hours and were seemingly always available for their students. I can't even imagine being in their shoes, yet in my memory they were always enthusiastic, prepared, inquisitive, and compassionate. The expectations they held for us, their students, were high, and as much as they pushed us to achieve on our own, they were also

incredibly supportive. Just when I felt like I couldn't balance one more thing, I knew I had a support network that was bound strong with my family and my teachers. In college and in my current career I have achieved success because of the high expectations, grounding ideals, and unstoppable support network. While I can't completely recreate the teacher-student relationships I so cherished through my Holderness days (and as a alumna), I can at least strive to embody the types of teachers that were influential to me and guided me through my adolescence.

#### **4.1.1. Intrinsic Motivation**

*“education needs to have both extrinsic and intrinsic value in order for it to be relevant, holistic, and potentially transformative.”*

*- Robert J. Nash & Jennifer J.J. Jang (2015, p. 109)*

Daniel Pink (2009), author of *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*, has developed an interesting theory about the intrinsic motivation that pushes me, and many others, forward through my most challenging moments, days, and weeks. Pink (2009) identifies three types of motivation: ‘Motivation 1.0’ is the drive to meet basic human survival needs; ‘Motivation 2.0’ depends on carrots and sticks, or rewards and punishments, to motivate individuals; and ‘Motivation 3.0’ relies on the motivation that builds from within and intrinsically rewards us to keep going. He argues that it's time for our society, including our institutions, businesses, and schools, to start recognizing, harvesting, and encouraging Motivation 3.0. In my interpretation, he believes it's the only type of motivation that has stamina and endurance, which I agree.

The three essential elements to Motivation 3.0 are autonomy, mastery, and purpose. *Autonomy*, Pink (2009) believes, is our ‘default setting’ as humans - we naturally want to be self-directed. Humans need autonomy in four essential areas: task (what is done), time (when it is done), team (who you work with), and technique (how you do it) (Pink, 2009, ch. 4). *Mastery* requires engagement, and engagement is a key component of Motivation 3.0 - mastery is the drive to get better at something and make progress (Pink, 2009, ch. 5). Pink (2009) also identifies three rules of mastery: 1. Mastery requires a growth-mindset; 2. Mastery requires grit and intentional practice, and; 3. Mastery is an ‘asymptote’, meaning, “It’s impossible to fully realize, which makes it simultaneously frustrating and alluring” (p. 223). Finally, *purpose*, is grounded in the idea that humans seek to have meaning and that they want to be part of something greater than themselves, contributing to the greater good (Pink, 2009, ch. 6). Not only do I identify intrinsic motivation as the reason I continue to work in the field of education, but from my perspective, I also believe that true student ownership of learning looks and sounds a lot like Motivation 3.0.

With the emphasis on education I grew up with, particularly ‘mastery’ in Pink’s (2009) words, I wish for all students to possess the drive and engagement to improve - and I would argue that all humans have that drive to improve oneself, if given the opportunity. Unfortunately, for various reasons, not all students display this drive or are able to access it. Maybe it’s due to insecurities, perceived shortcomings, or lack of self-confidence, which for middle school students is entirely possible. At the same time though, I also believe we could be providing students with learning environments more conducive to harboring and accessing their intrinsic motivation.

After school one evening, a colleague and I were casually discussing our visions and beliefs when it comes to our school and how that fits - or doesn't fit - with the current national and state models for public education, particularly at the middle level. The curious part to our conversation was that we didn't necessarily talk about any specifics, yet we both agreed that the schools we believe will best meet the needs of students don't yet exist. In these moments, lives small bursts of passionate energy for the work we do. A group of colleagues and I are working to try to 'get there' - to that school of our dreams - but we don't know just where it is, exactly, we are trying to 'get'. In these early stages, however, many of us believe that we need to figure out how to get students intrinsically motivated. The inherent challenge here is that intrinsic motivation, quite obviously, must come from within each individual student - it cannot be fed or maintained from an outside source. I believe the three components of Pink's Motivation 3.0 are some of the first steps we can take to provide students with a personalized, enriching, and meaningful education that they will feel invested in. Intrinsic motivation is what drives my quest for purpose and fulfillment.

