

**St. Stephen's College**

Standing in the Tragic Gap:  
Courage and Resilience in the Lives of Ordinary People

by  
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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF  
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*I dedicate this thesis to my mother, who has been an inspiration and companion. She is a woman of integrity, dignity, compassion, and empathy. She has a wonderful sense of humour. She asks for nothing and is ever so grateful. She is a woman of courage. She is an “ordinary woman,” who has had a profound impact on everyone blessed to be in her presence.*

## Abstract

Standing in the Tragic Gap: Courage and Resilience in the Lives of Ordinary People

The goal of this narrative inquiry was to gain an increased understanding of courage and resilience in the lives of ordinary people who have overcome adversity. The research question was, “What is the Lived Experience of Courage and Resilience in the Lives of Ordinary People who have Overcome Adversity?” The qualitative methodology of narrative inquiry was used to explore the lived experience of three ordinary people; Catherine, a woman in her eighties, survived the suicide of her first husband, and the tragic deaths of her son, son-in-law, and daughter. Lee, a woman in her early fifties, has been legally blind from age five. Mark, a young man in his mid-twenties, lost his older sister, a victim of incest, to suicide. The courage of each participant or *co-creator* was explored in a theological framework and resilience in a psychological framework. The narratives engage the reader in a manner that leads to a cognitive, and most importantly, a visceral understanding of courage and resilience. Participants readily admitted to being resilient. However, they were reluctant to admit to being courageous. It may be easier for people to identify with what they do than with who they are. Courage is a quality of the soul. Courageous people are humble. Ordinary people demonstrate courage through acceptance of what is and a fierce determination to live life to its fullest. Perhaps it is the very sacredness of courage that makes it difficult to admit to. The thesis has much to offer people who are supporting clients who may be “standing in the tragic gap”. The references, as well as the themes that were identified, will be useful to psychotherapists and others. They will be of interest to people who find themselves in a caring/supporting role.

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My dear friend, Linda Piper, lost her parents to cancer within two months of each other and her partner of 27 years to ALS: this in the span of one year. In April of 2013, she was diagnosed with stage III ovarian cancer. She had surgery and six chemotherapy treatments. In spite of this, she continuously encouraged me and was ever supportive.

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## Introduction

Your pain is the breaking of the shell  
 that encloses your understanding.  
 Even as the stone of the fruit must break,  
 that its heart may stand in the sun, so must  
 you know pain.  
 And could you keep your heart in wonder  
 at the daily miracles of your life, your pain  
 would not seem less wondrous than your  
 joy;  
 And you would accept the seasons of your  
 heart, even as you have always accepted  
 the seasons that pass over your fields.  
 And you would watch with serenity  
 through the winters of your grief.

(Gibran, 1923/2008, p. 52)

## Standing in the Tragic Gap

I have chosen to research the lived experience of courage and resilience in the lives of ordinary people. My goal is to discover how individuals are able to stand “in the tragic gap” with dignity and integrity. The tragic gap, according to Palmer (2009), is defined as “*the gap between what is and what could and should be*, the gap between the reality of a given situation and an alternative reality we know to be possible because we have experienced it” (p. 13). This quote is taken from the periodical *Weavings*, published for the Easter season. The articles in the periodical refer to the pain and suffering of Good Friday, the dead space of Holy Saturday, and the resurrection of Easter Sunday. The editor, John Mogabgab, elaborates on the theme as follows:

This is Holy Saturday ground, the ground we occupy between the virtue we see to be possible and its actual flourishing throughout the land. It is holy ground because the unanticipated, painful incomprehensible loss of cherished landmarks offers an opportunity to see alternate perspectives, different paths, fresh horizons. It is holy



ground because we stake our lives on it, holding fast to truth we know and holding out for truth yet to be revealed. It is holy ground because it holds within its soil the seeds of courage and the possibility of renewal. (p. 3)

I believe that people who demonstrate courage and resilience have stood in that tragic gap. In a fascinating article, “The Broken-Open Heart: Living with Faith and Hope in the Tragic Gap,” in *Weavings*, Palmer (2009) asks, “Can suffering become life-giving rather than death-dealing?” (p. 10). When he posits this question, he is referring to the response of the United States (U.S.) to the tragedy of September 11, 2001. He proposes that the U.S. “chose to fight despite the fact that an alternative path was available to us, a path of seeking justice rather than making war that might have allowed us to create rather than destroy” (p. 10). I believe that the same choice is open to individuals in their personal suffering. Individuals who have chosen to live with courage and resilience have made the choice to create rather than destroy. Palmer states, “There is no way to be human without having one’s heart broken” (p. 11). Heart, according to Palmer, is “not merely the seat of the emotions but the core of our sense of self” (p. 11). Palmer believes that this broken heart can be a “hidden wound” (p. 11) that we tuck away, or a wound that we try to heal by “inflicting the same wound on others” (p. 11). It can also be “that small, clenched fist of a heart ‘broken open’ into largeness of life, into greater capacity to hold one’s own and the world’s pain and joy” (p.11). Palmer proposes that it is a matter of holding “the tension between reality and possibility in a life-giving way” (p.13). The ordinary people that I interviewed had their hearts broken and chose to turn their “‘vale of tears’ into a ‘vale of soul-making’” (Keats, J., as cited in *Weavings* March/April 2009, p.15).

Narrative inquiry is my methodology of choice. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) suggest that:

Life—as we come to it and as it comes to others—is filled with narrative fragments, enacted in storied moments of time and space, and reflected upon and understood in terms of narrative unities and discontinuities. . . . Narrative is the best way of representing and understanding experience. (pp. 17-18)

My research question is: What is the lived experience of courage and resilience in the lives of ordinary people who have overcome adversity?

The goal of this narrative inquiry is to gain an increased understanding of courage and resilience in the lives of ordinary people who have overcome adversity.

The words courage and resilience are frequently used interchangeably. The word *courage* is used to refer to the moral, ethical, and spiritual qualities involved in overcoming adversity. The word *resilience* is used to refer to the psychological character traits involved in overcoming adversity. Both can be viewed as theological and/or psychological concepts. Theologian Paul Tillich (2000) describes courage as:

self-affirmation . . . [which] presupposes participation in something which transcends the self. . . . It takes a great deal of courage and imagination, [Tillich states] to believe that God is on your side when you are suffering or losing. To believe in love in the face of hatred, life in the face of death, day in the dark of night, good in the face of evil. (p. xxii-xxiii)

Boris Cyrulnik (2005), a French doctor, ethologist, and psychiatrist, describes resilience as “a strategy for struggle against unhappiness that makes it possible to seize

some pleasure in life despite the whispering of ghosts in the depths of our memory” (p. xvii).

The words courage and resilience are frequently associated with soldiers, firemen/women, police officers: people who are trained to face adversity and danger. These words are associated with those who do spontaneous acts of courage, i.e., rescuing someone from a burning building or someone who is drowning. However, for the purpose of this research, courage and resilience are associated with ordinary people, that is, people from all walks of life who have overcome adversity with integrity and dignity and who continue to enjoy life with a positive attitude, and with gratitude and hope.

### **Thesis Outline**

Chapter 1 situates the inquiry within the writer’s autobiography. Chapter 2 situates the inquiry within the requirements of the Master of Psychotherapy and Spirituality Program. Chapter 3 situates the inquiry within a philosophical framework. Chapter 4 situates the inquiry within a methodological and ethical framework. Chapter 5 situates the inquiry within a theological framework: courage, and Chapter 6 situates the inquiry within a psychological framework: resilience. Chapter 7 situates the inquiry within the narratives of my co-creators and incorporates elements of the literature on courage and resilience. Chapter 8 situates the inquiry within concluding comparisons and conclusions. This chapter is devoted to the comparison of themes within the narratives, narrative themes compared to the literature, my contribution to the existing literature, and further questions and conclusions.

The reader will notice that there is no separate chapter allocated to literature review. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) encourage their students “to weave the literature

throughout the dissertation [thesis] from beginning to end in an attempt to create a seamless link between the theory and the practice embodied in the inquiry” (p. 41). They believe that “literature [is] reviewed as a kind of conversation between theory and life” (p. 41). This belief runs counter to the more formalist inquiry outcome, which “is to contribute to the development of a theoretical framework and associated literature” and “to replicate and apply theory to the problem at hand” (p. 41). They conclude:

The contribution of a narrative inquiry is more often intended to be the creation of a new sense of meaning and significance with respect to the research topic than it is to yield a set of knowledge claims that might incrementally add to knowledge in the field. Furthermore, many narrative studies are judged to be important when they become literary texts to be read by others not so much for the knowledge they contain but for the vicarious testing of life possibilities by readers of the research that they permit. (p. 42)

## Chapter 1

### Situating the Inquiry Within the Researcher's Autobiography

Say not, "I have found the truth," but  
 rather, "I have found a truth."  
 Say not, "I have found the path of the soul."  
 Say rather, "I have met the soul walking  
 upon my path."  
 For the soul walks upon all paths.  
 The soul walks not upon a line, neither  
 Does it grow like a reed.  
 The soul unfolds itself, like a lotus of  
 countless petals.

