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FROM THERE, TO HERE, NOW WHERE?
MY JOURNEY OF VULNERABILITY TOWARD
INTERDISCIPLINARY TEACHING

A Thesis Presented

by

Jennifer L. Way

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

Few words have the power to make people both cringe in fear and lean forward, fascinated to know more. This thesis focuses on one such word: *vulnerability*. Through the Scholarly Personal Narrative writing format, I explore what vulnerability means to me and how my understanding has changed. I examine how vulnerability in my life helped refine me into a wiser, more compassionate, teacher.

Teaching requires vulnerability, a willingness to risk failure and accept mistakes for what they really are: lessons to create a connection among other humans. This thesis portrays how I have come to understand and accept vulnerability as a major component of my teaching practice.

I illustrated my journey of vulnerability, using the pattern, “From There, To Here, Now Where?” First, I share stories of my past, to examine my first experiences of potential vulnerability as an adult. These sections describe how those uncomfortable situations led me to question the more traditional, lecture-style teaching I absorbed through formal education.

In the “To Here” chapter, I share stories of how I developed a greater understanding of vulnerability through the graduate courses I chose. These sections demonstrate my evolving need for communication and connection—two vital aspects of vulnerable teaching.

Lastly, I convey what I expect to take with me into my future career, emphasizing “Now Where,” by looking forward. I shared my idea for a new, creative organization, highlights from my job search, and how my mindset has changed by accepting vulnerability. In closing, I offer a collection of universalizable statements I learned through this process.

This thesis chronicles my journey to accept vulnerability both personally and professionally. I found that teaching and vulnerability are intrinsically linked, and without the strength to be vulnerable, I am not an effective teacher. However, by being open to vulnerability, I may change the world for someone.

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Chapter 1: Preface and Methodology

1A. Preface: Why Vulnerability?

Brené Brown inspired my fascination with vulnerability during my first graduate class. Her approach to vulnerability captured my interest after reading two quotes from the first few pages of Daring Greatly. The first described a “willingness to own and engage with our vulnerability,” and the second described a conversation between her and her therapist, Diana.

Our willingness to own and engage with our vulnerability determines the depth of our courage and the clarity of our purpose; the level to which we protect ourselves from being vulnerable is a measure of our fear and disconnection.¹

Diana nods. “Yes, I know vulnerability. I know it well. It’s an exquisite emotion.”

“I said it was excruciating, not exquisite,” I point out. And let me say this for the record, if my research didn’t link being vulnerable with living a Whole-hearted life, I wouldn’t be here. ... Can you give me some homework or something? Should I review the data?”

“No data and no homework. No assignments or gold stars in here. Less thinking. More feeling.”

“Can I get to exquisite without having to feel really vulnerable in the process?”

“No.”

“Well, shit. That’s just awesome.”²

I immediately related to Brown viscerally. She spent decades researching vulnerability; she was a published author and her TED talks had millions of views. I considered her highly knowledgeable in her field. She knew the importance of living a “Whole-hearted life,” and she hated it as much as I did. I related to someone who

¹ Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead*, (New York: Avery Publishing, 2012), p. 02.

² Brown, *Daring Greatly*, p. 05-06.

opened her book with that level of blunt honesty and sarcasm as a defense. In the first quote, she shared why vulnerability made us feel exposed and unprotected, showing our “fear and disconnection.” In the second, how frustrating the journey from “excruciating” to “exquisite” is less about a checklist or gold stars and more about self-honesty and respect. I had her same reaction to “Less thinking, more feeling.”

This thesis is not a literature review of the psychological concept of vulnerability. It is not a recipe for expressing vulnerability or how to make friends and connect with others. I am not an expert on vulnerability, nor do I hold any deep secrets to make feeling exposed and unguarded less painful. Instead, I chose to write about vulnerability because I wanted to explore my personal growth, stories of shame that followed me through decades, and how I learned to cope and to accept them. Through this process, I want to learn how to be “kinder and gentler”³ to myself, so I can learn to be kinder and gentler to future students, colleagues, and people I meet.

This thesis is an exploration of vulnerability as I learned to become an interdisciplinarian. I attempt to explain this vast concept by re-framing experiences and choices of my life to critically analyze how I came to be where I am at this moment in life, and where I want to go in my future.

My thesis encompasses the chapters, “From There,” “To Here,” and “Now Where?” The first depicts relevant experiences as an undergraduate student and lessons I learned from my jobs after. The chapter explores my original understanding

³ Brené Brown, “The Power of Vulnerability,” TED.com, TEDx Houston, June 2010, https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability, time: 19:50-20:06.

of vulnerability. I slowly learned how important vulnerability is to my life, even though I did not begin to use that specific word until graduate school.

The “To Here” chapter expands what I learned about education, by exploring graduate school. I investigate interdisciplinary studies, the various lessons I learned by teaching, and where I currently stand. This section most clearly defines my changing attitudes of my role as a “teacher” and what interdisciplinary means to me.

In “Now Where,” I share professional goals for my life. I describe my “dream organization,” a part of the job search I engaged in while simultaneously writing this thesis, and what I take forward with me into the future. I also added a section on how to disseminate this experience to others, seeking the universalizabilities in my own.

For many years, I saw myself as “just” a teacher; a traditional, elementary teacher who was neither exceptional nor boring, but pleasantly average. This was my whole—and only—identity. This narrow definition inhibited my ability to explore the many facets of education with creativity and vulnerability. It kept me safe, without risk. If I maintained my elementary school persona, I could not fail. Unfortunately, neither could I thrive.

To be clear, I believe elementary teachers are some of the most dedicated, vulnerable educators. They must be teacher, nurturer, and disciplinarian; caring for the emotional, psychological, and societal needs of future generations; and preparing children for the academic rigors of high school and beyond. What separated me from these noble instructors was my failure to explore my own creativity and the lost opportunities to explore areas of potential failure and growth.

I was an automaton, following a script I thought necessary to succeed. The best thing that happened to me was failing spectacularly, breaking me from this debilitating mindset.

No longer content to be safe or average, I expanded my understanding of teaching. To be a teacher, I must communicate well with others, as well as myself. I must listen to what is said, and what is omitted. If I, as the teacher, am afraid to fail and look foolish, all I have communicated is that failure is also unacceptable of my students, that risk must be avoided.

Connection is another vital part of teaching as I understand it now. I do not know everything a student will ask me. I cannot possibly know how other people think or process information. It is my job to seek ways to connect content with lives: both my students and my own.

I became a more effective teacher when I cultivated multiple identities within myself. I tried to follow the script I internalized as a child: good grades led to a practical degree, which led to satisfying career, and on to retirement. Thankfully, that script did not work for me. I spent much of my life avoiding both vulnerability and any idea that I was more than a teacher. Eventually, I could no longer ignore the power of vulnerability. I needed to stop hiding and meet myself compassionately.

I chose to write my thesis on this journey of exploration, because I want to cultivate my own vulnerability. I want to explore why an interdisciplinary mindset is more appealing to me than a clearly defined career track. I want to share this journey, because mine was not an easy path. I struggled, side stepped, and have fallen on my

face more than once. Being vulnerable not only means opening old thoughts and experiences to daylight and scrutiny, but it also means recognizing that everyone else has as many vulnerable secrets. Vulnerability means accepting my own, so that I create a willing environment for other do the same.

Every struggle of my life taught me new, exciting things. I began learning resiliency and how to persevere. Every time I fell, I learned something new about myself. This thesis represents who I am discovering myself to be at this moment and my desire to share my journey with others. The most important lesson I learned in a decade of teaching is that without vulnerability, without a connection between “teacher” and “student,” many opportunities to learn will be lost on all sides. As the Dalai Lama describes, there is more to a teacher than content knowledge.

There are many qualities admired in teachers, such as patience, enthusiasm, the ability to inspire, being energetic, and being good at presenting lessons clearly. But above all, three qualities are regarded as the marks of a great teacher: academic excellence (khé), moral integrity (tsün), and kindness (sang).⁴

“Patience, enthusiasm, [and] the ability to inspire” are terrific qualities a good teacher should have. However, to become great, I believe the last three need balancing: “academic excellence, moral integrity, and kindness.” Academics were challenging but fun for me. Kindness was similar: I treated my students as if they were a friend in need of help, not with some inherent lack. Both seemed normal, since I enjoyed practicing both. What I lacked experience in was moral integrity. I never explored what made me vulnerable, and by extension, how my integrity fit into my

⁴ His Holiness the Dalai Lama, *Beyond Religion: Ethics for a Whole World*, (Massachusetts: Mariner Books, 2012), p. 96.

life. Through my life's journey, I have come to appreciate the greater insight and connection I experienced when I became vulnerable, opening myself to exploring all that is "*tsün*."

Vulnerability came as a surprise, and a shock, during my months of free writing and planning for my thesis. I had intended this document to chronicle several experiences that defined me as an interdisciplinary teacher, not a vulnerable one. A friend and fellow interdisciplinarian listened to my vision as I brainstormed aloud—how I wanted to focus on what choices led to choosing the specific degree; why I chose a variety of classes without specializing, and its importance in my life; and how I want to create professional development for teachers when I graduate. She was thoughtful as I outlined my thesis as a written account of my growth as an interdisciplinarian.

Amy leaned back against the vinyl seat, smirked, and said, "Well, it's a good news/bad news situation. It sounds like you are writing about vulnerability."⁵ In the months of planning, outlining, and writing vignettes about my thesis, it never occurred to me that while I was focusing on my journey as an interdisciplinarian, what I wanted to express was my burgeoning acceptance of vulnerability. My response unintentionally reiterated Brown: "Well, shit. That's just awesome."⁶

I included the word "journey" into my thesis intentionally. As I will describe, my path was far from linear. It took many years and many failures, but I started

⁵ Amy Magyar, conversation with author, August 07, 2017. [Personal communication]

⁶ Brown, *Daring Greatly*, p. 05-06.

learning how to enjoy the experience, almost more than the destination. Maya Angelou describes a “profound traveler,” that “touches us with her boldness and vulnerability, for her sole preparation is the fierce determination to leave wherever she is and her only certain destination is somewhere other than where she has been.”⁷

I love this quote.

Angelou’s traveler has “fierce determination” to leave a situation she spent enough time in and learned all she could. She knew when it was time to move on. She did not know her destination, “other than where she has been.” This profound traveler has no regrets. She refuses to stay in circumstances once she learned what she needed to. She is not afraid to head into the sunset, blind to the future until she arrives. I am learning to become this “profound traveler.”

⁷ Maya Angelou, *Even the Stars Look Lonesome* (New York: Random House, 1997), p. 59-60.

1B. SPN Methodology

*Stories are our way to illuminate the path and find common ground. Our illusions of separation disappear when we hear stories of another's struggles and discoveries. We hear ourselves say, "I can relate to that!"*⁸
—Sark

What makes a story? What keeps us awake, rationalizing *just one more page* as our eyes burn, and we know we will loathe the alarm in a few hours? During the mid-20th century, Joseph Campbell researched stories around the world and what they had in common, naming these similarities the 'Hero's Journey.'

*The usual hero adventure begins with someone from whom something has been taken, or who feels there is something lacking in the normal experience available or permitted to the members of society. The person then takes off on a series of adventures beyond the ordinary, either to recover what has been lost or to discover some life-giving elixir. It's usually a cycle, a coming and a returning.*⁹

Through this process of trial and error, failure, and setbacks, the hero faces situations that "demand everything of [her] ... and is transformed in the process."¹⁰ This is how I have come to understand life. I have undertaken many quests in my life, some of which this thesis explores. *How do I balance six classes, a subpoena, and a cyber stalker? Do I walk away from a career I spent my life preparing for, after three*

⁸ Sark, *Succulent Wild Woman: Dancing with Your Wonder-full Self*, (New York: Fireside Publishing, 1997), p. 125.

⁹ Julie Harris, "The Hero's Journey: Cultural Values and the Struggle Against Evil," East Carolina University, (n.d.), accessed November 27, 2017, from <https://www.ecu.edu/cs-educ/TQP/upload/tqpHeroJourneyAug2014.pdf>. P. 4/23 of PDF (labeled P. 3)

¹⁰ Paula Munier, "The Hero's Journey," *Writer's Digest*, February 2015, 52+. Biography in Context, accessed November 27, 2017 from http://link.galegroup.com.ezproxy.uvm.edu/apps/doc/A397454148/BIC1?u=vol_b92b&xid=57c1877b.

short years? What was I thinking, applying to a job out of state, and then accepting it right before the start of the semester?

My ordinary life was interrupted by a quest or opportunity for adventure, and I had to choose to accept or reject each one. I found mentors—some offered advice and tools, while others offered me practice saying, ‘not ever again.’ I faced numerous trials and failed, and made mistakes. Each quest or stage or learning experience of my life challenged and transformed me into a more refined version of myself.

As an SPN thesis, my stories not only help me to analyze my own journey, but offer some generalizations that people recognize. The most important part of the Hero’s Journey for me is the final stage: the return. Campbell stated this final stage was “a cycle, a coming and a returning.”¹¹ While the other stages are important, Campbell recognized one must “recover what has been lost” or to share some “life-giving elixir” with the people left back in the ordinary world. This thesis is that elixir, in that I have committed to paper my journey to where I am now. A thesis is the final stage in my graduate school quest. The next adventure awaits.

Stories help humans understand each other and themselves. We write, read, draw, or act out stories to deepen our understanding of the world around us. My chosen artistic expression is writing stories. I use experiences and people from my own life to bring life to an alternate reality. My first memories of writing stories involved rescuing a famous caped crusader and his pun-spinning sidekick from evil rubber band-like people in elementary and middle school. In high school, I wrote

¹¹ Harris, “Hero’s Journey,” p. 04.

about my friend and I finding love; she had the traditional princess wedding, while mine was filled with banter and mutual antagonism. I was a Victorian actress flirting with a grumpy sheriff, a hardware store owner helping the local ‘mad scientist’ learn manners, and have saved the world through magical tattoos and wood carvings.

By writing, I created interactions to explore different ways to connect with people. As Sark said in the epigraph, “Stories are our way to illuminate the path and find common ground.” More practical than fantasy, I have often used my stories to prepare for difficult conversations and occasionally as a source of inspiration—if this amazing, ass-kicking protagonist I wrote can stand up for herself, then I certainly can!

As I experienced more, my stories began to shift to ways of helping me understand and cope with experiences. I wrote ways to comfort a “friend” (me) who had negative self-body images. I wrote down dreams too vivid to fade, helping me to explore aspects of my personality.

An example of exploring myself through my writing occurred about a year after my dad passed away from complications of diabetes and degenerative disc disease. I wrote a story where the unnamed main character, me, fought an evil demon that looked grotesquely like my dad. This apparition tried to control me by forcing me to sew my mouth shut. In my story, I persevered with the realization that it was only tape keeping me quiet, nothing more. I tore it off and laughed, breaking the spell. I defeated the demon. After writing that story, I understood I had turned my anger and grief of my dad’s lengthy terminal illness and prolonged death into a demon. Only by accepting both the good memories and the horrible ones would I be able to move on.

*Everyone is born with a mind, but it is only through ... introspection, of self-examination, of establishing communication between the mind and the heart, the mind and experience, that you become an individual, a unique being—a soul. And that is what it means to develop a self.*¹²

The best way for me to “establish communication between the mind and the heart” is through writing. I learn best by reading, which has helped me become a good ‘textbook translator’-as one student called my teaching style. When I read something I’ve written, I learn about my own experiences, how I “become an individual, a unique being—a soul.” I chose to write this thesis to continue my personal Hero’s Journey, to explore my own “introspection and self-examination.” To do this, I wrote this document in the Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) style of writing developed by Robert Nash.

*SPN strives for an ideal mix of particularity and generalizability, concreteness and abstractness, practice, and theory. SPN writing has four major components: it starts with the identification of key themes; then it connects these themes to the writer’s personal stories to exemplify and explicate the points being made; then it draws on relevant, preexisting research and scholarship... to ground and enrich the personal narrative; and finally, it ends up with generalizable ideas and applications that we hope might connect with our readers in some way.*¹³

Identifying key themes, personal stories, relevant and preexisting research, and generalizable ideas are the core of SPN. This writing style uses “research and scholarship” to support the themes of generalization that anyone can understand. SPN creates a story that resonates with others, based on research and personal anecdotes to design a well-formed narrative.

¹² William Deresiewicz, *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life* (New York: Free Press, 2014), p. 84.

¹³ Robert Nash and Jennifer Jang, *Preparing Students for Life Beyond College: A Meaning-Centered Vision for Holistic Teaching and Learning* (Great Britain: Routledge, 2015), p. 20.

My SPN uses research on vulnerability, connection, and teaching, combined with personal stories of my life: snippets of experiences that led me to where I am now and toward my future. I shared stories of vulnerability and lessons learned. Through writing, I connect to myself, and to the larger world.

*By reading [memoirs], I understand a lot more about the people around me. ...I'm finding that ordinary people at the checkout counter are much more interesting, varied, and offer many more lessons than the menagerie of celebrities facing me on the covers of tabloids.*¹⁴

Humans connect most authentically with someone whose story rings true. We can understand the other person's feelings, without having to experience the same situation. Nash calls this connection "universalizability." No one person can experience the same as another; it is impossible to jump into another's life story and make the same decisions.

However, by universalizing my experiences, by sharing the sorrows, joys, and lessons of my choices allows others to connect with me through my writing with compassion and honesty. "When we allow our own light to shine, we often encourage others to shine their lights as well."¹⁵ Shining from within offers a safe space for others to muster the courage to do the same. One aspect of SPN I appreciate is Nash and Jang's caveat: "This means talking about not only what shines within us, but also what tends to tarnish the shine."¹⁶

¹⁴ Jerry Waxler, "Why Memoirs Are Becoming So Popular?" *Memoir Revolution*, September 26, 2017, accessed May 20, 2017, from <http://memorywritersnetwork.com/blog/why-memoirs-are-becoming-so-popular/>.

¹⁵ Nash and Jang, *Preparing Students*, p. 96.

¹⁶ Nash and Jang, *Preparing Students*, p. 96.

While memoirs share details, both sordid and glamorous, of one's life, scholarship offers a chance to examine an experience as a philosopher might, asking *how does this relate to something in my life? What are the parallels I can see in myself?* I am a philosopher; someone who is no longer content to accept the status quo unquestioningly. I like asking "why?" Many of my life-changing moments emerged from asking either "Why not?" or "What if?" I have learned that while I have the heart of a storyteller, I also need the scholastic balance to learn about myself most effectively. I can tell or read a story, but I learn most when I think critically and ask more questions than the story answered.

*Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other.*¹⁷

Freire understood knowledge was more than memorizing facts to take a test. "Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention." To become good, one must not only try, but try and fail and try again "in the world, with the world, and with each other." There is a lot of vulnerability in this sentiment. I cannot shine, as Nash and Jang suggest, without polishing the tarnish off myself. This thesis is one step in that work. "And it will never end! You'll be practicing vulnerability forever," exclaimed my Graduate Writing Consultant, at our last meeting of the semester.¹⁸ I smiled and replied, "I hope so."

¹⁷ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (New York: Penguin Publishers, 1996), p. 53.

¹⁸ Courtney Smith, conversation with author, December 07, 2017. [Personal communication]

While there are many stories to illustrate my larger key themes, there are dozens more I chose not to use. I picked stories that exemplify the feelings I tried to convey: vulnerability, fear, hope.

SPN is about being honest. With vulnerability, it is important to be “who I am and who I want to be.”¹⁹ Honesty and vulnerability have rarely been my strengths, but with the SPN model, I learned a way to share things that are deeply personal, so that I may reflect on the experience.

