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Man's Best Friend: Using Dogs In Middle-Level Education To Improve Self-Efficacy For Students And Teachers

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MAN'S BEST FRIEND: USING DOGS IN MIDDLE-LEVEL EDUCATION
TO IMPROVE SELF-EFFICACY FOR STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

A Thesis Presented

by

Emily A. Wills

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

The University of Vermont

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
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ABSTRACT

In this thesis I share stories of my journey to make meaning in my life, and explore how my relationship with dogs has helped me to overcome personal challenges. I break these experiences down into what I call my five Fs: family, faith, food, fear, and fido. After giving a history of the human-dog relationship, I extrapolate from my experiences ways in which I believe students and teachers could benefit from interactions with therapy dogs and other comfort animals within the public school day. Specifically, I examine the role dogs can play in helping students and teachers reduce stress and increase self-efficacy. I include the sample animal procedure I drafted for the school at which I teach. I also include some data from my time working with students and my dog. Written in Scholarly Personal Narrative format, I look to weave together my own realizations about anxiety, choice, and identity, with a call for others to find what self-efficacy strategies work for them to make meaning and purpose in their own lives.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

*Listen, a junkyard puppy
Learns quickly how to dream.
Listen, whatever you see and love—
That's where you are.*¹

1.1. Methodology

The methodology I have chosen for my thesis is Scholarly Personal Narrative, or SPN. My attraction to this style of writing is what drew me to the Interdisciplinary program at the University of Vermont in the first place. By 2015 I had already earned a Master of Education in Reading at another institution and written a traditional capstone paper full of impersonal research and sterile claims. I was struggling after a decade of teaching middle school English, unsure of my professional purpose or my personal passions. I was, as Dr. Nash termed it, having a quarterlife crisis at age 33. I felt that it was an existential crisis indeed; the students who were doing fine in school would do fine without my influence, and the ones who were struggling I felt as if I could not reach. Additionally, I was not at all sure who I was apart from my career, which was the only one I had ever had. My belief in myself to change was low.

I went into teaching because I love to read and I love to write. I had almost an idyllic experience in my kindergarten-through-twelfth-grade public school. I believed I would be happy to spend my days immersing myself in the subjects I adored in an environment where I would thrive. Eleven years in, however, I had begun to feel burned out. I could not summon the passion for adolescent texts that I once had, and I felt that public school had ceased to meet the needs of both its brightest and weakest students.

¹Mary Oliver. *Dog Songs*, (New York, Penguin Books, 2013), 17.

Although I spoke about this with my husband who is a fellow educator, my mentor teacher, several teacher-friends, and people outside of the profession, ultimately I discovered I must listen to Rainer Maria Rilke's words: "There is only one way: go within." But I did not know how.

Unbeknownst to me, at this time a co-worker was in her final semester of the Interdisciplinary Studies program and when I confided in her how I was feeling, she scribbled an email address down on a piece of paper and said, "Talk to this guy." Dr. Nash was that guy. My co-worker explained roughly what SPN writing was, and told me that if I was ready to read and write my brains and guts out, then this program could help me find the meaning I was looking for. Dr. Nash assured me of this during our first meeting at Chef's Corner, and I applied to the program soon after.

The idea of writing a thesis that allowed me ask open-ended questions, to say what I knew, why it mattered, how my peers could apply my learning, and also weave my personal narrative throughout was enticing. I hoped I could make meaning for myself and help others make meaning as well. As Dr. Nash wrote, "The inclusion of the self in research and scholarship is inescapable, even more so when writers try intentionally to excise the self from their research. The 'I' voice always has a way of seeping into an 'objective' third-person text. My students have learned to accept this subjective seepage, indeed, even to celebrate it."² I, indeed, celebrated it. I needed it. I craved it.

It is the combination of "me-search" and "research" that is crucial and delightful in Scholarly Personal Narrative writing. Dr. Nash and DeMethra LaSha Bradley say that

² Robert J. Nash, *Liberating Scholarly Writing: The Power of Personal Narrative* (New York, Teachers College Press, 2004), 26.

a good SPN needs “a belief or burning question that cries out to be answered.”³ To answer that question in the SPN style, you have to look both inside and outside yourself. By 2015 I was no longer sure of my beliefs about myself or my profession, but I was full of burning questions. What do I truly believe? How has that changed over time? Why am I living without a purpose I can believe in? These questions set me adrift from parts of my life that had always anchored me to comfortable certainty. I felt pretty alone. The courses I took throughout this program proved to me that “all of us, no matter how different our backgrounds, must face in common the existential challenges of creating meaning in a world where there is no intrinsic meaning.”⁴ The SPN writing I did throughout this degree helped answer some of my burning questions while raising others. The SPN writing of peers in my cohort showed me I was not alone.

This thesis is hopefully proof to me and my readers that “your own life has meaning, both for you and for others. Your own life tells a story (or a series of stories) that, when narrated well, can deliver to your readers those delicious aha! Moments of self and social insight that are all too rare in more conventional forms of research.”⁵ For me and many of my peers in my Interdisciplinary program, I know SPN writing has served to help us uncover and discover ourselves.

Several years ago in my SPN course with Dr. Nash we were asked to come up with metaphors for the SPN writing methodology. Unsurprisingly to those who know my love of dogs, I wrote, “SPN writing is a rescue dog who is settled in a cozy home for the

³ DeMethra LaSha Bradley and Robert J. Nash, *Me-Search and Re-search: A Guide for Writing Scholarly Personal Narrative Manuscripts*, (Charlotte, Information Age Publishing Inc, 2011), 36.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁵ Nash, *Liberating Scholarly Writing: The power of personal narrative*, (New York, Teachers College Press, 2004), 24.

first time.” I still feel that way. I have had so many seemingly disparate questions and ideas floating in my head for so long that I had no idea how to say what I wanted to say in a way from which others could benefit. I had no concept of how to bring my ideas home. However, with SPN I was able to take all those vagrant visions and give them a place to settle down. Rilke told me to go within, and I did. SPN helped me bring my within, without. Hopefully now it can benefit others.

I wrote a poem, also for one of Dr. Nash’s classes, to sum up how I feel about the SPN format. The first line is from Nash’s book *Liberating Scholarly Writing*.

Anyone who has ever suffered or rejoiced can tell a story.
Speak it.
Write it.
Cry it into a bowl of maple walnut ice cream, your grandmother’s favorite.
Mix it into the oil paints you smear across the canvas at two a.m.

Anyone who has ever suffered or rejoiced can tell a story.
Speak it.
Write it.
Shove it under the bed with your wife’s winter clothes.
Crunch it underfoot as you walk along the riverbank with your dog.

Anyone who has ever suffered or rejoiced can tell a story.
Speak it.
Write it.
File it along with a bankruptcy claim.
Release it along with purple balloons.

Anyone who has ever suffered or rejoiced can tell a story.
We are all audience.
We are all author.

1.2. Audience

The audience for this thesis is hopefully vast. I desire my stories to be of interest to anyone who has struggled to form her own identity after having it defined for her for

most of her life. I also hope my me-search and research speak to dog lovers of all stripes, but that those who do not love dogs can also extrapolate meaning. First, I want my thesis to help public school educators who work with the middle level population in grades five through eight. That is where I did my research, and where I myself teach. My goal is that teachers and students in public schools will reap the benefits of my personal experiences and evidence about the benefits of including dogs in the school environment. Second, I think therapists, medical professionals, coaches, and even parents who work with young adolescents could benefit from my exploration into how dogs can improve individuals' states of mind and therefore self-efficacy overall. Third, I hope that anyone who reads this thesis will see how embracing ownership of constructing meaning in our lives is essential. It is inevitable that we will form an identity, and if we do not play an active role in writing our own life's narratives, they will be written for us. Increasing our self-efficacy increases our options in the world. As Dr. Nash writes, "Each of us is both constructivist and constructed. The stories we construct then turn around and construct us, and we them . . . forever."⁶

1.3. Background

Heidi lies on the floor. Shaggy sheepdog hair covers most of her face, but her stump of a tail is wagging ferociously. My father is using my grandmother's pinking shears — all he could find, I now assume — to trim the hair between the pads on her feet and around her eyes and mouth. My soggy pink socks attest to the fact that having less chin hair on Heidi will lead to drier feet for all of us — less fur dragged through the water dish means less dripping across the floor. Dad scratches Heidi's cheek with one hand as

⁶ Ibid., 36.

he carefully snips with the other. “Who’s a good girl?” he whispers softly. “Who’s a good girl?”

Who’s a good girl? This is something I have asked myself my whole life. I have always wanted to be able to answer “Me!” but perhaps even more importantly, I have wanted everyone else in my life to say my name in answer to this question. More than anything, I have desired being right, perfect, and good. I need God, my boss, my father, my friends, and even my professors to be deeply and consistently pleased with me and what I do. In the past I always felt the most at ease when others told me what they expected of me and then I did it. I abdicated responsibility for my life. That way, I did not have to take my own risks or have my own failures, and I would get good feedback from others because I was toeing the line. I am an excellent rule-follower, and because of that I never learned to set my own boundaries and goals for myself. I lacked self-efficacy because I rarely made my own decisions.

Slowly over the past several years the entities I have looked to to tell me I am a good girl — especially my family and my faith — are no longer giving my life meaning. The things with which I have filled my meaning making void — food and fear — have not served me well. I surrendered a lot of my own growth and adulthood in the first three decades of my life to others, and I want to reclaim it now in a healthy way that gives my life purpose: a purpose I define for myself. I think I will be able to do that through my work with dogs — fido. I know I have already begun to grow my self-efficacy through my ongoing work with animals.

I have been striving to discover what makes me feel good on my own terms and nobody else's. It has been incredibly difficult for me to tune out the other voices that have been drummed into my head and listen for what rings true to me. Ultimately, I have found that I am more at peace following a guided meditation at home than I am listening to a homily at my Catholic parish. I am more present at the dog park with my two Golden Retrievers than I am at a large family gathering. I feel more joy in small moments than in big ones. I have discovered I feel like a "good girl" when I am being true to my own conscience and intuition. I am learning to tune into my own beliefs and that is increasing my sense of self-efficacy.

Initially, I worried that a thesis centering around dogs was one of the most inane topics I could choose. Coupling that with the idea of making people 'feel good' seemed like a recipe for some fluffy essay void of meaning — a feel-good puff piece. Even as I type the word "fluffy" though, I smile. Dogs are fluffy. Dogs make us feel good! This, for most people, is true. It is certainly true for me. And if something is true, it is probably not rare or original. Something that is true will keep showing up, over and over, wherever someone looks for it and is open to it. I worried my thesis might sound derivative because I have seen so much anecdotal evidence in my own life of dogs bringing joy and stress relief. But something that is obvious can still be valuable.

If I explore how dogs' increasing self-efficacy is true for me and true for others, then that is scholarly, personal, and narrative writing. Normal Rosenthal writes, "Getting to know yourself is a challenge... First, you keep changing... Second, your capacity to know changes as you develop... Also, in a way, the older you get, the more there is to

know.”⁷ Even though there was a firm due date for this thesis, I think Rosenthal’s quote explains why it took me so many combinations and permutations of drafts to write this thesis. Who I am in the spring of 2019 is not who I was in 2015. Likewise, who I will be four years from now will hopefully be different. Dr. Nash wrote “...If you want to locate the important whys in your lives, then write an SPN.”⁸ I did find those whys, and I hope I can universalize them for others too, even as I continue to grow and change.

I begin this paper with an explanation of self-efficacy and some examples of how my work with a therapy dog in school could increase self-efficacy for students and teachers. I then break the body of my thesis down into my five Fs to try to find both clarity and interdependence between my experiences. These are the five Fs I mentioned above — family, faith, food, fear, and fido. I move from my own life outward to how I believe my self-discovery can help others find purpose and peace in their own lives. I examine the history of dogs’ and humans’ mutually beneficial relationship, and how that can reduce stress and improve the learning environment among students and staff in schools. I end with a concrete proposal for the integration of dogs into daily public education, and give my own specific examples of my work at the middle level.

The epigraphs that begin each of my chapters come from Mary Oliver’s collection of poetry called *Dog Songs*. Each poem is a love letter to her pets, and it is one of my favorite books of poetry.

⁷ Norman E. Rosenthal. *The Gift of Adversity: The Unexpected Benefits of Life’s Difficulties, Setbacks, and Imperfections* (New York: TarcherPerigee, 2013) 24.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 40.

CHAPTER 2: SELF-EFFICACY

*“And now you’ll be telling stories
Of my coming back
And they won’t be false, and they won’t be true
But they’ll be real.”⁹*

Self-efficacy is the thread that I believe links my childhood experiences, my work as a teacher, and my love of dogs together. It is defined by psychologist Albert Bandura as a person’s belief and confidence that she can control her own behavior and have an impact on her environment.¹⁰ It is basically an assurance that a person is able to succeed in a given situation, or at least cope with the situation successfully.