(Gibran, 1923/2008, p. 55)

This is an excerpt from Kahlil Gibran's answer when asked, "Speak to us of Self-Knowledge" [author's format] (p. 54). I see myself as a seeker of truth. I see myself as journeying with others in this search. I love the image of the self as a lotus of countless petals. I believe that my soul, i.e., my essential being, will unfold in the process of this narrative inquiry. My essential being is enriched and made stronger in authentic, intimate encounters.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) state that "one of the starting points for narrative inquiry is the researcher's own narrative of experience, the researcher's autobiography" (p. 70).

My interest in the area of courage and resilience originated from observing the lives of my paternal aunts. My interest increased through encounters with the women of my women's group, the clients from my practica, the experiences of two very good friends, and the writings of Viktor Frankl. I had this topic in mind long before I had considered

enrolling in the Master of Psychotherapy and Spirituality Program. I will begin this chapter with a little of my personal story.

I grew up in the Lac St. Jean area of northern Quebec. My father was French Canadian, my mother English Canadian. We spoke English at home and French in the community. Growing up in two cultures allowed me to more easily see both sides of many situations. For instance, in many debates over the language issue, I am able to understand what was and is at stake for both sides. I understand that many French-speaking people in Quebec fear losing their language and culture, and being assimilated into the wider North American culture. I understand the fear, resentment, and anger of the English-speaking population of Quebec following the implementation of Bill 101: implemented in 1977 making French the official language of the province. I often joke with friends that I can never be 100% for anything as I am fundamentally 50% in make-up.

My paternal grandfather cleared a patch of forest and built his home. When it burned to the ground, he built another one.

My father's youngest brother was playing with matches behind the family stove and his clothes caught fire. My father, aged six at the time, wrapped his brother in a blanket and tried to smother the flames. His brother died a week later. I can't imagine what impression this left on my father. When my father was 15, he snowshoed 40 kilometres through the forest to work in a lumber camp and snowshoed 40 kilometres out, five months later.

My parents met while serving in the Air Force during World War II (WWII). My mother was a city woman who bravely took the train to a remote northern community in

Quebec, to marry the man she had only known for six months. She was English-speaking. She learned French having grown up in a multi-cultural neighbourhood in Montreal. Little did she know of the life of adventure that was to come!

My father was a construction superintendent. We moved many times. In 1953, my mother, my sister (one-and-half-years old) and I (three-years old) moved to what was then French West Africa. We were joining my father, who had been working there for a year-and-a half, under contract with the Aluminium Company of Canada. He was supervising the construction of a wharf for the shipment of bauxite. Our family lived in French West Africa for a year-and-a-half. I remember our house, the beach, the servants my parents were mandated to hire, their village and many odd souvenirs, including a beautiful red flower that sprung up after the rain.

We returned to Canada and settled in Isle Maligne, Lac St. Jean, a company town of the Aluminium Company of Canada, situated 300 kilometres north of Quebec City. We lived there for six years. My father worked in the smelter. He was not a man to be confined indoors doing repetitive, monotonous work. The fumes were affecting his health. He decided to return to construction. Consequently, he would be away for months at a time and my mother would be on her own with three young children. The separation meant loneliness for my father and much responsibility for my mother. In 1959, we moved to a small fishing village in Bonavista Bay, Newfoundland. Most houses had neither indoor plumbing nor electricity. We were lucky; we were hooked up to a generator and had a water pump in the house. It was an incredible experience. Life was so basic and simple. The people were wonderful.

We moved back to Quebec in 1961. My father continued to work on construction contracts. There were many times when we did not know when or where the next contract would take us. These were very worrying times for my parents. However, something always came up. From this experience, I learned that security was not defined by place, but trust, trust that things would work out. I have carried this belief with me my entire life.

I changed school four times. When we moved to Newfoundland, I thought we were moving to the end of the earth. I switched from French to English school. It was hard at first but within about two months, I had adapted and made new friends. I learned that it is very hard to say goodbye to old friends, delightful and thrilling to make new ones.

I always loved learning and was successful in school. I wanted to attend university but did not know what field of study to pursue. I knew my brother would definitely be going to university and my sister already knew, at 13, that she wanted to become a physiotherapist. Given my uncertainty, I felt that it was not right for me to burden my parents with college expenses.

I graduated from high school in 1964. I worked as a receptionist and took secretarial training in the evenings. In 1969, I decided to travel to Europe. My friends were not available to accompany me on my travels. I set off on my own, nine days after my twenty-second birthday. I obtained a six-month working holiday visa for England. My plan was to work in England and hopefully meet people who wanted to travel. I sailed on the Alexander Pushkin from Montreal to Tilbury Dock in London. On board, I met three young women from Vancouver, Linda, Judy and Diane, who invited me to join them. I purchased a backpack in London and hitchhiked with them. We would take a



bus to the limits of the city or town, make a sign for our next destination, and wait. We had no clear plan as to where we wanted to go. Diane joined another group and Judy returned home after three months. Linda and I continued our travels. We left our return tickets in a safety deposit box in London. We travelled for three months and then worked for four months on the Canadian base in Lahr, Germany. We both subsequently met service men and made plans to marry. We returned to England to pick up our tickets, and hitchhiked in England and Scotland prior to returning to Germany. My friend married her young man, but I called off my wedding a month prior to the day. I listened to my inner voice that said this was not a good match: a decision that I never regretted.

I spent 10 months travelling and working in Europe. What a thrill it was to live so free and with so little, to see many beautiful places and meet wonderful people, and to experience the challenge of communicating in another language. I learned to trust my instincts and trust in the goodwill of others. We never experienced problems. This was 1969-70 (a different time altogether).

In 1972, I enrolled in university, still undecided as to what field to specialize in, but having a great desire to enrich my mind. I had found secretarial work very boring. I worked full-time plus two evenings a week to save money. I attended two years full-time studying philosophy, anthropology, psychology, sociology, German, math, statistics, English and French Literature. When I ran out of money, I returned to work full-time and pursued my studies in the evenings for three more years. By this time, I had decided to major in French Literature. I graduated in 1977, followed by a one-year Diploma in Teaching. I was 31 when I started teaching. In early August of 1978, I was offered a position teaching French as a second language. With this being so close to the beginning

of the school year, I debated as to whether I should take the position, or not. Would this be the only offer? In my heart, I knew that I much preferred immersion, so I declined the position. Two days later, I was offered a position in immersion.

I taught for 16 years in Montreal. By this time, 1994, I had grown tired of the city and wished to live in a small town, but had no idea where. I thought that I would like to live either by the sea or in the mountains. In February of that year, I visited my sister in Edmonton. We went to the mountains for a weekend. I had been before, but this time I fell in love with the place. I had the strongest feeling that this was the place for me. I remember saying to myself that night, "If the sun shines through the window on me tomorrow morning that will be my sign that this is the place for me." It did. I sold my house and moved out west in September. I finally got a job in January 1995, but things did not work out and I was fired in April. By this time, my money was running out. I knew that I had to make a decision as to whether I would stay, or return home. I was feeling particularly anxious this one day when I happened to see two ads in the local paper. One was to work as a clerk for a tour company and the other was as a teaching assistant at the local elementary school. I earned enough with the low-paying clerical job to tide me over for the summer until I started the much better-paying teaching assistant position in September. At the end of October, I was offered a permanent teaching position. What luck!

I retired from teaching in 2001, and entered the Master of Psychology and Spirituality Program. I worked part-time three days a week and pursued my studies three days. I was very fortunate that my employers always granted me the week required to go to Edmonton for my courses.

My father passed away in 2002. My mother moved out west and lived with me for six months. She had always said that she wanted to live in a senior's home. She lived in Calgary for a year-and-a-half and then moved to my town. My mother suffers from Alzheimer's. I was her primary caregiver for nine years. My mother's condition deteriorated in September 2013 and she was placed in a long-term care facility in another town, an hour's drive from me. I now see her twice a week.