*Compassion practice is daring. It involves learning to relax and allow ourselves to move gently toward what scares us. ... Compassion is not a relationship between the healer and the wounded. It's a relationship between equals. Only when we know our own darkness well can we be present with the darkness of others. Compassion becomes real when we recognize our shared humanity.*²⁰

Being compassionate means showing vulnerability. To be vulnerable, I must not hide from “[my] own darkness,” as Chödrön says. I have needed compassion for myself, to be vulnerable and to share the stories I did. I needed courage not to delete many of the scarier stories and replace with ones less shameful. I also needed to be vulnerable, and to accept the feelings of shame and dread that those stories invoked. This thesis is a compassionate, vulnerable journey. I explored experiences I did not have the courage to analyze before now. “Compassion practice is daring,” because the scariest judge of my life is the harshest critic I know: myself. Compassion and

¹⁹ Magyar, conversation with author, August 07, 2017. [Personal communication]

²⁰ Pema Chödrön, *The Places That Scare You: A Guide to Fearlessness in Difficult Times* (Massachusetts: Shambala Publications, 2001), p. 154.

vulnerability helped me become honest with myself and more prepared for my next quest.

SPN is less formally structured than a research paper, more evidence-based than a memoir, but draws on “relevant, preexisting research and scholarship” of the former and personal experience of the latter.²¹ As Nash and Jang caution, “It is important for the reader to understand that SPN does not present the author as some omniscient, third person authority.”²² I particularly like that sentiment; I am neither oracle nor “sage on the stage.”²³ Based on my experiences and the expert testimony provided to support my interpretation, essentially to “ground and enrich the personal narrative,” here is my story.

The Constant Reader, as Stephen King calls his audience in each of his books, must decide to accept or question the findings after reading an SPN composition. Nash and Jang describe the author’s voice as “personal, clear, fallible, and honest. It is also humble and open-ended. SPN shows some passion. It is not a detached, ‘objective’ examination of a topic.”²⁴ I chose SPN because I can share my story, and the scholarship of those that came before me, in a format that is integral to my current understanding of who I am.

²¹ Nash and Jang, *Preparing Students*, p. 20.

²² Nash and Jang, *Preparing Students*, p. 20.

²³ Paul Peterson, “More Lecturing, More Learning,” Education Next, podcast audio, April 19, 2011, accessed January 20, 2018, from <http://educationnext.org/more-lecturing-more-learning/>.

²⁴ Nash and Jang, *Preparing Students*, p. 20.

Chapter 2: “From There...”

2A. Undergraduate Lessons in Vulnerability

My journey of becoming an interdisciplinarian began long before I chose to earn a graduate degree about the subject in 2015. The word I used to describe my varied interests was “well-rounded,” after reading countless scholarship and grant applications my junior and senior years of high school. Academics was not the barrier to higher education; I held no doubt about my ability to conduct myself scholastically at college. What kept me up at night was how I would pay for it.

The first time I articulated my desire to attend college was in middle school. My parents scoffed, and then when I stubbornly persisted, we had a “serious discussion.” There was no money, no hidden trust fund, and certainly no rich great aunt who would miraculously agree to pay for me to attend any university. Their final word on the matter was, “You aren’t going to college.” *MY* final word on the matter was, “Watch me.”

I knew I could never afford to attend college on my own, and both my parents and I agreed they were not cosigning a loan. I applied for as many grants, scholarships, and forgivable money that I could find. By my junior year, I was fourth in my class. I have no idea how I managed to keep my 94-grade average, a 3.9 on a 4.0 scale, while applying for several hundred scholarships, complete with separate essay and time-consuming, handwritten application, but I did.²⁵ The #3 person moved to a different

²⁵ GPA Calculator.net, “What Does 3.9 GPA mean? GPA is Equivalent to 94% on Percentile Scale,” last modified 2017, accessed September 11, 2017, from <http://gpacalculator.net/gpa-scale/3-9-gpa/>.

district that year, and the #2 person chose to give up homework, which dropped him below my steady 94%. I graduated high school as the salutatorian of my class.

In 2002, the University of Maine offered in-state valedictorians and salutatorians free tuition. With the hundreds of small-to-medium scholarships I earned, I paid to live on-campus for four years, with a hearty meal plan, textbooks for my entire degree, and all supplies I needed for four years of college.

Once at college, I explored the micro-world that is a college campus with a diverse population. I was never tempted to begin any of the usual 'recreational activities' found with young adults newly liberated from parental oversight. Rather, I was drawn to cultural experiences, attending events and lectures about every subject imaginable. I listened to people speak about their passions from around the world. I learned that while my corner of this globe was small, it did not have to stay that way.

While I began exploring what the world presented, I never forgot why I was there. I wanted to be the best teacher, and nothing was going to sidetrack me. To be the best, I needed the best grades. I learned an important lesson about how a perfect transcript could hide a lot of emotional pain.

*Getting A's no longer means that everything's okay, assuming that it ever did. 'We have students, who, no matter what else is going on in their lives, know how to get those grades.'*²⁶

"No matter what else is going on in [life, I] know how to get those grades."

Deresiewicz described the plight of 'high achieving' students, ones that have high grades and appear to be exemplars of the education society. He cautioned that the

²⁶ Deresiewicz, *Excellent Sheep*, p. 11-12.

masks of 'perfect students' could hide terrible anxieties, fears, and shame. I know this sentiment well. As previously stated, the studious life came naturally. Read the textbook, do the homework, take the test, and repeat. Time consuming, absolutely, because I always wanted a perfect paper or assignment, but not challenging. I cultivated the ability to disseminate information from textbooks, and I was highly skilled in taking notes and organizing my learning.

Perfection is the voice of the oppressor, the enemy of the people. It will keep you cramped and insane your whole life ... I think perfectionism is based on the obsessive belief that if you run carefully enough, hitting each stepping-stone just right, you won't have to die. The truth is that you will die anyway and that a lot of people who aren't even looking at their feet are going to do a whole lot better than you, and have a lot more fun while they're doing it.²⁷

The struggle to turn in perfect work was the most stressful part of my academic life, and this perfectionism began early. Once in elementary school, I spent three hours meticulously outlining a map of the world. Each border was approximately 0.5 cm and no two of my colored pencils were used next to each other. As a result, my memory of the experience was less on locations of countries but feeling "cramped and insane," as Lamott described perfectionism. After many years, I eventually realized "good enough was good enough," paraphrased from a 1950's psychoanalyst, Donald Winnicott.²⁸

²⁷ Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1994), p. 28.

²⁸ The School of Life, "Good Enough is Good Enough," YouTube, April 28, 2017, accessed October 12, 2017, from <https://youtu.be/RbtflLkVv4E>. Time: 01:01-01:10.

Since lessening the death grip on the perfectionism reins, I have jumped to the group who don't "look at their feet," and have both felt "a whole lot better" than I used to, and certainly have had "a lot more fun while doing it."

I held a fixed mindset (discussed in the section, 4C. *Vulnerability and the Growth Mindset Dilemma*) in elementary and high school. I was unaware how driven I was by perfectionism, and how trapped. I think this might be one reason I struggled with standardized tests, but could complete essays and teacher-created assessments with ease. Averaging the highest math from one SAT and the highest verbal from another day's testing, I managed to eke out a 1060, well below the 1100 cutoff that my undergraduate college recommended for its incoming freshmen in 2002.

My class standing outweighed my inferior score on a standardized test, and I was admitted. Most of my years as an undergraduate followed the same pattern academically that I learned in high school. Go to class, read the book, take notes on the lecture, study, and take the test—practicing the art of "getting those grades."²⁹

Only two semesters stand out from the haze of memory. I chose to highlight the below semesters because they exemplify valuable lessons I needed to learn about living wrapped inside my head. I learned how shame has the potential to drown anyone that thinks "polite, pleasant, mild, and presentable; well-mannered, well-groomed, and well-spoken" are the keys needed to protect oneself from the horrors of the world. Shame forced me to fashion "that façade of happy, healthy, high

²⁹ Deresiewicz, *Excellent Sheep*, p. 12.

achievement.”³⁰ I did not realize how thin the façade of perfection was, or how little protection it truly offered.

I believed acting “polite, pleasant ... and well-spoken” were how I could succeed, without analyzing where such ideas came from or why I had internalized them as infallible doctrine. I believed my façade was all I needed for “happy, healthy, high achievement.”

Deresiewicz offers a call to arms for the teachers, parents, and people in authority on campus to “take away the blinders that keep us [teachers, parents, authority figures] from seeing their [students'] distress.”³¹ I, like many other high achieving students, could have benefitted from someone seeing beyond the “blinders” when I was in college, because my own set almost became part of my identity. I learned—with some help along the way—to remove those blinders and begin the arduous journey of vulnerability and self-forgiveness. These semesters stand out as pivotal quests in my personal Hero’s Journey.

Drama and the six class-semester

Three semesters into my undergraduate program, I enrolled in six courses—one more than the average. That required special permission from my advisor. He glanced through my transcript, all A’s, and signed off immediately. *What was one more class? I had the pattern down.* Deresiewicz described students who upheld my logic of read-study-test-repeat as learning how to “be a student.”

³⁰ Deresiewicz, *Excellent Sheep*, p. 12.

³¹ Deresiewicz, *Excellent Sheep*, p. 12.

The problem is that students have been taught that that is all that education is: doing your homework, getting the answers, acing the test. Nothing in their training has endowed them with the sense that something larger is at stake. They've learned to 'be a student,' not to use their minds.³²

I knew how to “be a student,” but not what to do when something outside of a textbook threatened to crack my worldview like an eggshell. Unfortunately, many things coalesced in that semester that shook much of the “façade of happy, healthy high achievement” I had proudly and happily worn until that time. After that semester, I became aware how fragile that façade was, and that it did not shield me from anything.³³

I dated and broke up with someone the summer before, “Steve.” During my fall semester, after we had broken up, a friend of Steve’s, “Fred,” sued Steve in a civil court case. I never learned the reason for the civil suit. Fred found out my college dorm contact information and subpoenaed me as a character witness—for Fred, whom I had never met, against my ex. The subpoena had my full name, dorm name, and room number. I did not realize the significance that Fred knew my exact location then.

While that drama began to unfold, I also had academic drama as well. That sixth class I signed up for was a second language, always my weakest area. The “blindness” had started cracking, but I simply slept less, to study more. I refused to allow something as trivial as a summons to court to testify *for* someone I did not

³² Deresiewicz, *Excellent Sheep*, p. 13.

³³ Deresiewicz, *Excellent Sheep*, p. 12.

know, *against* an ex that I had no interest in seeing again, to interfere with achieving A's in all six courses.

To sort out both college life and the court situation, I talked with someone I met online. I did not know at the time, but found out later that Fred hacked Steve's computer and found our conversations from the summer, along with my contact information. Fred created a fake account and began talking to me.

Fred, as the anonymous friend online, taught me the cardinal rule of talking to strangers online: don't. This person was so understanding and always seemed interested in talking about whatever I wanted: intricacies of academic rigor, the lameness of parents, and eventually to an intimate online relationship. While not porn-worthy, our conversations were certainly nothing one would wish one's parents to read. After a month or so, Steve contacted me, because he had found out that Fred was my online friend. I blocked him immediately. Things started getting weirder.

After blocking Fred, he created a new account with different email addresses to message me once a day. He messaged me with things like, "I'm going to kill Steve, and it'll be your fault," "One night, I'm going to rape you and there's nothing you can do about it," and "I know which route you take to classes and I'm going to kill you one day."³⁴ Obviously after each message, I'd block the address, but he created a new one and would send me another message a day—just one, but that was enough to remind me he could get to me, any time he chose.

³⁴ Jennifer Way, paraphrased email from author, 2005. [Personal communication]

Because I was subpoenaed to court, my parents read the evidence of our online friendship, every detail of my “friend’s” conversations. The usual themes of my parents’ “talks” with me involved my stupidity for jeopardizing my future, how ungrateful I was to be at college, and how slutty I was for allowing “this kind of thing” to happen in the first place. I honestly don’t remember if I ever told them about the rape and death threats that continued for at least a month until I deleted that account and email address and changed my social security number in the campus database to a fake ID number. I left my room only to attend classes and collect food to bring back to the dorm. I was 20.

My blinders lifted enough to seek out weekly counseling sessions. The main reason, of course, was more practical and rational than emotional. Someone on campus would know why I disappeared, if I failed to show up for each week’s appointment. While my parents could only see “the entitlement [and] the lack of direction” that I showed in my ‘sinful behavior,’ the “panic, the often-crippling anxiety that lies behind that façade of serene achievement that ... college students learn to show the world” became my norm.³⁵ Panic and “often-crippling anxiety,” hidden behind a “façade of serene achievement” meant that while I felt I was trapped and in perceived mortal danger, I still needed to focus on perfecting all six classes, because otherwise, something might be wrong.

³⁵ Deresiewicz, *Excellent Sheep*, p. 21.

Until then, I remained in a fixed mindset academically. As Lamott argues, “Perfectionism is a mean, frozen form of idealism,” and I had to let it go to survive.”³⁶ When I allowed some of that “mean, frozen form of idealism” to fade away, I found myself better able to cope with the academic rigor as well as the emotional strain of a life in crisis.

Eventually, my counselor helped me understand that something had to give. Since I could not relinquish the fear of unknown strangers around every corner, perhaps I could forgive myself the potential of not achieving a perfect score on every paper or assignment. She offered me the psychological permission to allow the acceptance of a B or, God forbid, a C. That semester ended with two A’s, two B’s, and two C’s—the only C’s and half of all the B’s I received as an undergraduate.

Looking back, I am damn proud of those C’s. I survived. I did manage to find help, and I allowed myself to release the ‘perfect student.’ I stopped trying so hard to “be a student,” and began exploring not just my world, but myself. When I gave up some of the façade, I removed the blinders for a little while, and I learned I could survive and grow.

Towards the end of the semester, I was also granted legal absolution. The civil case was thrown out of court because there was no evidence. Unfortunately, no one informed me the 2.5-hour ride from school to the court was unnecessary. Neither party showed to the court date, and it took at least an hour for the bailiff to find out

³⁶ Lamott, *Bird by Bird*, p. 32.

who I was and tell me I was released. I went to the local police who delivered my message to both Fred and Steve to leave me alone. I never heard from either again.

Like Deresiewicz, I “have been haunted [my] whole life by a fear of failure,” and I can honestly say that failure lost a bit of its power over me that semester. When I first walked into the counselor’s office, I “suddenly felt that I was missing my life, I was missing my chance to be happy, missing my chance to be free.”³⁷ I resented that I was missing so much; I resented the fear. Going to counseling was me fighting back. I needed someone else to help me carry that burden. When I finally realized I was “missing my chance to be free,” I acted. She sat down, and I gave myself permission to share everything. Thankfully, my perfect student died that semester.

I learned that asking for help was the most powerful tool I owned. The most powerful lesson I learned from that experience had nothing to do with grades or being subpoenaed and stalked by someone I did not know. By surviving that semester and by seeking help, I learned I did not have to carry fear and anger with me by myself. I was no longer alone in my shame. Only by being vulnerable was I able to regain control of my life.

Teaching Internship

My internship was the first time in my college experience where I started to understand that teaching wasn’t something I could just read/study/test and repeat. There was no ‘perfect teacher.’ It was fascinating, and for the first time, truly challenging. I asked questions of my instructors that centered on life outside of a

³⁷ Deresiewicz, *Excellent Sheep*, p. 54.

syllabus. While I was not in charge of anyone's learning, I helped teachers plan lessons and discovered how they handled "that kid" that always tested boundaries. I began to fully engage in my journey of learning, not just learn passively. That creativity was amazing.

Failure was more accepted than perfection in the classrooms I audited. Every teacher I talked to shared stories of terribly planned lessons and perfect ones that fell apart for no reason. These teachers share about the days when things looked grim, but then magic happened, and everyone learned something. The blinders came off for a brief second, and I loved it. I wanted more. There was more to teaching than what I had experienced in my own education.

The teaching internship was the first time I began to understand that teaching as a vocation is more faceted than I used to believe. Dewey described vocation as a "variety of callings, in each of which he should be intelligently effective."³⁸ He warned against working or learning in isolation. "Any one occupation loses its meaning and becomes a routine keeping busy at something in the degree in which it is isolated from other interests."³⁹ The most fascinating teachers I worked with were ones that explored "a variety of callings," and were engaged in those pursuits, not "isolated from other interests."

³⁸ Maria Popova, "John Dewey on How to Find Your Calling, the Key to a Fulfilling Vocation, and Why Diverse Interests Are Essential for Excellence in Any Field," Brain Pickings, published October 20, 2015, accessed November 09, 2017, from <https://www.brainpickings.org/2015/10/20/john-dewey-democracy-and-education-calling/>.

³⁹ Popova, "John Dewey," 2015.

I learned the best teachers were ones that knew how to connect with students honestly and openly. Those same teachers approached their jobs with passion and enthusiasm, all of which were distinctly fascinating from their fellow teachers. Education, was more interesting when the teachers were interesting themselves.

So much of the education courses required by my highly structured degree centered around theory and generalizations. By spending time in a real classroom, I was exposed to teachers who preferred to eat lunch with a kid that struggled, so they could talk together, rather than complain in the teacher's lounge. Those were the teachers I began to admire, and eventually emulate. Unfortunately, this wonderful, practical experience occurred during my senior year, rather than exposing me to a tangible classroom as a first year.

As Bertrand Russell described in a 1959 interview for the BBC, "Love is wise, hatred is foolish."⁴⁰ Experiencing the above semesters and others of my undergraduate degree, I learned that I can live my life without having to be "polite, pleasant, ... and well-mannered," but I do not have to carry hate with me.

During my six-course semester, I learned fear and shame, and I learned to hate. The only way to forgive the shame I felt for becoming embroiled in such a situation was that I then had to learn self-compassion. Sharing the self-loathing with a counselor helped me realize how destructive that thinking was. If my best friend said

⁴⁰ Patrick Metzger, "Bertrand Russell's Advice for Future Generations," YouTube, published February 27, 2015, accessed October 11, 2017, from <https://youtu.be/s7HOMfcRFmY>. Time: 01:18-01:58.

the things I repeated to myself, I would have stopped her with love. I had to forgive myself, and to love myself.

Once I accepted and survived that semester, my internship showed me how to release the 'perfect teacher' syndrome. I survived by asking questions, and that was the best way I knew to continue exploring my world. The six-course semester was the first experience I had to hate, and to let go, while the internship semester was my first chance to explore how valuable vulnerability was to my chosen profession.

"Love is wise, hatred is foolish."

2B. Special Education and Adult Education Experiences

There is a saying in adult education: Everyone enters through the back door, even the teachers. I have yet to talk with an adult educator who graduated college with the express desire to teach in that field. I, like many other adult educators, followed the scenic route to educate.

Not having any practical experience when I graduated with my bachelor's, I found a para-educator position at the local school (described in section 3B, *Vulnerability and Teaching*). After a year, I found myself the special education teacher. The 'expert' with multiple degrees in behavior education quit before Thanksgiving. The special education director called me to her office and exclaimed, "Congratulations! Now, fill out the paperwork."

She told me that the administration required a paper trail, but the job was mine, because I could handle "the situation." The only condition to my placement that I readily agreed to was earning my certification. I spent three years acquiring theory, while also experiencing a daily trial-by-fire on how to reach students without verbal or written communication skills.

I learned how to make science and math come alive by taking nature walks and counting hops, rocks, and trees we passed. I learned to read another person well enough to know when I could challenge, cajole, or offer a comforting silence. Essentially, I unlearned all I absorbed in college and through certification, and allowed my students to teach me what they needed. This took faith in my ability to

recover from failure, as I had no clear idea of what I was doing. Looking back, I recognize the amount of courageous vulnerability I needed that first year.

My first true success with one student was when I made the connection between a student and television. He could not process something said to him, but he repeated and responded to movies, commercial, and music videos. I began recording short lessons. Both his engagement and understanding skyrocketed.