I first became aware of self-efficacy theory when I talked with my counselor about my disbelief in my ability to handle situations that trigger my anxiety. As I considered my own life and lack of self-efficacy, I saw how my experiences with the rigidity of both Catholic doctrine and my parents’ expectations kept me from relying on my own judgement. I thought about how many of my students do not believe in their own abilities to succeed socially or academically. I know my fellow teachers struggle to feel empowered too. I also see and feel a lot of emotional dysregulation throughout a typical school day.

I have been looking for a way for me to combine my passion for dogs with my career as an educator. I also see a great need for a decrease in stress and an increase in self-efficacy among my fellow educators and especially among the students with which

⁹ Oliver, *Dog Songs*, 77.

¹⁰Michael P Carey and Andrew D. Forsyth, “Teaching tip sheet: Self-efficacy,” American Psychological Association. Accessed February 15, 2019, <https://www.apa.org/pi/aids/resources/education/self-efficacy>.

we work. I believe a therapy dog like my dog Fozzie Bear can help with this process in a few ways.

Bandura identifies several sources of self-efficacy: enactive mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological and affective states.¹¹ The most impactful of these is enactive mastery experiences, because when a person succeeds at a challenging task due to perseverance she comes to believe she can rise to other difficult situations as well.¹² “Younger children... have special difficulty appraising their efficacy in terms of aggregate experiences spread out over a long time. The more recent experiences are likely to be easier to recall and thus carry the greater weight.”¹³ I have told the group of students with which I am currently working that they are helping me train Fozzie for his future work as a therapy dog. They are teaching him to be calm in a school setting, but also reinforcing the skills I have already taught him like “sit,” “stay,” and “come.” Finally, the students are teaching him new tricks as well, like catching a ball off a bounce. By working with Fozzie week after week and having success with training, I hope students’ self-efficacy will increase as they have frequent, and recent, experiences of success on a challenging task.

Vicarious experiences are another way to improve self-efficacy. Watching a capable person model certain behavior is a powerful means of increasing an individual’s beliefs she can succeed as well. However, people compare themselves to those around them to see how they measure up. “Surpassing associates or competitors raises efficacy

¹¹ Albert Bandura. *Self-efficacy: The Exercise of Control* (New York: W.H. Freeman and Company, 1997), 79.

¹² *Ibid.*, 80.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 86.

beliefs, whereas being outperformed lowers them... self-efficacy appraisal will vary substantially depending upon the talents of those chosen for social comparison.”¹⁴ For this reason, I think it is key that the special educator and I matched the students in my groups carefully for their time with the therapy dog. Fozzie and I are working with three students in a leveled reading group in which all of the students need the same intervention. The two students with whom we are doing mindfulness work are both on Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and have emotional trauma. There is another student I see one-on-one. I believe this can help our students increase self-efficacy vicariously as each of them practice from roughly the same starting point and do not feel at a disadvantage to their peers as they may in the traditional classroom setting.

Verbal persuasion is the third source of self-efficacy Bandura identifies. Essentially, this is encouragement coming from a valued person at a time when someone is struggling. “It can bolster self-change if the positive appraisal is within realistic bounds. People who are persuaded verbally that they possess the capabilities to master given tasks are likely to mobilize greater effort and sustain it than if they harbored self-doubts and dwell on personal deficiencies when difficulties arise.”¹⁵ In one way, I believe that the special educator and I can be the ones to supply the verbal persuasion, since we ostensibly are further along the path toward mastering reading and self-control than the students are. However, I also think that Fozzie can provide encouragement. He is not giving verbal persuasion, of course, but he is of great value to the students and they find it encouraging to be in his presence. In fact, they seem more willing to spend time in

¹⁴ Ibid., 86.

¹⁵ Ibid., 101.

my and the special educator's presence when the dog is involved. Fozzie also provides a distraction for students that keeps them from focusing on self-doubt.

Physiological and affective states are the final avenues for increased self-efficacy that Bandura identifies. Basically this means that people interpret their physical stress reactions to a challenging situation as an indicator that they are incapable of dealing with the situation successfully.¹⁶ “By conjuring up aversive thoughts about their ineptitude and stress reactions, people can rouse themselves to elevated levels of distress that produce the very dysfunctions they fear.”¹⁷ Therefore, reducing stress levels and enhancing overall physical well-being can improve the opportunities to grow self-efficacy among both students and teachers. As I will discuss later, it has consistently been shown that dogs lower the stress hormone cortisol in the human body, lower heart rate and blood pressure, and increase the “love” hormone oxytocin.¹⁸ Eradicating physical blocks to self-efficacy can help put people in a comfortable place to grow, and Fozzie can facilitate that.

Self-efficacy links closely to a huge issue that I and other public educators are having with our middle school students: self-regulation. Self-regulation is how a student's thoughts, feelings and actions affect her ability to learn. Self-regulation could be a behavior plan for a student to achieve her goals, including breathing exercises, interruption of intrusive thoughts, and a place to go when she is feeling upset. Self-efficacy is her belief that she will actually be able to use this plan successfully to make

¹⁶ Ibid., 106.

¹⁷ Ibid., 106.

¹⁸ Maria Peterson et al, “Oxytocin and Cortisol Levels in Dog Owners and Their Dogs Are Associated with Behavioral Patterns: An Exploratory Study,” *Frontiers, in Psychology*. Accessed March 1, 2019, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5645535/>

changes in her world.¹⁹ Students need both self-regulation and self-efficacy to be successful, but in my experience self-efficacy often has to come before the action involved in self-regulation. If I do not believe that change is possible, and that I have some agency in my life, why would I even attempt change? I probably would not. In fact, I can say from experience in my childhood and young adulthood that if someone does not believe she has agency, she will suffer in her current circumstances.

Bandura suggests that self-efficacy influences what we choose to do — what coping mechanism we choose to utilize — when we are stressed and anxious.²⁰ For students, choosing to take deep calming breaths when presented with a challenging math test is a better coping mechanism than throwing a pencil and storming from the room. Many students struggle to land on a coping mechanism that they will actually turn to and use reliably in the heat of the moment. They do not have the self-efficacy to believe they can make different choices and be successful. My plan is that a dog is a strong enough attraction to allow students to successfully use it as a tool to regain self-control. It is my conjecture that this will increase their sense of self-efficacy. They will believe they can continue to make good choices and be successful because now they see they have been.

The idea of self-efficacy is important for teachers too. I surveyed the fourteen core teachers in grades five to eight at my school, and eleven of them responded. When I asked them if they would utilize a therapy dog to help regulate their stress during the school day and fight off burnout, all but one of them said yes. There is a lot that we teachers cannot control. In general, teachers are paid thirty percent less than our fellow

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

college graduates in the United States, and we teach the greatest number of hours per week with the least planning time compared to educators in other developed countries.²¹ It is beyond my grasp to change state and federal policy, but I hope I can improve teachers' day-to-day life.

A strong sense of self-efficacy can perhaps protect against teacher burnout, a huge issue in my profession where more than forty percent of educators abandon the profession within their first five years of teaching.²² I wept openly this past fall in a meeting with my three co-teachers, my principal, the special educator for our teaching team, the speech and language pathologist, the director of student services, and the behavior room coordinator. It was mortifying, but I was at the end of my rope. My self-efficacy was very low; as I mentioned before, I felt like I could not help the children who need it and the kids who are fine would be fine without me. I did not believe I had the agency to make the changes that were needed, and I was so stressed that I could not summon the energy to think of solutions to the problems. This is where I think an opportunity for a few quiet minutes with a dog could have helped me, and can help out other stressed out teachers like me to be more resilient and be more able to weather the stormy seas of public education. It would not fix the problem, but it could help to reset my parasympathetic nervous system.

²¹Valerie Strauss, "Why It's a Big Problem That So Many Teachers Quit— And What To Do About It," *Washington Post*, published November 27, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2017/11/27/why-its-a-big-problem-that-so-many-teachers-quit-and-what-to-do-about-it/?utm_term=.c40224b50b2e.

²²Kelly McLaughlin, "Teachers are Seeing Their Colleagues Leave the Profession at an Alarming Rate, and This Might be Why," *The Insider*. Published November 15, 2018, <https://www.thisinsider.com/teachers-are-seeing-their-colleagues-leave-at-an-alarming-rate-2018-11>.

The parasympathetic nervous system is what Bandura is speaking of when he talks about physiological and affective states as being a stumbling block to self-efficacy. It is one part of the human autonomic nervous system. Its job is sometimes called “rest and digest,” meaning it slows the heart rate and increases the system’s needs to process food. It is the opposite of the system in our body that triggers fight-or-flight.²³ It runs the systems in the body that do not require an immediate, instinctual reaction. As I mentioned, it has been proven that heart rate, blood pressure, and the stress hormone cortisol all drop in humans when they are interacting positively with a dog.²⁴ This will serve teachers, and students, well. It has definitely helped me in my personal life.

The work with self-efficacy and self-regulation may feel circuitous, but the work must start somewhere. It is my opinion that therapy dogs can increase student self-efficacy through their work in school, and then the dogs could also be used as a tool in self-regulation. I hope to use my dog Fozzie to help children and adults get into a more relaxed physiological state where they can work on self-efficacy, with the hope that they will feel more agency and know self-regulation is possible. They will come to believe in their own control over their circumstances.

When I began the Interdisciplinary program in 2015, I was scraping the bottom of my self-efficacy barrel. As I said earlier, I felt that I was having no impact on my environment at school. I felt helpless, and this was making me feel burned out. I also was having struggles with anxiety in my personal life. It was then that I began to find my

²³ Laurie Kelly McCorry, “Physiology of the Autonomic Nervous System,” *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education*. Published August 15, 2007, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1959222/>.

²⁴ Ibid.

own purpose and an increasing sense of self-efficacy through my work with dogs. For me, it was empowering to make meaning through working with dog rescues and humane societies, and my work with my own animals. Believing I have the power to be a good girl on my own terms is what will give me ongoing meaning in my life. Possibly this will allow me to continue in the teaching profession, especially if I can bring my dog into the school. If I can couple my teaching experience with my passion for animals, I think my sense of self-efficacy will continue to grow. My hope is that students and educators will benefit from my work as well.

CHAPTER 3: FAITH

*We become religious
Then we turn from it,
Then we are in need and maybe we turn back...
Steadfastness, it seems,
Is more about dogs than about us.
One of the reasons we love them so much.²⁵*

I grab a cookie from the counter where they are cooling. Snickerdoodles. Not my favorite, but still, a good get for a Tuesday morning.

“You put that cookie down!”

I whip my head around. Memere is standing behind me with a spatula raised in her right hand. I cram the cookie into my mouth and speed away from my grandmother toward the front door as fast as my eight-year-old legs will go. I do not notice one of our kitchen chairs sticking out slightly from under the table. I catch my toe and go sprawling, the wind knocked out of me.

As I lie on the floor gasping, crumbled cookie scattered around my head like a powdery halo, Memere looms over me. A quick look tells her I am not seriously harmed, and so she laughs. “Well, I guess Baby Jesus punished you!” she says.

In her book *Writing to Change the World*, Mary Pipher says, “The finest thing we can do in life is to grow a soul and then use it in the service of humankind.”²⁶ I will always be grateful to the seeds my Roman Catholicism planted in me when I was young

²⁵ Oliver. *Dog Songs*, 3.

²⁶ Mary Pipher, *Writing to Change the World* (New York, Riverhead Books, 2006), 241.

that helped me to “grow a soul.” Memere may have taken a more unorthodox approach, but overall the first messages I got from my family about my religion were those of love.

My mother read me Bible stories as I sat on her lap, and the way Jesus fed the hungry, healed the sick, and told the little children to come to Him filled me with a desire to help others. I saw my father visit the elderly and infirm, and volunteer in prison ministry, as the Beatitudes told him to. My parents sent money monthly to support a child in the Third World. I saw their faith guide them to serve humankind, and I think that example is part of what helped me decide to be a teacher. I knew that I needed to put my soul into my career, and help people through my daily life as Jesus did and as my parents’ modeled.

I do also have memories from my childhood in which I now see my parents’ attempts to live their religious beliefs as harmful. I remember standing outside a local Planned Parenthood with my mom and dad as they prayed the rosary. Some in our group held signs; though I cannot remember what was on them, I remember that I was not allowed to hold one. Sometimes the group sang — I loved the singing. We were on the sidewalk across the road from the clinic. I remember cars honking, and not understanding why.

Looking back, I not only feel upset that my parents demonstrated against abortion outside of a woman’s health facility, I also resent that I was brought along to be a part of it. My mother said she does not remember me ever coming, but when I described the details to her she admitted that it sounded right. This is probably my earliest memory of shame being associated with my religion, though only now through my hindsight. It feels like my parents were directing shame and judgement toward the employees and patients

at Planned Parenthood, although I know they would say they were directing love toward the innocent unborn and the misguided women heading into the clinic. The older I became, the more problematic my Catholicism became for me, and the more shame seemed to take over the message of love I remembered from childhood.