These experiences taught me to trust, to have vision, to be adaptable, to take action, and to believe that things would work out. It was difficult, scary, sad, and lonely at times. However, things have always worked out for the best. It may not have been what I originally had planned, but it was good.

Now about my two aunts: the first aunt was married to a farmer and the mother of nine children. They eked out a living on a subsistence farm. We spent a week in the summer with my aunt and her large brood for a number of years. My recollections are of very hard work, rudimentary living conditions (no indoor plumbing), little material wealth, and much laughter. The hardships were an accepted part of daily life, but they did not break the person's spirit.

The second aunt was married to a man 20 years her senior and in poor health. She was the mother of 11 children, and made ends meet as a seamstress. We spent a lot of time with this aunt. She always welcomed us with open arms. New Year's Day celebrations would find 50 of us sitting at the dinner table. I don't know how she managed it.

I never heard complaints from these aunts. Despite their large families, poverty, and very hard lives, each one had a zest for life and a marvelous sense of humour.

At the first meeting of my women's group in 1998, each woman was invited to bring in a few photographs as way of introduction. One by one, each woman related a little of her story. I was amazed and inspired as I listened to these well-dressed, smiling, and personable women tell heartbreaking stories of adversity. I remember driving home and marveling at how courageous and resilient they were, and wondering how many other people had similar stories to share.

I had occasion to meet many more courageous and resilient people while doing my counselling practica.

In October 2012, a very good friend of mine died. I witnessed this older friend endure declining health over a period of four years; ultimately, being confined to bed for a year-and-a-half prior to passing away. His favorite saying was, "Well, it could be worse!"

A very dear friend of mine lost her partner of 27 years to amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) in January 2013. I witnessed the tremendous courage of the partner as she struggled daily to do the most mundane of activities. My friend struggled with her deep sorrow at watching her partner's decline. The previous year, my friend lost both her parents within two months of each other. In May 2013, she was diagnosed with stage III ovarian cancer. She had surgery and six chemotherapy treatments. I don't know how she managed to stay positive, to work, to be the loving older sister to her siblings, and such a supportive friend to me. In October of that year, we went to France. She, just two weeks post chemotherapy, and I, with 14 fractures: 11 rib fractures and three pelvic fractures. I had fallen down the stairs taking my suitcase to the car. I had gone to the hospital for an x-ray but there were no signs of fractures. We made quite the pair in our respective

wheelchairs in the airports. We were unable to do many of the tours, but we were good company for each other. I walked with a walker, and my friend walked with her hat to cover her missing hair.

As mentioned above, my background is in teaching. The students' resiliency amazed me. I particularly liked working with children with learning disabilities. They were so courageous. They would struggle and struggle. When they would finally understand or gain proficiency, their eyes would light up and there would be a big, broad smile. It brought tears to my eyes every time. I always came away from parent-teacher interviews uplifted. Most parents love their children deeply and make numerous sacrifices for them.

I have been profoundly moved and inspired by the stories of survivors of Nazi concentration camps. Personally, I cannot fathom living through such an experience without being completely and irrevocably broken. Viktor Frankl survived physically and spiritually. His book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, has been an inspiration to me for many years.

I will now discuss the religious and spiritual influences in my life.

The Catholic Church in rural Quebec of the 1950's was very powerful and governed every aspect of an individual's life. My mother was obliged to seek permission from the local priest to have a hysterectomy. The Church taught that suffering on earth was not only good, but to be sought, as it would lead to eternal reward. This belief created two differing mind-sets. One mind-set caused a certain passivity and lack of taking responsibility for one's life. I sometimes had the feeling that people felt crushed. The

other mind-set, stoicism, was characterized by an acceptance of one's lot in life and very little complaining or self-pity.

Both sides of my family were Catholic, except for my maternal grandmother who was Protestant. On my mother's side, her aunts and uncles believed that the Church's purpose was to guide them and inspire them to live correctly, above shame and blame. They went to church because it was the correct thing to do. However, being raised Roman Catholic in rural Quebec in the late 1950's and early 1960's was a very different situation. The Church was very authoritarian and repressive. I was taught what to believe and how to express that belief. Fundamental to that belief was that life was meant to bring suffering. We were to accept the suffering with humility and taught that this suffering would earn us eternal reward. I attended Catholic school. I asked many questions in Catechism classes that remained unanswered.

In the 1960's, Quebec underwent a cultural revolution and the role of the Church was greatly diminished. Our family left the Church when I was in my late teens. I carried on for a number of years, content to think that I believed in God: a male, omnipresent, omnipotent, and punitive God. I never questioned or examined my belief. In my early thirties, I had a crisis of faith. I was volunteering with Amnesty International. I was completely devastated by the situation of prisoners of conscience. I had nightmares. I no longer took pleasure in things because I felt I had no right to while people were suffering so terribly. For about a year or two, I no longer believed in God. In this time of darkness, I came to realize that I *needed* [emphasis added] to believe in a divine presence in order to bring purpose and meaning into my life. Thus started a long journey into defining my own spirituality. It was an outward journey as I searched for a concept of

the divine that was meaningful to me. It was an inward journey as I integrated my evolving concept of the divine, my life experiences, and the person that I am. I eventually found my spiritual home in the Unitarian Church in 1980.

When I first moved out west to my small town, I attended the Unitarian Church in the city. It was great and I felt at home. However, living at a distance, I could not truly be a member of the church community. I now attend the United Church in my town. I have always admired the United Church's courage to speak up and address thorny issues and to take a brave stand regarding the ordination of women, as well as being a welcoming congregation. The United Church proclaims a belief in God and in Jesus Christ. The Unitarian Church believes in a person's independent search for meaning and purpose. I am comfortable in the United Church because the Church is very accepting of divergent views.

I believe in God. I prefer to use the term Blessed Spirits in recognition of the masculine and feminine qualities of the Divine. I question the deity of Jesus. I attend church fairly regularly. I feel that weekly church attendance offers me the opportunity to get away from busyness and to find my centre. I feel uplifted and refocused. Our minister's sermons are always inspirational. My daily spiritual practice consists of prayers of intercession in the morning and prayers of gratitude at night.

The Unitarian Church and the United Church are very focused on social-justice issues. In my congregation, the service leader presents a project of the Mission and Service Fund every Sunday. There is so much that can be done to make this world a better place. I am really looking forward to graduating and having the time to contribute in a substantial way.

## Chapter 2

### Situating the Inquiry Within the Master of Psychotherapy and Spirituality Program

#### The Real Work

It may be when we no  
longer know what to do,  
we have come to our real work,  
and that when we no longer know which way to go,  
we have begun our real journey.

Berry, 1983, [www:writersalmanac.publicradio.org](http://www.writersalmanac.publicradio.org).

Berry speaks of the journey. Entering the Master of Psychotherapy and Spirituality Program was a momentous journey for me. I travelled from my town to Edmonton for my courses and from my town to Calgary for my practica. It was a journey of excitement, discovery, hard work, learning and fascination. My co-creators journeyed through their adversities. We journeyed together in the sharing of their narratives and I journeyed through the retelling of these stories in my thesis. The Master of Psychotherapy and Spirituality Program seeks:

To integrate psychology, spirituality, and personal reflection in a supportive learning environment. The Program is broadly inclusive of all spiritual perspectives and traditions, and supports those who are seeking theoretical and practicum experiences that will prepare them for psychotherapy and spirituality counselling. (St. Stephen's College 2014)

My narrative inquiry, *Standing in the Tragic Gap: Courage and Resilience in the Lives of Ordinary People*, explores courage within a theological framework and resilience within a psychological framework.



When I applied to enter the program, I was required to write four reflective papers. I would like to return to these. I began the first paper, *My Understanding of Pastoral Counselling*, defining some terms. Psychology is a science of the mind. It is the study of the attitudes, motivations and behaviours of individuals or groups. Psychology is the knowledge base. This knowledge base was instrumental in helping me understand my co-creators' experiences and guide me in my interactions with them. Counselling is a practice where individuals are guided to a better understanding of themselves. Case histories are collected. These histories present stories. The stories help the counsellor understand the client. The stories help the clients put the pieces of their lives into a comprehensive and meaningful whole. I had to be very mindful, when entering in conversation with my participants/co-creators, to not engage as a counsellor. Like a counsellor, I was there to hear and listen, but I was not there to guide in self-discovery. Self-discovery happened as a consequence of the co-creators relating their stories. I prefer the term co-creators to participants and will use it henceforth.