Unfortunately, these lessons were learned without the benefit of a mentor or supportive colleague environment. I asked for mentors repeatedly from both the principal and special education director. I observed the high school special education staff for a couple of half-days, but the differences between elementary and high school instruction only increased my feelings of isolation. I was swimming in a sea of doubt and fear. I graduated college only a year before I found myself in charge of writing federally mandated documentation when I could barely put together a lesson plan. I actively sought professional development courses and conversations with veteran teachers, trying to grasp the intricate and subtle art of teaching children with vastly different learning needs.

While I enjoyed learning how to communicate and challenge the students in my care, I was often called to the principal's office to defend nontraditional teaching methods, such as allowing my students to go outside or run and scream before a reading assignment. We counted pine cones and steps, both tactile and visual, rather than boxes on the highly structured math curriculum worksheets the school utilized.

A teacher appeared intent on thinking the worst of me, but that may have been miscommunication and continual bad timing.

One time, this teacher walked into my classroom as I read The Cat in the Hat, while several of my students hung onto me. Two students leaned on my knees and one was in my lap. A fourth leaned onto my shoulders to see the words. The instructor informed the principal I was “engaging in inappropriate behavior with the students.” She failed to ask why I was reading instead of sending my students to speech class.

She did not ask what occurred before she walked into my room. This instructor did not know about the 25-minute meltdown we had survived and were recovering from. She did not know that the student on my lap was successfully engaging in the nonverbal, positive reinforcement plan I instituted.

The child responded positively to “deep touch pressure,” which is “the type of surface pressure that is exerted in most types of firm touching, holding, stroking, petting of animals, or swaddling.”⁴¹ I instituted the positive intervention, with written permission from the principal, the special education director, and his parents, after I realized why he ran headlong into the classroom wall on a semi-weekly basis. The school trained me in small child hold techniques, which I despised, but were all I knew to keep him and other safe. It occurred to me this behavior was the only way he could ask for the tight squeeze he needed when he felt overwhelmed. Rather than

⁴¹ Temple Grandin, “Calming Effects of Deep Touch Pressure in Patients with Autistic Disorder, College Students, and Animals,” *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychopharmacology*, Volume 2, Number 1, (1992), Mary Ann Liebert, Inc., Publishers, accessed January 22, 2018, from <http://www.grandin.com/inc/squeeze.html>. Clinical Effects of Deep Touch Pressure section.

reinforcing that horrible negative behavior, I tried turning his need for sensory stimulation into a positive reward and taught him how to request a “hug” before he escalated. I think the success of the sensory plan was in part to the “secret code word” the student and I agreed on, so the student would not feel embarrassed.

The teacher that constantly reported me to the principal did not see how engaged the students were while listening to The Cat in The Hat. She ignored the intense stares of concentration each student exhibited. None of those students had ever been close enough to a book to clearly see the words as they were read. Two of the students had never been read to at all. Each time I read “the,” all four had to find the word on the page, working together when someone missed it. There are 34 instances of “the” in the first 14 pages alone, and this activity engaged all four children, while teaching them a valuable sight word, and how to collaborate and take turns.⁴² The stress-free activity of being read to, and finding the “magic word,” helped the students recover from that day’s meltdown.

During the recovery stage, children are often not ready to learn. Thus, it is important that adults work with them to help them ... once again become a part of the routine. This is often best accomplished by directing the youth to a highly motivating task that can be easily accomplished such as an activity related to a special interest.⁴³

⁴²No author, no date, PDF of first 14 pages of The Cat in the Hat, by Dr. Seuss, originally printed 1957, accessed October 25, 2017, PDF from <http://www.mfwi.edu/MFWI/Recordings/cat%20in%20the%20hat.pdf>.

⁴³ Brenda Smith Myles, “The Cycle of Tantrums, Rage, and Meltdowns,” Research Autism, published October 01, 2004, accessed December 08, 2017, from <https://researchautism.org/the-cycle-of-tantrums-rage-and-meltdowns/>. Recovery Stage section.

Forcing my students to reengage in the ‘normal’ routine without fully supporting the recovery stage, any “intervention may simply resume the cycle in a more accelerated pattern leading more quickly to the rage stage.”⁴⁴ I was never able to impress the importance of the recovery stage onto the teacher described above. She often accused me of withholding my students because I maliciously chose to hinder their speech therapy. The unfortunate reality was that I tried to prevent repetitions of “the rage stage” outside the safe space of my classroom.

By reading in such a relaxed manner, I helped reinforce that my room and I were both safe. I cared for each student, even after a meltdown. I was consistent and predictable. After each meltdown session, we followed a pattern. Distress to calm down, talk about the situation afterwards, and “review the incident in a supportive—not punitive—manner that ensures [the child] understands what [went] wrong, how [to] handle it differently next time, and what [the child] did right.”⁴⁵ I believe allowing time for recovery is more important to address than interventions before a meltdown, because recovery is where the most change in behaviors occurs.

I experienced so many of these moments from this teacher, that the principal and I fell into a bi-weekly pattern. He’d ask what happened right before this teacher saw me, I shared the meltdown-of-the-day, and he would say to keep doing my job, and not to worry about that other teacher. However, he also never ventured into my

⁴⁴ Myles, “The Cycle of Tantrums,” Recovery Stage section.

⁴⁵ Ellen Notbolm, “A Team Approach to Handling Meltdowns,” *Exceptional Children: Navigating Learning Differences and Special Education*, Children’s VOICE, published Fall/Winter 2011. Accessed December 08, 2017. P 15.

room or granted my requests for a mentor. I never received either a formal or informal observation in the three years I worked there.

Eventually the district transferred me to another school, in a more “academic” setting of instructional support. The other teachers were great, but I was in the same separate, self-contained environment that I had been in at the previous school for three years. Instead of working with students for 45-minute sessions on math skills as I had been led to believe, I worked with students 5.5 hours a day, again with little mentorship or support. That move from the familiar stress to the unknown stress was what led to finally acknowledging my failure. I was one of *those teachers* who succumbed to “teachers’ burnout,” which has been “[recognized] as a serious occupational problem in school systems worldwide.”⁴⁶

“Burnout is a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who work with people in some capacity.”⁴⁷ Those that experience burnout can no longer function at top efficiency, because they experience “an attempt to distance oneself emotionally and cognitively from the recipients by ignoring the qualities that make them unique and engaging people.”⁴⁸ While I struggled to maintain a professional, caring relationship with my students, I rarely succeeded in my personal relationships. I

⁴⁶ Janne Pietarinen, et al. “Reducing Teacher Burnout: A Socio-Contextual Approach.” *Teaching and Teacher Education*, Vol 35 (2013), p. 62.

⁴⁷ Bo Shen, et al. “The relationship between teacher burnout and student motivation.” *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, Vol 85, (2015), p. 520.

⁴⁸ Shen, et al. “The relationship between teacher burnout.” P. 520.

vacillated between angry and apathetic, and did not recognize the symptoms of burnout until several years later.

An unfortunately prevalent side effect of teacher burnout is that the teacher is unconsciously blamed for not being able to 'handle the job.' I experienced both internal shame from this fact, as well as from the school and the larger social community. While researching this phenomenon, I found one article that differentiated between "burnout" and "demoralization," which the author argued was the real reason teachers left the classroom.

Burnout tends to be characterized as a natural by-product of teaching in demanding schools and leaves the problem of burnout as an issue of teacher personality and/or naiveté. Burnout is characterized as a failure of individual teachers to conserve their personal store of resources.⁴⁹

While I was inexperienced, I was not a "failure of [the] individual." I did "conserve personal stores of resources," but I was never able to find support. I was the support for my students, without the opportunity to travel through the recovery stage from the trauma of watching a child slam his head into a wall, or the shock of being stabbed by a pencil because I tried to prevent her from slamming it into her own arm. Rosales argued that "demoralization occurs when the job changes to such a degree that what teachers previously found 'good' about their work is no longer available."⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Jon Rosales, "How Bad Education Policies Demoralize Teachers," NEA Today, published February 07, 2012, accessed December 08, 2017, from <http://neatoday.org/2012/02/07/how-bad-education-policies-demoralize-teachers/>.

⁵⁰ Rosales, "How Bad Education Policies Demoralize Teachers," NEA Today.

I found myself struggling to balance the joy of helping a student learn to write his name legibly with the stress and tension of having a child attempt to pull his hair out because he became overwhelmed. I believe “demoralized” is a far better description of what I experienced than “burnout,” because “there is no shame in demoralization—it is the work that has changed, not the failure of an individual to tough it out.”⁵¹ There was shame in burnout, my personal failure. However, with a greater understanding of vulnerability, I realize shame kept me silent. I could have utilized the union to force the principal to give me observations or a mentor. I could have used conflict resolution strategies to explain what I was attempting with the instructor that constantly reported me. At the time, I was afraid of being more vulnerable than I already was. I tried to minimize my shame, until I could no longer contain anything. I left special education on September 23, 2010, heartbroken and sure I would never teach again. I left with the assumption that I was a terrible teacher. I walked out of the classroom for the final time, convinced I could never step into another classroom again.

Parker Palmer describes teachers that can no longer access their own vulnerability tend to “lose heart” in their profession and themselves. I “lost heart,” because so many of my colleagues taught me reaching out was not done, and asking questions unacceptable. I was the failure, so I stopped advertising the only way I knew: I stopped asking questions.

Many of us became teachers for reasons of the heart, animated by a passion for some subject and for helping people learn. ... We lose heart, in part, because

⁵¹ ⁵¹ Rosales, “How Bad Education Policies Demoralize Teachers,” NEA Today.

*teaching is a daily exercise in vulnerability. ... What I care about helps define my selfhood. ... To reduce our vulnerability, we disconnect from students, from subjects, and even from ourselves. We build a wall between inner truth and outer performance, and we play-act the teacher's part.*⁵²

Asking questions of an instructor who has educated longer than I lived, has gone one of two ways. One, the rare teacher will invite me to explain my situation, ask some leading questions, and offer a few suggestions. The other way still makes me cringe as I remember feeling small, insignificant, and a failure for not knowing how to handle “that little thing,” as a coworker dismissed me once. She had been one of the reasons I wanted to become a science teacher; she made the subject interesting, perceptible, and attainable. I threatened her somehow. I think she preferred me as a 10-year-old student, not as a 24-year-old coworker.

Perhaps the teachers I worked with felt as disconnected as I did, but refused to acknowledge the stress, to maintain their jobs. Perhaps in my exuberant enthusiasm to understand more about what ‘teaching,’ meant, I made them feel defensive and “they [barricaded] themselves behind their credentials, their podiums, their status, their research.”⁵³

I tried to become a better teacher, but I recognized how asking for help was unconcealed vulnerability. When I admitted my weakness, people felt my raw and honest emotions. Vulnerability in any form is scary. Brené Brown defines

⁵² Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*, (California: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998), p. 17.

⁵³ Palmer, *The Courage to Teach*, p. 48.

vulnerability as “uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure.”⁵⁴ I asked a lot of questions, and did so at every opportunity. ‘*I do not know; will you help me?*’ The “uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure” was not something many of my colleagues wanted to wade through with me. Faced with the constant turning-away of my coworkers, I learned to ask fewer questions. I internalized that asking questions alienated people. *It is easier to fit in when questions remain unasked.*

Now, I understand how profoundly disturbing this style of teaching is. One learns to memorize, not to think. Students learned just as I did that questions were extraneous and were ignored. They learned to “be a student,” while I learned how to be a “perfect” new teacher: silent and hidden away in my classroom.

I learned how deeply emotional being “demoralized” was, and how psychologically scarring. I could not see myself in a classroom again. I was terrified, because all I knew and wanted was to teach. I felt banned from the learning environment, which devastated my self-confidence.

I left the classroom in September, which was my rock bottom. I spent the remainder of 2010 trying to start over. I attended career counseling workshops, crying when every career-match assessment recommended “teacher.”

I worked part time in a gluten free bakery for a few months. Mixing, creating, and the special magic that cooking gluten free requires, gave me some solace as I tried to accept the trauma of leaving education, for I thought, forever.

⁵⁴ Brown, *Daring Greatly*, p. 34.

Several months later, a friend suggested adult education, to dip gently back into the teaching field, starting with a single class. During my interview, the director asked why I applied with no experience working with anyone over the age of 12. I told her I missed the classroom, I missed learning with students, and by the time I told her I thought adult education would offer me more creative freedom to connect with my students, I started crying.

I cried because I could not hide my feelings of failure for leaving and embarrassment for not ‘sticking with it.’ *I failed once already, I’ll just fail again.* I cried because I was once again taking a risk into emotional uncertainty. *Here I am, pretending I was ready to teach again. I can teach adults—maybe?*

To this day, I am surprised she understood anything I said through my messy interview. Brown’s succinct description of vulnerability, “uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure,” accurately describes that interview.⁵⁵

As an aside, I do not recommend crying as an effective interview technique. However, I was shocked when she hired me. I asked her months later why she gambled on someone unable to remain professional during a job interview. “You had passion. You cried, because you thought you had failed your students and that pissed you off. That passion will make you a hell of a teacher.”⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Brown, *Daring Greatly*, p. 34.

⁵⁶ Razell Ward, paraphrased conversation with the author, 2011. [Personal communication]

While tears hindered communication, I shared some of my experiences as a special educator, working without constructive feedback or connection among my colleagues. My future boss bought me lunch and told me I was home. I started work that next week.

My first class, geometry, solidified how strong a connection I felt to the new environment. My boss introduced me to everyone, checked in after my first class and first week, and every adult education teacher there welcomed me as if I had always been there.

Evidence suggests ... a positive climate or opportunities to receive constructive feedback and professional recognition ... may play a central role in reducing teacher burnout and promoting job satisfaction as well as good job performance.⁵⁷

Teaching adult education was stressful in different ways from an elementary school. More often, I was alone with 10-20 students, from 16 years old and up. We had 45 hours to cover a year's worth of material, so they could pass proficiency tests. Each of us had difficulties and emotional trauma from terrible education experiences. Whether the student sitting in my class left high school two weeks before or two decades made little difference. Traditional teaching methods did not work with my new students, so I struggled constantly to find—or create—unique ways of sharing information. There were tough days, but never one where I left work, frustrated and tense after yet another wasted day, swimming in uselessness and guilt.

⁵⁷ Pietarinen, et al. "Reducing Teacher Burnout," p. 64.

The “positive climate” and “opportunities to receive constructive feedback” truly helped me to “[reduce] teacher burnout and [promoted] job satisfaction as well as good job performance.” I learned that environment was what traumatized me from teaching in special education.

“Contextual dissonance may result in a feeling of not belonging or a feeling that one does not fit in.”⁵⁸ I was never in harmony with my situation as a special education teacher. Once I found something that matched my personality more accurately, I realized teaching did not have to be heartbreaking. I was welcomed into adult education. The instructors and my director offered constructive, timely feedback, and encouraged me to ask questions. Vulnerability was more than tolerated; it was encouraged and celebrated.

I worked as an adult educator in western Maine for two years, teaching a variety of subjects in four locations across two counties. My director included me in all professional development excursions, and there were many. She believed the best way to increase teaching skills was to talk, listen, and explore with fellow teachers. She invested heavily into the professional development of her staff.

At one conference, I met two adult education people from Vermont. After two years of driving across the state for four part-time jobs, I applied—and was accepted—to be a full-time adult educator in northern Vermont.

⁵⁸ Einar M. Skaalvik and Sidsel Skaalvik, “Teacher Job Satisfaction and Motivation to Leave the Teaching Profession: Relations with School Context, Feeling of Belonging, and Emotional Exhaustion.” *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 26 (2010), 1029-1038. P. 1031.

I continued to refine both how to maintain my vulnerability, and how to fight for what I needed professionally. In Maine, adult education follows the traditional high school Carnegie units, where a student needs to have a certain number of “credits” in English, math, and others. In Vermont, organizations handle teaching adult education, and are not affiliated with high schools. This allows for more flexibility in who works with at student, as well as in the work a student completed to show proficiency. In a new location, I was no longer the sole person responsible for a dozen students’ physical, emotional, and cognitive health. I was no longer in a situation where I was told to “handle it,” or “you’ve got everything under control,” as I had been while a special educator. While I missed teaching in Maine, I thoroughly enjoyed my experience in Vermont.

For two years, I worked for a manager who was as concerned for my emotional well-being as I was of my students. She encouraged me to reach out to adult educators across the organization or state, to connect and learn. I was no longer alone, and with that realization, my understanding of my own teaching grew exponentially.

Personal contact, personal magnetism, or let’s call it the personal touch, plays a large part in the development of good responsible citizens whose aims and ideals are such that they can be depended upon to react sanely in a crisis. In democratic theory the individual’s thinking is not done for [her]; [she] must be trained to think for [herself]. [She] is not a standardized product.⁵⁹

Bruner exemplified why I felt change was necessary in my own teaching. Standardized teaching leads to uniform thinking. A crisis, defined by Merriam-

⁵⁹ Carl Bruner, “Why the Swivel Chair Educator?” *The Phi Delta Kappan* (Phi Delta Kappa International, January 1936), Vol. 18, No. 5, p. 143. Accessed October 12, 2017, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20258479>.

Webster online, is “an emotionally significant event or radical change of status in a person's life.”⁶⁰ One cannot predict a crisis, and so there is nothing to prepare for. To “react sanely” when faced with a crisis means learning how to adapt to unusual situations. Teachers that train students to “think for [him/herself]” are more accurately preparing a person to handle life.

As a teacher on a journey, I am striving to learn how to “have the courage to maintain a struggle against overwhelming odds.”⁶¹ I learned the importance of asking questions when I do not understand. I also learned the power to keep asking questions, even when I am socialized to keep my silence. The special education experience better prepared me for adult education. Both taught me how important not only my students’ learning is, but that I must also consider my own. There is true power in “seeking to give voice to others even before fully developing [my] own.”⁶² I am finally comfortable with not yet knowing how to teach most effectively in all situations. I am learning, and will continue to do so. I may still be developing my own voice, but I seek to give voice to others who may not have yet learned to speak at all.

⁶⁰ "Crisis." Merriam-Webster.com. Accessed November 25, 2017. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/crisis>.

⁶¹ Nash and Jang, *Preparing Students*, p. 101.

⁶² Nash and Jang, *Preparing Students*, p. 101.

Chapter 3: “To Here...”

3A. Interdisciplinary Graduate Practice

Since I began my degree in 2015, I did not want to write a thesis. The Interdisciplinary Studies program was the only M.Ed. where that was an option. What could I possibly be interested in to write *20,000 words* on a single topic? I thought taking two more courses would be more useful to me than writing a thesis. I am proud to admit my error.

The Interdisciplinary Studies program draws from all fields, generational standing, and life experience. I originally began my degree as a “currently employed professional” seeking “career advancement in [my] current field.”⁶³ I realized as I continued through the program that I wanted more “intellectual (interdisciplinary) stimulation of ... the pursuit of new knowledge and professional practice,” which occurred as I began forming my thesis topic.⁶⁴ Once I began writing, I realized I my next step on my career journey would involve “a broadly conceived, interdisciplinary course of study to determine which career path might be best for [me] in the future.”⁶⁵

⁶³ College of Education and Social Services, “Interdisciplinary Studies—Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)”, modified 2017, accessed September 13, 2017, from https://www.uvm.edu/cess/dlds/interdisciplinary_studies_frequently_asked_questions_faqs.

⁶⁴ College of Education and Social Services, “Interdisciplinary Studies—Frequently Asked Questions.”

⁶⁵ College of Education and Social Services, “Interdisciplinary Studies—Frequently Asked Questions.”