#### **4.1.2. Learning as a Lifelong Pursuit**

In an effort to help build intrinsic motivation in our students, I think we need to be cautious in our efforts to help students develop skills, practices, and habits to be sure we are not robot-icizing learning. Yes, there are many valuable skills and qualities in school and in life, whether it be as an employee, citizen, community or family-member. But we cannot lose sight of the importance of developing learners who are interested in learning

and want to continue to be thinkers and seekers of knowledge when they leave our classrooms. As the author of *Joy: A Subject Schools Lack*, Susan Engel (2015) states,

Decades of research have shown that in order to acquire skills and real knowledge in school, kids need to want to learn...you can't force a person to think carefully, enjoy books, digest complex information, or develop a taste for learning. To make that happen, you have to help the child find pleasure in learning - to see school as a source of joy.

I believe an essential moment to help students find enjoyment in learning is in middle school - it might be the “last best chance” to reach them, states Penny Bishop, University of Vermont middle level education professor and director of the Tarrant Institute (Univ. of Vermont, 2014). To think more positively and with the adolescent learner in mind, our middle school students are growing into their own individual selves during the years they are in our classrooms. We need to harness their interests and use their skills to partner with them to make learning engaging and enjoyable.

As Michelle Obama was quoted by Slevin (2015), ““When you’ve worked hard and done well and walked through that doorway of opportunity, you do not slam it shut behind you. No. You reach back, and you give other folks the same chances that helped you succeed”” (p. 320). While I cannot provide my students with all the opportunities I had as a child, what I can provide them with is a teacher who cares about learning for learning’s sake, who wants to model and hopefully impart that belief on her students. I find a lot of meaning in my life from seeking and learning new information, and I hope I model this for my students as well.

## **4.2. Building Strong Communities**

### **4.2.1. Classrooms as Ecosystems**

When I think of my classroom of learners and reflect on learning communities I've been a part of in my life, I see them as diverse, compelling places, thus I present the metaphor: a classroom is like an ecosystem. When I teach my science students about ecosystems, we speak of the biotic (living or once-living) factors and the abiotic (never living) factors, as well as how these factors interact with one another. In learning communities, there are living, breathing organisms, and there are non-living, abiotic factors. Some of the biotic factors in classrooms are the students, the teacher, support staff, and in my classroom, the plants. Then there are the abiotic factors: the furniture, the air and circulation, the temperature, and the lighting. At a basic level, these are some of the factors in our classroom ecosystem, all of which interact in one way or another. These ideas could be expanded further, particularly because humans are dynamic beings who had life experiences before entering the classroom and will have life experiences once again upon leaving the classroom. Each individual experiences a different home life, diet, health, sleep habits, relationship with school, social experiences, and so on. Each individual brings their own unique experience to our classroom ecosystem, which gives us biodiversity.

Biodiversity in ecosystems is an indicator of an ecosystem's strength, health and resilience - diversity and individuality in our classrooms provides for rich discussions and strength as a community of learners. However, in the process of building and maintaining a classroom community, there are challenges - disagreement, self-consciousness, fear, lack of motivation, disinterest and disengagement. These are the

threats, these are the invasive species to our ecosystems. Efforts to build strong communities discussed in this section, like celebrating success, practicing patience, cooperation, empathy, and compassion, and valuing diverse communities, are the tools to combat these threats and invasive species. These are the efforts I aim to commit to in order to move forward in my career while maintaining balance and finding purpose and fulfillment. In addition, we must always remember that we, both students and educators, are whole beings - separating our hearts and minds is a disservice and a threat to teaching and learning. As Palmer (1998) states:

heart and mind work as one in our students and in ourselves. They cannot be treated separately, one by the professor, the other by the therapist. When a person is healthy and whole, the head and the heart are both-and, not either-or, and teaching that honors that paradox can help make us all more whole. (p. 64)

#### **4.2.2. Taking a Moment to Pause and Celebrate**

Clearly, I'm someone who needs purpose and needs to feel fulfilled. Work gives me that to some extent. And working as a teacher, it also gives me several weeks each summer to be able to do as I choose and as I wish most every day. Having more freedom during my summers and weekends is one of the advantages I see in being a teacher. It's probably not the most respectable benefit of my work, but it's surely something that I value. I find I need the time to rejuvenate during the summer months, whether that be enrolling in summer courses or conferences to connect with other educators, or taking the mental and physical space away from my demanding work in order to feel refreshed and



motivated. There's also a special sense of accomplishment at the end of each school year. At my school, all the middle school teachers line up along the stairwell and high-five all the middle schoolers on their way out the door on the last day of school. We high-five because we all just accomplished something great and measurable - we all made it through another year of hard work, we all made progress, and at the end of the year on a beautiful warm June day it's now time to celebrate and relax for a little while.