The program was originally called Master of Pastoral Psychology and Counselling. I looked up the word pastoral. The word shepherd in the description resonated with me. A shepherd feeds and guards the sheep. This image conjured up feelings of being cared for and nurtured, feeling safe, and having a sense of belonging. I felt that it was of utmost importance that I be a caring, nurturing presence to my co-creators and offer them a safe environment in which to share their stories. Narrative inquiry creates a situation of being in there together, giving and receiving, co-creating.

In this initial paper, I said that I loved people's stories, and was amazed by people's courage and resilience. This, interestingly, became my thesis topic.

The paper entitled *Psychotherapy* related my experience of counselling. I believe that we all need to understand and come to terms with our background. The imprints, influences and referral points are there. We need that awareness to make choices that are right for us. Without that awareness, we react to what we have experienced, or we continue a pattern. I described my experience of psychotherapy as gradually peeling the layers of skin from an onion. The process was very painful and exhilarating. The pain came from accepting that some things couldn't be changed, admitting that there were parts of me that I did not like. The exhilaration came from the discovery of who I was, an appreciation of my strengths, and the acceptance of my weaknesses. I felt empowered as I developed new attitudes and learned new skills. I accepted that I was responsible for my life and the choices I made, each step of the way. Had I not had this experience, I could not have related to my co-creators in the profound way that I did. I was more receptive to, and understanding of, their struggles, and happy for their triumphs. I felt a soul-to-soul connection.

In the paper, *My Spiritual Journey*, I explored my journey from being raised Roman Catholic in a traditional, rural community in northern Quebec under what were then very rigid doctrines of the Catholic Church, to becoming a Unitarian Universalist. As mentioned earlier in my autobiography, I experienced a time of the dark night of the soul. I will elaborate on this topic in Catherine's narrative, contained in Chapter 7, "Situating the Inquiry Within the Narratives" of my thesis.

In my paper, I described spirituality as something that is not outside myself but is my very essence. I am a human being and a spiritual being. My spirituality guides, nourishes, inspires, and defines me. My spirituality is what keeps me in touch with my

essential being, in other words who I am meant to be in God's eyes. Connectedness to others, what I learn, and life experiences shape my spirituality. My words, deeds, and who I am express it. Art, music, and nature nourish it. Pain and suffering challenge it. Materialism, busyness, negativity, and neglect threaten it. My spirituality is my life force. I found it interesting that two of my co-creators willingly shared their concepts of spirituality without prompting. This reinforces my belief that psychotherapy and spirituality must coexist in a counselling situation. The individual's core beliefs are the foundation that will enable him/her to live a life of meaning and purpose, to face life's challenges, and to be the best version of him/herself.

In the last paper, entitled *My Professional Goals*, I stated that I was not entering the Master of Psychotherapy and Spirituality Program in search of a new career. I was seeking to learn, grow, and change. In the words of a Passover prayer found in "Chalice or Candle Lighting Word," I wish to use my powers "to heal and not to harm, to help and not to hinder, to bless and not to curse, to serve you, spirit of freedom" (Church of the Larger Fellowship, 1967/1990, p. 54).

I would like to refer to concepts presented in some of my courses that I believe are particularly relevant to my thesis topic and narrative inquiry. The course, "Introduction to Pastoral Psychology and Counselling," emphasized the importance of the client/counsellor relationship. There is a dynamic interchange between therapist and client. Therapist and client are actively involved in the process and with each other. Jackson and Chable (as cited in Willis, 1994) define engagement, as "a complex reciprocal process concerning the relationship between the therapist and the family. It refers to the specific adjustments which the therapist makes to him/herself over time to

accommodate to the particular family [client]” (p. 97). The accommodation between therapist and client reminds me of Clandinin and Connelly’s (1990) description of the relationship between researcher and participants as a “negotiation of a shared narrative unity” (p. 3). They explain that “collaborative research constitutes a relationship. . . . Collaborative research . . . requires a close relationship akin to friendship. Relationships are joined . . . by the narrative unities of our lives” (p. 4).

A recommended reading for the course called “Lifespan Psychology,” was Hevda’s (1992/2001) *Betrayal, Trust and Forgiveness, A Guide to Emotional Healing and Self-Renewal*. Hevda describes seven types of betrayal: “Betrayal of the Mother Gateway to Self-Trust and Self-Knowledge” (p. 44), “Betrayal of the Father Gateway to Self-Direction and Purpose in Life” (p. 69), “Betrayal of the Beloved Gateway to Wholeness—Union between Self and self” (p. 91), “Betrayal of the Body Gateway to Surrender” (p. 122), “Betrayal of Self Gateway to Forgiveness” (p. 146), “Betrayal of Society Gateway to the Family of Humanity” (p. 176), and “Betrayal of the Planet Gateway to a New World.” (p. 202)

I believe that most individuals seeking counselling, and certainly my co-creators, have experienced one or more of these betrayals. It can be said that we all have, to a lesser or greater extent. The experience of betrayal “is a spiritual event in one’s life” (Hevda, 1992/2001, p. viii). Betrayal can be an opportunity for transformation. In every instance of betrayal, the person’s sense of trust is shattered. Life as it was is no longer. Hevda compares the process of moving from betrayal to trust and, ultimately, forgiveness to initiation rites: “The five phases of initiation [are]; *separation, purification, symbolic death, new knowledge, and rebirth*” (p. viii).

Excruciating feelings of uselessness, worthlessness, of being unappreciated and unloved characterize the separation phase. The person loses all sense of worth, and faces the choice between spiritual death and resurrection. Purification is the second phase. It is important to recognize the emotions, and to feel and accept them. Hevda (1992/2001) suggests using feelings to guide individuals to actions that are right for them. Symbolic death is the third phase. The person is encouraged to “let go of false identities and old ways of being that are no longer appropriate or no longer serve the soul’s greatest good” (p. 13). The fourth phase is new knowledge. The person learns to turn inward, to trust intuition, to fathom that “unconditional love is real and available to us from within the psyche” (p. 51). This knowledge gives the person the strength to face life head on and boldly. The fifth phase, rebirth, “brings the individual back to life and back to one’s community to fulfill a new role within that community” (p. 7). The reader will get a vivid picture of the five stages of initiation in the narratives of my co-creators presented in Chapter 7, “Situating the Inquiry Within the Narratives.”

In the course “Explorations of Hope,” I explored the many dimensions of hope. I had always thought of hope as a little flame that burned inside. You either had hope or you didn’t. I knew one could lose hope, but I did not know that one could actively work toward finding and sustaining hope.

Hope can be found in a vibrant definition of sexuality:

Our sexuality is our desire to participate in making love, making justice, in the world; our drive toward one another; or movement in love; our expression of our sense of being bonded together in life and death. Sexuality is expressed not only between lovers in personal relationship, but also in the work of an artist who loves

her painting or her poetry, a father who loves his children, a revolutionary who loves her people. (Zappone, 1991, p. 62)

Flickers of hope are found in poetry, song, dance, and art. Hope is found in the many little positive choices made each and every day. In situations of extreme challenge, the person faces life altering choices. Kyung (1990) is a feminist theologian who wrote on the extreme oppression of Asian women quotes Mananzan: “From these private hells we emerge either triumphantly with inner liberation or with bitterness and resentment, crushed and mortally wounded in the depths of our being” (p. 87). My co-creators chose to “emerge triumphantly with inner liberation” (p. 87).

Hope is having dreams and vision. Zappone (1991) speaks of “one’s unique individuality. Self-respect and self-love both enable and are the fruits of who I am, who I want to become, what my values are, and how I can live according to my goals and vision” (p. 52).

This brings me to my practica. I believe that every client who seeks counselling has some ember of hope, some inkling of uniqueness, some measure of self-respect, and self-love. If not, why would they make that initial appointment? Many have experienced one or many of the betrayals mentioned above. I remember a client who suffered horrible neglect and physical abuse as a child. She was struggling to love herself. I saw hope in her coming to our sessions well-dressed and well-groomed. She spoke of keeping her apartment immaculate: She had lived in filth and squalor as a child. She ate nutritious food: She had been denied food or given rotten food. I shared with her that these acts of nurture indicated that she did love herself on some level and that she could build on that.

I told her how incredibly strong she was to have this measure of self-esteem, given the abuse and neglect she had suffered.

I worked three months with a young client who had suffered horrible emotional abuse. Each session ended with the writing of a No-Harm Promissory Contract. I was terrified that he would commit suicide. We explored how he had established a sense of self in spite of the abuse. He dreamed of becoming a pilot. He faced many challenges. Each challenge was broken down into small manageable steps. He felt overwhelmed and discouraged, but he kept every appointment – a three-hour round trip.