When I chose to write about my personal journey of vulnerability, I was not sure why this was so important to me. As I began writing, I learned that becoming an interdisciplinarian connected me to becoming a better teacher. Nash describes the learner's mindset as an interdisciplinarian, while Wapnick uses the word 'multipotentialite.' Wapnick defines a multipotentialite (multi-potential-ite) or multipod as "someone with many interests and creative pursuits," a person that "thrives on learning, exploring, and mastering new skills. We are excellent at bringing disparate ideas together in creative ways."⁶⁶

I am a mixed-style multipotentialite, who:

- *Is happiest when [I] have a few different projects on [my] plate at any given time*
- *Loves variety, but gets overwhelmed when [I] have too much*
- *Sometimes go through periods where [I am] juggling a bunch of different projects and periods where [I am] deeply invested in a single thing⁶⁷*

As an interdisciplinarian, I value the unique opinions of the people I work with, because they expose me to new ways of thinking, and thus exploring the world around me in a new and fascinating way. As a multipod, I enjoy not only working with different people, but also on different projects. When I start a new project, I somehow balance the excitement of something new with anticipatory panic: the overwhelming fear that there is *too much*, even as I draw myself into the new endeavor.

⁶⁶ Emilie Wapnick, "Terminology: Multipotentiality," Puttylike.com, modified 2017, accessed October 29, 2017 from www.puttlike.com/terminology/.

⁶⁷ Emilie Wapnick, "Are You a Multipotentiaite?" Puttylike.com, modified 2017, accessed September 26, 2017 from <http://puttylike.com/quiz/>.

Exploring being a multipod and an interdisciplinarian is a great metaphor for my thesis. By choosing disparate classes, I was guaranteed to work with different classmates and instructors, broadening my knowledge of how others learn. At the beginning of this journey, I was both elated and fearful of choosing *so many classes on my own. What if I pick one that I will never use? What if I don't learn anything?* As I began my thesis project, I felt my interest move from “juggling a bunch of different projects” to where I became “deeply invested in a single thing.”⁶⁸

I believe immersing myself in the SPN (Scholarly Personal Narrative) style helped feed all parts of me: everyone has something to teach me, I can write and explore many different aspects of my own history, and move this thesis from the jumbled jigsaw puzzle pieces that I began writing with to a cohesive exploration of my transformation into an Interdisciplinary Teacher.

Culmination vs. Terrace

As I began planning and free writing, my thesis represented a culmination of my life's lessons, an ending to my formal academic learning. However, that representation became a limited definition of my experience. My greatest gift in teaching is that of learning. I know my students will teach me more than I knew before working with them. Writing this thesis afforded me the opportunity to not only reflect on past experiences, but also to apply that self-reflection on my learning experiences as a graduate student.

⁶⁸ Wapnick. “Are You a Multipotentialite?” Puttylike.com.

Synonyms of “culmination” include: apogee, finale, pinnacle, summit, and zenith.⁶⁹ The common thread: they describe the ending point of something, where nothing more can be gained. A mountain’s summit signals the start of the descent, the race’s finale to stop running. Constricting my learning to a “culmination,” defies everything I learned as a teacher. When someone engages in self-limiting behaviors, they do not stretch beyond those limits. This behavior is learned helplessness, the “belief that our own behavior does not influence what happens next, ... [our] behavior does not control outcomes or results.”⁷⁰ Learned helplessness is when a child “hates” art, because an older sister laughed at his drawing, or when an adult working on their GED refuses to practice a new sentence structure or math problem, because they “already know” it will be “too difficult.”

My own learned helplessness appeared when contemplating the end of my graduate degree. I looked forward to checking off the final paper, no longer analyzing myself after I graduate. Of course, as I progressed through my degree, I could not help but to analyze my actions and feelings. The Interdisciplinary degree was intentionally designed to do just that. I chose the program for that very reason. If I maintained my initial ideal of a “culmination,” I would not have not only failed to learn anything while drowning myself in debt, but I would have also cheapened my own experiences.

⁶⁹ “Culmination,” Thesaurus.com, accessed October 04, 2017, from <http://www.thesaurus.com/browse/culmination>.

⁷⁰ Carmen Reyes, “When Children Fail in School: What Teachers and Parents Need to Know About Learned Helplessness,” Edutopia: George Lucas Educational Foundation blog, posted on August 29, 2011, accessed October 25, 2017, from <https://www.edutopia.org/groups/special-ed/72044>.

Rather than a culminating peak, I see my journey of academics and life more as terraced farms like those I noticed while riding through the Andes Mountains in Ecuador. Many of the trips throughout the country involved traversing 8,000-14,000 feet mountain ranges. Such extreme heights necessitated my acquisition and use of all 12 packets of the motion-sickness pills our group's staff thoughtfully provided. Level ground is impossible at such elevations, and water is precious. In Ecuador, as in other countries that cross steep mountain ranges around the world, farmers turned the land into steps (terraces), where water trickles through various crops.

"The main purpose of terracing land for farming is to reduce the velocity of water runoff and thereby soil erosion by breaking the length of the slope that runoff has available."⁷¹ DelVenado's article on terrace farming indicated that both soil and water conservation are the main reasons for creating such a landscape formation. While riding through the precipitous mountains on a bus that I was constantly motion sick in, I was amazed at the number of farms appearing to defy gravity and logic in their construction. At altitudes that made me gasp climbing a short flight of stairs, farmers had cultivated the land so that crops could easily thrive in the semi-arid reaches of the Andes.

Terracing is a far more optimistic metaphor of myself than a "culmination." I could consider graduating with a master's degree the peak of academic achievement, but that is neither accurate nor self-compassionate. There is nowhere else to go, and

⁷¹ Roger DelVenado, "The Advantages and Disadvantages of Terrace Cultivation," People of Our Everyday Life, modified 2017. Accessed August 31, 2017, from <http://peopleof.oureverydaylife.com/advantages-disadvantages-terrace-cultivation-9292.html>.

no drive to push myself more. I much prefer the idea that I can't possibly learn everything. That keeps me striving to learn more, and reminds me that as a teacher, I should always learn. Knowing that I open myself to learn more helps maintain my own vulnerability.

Education, like life, is a work in progress, as a terrace style of teaching should be. Terraces follow the mountain of knowledge, but there is always another one just up the road. As I learned how to teach from examples around me, I also chose courses in my graduate degree for their ability to stretch my brain in different ways. Each course of my degree added an additional terrace to my understanding. While I learned something important from each, there are a few courses I chose to highlight, because they represent examples of something that impacted how I see the world, increasing my knowledge of what being an Interdisciplinary truly means.

Philosophy of Education

My first graduate class was a gamble, a test whether I wanted to continue in this eccentric degree program. The description was not helpful, as it described a “critical examination of key beliefs and values in current philosophies of helping, e.g. phenomenological, behavioral, holistic, as practiced in a variety of educational and social service institutions.”⁷² While the course description left much to be desired, I chose it because Nash described the content was designed to explore one's personal philosophy of life. I never thought about philosophy before that conversation, but I

⁷² University of Vermont, “UVM Course Directory: EDFS 302—Philosophy of Education,” modified 2017, accessed August 30, 2017, from <https://www.uvm.edu/academics/courses/?term=201709&crn=91408>.

was intrigued. Earning a Master's degree was how I chose to discover who I am. The first day, I was nervous and unsure: *What if I made a mistake by taking this class? What if it was just talking about ancient philosophers, and not relevant to my life?* When I read the syllabus, however, my fears abated.

When I think of passionate educators, I think especially of those educators who are unavoidably, helplessly, in love with their work. I think of teachers who feel intimately, indeed amorously, about their subject matter and the whole magical experience that sometimes transpires whenever learners and educators come together in the confined, artificial space called a classroom or a seminar room or an office or some other teaching-learning space.⁷³

Nash's description of "passionate educators" was the most succinct description of who I am striving to become that I ever read. Before beginning my degree and naming my journey as that of an interdisciplinarian, I erroneously saw myself as a one-dimensional teacher. I was drawn to the interdisciplinary degree program because I wanted to learn more about "the nature of knowledge, about what makes people of all ages want to learn even when they are most surly and resistant."⁷⁴ Reading that paragraph reinforced how important learning to explore myself was. A friend once described me as "wanderer," not willing to "settle for the known and comfortable."⁷⁵ At 31 years old, I finally began to wander into my own life, my own experiences, and begin to understand who I am.

⁷³ Robert Nash, "EDFS 302: Philosophy of Education: The Search for Meaning," Fall 2015 syllabus, University of Vermont, p. 02.

⁷⁴ Nash, "EDFS 302 syllabus." P. 02.

⁷⁵ Amie Smith, paraphrased conversation with author, 2009. [Personal communication]

Nothing about my teaching journey has followed a clear, easy-to-trace path. I wanted to become one of “those educators who are unavoidably, helplessly, in love with their work.” I wanted to learn how to connect my experiences with feeling “intimately, indeed amorously, about their subject matter and the whole magical experience that sometimes transpires whenever learners and educators come together in the confined, artificial space called a ... teaching-learning space.”⁷⁶ I was in the right place.

While researching this thesis, I found a description of a teacher that reminded me of my first foray into graduate studies. The way Deresiewicz described one of his teachers (below) sounded as if I could have written it about Nash’s style of teaching.

*His teacher’s methods were the same as those of Socrates, the teacher of Plato himself: he echoed your opinions back to you or forced you to articulate them for yourself. ... The point was not to replace his students’ opinions with his own. The point was to bring his charges into the unfamiliar, uncomfortable, and endlessly fertile condition of doubt. He was teaching them not what to think but how.*⁷⁷

Philosophy of Education helped me begin to explore the “unfamiliar, uncomfortable, and endlessly fertile condition of doubt.” I started learning about myself with honesty and sincerity, which was a first for me. Something I aspire to become is a teacher that teaches “not what to think, but how.” Why would I want dozens of people that think like I do? Sometimes, I think one is more than enough.

I was taught that teachers are the holders of knowledge, to “replace the student’s opinion with [my] own.” That mantle never set comfortably on my

⁷⁶ Nash, “EDFS 302 syllabus.” P. 02.

⁷⁷ Deresiewicz, *Excellent Sheep*, p. 80-81.

shoulders. Exploring the “endlessly fertile condition of doubt” along with my students seems far more exciting.

In Nash, I experienced the power of a teacher who is unconcerned with his own position of authority or of being the mystical keeper of knowledge. Instead, I saw firsthand the power of a different mindset: one where knowledge did not emanate from the all-knowing teacher. The teacher was responsible for asking the well-phrased question, to guide the students’ own understanding. Why learn from someone who teaches *what* to think, when one could learn from someone who teaches *how*?

“By dragging [opinions] into the light, asking you to defend them or just acknowledge having them, [the instructor] began to break them down, to expose them to the operations of the critical intelligence.”⁷⁸ When I acknowledged the opinions I had carried, unanalyzed for much of my life, I learned to explore my worldview. Critically examining my experiences for universalizable themes has helped me make connections to my life. Through writing this thesis, I learned I have been an interdisciplinarian long before I knew the word.

Independent Study #1—Ecuador

During the summer of 2016, I spend two months in Ecuador, teaching English grammar to Spanish-speaking summer camp children wanting to have a fun, interactive “American camp” experience. I learned of this camp from a career fair; I had taken a personal day from work to attend. My partner and I decided to quit our

⁷⁸ Deresiewicz, *Excellent Sheep*, p. 80.

jobs and move across the state, so I could continue my degree as a full-time student. That career fair felt like a small rebellion against the restrictive environment I was then working for.

While I still loved teaching adults, the new boss and I had intense personality conflicts. I held my students' confidentiality in highest regard, I never spoke about students to others, even if I knew they were intimately connected. The manager, for example, shared amusing or irritating anecdotes about students to and with other students, and he did not like that I voiced my displeasure with that practice. I disliked the manager's conflict avoidance, passive-aggression, and deeply-held belief that education was a useless waste of time. This person laughed at me when I started graduate school. The irony was that he managed an adult education office, a place where people came seeking education and knowledge. Rebellion is an appropriate word for how I felt; I had had enough of that person, and I finally chose to do something about it.

The vulnerability involved moving across the state, without a job, house, friends, or any other form of security one hopes for when making major life changes. Both my partner and I were employed full-time, and had some savings. Rather than rent, we purchased a mobile home that had been in foreclosure. Over the summer, my partner fixed the place up and made it livable.

I saw spending the summer in Ecuador as a test, a way to say that if I could teach in somewhere so unfamiliar, then I could succeed by embracing my own vulnerability as both a teacher and an individual. I also think part of my impulsive

decision to spend the summer in Ecuador was that my manager would never have had the courage to walk onto the plane. I did.

By keeping a daily diary and later analyzing the entries, I taught myself that my comfort zone does more to limit me than anything else. I learned that even sick with severe bacterial and viral infections and suffering from altitude sickness, I remembered what having fun in teaching should be like. I don't have to know everything. It is quite exhausting to think I do.

I think adventuring outside of one's comfort zone...is part of living a "whole-hearted" [Brené Brown's term] lifestyle. Learning to face my fears ... helped remind me of the importance of pursuing life, in the face of fear.⁷⁹

Teaching in Ecuador taught me more about myself than I learned from any other single experience, after writing this thesis. I went to another country, where I did not speak the language. I taught a challenging subject for me, in front of 100 kids, from four years old to 17. I was sick more days than I was not. All of that and so much more reminded me "of the importance of pursuing life, in the face of fear."

When I reread that passage a year later, I saw how much vulnerability I experienced during that journey. How could I maintain an authoritarian classroom environment, when students, counselors, and even the computer could not easily communicate with me? That first week was incredibly difficult, because I tried to be "Teacher," infallible and all-knowing. The traditional, formal, teaching I defaulted to at first simply could not exist when an adorable five-year-old child stares up at you,

⁷⁹ Jennifer Way, "Local Teacher to WorldTeacher: My Adventure in Education and in Life with WorldTeach: Ecuador," (in the author's possession), October 14, 2016, p. 42.

completely confused and that 17-year-old laughs at the frazzled American teacher. The first words I picked up in Spanish were please, thank you, look, listen, and repeat. I connected with the young ones—by far the tougher audience—by playing “What is /Que es?” I pointed to something in the room, ask in English, the class responded in Spanish which I repeated, then we reversed roles. When they saw me willing to try Spanish, they engaged with English, and we all had a lot of fun.

In these adventures, I learned how to explore my world a little bit deeper, and accept love of friends a little bit more. I learned that while feeling secure and in control of one’s environment can offer some level of comfort, when one breaks free from those bonds, the experience, the adventure of LIFE can be far more than anything expected. I faced my fears, then I wrote about them. As I quoted in my paper from Brené Brown’s talk about vulnerability, the “whole hearted people had, very simply, the courage to be imperfect.”⁸⁰

My experience in Ecuador helped me recognize the power in being vulnerable. I learned I could not bullshit a four-year-old; I had to be honest, so she would choose to pay attention. Only when I shrugged, gave up all pretenses of teaching the way I would in an environment back home, and ventured into broken Spanish with terrible pronunciation, did I make any progress at all. Every age group became more comfortable making mistakes in English as I made mistakes in Spanish. Together, we created an environment of shared vulnerability.

While my experience in Ecuador was necessary for widening my world view and exposing me to new ways of thinking, I would not have been so articulate with my learning without having the experience of analyzing the entire experience

⁸⁰ Jennifer Way, “Self-Evaluation of Ecuador Experience,” (in the author’s possession), October 14, 2016, p. 02.

afterward. I found universalizabilities that could have rivaled the HOLLYWOOD sign in their obviousness, but they only appeared after, when I organized my thoughts into a coherent document.

Independent Study #2—Vermont Mathematics Institute Reflections

Much of my teaching career has been around basic math skills—from addition to dividing fractions. I spent many years figuring out what works with students that think differently than the “norm,” and how I could best support gaining not only math fluency, but comfort with the subject as well. In the summer of 2017, I used the first two courses of the Vermont Mathematics Institute (VMI) graduate cohort as an independent study. My goal: to gain a more detailed understanding of math fundamentals so I could teach math more effectively. For my independent study, I chose 10 challenging problems to write reflections about my changing understanding. In one reflection, I described how my original expectations did not match what I learned through the process.

I expected these classes to be full of “how-to’s” and “don’t do’s,” leaving the week with a solid checklist of strategies for teaching math to elementary students, that I would easily be able to scale up to an adult audience. Wow, was I off the mark. I was blown away today. This isn’t about some handy checklist a teacher can simply cross off when task A or student B is complete. This is about teaching us how to think in math, how to solve problems that always eluded me. Not a single textbook in sight, either. I have never worked harder in a class in my life, and I am exhausted. And I can’t wait to go back tomorrow.⁸¹

While I thought I wanted a “solid checklist of strategies,” what I left that class with was a deeper understanding of math as a subject. I learned *why* the division sign

⁸¹ Jennifer Way, “VMI Independent Study Reflections,” (in the author’s possession), August 2017, page 45.

changes to multiplication when dividing by a fraction—something I was never able to explain satisfactorily to adult education students, forcing them to learn it because the teacher said so. I learned how to logic my way from finding the area of a square to finding the area of an irregular trapezoid; a shape I strongly disliked. I learned how to read and interpret patterns in numbers sequences and currency exchanges. There was no hyperbole in my statement: “I have never worked harder in a class in my life, and I am exhausted.” I also enjoyed myself immensely.

In addition to the practical side, I also learned more about my feelings toward failure. I failed a lot during those two weeks, often several times during each 8-hour class. “I have often had a superficial relationship with the subject [math]. For many years, math felt like junk food—tasty, but lacking [in] substance.”⁸² Outside of the three required high school classes, and two undergraduate math requirements, I have never had formal math instruction that did not directly involve the textbook-student passivity pipeline. As an alternative educator, I learned how to make math engaging, realistic, and useful to my students. However, math remained “tasty, but lacking [any] substance.” Attending the VMI courses and reflecting on the experience helped me redefine how I view my academic failures.

As a learner, I accept failure, because I want to learn how I failed. I talked with classmates and mentors, asking for clarification or an alternate understanding until it made sense. I saw the point of learning more, because I wanted to fill in the gaps that time and years of textbook teaching missed. ...

⁸² Way, “VMI Reflections,” p. 36.

As an instructor, I often struggle with failure in my teaching. I “should” know how to solve this problem, and I “should” be able to explain it to others.⁸³

I have often experienced feeling like a fraud when teaching math. I knew procedures, but lacked the conceptual understanding that brings knowledge from mindlessly solving a problem to understanding what I solved. This lack of knowledge felt false to my teaching philosophy, not able to answer my students’ questions of “Why do it this way? What does it mean? Where’s this in my life?”

The focus on memorization, fueled by standardized testing, has obstructed learning, ... students have been losing or squandering most of the information they acquire in school. But if that information is applied or actually used to solve problems, students will leave school with a much richer education.⁸⁴

As a learner, I could “accept failure, because I [wanted] to learn *how* I failed.” I was more interested in understanding the concept behind the procedure—and I was surrounded by 40 other classmates that struggled to understand along with me. Our questions were encouraged, our vulnerability kindly supported. Each class had a dozen helpful mentors and teachers willing to facilitate my own understanding. Those mentors and teachers did not give us 25 problems to do as homework, to assure we understood a concept. Rather, the courses were designed to have a single, vaguely similar problem to the day’s content that applied our knowledge to a new endeavor. We used our class experience and “actually used [the information] to solve problems,” leaving the VMI course with a “much richer education.”

⁸³ Way, “VMI Reflections,” p. 46-47.

⁸⁴ Luke Towler, “Deeper Learning: Moving Students Beyond Memorization,” NEA Today, published November 25, 2014, accessed November 09, 2017, from <http://neatoday.org/2014/11/25/deeper-learning-moving-students-beyond-memorization-2/>.

Through this experience, I rediscovered my learner’s mentality—one of exploration, questioning, and seeking alternate examples to content I did not understand. I also discovered how difficult that same attitude is to cultivate when I don the mantle of teacher. *“I struggle with befriending failure and often try to avoid the learning that comes from it.”*⁸⁵ Why would I take such pleasure in the process of learning, but try to deny that learning is more about failures than successes? This dichotomy reminded me that while learning is messy, fraught with failures, setbacks, and the excitement of life, teaching cannot be separate from learning. Palmer called scarred teachers those that “lose heart, in part, because teaching is a daily exercise in vulnerability.”⁸⁶ To teach, I must tap into my vulnerability, because without that, my learners fail to see what I teach be enacted outside the walls of the classroom. If I never fail or avoid potential areas to learn, my students learn that is what is expected.