This feeling of 'surviving' another school year is as much about 'surviving' as it is about 'transitioning'. Not only is the minute-by-minute planning and grading done for a few months, but what a relief and feeling of achievement that we successfully brought students through another year of learning. When I look back at all the work my students accomplished and the hardships they endured, the resilience they displayed is incredible. Seeing previous students is rewarding because you can see how they continue to grow, and I like to think I had something (maybe even just a little thing) to do with their success. I helped build their work ethic, their self-respect, their kindness, their good humor, their empathy and compassion.

We humans, we're all in the works - none of us are done. The end of the school year marks an accomplishment for our students and the beginning of a transition for our students. As author Nancy Slonim Aronie (1998) writes, "Transition is the shedding of the snakeskin. You don't hear the snake saying, 'I can't let go of the whole thing. I just need to keep a little clump - just in case.' Nature has the thing designed to perfection" (p. 163). In this way, most students are masters of transitions. I, as their teacher, value the 'clean-cutness' of the end of a school year; however, transitions can also feel more like "those in-between places where you've got one foot in the old life, and one foot poised -

but not quite set down - in the new life. Transition is the gray..." (Aronie, 1998, p. 163). As someone who is always seeking to improve and explore, sometimes life feels like one big transition grey zone. But to live a static life is not a life fully-lived. We continue to explore the world through our experiences and opportunities, whatever they may be. We are all shaped in a unique individual way - no two collections of stories or experiences are the same, yet the ties that bind us and the threads of connection that link us together through these stories is remarkable.

I find that I don't take enough moments to celebrate our collective and individual accomplishments in school. Yes, I give positive, encouraging feedback to students on an ongoing basis, but to actually take pause and celebrate? That doesn't happen as often as it should - it's usually more like, "Yay! We made it to vacation week!" versus "Wow! Look at what we've accomplished and learned over the last six weeks!". This is one area where I feel I have some level of control when it comes to finding purpose in the work I do.

I believe in a teaching model where students have more voice and choice in what they learn, how they learn it, and how they show what they've learned. I dream of a classroom where students can pursue their areas of interest. Where students are researching and seeking information about a specific topic; where they are working either to solve a problem or to develop a project that has meaning for them as learners. Students could work on a common theme or on common skills, but there could be more flexibility. In this type of education model, I see the teacher as more of a coach and guide, and much less prone to falling into habits of 'stand and deliver' - habits where I feel purposeless and unfulfilled. I believe it is progressive changes like these that would

not only give my work more meaning, but hopefully also give my students more purpose in and ownership of their own education.

#### **4.2.3. Patience and Cooperation**

Working with adolescents and in a field prone to change and transitions requires patience. My belief in the importance of patience lies in my former peer's definition, "to allow space and time for action" and that to have patience for yourself is to care for yourself, and to have patience for others is a way to care for others. In addition, the concept that time is fluid has helped me see how essential having patience with *practicing* patience is. If in my daily life I can practice small acts of patience, I will thereby live a lifestyle where patience is part of it. I may not be patient every moment of every day, but if I consciously do my best to care for myself and others in this way, then those 'puddles' of patience will eventually add up to a pond, and then hopefully an ocean of patience. To have patience with someone or with someone's actions requires care, compassion, and/or love for that person. I must have patience in the balancing act between work and life.

Our students arrive at our school in seventh grade - right in the midst of the largest developmental shifts humans experience outside of the changes from birth to two years old. We impart a transition on them when they can handle it and cope with it the least. Their bodies and brains are undergoing transitions they don't understand - their hormones have usurped control over their physical, social, emotional, and developmental selves. There are many different school arrangements in regards to how the grades are organized, and different models work better for meeting different community needs. Yet

regardless of how students and schools are organized, I believe we (educators) need to continually practice and model patience with and for our students.