Another client left an abusive relationship and lived in a shelter. Little by little she took steps to improve her lot in life. I was amazed at her gumption and determination. She laughed at the past and entertained hope for the future. There was a measure of transformation and growth every week. This client had an indomitable spirit and love of humanity. She was of great support and help to other women in the shelter.

I attended a Rotary lunch with a friend of mine. The guest speaker spoke of the women's shelter her association had been operating for about a year. One of the Rotarians asked what the success rate was, as in how many women had jobs and were now living independently. The speaker replied that she defined success in the transition from being on the street to coming to the shelter: a huge step for these homeless women. This was a real eye opener for me. We need to think carefully as to how we define success. If success were measured by the number of women who had jobs and an apartment, the rate of success in this shelter would have been low. If, on the other hand, success were measured by the number of women who took that first step in coming to the shelter and trying to better their lives, the success rate would be high.

In the words of Wendell Berry's poem, quoted above, "When we no longer know which way to go we have begun our real journey." The women coming to the shelter, the clients from my practica, and my entering the Master of Psychotherapy and Spirituality Program are examples of not knowing which way to go and beginning a journey.

I invite the reader to journey with my co-creators in their narratives of living with handicaps, tragic losses, dark nights of the soul, and abuse, wherein the reader will discover courage and resilience in the lives of ordinary people.



### Chapter 3

#### Situating the Inquiry Within a Philosophical Framework

##### *Sermons in a Monastery*

If you want to know a people  
 You must learn the songs they sing,  
 The stories they tell, the dreams they dream.  
 This is true of any people.

Kelty, (as quoted in Jones, 1989, reverse side of dedication page)

In the course “Systemic Theories in Pastoral Counselling and Psychotherapy,” I was introduced to hermeneutics and collaborative language therapy. I will discuss their great influence on my philosophical understanding of the Other, as understood to be any person other than me, in the approach to my narrative inquiry. I include perspectives on suffering and I will look at “World Five: Suffering and Life—The Victim/Refugee” (p.97) in W. Paul Jones (1989), *Theological Worlds: Understanding the Alternative Rhythms of Christian Belief*. Although I believe Jones’ work to be pertinent and interesting, it is not my intention to categorize my co-creators in any way.

#### **The Influence of Hermeneutics**

Bleicher (1980), in his introduction to *Contemporary Hermeneutics*, states:

Access to other human beings is possible, however, only by indirect means: what we experience initially are gestures, sounds, and actions and only in the process of understanding do we take the step from external signs to the underlying inner life, the psychological existence of the Other. . . . The act of understanding provides the bridge for reaching the spiritual self of the Other and the degree of enthusiasm with which we embark on this adventure depends on the importance the Other has for us.  
 (p. 9)

Schleiermacher, a well-known 18<sup>th</sup> - 19<sup>th</sup> century philosopher who specialized in the philosophy of religion with an emphasis on hermeneutics, supports this idea. The hermeneutical task is “understanding the Other, being able to see things from his/[her] perspective” (as cited in Bleicher, 1980, pp. 15-16). I think this perspective is important to narrative inquiry as the objective is to give voice to the Other.

Ricoeur’s (1981) work in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences* consists of a series of essays on language, action, and interpretation. Ricoeur refers to a number of authors in his discussion on hermeneutics. One of these authors, Dilthey, in his search for “the distinctive feature of understanding” believes that “every *human science* every modality of the knowledge of man [woman] which implies an historical relation – presupposes a primordial capacity to transpose oneself into the mental life of others” (p. 49). I understand this to mean that humans have an innate capacity for empathy, that they are able to be open to the experiences of the Other. We can never feel what another person feels, but we can open our hearts and minds to allow their experience to penetrate our being.

Ricoeur resumes the discussion saying:

Historical knowledge ... is to be found in the fundamental phenomenon of *interconnection*, by which the life of others can be discerned and identified in its manifestations. Knowledge of others is possible because life produces forms, externalizes itself in stable configurations; feelings, evaluations and volitions tend to sediment themselves in a *structured acquisition* [*acquis*] which is offered to others for deciphering. (p. 50)

I believe that my role as a narrative inquirer is to accept this offering.

Gerkin (1984), former professor of pastoral psychology at the Candler School of Theology and Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, Emory University, refers to Anton Boise's hermeneutical as an:

Image of the human person as a "document" to be read and interpreted in a manner analogous to the interpretation of an historical text. . . . Each individual living human document has an integrity of his or her own that calls for understanding and interpretation, not categorization and stereotyping. (p. 38)

I approached my co-creators with an attitude of discovery, humility and reverence.

Gerkin (1984) also refers to Zygmunt Bauman, who states that "understanding means going in circles; rather than a unilinear progress towards better and less vulnerable knowledge" (p. 138). Although Gerkin is referring to pastoral counselling, the following concept is most applicable to narrative inquiry:

To follow a hermeneutical methodology . . . includes the sorting over of stories, impressions, recollections, and shared interpretations of relationships with a view to deepening and extending one's own and one's counselee's [co-creator's] understanding of the central narrative story of a person's life and the deep issues of that person's soul. (p. 138)

I felt a deep soul connection with my co-creators. I think that any time we enter into meaningful conversation with another, we are doing soul work.

The hermeneutical approach implies a working toward meaning. Meaning is temporal, contextual, and multi-layered.

Ricoeur, refers us to Gadamer's take on hermeneutics:

Whenever there is a situation, there is a horizon which can be contracted or enlarged. . . . Communication at a distance between two differently situated consciousnesses occurs by means of the fusion of their horizons, that is, the intersection of their views on the distance and the open. . . . Insofar as the fusion excludes the idea of a total and unique knowledge, this concept implies a tension between what is one's own and what is alien, between the near and the far; and hence the play of difference is included in the process of convergence. (p. 62)

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) speak of how difficult it is for narrative researchers to remain objective due to the close relationship of the researcher and the participants. This is covered in more depth in Chapter 4, "Situating the Inquiry Within a Research Methodological and Ethical Framework."

### **The Influence of Collaborative Language Therapy**

Note to readers: I will be quoting from Harlene Anderson (1997) and Tom Andersen (1991). I am drawing attention to this so as to avoid confusion with the two names.

The findings from my research will emerge through conversations. Although Harlene Anderson's (1997) theories on collaborative language apply to the therapeutic process, I think some of her ideas are very relevant to narrative inquiry.

Collaborative language therapy explains the role of conversation in bringing about transformation. Anderson (1997) speaks of a "conversational partnership" where "therapist and client mutually define membership and determine boundaries" (p. 71). I believe this applies to narrative inquiry as well. We negotiate entry into the research with

our participants: time, place, and availability. We obtain consent. We give participants the choice to opt out at any time. The inquiry is a shared experience.

I particularly like the notion of a “*dialogical space*—a metaphorical space between and within the conversation co-creators” (p. 112). I can hold this space allowing ideas, thoughts and opinions to emerge. Anderson (1997) describes conversation in the following manner:

One of the most important features of life is conversation. We are in continuous conversation with each other and with ourselves. Through conversation we form and reform our life experiences and events; we create and recreate our meanings and understandings; and we construct and reconstruct our realities and ourselves. (p. xvii)

The philosophy underlying collaborative language therapy is that human beings live in relationships and maintain these relations through conversation, i.e., the use of language. Humans generate meaning together. According to Anderson (1997), what distinguishes conversations in therapy from conversations in general, is their focus on “communicative relevance” (p.72).

I will elaborate on Anderson’s (1997) idea of conversation. Conversations occur and are formed on a moment-by-moment basis. They are contextual based upon the participants and their circumstances. Anderson identifies a number of characteristics basic to all conversations. I will summarize. When people enter into conversation they bring aspects of their everyday lives. They bring their self-identity. Conversations are contextual. There are conversations between family members; between various social groups, cultures, and across time. There is a continuum to conversations. They are

connected to, and influence, past and future conversations. Each participant contributes purpose, expectations and intentions to any and all conversations. Finally, conversations are both external acts, speaking with others, and internal acts, speaking with one's self.