In my final reflection of the class, I shared my hope for the future.

*Becoming comfortable with my own shortcomings will help me reach my goal of working with teachers one day. I want to help them make their teaching better. As a friend who is a life coach told me recently, “I’ve made every possible mistake there is, so I can keep you from making those same mistakes.” I love this sentiment. I have made many mistakes teaching. Hopefully, someday, I will be able to help other teachers from making those same mistakes.*⁸⁷

I have made mistakes teaching. But I have learned from each one of them. With hindsight, I see how each mistake and failure helped me succeed later. Someday, I will help other teachers from making those same mistakes.

⁸⁵ Way, “VMI Reflections,” p. 30.

⁸⁶ Palmer, *Courage to Teach*, p. 17.

⁸⁷ Way, “VMI Reflections,” p. 30.

3B. Vulnerable Teaching

*In Plato's Apology, while defending himself in a trial for his life, Socrates tells the jury, provocatively: "I say it is the greatest good for a human being to discuss virtue every day and those other things about which you hear me conversing and testing myself and others, **for the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being.**"*⁸⁸ —Jacob Held (Emphasis mine)

*"It is easier to try than to prove it can't be done."*⁸⁹ —The Moody Blues

Disaster Jobs: Evidence for Why I Teach

Teaching is in my blood; I knew my whole life. I returned from morning kindergarten to teach my younger sister everything I discovered that day. When she wanted to play with her Barbie collection, mine had careers, advanced degrees, and often had to concoct convoluted plans to rescue Ken. I never was the babysitter growing up, but I was the tutor.

I worked in different office settings over my life, and thankfully only eight interminable weeks in a cubicle. I spent a summer filling grumpy customers' orders on a food line at a chain sandwich store, and one terrible summer as a teller. The summer I was a teller, at least once a week, my money drawer did not match my receipts and tickets for the day. This resulted in a recount of my drawer and a search through the day's transactions until the missing money was accounted for. For a math teacher, that was both humbling and terribly embarrassing.

⁸⁸ Jacob Held, "Dr. Seuss and Philosophy: Oh, the Thinks You Can Think!" (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2011), p. 04.

⁸⁹ A-Z Lyrics.com. "Blue World-Moody Blues." Accessed October 20, 2017, from <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/moodyblues/blueworld.html>.

During the early part of my scheduled last week of being a summer teller, my drawer was short \$14,000. None of the other tellers found it, and nothing I had done that day came close to the missing amount. The bank closed at its usual time, but I did not leave until several hours later. Every teller reviewed my transactions for errors, and everyone was confused. Eventually, they allowed me to leave, and the branch manager told me not to finish the week. The bank's insurance covered my mistake.

In hindsight, I struggled so much in that position because it was mentally exhausting. Every day was identical, as were the conversations. I had neither creativity nor conversation to spice up the day's tedium. In this branch, we stood in our two-foot square of the counter and waited for customers. Talking among the tellers was discouraged as it was "unprofessional," as was sitting or walking around when we were not busy. I am naturally a pacer, who thinks by talking with others and physically moving. I was deeply out of my element. I could not talk, move around, learn something new, or find creative approaches to problems. All this contributed to the infamous day that ended my career in banking.

The teller job was the worst, but processing loan paperwork, filing reports, data entry for the Department of Children and Families, and making sandwiches all caused anxiety. None were teaching.

The lack of external stimulation leads to increased neural arousal in search of variety – failure to satisfy this leads to [experiences of] boredom. ... Extroverts require more stimulation to maintain optimal levels of arousal and so could be

*more easily bored, ... but extroverts may be better at seeking stimulation, especially in social contexts, and thus be better able to reduce their boredom.*⁹⁰

I struggled in the above jobs because I was not allowed to break the strict social norms that those businesses thrived on. I am far more comfortable talking with others than surrounded by a cubicle. "Extroverts require more stimulation to maintain optimal levels," and being stuck in a position where I cannot achieve that level of stimulation leads to "experiences [of] boredom."⁹¹

These positions discouraged creativity of action, and interactions with people followed superficial social norms. "How can I help you today? Would you like pickles or twenties (depending on the job)? Thank you, have a nice day. Next?" I do not flourish in such rigidly uncommunicative environments. I become bored, and made many mistakes. Teaching affords me the opportunities to "seek stimulation, especially in social contexts, and thus be better able to reduce [my] boredom."⁹² The cliché that every day is different in teaching is true. In almost a decade, I have never experienced two identical days. In the temporary jobs, 'different' was the myth, not the reality.

I enjoy both working independently as well as within a group. I prefer an environment with time to work alone, tossing imaginative or crazy ideas around to see what might work or tweak something to make it more interesting. As important as the alone time is, I also need working with people and receiving feedback after the

⁹⁰ Sandi Mann, "The Boredom Boom," *The Psychologist Magazine*. The British Psychological Society. Vol. 20, No. 2. Published February 2007. 90-93. P. 90.

⁹¹ Mann, "Boredom Boom," p. 90.

⁹² Mann, "Boredom Boom," p. 90.

independent creating has produced a working draft. I love communicating to find a deeper meaning than what I could achieve on my own.

Constructive collaboration and creative quiet time are essential to making me feel both comfortable and challenged in a work environment. As an example, in early 2013, I was tasked with creating a set of lesson plans designed to help people pass the GED, before the updated version was released in 2014. The General Equivalency Diploma (GED) test is designed as an alternative to the traditional, high school experience. There are four content areas tested in the recently released version: Reasoning Through Language Arts, Mathematical Reasoning, Science, and Social Studies.⁹³ In 2013, there were five: Language Arts, Reading; Language Arts, Writing; Mathematics; Science; and Social Studies.⁹⁴ Anyone that did not complete all five 2002 GED Series tests had to retake all four of the updated 2014 GED Series test.

Using the two most avoided content areas, I created several lessons to help people get their “GED ASAP,” my name for the lessons. My goal was to help the people that only needed to pass math or writing.

Within a few weeks, students were using the math version of GED ASAP. However, the grammar and essay portion stumped me. I never taught writing as a detailed subject, and struggled for many days to create engaging material, each revision only marginally better than the dozen that came before. I asked another adult

⁹³ GED Testing Service, “Programs & Services: Benefits of the GED Test,” (n.d.), accessed November 16, 2017, from <https://www.gedtestingservice.com/educators/2014test>.

⁹⁴ GED Testing Service, “The 2002 GED Series Test,” (n.d.), accessed November 16, 2017, from <https://www.gedtestingservice.com/educators/the-2002-series-ged-test>.

education teacher, whose focus was in writing, to analyze the draft I wanted to share with students. She politely informed me it was terrible. Together, we scrapped my entire set of lessons, and began again.

Our planning and brainstorming were often mistaken for fighting. As gregarious extroverts, we tended to speak both faster and louder than necessary. It worked great for our creative process, but we were often shushed. One day, we realized our executive director had been in the next room during one particularly boisterous session. We tried to apologize, embarrassed, but she laughed, saying she loved hearing our passion as we worked together.

With a colleague to scrap the terrible ideas and fine-tune the more promising ones, the actual lesson design was completed in less time than the math took me to create. The two lessons eventually helped at least a dozen people gain confidence in their skills to complete the GED assessment before December 2013.

Sharing the experience of creating, dissecting, and reshaping an idea reminded me of the lyric from the Moody Blues in the epigraph. Together, we proved “it is easier to try than to prove it cannot be done.”⁹⁵ The GED ASAP writing curriculum survived several “shitty first drafts,”⁹⁶ as Anne Lamott describes, to finally polish a useful product for the students that needed a boost to their skills. When the GED ASAP curriculum was complete, I shared it with several adult education organizations I worked with in Vermont and Maine.

⁹⁵ A-Z Lyrics.com, “The Moody Blues, Blue World.”

⁹⁶ Lamott, Anne, *Bird by Bird*, p. 21.

Experience with Nontraditional Teaching

When I graduated with my bachelor's degree, I wanted to teach middle school science for 30 years in a rural school system and then retire. I eventually realized it was unrealistic and too vague to be useful, a "SMART" goal it was not.⁹⁷ This weak *plan* had neither passion nor humor.

The ink was barely dry on my diploma when I began looking for teaching positions. After approximately 200 applications and rejection letters from only a small percentage of that amount, I found a position as a special education para-educator in the elementary school I attended as a child.

I worked with 5th and 6th grade students that needed additional math support than what the classroom teacher provided. While the job was not great, I enjoyed a tremendous amount of freedom to deliver interesting lessons. My supervising teacher was only ever in the room long enough to grab her coffee or a snack. This was illegal, but I did not know that at the time.

I developed a rapport with students, and lacking any formal training in special education or supervision, I leaned heavily on my ability to connect with strangers quickly. Together, we created a warm and welcoming dynamic, unfettered by a more 'traditional,' lecture-based, teacher-knows-all approach to the age group. I loved how much each student challenged me, and I learned useful skills each day.

⁹⁷ SMART Goals: How to Make Your Goals Achievable, Mind Tools, modified 2018, accessed January 26, 2018, from <https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/smart-goals.htm>.

This first practical experience set the stage for how I began changing the way I teach. In college, I suffered through innumerable lectures about students' unique learning styles. I later understood the irony of those classes that held 100-300-students, where we were lectured at for 90 minutes at a stretch, told to memorize the textbook on how to teach, and given standardized tests to prove we could tell the differences among Dewey, Jung, and Erikson. Those fifth and sixth graders taught me how important knowing a student's individual strengths are. I learned very quickly lecturing caused a riot. Instead, I chose to learn who each child was, and offered different strategies that fit the personality and learning style of those students. Effectively, I started to understand that "teaching is much more than a simple transmission of knowledge."⁹⁸

Teaching, Vulnerability, and Becoming an Interdisciplinary

Much of my early teaching experiences were based on a heavy dose of imposter syndrome. I assumed people would suddenly call me out as a fraud, a charlatan with no real idea of how to successfully manage the arduous task of teaching the future. I wish I had known then how many people also felt that way. I found an appropriate anecdote from the fantastic writer, Neil Gaiman, who described a conversation with Neil Armstrong where they both felt out of place in "a gathering of great and good people: artists and scientists, writers and discoverers of things."⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Luca Tateo, "What Do You Mean By 'Teacher'?" *Psychological Research on Teacher Professional Identity*, University of Salerno, Italy, originally published in *Psicologia & Societade*, 2012, p. 346.

⁹⁹ Neil Gaiman, "Imposter Syndrome" post, Official Neil Gaiman Tumblr blog, May 12, 2017, accessed January 26, 2018, from <http://neil-gaiman.tumblr.com/post/160603396711/hi-i-read-that-youve-dealt-with-with-impostor>.

If Neil Armstrong felt like an imposter, maybe everyone did. Maybe there weren't any grown-ups, only people who had worked hard and also got lucky and were slightly out of their depth, all of us doing the best job we could, which is all we can really hope for.¹⁰⁰

With vulnerability comes understanding. I had to live that fear, to recognize it and accept it now. However, when I was a newly minted teacher, I often acted as if I knew more than anyone else, so listen up! I felt most comfortable coming from a position of power; *the* authority on any given subject, so no one would guess I was a fake that did not know what was really happening. Teaching granted me an unconscious level of superiority that I rarely analyzed or even acknowledged.

I never enjoyed filibustering, but often defaulted to a lecture-style. I felt that I had a lot to say, and it was all important, because I was the *teacher*. This was my primary attitude in my first few years of the profession. I operated under the false pretense that that was what teachers did.

Out of the hundreds of teachers I experienced in my life, far more lectured than taught. One undergraduate seminar professor stood out from the multitude. She treated me, and the dozen students I saw her interact with, as humans that happened to be students. She hated the word “mistakes,” because that felt more like an end to learning, but “missteps” encouraged the process of exploration. I have since forgotten her name, but her concept of missteps has stuck with me for well over a decade.

“One can't argue one's way to the good life; one must craft it, like a work of art. Crafting one's life requires that we see life as a work of art; a serious, creative, playful

¹⁰⁰ Gaiman, “Imposter Syndrome” post, 2017.

endeavor.”¹⁰¹ My undergraduate professor, who believed in missteps and learning as a journey, would have loved Held’s assertion that life must be “crafted,” as a “serious, creative, playful endeavor.”

As I continued teaching in ‘alternative’ classes, I began realizing no one would learn anything from me if I kept “arguing my way to the good life.”¹⁰² I began to see how “serious, creative, [and] playful” both teaching and my own life could be, rather than the stressful, argumentative version I was trying to force myself into. I started to understand that “what really matters for happiness is the condition of your soul (*psychê* in Greek)—that is, your mind and character, the kind of *person* you are.”¹⁰³

With experience came a deepening understanding that I was not a traditional teacher, and an acceptance that that was all right. Lecturing is not part of “[my] mind and character, the kind of person [I am.]” Over time, I gained practice teaching adults, learning that lecturing bored both my students and myself. I also learned if all I did was lecture and teach from a textbook, those adult students did not come back. Working in the nonprofit business sector, if the clients do not return regularly, funding is cut, and so would jobs.

Slowly, I began to change my approach. I did not realize it at the time, but this change in thinking was my first step toward accepting my own vulnerabilities. Vulnerability requires thoughtful introspection, and as Held quoted Socrates in the

¹⁰¹ Held, *Dr. Seuss and Philosophy*, p. 23.

¹⁰² Held, *Dr. Seuss and Philosophy*, p. 23.

¹⁰³ Held, *Dr. Seuss and Philosophy*, p. 11.

epigraph at the beginning of this chapter, the “unexamined life is not worth living.”¹⁰⁴ By acknowledging my own insecurities, I slowly began to transform into an interdisciplinarian, someone who acts with intention and acknowledges that learning comes in “infinite diversity in infinite combinations.”¹⁰⁵

Teaching required me to learn about different learning styles in a more practical manner than ever before. Sally loves art and hates math: for every math session, encourage her to incorporate the answer into a drawing. Don, a highly successful DJ at 17, needed encouragement sprinkled lightly with puns and witty sarcasm. Alice, a new mother, practiced math skills by creating and balancing her household budget. Once I began looking, the ‘directions’ for each student presented themselves clearly.

I did not have a word for my changing style, until I entered this Master’s degree program. I explored both my own deepening interdisciplinarian and how acknowledging my own vulnerabilities make me a better teacher. My first graduate class, Philosophy of Education, included the first tiny steps into critically analyzing my own vulnerability with a thoughtful and metacognitive perspective. Toward the end of the semester, my instructor sent me this from a reflection assignment.

¹⁰⁴ Held, *Dr. Seuss and Philosophy*, p. 04.

¹⁰⁵ Michael Unknown. "Don't Know Much About (Vulcan) Philosophy." Star Trek Fact Check: Separating Fact from Legend blog. August 23, 2013. Accessed October 20, 2017. <http://startrekfactcheck.blogspot.com/2013/08/dont-know-much-about-vulcan-philosophy.html>. Quote originally from Star Trek: The Original Series episode, "Is There in Truth, No Beauty," aired October 1968.

You are someone who wants to understand, and live in, vulnerability. We're all wounded, and there's no way ... to deny or hide it. And we're all worth more than we think we are, especially in our most self-denying, self-critical moments.¹⁰⁶

In this email, Nash reminded me that everyone feels insecure. If we keep that secret part of ourselves hidden, we will never be able to authentically connect with each other. Teaching, at its heart, is about communicating information from one person to another. I want to “understand, and live in, vulnerability,” because that is how I learn from someone, and it is how I learn more about myself. To delude myself with “self-denying, self-critical” talk is to remain aloof from my vulnerabilities, and thus, I will never learn.

When I work with someone who proclaims to “hate math,” we spend a lot of time connecting math to their lives. When you shop for groceries, and one brand of baby wipes are 10%, while the other is \$4.00 off for less wipes, which is a better deal? How much money do you spend on brand name, store-bought coffee every week, because you insist “good coffee” is too expensive to buy in bulk? Showing that math is more than a subject restricted to a textbook or classroom helps build a connection between humans, learning to explore how to wield math as an enhancement to life.

My Textbook Allergy

Textbooks and lectures never worked for those students in special education, as much as I relied on them as a freshly-released teacher into the wilds of the classroom without any nurturing or guidance.

In my opinion, the prefabricated curriculum and board mandates that are concocted to hide this state of affairs can work two ways. They can be benign

¹⁰⁶ Robert Nash, email from Robert Nash to author, November 06, 2015. [Personal communication]

*suggestions that make talented inventors out of teachers. Or they can make it so people who don't have anything to share can still work, since their scripts are made up for them.*¹⁰⁷

Esmé Codell, first year teacher, summarized how important textbooks could be as a supplemental tool, but in the hands of someone who "doesn't have anything to share [and] can still work," little learning will take place. When every word is scripted, there is neither passion nor drive to do better the next time that same lesson is taught. When I did try to read from the script, my students disengaged immediately. I saw their eyes dull and disruptive behaviors increase.

Actors are paid to deliver scripts written by others in a convincing and dramatic fashion, yet many of our movie culture's famous lines were unscripted, including "You're going to need a bigger boat," from *Jaws*, and "You can't handle the truth," from *A Few Good Men*.¹⁰⁸

For me, following a script to teach rarely went well. I am neither spontaneous nor interesting when delivering lines. If I follow my every line, I miss the most important aspects of teaching: listening to my students. There is so much structure and so little freedom in many of the curriculums I worked with. They often reminded me more of a manual of a complicated toy model kit than a recipe for educational exploration and discovery.

¹⁰⁷ Esmé Raji Codell, *Educating Esmé: Diary of a Teacher's First Year*, (North Carolina: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 1999), p. 139.

¹⁰⁸ John Birmingham, "Unscripted—21 Ad-Libs That Became Classic Movie Lines," Purple Clover, modified 2017, accessed August 30, 2017, from <http://www.purpleclover.com/entertainment/4792-ultimate-ad-libs/>.

I have taught people both older and younger than myself, who have lived through experiences I cannot relate to. Being a good teacher does not mean ‘I know what you are going through,’ but rather, ‘I recognize you are struggling. How can I help?’ A vulnerable teacher’s job is to create a space where students explore and learn, without fear of reprisal or ridicule. “When our self-worth isn’t on the line, we are far more willing to be courageous and risk sharing our raw talents and gifts.”¹⁰⁹

I have taught children as young as four, 70-year-old grandparents, and countless in between. Many of those students exceeded their own expectations when they learned that I would not shame them. Their self-worth grew because I offered them the space to do so.

An example of a vulnerable learning environment that helped students take risks was my mixed-age adult education chemistry class. One student, a grandmother that had an undiagnosed learning disability, had been fired from her multi-decades position as courtroom clerk. Technology replaced her. She chose to complete her high school diploma. She asked an amazing amount of questions, often asking both me and her classmates to explain a chemistry concept in a new way. No one laughed at her or belittled her struggle to understand. Our classroom space was built on questions, not ridicule. They all recognized how much “self-worth [was] on the line.”¹¹⁰

This grandmother spent many hours after class ruminating on the material—often with frantic hour-long sessions of “Please explain this again!” She eventually

¹⁰⁹ Brown, *Daring Greatly*, p. 64.

¹¹⁰ Brown, *Daring Greatly*, p. 64.

passed the course, and later, earned her diploma. Several months went by, then she asked me to tutor her in College Biology. After her experience with her diploma, she decided to continue her learning with an Associate's degree. She felt welcome and worthy of owning her own learning in my class, so she sought help with the more complicated biology work.