As I matured and understood more of the homilies preached each week, Mass on Sundays became more about the fear of Hell, the fear of not living up to Jesus sacrificing His life in payment for my sins, and fear of always falling short. I distinctly remember how my stomach would clench when we read in Matthew's Gospel: "The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will weed out of His kingdom every cause of sin and all who practice lawlessness. And they will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."²⁷ I was terrified of the physical pain of my skin and body burning, and I was told the spiritual torment of being separated from God would be even worse. Then there was also the fear of never being good enough to live up to Christ's ultimate sacrifice of His life for me, which led to shame. I remember lying sleepless in bed at night as a young adolescent, feeling horrible guilt that my impure thoughts or lies to my parents had contributed to Jesus bleeding on the cross.

The older I became, the more I saw myself as a Catholic who was failing at my religion as it was preached to me, although I had wanted desperately to succeed. Jesus' life still seemed like a model worthy of following, but I more and more felt that the Church was missing His message. I felt that I was constantly being reminded of the worthiness I lack, at what is wrong, at how I am coming up short, about the ways I am failing to be a good Catholic. It was paralyzing, and depleted my sense of self-efficacy. I

²⁷ Matthew 13: 41-42.

am someone who seems to be hardwired to be hard on myself, so a religion that feels like it focuses on shame is not a religion in which my participation is sustainable any longer. I also was no longer convinced that me being a good Catholic as it is preached to me would match what I consider to be a good person.

Throughout my life, I have felt God's presence. I have never doubted that a Higher Power exists, and that I am a part of a bigger narrative. Catholic activist Dorothy Day said, "Whenever I felt the beauty of the world in song or story, in the material universe around me, or glimpsed it in human love, I wanted to cry out with joy."²⁸ That is how I feel as well. I sense God in mountains and in big dance numbers in Broadway musicals and in a good cup of coffee and in my niece's hug and in an engrossing book and in my dog's happy snorts as she shuffles around in the snow. These things make me feel so filled up inside that I actually sense my soul connecting to something that is larger than my one, mortal life and this small planet we live on. However, I have not been sensing that universal benevolent God in Church. Author Gabrielle Bernstein writes that "joy is our birthright,"²⁹ but I can no longer find joy in the religion of my birth.

I think the election of Donald Trump crystalized this issue for me. Sixty percent of white Catholics voted for Trump.³⁰ This statistic floored me. His vicious stances against immigrants and the poor seemed antithetical to everything I had been raised to believe Jesus represented. Yet his homophobia and anti-abortion rhetoric sounded familiar to sermons I was hearing at Mass. I felt that I had no agency in my own life;

²⁸ Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness* (New York, Harper One, 2009), 29.

²⁹ Gabrielle Bernstein, *The Universe has your Back* (New York, Hay House Inc, 2016), 10.

³⁰ Gregory A. Smith and Jessica Martinez, "How the Faithful Voted: A Preliminary 2016 Analysis," *Pew Research Center*. Published November 9, 2016, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/09/how-the-faithful-voted-a-preliminary-2016-analysis/>.

only once choice was presented as moral, but it was a choice I could not stomach. I ultimately decided that I could not continue to attend Catholic Church if I was going to be told over and over what we were against instead of what we were for.

Still, I have found myself hesitant to give up such a clear set of rules and expectations, and a laid-out checklist to determine if I am being a good girl or not. The Ten Commandments? An Examination of Conscience? The Catechism of the Catholic Church? All lists that a good girl could mindlessly do her best to follow. There is no greater “atta girl!” than gaining entrance to Heaven! No matter how many times I came up short in my religion, I still craved approval and chased perfection.

Christmas 2018 was the first time in my life that I have not attended Mass to celebrate Jesus’ birth. In fact, I have not been to Mass in a year. I hope to be able to go back to what I believe is the real root of my faith which for me is love, but I think I may have to do it outside of the Church, at least for now. For me though, that does not mean outside of God or Jesus. Bernstein says, “The practice of being on a spiritual path isn’t about being the best meditator, or the kindest possible person, or the most enlightened. The practice is about surrendering to love as often as possible.”³¹ Amen.

I think this self-discovery is applicable to my work as an educator, and to my peers as well. I have seen so many of my fellow teachers reach the point of tears over the frustration of working in the current public school setting. They want desperately to do right by the students for whom they are responsible, and to be recognized by someone as doing a good job. I feel this way at least weekly, if not more often. Stress continues to

³¹ Bernstein, *The Universe has Your Back*, 5.

build in our workplace, and our above-and-beyond efforts go unrecognized. We do not feel as if we can really make a difference; we have lost self-efficacy.

I am not interested in pursuing an administrative license, and I doubt that I will ever do much to change the overall bureaucracy that surrounds schooling in America. I do not think that is where my talents or interests lie. I do hope that I can help my peers and myself “surrender to love” as Bernstein says. In this instance, I believe self-efficacy can be achieved through choosing to use an available tool I will offer them to bring them back to a place of well-being, and in turn belief that things can get better. Through petting a dog during their own moments of angst and offering the same dog to help them ameliorate their interactions with challenging students, teachers can believe at least the small things under their control have options with how to make meaning in their days.

CHAPTER 4: FAMILY

*When I pick up the broom
He leaves the room.
When I fuss with the kindling he
Runs for the yard...
Benny, I say,
Don't worry. I also know the way
The old life haunts the new.³²*

For me, the topics of faith and family are completely intertwined. My parents' lives center around their Catholicism. My brothers and I were all baptised before we were a month old. We went as a family to a rural Catholic camp for a week each summer to swim and fish, but also to pray and worship. When I disobeyed a rule my parents set for me, I was not just being disrespectful to them; I was also sinning against God and violating the fourth Commandment. It was something I should bring to Confession. I found it intoxicating to be praised for doing exactly what was expected of me, and likewise crushingly shameful to violate my parents' expectations.

When my dad was ten years old, his father died. He was told he was the man of the house, and that he had to take care of his mother and younger brother. My paternal grandmother, Memere, had left school in eighth grade to help take care of her sick mother and younger siblings. She was poor; she had all her teeth pulled and had dentures by the time she was twenty-four. Memere worked hard every healthy day of her adult life, first in the city as a department store clerk, and then in the country as the wife of a farmer. When her first husband died, she married his older brother, had two children, and kept on

³² Oliver, *Dog Songs*, 31.

working the farm and running the household. She suffered the miscarriage of a daughter, and then lost her second husband, my grandfather whom I never met. That my dad was expected to step into this fragmented life and make it whole when his father died was an impossible task. It makes it clear to me why he sought the security of black-or-white thinking and perfectionism in an attempt to control a world that seems so cruel, and to follow a strict religion to appease a God who could seem so capricious.

I am so proud of Dad for earning scholarships and working his way through college, becoming the first person in his family to earn a Bachelor's degree. Dad got a reliable job, bought his childhood home so Memere did not lose it, and is still at that job he took fresh out of college. He got married and had children and now grandchildren. He saved money and borrowed money so he could help all three of us kids go to college. Dad took in Memere so she would not be lonely as she aged, and so he could help care for her. He took in his brother as well for a time. He continues to be the patriarch of our family. I am so very grateful, and I am in awe of how far Dad and Memere propelled our family forward in just two generations through sheer will.

Yet Dad paid a terrible price. I think my father has suffered greatly from the expectations put upon him by his Church and his relatives — even though they had good intentions, and even though I think he clung to those expectations as a safety net against an uncertain future. They provided him with his own set of rules. My father was hospitalized in 2005 after a nervous breakdown and a diagnosis of clinical depression; another bout of crushing depression hit him in 2017. My grandmother suffered from undiagnosed depression and anxiety for years that manifested themselves in many physical ailments. Now I am living with generalized anxiety disorder and obsessive

compulsive disorder, as well as binge eating disorder. Norman Rosenthal writes, "...the traumas of a person's family history are implanted in the heart, exerting their silent influence, and waiting to pour out when the right switch is thrown."³³ The generational trauma that my grandmother passed to my father he then passed to me, though it was no one's intention for that to happen.

When my parents, especially my father, held me to perfectionist standards in regards to school and behavior, I chafed at them because I felt that I was always falling short although I truly wanted to comply. I remember my dad asking me why I had only earned an A- in precalculus. It made me furious, but also broke my heart because I just desperately wanted to be his good girl. As Dr. Nash observed, "Striving for perfection was just another way of asking if anyone really loved me."³⁴ I think my dad was asking that question throughout his life, and unwittingly taught me to ask it too. I remember one night when I was seventeen especially clearly.

Jeremy sets his pizza crust on his plate and pushes back. The waitress drops the bill unceremoniously on the table and begins stacking chairs around us. Behind her, I can see big flakes of snow falling from the sky.

"Time to hit the road," Jeremy says, setting a twenty down next to the bill and sliding into his coat. I put on my jacket as well and follow him out the door. As we lower ourselves into his beater Plymouth station wagon and he starts it up, the clock on the dashboard flashes to life: 8:58.

³³ Norman E. Rosenthal, *The Gift of Adversity: The Unexpected Benefits Of Life's Difficulties, Setbacks, And Imperfections* (New York: TarcherPerigee, 2013), 42.

³⁴ Bradley and Nash, *Me-Search and Re-search*, 62.

“You’re dropping me off on the way through to get your sister, right?” I ask him. I told my dad I would be home by 9:30, and I know it will take at least an hour to get Melissa and then come back into town — more, probably, the way the snow is coming down.

“I can,” Jeremy replies, shifting and motoring slowly out of our parking spot. He yawns. “I’m pretty beat. It would be cool if you’d keep me company on the roads though, since it’s dark and snowing.”

I tuck my pinkie nail into my mouth and start chewing. I want to be a good friend, but I know Dad is going to be angry if I blow off curfew. Still, if Jeremy fell asleep and went off the road I would never forgive myself. “I can ride with you,” I said.

By the time I wave goodbye to Jeremy and Melissa, it is almost 10:30. I can see a light is on in the kitchen, and I feel a sinking in my stomach. As I step in the door, my dad pivots from where he has been sitting at his spot at the kitchen table. “Where have you been?” he whispers angrily. His face is red, and his eyebrows are raised up into his hairline. His jaw is jutted out, and I take my time shutting the door behind me so I do not have to look at him. “Do you know what time it is?” he hisses.

I nod. “Jeremy had to go get his sister and I didn’t want him to drive alone in the snow.”

“That isn’t your problem,” Dad replied. “He should have planned ahead and left earlier. Or you shouldn’t have gone out to eat.”

I feel myself losing my temper. “I was trying to be a good friend! I never stay out late, or drink, or do drugs. I get As in school. I play sports. I’m on NHS. What else do you want me to do?”

Dad's face turns to stone. "When I was your age, God knows I would have given anything to have a father alive to sit up and wait and worry about me."

There is nothing to say. I sling my purse over the chair and head up to bed.

In her book *Writing from the Heart*, Nancy Slonim Aronie said, "I had always thought freedom was not combing my hair and saying 'fuck' in front of grownups. But it turned out that discipline is freedom... The discipline I am talking about it not inflicted—it's desired."³⁵ I had a lot of discipline inflicted on me by my parents when I was a child, and it eroded my own sense of self-efficacy. I was not allowed to make my own decisions and face my own challenges, and learn through success or failure. But as an adult, I can appreciate why. My dad especially was sincerely trying his best to protect me and guide me in a world that he saw as threatening, and now I can love him much more than resent him for it. However, it did set me up to expect firm boundaries to always be set for me in life, rather than setting my own. It also led me to look for external praise and people-pleasing rather than listening to my own internal voice. It made me feel a lack of control.

I am trying to find discipline in my life now, a discipline that feels like freedom, a discipline that I desire. I want to live up to the expectations I set for myself, and I want them to be flexible. This is causing me to sift through lessons I learned so well as a child, but that no longer serve me. I want to unlearn lessons of shame, and find a way to define success and acceptable behavior for myself. Oscar Wilde said, "Children begin by loving their parents; as they grow older they judge them; sometimes they forgive them." I think

³⁵ Nancy Slonim Aronie, *Writing from the Heart* (New York, Hyperion, 1998), 105.

that forgiveness can be reached through writing and reflecting about the past. Without writing our way through both the love and the judgement, it will be difficult to get through to the forgiveness, where necessary.

I think of this when I think about our current teaching environment in the public middle school. Many of the teachers in my school feel as if our disciplinary system is broken. I do not want us to have immovable boundaries for students and to try to get them to feel shame. I am proof that this strategy for making choices in life does not work long-term. However, I do think schools must do a better job of finding ways to help students make acceptable behavioral choices, and to support teachers who are struggling with disregulated students day in and day out. I think a dog can help with this.