Anderson (1997) describes two types of conversation important to the therapeutic process—dialogical and monological conversations. I will refer only to the dialogical conversations as they are the most relevant to narrative inquiry. A dialogical conversation is an “in-there-together, two-way, give-and-take exchange ... in which people are talking with each other, rather than to each other” (p. 112). There are no presumptions. “Each is committed to learning about and trying to understand the other by negotiating meanings through the use of language” (p. 112). Meaning emerges through dialogical conversations. This shared inquiry involves a “*dialogical space*—a metaphorical space between and within the conversation participants” (p.112). Therapists hold this space allowing ideas, thoughts, and opinions to emerge, opening the possibility of transformation to clients through the telling of their stories and sharing of themselves. This is what we do when in conversation with our participants.

In dialogical conversation, “a client and therapist participate in shared inquiry: the mutual puzzling that involves exploring the familiar ... a client's story ... and developing the new (for example, meanings, realities and narratives)” (p.113). This approach to conversation allows for the process of “asking-telling-listening” (Anderson, p 113).

Anderson (1997) states that understanding is an “interpretive process” (p.113). We hear the other person's story, we add our meaning to the story, and verify with the other whether the meaning fits. The process continues until therapists and clients come to a mutual understanding. I would suggest, that in the narrative inquiry process, participants

and researchers work toward mutual understanding in the telling and retelling of the participants' story. Mutual understanding is achieved when participants feel that researchers have accurately reflected their lived experience in the retelling of their story. I will elaborate on the term understanding.

Gerkin (1984) refers to Gadamer's view of understanding "as a merger or fusion of horizons of meaning and understanding" (p.44). The participants in a conversation bring their prejudices, pre-understandings, and biases into the conversation. As the conversation evolves, the participants expand their horizons, making room for the other. Gerkin quotes Gadamer:

Care involves the opening of the horizon of our understanding to admit the intrusion of the world of the other in the hope and expectation that something truly new may be shared in the encounter—a "fusion of horizons" in which the other is permitted to speak, to question our understanding and vice-versa. (p.45)

The concepts of understanding as a hermeneutical circle and of understanding as a meshing of horizons contribute to meaning. Meaning is temporal, contextual, and multi-layered, necessitating continuous dialogue.

Boisen proposes an image of persons as "living human documents" (as cited in Gerkin, 1984, p. 37) "Each individual living human document has an integrity of his or her own that calls for understanding and interpretation, not categorization and stereotyping" (p. 38). This statement evokes a sense of wonder and awe toward this individual living human document and a sense of humility in attempting to understand and interpret this individual living human document's experience through conversation. It is particularly relevant in narrative inquiry as the role of narrative inquiry is to

understand experience. To this end, narrative inquirers try “to think of the continuity and wholeness of an individual’s life experience” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 17).

Tom Andersen (1991) in *The Reflecting Team: Dialogues and Dialogues About the Dialogues*, defines conversations “as a series of exchanges of ideas. Something said is listened to, thought over, and a question is created that hopefully creates new ideas about what has been said first” (p. 35). He continues:

A conversation should struggle to include the two or more participating persons’ talking and thinking and listening in terms of speed and rhythm of these phases. When we talk with someone, we try to follow his/her rhythm without losing our own. (p. 32)

Andersen (1991) explains that conversations require small pauses before talking (or taking action) to find the meaning of what has been said to us, and small pauses before listening (getting a sense of) to set us up to be truly attentive to what will be said. This is so crucial in listening to each other as we try to understand one another through our individual use of language.

In his article, “A Melancholy of Mine Own,” Joshua Wolf Shenk (2001) characterizes inner speech as “engaging with one’s inner cast of characters” (p. 49). When one thinks of a cast of characters, one thinks of the many ideas, the various opinions, and the dynamics in the exchanges. Newness emerges from the exchange between the therapists and clients as they reach ever-deeper levels of understanding. In this ongoing dialogue, there is the “*unsaid*” and the “*yet-to-be-said*” (p.118). “Psychotherapy (as shared inquiry) is a process of forming, saying, and expanding the unsaid and the yet-to-be-said—the development, through dialogue, of new meanings,



themes, narratives, and histories—from which new self-descriptions may arise” (p.118). In this way, collaborative language therapy views dialogue as a holding of possibilities. The hope for understanding is contained between the said and the unsaid or yet-to-be-said. Meaning emerges on a moment-to-moment basis throughout the dialogue. I believe that the approach of the in-there-together conversation can greatly contribute to the effectiveness of the narrative inquiry.

Much of Anderson’s (1997) thinking was influenced by Shotter. Shotter refers to the “as-we-go-along dialogical exchange” as “*responsive listening*: instead of us acting out of an inner plan, we act responsively ‘into’ a situation, doing what it ‘calls’ from us” (p. 120). Being responded to encourages a sense of belonging. A dialogical exchange does not presuppose agreement. In a dialogical exchange, there are shared ideas and feelings, areas of mutual consent, ambiguities, and areas of divergent opinions and attitudes. What is constant is the willingness to keep the dialogue going. There is no place for judgment and presuppositions.

Having presented the philosophical influences that shaped my approach to this narrative inquiry, I would now like to explore the philosophical concepts of suffering that I believe are relevant to this inquiry.

### **Philosophical Concepts on Suffering**

There is no greater need for courage and resilience than when confronted with suffering. I consulted the thematic unit, “Suffering,” in *The Every Day Study Bible* (New Century Version). Here are some of the views presented: Suffering as a consequence of original sin, our sins, or as a result of someone else’s sin. Sometimes there is no reason. This is seen as “*unfair* suffering.” Suffering caused by acts of God (i.e., earthquakes).

Suffering as part of “God’s plan.” “God is not good.” God has reasons to bring suffering in our lives and that these are unknown to us. Suffering as a lesson. Denial that suffering and evil exist. Suffering as a help to become more holy. Suffering that will “prepare us for greater glory.” Suffering that ties us to Christ’s suffering. Suffering as a means of learning obedience. Suffering as “part of the Christian life.” (p. 1121)

I was taught these concepts of suffering in school and in the society where I grew up. I witnessed resignation, helplessness and a lack of assuming responsibility for one’s life. I felt frightened and guilty when things were going well and I was feeling happy. I was always waiting for the clouds to roll in. I was not supposed to be happy in this life.

I did an Internet search on suffering and found three articles that I thought were of interest.

Howard Kainz (2012), Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at Marquette University, in the article, “Catholicism and Suffering,” taken from *The Catholic Thing*, speaks of the value the Catholic Church has placed on suffering, as evidenced in the graphic portrayals of Jesus on the Cross to the saints who either accepted, were resigned to, and/or desirous of suffering. The saints were motivated by love of God. Kainz believes that Christians are connected to Jesus through their suffering. Christ suffered the Crucifixion to atone for the sins of humanity and to bring about salvation. Individual suffering will atone for sins and lead to salvation.

The article, “Redemptive Suffering: ‘Offering-it-up’” taken from *Fish Eaters*, suggests:

Our being (non-ministerial) priests means that we make sacrifices, we *offer* something. . . .Why do we do this? Because we are exhorted to ‘put on Christ’ and

to imitate Him ... so that we might partake of the divine nature. . . . We, too, must take up our cross, accept suffering, and strive to offer Him all (n.d. section: We are members)

These views contrast with those in Rev. Mary McKinnon Ganz's (2009) sermon, "Awakening to the Meaning of Suffering." Rev. McKinnon Ganz is minister of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Arlington, VA. She gave this sermon on suffering prior to leaving for Nicaragua to do volunteer work. She reflects on the terrible suffering of the people of Nicaragua during the civil war. She questions what kind of God would allow such suffering. She asks, "And yet, is there anyone who has lived without suffering? Is there any sense to who gets cancer, who dies young, who is left alone?" (qtd. in Ganz, 2009)

Rev. McKinnon Ganz believes that we make meaning from our suffering. She gives the example of Judea Pearl, father of Daniel Pearl, who was beheaded by Islamic militants in 2002. Daniel's father eventually found meaning in the loss of his son, in the story of Abraham sacrificing his son, Isaac, on orders from God. At first, Pearl believed that it was "a horrible story of an awful God" (qtd. in Ganz, 2009). How could God ask such a thing from someone he supposedly loved? Pearl came to a new understanding of this story. In trying to answer the question, "What does it mean to sacrifice your son to God," he theorized that perhaps it meant to "educate your children by certain principles and to certain ideals. Why is death involved? Because living by principles is a dangerous enterprise" (qtd. in Ganz, 2009). Pearl could make meaning of his tragic loss in the fact that his son had lived and died by his principles. He acted out of trust in humanity. Rev. McKinnon Ganz emphasizes that we cannot escape suffering, but there is a difference

between accepting that we will suffer and “valorizing suffering” (qtd. in Ganz, 2009) by saying that it is God’s will. Yes, we will suffer but we are not our suffering, according to Rev. McKinnon Ganz. “Compassion is what we should be cultivating.” (qtd. in Ganz, 2009) Compassion means to “suffer with.” (qtd. in Ganz, 2009) This view of suffering is one that recognizes that suffering is part of life, but life is not suffering. We suffer, but we are not meant to suffer. We don’t suffer in this life in order to merit a better life in the hereafter.