During the chemistry class, I unknowingly gave her permission to “risk sharing” her unique learning style. As the instructor, I could easily have shut her down, refusing to alter my teaching methods to her learning style. However, I believe in encouragement of my students’ talents and interests, rather than demanding they fall in line with everything I say. “High-stress environments in which students feel chronically unsafe and uncared for make it physically and emotionally harder for them to learn and more likely for them to act out or drop out.”¹¹¹ When someone feels disrespected, their guard is up, and learning halts. Any “high-stress environment” where someone “feels unsafe and uncared for” is not one where learning happens. A powerful teacher requires vulnerability of herself, to allow room for the student vulnerability space to thrive.

On a dare, actor Tony Danza became a first-year ‘rookie’ teacher at 50. The actor asked veteran teacher Bobby how long before he became a “good” teacher. Bobby’s reply summarizes my feelings of connection.

¹¹¹ Sarah Sparks, “Social-Emotional Needs Entwined with Students’ Learning, Security,” *Education Week*. January 03, 2013. Accessed November 25, 2017, from <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2013/01/10/16environment.h32.html>.

It's when they [teachers] get it. It takes time for sure, but you can tell the ones who'll be great teachers. They're the ones with the passion. The ones who try things and watch other teachers, and network with teachers even outside their subject areas. You've got to be motivated to be a motivator. You've got to be able to excite the kids with a story or an action and then get them to bite on what you want them to learn.¹¹²

What life lesson or discovery can be unraveled from a textbook teacher, who follows along every with every word, leaving no room for imagination of her students or herself? The answer, of course, is that one learns to color in the lines, without imagination. One spends an inordinate amount of time ensuring each line of a map identification activity is color coded and has an even thickness, failing to memorize the location of each country.

Passion is different from obsession. Obsession requires perfection, a desire to have a *perfect product* at the end, regardless of learning achieved. To be passionate, however, I must have passion, and to connect with others, I must enjoy connecting with myself. It was only after I began allowing professional perfectionism to slip away that I started understanding the power of connection and compassion.

The day after the recent president was elected, I was note-taking for an undergraduate social work course. The instructor gathered the 20 students into a circle and offered them a safe space to discuss concerns, questions, and fears they had for themselves and friends that might become targets under the new regime. The instructor, who had cultivated from the first day an environment of safety and compassion, allowed each student to talk as much, or as little, as they needed. She

¹¹² Tony Danza, *I'd Like to Apologize to Every Teacher I Ever Had: My Year as a Rookie Teacher at Northeast High*, (New York: Marc Anthony Productions, 2012), p. 75.

exemplified passion, caring, and the nonjudgmental connection that a natural social worker has. She did not allow the discussion to break down into hysteria, but expertly supported a space for her students to explore their feelings publicly. The important material to be covered that day was tabled, disrupting her meticulously planned lessons. On that day, more than any other, she showed her students what a social worker should be. She truly was “motivated to be a motivator.”

I, like the above social worker, want to make a real connection with my students. As I have grown, learned, and experienced, I have become more focused. The realization that I am not an expert in anything has begun dawning on me with the slowness of an overcast, dreary day. I want to learn more from my students than they do from me. Lecturing is not how I will take the next step in my teaching vocation. To do this, Danza's mentor teacher, David Cohn, offered this advice:

*Let them read—and do—their own work. ... You're trying too hard to make them like you. ... I hear your voice too much and their voices too little. ... What we're ultimately teaching them is to teach themselves. ...*¹¹³

David Cohn's advice to Danza is like what I have come to see important during my teaching career. “Think about doing more with less... less of you, more of them.”¹¹⁴ As an undergraduate student, I was drilled in classroom management and writing the perfect lesson plan. We completed fishbowl exercises with peers and debriefed how to disseminate knowledge to the best of our ability. However, the underlying message I internalized was that the teacher is the one with the knowledge, and it was our job

¹¹³ Danza, *I'd Like to Apologize*, p. 45-46.

¹¹⁴ Danza, *I'd Like to Apologize*, p. 45.

to deliver that knowledge to our students. Only a couple stand out for impressing upon us the need to share responsibility of learning. As an adult educator, the most important criticism I received from my supervisor reaffirmed Cohn's advice to Danza. "I hear your voice too much and their voices too little."

When I transitioned into adult education, my steep learning curve involved 17-25-year-old young adults that despised the obedience and passivity that high school teachers demanded. To succeed as a geometry teacher of 15 people who 'failed' school because of math anxieties and disconnection between academics and delivery, I needed a new way to reach students. Instead of drilling with textbooks, I started asking questions. *Which shape had more surface area—Joe's water bottle or Beth's notebooks? Which water bottle holds more? Would that big tree in the yard hit the building if a hurricane knocked it down?* The students responded when I took a risk and opened the classroom to thinking. "When it's silent, they're thinking. You've got to give them time to think."¹¹⁵

Creativity in Teaching

As a geometry teacher working with teens recently removed from the traditional high school setting, I challenged my class to discover pi. I brought in dozens of round objects: lids, empty soda bottles and cans, containers, and toys. With a limitless amount of string, I scaffolded the lesson for them to find a connection between diameter and circumference. They were surprised that regardless of size, every circumference held three lengths of diameter and 'a little bit extra.' With little

¹¹⁵ Danza, *I'd Like to Apologize*, p. 46.

guidance and no lecturing, my students discovered why pi roughly translated to 3 'and a little more.' I found a parody song of "Jenny, Jenny (867-5309)," and accompanied by tortured groans and pleas to "make it stop," they learned pi to 5 digits without a standard memorization homework assignment. "3.14-159." (*"three point one four one five niiiiine"*)¹¹⁶

These experiences continued shifting my teaching style. As Cohn summarized to Danza's first year confusion, the job of the teacher "is to teach themselves. ... When it's silent, they're thinking. You've got to give them time to think."¹¹⁷ That geometry class was my first intentional experience with stepping aside from the teacher-as-authority, and instead, move myself out of the way. While it was not the first lesson I taught creatively, it was the first I intentionally planned to use other resources than our textbooks.

Another clear example of my shifting priorities in effective teaching occurred several years after the singing geometry lesson described above, before becoming a full-time graduate student. The adult education organization I worked for collaborated with the local Community College of Vermont for me to teach College Essentials: Math. This class was designed to raise academic grades enough to pass the college's entrance exam. I spent weeks trying to make it interesting, stressing about how to teach what in which order. Textbooks were useless, as each one I found—both

¹¹⁶ FilmJerkProductions. "3.14159 Jenny." YouTube. March 11, 2010. Accessed October 20, 2017. <https://youtu.be/E8lkAsFLGvs>.

¹¹⁷ Danza, p. 45-46.

in print and electronic—demanded fractions, decimals, and percentages be taught separately, and in that order. I could find no empirical evidence to support this method, so I chose to teach them more organically. That semester, I taught decimals first with multiplication and division, followed by converting money into percentages of paychecks—how much did you spend on McDonalds’s this week? By the end of the semester, the class easily converted decimals into fractions and back again, “accidentally.” They gained a deeper understanding of the relationship between numerator and denominator. By teaching the topics as extensions of each other, students could make connections with the material faster. Out of 14 people in my class at the beginning of that semester, one unfortunately left college for personal reasons, but everyone else made significant growth on the college’s entrance exam. Most scored high enough to test out of the first required algebra course.

“Powerfully Influence Opportunities and Motivation”¹¹⁸

When I taught College Essentials: Math, I ignored everything I had been indoctrinated to believe about the subject. I found no evidence saying math *must* be taught in a linear format: fractions first, decimals second, and then percentages—all separate entities. Every resource I found demanded compliance to this undeviating path of pedantry. There is, however, significant evidence to support teaching with a comprehensive approach, integrated into life outside a textbook, is a more effective method of learning.

¹¹⁸ National Research Council, *Adding it Up: Helping Children Learn Mathematics*, National Research Council. (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 2001). P. 09.

*Math presents acute barriers for many [adult] learners; confidence, contextualization, and learner mindset are key to increasing math skills. Market signals require meeting learners (and educators) where they are.*¹¹⁹

The *Math Gap* report described how many challenges adult education students face, outside of the academic difficulty. I wanted to succeed in adult education, which meant it was my responsibility as the teacher to offer my students “confidence and contextualization,” to better support their learning. Essentially, I needed to “meet learners (and myself)” where we were.

*The PD [professional development] opportunities for educators of adult learners are particularly stark; relatively little PD is designed particularly for the adult educational environment. Training instructors in applied adult learning theory, social and emotional learning, learner mindset, and other important aspects of effective math education is one of the most crucial factors in elevating math skills for adult learners.*¹²⁰

Adults need to know *why* they are learning something. They do not respect someone that demands memorization without explanation. That style of teaching did not work for them as a teenager, so why would I expect it to work again 10, 20, or 30 years later? When I realized I could not find a geometry lesson about circumference and pi, I created one. As I designed the College Essentials: Math class, I did the same: collecting the interesting, juicy tidbits of each topic and brainstorming how best to engage my students.

¹¹⁹ Luminary Labs, “The Math Gap: Implications for Investing in America’s Workforce,” Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education, September 14, 2017, accessed October 21, 2017, from <https://community.lincs.ed.gov/notice/new-research-power-numbers-math-gap-implications-investing-america%E2%80%99s-workforce>. P. 06.

¹²⁰ Luminary Labs, “The Math Gap,” P. 11.

“Teachers’ expectations about students and the mathematics they [can] learn can powerfully influence ... [the students’] opportunities and motivation for learning.”¹²¹ Teachers supply the opportunities for learning, but students bring the motivation. My students learned the most when I believed more in them than in my ability to deliver the material. To achieve “expectations... that can powerfully influence” a student’s desire to engage critically with whatever topic is under discussion is the reason I became a teacher, and why I have spent the past several years exploring how to increase a student’s “motivation for learning.”

The Vulnerability of Saying “No”

Students are the most important aspect of my job, and without them, I would have no one to teach. I am not the dictator in the classroom. People may learn to rise above such control, but most will give up, internalizing that someone else will always know more. My first inclination of my changing worldview of teaching was a job interview where the principal asked me what I would do if half my class failed a test.

My answer, which seemed obvious and straightforward, was to reteach the material in a new way, because statistically speaking, at least half of the people that passed did so by a slim margin. I was unprepared for his reaction. He whipped off his glasses and stared with a blank expression at the assistant principal, the only other member of the interview committee. Leaning back in his chair, he exhaled slowly and shook his head. The principal informed me that in several years of hiring teachers at his school he never had a teacher offer to reteach her students.

¹²¹ National Research Council, *Adding it Up*. P. 09.

At the time, I was desperate for a job. I needed to move out of the state and start my “real life.” For several years before that interview I had cared for my terminally-ill father, who passed away the year before. I was frantic to move out of Maine and prove myself. However, the principal’s reaction worried me. If my potential coworkers did not consider reteaching to be a useful strategy, I did not think I would fit there. I turned down the job, even with the resettlement offer they extended. “Instruction should not be based on extreme positions that students learn, on one hand, solely by internalizing what a teacher or book says or, on the other hand, solely by inventing mathematics on their own.”¹²² I was not comfortable moving to a school where teachers might not accept my more creative style, and I was not interested in overhauling an entire school to my own way of thinking. Everyone views teaching differently; this is one reason I believe collaboration to be vitally important. However, I have learned enough of myself to know that I do not work well without colleagues to share creative ideas with.

Why Be Vulnerable, to Teach?

To be a successful teacher I must be willingly vulnerable with my students and colleagues. I have grown in my understanding of what my role as a teacher should be, and I cannot regress into the mean—average, not angry—teacher. I choose not to deny the lessons I learned through the experience of analyzing myself with compassionate, critical examination.

¹²² National Research Council, *Adding It Up*, p. 11.

One assignment in a graduate class was to think about the eulogy spoken over our future graves. While others found it morbid, I found the idea intriguing. I created one to explore my burgeoning vulnerability, and was hit with a revelation explosion. My first attempt was dry and depressingly sad. I called myself a nurturer, a good listener, and a warrior, but I failed to include my numerous passions. To break through my vulnerability shields, I solicited friends' advice, and the compilation became far more reflective of who I am learning to be.

Jen Way, Aunt Jen as my kids call her, was one of the most vibrant and fun-loving friends I had. With her loud and boisterous spirit, she encouraged me to step out of my shell. When times were difficult, and things were tough, Jen was always there for us without hesitation.

She had no tolerance for injustice, and she encouraged those around her to be equally empowered, if not more so. Yet, strangely, at the same time, she was a subtle person in a loud world. As extroverted and empowered as she was, her greatest achievements were often very much behind-the-scenes.

Her lesson plans were creative, fun, interactive and always individualized. But it was Jen that delivered them and brought them to life in a way no one else can. She LOVED learning and teaching, and it was contagious. Jen inspired her students to be brave and bold and ask questions and play with learning.¹²³

Life is not meant to be endured, but to be lived. That eulogy feels more reflective of who I am in the process of growing into, and who I strive to be. The only way to become that person described is to be vulnerable. I asked for help creating it, because I could not see myself as others see me at that time.

Vulnerability requires risk. Teaching is a type of vulnerability, for it takes courage to stand in front of strangers and share one's understanding of the world. In

¹²³ Jennifer Way, "Final eSPN to Class: To My Fellow Philosophers," (in the author's possession) November 30, 2015, p. 02-03.

the teaching, inevitably, there is a sharing of personal beliefs, stances, and a willingness to sit with uncomfortable alternative opinions. I believe teaching means looking for the spark of potential and magic of even the most closed-down individual, and encouraging that spark. Teaching requires a connection among all the people in the space: teacher, student, colleagues, and people only marginally connected to education. The profession also requires challenge: I challenged my geometry students to learn math when they *knew* they could not. I challenged someone who said he couldn't read because he had ADHD, to read while walking.

My favorite teachers have challenged me to move beyond the comforts of the assignment, to find the challenge within myself, such as writing my eulogy with intention and with heart. These challenge teachers, “contrarians,” are useful to have around, “if you really want to *learn* something.”¹²⁴ Contrarians are the best teachers, because “by sticking with them for a while, I began to recognize qualities that weren't obvious at first.”¹²⁵ This “sticking with” skill requires a great deal of courage and vulnerability. To engage with someone who might irk and challenge long enough to find “qualities that weren't obvious at first,” requires time, patience, and a constant reassessment of how the situation unfolds.

Perpetuate Fear or Empower to Overcome?

I am the state representative of the Adult Numeracy Network (ANN), an organization dedicated to connecting people that teach math across the country.

¹²⁴ Held, *Dr. Seuss*. P. 54.

¹²⁵ Held, *Dr. Seuss*, p. 53.

Every year, they host a math day at the national adult education conference, the Coalition of Adult Basic Education (COABE). This past year, one of ANN's members, Lindsey Cermak, presented a talk about how important her vulnerability as a teacher is to her students. "Are we scared to be vulnerable with our students? We say making mistakes is a good thing. *I said that*. But do we authentically model that?" Cermak summarizes how I feel about becoming vulnerable with my students.

Without "authentically modeling" vulnerability, we teach our students they cannot be vulnerable. "Are we teaching our students how to frame 'failure' with proper perspective? *Do they know that we don't know everything?* Do they know that they don't have to know everything to be successful?" ¹²⁶ Cermak brought another level to the importance of vulnerability in the classroom. It is not enough to teach without vulnerability. By doing so, we teach our students that learning is about facts, not emotion. Education, at any level and age, can be incredibly scary and confusing. "Once you name a fear, it loses its power to paralyze you," Cermak argues.¹²⁷ Only when a person can let go of the fear of the unknown and begin learning can actual understanding take place.

"Once you name a fear, it loses its power to paralyze you. Let's be honest with ourselves, do we perpetuate the fears our students have, or do we empower them to overcome them? My students don't need me to be a perfect teacher; they need me to step out, they need me to be confident no matter what the result is. My last

¹²⁶ Lindsey Cermack, "Take the Pressure off to Take the Pressure Off," ANN/COABE Pre-Conference "Math Day," presented October 18, 2017, accessed October 25, 2017, from <http://adultnumeracynetwork.org/2017/05/03/ann-under-10-lindsey-cermak/>, 08:27-09:05.

¹²⁷ Cermak, "Take the Pressure Off," 09:37-09:41.

question is: by trying to be perfect teachers, do we unknowingly perpetuate the pressure our students feel to be perfect students?"¹²⁸

I am a cheerleader for my students, because I can see that spark of potential and I enjoy fanning that into an inferno of desire to learn. But if my fear of failure, of being vulnerable, threatens to drown that spark in doubt and insecurity, we all suffer. Vulnerability is necessary for connection, but it is also necessary to encourage space for risk, challenge, failure, and ultimately, learning.

¹²⁸ Cermak, "Take the Pressure Off," 09:37-10:08.

3C. Belly Dancing: An Exercise in Fear and Learning

“The biggest adventure you can ever take is to live the life of your dreams.” – Oprah Winfrey¹²⁹

When children aren't given the space to struggle through things on their own, they don't learn to problem-solve very well. They don't learn to be confident in their own abilities, and it can affect their self-esteem. The other problem with never having to struggle is that you never experience failure and can develop an overwhelming fear of failure and of disappointing others. Both the low self-confidence and the fear of failure can lead to depression and anxiety. –Ken Robinson¹³⁰

There is a small metal figurine in the windowsill of the dance studio where I wait for my class to begin. Three dancers lean in different directions, but just enough to balance the other two. I use this small statute as a focal point, trying to slow my racing heart. Now is *not* the time to take a resting heart rate. Two lines from an Eminem song repeat in my head: “His palms are sweaty, knees weak, arms are heavy...He's nervous, but on the surface, he looks calm and ready...”¹³¹ *Why did I bring leggings that will only make me hotter once I get started? Do I remember anything from the last time I did this? Why didn't I bring my hip scarf? I'm too fat to start this up again. There are mirrors everywhere, no place to hide.*

¹²⁹ Oprah.com, "What Oprah Knows for Sure About Life's Biggest Adventure," Oprah.com, July 2002, accessed October 07, 2017. <http://www.oprah.com/spirit/what-oprah-knows-for-sure-about-lifes-biggest-adventure>. Electronic article from July 2002 issue of O, The Oprah Magazine.

¹³⁰ Ken Robinson and Lou Aronica, *Creative Schools: The Grassroots Revolution That's Transforming Education*, (New York: Viking Penguin, 2015), p. 213-214.

¹³¹ A-Z Lyrics.com “Lose Yourself-Eminem.” Accessed October 07, 2017, from <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/eminem/loseyourself.html>.

A decade ago, I walked into my first belly dance class. There, I found a community of exceptionally welcoming women, on all points of the generational spectrum, from myself in my early 20's to the multi-time grandmother who taught the class. I also found a way to connect with my body that I never experienced before.

Much of my life has been heavily intellectual, where I tend to forget my physical side. This unbalanced life contributed to various torn ligaments, sprained joints, and bruises from carelessly moving through space, without awareness. However, that first class so long ago reminded me "*It's in the reach of my arms / The span of my hips / The stride of my step,*" that made me remember I am a "Phenomenal woman. / That's me."¹³²

That belly dance class was over a decade ago, and as Stephen King's main character in the Dark Tower saga often says, "The world moved on."¹³³ A few weeks ago, I found myself trying to recapture that powerful feeling of connection between mind and body. Unfortunately, this time came with a decade of negative self-talk to wade through. But I stayed. I stared at that statute of balanced dancers. And I walked into the studio boldly and without fear. I danced.

Facing any fear, regardless of the specifics, takes courage and a willingness to be shamed if something does not go well. I faced my fear of reconnecting my body and my mind, because the risk is greater than the fear.

¹³² Poetry Foundation, *Phenomenal Woman-Maya Angelou*, Poetry Foundation, 2017. Poem originally from *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou* (Random House Inc., 1994). Accessed December 10, 2017, from <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48985/phenomenal-woman>.