I agree with the Dalai Lama (2011) in that we need to use moral discernment to assess how our actions affect ourselves and others, as discussed in *Beyond Religion: Ethics for a Whole World*. I need to consider how the actions I take to support students will affect them. The Dalai Lama (2011) also believes (as do I), that we should take those actions which will result in the greatest good, because by tailoring our actions towards those that cause the greatest good and away from those that cause the greatest harm, our behaviors will eventually be those that result in more good than bad - utilitarianism, anyone?

I have found that I need to consider the perspective of others when approaching a challenging situation or ethical dilemma, like working with challenging students or debating my choice of profession. As the Dalai Lama (2011) referenced, if you can look at problems from a broader perspective then you can approach the problem with a calmer affect. Humans are not able to see situations from every perspective, but if I can have patience and compassion for my students and my colleagues (and even myself) to hear where they are coming from, then we will all be able to work together more cohesively. These perspectives may not always result in the same preferred course of action, but it is necessary to at least understand and see where the others are coming from. If I disagree with a person's action, I believe it is essential to remember that it's the action I don't care for, not the individual. And for the sake of inserting some humor here, I am often baffled and perplexed at the 'disagreeable actions' middle schoolers sometimes take.

### **4.3 Valuing Diverse Communities: The Importance of Empathy and Compassion in Schools**

*“We need good relationships to celebrate the wholeness in the best of times, to help hold the pieces together in the worst of times, and to simply be together during the times in between.”*

*- Robert J. Nash & Jennifer J.J. Jang (2015, p. 85)*

Even in the small world that is my classroom, or even in my advisory group of a dozen students, we are a community. There are times in these small communities when we agree, when we share the same vision and purpose, while other times we disagree or we see things from a different perspective. Regardless of our condition, I try to model patience, compassion, trust, and empathy for my students. To be honest, when my life feels out-of-balance, when I'm frustrated with my dissatisfaction with my work, or when I'm feeling unfulfilled and purposeless these values and practices of mine get lost. That's when I know I'm out of touch and ungrounded. But students also have their own values, practices, and beliefs - each and every one of them. This mosaic of perspectives and personal stories mirrors the world around us, which is why I believe cooperation is vitally important. I encourage my students to cooperate and collaborate almost daily. I believe that in order to find genuine success in most things I do, professionally or personally, there must be empathy, compassion, and cooperation.

Schools are a unique place in society where people from across the socioeconomic spectrum in communities come together to collaborate and learn, to make mistakes and improve, and to discover or grow their identities that are as complex and

individual as each one of them. Specifically, the middle school students I work with are at the age where they are beginning to develop into individuals with their own views and opinions on issues, while questioning their families' rules and expectations. I believe working in this 'cross-section of society' provides me with the opportunity to use it as fertile ground for how we want to educate and shape our society. Our children are the future citizens of our country and of our increasingly global, interconnected world - a society and world that grows in diversity each and every day. Some days it seems there are more things that divide us in our small and large communities than things that unite us; those are the challenging days. Yet there are other times when these relationships and community ties are strong and united; those are the encouraging days.

In times of challenge and encouragement alike, I believe the most important practices we must have are compassion and empathy. I refer to these as *practices*, because they are just that, similar to the *practice* of patience. Although in their basic sense they reference how we treat other people, they also go beyond that. They are not the easiest things, which is why we must practice compassion and empathy as often as possible to build stronger, more resilient communities. Kindness breeds kindness.

As reinforced by the Dalai Lama in *Beyond Religion* (2011), not everyone holds the same moral values and beliefs; however, I believe that there can be cooperation without a universal moral code. In my interpretation, *universal moral code* is the concept that all humans would accept and follow the same moral values and beliefs. Considering all the different cultures and religions in the world, I struggle with the idea of constricting everyone to one set of universal moral values. While I do believe it is acceptable for our small classroom and school communities to hold everyone to a certain set of norms for

respect, I also value the diversity in perspectives that we can encourage our students to have and express. As the Dalai Lama (2011) states, “at the very heart of cooperation is the principle of taking into account the interests and welfare of others...But there can be no room for complacency” (p. 86). To be complacent is to be unable or unwilling to “find the truth in what you oppose [and]...the error in what you espouse” (Nash, 2002, p. 26). To be *complacent* is defined as, “marked by self-satisfaction especially when accompanied by unawareness of actual dangers or deficiencies” (Merriam Webster, 2016). If you can’t even be aware of and recognize a potential defect or deficiency of your own, how can you begin to cooperate with others? If you can’t recognize some of the limitations of your own perspectives, how can you begin to see the breadth and depths of others’?

## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

### 5.1 Reframing: Finding my Identity and Teaching Philosophy

*“Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It’s not.”*

*- Dr. Seuss (1971)*

While I wouldn’t argue that I’ve started a movement in the institution of public education, I have found myself planted and growing in our learning community at a time of change and transition, which some may argue is constant in this field. Maybe it’s my naivety, but I’ve taken the prospect of change on and tried to embrace it. As Parker Palmer (1998) noted, “People who start movements do so not because they hate an institution but because they love it too much to let it descend to its lowest form” (p. 170). We, as a nation, have been ‘tinkering’ with our public education system for decades, yet as discussed in Chapter 2 of this thesis, not much has changed. This simple fact that many of our traditional public schools are relicts of the industrial era is evidence enough for me to join the movement in an effort to limit the continuation of this ‘educational tradition’. The ‘just the way schools are’ approach to keeping education the same is, to me, allowing our educational system to descend to a lower form. Using the opening Dr. Seuss (1971) quotation in this section as motivation, if I don’t care, then nothing is going to change - whether that’s change in my classroom, my school, or in Vermont education. But if I do care, which I hope it’s clear that I do, maybe education will change - and if that starts with one student or one classroom, then that’s more



progress than not. At the outset of this process of me-searching and re-searching for this thesis, it wasn't clear to me that I cared enough, but it is now.

This mission of mine to finding a purposeful and fulfilling career, while maintaining balance between my professional and personal lives, has allowed me to explore my identity and teaching philosophy in ways that I don't think I would have been able to do had I not embarked on the journey of writing an SPN thesis. By reflecting on my foundations and experiences in education, sharing vulnerable personal stories, and defining my beliefs on education and the role of the teacher, I have been provided the opportunity to find my identity as an educator, which leaves me feeling grounded, confident, and balanced. According to Palmer (1998), "understanding my identity is the first and crucial step in finding new ways to teach: nothing I do differently as a teacher will make any difference to anyone if it is not rooted in my nature" (p. 71). With this in mind, when I embrace new ways to teach, connect, or learn, I now have a place - 'my nature', my identity - to find a rootedness that has not always been available or even in existence.

In my first couple of years teaching, I was routinely overwhelmed at this idea that I was expected to continually improve in what seemed like all facets of my life - I was plagued by living in what Brené Brown (2012) has coined as a 'scarcity culture', where nothing (including me) is ever 'enough'. Now in my fourth year of teaching, I have slowly come to realize that this concept of always try to improve in some way can be healthy, and I believe may even prevent calcification of my teaching strategies and professional growth - it will help me to continue to have purpose in the work I do. Yes, initiatives still overwhelm me, but I have found a new reality that has provided some

relief. As Parker Palmer (1998) shares, “while we are in transit, we are not very good at what we are doing. En route to a new pedagogy, there will be days when we serve our students poorly, days when our guilt only deepens” (p. 132). While the goal remains to improve our teaching practice to help all students learn, what a relief to hear that it’s nearly a universal reality that sometimes our experiments in teaching go poorly. Even just recently at a professional conference for Vermont middle-level educators, I was able to see and hear the universal challenges, struggles, stories, and successes that my peers across the state experience. I couldn’t help but think - we’re all in this together; we’re all seeking fulfillment.

Continued participation in professional communities is the final piece to my puzzle to finding purpose and fulfillment in the work I do. My efforts to be an involved professional have helped me stay current in Vermont middle-level education and provided me with motivation to try new strategies and take risks - all in an effort to provide the best education I can to my students. Trying something new or different in the classroom is intimidating and can put educators in a vulnerable position - we are putting ourselves out there with and for our students. Our successes are public, and so are our failures. There may be times when resources, tools, or self-confidence may be in short supply, but I must remind myself of what Theodore Roosevelt once said, “Do what you can, with what you have, where you are.” As I departed this recent conference on a cold January afternoon, I felt rich with ideas, positive energy, and support. While this wealth can at times get tangled in the ‘I’m not enough’ knot, by connecting myself to my roots and identity I can allow myself to be grounded in who I am and what I can do. I am an advocate for the education of our youth. I am enough. I am fulfilled.