I will continue this exploration of suffering by looking at the work of W. Paul Jones. Jones (1989) begins *Theological Worlds: Understanding the Alternative Rhythms of Christian Belief*, with:

We are restless, and thus religious, for we are never satisfied with the apparent, or tamed by the known limits. Rather, like a spider trapped in a bottle, we push at the boundaries of life and death, puzzle over strategies of good and evil, while dropping from a string hung daringly over the edges of mystery. The religious in each of us is an impulse to journey, to quest, to seek—for self-identity, belonging, legitimacy, meaning. And in the end, it is a hope worth believing that the impulse within has its counterpart in a luring that is Without. (p. 11)

Jones (1989) describes five theological worlds each “characterized by what we will develop as differing *obsessios* (dilemmas), attuned to contrasting *epiphanias* (resolutions). Each rhythm functions as an aperture through which one may perceive and, in turn, project, alternative meaning into common-day interaction” (p. 18). He describes *obsessio* as:

whatever functions deeply and pervasively in one's life as a defining quandary, a conundrum, a bogging of the mind, a hemorrhaging of the soul, a wound that bewilders healing, a mystification that renders one's living cryptic. . . . An obsessio is that which so gets its teeth into a person that it establishes one's life as plot. (p. 27)

Jones describes epiphania as:

“to show upon,” that which keeps the functioning of obsessio fluid, hopeful, searching, restless, energized, intriguing, as a question worth pursuing for a lifetime. Indeed, quietly within its promise is the hope that the obsessio, while never lost, might become the center for a pearl of great price, flowing back to redeem the whole. (p. 28)

Of interest to this inquiry on courage and resilience in the lives of ordinary people is Jones' (1989) “World Five: Suffering and Life— The Victim/Refugee” (p. 97). It is not my intention to identify my co-creators with this world. I find the epiphania of this world very relevant to their stories.

The obsessio of World Five is “characterized by a feeling of being overwhelmed” (p. 97). Jones (1989) explains:

This World is an amalgam of psychological, social, and metaphysical dimensions, experienced with the impact of a conclusion: “That's the way things are.” . . .

Thus citizens of World Five are transfixed by sheer givenness, for which nothing can be done. . . . It is a matter of “keeping on keeping on.” (p. 99)

It is a world of suffering.

Epiphania comes in the form of “*hope* as living in the face of all evidence to the contrary” (p. 102). Jones (1989) describes this hope as “the future stands as miracle in the face of the present” (p. 102). Paul Tillich (2000) says much the same:

It takes a great deal of courage and imagination to believe that God is on your side when you are suffering or losing. To believe in love in the face of hatred, life in the face of death, day in the dark of night, good in the face of evil. (p. xxiii)

I refer you to Judea Pearl that I mentioned earlier, and how he found meaning in the death of his son, Daniel.

According to Jones (1989), the road to epiphania in World Five is found in the ability to discern the little blessings in life. Epiphania is found in a sense of community, of not being alone. “Epiphania will require variations on the theme: of resoluteness, of steadfast will, of integrity as tenacity” (p. 105). Jones categorically states that epiphania:

cannot center in another time or another place. It must be now, in the midst of life purged of romanticism. . . . The only change possible is one of perspective. . . . All things stay as they are, except the way we “take it.” (p. 103)

I am reminded of Viktor Frankl (1946/1963) and how he was able to survive life in the Nazi concentration camps. He believed that “the last of the human freedoms [was] to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way” (p. 104). Jones concludes, epiphania lies “in the fiber of the strength of persons” (p. 107). This is so true of my co-creators whose stories you will read in Chapter 7, “Situating the Inquiry Within the Narratives.”

## Chapter 4

### Situating the Inquiry Within a Research Methodological and Ethical Framework

#### Open Your Eyes

*Once you open your eyes,  
You will gradually find  
Little dims of light  
That make your life bright.*

*Try to open your eyes,  
You soon will realize  
That lives are miracles  
Which constitute a cycle.*

*Just open your eyes,  
And peek in a trice  
Long for tomorrow  
There should be no sorrow.*

*Your pair of eyes  
Is a window that never lies.  
Trust your future  
And seek your own treasure.*

(Ho, 2008, p. 29)

#### Methodological Framework

**Discussion on narrative inquiry.** This poem, by Natalie Iris Ho in *Believe and You'll Succeed*, is a good introduction into narrative inquiry. Narrative inquirers open their eyes and, I would add, hearts and minds to the miracle of the lives of their co-creators. I like the notion of cycle. It brings to mind narrative researchers and authors Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) concept of the three-dimensional spaces of narrative inquiry:

As inquirers we meet ourselves in the past, the present, and the future. What we mean by this is that we tell remembered stories of ourselves from earlier times as

well as more current stories. All of these stories offer possible plotlines for our futures. (p. 60)

I chose narrative inquiry because I love to listen to people's stories. I explained earlier that my interest in the topic stemmed from the lived experiences of my paternal aunts, the stories related by the women of my women's group, and my clients' stories from my practica experience. I engage people in telling their stories in any number of places and circumstances, among them standing in line at the bank or grocery store or eating lunch at Costco. It is a natural thing for me to do.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) speak of the importance of understanding experience and how narrative inquiry helps us to achieve this:

Narrative has its origins in our interest in experience. With narrative as our vantage point, we have a point of reference, a life and a ground to stand on for imagining what experience is and for imagining how it might be studied and represented in researchers' texts. In this view, experience is the stories people live. People live stories and in the telling of these stories, reaffirm them, modify them, and create new ones. Stories lived and told educate the self and others. (p. xxvi)

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) believe that "life—as we come to it and as it comes to others—is filled with narrative fragments, enacted in storied moments of time and space, and reflected upon and understood in terms of narrative unities and discontinuities" (p. 17). They continue "narrative is the best way of representing and understanding experience. Experience is what we study, and we study it narratively because narrative thinking is a key form of experience and a key way of writing and thinking about it" (p. 18). When pondering a problem, or thinking back on a particular



experience, I must talk aloud, expressing the pros and cons in order to be able to think something through and to make sense.

One of the elements that gives our lives meaning is the privilege of sharing our stories. When I was in conversation with my co-creators, time and space disappeared. We were alone in the universe in a marvelous connection. I felt such a sense of awe, reverence, and humility. I felt privileged that my co-creators would share so much of themselves. I came away from our encounters feeling uplifted, my mind raced with questions and ponderings. I had a similar feeling with my clients when doing my counselling practica.

Other authors speak highly of narrative as a method of inquiry. Anthony Paul Kerby (1991), Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of Ottawa and one of the founding members of the Canadian Society for Hermeneutics and Postmodern Thought, writes, in *Narrative and the Self*, that “Life is inherently of a narrative structure, a structure that we make explicit when we reflect upon our past and our possible future” (p. 40).

The French philosopher Ricoeur explains, “To narrate experience is ... to refigure it, to tell it in a certain way, and often for a certain end. Self-narration is, as we have previously stressed, both a receptive and a creative-interpretive act” (as cited in Kerby, 1991, p. 47). Narrative is fundamental to humanity. Our earliest bonds are formed when we listen to our mothers talk to us and we make every effort to respond by cooing and making soft noises. The individual knows of his ancestry through narrative. Many courageous couples seek the help of a therapist when they are no longer able to listen and hear one another. First Nations people suffered tremendously when they were cut off

from their families and culture. Many First Nations people, who suffered from alcohol and drug abuse, were healed when they returned to their communities and spent time listening to the stories of their elders. The Truth and Reconciliation panel that travelled across Canada gave voice to the tragic experiences of our First Nations people in residential schools. Stories from the Bible inspire and sustain us to this day. The works of Shakespeare are timeless.

Bradt (1997), in *Story as a Way of Knowing*, posits:

Story is arguably one of the oldest and most elemental forms of knowing. . . . It is a way by which and through which we come to know and understand ourselves, others, the world around us, and even God. . . . By “storying” I mean the making of stories together, the thinking together in story form, and the co-creation of stories by tellers and listeners. (p. viii-ix)

This is why I prefer the term “co-creators” when referring to my participants.