Overall, I was raised in a functional and involved family. This is not true for many of my students. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than half of American children have experienced abuse, violence, or neglect.³⁶ This can lead to secondary trauma in educators, or “vicarious trauma”, as we relive our students’ mistreatment with them and are victims ourselves of the students’ inability to thrive in school. Some specialists suggest that teachers have coping mechanisms and self-care strategies in place before the head of the moment.³⁷ I would like to think that a time-out for a child or adult to access a therapy dog would be a welcome reprieve in a hectic school day, and deviates from the power struggle that has traditionally been set up when changing behavior is the goal. A crucial tenet of self-efficacy is the belief that we

³⁶ Emelina Minero, “When Students are Traumatized, Teachers are too.” *Edutopia*, published October 4, 2017, <https://www.edutopia.org/article/when-students-are-traumatized-teachers-are-too>.

³⁷ Ibid.

can positively impact our environment through our choices, and having a dog available as a choice for regulation seems beneficial.

CHAPTER 5: FEAR

*But sometimes dreams are dark and wild and creepy
And I wake and am afraid, though I don't know why.
But I'm no longer sleepy
And too slowly the hours go by.*³⁸

Memere, my dad's mother, lived with us for most of my childhood. She lit a candle in front of her statue of the Virgin Mary when I went out at night as a teen. "There are a lot of nuts on the road," she said to me. "You could end up dead in a ditch." Memere also lit a candle when there was a storm. "That old dead tree is going to fall on the house and kill us all," she said. "Just you wait." There was always fear around her. "Eat slower! You're going to choke!" "You know, my cousin had surgery like that and she died on the table." "I just hope you don't regret spending that money all in one place when you might need it for something else." "Do you smell hot wires?" Nearly everything my beloved paternal grandmother said to me when I was a child was a message that life was out to get me and bad things were going to happen.

Though my childhood and adolescence contained many wonderful experiences, and I firmly believe and know in my heart that my parents and my grandmother did their best raising me, I still headed off to college as someone primed to develop an anxiety disorder, which I did. The boundaries and structures around me while I was in my parents' home and in my Catholicism were so rigid that I easily knew when I was doing something "right" or when I was doing something "wrong." Every question had an answer. My home and Church were familiar ground. College and young adulthood were

³⁸ Oliver, *Dog Songs*, 7.

an entirely different world, and I had not developed a sense of self-efficacy that let me believe I could handle what life threw at me.

I finally realized how little certainty there is in life. I had identified so strongly with my family and faith that when they both started to fall away as clear ways for me to make meaning in my life, fear filled that void. It was like losing a tooth, or having one pulled. Your tongue keeps going to that empty socket. The tongue of my unconscious kept finding fear in a place where there was once supposed certainty and authority, but where now there was an emptiness. Anxiety took over as the power of my dad and my religion fell away, and I made meaning in the world by being wary of everything.

After a cancer scare and major abdominal surgery when I was nineteen, I started the first of many medicines I have tried for generalized anxiety disorder (GAD). For the past nearly twenty years I have seen three different counselors and tried six different prescription drugs. I have gone off and on oral birth control to see if hormones made a difference in my mental state. I have had a colonoscopy to see if my bouts of diarrhea had a physical reason, or were related to nerves alone.

Sometimes when my anxiety is bad enough I become paralyzed. I feel like I cannot take any action because I am afraid of what I might do wrong, or what could go wrong even if I try my best — a clear lack of self-efficacy. The good girl siren song still plays loudly. I cancel doctor's appointments because I am afraid of getting bad news. I make plans with friends, but bail out if the location changes. I imagine food allergies that I do not have. I grind my teeth at night, have back and neck spasms, and sweat. I have obsessive, intrusive, catastrophic thoughts daily.

Despite the ice on the roads, I throw my Kia in drive and navigate carefully out of my driveway. Fozzie pants over my left shoulder, fogging up the driver's side window. It takes about fifteen minutes to drive to doggie daycare, so to counteract this dreary Wednesday in February I crank up an old Dixie Chicks CD and sing along. "Wide open spaces!" I bellow. I am eager to get back home so I can focus on writing some of my thesis in peace and quiet while Fozzie gets the play and attention he needs.

Jim comes down the steps as soon as he sees us pull up, stepping gingerly over crystalized puddles and crusty snow. I hand over Fozzie's thick gray leash, a bag of food, a twenty dollar bill, and thank him. As I pull away, I glance in my rearview mirror and see Fozzie hurtling toward the front porch steps, Jim sliding along behind him trying to keep up.

Instantly my head explodes with scenes of disaster. Fozzie yanks away from Jim and runs off, across the field or onto the frozen lake. Jim falls and cracks his head on the ice, and then he and Fozzie are trapped outside in the cold all day. Fozzie slips while he is running over the ice and blows out his knee. As these images flood my brain, I feel my heart rate speed up and my respiration get shallow. My hands grow sweaty even as they grip the steering wheel more tightly.

I find a pull-off on the side of the dirt road and attempt to do my four-seven-eight calming breaths and other strategies my counselor taught me, but I cannot retain the air long enough because my nervous system is in overdrive. I turn off the car radio and close my eyes, willing myself to just act like a normal fucking person.

I adore dogs, but I when we got our puppy Fozzie in August of 2018 I knew it would trigger my GAD. I kept living all the potential negatives in my mind, imagining him dead in his crate, or choking on a toy, or making our older dog Posey feel like she was not loved. I wanted to raise this new puppy exactly right, whatever that meant. And since I did not know what it meant, how could I know that I was doing it well? How could I be a good girl on this unfamiliar terrain, and how would I cope if I somehow failed this dog? I took a sabbatical for the second half of the 2018-2019 school year, and my leave agreement with my school board included training a therapy dog for work within the school. In turn, that work was a planned part of this thesis. What if everything collapsed and it was my fault?

After my anxiety attack on the roadside a few months ago, I came home, threw my meditation cushion on the ground, lit my Deep Calm candle from Lunaroma, and fired up my Insight Timer app. I closed my eyes and forced myself to be still — physically, if not mentally — for the next ten minutes. I listened to a musical chant, followed by a brief mindfulness body scan. I breathed. I dropped my shoulders. I relaxed my jaw. When the ten minutes was up, I felt noticeably better. I made myself tea, sat down and wrote a thousand words of this paper. My mind kept darting back to Fozzie and I continued to check my phone for texts of disaster. However, I also moved forward. For me, this was huge. It felt like a step toward building self-efficacy.

Dr. Reid Wilson wrote a book that my current counselor suggested and that has helped me greatly: *Stopping the Noise in Your Head*. In this text, Wilson says that many of us hesitate to let go of worrying because it fills a purpose for us. “Where would we be without our worries? How would the dishes get done, children get fed, bills get paid...

the floors get swept, homework get done, birthday cards get mailed on time? How would we get enough sleep each night unless we worried about *not* getting enough sleep?”³⁹ For a long time, I felt this way. When left to my own devices to navigate the world, I turned everything into a high alert. I needed rules to follow and boundaries to set so I could function. And as Wilson says, “When our attention keeps getting redirected toward unhelpful worry, we become self-absorbed.”⁴⁰ I could feel that happening to me. I could not see past my own fixations to what others around me might need. That is why I have been trying so hard now to find meaning in my life that allows me to extend outward and connect to others instead of withdrawing into my own head.

Fear continues to fill up a place in my spirit that false certainty used to inhabit, but I am trying to learn not to let it control me, and I am making progress. It helps for me to find some new rules for living that help me meet my goals. Dr. Wilson differentiates between “signals” and “noise” in his book about anxiety. Signals are worries that we have that are valid concerns, and we can act on them and put them to rest. Noise is irrelevant and stress-provoking thoughts about things that are out of our control.⁴¹ We are to ignore noise and take positive action for signals. Signals have a solution, while noise cannot be solved. This strategy has helped me determine which of my anxieties are valid, and which are not. It has honed my personal sense of identity. I may take proactive steps for my signals others do not in some situations — like looking online for good bathrooms stops for an upcoming road trip. Yet I am also learning to acknowledge that many of things I fret about are noise and not in my control, like the traffic on the

³⁹ Reid Wilson, *Stopping the Noise in Your Head* (Deerfield Beach Florida, HCI, 2016), 1.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 48.

Sagamore bridge. I need to let go of things I cannot control, and when I was growing up I do not think I was ever given that permission. I also need to trust in my ability to handle an unforeseen situation, which is the job of self-efficacy.

Medication, meditation, and counseling continue to help me manage my GAD. However, my new mindset is probably helping most of all. My faith and family held me to such a high standard and strict structure that it was hard for me to feel successful, and that contributed to me becoming an anxious person especially as the false security of those boundaries provided fell away. Fear took over. I am continuing to work to make my locus of control an appropriate size. I hope that my continued improvement will help me be better able to be there for my students as well.

Nearly three million American children have been diagnosed with an anxiety disorder.⁴² I see more and more students in my classroom who are complaining of many of anxiety's symptoms: poor sleep, stomachaches, headaches, procrastination, irritability, sweating, shaking, flushing, and more.⁴³ Although many of these symptoms can also be a part of the regular changes an adolescent goes through, they can also indicate something more serious. To me, regardless of the reason a student is experiencing these unpleasant symptoms, accessing a therapy dog could help to ameliorate these issues. It would address the physiological issues of self-efficacy Bandura mentioned. Working with dogs has helped me find my way out of fear, and I firmly believe they can help others.

Self-efficacy means we believe that the choices we make will have an impact and that we have some control over our lives. Why would someone who is anxious or fearful

⁴² "More than 1 in 20 US children and teens have anxiety or depression," *Science Daily*. Published April 24, 2018, <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2018/04/180424184119.htm>.

⁴³ Ibid.

try different means of feeling better if she does not believe they will work? My counselor and I have done a lot of work so that I have the confidence that I can handle what life brings me. I believe having dogs on public school campuses will offer a tool for anxious students and staff to try to help them feel better, and if that works, their belief in their own self-efficacy will increase and be applicable in future situations both in and out of school.

CHAPTER 6: FOOD

*“Please, please, I think I haven’t eaten
For days.”*

*“What? Ricky, you had a huge supper.”
“I did? My stomach doesn’t remember.”⁴⁴*

“That will be \$7.23,” the clerk says.

I pass her a ten and ask her to put my purchases in a bag. She does, and I thank her. Once back in my car, I rip open the bag of Doritos first. The crunch and burst of salt is just what I wanted. I chew quickly, putting in more chips before I have even finished swallowing the last ones. I start the car and pull out of my parking spot up to the stop sign, sucking at the orange dust on my fingers.

Once merged into traffic, I reach over and snag the Oreos out of the bag. Double Stuf, natch. I grab three at once, balancing two on my ample thigh and taking a bite out of the other one. The sugar coats my teeth and tongue.

I alternate between sweet and salt for the rest of my drive, consuming over 2000 calories as I travel the interstate between Burlington and Georgia. Once I am back on secondary roads, I pull into a gas station. I stuff the empty Oreos and Doritos containers into the plastic bag, and then shove it in a garbage bin at one of the pumps. When I arrive home ten minutes later to eat the dinner my husband has prepared for me, there is no sign of my binge other than my slightly stained index finger and thumb.

⁴⁴ Oliver, *Dog Songs*, 83.

Binge Eating Disorder, or BED, is a diagnosis I have only recently received, but is what I have been living with since I was sixteen years old. This disorder is characterized by eating large amounts of food quickly and to the point of discomfort, feeling a loss of control while eating, sneak eating, and experiencing shame related to food.⁴⁵ All of these things are true for me.

The amount of humiliation I feel about my eating is indescribable. Not only is gluttony one of the Seven Deadly Sins, which harkens back to the shame in my religious upbringing, but it also reminds me of the way my dad teased me when I was young. I did not start to become overweight until I went through puberty, but around that time I remember my dad encouraging my brothers to chant along with him, “Thunder Thighs!” “Boom-Boom Bottom” as I walked through the kitchen. The irony of this situation is that my dad has been obese his entire life. However, for him to tease me about my weight made me feel like I was failing him somehow instead of being a good girl.

Binge eating has been the only consistently reliable coping mechanism I have ever developed. I have always wanted to be that good girl, and perfectionism means I avoid whatever I cannot do just right, and I hold myself to impossible expectations. The one area where I let myself give the middle finger to what others expect of me is in my eating. The black-or-white, right-or-wrong dichotomous thinking that I learned through my faith and my upbringing defines eating for me. I am either on a diet, or I am binging. I do not know how to eat normally anymore. I no longer recognize signs of fullness.

⁴⁵ “Binge eating disorder,” *National Eating Disorders Association*.
<https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/learn/by-eating-disorder/bed>.

In the past few years, I have crept up to my highest weight ever, over three hundred pounds. That is far too much for my 5'9" frame, and at my recent physical my doctor told me that all my tests are borderline. I am not yet, diabetic, or on blood pressure medication, or cholesterol medication, but I am almost to that point. My back aches. I snore. I am only thirty-seven years old. In my younger years I used food to rebel against others' assumptions of who and how I should be. In the past few years, I have used food to dull the void I have had in my meaning-making now that my faith and family voices are no longer working for me. Binge eating can also sedate me to the point of not feeling all the awful turmoil of anxiety, but it obviously has the unwanted side effect of weight gain. And now, it is beginning to ruin my health.