## **5.2. Implications for my Audience: Why do Educators Stay?**

*“If you want to see the sun come up, you’ve got to get up in the dark.”*

*- Karl Pillemer quoting Albert Folsom (2011, p. 82)*

Since teaching is a profession that comes with inherent challenges, maintaining balance is integral to my success both at school and at home. What I hope to have provided in this thesis are not only personal stories and insights into my work as a public school educator, but more importantly I hope I have connected with my readers by sharing universal thoughts, perspectives, and experiences on my theme of the challenges of maintaining balance when working in a ‘helping’ or ‘giving’ profession. I hope I’ve spoken to the social workers, health care workers, police officers, and other public servants who dutifully work to serve, give to, and educate others. While I do not know the ins and outs, the daily life, or the specific challenges of other ‘helping’ professionals, I truly believe we all have more in common than not. The emotional, mental, and interpersonal highs and lows we encounter in our work give us the opportunity to explore the intrapersonal world that is our own mind, body, and spirit. As mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, SPN writing is, “from the head to the heart...and back again” (Nash & Viray, 2014, p. 2), just as teaching is. SPN writing and conversations can be the vehicle for this exploration of the interpersonal and intrapersonal world. Our professional discussions mirror the SPN methodology in many ways, and through continuing to share stories with one another about the challenges and accomplishments of our work we can forge stronger relationships and more balanced learning

communities. It is my hope that this thesis is one public (vulnerable) step in that direction.

We each possess our own coping strategies for enduring the challenges of the job, and I will say, acknowledging my bias, that I hope we all use or find healthy habits and sustainable strategies so that we can keep ‘showing up’ for the important work that we do. Through this journey of mine, I’ve discovered several strategies of my own in an effort to achieve and maintain balance between my work and home lives that allows for me to find more fulfillment in the work that I do. By practicing healthy habits, such as daily exercise, reduced alcohol consumption, and healthy eating, I have been able to ‘fill myself back up’ on a regular basis so that I have the mental, emotional, and physical energy to return to my demanding work as an educator. In addition, I have made an effort to alter my mindset in order to have calm focus and to see challenges as opportunities to be taken advantage of.

Palmer (1998) enlightened me to a new way of interpreting responses to change that opposes our evolutionary instincts, which are an all-too-common, albeit natural, response to resisting change, when he states:

Normally, when we are taken by surprise, there is a sudden narrowing of our visual periphery that exacerbates the fight or flight response - an intense, fearful, self-defensive focusing...that is associated with both physical and intellectual combat. But in the Japanese self-defense art of aikido, this visual narrowing is countered by a practice called ‘soft eyes,’ in which one learns to widen one's periphery, to take in more of the world.

(p. 113)

While Palmer (1998) essentially only references a visual awareness here, I find these responses can be applied to a mental and intellectual awareness as well. The practice of ‘soft eyes’ is similar to how I try to approach new situations and ideas, particularly in the workplace. I will admit, this has taken practice and I’m not always successful. However, by taking a step back and attempting to see a change or challenge from as many perspectives as possible, with ‘soft eyes’ and a ‘soft mind’, I have found that I’ve been more able to achieve optimism and open-mindedness, and to see challenges as opportunities. While this may all sound like sound bytes, or clips from a motivational speaker, in order to practice balance in my life I need to maintain a focus on my mindset.

I believe I was called to be an educator and to serve the youth of our country. While the opening quotation for this section plainly references the darkness before the dawn, I believe it also references the fact that if you want to see the beauty in life and reap the benefits of your hard work (the sunrise), then you must also endure the challenges that come your way (the darkness). I can’t say why some educators leave and some stay, but for some it may be that the depth of the darkness overshadows the light. Although it’s clear through my personal stories, I may not be motivated each and every day by the work I do, I can now say with relative confidence that I believe I have a duty to serve our communities through educating and mentoring some of our most vibrant and unique members of our communities - our adolescents.