¹³³ Stephen King, "The Dark Tower – Glossary," StephenKing.com. 2000-2017, accessed October 07, 2017 from <http://stephenking.com/darktower/glossary.html#itemLowM>. Phrase "moved on."

Taking those types of risks remind me of the fear that I ask others to wade through when sitting with a student scared of math. To be the kind of teacher that challenges, engages, inspires, and motivates her students, I must be the role model that engages, inspires, and motivates herself—even if they never see my risks. This takes courage. I cannot be inspiring if I do not authentically experience failures and learn from them. I cannot challenge someone with the impression that I have everything together, if I maintain the delusion.

I think being a caring teacher requires a deep, honest, meaningful connection to learning, to the understanding that nothing comes for free. Everything worthwhile must be worked on and struggled with. Returning to belly dancing connected me more with my future students than a dozen professional development trainings on ‘Student Fears.’ I know that fear, and I have learned some strategies to face it courageously, and with great compassion.

*The person who risks nothing, does nothing, has nothing, is nothing, and becomes nothing. [She] may avoid suffering and sorrow, but [she] simply cannot learn, feel, change, grow or love. Chained by [her] certitude, [she] is a slave; [she] has forfeited [her] freedom. Only the person who risks is truly free.*¹³⁴

“Only the person who risks is truly free.” Belly dancing was and continues to be an emotional risk. Looking in a mirror and confronting parts of me that feel exposed or socially unacceptable, and then to accept them, feels both scary and exhilarating. I may “avoid suffering and sorrow” of shame and social expectations, but I will never “learn, feel, change, grow, or love.” I cannot exchange my meat suit for

¹³⁴ Skip Towne, *Leo Buscaglia on Risks*, YouTube, published on February 20, 2015, accessed October 27, 2017, from <https://youtu.be/-RDwHKpXnjs>. Time: 01:24-01:51

another, so acceptance is how I practice risk. Once in a writing workshop, I heard the advice to give characters complicated backstories that will never be part of the current story. The theory is that those traits will naturally bleed into the writing, and the audience experiences a more realistic character.

My academic students may never know how much I seriously considered walking out of that first belly dance class after a twelve-year hiatus. But they will sense that I have struggled against my “certitude chains,” to fight for my freedom. It is, of course, a lifelong struggle; one that I may lose battles in, but will never stop fighting. This ‘complicated backstory’ is not necessary for my students to read. By my actions teaching, and more importantly, listening, seeps into who I am as a teacher.

While I was scared and anxious walking into my recent belly dance class, I enjoyed the experience immensely. My fear disappeared as I lost myself in relearning something I care deeply about—myself. While I learned again the basics of isolating hips and shoulders, I remembered why I love this type of exercise. I felt my anxiety melt away and I wondered why it took so long for me to come back. As Oprah said in the epigraph, “The biggest adventure you can ever take is to live the life of your dreams.”¹³⁵ That moment I put on a borrowed hip scarf and gave an experimental shimmy, I remembered how much an adventure learning truly is. I am not a runner, and yoga does nothing for me. Traditional meditation, while useful, is not something I practice often. I would much rather “live the life of my dreams” through dance. I feel

¹³⁵ Oprah.com, “What Oprah Knows.”

magical and strong when I dance, and the shaking arms and burning thighs only add to the adventure. I feel “phenomenally me.”¹³⁶

Many of my students came to adult education seeking a skill set they lacked—academic proficiency. I belly dance to learn another type of skill set. Regardless of the motivation or how the learning is accomplished, the *desire to learn* creates an environment where failure is more important than success. Whether the learning occurs in a classroom with numbers that terrify or through excessive sweat and sore muscles on the dance floor, both my students and myself are engaging in growth mindset behaviors.

As will be discussed in the section, “Vulnerability and the Growth Mindset Dilemma,” a growth mindset is found in people that celebrate failures for learning opportunities, not nightmares to be avoided. These people seek out criticism and persevere through struggles, to gain deeper insights. For me, a growth mindset is most exemplified in belly dancing. I may not know a move now or be able to execute perfect snake arms, but that will come. I am confident in my ability to keep engaging with this exercise, because I relish the journey of learning.

I can easily see how coming back to belly dancing takes the same growth mindset as someone walking into adult education for the first time, terrified of the very subject they were there to learn. I can also see the connection to people who do not feel driven to learn.

¹³⁶ Poetry Foundation, “Phenomenal Woman-Maya Angelou.”

*When children aren't given the space to struggle through things on their own, they don't learn to problem-solve very well. They don't learn to be confident in their own abilities, and it can affect their self-esteem.*¹³⁷

In Creative Schools, Ken Robinson and Lou Aronica share examples of a fixed mindset in children that are not “given the space to struggle through things on their own.” If a child does not learn how to struggle and persevere, the adult that child will become grows in fear. They cannot problem-solve, and might feel trapped in a dead-end position. If a child cannot learn self-confidence, the adult may engage in unhealthy relationships, because they might not feel confident to expect respect.

*The other problem with never having to struggle is that you never experience failure and can develop an overwhelming fear of failure and of disappointing others. Both the low self-confidence and the fear of failure can lead to depression and anxiety.*¹³⁸

Failure has a powerful stopping power, limiting people from taking risks and seeking new adventures. However, fear can be more debilitating than actual failure. Fear keeps vulnerability hidden inside shame. If someone has a fear of failure, that person does not know how to cope with situations where failure is a possibility. “Both the low self-confidence and the fear of failure can lead to depression and anxiety,” because someone does not have the necessary skills to be vulnerable.

¹³⁷Robinson, *Creative Schools*, p. 213-214.

¹³⁸ Robinson, *Creative Schools*, p. 214.

Failure to pursue belly dancing on my own kept me from something I love for a long time. Fear of what I looked like prevented me from exploring a fascinating dance. Vulnerability made me tie on a hip scarf and remember why I love it.

“Live the life of your dreams.”¹³⁹

¹³⁹ Oprah.com, “What Oprah Knows.”

Chapter 4: “Now Where?”

4A. “Failure Absolutely Is Learning.”

From 2013 to 2015, I was part of the Business and Professional Women (BPW) Foundation chapter based in St. Johnsbury, VT. I joined this eclectic group of women because I wanted a connection to the community around me. Outside of the people I worked with daily, I had little communication with anyone. I was lonely.

While I was the youngest woman by several years, I enjoyed the camaraderie and community of the small group. Highly distinguished women surrounded me. Everyone worked to make their own happiness in life. There were a few whose personalities clashed with mine, but I learned that no matter what our backgrounds, we still worked together successfully. It did not matter that we would not be friends; we came together with a common goal and did what needed doing.

That was one of the first times in my adult life that I realized that relationships were more complicated than liking or not liking a person. Those women challenged my secretarial style, argued successfully against ideas I shared, and prompted me to prepare more in-depth reasons for changing a rule. For that, I am grateful to them.

While with BPW, I participated in the Virginia Allen Young Careerist regional speech competition. The task was to create “a new organization; what would be the name of the group, who would be your target audience and why, and what would the

mission statement be for the organization?"¹⁴⁰ Each competitor had four minutes to deliver our memorized charter organization, without props or notecards.

While my competitors discussed opening a free law practice, an organic grocery store, or other tangible and realistic organizations, my organization was designed primarily to fill a deficiency in my own life. My target audience was my future self. Even before I began to explore vulnerability, I sought a time when I make friends with that feeling.

Congratulations, everyone, and welcome to "Persevere," an organization dedicated to the knowledge that difficulty leads to growth, if we actively choose to learn from that adversity.

We are open to anyone willing to make the commitment to learn from life's obstacles. There are no cultural or ideological barriers to joining. This organization supports people who have hit a roadblock in their lives. We offer guidance and support, working together to encourage, motivate, and challenge each other on their journey of growth.

Our mission statement is simple, FAIL, Failure Absolutely Is Learning. We believe that when an obstacle appears in our path, we have a choice: to allow that obstacle to stop us, or to see it as a learning opportunity, to understand that we can grow from these experiences to create a new life, more interesting than we ever thought possible.

¹⁴⁰ Jennifer Way, email regarding Business and Professional Women 2015 Young Careerist Speech Topics. [Personal communication]

You have made the choice to seek your dreams with diligence and uncompromising determination. You have chosen to accept failure as it occurs—not as a negative, but rather, to pick yourself back up, dust off, and say, “Well, that didn’t work. Let’s try something else.”

*The Japanese culture has a fascinating art form called kintsugi, which is both practical and stunning. Broken pottery is repaired with lacquer and powdered metals, usually silver or gold. This type of art can only begin once the piece has been cracked, scarred, or even broken and unusable in its current state. This type of repair job is not designed to hide the cracks, but to embrace them: to make the piece unique and beautiful, **because** of its imperfections.*

So often in our society, we try to hide our scars, repress our mistakes. As members of “Persevere,” we choose to see failure for what it really is: a way to solve a problem creatively when one solution does not work. That choice, to learn from mistakes, and continue living, is what supports and grows this agency.

And just like the broken pottery made better than before, when we have survived a stressful experience, our scars remind us of all that we have accomplished and learned from an experience that seemed insurmountable at the time. We have become more interesting from being damaged. We now have a lesson to share and a story to tell.

Failure is a part of life. We do not waste time expending energy on silly things like perfection or status quo. Nor do we worry about what someone will think of us when we ask for help. Instead, we do what we love, even in the face of

obstacles. We strive to “follow [our] bliss,” as researcher Joseph Campbell was quoted saying in the 2011 movie, Finding Joe.

Do what makes hours fly like minutes. We pledge to explore our bliss. We pledge to be our own motivator, challenging ourselves to reach our potential and reconnect with what each of us finds important.

When we at Persevere push to go on, when the struggle is extraordinary, that is the time we will learn the greatest lessons and earn the greatest treasures, whatever they may be.

No failure will stop us from following our bliss. No mistake is too large to learn from. Failure Absolutely Is Learning. Welcome to Persevere, and congratulations on beginning your adventure!¹⁴¹

While I did not win the competition, I chose to include the content of my speech into this thesis, because it hints at what I have long struggled with. Without explicitly stating the word “vulnerability,” I screamed it between each line. I created an organization that reminded me how important failure is to life.

Persevere’s primary goal was to embrace something that we are often taught to hide: physical or emotional scars. Rather than shame those scars, I wanted a place to celebrate the strength it took to survive those experiences. I wanted something deeply personal, something I needed—and still do need—a lot of practice in, a way to reframe some of my own insecurities and fallacies.

¹⁴¹ Jennifer Way, 2015 Business and Professional Women Young Careerist speech content. [Personal communication]

In short, my organization dealt with vulnerability. Before I was inspired to think critically and honestly about vulnerability and before I consciously yearned for more vulnerability in my life, I wrote the celebratory speech of Persevere. My motto was a call to explore life. Failure is not evil, only a step on the learning process. I wrote about the power failure has, if framed as a learning experience and not a termination of effort. I found a form of art that exists only after things break. I learned about Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey, the universal path that a hero takes in a story, found in every culture on our planet. I think next to Persevere's welcoming plaque would be the *Manifesto of the Brave and Brokenhearted*, by Brené Brown, written below.

There is no greater threat to the critics and cynics and fearmongers

Than those of us who are willing to fall

Because we have learned how to rise.

With skinned knees and bruised hearts;

We choose owning our stories of struggle,

Over hiding, over hustling, over pretending.

When we deny our stories, they define us.

When we run from struggle, we are never free.

So, we turn toward truth and look it in the eye.

We will not be characters in our stories.

Not villains, not victims, not even heroes.

We are the authors of our lives.

We write our own daring endings.

We craft love from heartbreak,

Compassion from shame,

Grace from disappointment,

Courage from failure.

*Showing up is our power.
Story is our way home.
Truth is our song.
We are the brave and brokenhearted.
We are rising strong.¹⁴²*

I began exploring my vulnerability through my graduate classes, and more specifically through this thesis. When I reread my speech, I was fascinated, but not surprised, how important self-acceptance and risk taking are to me. Reading Brown's Manifesto connected me back to that feeling of "compassion from shame ... courage from failure."

"With skinned knees and bruised hearts," there is no "greater threat to the critics and fearmongers." Both *Persevere* and *Manifesto* remind me how important vulnerability is to me. No one knows the life they will lead. No one can detail every heartbreak, fall, or rock bottom. All we can do is remember that "Failure Absolutely Is Learning," and be willing to be "brave and brokenhearted," by "rising strong." These sentiments inform my hopes and expectations for the future.

¹⁴² Brené Brown, "Manifesto of the Brave and Brokenhearted," BreneBrown.com, modified 2017, accessed September 14, 2017, from <http://brenebrown.com/downloads/>.

4B. Job Search

Why have I made the choices I made? How did I get here? What have I learned so far? Where do I want to go next to continue supporting my awakening philosophy of vulnerability and interdisciplinary teaching? As much as I enjoyed my graduate courses, if I were to stay a student in academia—assuming I could pay for a lifetime of courses—I do not want to become comfortable and compliant. Academia, as I have discussed, has often been challenging but not difficult. While my graduate degree had more intentionality and vulnerability than any other academic space I experienced, there are few post-graduate degrees with the level of flexibility and insight that made my Interdisciplinary Studies degree so powerfully motivating.

“Voluntary risk-taking is often pursued for the sake of facing and conquering fear, displaying courage, ... and [increasing] a sense of personal agency.”¹⁴³ For me, playing the student is a natural talent, one I cultivated for many years. However, with my growing understanding of the importance of vulnerability in teaching, there is little “facing and conquering fear, displaying courage, or personal agency” in continuing to take classes at this point in my life. I firmly believe that professional development, personal enrichment, and seeking knowledge to be a lifetime goal, and I shall not limit myself from this pursuit. I do, however, have an opportunity to explore my fears, courage, and agency by examining the next stage of my life: finding a job.

¹⁴³ Deborah Lupton and John Tulloch, “‘Life Would be Pretty Dull Without Risk’: Voluntary Risk-Taking and its Pleasures,” *Health, Risk & Society* 4, no. 2, 2002, 113-124. Environment Complete, EBSCOhost, accessed November 14, 2017.

I have taught in public school, as a special educator. I taught adults how to trust themselves and gain control of the power of education. I left both positions after I could no longer ignore my stress level. I felt surrounded by people betting on how quickly I would fail. In addition to the extreme professional ostracizing, I also experienced a severe conflict of ethics with a manager at one position. He chose to run the office without professionalism or confidentiality, two tenets of my teaching.

“The ‘size’ of human suffering is absolutely relative.”¹⁴⁴ Viktor Frankl, a survivor of the Holocaust concentration camps, pioneered logotherapy, the study of “striving to find meaning in one’s life.”¹⁴⁵ He believed that suffering happens to everyone, and there was no scale of who suffers worse.

For a long time, I believed the opposite. I justified accepting poor behavior from others, because I could imagine worse situations. Yes, an antagonistic colleague refused to use the accommodations for a student because I had cut her off once in a staff meeting, but **at least** I had a job—thousands were not as lucky. Even though my boss willingly shared confidential information with students unrelated to the situation and blocked the exit with his body, clutching the doorknob to berate me for talking to a community member, **at least** I wasn’t sexually harassed like several of my out-of-state colleagues had been.

¹⁴⁴ Viktor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy*, (New York: Pocket Books, 1973), originally published by Beacon Press in 1959. P. 70.

¹⁴⁵ Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, p. 154.

Brené Brown labels this as “silver-lining” scary and vulnerable feelings, where empathic responses “rarely begin with ‘At least.’”¹⁴⁶ It took me a long time to realize the negative effect “at least” had on me. I offered myself a justification for each action, and it took many years for me to understand that “the ‘size’ of human suffering” does not negate one’s own experiences. No person’s suffering can be compared with another; suffering is “absolutely relative.”

Now that I have explored how powerful and fulfilling vulnerability is for connection and communication, I intend to rekindle “the last of human freedoms... to choose one’s own way.”¹⁴⁷ I want to create inventive, useful, and interesting professional development content for educators. I want to be the mentor I did not have. I want to share my experiences of being an interdisciplinarian and of learning about my own vulnerabilities and insecurities.

Hope, as Angela Duckworth described her research, is needed “from beginning to end” of an endeavor. Without hope to light the way, shame and fear of vulnerability could derail any action. However, with hope, I will find a position in education where I can continue exploring my passion to teach.

You really do need hope from beginning to end. Because, of course, no matter where you are in your journey, there are going to be potholes and detours and things that might make you think that it’s not worth staying on this path. Hope,

¹⁴⁶ The RSA, “Brené Brown on Empathy,” published on YouTube, December 10, 2013. Accessed November 14, 2017, from <https://youtu.be/1Evwgu369Jw>.

¹⁴⁷ Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, P. 104.

*essentially, is the belief that there's something you can do to come back from these problems or from these challenges.*¹⁴⁸

Whenever a major change in my life occurred, I never lost the hope that I would learn from that change, and hope that my life will take a new, interesting path.

I do not know which group of teachers I want to work with most, nor do I know they type of professional development I want to implement. Working in a cubicle does not appeal to me. I prefer numerous, face-to-face interactions with dedicated, motivated people. As my friend and fellow interdisciplinarian, Amy Magyar suggested, I need to find the people who I'd work with for free on my birthday. They are my tribe.¹⁴⁹

I asked myself where I would like to live geographically, which state had the highest mean salary, and whether I would prefer an office or open plan. What were the unequivocal No's—the things I would refuse to compromise on? Thanks to LinkedIn, I researched people with job titles I found interesting. I met with a Career Counselor and attended a virtual conference on becoming an entrepreneur. I participated in conferences around Burlington, learning about math education, science teaching, and a Women's Summit on equality and diversity. I interviewed 10 people who are directly involved in professional development delivery or coordination to explore this field.

¹⁴⁸ Stephen Dubner, "How to Get More Grit in Your Life," Freakonomics Radio, published May 04, 2016, accessed November 09, 2017, from <http://freakonomics.com/podcast/grit/>.

¹⁴⁹ Magyar, conversation with author, August 07, 2017. [Personal communication]

While I am no closer to answering, “What are you going to do with that degree,” I do understand much more about the field of professional development and coordination than I did before. Tateo quoted McCulloch, Helsby and Knight (2000) to describe how important teacher buy-in is for changes to occur successfully.

*Educational improvement depends on teachers wanting to make a difference. It depends upon their feeling professional. Neither raising standards by regulation nor professionalizing by prescription will work. Teachers have power in the sense that they [must] want improvement for improvement to happen.*¹⁵⁰

I have the drive to make a difference. I want to work with teachers, helping them craft lessons and units that are realistic and engaging, not the textbook version of ‘real life.’ “Neither raising standards by regulation nor professionalizing by prescription will work.” I want to use my passion for education and teaching to inspire vulnerability and improvement in my colleague’s classrooms.

One excellent side benefit of exploring one field in depth, is that I am uncovering the values I hope to promote in my future career, whatever that may be.

- Professionalism, respect, and collegial interaction
- Time to work alone and time working with others
- Work where I continue to explore my own vulnerability
- Continue connecting and communicating with myself and students
- Help others to find universalizabilities, as I began exploring my own

Another benefit of exploring jobs I want to work in, is that I may not end up in education, as I currently envision it. Taking my passion for helping others and my new understanding of vulnerability, perhaps I may find a career in social justice, or working in an organization that promotes equality among the sexes.

¹⁵⁰ Tateo, *What Do You Mean by “Teacher?”*, p. 349.

One example of this was during the Obama administration, when women in the Oval Office adopted an “amplification” strategy; where all voices were heard. “When a woman made a key point, other women would repeat it, giving credit to its author.”¹⁵¹ This amplification strategy decreased the likelihood of the male-dominated meeting to interrupt, overlook, or appropriate the ideas and suggestions offered by women.

I believe fighting for the rights of those that might not yet have their voices respected is part of education: to educate is to teach different ways of thinking. I want to work where I can help contribute to correcting societal vulnerabilities.