My self-worth has always been defined by things other than my weight, but that may not be true of how others see me. As I consider whether or not to continue in the teaching profession, I am thinking about what other work I may do. I would need to go on job interviews, or if I do continue in education I would hope to be pitching the therapy dog program I am developing to strangers in other schools. Either way, I will be meeting a lot of new people, and research shows that obese people are discriminated against. In one study, "Results demonstrated that [hiring committee] study participants rated obese candidates as less suitable compared with normal weight candidates... the study findings contribute to evidence that obese people are discriminated against in the hiring process and support calls for policy development."⁴⁶ This may not be fair or moral, but it is fact.

⁴⁶Stuart W. Flint et al., "Obesity discrimination in the recruitment process: "You're not hired!" *Frontiers in Psychology*. Published on May 3, 2016, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4853419/>.

I want to have a new external appearance to reflect the ongoing positive change that is happening inside me.

I have been working for the past six months with a surgeon to pursue a bariatric operation, specifically the vertical sleeve gastrectomy. I do not have a surgery date yet, because there is an intricate screening process and insurance requirements prior to approval. I also have to lose a set amount of weight on my own to prove I can do it before the operation. Postoperatively, my new stomach will hold only three to five ounces. The risks and new lifestyle this change will require are intimidating. Nevertheless, it is a risk I think I want to take. It feels like the right choice for me. I think this is a sign of my increasing self-efficacy; I am not sure how this choice will go, but I believe I can handle what comes. I hope to complete my procedure by late summer in order to eliminate food as a coping mechanism and show my commitment and dedication to reclaiming my life.

Self-efficacy plays a significant role in binge eating disorder, actually binge eaters who have lower self-efficacy are less likely to succeed with weight loss long-term.⁴⁷ They do not believe they can, so why would they try? I can say, as someone who has dieted for almost three decades, that repeated failure is exhausting. This continual lack of success erodes mastery self-efficacy. Students who experience repeated failure to meet behavioral expectations in school are surely exhausted too. Their self-efficacy is depleted. I am trying something new — surgery. I want my students to try something

⁴⁷Ibid.

new to help them succeed behaviorally — work with a dog. My hope is that self-efficacy goes up for all of us.

I have seen quite a few of my fellow teachers struggle with using food — and alcohol — as a coping mechanism for the stress surrounding our jobs. My current class is very challenging behaviorally, and a teacher who had them two years ago stopped me in the hall and said, “I gained twenty pounds from stress-eating while I taught those kids, and I’m still trying to take it off!” In fact, obesity is a significant issue among female teachers, and seventy-five percent of public school teachers are women.⁴⁸ I am in no way blaming my career choice for my binge eating disorder, but I do think it has given me additional barriers to overcoming it. A recent study of five hundred female educators found that over three hundred fifty of them had some level of obesity, leading to everything from arthritis to high blood pressure.⁴⁹ One of the necessary steps for me to overcome compulsive eating habits is to replace my unhealthy coping mechanisms with healthier options. For me, I think dogs play a huge role in reducing stress — a reason I binge eat — and also can make me more likely to go for a walk or to the dog park instead of seeking out food for self-soothing. Perhaps having a dog in school will help my fellow teachers deal with stress without reaching for food as well.

⁴⁸Motoko Rich, “Why don’t more men go into teaching?” *New York Times*. Published September 6, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/07/sunday-review/why-dont-more-men-go-into-teaching.html>.

⁴⁹Sara Jane Monica et al., “Risk of obesity among female school teachers and its associated health problems,” *Current Research in Nutrition and Food Science*, <https://www.foodandnutritionjournal.org/volume6number2/risk-of-obesity-among-school-teachers-and-its-associated-health-complications/>.

CHAPTER 7: FIDO

*He puts his cheek against mine,
And makes small, expressive sounds...
“Tell me you love me,” he says...
Could there be a sweeter arrangement? Over and over
He gets to ask.
I get to tell.⁵⁰*

My hands shake so badly that I drop my cell phone on the floor. I pick it up and say Charlie’s name. He turns his head and looks up at me from where he is sitting between my legs. His tongue lolls out and he smiles. I take a few quick photos, and slip my phone back into my purse. I bend over and ruffle his ears, smell the top of his head, kiss his black nose. “You’re gonna be ok,” I whisper to him.

A quick knock, and the veterinarian enters the room. Charlie stands up and moves toward him in greeting. “I’m sorry, Emily,” the vet says, scratching Charlie’s butt. “It’s not good. The biopsy and imaging clearly show a mast cell tumor on his intestines. And it’s big.”

My breath is shallow and any saliva I had was gone. “That’s cancer?” I ask dumbly.

“Yes,” he says. “Visceral mast cell tumors are always malignant. They’re pretty rare in dogs. But poor Charlie here has one, and that explains the vomiting and lethargy you’ve been seeing.”

⁵⁰ Oliver, *Dog Songs*, 51.

Charlie comes back toward me and lies down on the floor, head on his paws. His orange face blurs as I furiously bat my eyes against the tears. Voice shaking, I nearly whimper, “What do we do?”

The vet crosses the room and sits in the empty chair next to mine. “Nothing will cure this, and I think if we try surgery he would bleed out on the table. In fact, I think euthanasia would be the kindest option for him. If this tumor ruptures, there will be a lot of a pain and blood. You don’t want that some night at 2 a.m.”

“When should we do it?” I grab my phone back out of my purse and swipe, already typing in my husband’s cell number.

The vet sighs, “I would do it today.”

Now my legs are shaking as well as my hands, and if I was not sitting I think I would fall.

“We can do it here, of course, or you could take him back to your home vet if you’d prefer. In fact, would you like to call her now and tell her what we’ve suggested, and see if she agrees?”

I nod, backspace over Justin’s number, and call Dr. Vrba instead. She listens, making small clucking sounds, and finally says, “We can get poor Monkey-noodle in this afternoon. Just come right here with him.” A quick call to Justin brings him up to speed too, and I can hear the shock in his voice as he just repeats, “Okay. Okay. Okay. I’ll meet you there.”

After a hug from a kindly vet tech on the way out, I guide Charlie into the back of my Honda Civic. His tongue lolls out and he smiles. He loves rides. It is only March — in fact, it is the first day of spring, but snowflakes blow across my windshield.

Nevertheless, I roll down my windows and Charlie sticks his snout joyfully outside and into the crisp air.

I cry. I cry for the entire half hour trip to Dr. Vrba's, and yell at God a little bit before I realize it might be scaring Charlie and stop. I reach back to rub his head and under his chin. His tongue lolls out and he smiles. When we pull up and park, I see Justin has beaten me here. He guides Charlie around on a short walk to say goodbye to him while I go inside. Dr. Vrba comes out of the exam room holding a few slices of cheese. "Do you think he'll take these?" she asks. I laugh. In his six years Charlie has never once said "no" to cheese.

Justin comes in with him, and we get him comfortably arranged on a few handmade quilts Dr. Vrba has laid on the floor. She starts an I.V., and Justin and I feed Charlie bits of cheese and tell him how he was a gift, a friend, an asshole, a joy. I cradle his head while Justin lies alongside him. "I'm sedating him now," Dr. Vrba says. I watch as Charlie's breathing deepens and slows. "When I inject this second drug, he will pass," she says gently. I nod, and she depresses the plunger. I smell the pads of Charlie's paws, looking for one last hit of that amazing corn chip scent that dogs have. I touch Charlie's silky ears. His tongue lolls out and he smiles, one last time.

Dr. Vrba presses the stethoscope to Charlie's side. "Okay, he's gone," she says. "Stay as long as you like."

The only years I have spent not living with a pet were my four years of undergrad, and I missed dogs terribly. In my childhood we had Pickles, Shannon, Heidi, Abbey, Buddy, and Lily as family dogs. When I was in college and first married, my parents

adopted Cooper and Zeke. Charlie was the first dog my husband and I owned together, followed Posey and now, Fozzie. I have two thousand photos on the camera roll on my phone, and at least two-thirds of the photos are of dogs.

The name Fido originates from the Latin meaning “to trust.”⁵¹ Abraham Lincoln named one of his most beloved dogs Fido, which is why it became a popular name when referring to dogs. When his wife forbade him from bringing the dog to the White House, Lincoln left him behind with a friend, and a clear set of directions for his care. Lincoln specified that “the family was never to scold Fido for entering the house with muddy paws. He was not to be tied up alone in the backyard. Fido was also to be allowed to enter the house whenever he scratched at the door, or whenever the family sat down to meals. People were encouraged to feed Fido titbits while they ate in the dining room, since the new President explained that Fido was used to being given food by everyone sitting around Lincoln’s table. Finally, to make Fido feel fully at home, Lincoln gave [the dog] his horsehair sofa, which was Fido’s favorite piece of furniture.”⁵²

So it appears that I am in good company with my love of canines. When Charlie died, I did not know how to explain to people that I felt his loss more keenly than I would feel the loss of many family members and friends. I saw Charlie daily, hugged him hourly, talked to him endlessly. That is more than I can say about many people in my life. His absence was almost a presence with its palpability. When I did speak to other dog lovers about my emotions though, I found that there was empathy everywhere.

⁵¹ Stanley Coren, “Why are dogs so frequently called fido,” *Psychology Today*. Published on October 12, 2011, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/canine-corner/201110/why-are-dogs-so-frequently-called-fido>.

⁵²Ibid.

There are almost ninety million pet dogs in the United States, which is about one for every four people.⁵³ Dogs are one way I give my life meaning, and it is meaning I am constructing for myself. I do not have children, and I do not want them. I do not consider dogs to be furbabies or a replacement for human kids. I do, however, love to nurture them and care for them, and in turn to benefit from their companionship. Dogs are a way to fill my heart in places my family does not, and to reaffirm my faith in a kind God who created animal companions for us. Getting dogs like Fozzie force me to confront my fear about the lack of control I have over the world, and they keep me active in a way that can help balance out my disordered relationship with food. For me, dogs are the thread that connects my other four Fs. I feel like I am being a good girl on my own terms when I give dogs the love and care that they deserve, especially if I can use dogs to help others and use my own skill set to help dogs. This in turn increases my self-efficacy.

I volunteer for Golden Huggs Rescue as a fundraiser, and Maple Leaf Mutts as an application screener. I do the Chase Away Canine Cancer 5K run/walk each year to raise money for research that benefits both dogs and humans. I do laundry, painting, and yard work for Franklin County Animal Rescue (FCAR), and coordinate a group of students to go to the shelter and help clean kennels. Instead of gifts, I raised money and donated it to animals causes for my thirty-fifth birthday. I bring Posey into the local nursing home to visit the residents there, and have been doing so since Memere was there before she passed. I have earned extra money working for Rover, an online dog walking and dog

⁵³ "Number of dogs in the United States from 2000-2017 (in millions)," *Statistica*, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/198100/dogs-in-the-united-states-since-2000/>.

sitting service. I am currently bringing Fozzie into my school to help students with mindfulness breaks and reading intervention.

The only place I am fully present and not worried about the future or the past is at the dog park, during dog training, or working with one of my dogs. When I am around dogs or helping dogs, I feel like I am in the right place doing the right thing. To let my dogs responsibly interact with other people and animals, I need to be fully mentally and physically present. That is a gift to me. I would like to think it is also a gift for the people who are interacting with my dog as well. That is why I chose this thesis topic. I believe that my increasing self-efficacy is due in part to my life with dogs, and I see how dogs can benefit students and my fellow educators as well. When I train a dog, I see the progress we make. I know that the effort I put in directly affects the results I get from the dog. The motivation I discover to keep working with dogs is both that it benefits me and my issues with anxiety, but also that it benefits others.

Author Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi wrote his groundbreaking book *Flow* nearly thirty years ago, but his lessons still resonates with me. He says, “To overcome the anxieties and depressions of contemporary life, individuals must become independent of the social environment to the degree that they no longer respond exclusively in terms of its rewards and punishments. To achieve such autonomy, a person has to learn to provide rewards to herself.”⁵⁴ That is exactly what I am attempting to do through my work with dogs. It is where I am finding autonomy and making my own meaning in my life. Csikszentmihalyi also speaks about that magical “in the moment” feeling I have when I

⁵⁴ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 1990), 74.

am with dogs. He writes, “Every flow activity...had this in common... It pushed the person to higher levels of performance, and led to previously undreamed-of states of consciousness... it transformed the self by making it more complex.”⁵⁵

The author points out that we will feel boredom if an activity becomes too easy. That might be what is currently happening with me and teaching after fourteen years. He also says that we will feel anxiety if an activity is too hard and we cannot succeed, which is probably what happened to me amongst the rigorous expectations of my childhood. This decreases self-efficacy. Csikszentmihalyi writes that when we find flow, we can find purpose in our lives. He says, “It is true that life has no meaning, if by that we mean a supreme goal built into the fabric of nature and human experience, a goal that is valid for every individual. But it does not follow that life cannot be given meaning.”⁵⁶ That is what I am trying to do through my work with dogs.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 74.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 215.