Community and human connectedness are crucial to my being. While exploring a topic for this thesis, at one point I had wanted to write about community and the central role it has played throughout my life, and that I hope it continues to play. I nixed that topic when it became clear to me that I needed to explore the imbalance and lack of

fulfillment I was experiencing with my choice in profession - it seemed as though I was encountering a dreadful quarter-life crisis. As we in 'helping' and 'giving' professions know, there are hurdles and slumps, but we somehow, some way keep returning; as much as we help and give, we get so much back too - yet we need to be open to seeing and feeling it. The unbalanced life draws more out of us on one end, leaving us closed-off and unavailable to accept the 'return on our investment'. We don't do this work for those returns, but in a way it's the rewarding nature of these careers that led us here and keep us here. However, in these final moments of reflection, I must note that I subconsciously wrote about community throughout my work - so crucial to and interwoven in my being that it lives comfortably in, and as an essential component of, each chapter.

### **5.3. In Remembrance: Mr. Walker**

"Love kids and work hard" was Mr. Walker's philosophy of education. Whether it was working through our biography term papers, reading Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, or introducing *Romeo and Juliet* to high school freshmen, he was dedicated and hardworking and expected nothing less in return. Mr. Walker was a passionate educator. His size and presence as a coach on the football field wouldn't have you thinking he was sensitive and loved literature. But he cared for his athletes and he connected with them - just as he did with his students. My first day of boarding school, September 11, 2001, Mr. Walker broke the news with sympathy and concern. He was patient in his explanation of the tragedy to our group of young students who didn't quite understand the gravity of the situation our nation was experiencing. We were adolescents

- we and our new friends were the center of the universe, or so we thought. He applied this patience to every task he pursued and showed us that learning is a challenging adventure requiring exploration and critical thinking. Mr. Walker may never have doled out an answer, but under his unwavering guidance and support we quickly became proud of our work. In retrospect, I first experimented with writing to make meaning with Mr. Walker.

In the years I knew Mr. Walker, I also learned the importance of being an engaged community member and the value of a holistic approach to education. Through bringing students to volunteer at food shelf distribution sites, discussing current events at breakfast, and involving parents, families, and other faculty members he was devoted to each student's well-being. At my five-year high school reunion, he was the teacher I looked forward to seeing the most; however, I knew it would be difficult. He had recently undergone surgery and started treatment for brain cancer. In his advanced disease state, he had lost his ability to write poetry and recall how to use the English language in the beautiful ways he once could. Regardless of his condition, his spirit and devotion to the school community were ever-present that day, yet less than a year later he passed away. Maybe it proves just how fantastic he truly was, that such a loss of his mind would mean no quality of life. I hope his suffering was brief, as the time from his diagnosis to death was narrow. But to lose one of life's greatest joys to an uncontrollable, cruel disease would be unbearable.

Thankfully, Mr. Walker's love for teaching and passion for learning lives on in his students, family and written work. He clearly still has an impact on me, and he is one of the great legends from my high school. There, he is a household name. There, he is

the gold standard. He not only contributed to my academic education, but also to my character in ways I hope to pass on to my students. Here, I still think of him when I edit my writing...15 years later. His legacy lives on, as he was not only a great teacher, but an artist - his words describe him best:

**Excerpt from *Teachers*, by Norman Walker (2001):**

*Good teachers are artists.*

*Artists do not punch a time clock at nine a.m. and five p.m.; they are often so committed to their work that the creative process never really ends. There is always one more chord to strike, a word or phrase to change, one last touch with the brush or chisel...*

*In a day and age when there is so much political posturing about the reform of education, it is perhaps advisable to remember a simple truth about schools: there can be no 'reform' without good teachers; without individuals who approach the task of educating young people the way artists approach their work...*

*...The journey to become a master is difficult. After all, the task of a teacher is enormous: one must instruct students how to read carefully and sensitively, to think critically and creatively, and to express themselves clearly in writing, art, music, numbers, and foreign languages. Teachers must do all this and, at the same time, be models of self-discipline, positive values, and concern for others. This is not a job for the frivolous or the faint of heart.*



*Great teachers understand that students have to be energized and inspired in order to be instructed; they know in their bones that students are not simply clients, not clay to be shaped, not products to be put up for market, and not future citizens to be indoctrinated. Young teachers who are destined to be good at this profession learn early on, from watching the masters, that they must become artists to reach the young people in their care.*

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