Perhaps my definition of teaching has been too specific. I searched online for the definition of education, and per Google, is “an enlightening experience,” so I looked up enlightenment, which led to this definition: “give (someone) greater knowledge and understanding about a subject or situation.”¹⁵² I believe “giving greater knowledge and understanding,” for an “enlightening experience,” create the basis for educators. Seeking jobs that I will feel fulfilled may be in a wider job environment that I originally thought. I believe to teach is to offer “an enlightening experience,” if the educator is honest about herself and knowledgeable of the many ways she is not perfect.

¹⁵¹ Juliet Eilperin. “White House Women Want to be in the Room Where It Happens.” The Washington Post. Published September 13, 2016. Accessed November 18, 2017, from https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/wp/2016/09/13/white-house-women-are-now-in-the-room-where-it-happens/?utm_term=.74cf1bc0266f.

¹⁵² Google Search Engine: “education,” and “enlighten.” Definitions appeared above search links, on November 18, 2017.

If teachers talk about the value of kindness, elaborating its benefits, while failing to illustrate what they are saying through personal example, then students are unlikely to find their worlds compelling. If, on the other hand, teachers embody kindness in their own behavior by showing genuine concern for their students, they will make their point more effectively.¹⁵³

The Dalai Lama espoused the most important aspect of an educator: vulnerability and “genuine concern for their students.” No one can fake vulnerability: either I am honest with my fallibility and willing to risk shame, or I am closed-off, protected, and untouchable. I have experienced many examples of opportunities to be vulnerable and I turned away, but also experienced several times when I faced my fears and shame, and took a leap. The most powerful learning of the two always comes after vulnerability.

I do not respect someone who does not act in the manner they demand others to do so. One example of this was a boss whose demanded his subordinates “communicate in a constructive, honest, and respectful manner,” where “conflict shall be discussed with direct communication.” While these are important for useful communication in an office, this person refused to communicate in a timely manner, and referred to himself often as “conflict-avoidant.” He left things unsaid for months at a time, until he had collected enough anecdotes in his notebook to ambush his employees with months of so-called “inappropriate behaviors.” He once accused me of “spending too much time on professional development” when there were no students in the center. This was also the same person who laughed in my face when I

¹⁵³ Dalai Lama, *Beyond Religion*, p. 95.

decided to enroll in graduate school. He later shared that colleges were unnecessary and earning degrees were “a waste of time and money.”¹⁵⁴

The above anecdote bothers me still, because the duplicity between action and proclamation made trust difficult. Vulnerability was neither welcomed nor accepted. As the Dalai Lama described, the above manager enjoyed “talking about the value of kindness,” but failed to “illustrate ... through personal example.” After analyzing the experience, my colleagues and I were “unlikely to find [his] worlds compelling.” Vulnerability was scorned, so the office conflicts remained unsolved.

However, with vulnerability comes understanding, I believe. I understand how important vulnerability is, as well as the importance of “being impeccable with your word,” Don Miguel Ruiz’s first of four Agreements toward “transformation of your life ... and creating ... your personal dream of heaven.”¹⁵⁵ My future career, wherever it may be, will be a place where I strive to maintain being impeccable with my word, as well as endeavoring to create a space for people to do the same. “Win your own mind, envision a future, and make it a reality.”¹⁵⁶ As I explore job options, I feel as if I am “winning my own mind,” because I can see a future, and I will “make it a reality.

¹⁵⁴ Jennifer Way, Diary entries for July 2014 and June 2015.

¹⁵⁵ Don Miguel Ruiz, *The Four Agreements*, (California: Amber-Allen Publishing, 1997). PDF copy accessed on November 18, 2017, from <http://wtf.tw/ref/ruiz.pdf>. PDF page 8.

¹⁵⁶ Marietta McCarty, *How Philosophy Can Save your Life: 10 Ideas that matter most*. (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2009) P. 41.

4C. Vulnerability and the Growth Mindset Dilemma

In September 2017, I attended the “Economic Opportunity for Women in Vermont” conference, sponsored by Senator Patrick Leahy. The workshop I attended, “Beyond the Power Pose: Building Authentic Confidence,” could easily have been renamed “A Study in Vulnerability.” The presenter, employed by Vermont Works for Women, described how she and others help girls build confidence in “non-traditional trades,” like carpentry and welding. The girls are placed in uncomfortable-yet-supported situations and encouraged to experience opportunities to fail and to learn.

The presenter originally wanted our workshop to be an obstacle course on bicycles. This terrified me, and I felt my heart speed and my palms sweat. Bike riding scares me. I started learning about a year ago. I can usually balance and travel on straight sidewalks, but lack the ability to turn safely, look around, or stop without losing my balance. I am afraid to ride the bike. I am also afraid of falling, of breaking or spraining something, and I am very afraid to ride in the road.

It is difficult to decide whether I am afraid of riding because I do not know how to do so safely and well, or if I just do not enjoy the activity. There have been many times where I succeeded this summer: I turned the corner, rode for several blocks without falling, and stopped safely. There were no falls or wobbles, but I never felt elated or surprised, only a deep sense of fear, wishing an expedient end to the experience.

I think this fear helped me listen more attentively to the discussion that followed during that workshop: recognizing how stifling a fixed mindset can be, while how liberating a growth mindset is. The presenter asked for examples of a fixed mindset before sharing the research.

Fixed Mindset
I'll never get math.
I can't do it.
This is beyond me.
This is impossible.

Growth Mindset
} YET!

To summarize the growth mindset, our presenter added “Yet,” to the above list. While not grammatically perfect, the idea instantly made her point. Adding “yet” to the ideas we shared for a fixed mindset changed those statements into something that is both possible and probable in the future. There are several traits the fixed mindset community have in common: they appear intelligent but avoid intellectual heavy lifting, give up more easily, ignore feedback, and are threatened by others’ success. A member of the growth-mindset community appreciates a learning curve for growth progress. They make mistakes, persevere through struggles, learn from criticism, and are inspired by others’ successes. Essentially, one controls their local environments to minimize risk, while the other believes the effort to learn and succeed is more important than the *appearance* of success.¹⁵⁷

Being both a special education teacher and an adult educator, I was trained in the fixed/growth mindset dilemma many times. However, on this occasion, I

¹⁵⁷ Jennifer Roberts, “Beyond the Power Pose: Building Authentic Confidence,” from Senator Leahy’s 21st Annual Woman’s Economic Opportunity Conference, September 16, 2017.

recognized the personal within the concept. I allow my fear to control me about riding a bike. I don't know how to break this fearful, fixed mindset, but I want to share a little of my vulnerability about riding. After the first ride this year, I wrote the following.

What is it about the fear of looking foolish that hinders my exploratory, adventurous spirit? I know it's there!

- *I went to UMaine [undergraduate] with no idea what college would be like, no friends or close family to run to in case I couldn't hack it. The only thing I heard about was the "freshman 15," and I lost, rather than gained, over 30 pounds, because I walked any time I wanted to, day or night.*
- *I became a special education teacher with no training, experience, or any idea what I agreed to, taking over for the expert with a decade of behavioral education and degrees, who quit before Thanksgiving.*
- *I gave the salutatory speech in high school-my first public speaking.*
- *I learned that I could fall in love, and live after a broken heart. I learned how to be myself and love someone with the courage to be all-in, offering those few buttons that could destroy you, trusting them to keep those buttons safe. When they did not, I learned I could love again.*
- *I started teaching adult education, after I swore I would never be in the classroom again. I cried during the interview, and still got the job.*
- *I moved to Vermont, with no friends, no real understanding of the job I was about to have, or even where the grocery store was at the time.*
- *I delivered a speech to hundreds about perseverance from memory, and delivered it with humor and style.*
- *I went to Ecuador, without knowing the language, to teach English grammar to summer camp, knowing all the potential dangers.*

And yet, riding a bicycle is still by far one of the most terrifying things I've done in my life. Learning how to drive was the first: Dad forced me to drive, over and over and over, and it took months for me to figure out the width and length of the car, months more before I released my white-knuckle grip on the steering wheel.

Why does the thought of failure scare me so much? And it is really a fear of failure? Or is it a fear of looking like a fool, someone bumbling and insecure, lost and confused in a canoe while adrift amid the luxury cruisers and yachts others seem to pilot with ease?¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁸ Jennifer Way, personal journal, May 02, 2017. [Personal communication]

I wrote the above as a reminder of how often I faced challenges in my life, and that was just a quick scribbling, a stream-of-consciousness writing that I could certainly add to. During that workshop, the presenter shared how important a growth mindset is for learning. She described studies of people who were praised for intelligence in one group, and praised for effort in another group, based on Carol Dwek's research.

The ones praised for how much effort went into solving a challenging problem were more likely to engage in further challenging behaviors, as if to say, "I got that one, and I can get this next one, too." The intelligence-praised group risked failure and social acceptance if they were not "smart enough" to solve another challenging problem, so they chose not to try. "Out of the group that was praised for their intelligence, 67% chose the easier option [to complete a task], while 92% of the kids who were praised for their effort chose the harder test."¹⁵⁹ These groups of children were tested with a similar task to their original, and the intelligence-praised students scored 20% lower than their original scores, while the effort-praised students scored 30% higher.¹⁶⁰

Drawing a connection between my feelings on riding and the fixed mindset group, I knew why the idea of riding a bike still terrifies me. A long time ago, I heard or convinced myself that I would never ride a bike. With no desire to break that

¹⁵⁹ Trevor Ragan, "Carol Dwek—A Study on Praise and Mindsets," January 30, 2014, YouTube video, accessed September 17, 2017, from <https://youtu.be/NWv1VdDeoRY>. 1:22-1:35.

¹⁶⁰ Ragan, "Carol Dwek," 3:24-3:37.

mindset, I kept reinforcing it. I may have a growth mindset in many aspects of my life, but this one is solidly fixed. I think this mindset is insidious because I never analyzed it before. A social work instructor whose class I took notes for once described unanalyzed assumptions as part of a ‘little red wagon’ we carry throughout life.

*It is filled with negative opinions and stereotypes from others we collected. You can always stop and throw out any of those opinions that you don't believe in anymore. But you must look first.*¹⁶¹

I have ridden a bike throughout the summer, although not as much I should. I think one step has been admitting that I am still scared of the activity. Recognizing that fear—rather than simply finding excuses to do other things—helped take it out of the darkness of my own shame and inability. I may struggle with my courage for a while longer whenever the subject occurs, but being honest and vulnerable with myself may help to take off some of the pressure of not being good enough—yet.

Instead of “growth mindset,” Brené Brown used the term “whole-hearted” to describe a similar phenomenon in her 2010 TED Talk.

*“These people had, very simply, the courage to be imperfect. They had the compassion to be kind to themselves first and then to others, because, as it turns out, we can't practice compassion with other people if we can't treat ourselves kindly. And the last was they had connection, and -- this was the hard part -- [because of] authenticity, they were willing to let go of who they thought they should be ... to be who they were, which you have to absolutely do that for connection.”*¹⁶²

Vulnerability emerges from a growth mindset, where someone believes effort and dedication are better tools for learning than being intelligent. Vulnerability

¹⁶¹ Susan Comerford, paraphrased from discussion to Fall 2016 Introduction to Social Work course. [Personal connection]

¹⁶² Brown, “Power of Vulnerability,” 09:08-09:40.

thrives in a whole-hearted lifestyle, when authenticity and compassion for ourselves override the fear of what other people might think of us. Riding a bike is still terrifying to me, but my goal next summer is to get back on and keep practicing, a little at a time.

4D. The Universalizabilities Presentation

At my first Career Center appointment in September, my Career Coach asked what I would do with my findings after writing about “such an interesting topic.” At the time, I did not have an answer for her, but then on October 13, 2017, I received an email from the Coalition of Adult Basic Education (COABE) to submit a proposal for a workshop at their national conference, and an idea struck. I decided to end my thesis with a transcript of a potential workshop, delivered to education colleagues across the country. While I missed the deadline for presenting at COABE, I have applied to other conferences. As of publication, I have been accepted to present my thesis to a graduate student conference held at the University of Rhode Island.

In the below workshop presentation script, I define both teaching and vulnerability, and then share some of the universalizabilities I discovered on my journey to here.

The Universalizability of Vulnerable Teaching

What does vulnerability look like to you? Share some personal thoughts.

Brené Brown defined vulnerability as “uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure.”¹⁶³ Palmer identified teaching as “a daily exercise in vulnerability.”¹⁶⁴ I believe both perspectives encompass teaching with vulnerability. “Uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure” in the classroom does not mean the teacher shares with her

¹⁶³ Brown, *Daring Greatly*, p. 34.

¹⁶⁴ Palmer, *Courage to Teach*, p. 17.

students the fight she had with her partner the night before or how much the administration is restricting her ability to teach creatively. Rather, this definition asks teachers to release the idea that the teacher is the god of all knowledge, while students are empty vessels, waiting patiently to be filled. If one believes she knows everything about a subject, she loses touch with the “daily exercise in vulnerability” required to connect with students honestly.

Vulnerability in the classroom looks like a teacher allowing the lesson to drift from the meticulous plan, to meet the needs or interests of her students. Vulnerability means the teacher admitting she is neither perfect nor all-knowing. She admits, “I do not know.”

Teaching and vulnerability are intrinsically linked. I can’t give you any tips to be freed from vulnerability. Nothing to take back to the classroom to implement immediately, only things to think about.

What is my definition of teaching?

“It’s easier to try than to prove it can’t be done.”¹⁶⁵

- Connection: the teacher doesn’t hold knowledge, she helps you unlock it. Socrates believed “the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being!”¹⁶⁶ The connection between a teacher that cares and a student that feels

¹⁶⁵ A-Z Lyrics.com. “Blue World-Moody Blues.”

¹⁶⁶ Held, *Dr. Seuss*, p. 04.

respected helps each to examine their lives. Does your student hate math but love to draw? Have them illustrate homework.

- Communication: listening to what is said and what isn't. Teaching is not only about disseminating content. We offer guidance, counseling, and a scaffold for young humans to learn how to navigate through the world successfully.

Teachers are asked to act as mediators and facilitators in classroom, and to teach students how to learn independently, to collaborate and to reflect. They are also asked to scaffold the holistic growth of student's Self, helping to face challenges of [a] knowledge society.¹⁶⁷

Such tasks require honest, compassionate, and vulnerable communication and connection. We lead by example. If we ask our students to be vulnerable, we must first practice and demonstrate what that vulnerability may look like.

- "I don't like math," hides *I'm afraid to try something and fail.*
- "I'll never be any good." *I've already shut down and can't hear you.*
- "This is stupid." *I'm afraid you're going to laugh at me.*

What is my definition of vulnerability?

- Finding universalizabilities everyone can relate to. Everyone struggles with connection: Did I just blow my big opportunity? How will I ever look them in the face after that fiasco? I can't believe I was so stupid that I...?
 - Mistakes happen. Learn from the experience, and share, if necessary, to build understanding with others.

¹⁶⁷ Tateo, "What do you mean by 'Teacher?'" P. 350.

- Having to take a deep breath before sharing something personal and relevant, but finding the strength to share anyway.

Vulnerability is not a single vaccine and, if faced once, your life is free from experiencing that emotion again. Vulnerability is more like food: regardless how much you eat, eventually, the need returns. With vulnerability, however painful, comes a deeper understanding of who you are, and a stronger connection to others.

5 Universalizabilities and their Application

1. Vulnerability is difficult, and you can't build up an immunity.

- Vulnerability looks different for everyone.
- The best teaching requires vulnerability. The teacher is not omnipotent, and the best way to model growth mindsets is through self-acceptance.
- Vulnerability requires sharing with intention, discretion, and self-compassion.
- *The person who risks nothing, does nothing, has nothing, is nothing, and becomes nothing. He may avoid suffering and sorrow, but he simply cannot learn, feel, change, grow or love. Chained by his certitude, he is a slave; he has forfeited his freedom. Only the person who risks is truly free.*¹⁶⁸

2. To make a difference, you must be authentic.

- Authenticity thrives when we explore our biases, opinions, and expectations of the world. We must know who we are.
- Past failures can be a wall against making new disappointments, or it can be a door that leads to new discoveries.
- Show yourself the compassion that you willingly offer to your best friend.
- A mistake can be final and fatal, leading to perfectionism. A misstep leads to another path of exploration. Practice engaging with missteps, to learn.
- Remember: *"I am somebody. I was somebody when I came. I'll be a better somebody when I leave. I am powerful, and I am strong. I deserve the education that I get here. I have things to do, people to impress, and places to go."*¹⁶⁹

3. Ask for help.

- I don't have to be right, and I don't have to go it alone.
- Everyone that travels the Hero's Journey has mentors, guides, and teachers.
- We are all vulnerable. And ashamed. And brave. We know instinctively how important vulnerability is, and appreciate valiant sharing of raw emotion.
- Don't be afraid to ask yourself what you need to be happy. Seek it out.
- *"A well can give out water because it is designed with a continuous supply of water coming in, so there can be a supply of water going out of the well. ... People [need] a continuous source of refueling, refilling, and replenishing ... to [give] a lot every day. ... To give a lot, you need to have a lot to give, so make sure you are filling Your Life Well."*¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁸ Towne, "Leo Buscaglia on Risks," 01:24-01:51.

¹⁶⁹ Rita Pierson, "Every Kid Needs a Champion," TED Talks Education. Published May 2013. Accessed December 11, 2017, from https://www.ted.com/talks/rita_pierson_every_kid_needs_a_champion. 03:58-04:13.

¹⁷⁰ Carrie Stack, *The Dream Boss: Inspire Individuals and Teams to Succeed.* 2015. CreateSpace Publishing. P. 64-67.

4. Share your story.

- No one knows exactly what, or how, you feel.
- Everyone can relate to happiness, sorrow, loss, excitement, fear.
- I write to hear what I think, and I write to understand the life around me. Scholarly Personal Narrative uses the power of memoir to share a story, and scholarly research to add efficacy to that story.
- Analyze past experiences with loving kindness. The past happened. Explore the experience with new eyes and an understanding that the only thing you can take with you are your insights.
- *Say what you mean and believe what you say. But always make it a point to leave room for the ellipsis dots that, in theory, can end every sentence you write, and every story you tell, and every truth you proclaim. ... We ask you to write as many stories as you can muster.*¹⁷¹

5. Be a wanderer in your own life.

- A colleague and friend once kept special coloring books and crayons on a high shelf. After school, we spent time coloring and processing the day.
- One day, I described my lack of fulfillment, how dissatisfied I was with not being able to connect with other teachers. She smiled and called me a wanderer: *someone who was not content to spend her whole life in one place for an extended period.*
- “Be a wanderer in your own life” does not mean you must move jobs or geography every three years. Instead, by wander, I mean explore. Take an adult enrichment course: learn sign language, take a pottery class, or read a book and find people to talk about the surprise plot twist with.
- Do something that you’ve always thought was interesting. Wander from your routine, wander from your norm. The greatest journey anyone can ever take is to wander into who and what contributes to the self, to embrace the truth that “*there is no one alive more You-er than You,*” as Dr. Seuss says.¹⁷²

*No failure will stop us from following our bliss. No mistake is too large to learn from. Failure Absolutely Is Learning. Welcome to Persevere, and congratulations on beginning your adventure!*¹⁷³

¹⁷¹ Robert Nash and Sydnee Viray, “Dear Students: A Letter from Your Co-Instructors,” Scholarly Personal Narrative blog, modified 2014, accessed September 27, 2017, from <http://blog.uvm.edu/intrdisc/>.

¹⁷² Kinder Garden, “Happy Birthday to You, by Dr. Seuss, read aloud. Dr. Seuss’s Birthday,” YouTube, published March 02, 2015, accessed October 26, 2017, from <https://youtu.be/Bz79JFI57rs>. Time: 12:07-12:11.

¹⁷³ Jennifer Way, 2015 Business and Professional Women Young Careerist speech content, [Personal communication]

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