CHAPTER 8: RECLAIMING THE NARRATIVE

*For when he sniffed it was as if he were being
Pleased by every part of the world.⁵⁷*

For me, the crux of my five Fs is this: for the first thirty or so years of my life, my faith and family told me who I should be and what I should do, and I believed them pretty much unquestioningly. When those two things started to not make sense in the same way to me, I allowed — though not consciously — fear and food to grow to fill the void. I do not want any of my first four Fs to define me any longer. I want to bring fido into a central part of my meaning making. That is where I think I can grow my own self-efficacy. I believe that my choices will produce change for me. I am taking back my belief in myself.

However, that does not mean I reject my faith or my family. I recently went on a two-day yoga retreat, and we did a “letting go” meditation from the book *Awakening Shakti*. Part of the text said, “Consider the ways you define yourself. Woman. Daughter of someone. Wife of someone. Lover. Teacher. ...neurotic, intelligent, fat, tired, happy... With an exhalation, have the thought ‘Let go,’ and release those definitions, one by one. Know that you can always take them back. This releasing is just for now.”⁵⁸ I feel that I am releasing some of these definitions and identities that no longer serve me, but it is very comfortable for me to think that I am only setting them aside for now, and can take them back if and when I wish. It feels like I can still appreciate the traditions my family and faith gave me without being smothered by them or letting them define me.

⁵⁷ Oliver, *Dog Songs*, 71.

⁵⁸ Sally Kempton, *Awakening Shakti: The Transformative Power of the Goddesses of Yoga* (Boulder Colorado, Sounds True, 2013), 233.

Obviously food and fear will still be a part of my life — likely each day — but I want them to be a proportionate part. I was to embrace them within healthy boundaries. I do not want to use food to stifle my emotions, or eat to the point of illness. I do not want fear to dictate my decisions and dampen my dreams.

I also want to be clear that I do not hold my family responsible in any way for the struggles that I am currently having with my religion, eating, and anxiety. My father, despite his own struggles, was present through every stage in my childhood and did his level best by me. I know that I was shaped in some part by his flaws as well as his strengths, but that is okay. As my friend Amy said, “There is a lack of culpability with your dad because there is a lack of intent,” and that is something that I truly believe.

Like Csikszentmihalyi urges, I must choose what will define me, consciously, and with intention. I am hoping that for me, my work with animals, especially dogs, will do that. I should practice my self-care at least as well as I care for my dogs. I will make meaning for myself, and hopefully others, through animals. I want to be my own good girl. Csikszentmihalyi writes, “People who learn to control inner experience will be able to determine the quality of their lives, which is as close as any of us can come to being happy.”⁵⁹ I believe him. That is self-efficacy.

After a challenging therapy dog training class with Fozzie recently, I drove home in tears. I talked with my husband and did some meditation, then I sat down and wrote the following poem which includes a quote by Paul Jennings:

⁵⁹ Ibid., 16.

Hackles up.
Shoulders taunt.
I have learned not to pull back on the leash.

Throaty growl.
Piercing bark.
I have learned not to raise my voice.

“Talking to dogs is one of the few acts of faith still made nowadays.”

I have learned to accept rather than anticipate.
I have learned to ask for help when I need it.
I have been reminded of kindness.
Of humility.
Of love.

This poem not only describes training techniques I am working on with my dog, but also is a metaphor for how I am learning to look at life and make meaning. The way I handle my dog is how I should handle myself. If I raise my voice or pull on my dog’s leash, it creates more tension in the training situation. Likewise, I am realizing that acceptance is key to happiness in my own life. I do not have all the answers as I move forward redefining myself apart from my family and my faith. I am not sure how successful I will be in letting go of my fear and my food abuse. But I know I continually learn how to be a better person through my work with fido, and I think others can benefit from interaction with animals too.

I definitely acknowledge that animals will not be a part of how everyone makes meaning. However, it is not about the audience of this thesis trying to find purpose doing my thing; it is about them finding purpose doing their thing. I thought saying, “I find meaning through dogs” was the most basic and boring and obvious topic about which I could write a paper, and I dodged it forever, but it is true for me. I simply want my readers to stop and examine how they are currently finding purpose in their lives — or

not. Then I would encourage them to reflect on instances when they lose track of time and feel fully present. I want them to find what is true for them, and where their self-efficacy thrives. I suggest that where the reader finds her flow, she will also find her purpose.

CHAPTER 9: BACKGROUND ON THE ROLE OF DOGS IN HUMAN LIVES

*Said Ricky to me one day, "Why is it you
Don't have a tail?"
Well, I just don't. Maybe once upon a time
I had one, but not anymore."⁶⁰*

As I transition from my own personal history and the role of dogs in it to the bigger picture, from “me-search” to “re-search”, it is necessary to understand the history of dogs and their interactions with all humans in the past and present in order to show why their presence in educational settings will be helpful to educators and students.

Experts cannot agree on when dogs became domesticated, but the general estimate is twenty thousand years ago.⁶¹ The belief is that wolves actually “self-domesticated,” which is when the friendliest animals of a certain species gain an evolutionary advantage.⁶² Some physical changes go along with this self-domestication, including floppy ears and curly tails. That friendliness between wolves and humans actually translated to bodily adaptations in the former. The advantages granted to domesticated wolves through their friendship with people — including food and shelter — led to a connection between our two species⁶³

Over time dogs have evolved to need humans. When given a food-based puzzle to solve, wolves will work physically and try multiple strategies to find a solution, while

⁶⁰ Oliver, *Dog Songs*, 103.

⁶¹ Brian Handwerk, “How accurate is alpha’s theory of dog domestication?” *Smithsonian.com*. Published on August 15, 2018, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/how-wolves-really-became-dogs-180970014/>.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

dogs make eye contact with their owners and look to humans to help them.⁶⁴ This led researchers to believe that domesticated dogs have traded some of their critical thinking skills that would have kept them alive in the wild for social strategies that bond them to their people. This bonding is also shown to happen on a chemical level.

When a dog and its owner look into each other's eyes, oxytocin the "trust and bonding hormone," is released in the brain of both the owner and the dog. Science has only ever seen this cross-species love affair between humans and pups, not between humans and other species.⁶⁵ One study done in Australia also showed that when a dog and its owner are together, their heart waves sync up to rise and fall together, and the person's heart rate often decreases.⁶⁶ This can improve our well-being because stress increases a human's heart rate and that is damaging to people in the long run. It appears to be true that dogs have shaped themselves to our needs, but it is a mutually beneficial symbiotic relationship.

I currently have a ten month old puppy named Fozzie and a ten year old dog named Posey. Both are Golden Retrievers. As I write this section of my thesis, Fozzie is off at doggie daycare romping with some puppy pals and burning off energy. Posey is drowsing next to me on the couch, legs outstretched, chest rising and falling with each breath. After every few lines I type, I reach over and give her a scratch or a pat.

Although I have written chunks of this paper in coffee shops or libraries, I love writing in

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Helena Horton, "A dog's heart beats in sync with its owner's, says new study," *The Telegraph*. Published on May 4, 2016, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/05/04/a-dogs-heart-beats-in-sync-with-its-owners-says-new-study/>.

the comfort of my home with my dog nearby. Taking a deep, conscious breath and laying my hand on Posey helps me reset and focus my thoughts. Taking Fozzie for a walk scrubs my head free of cobwebs after a long writing session. This has always been true for me; having a dog around make me feel better physically, mentally, and emotionally. It is gratifying that research supports why and how that might be so.

There is a history, of course, of dogs being used more formally to help humans as well. In America in 1929, the first training center for service dogs was opened in New Jersey, called the Seeing Eye School.⁶⁷ The impetus for this center being formed was the return of many men from WWI blinded by poison gas. Since then, service dogs have been trained to help people with traumatic brain injuries, PTSD, mobility issues, hearing loss, seizures, diabetes, autism, and many more.⁶⁸ Service dogs, according to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), are “an animal that has been individually trained to provide assistance or perform tasks for the benefit of a person with a physical or mental disability which substantially limits one or more of the person’s major life functions.”⁶⁹ Recently Sully, President George H. W. Bush’s service dog, was in the press after the president’s passing. Sully was a service dog trained to help veterans, and he helped Bush with mobility issues. The work I am hoping to do in school is not service dog work, and that distinction is important. My work will be with therapy dogs.

Therapy dogs are “trained with specific commands to provide comfort and affection to people in hospitals, schools... and other stressful situations to include

⁶⁷“Types of assistance dogs,” *Service Dog Express*, <https://www.servicedogexpress.com/types-assistance-dogs/#6>.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

disaster areas. Therapy dogs provide people with animal contact; people who may or may not have a form of disability.”⁷⁰ My goal is for my dog Fozzie to be certified as a therapy dog to work with students in my school, and possibly other local schools. Fozzie will hopefully pass a rigorous test in order to be an official Therapy Dog of Vermont, whose slogan is “Touching Hearts, Bringing Joy, Offering Comfort, and Enriching Lives.” This certification will mean he is welcome in places where ordinary dogs are not allowed to go, such as the University of Vermont Medical Center and my school. It also means that the Therapy Dogs program stands behind his training, and grants us an insurance policy that follows us when we are doing work through their organization.

Emotional support dogs and comfort dogs are the most nebulous classification. Technically an emotional support/comfort dog’s role is to provide companionship and focus to its owner who has a type of mental illness such as anxiety. A doctor can write a note to allow such animals to go places where regular pets are not allowed, but there is very little training required of an emotional support dog or comfort dog.⁷¹ A doctor’s note does not make an emotional support dog/comfort dog into a therapy dog or a service dog.⁷² Institutions and public places have a right to refuse therapy dogs, emotional support dogs, and comfort dogs entry, but must allow service dogs to be present.

As far as dogs in the public school setting go, “the ADA permits a student with a disability who uses a service animal to have the animal at school. In addition, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷²“Service animals and emotional support animals,” *Americans with Disabilities Act National Network*, <https://adata.org/publication/service-animals-booklet>.

Act allow a student to use an animal that does not meet the ADA definition of a service animal if that student's Individual Education Plan or Section 504 team decides the animal is necessary for the student to receive a free and appropriate education.”⁷³

This makes it clear that Fozzie, though not a service dog, could be written into students' IEPs and 504s if his presence allows them to more effectively access their education. I have also drafted a new animal procedure for the school at which I teach, so therapy dogs are welcome as well as service dogs. Nearly one hundred years after the Seeing Eye school opened, I am hoping that dogs will increasingly be welcome in public schools and continue to help humans on this new frontier.

⁷³ Ibid.

CHAPTER 10: WHAT IS BEING DONE LOCALLY

*You love
This earnest dog,
But you also admire the racoon
And Lord help you in your place
Of hope and improbables.⁷⁴*

I have interviewed several local people who use therapy dogs in educational settings. My twofold goal was to learn from the experiences of others as I begin taking my own dog into school with me, and to gather qualitative data that encourages my principal to let me bring Fozzie into our school on a regular basis.

One of the local therapy dog workers in Vermont is Beth Sayre-Scibona. She retired from teaching two years ago, and currently uses her Golden Retriever Bear for therapy dog work in two local schools. She adopted Bear from the same rescue from which I adopted my dog Posey. At her former school, she and Bear spent two hours a day, twice a week working with students. On one of these days Bear is read to by small groups of preschool students in a rotation. On the other day, Bear works one-on-one with students who have suffered trauma, or who have anxiety or oppositional defiant disorder. Beth said, “One of these students has some serious behavior issues, and it has been reported to me that those issues have decreased considerably since having time with Bear. He and I talked about thinking about Bear when he is upset to help calm him down.”

Additionally, Beth and Bear go to another kindergarten through eighth grade school for two hours once every other week. Bear is read to here as well, but also serves another function: “Bear and I go to the 6th grade right before they have a math quiz or

⁷⁴ Oliver. *Dog Songs*, 35.

other assessments to have some de-stressing time. There are two particular students who need a bit of extra TLC, and they take him for a walk.”

Beth also mentioned that a teacher at that school died unexpectedly over winter break, so she and Bear visit that classroom frequently to help the class with their grief and anxiety. Beth thinks the calming presence of Bear has been good for the students, and said, “He also can be quite a goofball, and that has produced some much-needed laughter.” She also notes that teachers adore spending time with Bear as well, and she will fit in time for Bear to visit staff and faculty while they are in school.

Beth said if she works Bear for more than two hours at a time around children, “he becomes unfocused and I can feel him shutting down.” That is something I will need to consider as I make a plan for my dog Fozzie’s workload. I will need to find a way to get him to the school part-way through my teaching day, or get him home when his work is done. Or perhaps my dog will have more stamina, and I will need to find a way for him to eat, drink, toilet, and nap while in the building for the whole eight hours I am.

Beth finds her work extremely rewarding. She said, “It has been a great blend of my love of dogs, kids, and ties to education to do this work. I can hear whispers down the hall as we appear: ‘Bear’s here!’” I have found the same as Fozzie and I have started some initial visits to my school. In fact, when I brought Fozzie to a special education classroom in mid-March, from down the hall I heard a shriek and a girl shouted “That dog with curls is back!” (Fozzie’s coat has an unusual amount of ripples for a Golden Retriever.) I have also gone to the school to tutor without my dog, and by way of greeting when students saw me they yelled, “Where’s Fozzie?” His presence is definitely noticed and felt.

Another local therapy dog team I interviewed is Margo Rome and her seven-year-old black Lab mix Jazz. Margo and Jazz have been together doing therapy dog work for less than a year, but in that time she has gone to schools for a reading program and also nursing homes to visit residents around Vermont. “Jazz is predisposed to this kind of work,” Margo said. She finds Jazz is a “Velcro dog” who loves human attention and loves to be touched, so she is a natural as a therapy dog. Margo said Jazz does still struggle to resist food when residents or students are eating. That is something Fozzie needs to work on as well, since on our first trip to school to volunteer he lunged for a student’s French fries in the hallway.

Margo worked for the Department of Children and Families in Vermont for over thirty years, and has a Masters in Social Work. Yet despite her experience and training she said, “I don’t know that I would choose to visit people in a nursing home on my own. My confidence and comfort go up with Jazz around. She is very good at this work. I promote her and others’ well-being by bringing her to do what she is good at. I feel good about myself for being able to provide that to her and others.” That is what I find as well. Students interact with me in a completely different way when I have Fozzie with me, and I feel more at ease working with needy students when he is there.

Margo told me that she has loved dogs for as long as she can remember. She said that she begged her mom for a dog when she was a child, but her mom would not allow a dog in the house. She did, however, permit Margo to adopt a kitten. Margo named the kitten “Puppy.” This has been a common thread as I have interviewed people who do therapy dog work. Most of them did not search out a dog with whom to do therapy dog

work, but rather they love dogs and a dog came to them who seemed well-suited to being of service to others.

The local high school Student Assistance Program counselor (SAP) reached out to me to ask if Fozzie and I could be a part of the high school lunch and wellness block once a week to allow students to relax and recharge by interacting with him. Unfortunately that high school block conflicts with the time I work with my middle school students so I could not help her out. However, I connected the SAP with Margo and Jazz, and they now have set up a time for therapy dog work to happen for high school students too.

Maddie Nash and her dog Daisy are another therapy dog team in northern Vermont. She also happens to be married to my advisor, Robert. Maddie was a guidance counselor in schools for years, and now in her retirement she returns to elementary schools and libraries with Daisy to rotate through classrooms and participate in the read-to-a-dog program. Maddie and Daisy do this work twice a week, and they also go to the University of Vermont during exam time to offer comfort and relaxation to college students. They have been a certified therapy dog team for nearly five years.

Maddie pointed out that different dogs do well in different therapeutic settings based on several things, including their temperament and size. Daisy is a great fit in schools because she is low to the ground, so it is easy for the younger, smaller students to pat her. She is also eleven years old, so she is calm, and she is never prone to barking. However, because she is a short-legged dog, she did not work well in a nursing home. Maddie said, “Daisy is too small for a bedridden patient to reach, and she is even too short for an elderly person in a wheelchair to easily pat.” Physical proportions were not something I had considered in therapy dog work, so Maddie’s insight is really helpful. I

think Fozzie's seventy-five-pound size, long legs, and high energy make him a good fit for the adolescent population with which I will be working.

Maddie said she loves being able to volunteer her time with Daisy. "When a dog appears in a place where people aren't expecting to see a pet, it just brings a smile to everyone's faces. It's really wonderful." From the shrieks of delight I hear when people come around a corner and are surprised to see Fozzie, I can attest to that being true.

Cathy Branon teaches grades five and six in a loop at Saint Albans Town Education Center. For the past year her nine-year-old Lab mix Mocha has been in the classroom with her for the entire school day, Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays each week. Cathy knew going into this loop of students that they had a history of behavioral challenges, and many of the students had trauma backgrounds. Cathy approached her principal and asked to have Mocha accompany her to school a few days a week to see if that improved the classroom environment, and her principal agreed.

Cathy said the benefits have been incredible. "In the past these kids were really set up to be defiant with adults who were always telling them what to do, but Mocha breaks that down because she has no expectations of them. If a child and I are having a difficult conversation, I bring Mocha between me and the child and they process with me, but they're not being mean to me or rude to me because they are patting the dog. Any adult interactions can be a trigger for these kids, but Mocha being there adds a default positive interaction."

Cathy also sees benefits to Mocha being immersed in her entire classroom

routine three days a week, rather than just working with specific students in a pullout setting. “There is no demographic difference to Mocha among the students, and she doesn’t bring prior assumptions and knowledge to her work with kids. No one is stereotyped as having ‘issues’ for interacting with Mocha. There is no judging. There is no stigma attached like there sometimes is for students who work with certain adults. Mocha does something for everyone, no matter what.” This is something for me to consider as I figure out Fozzie’s role in my school. We have so far been doing our work in a pullout model, but as Cathy says, adolescents are very aware of being different, and they desperately want to fit in. Since I believe all students could benefit from time to interact with Fozzie if they wish to, hopefully I can find a way to make him a regular part of the school day for as many students as possible.

Finally, I spoke with Deb Helfrich. Deb is the co-founder of Gold Star Dog Training in Fairfax, Vermont. She is also the Director of Certification for Therapy Dogs of Vermont. Deb has been a therapy dog handler since 1996 and currently works with her canine partner Cora. She is launching a Therapy Dog training class this spring in which Fozzie and I are enrolled, in order to share her expertise with handlers who are hoping to do this work.

My biggest question for Deb was about Fozzie’s wellbeing during this challenging work. Margo and Cathy said their dogs love the work and never tire of being patted in a long day of therapy work. Beth said Bear can do his work in a school for only two hours at a time before he fatigues and seems agitated. Maddie said that Daisy will go behind her chair and “hide” when she is overwhelmed with her work with small children, which is usually after an hour. When I asked Deb about this, she said that every

dog is different, and I should allow Fozzie’s body language and behavior to show me how long he can work. So far he has done two-hour stints at my school with no issues, and within that time I take him for a walk outside with a group of students which allows him to use the bathroom and have a break.

Deb also said that Fozzie should have a routine both for starting his work and for ending it, and a way to release the emotion and tension dogs absorb while giving their time to humans. At this point I am putting on Fozzie’s harness and bandana and saying, “Let’s go to work!” before we enter the school, and when we leave I take them off and say, “All done!” as we get back in the car. Once we return home, we play with his Frisbee outside, I feed him lunch, and then he naps. This has been really successful for us so far.

Recently, the Education Secretary of England endorsed the idea of all schools having “wellbeing dogs” to help students handle stress and trauma.⁷⁵ Damian Hinds said it is a cost-effective way of mitigating some minor mental health issues in school “because children can relate to animals when they are hurt and anxious and sad in a way that they can’t always with human beings.”⁷⁶ I definitely agree with this, and the experiences Beth, Margo, Maddie, and Cathy have all had bears this out as well. That is why I decided to pilot my own work with Fozzie in the middle school at which I teach.

⁷⁵ Sean Coughlan, “Every school needs dog as stress-buster,” *BBC News*. Published on March 21, 2019, https://www.bbc.com/news/education-47655600?fbclid=IwAR0z7d7XVv7KPPpnamm3Rl_3ou0EiUfFJwU5kmMAK2RFGJ-jjADuByDv_0w.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

CHAPTER 11: MY RESEARCH IN THE MIDDLE SCHOOL

*Ah, this is the thing that comes to each of us.
The child grows up.
And, according to our own ideas, is practically asunder...
Just look at that curly-haired child now, he's his own man.⁷⁷*

When I began my sabbatical from teaching in mid-January, I decided that I would slowly introduce Fozzie to working in a school environment by bringing him into the building once a week throughout my leave. I thought this would be a great way for me to gather some data from students and teachers about Fozzie's interactions with them. I also believed it would be a good way for Fozzie to acclimate to being around large groups of children, and prepare him for future therapy dog work.

For January and February, Fozzie and I went into a special education classroom and worked with two students whom I will call James and Kylie. James has a social worker assigned to him for emotional struggles and is in foster care. He has an Individualized Education Program (IEP) for a specific learning disability. Kylie has PTSD and an emotional disturbance, and also has an IEP. These two students spend fifteen minutes in the special educator's room daily for mindfulness time. This is to help them transition successfully between recess and their next classroom work block, but is also a chance for them to try different strategies for monitoring their own emotions and regulating their behavior — in other words, steps towards building self-efficacy. During their visits with Fozzie, James and Kylie pat him, feed him treats, try to teach him new tricks, play fetch with him, or just sit near him while they used a mindfulness app or take some deep breaths.

⁷⁷ Oliver, *Dog Songs*, 53.

For March and April, Fozzie and I extended our time in the school. We have a small special education reading intervention group of three students read aloud to Fozzie for twenty-five minutes. Then, Fozzie spends twenty minutes being visited and patted by teachers on their lunch breaks, and by one student on an IEP who is transitioning from unified arts classes back to regular blocks. The following twenty-five minutes are a recess block, during which time a different group of fifth grade students each week has a chance to take Fozzie outside for a bathroom break and play with him instead of having traditional recess time. Finally, James and Kylie have their already established fifteen minutes of mindfulness time with us before we leave. This means we have currently worked up to an hour and a half of successful dog time within the school day. In the last three weeks of my time in the school, a school-based clinician requested an extra twenty minutes of Fozzie's time at the end of our visit to work one-on-one with a fourth grade girl with a lot of challenges, and a teacher asked for Fozzie to visit her classroom one day, ahead of a block of federal testing. So Fozzie's reputation precedes him and he is being requested for specific tasks. That is very gratifying, and shows me that I am onto something with our work.

The group of students who spent their recess time with Fozzie was different every week that we visited, so I did not collect data from those students. However, I did collect data from James and Kylie since I saw them over a four-month period, and I also collected data from the three-student reading group because they interacted with Fozzie over a period of two months. Additionally, I asked teachers to voluntarily give feedback when they interacted with Fozzie for a chunk of time during their free blocks.

I was interested to see if students' and teachers' self-reporting of their enactive mastery experiences went up over time as they worked with Fozzie. I also looked for feedback about their general physiological and affective states after their time with Fozzie, since that impacts self-efficacy as well. Additionally, I was interested in any general feedback for me on how the teachers felt after spending time with a dog in the midst of a hectic school day.

I asked the three students in the reading intervention group, as well as James and Kylie, to rank a list of stress management strategies in order of "most likely to do it" to "least likely to do it." Their choices were: take five deep breaths, use a fidget or get some gum, ask to visit Fozzie, say to yourself, "I can calm down. I am going to be ok," think of a happy place or think of your favorite things, have a snack or get a drink of water, or take a walk.

Of the seven choices, the "most likely to do it" management strategy all five students chose was "ask to visit Fozzie." Four of the five students listed "use a fidget or get some gum" as a top three choice. James said to me, "I need to do something with my body when I'm stressed." I think playing with a fidget, chewing gum, or patting a dog all let a child move and take a physical break to reset, but I believe the social interaction and physiological benefit that come uniquely from spending time with Fozzie could increase self-efficacy in a way that gum chewing and fidgeting do not.

I asked the same group of five students to fill out a rating system for themselves twice, three weeks apart. I asked them if after spending time with Fozzie, they felt more: relaxed/calm, confident, energized, in control, and focused. A rating of 1 meant "not true for me" while a rating of 5 meant "very true for me." When Kylie rated herself in March,

she rated herself as a 3 for all questions except “I feel more focused” for which she rated herself a 4. When she rated herself in April, she felt she was a 4 in all categories, so her feelings about her affective state had improved over time. James was unable to complete the rating system the first time, so I do not have a comparative data set for him.

The same results were true for the students in the intervention reading group; their overall sense of wellbeing improved. One student who had rated herself with one 3, one 4, and three 5’s in March reported feeling mostly 5’s in April, including a two-point jump in the area of feeling more in control. Another student who self-rated with all 4’s and 5’s in March said she felt at all 5’s in April. The third student said to me, “Mrs. Wills, I wish Fozzie could come to school every day,” and rated herself all 5’s both times. I interpret this data as meaning that again, Fozzie’s presence over time increased students’ self-perceptions of self-efficacy in the area of affective state and psychological status.

Additionally, I asked these students to rate their feelings of self-efficacy overall within their school day, with statements such as, “I am okay handling unexpected events when they happen,” “I believe the brain can be developed like a muscle,” and “I can learn what is being taught in class.” The students rated these statements on the same 1 to 5 scale with the same three-week gap between ratings. Interestingly, these scores hardly changed at all for any of the four students who completed both surveys. I am not sure why their overall scores on wellbeing would improve measurably in their self-assessment, but their beliefs about their own self-efficacy would not. If they were to continue to interact with Fozzie over more months, perhaps their positive experience with him in small groups would bleed over into their work in their core classroom. Or, as Cathy Branon observed with her dog Mocha, perhaps Fozzie has to imbed within a

classroom to improve a student's belief about her ability to succeed in that particular classroom.

Two teachers who spent significant time with Fozzie while he was in the building also gave feedback on their time with him using same statements and 1 to 5 rating system that the students utilized. Both of them said they were thrilled to have had dog interaction during the day. Eighth grade social studies teacher Ben Psaros said, "I love the smiles that Fozzie brings to the faces of students and staff!" and scored himself as feeling more calm, energized, and focused after some time patting my dog. Fifth grade science teacher Sandy Brown also said she was more calm and energized after spending time with Fozzie during her lunch block, and added that she felt more in control of her emotions. Sandy said that over the past couple years, "I find that the things I thought I could help students with I am not having success doing." She reports that seeing Fozzie brightens her day, and she hopes he can fill in the gaps for students where she feels she is not able to reach.

The time I had available to spend with Fozzie within the school, and the sample size of students and teachers with which we worked were both quite limited. This may impact the validity of my data. I also worked mainly with a student population that had disabilities and limitations, and only interacted with the general education population during recess. However I am encouraged that the self-assessment ratings I did receive from students and teachers showed an improvement in their affective states after spending even limited time with Fozzie. This is a crucial step on the road to improved self-efficacy. I am hoping to pilot a program next year that will involve Fozzie

interacting more frequently with more students. In order to do this, my school needs to expand its procedure for having animals in the building during school hours.

CHAPTER 12: PROPOSED ANIMAL PROCEDURE FOR BELLOWS FREE ACADEMY FAIRFAX

*You're like a little wild thing
That was never sent to school.
Sit, I say, and you jump up.
Come, I say, and you go galloping down the sand
To the nearest dead fish
With which you perfume you sweet neck.⁷⁸*

The school at which I teach granted me a sabbatical for one semester while I wrote this thesis. A condition of this leave was that I must present them with a plan of progress in order to show that I would use my time off in a productive way that will benefit the school upon my return. I proposed that I rewrite our school's animal procedure, which was drafted in 2013. I thought this would dovetail well with my thesis topic about using dogs within school to increase students' self-efficacy. In order to bring my dog and other dogs into the building, our animal procedure would need to be amenable to such a thing. The current procedure is obsolete and not being followed.

For example, Bellows Free Academy Fairfax has a thriving farm to school program. Our students grow fruits and vegetables that are eaten in the school cafeteria. They grow flowers that attract birds and bees. There is a beehive on campus, as well as coops for chickens and pens for pigs and possibly goats that will be filled this spring. The elementary office has two turtles in it, and the high school office has fish. Dogs are often brought to soccer, football, and baseball games. I have brought in my dogs on the last day before a vacation to celebrate. However, all of these situations are not allowed in the current animal policy.

⁷⁸ Oliver, *Dog songs*, 49.

My friend who is an attorney went over the new animal procedure I drafted. Then, I met with the administrators at my school to show them my changes and see if they approve. We tweaked the language together, and changed the procedure to apply only to animals inside the building during the school day. Once this procedure is formally adopted, it will go into effect this coming fall and be listed on our school's website and in the handbook. By then, Fozzie will have hopefully officially passed his therapy dog training program and test, and we can begin working with students in a formal capacity. So far we have been working in the school through special permission by the principal and signed permission slips from all the parents whose children have interacted with Fozzie.

I am considering developing a formal therapy dog procedure and program for public schools which I will copyright that is applicable in any educational setting, not just mine. If I do discontinue my work as a classroom teacher, perhaps I can keep working with the adolescent age group I love in my capacity as a therapy dog handler. I am not sure how to monetize that, though. For now, I am choosing to focus on this upcoming school year and troubleshooting the draft of my current procedure.

I have included my animal procedure below, the one the school principals and I agreed upon. In writing it, I found it valuable that for this thesis I researched the differences between emotional support animals, therapy animals, and service animals. Since I am very involved in the animal/dog world and I did not know the nuances between these categories, I included them in my procedure since I assumed others would be confused as well. The principals did not want to entertain the idea of emotional support animals at this time, since that category is the most ambiguous as far as

animal/human therapeutic relationships, so you will notice they are not discussed in the procedure. They would be covered by the “other animals” section.

Bellows Free Academy Fairfax Animals- in-School Procedure

The Bellows Free Academy Fairfax Elementary, Middle, and High Schools (“School”) will take reasonable steps to provide a healthy environment for all students, faculty, and staff. The School recognizes that animals have been part of the learning experience for many years. However, allergies and safety concerns must be taken into account when allowing animals into the educational environment.

Service animals and law enforcement dogs are allowed in the School at all times.

Service animals are animals that have been “individually trained to provide assistance or perform tasks for the benefit of a person with a physical or mental disability which substantially limits one or more of the person’s major life functions.”⁷⁹

Therapy animals are also allowed in the School. Therapy animals are “trained with specific commands to provide comfort and affection to people in hospitals, schools... and other stressful situations. [They] provide people with animal contact, people who may or may not have a form of disability.”⁸⁰ Therapy animals should have completed the Therapy Dogs of Vermont training program, the Canine Good Citizen program, or similar.

⁷⁹“Types of assistance dogs,” *Service Dog Express*, <https://www.servicedogexpress.com/types-assistance-dogs/#6>.

⁸⁰Ibid.

Other animals may be allowed in the School once emailed permission has been obtained from the principal and the nurse. The correspondence should make clear how the animal is of benefit to students or staff for educational purposes. The decision of the principal and the nurse shall be final.

All animals within the School must be appropriately restrained (with a leash, etc.) or caged. Dogs must be licensed with their town of origin and vaccinated. Birds, fish, reptiles, amphibians, and other tank-contained animals used for learning may be allowed in the school. Small mammals are not well-suited to a School environment, but may be allowed in certain situations. Domesticated farm animals and bees may be used in the Farm-to-School program.

If a student is injured by an animal during a School-sponsored activity the principal, school nurse, and parent must be notified as soon as possible. If staff, faculty, or a visitor is injured, the principal must be notified. A report must be made as applicable to the Vermont Department of Health.

The lingering issue, then, is how I will fulfill my contractual obligations as a teacher and also use Fozzie within the school day for students and teachers. Therapy dog teams must always remain a unit according to the Therapy Dogs of Vermont policy; I cannot hand my dog off to someone else and continue teaching my class.

My proposal to my current principals and the school board is that two days a week I am relieved of my advisory supervision so that I am able to have ninety-minutes

each week to do focused therapy dog work in grades five through eight. I am not sure if this will work logistically, but since I am the only English teacher in our school for eighth graders, having someone else cover a teaching block for me is not a possibility. My advisory time is my only time “on the clock” during which another adult could cover my students.

Additionally, our middle school will have a new principal next year, and that person may or may not support my therapy dog program efforts. Our school will also have a new superintendent. We will likely be piloting a new daily schedule in the 2019-2020 school year. My classroom is also being reassigned. With so many unknowns, I believe the best thing I can do is use the evidence from this thesis and the good word-of-mouth from current students and teachers working with Fozzie to convince the new principal that this program is worthwhile, if convincing is needed. Ideally I would like to have Fozzie work up to spending full days with me, as Cathy Branon has Mocha do.

CHAPTER 13: CONCLUSION

*Okay, I said. But remember, you can't fix
Everything in the world for everybody.
"However," said Ricky, "you can't do
Anything at all unless you begin."*⁸¹

As I write the conclusion for this nearly twenty-four thousand word thesis, I am fighting a maniacal urge to highlight the entire document and hit “delete”. I do not think it is cogent enough, or that I cover everything I am thinking about, and my perfectionist streak lingers. I am worried too about staking my name and reputation on dogs, and on having peers and students interact with them to improve their self-efficacy and overall well-being. As Bradley observes, “There is fear associated with asserting something to be true, either for oneself or for others.”⁸² But that is the gift of Scholarly Personal Writing as well; “No one can tell you that your experience is not your experience, nor can they dissect how you see those experiences informing your professional life.”⁸³ And what I am claiming I have seen to be true, over and over again, both for myself and for those in my public middle school environment: dogs help people.

However, I am left wondering if I have done what SPN writing charges me with: have I said what? So what? Now what? Nash and Bradley remind me that “the best SPN writing *exposes*. It does not *impose* or *depose*.”⁸⁴ I feel so strongly about my own journey and what I have learned from it — and what I hope others can learn from it — that I am worried I sounded authoritative when I meant to sound suggestive. I do not

⁸¹ Oliver, *Dog Songs*, 91.

⁸² Bradley and Nash, *Me-Search and Re-search*, 111.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 196.

think I have all the answers, or that dogs are the only answer, but I think I have found some possible answers, and that my ongoing questions are sharper ones because of this process.

13.1. What?

My what is the events of my childhood and young adulthood. I struggled to find my own identity apart from my faith and my family. When I could not make meaning myself, I was filled with fear and turned to food for comfort. The experiences I was having professionally also caused me to struggle with my purpose in my personal life and with self-efficacy.

13.2. So What?

It was through dogs that I found my own personal fulfillment. I am fully present and in flow when I am training Fozzie or working with him and my students. I also feel like my own anxiety is lessened by having a dog around. I am still searching for professional fulfillment, and one way I think I can find it is by integrating dogs more in my work with students, and by helping my fellow teachers through that work as well. I have seen my own self-efficacy increase as my time with animals increases, and I have the beginnings of evidence that show the same is possible for students and teachers in the public middle school environment. I think I have found my meaning, and I want others to develop the skills to find their meaning too. This can only happen if they have the self-efficacy to believe change is possible.

13.3. Now What?

Questions still linger for me. Will I really be able to balance my regular teaching day with my work as a therapy dog handler in my school? Is this animal procedure and

therapy dog program in school something I might want to make my full-time career? If so, how can I make that happen? What happens if I stop finding my purpose and comfort through my work with dogs, as I have stopped finding meaning in other things as I have matured and changed? I think the next step for me is hopefully using Fozzie next year in my school and troubleshooting issues as they arise. I think the next step for anyone seeking to increase her self-efficacy is to find a situation in which she is in flow, and then tease out how that feeling can blend into other areas of her life. If it cannot, it might be time to make a change of relationship, location, career, or religion. That is something I am still pondering too.

As I mentioned, working with dogs and being with my dogs cements me in the present moment in a way that my faith, family, fear, and food could not. That is when I am in flow, and when I feel like I have the internal peace to have agency in my own life.

I wrote a poem attempting to capture that feeling:

You throw back your furry head and laugh.

Pink tongue falls over white teeth,
Black nose and brown eyes shine in the sunset,
And golden paws drip in river water.

The tug of the current
Pulls tendrils of your delicate leg feathering
Along the surface of the Lamoille.

The flow I stand in is so different from yours.

Your presence is solid,
And the evening light
Dapples over you playfully.

Joy in the moment.

I spread my fingers,
Reach one hand toward the river
And one toward the horizon,
Calming my hummingbird heart.

I anchor myself to your
Companionship,
And try to celebrate
Wet feet and a warm face.

I use poems to record my life story and to try to make meaning. However, this is the first time I have done so in a lengthy formal paper. Rosenthal writes, “The stories you tell both reflect and shape who you are. Therefore, choose your words thoughtfully, but don’t be afraid to change your story. Changes often reflect and increasingly subtle and complex understanding of life and its possibilities”⁸⁵ I have undergone so much change over the past four years that I can only imagine how different this thesis might look if I were writing it in 2023, or 2027, instead of 2019. I still have questions. This thesis will always feel like a work in progress, just as I am. I am trying to be content with not having all the answers, but instead focusing on what I have learned and appreciating that I now have better questions. Bandura says “Once formed, efficacy beliefs contribute to the quality of human functioning in diverse ways. They do so by enlisting cognitive, motivational, affective, and decisional processes through which accomplishments are realized.”⁸⁶ This thesis is definitely an accomplishment realized.

To the best of my ability at this juncture I have chosen my words thoughtfully. I have tried to thread the narratives from my life into my scholarly research, and reflect on my personal experiences to hopefully help others and make my ideas universalizable.

⁸⁵ Rosenthal, *The Gift of Adversity*, 235.

⁸⁶ Bandura. *Self-efficacy*, 115.

Only my audience can say if I have done that. But as I type these final words with Fozzie lying across my feet and Posey curled up to my right, I feel as if life's possibilities are open to me much more so than they felt four years ago. This chapter's epigraph states that you cannot do anything at all unless you begin. As I finish this program, I am so grateful that I had the tiny bit of self-efficacy it took to begin it back in 2015. I plan to just enjoy this accomplishment for a bit, and to tell myself I am a good girl. I will sit. I will stay. Then, I will keep writing my story.

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