When I approached my co-creators to invite them into this narrative inquiry of courage and resilience in the lives of ordinary people, all of them felt timid, humble, and unsure, concerned as to their suitability. At the end of the interviews, all of them felt some sense at having demonstrated those qualities in overcoming the adversities they had faced in life. The co-creators viewed their experience in a different light. I felt that the process of telling had brought some measure of closure. This will be discussed in more depth in Chapter 8, “Situating the Inquiry Within Concluding Observations and Conclusions.”

Bradt (1997) mentions “how powerful and pervasive story can be in people's lives” (p. vii). Stories evoke “a change in consciousness, a surrendering of defenses, a caring

for the characters, a release of empathy and emotion, a creative engagement with the imagination" (p. viii).

Bradt explains further:

Story does not claim to "represent" reality; instead it seeks to explore it, to consider its possible meanings and significances. This is possible in a world where reality is open, unknown, indeterminate, irreducible, where it is always "more," "other," "different," in short, mysterious. Mystery invites inquiry rather than definition, erotic participation rather than geometric proof, relationship rather than reason, pursuit rather than purchase. Therefore, we will examine storying as that way of knowing which views reality as a coevolving mystery and a dialogue partner in the making and remaking of meaning. (p. x)

Bradt (1997) differentiates between "storying" and "storytelling." "Storytelling" separates the person telling the story and the person hearing the story. "Storytelling" is passive. "Storying" involves both the teller and the listener in the shaping of the story together. Both parties are actively involved (Bradt, 1997, p. x).

Had I interviewed my co-creators with the intention of proving a hypothesis on courage and resilience, I would not have been able to be present to them, to hear them and to be open to the mystery of who they are. Narrative inquiry is therefore an excellent tool to learn about people's experiences in life, "Narrative knowledge does not aspire to any independent existence apart from its participants, namely, teller and listener" (Bradt, 1997, p. 108).

Bradt (1997) continues:

Story can bear ambiguity, doubt, contradiction, mystery, and enigma. Story can tolerate the obscure, the imprecise, the suspect, the indeterminate. Story knows more is said than can ever be articulated – through indirection, suggestion, tone, and dynamics. Story can neither prove nor define the way science claims its representational discourse can but story at least can permit the paradoxical simultaneities of reality. (p. 108)

When we are dealing with a person relating a life experience, we must remain in a state of unknowing if we are to learn from their experience and if we are to honour that experience.

Parry and Doan (1994), in *Story Re-visions: Narrative Therapy in the Postmodern World*, have some interesting and relevant thoughts on narrative. They begin:

Once upon a time, everything was understood through stories. Stories were always called upon to make things understandable. The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche once said that “if we possess our *why* of life we can put up with almost any *how*.” (p. 1)

Parry and Doan refer to the stories from the Bible and literature that have influenced us. “All such stories have in common, however serious or whimsical, a quality of sufficiency. . . . It is the meaningfulness of the answers given, rather than their factual truthfulness that gives them their credibility” (p. 2). Parry and Doan propose that rather than establishing a truth, categorizing or conceptualizing, “narrative convinces . . . because it provides a web of meaning and of connectedness to events, which reassures people that things happen as they do because they take place in a moral universe” (p. 3).

Arthur Frank's (1995) *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics* narrates his experience of illness, as well as that of others, to demonstrate how the body's suffering creates a need for stories: "The *personal* issue of telling stories about illness is to give voice to the body, so that the changed body can become once again familiar in these stories" (p. 2). I believe this was applicable to the people I interviewed. In the past two years, I have experienced many health issues. My best friend, who lives in the U.S., was diagnosed with stage III ovarian cancer in May 2013. Many of our telephone conversations focused on our health. At times, we just listened empathically to one another's struggles; at other times, we were able to laugh and joke about our conditions. These times of sharing brought us closer and helped us individually to feel less alone, less stressed, and less in pain.

**Negotiation into the field situation.** Clandinin and Connelly (2000) state that "one of the starting points for narrative inquiry is the researcher's own narrative of experience, the researcher's autobiography" (p. 70). The importance of starting here is that these "narrative beginnings of our own livings, tellings, retellings, and relivings help us deal with questions of who we are in the field and who we are in the texts that we write on our experience of the field experience" (p. 70). You will have read the narrative of my experience in Chapter 1, "Situating the Inquiry Within the Researcher's Autobiography."

When describing the relationship between researcher and participants, Connelly and Clandinin (1990) talk about "negotiation of a shared narrative unity" (p. 3). They explain that "Collaborative research constitutes a relationship. . . . Collaborative research . . . requires a close relationship akin to friendship. Relationships are joined . . . by the narrative unities of our lives" (p. 4). In the conversation, the participant/co-creator tells

his/her story. In my inquiry on courage and resilience in the lives of ordinary people, voice is given to the participant/co-creator in the telling of his/her story. Connelly and Clandinin believe that the participant, “who has long been silenced in the research relationship, is given the time and space to tell her or his story so that it too gains the authority and validity that the research story has long had” (p. 4).

I chose my co-creators to ensure diversity with respect to age, gender, and the adversity that was overcome. The first person interviewed is a woman in her eighties, whose husband, an alcoholic, committed suicide. Her son and son-in-law died in a plane crash. Tragically, the daughter was later killed in an automobile accident. This co-creator’s name was mentioned whenever I spoke of my topic to friends and acquaintances. I had heard of her story. The second person is a woman in her early fifties who is legally blind. I knew her from an association that we belonged to. The third person is a young man in his early twenties whose sister committed suicide. The sister was a victim of incest perpetrated by the father. I was given the young man’s name when I made general inquiries about wanting to interview a young man in his early twenties who had overcome adversity.

I asked all three co-creators if they would be interested in participating. Following the approval of my thesis proposal, I contacted them again to confirm participation. This was followed by a meeting where I explained my research and obtained written consent.

**Data collection and analysis.** Clandinin and Connelly (2000) refer to data as field texts. They say that there are many types of field texts. Of those texts, I include conversations, photos, journals, letters, anecdotes, music, literature, memory boxes, and artwork. Clandinin and Connelly say that:

Field notes are the most important way we have of recording the ongoing bits of nothingness that fill our days. These ongoing, daily notes, full of the details and moments of our inquiry lives in the field, are the text out of which we can tell stories of our story of experience. (p. 104)

I met with each co-creator for an hour on four different occasions. These conversations were set up according to the co-creators' availability and desired location. I met the two women in their homes and the young man in my home. During these conversations, my co-creators told me of the time in their lives when they faced adversity. I had hoped that my co-creators would share photos, journals, and other forms of data. Regrettably, that did not happen.

The interviews were recorded using an audio-cassette. I personally transcribed the data to my computer. This allowed me to become very familiar with my data. I took notes of thoughts and feelings, and things that informed me about my co-creators and their lives.

I kept a journal. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) remind us that "journals are a powerful way for individuals to give account of their experience" (p. 102). Clandinin and Connelly conclude "Field notes combined with journals written of our field experience provide reflective balance" (104).

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) view field texts as "texts of which we ask questions of meaning and social significance" (p. 130). All texts were read and reread, sorted, and coded. Clandinin and Connelly suggest that "although the initial analysis deals with matters such as character, place, scene, plot, tension, end point, narrator, context, and

tone, these matters become increasingly complex as an inquirer pursues this relentless rereading” (131).

In the process of narrative inquiry, the researcher becomes immersed in the stories and feels a closeness with the co-creators. It can be difficult to remain objective. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) believe that narrative inquirers “must become fully involved, must ‘fall in love’ with their participants, yet they must also step back and see their own stories in the inquiry, the stories of the participants, as well as the larger landscape on which they all live” (p. 81). This became evident to me. I knew the two women prior to the research and needed to balance that relationship with the research relationship. In addition to this, I had to “‘slip in and out’ of the experience being studied, slip in and out of intimacy. . . .This movement back and forth between falling in love and cool observation is possible through field tests” (p. 82). I spent many hours looking at the various themes that emerged from each co-creator’s experience.

**Writing the narrative.** Transcribing the conversations myself allowed me to hear the unspoken nuances present in the conversations: the length of pauses, sighs, hesitations, voice inflections, excitement, sadness, anger, and determination. I had a file for each co-creator with my notes and journal entries, and a record of themes and sub-themes. The themes and sub-themes evolved as I read the transcripts. I noted relationships, place, influences, experiences, attitudes, character traits, family configuration and education, to name but a few. I kept notes from my literature search divided into topics. Writing the narratives allowed me to enter more deeply into the stories, to incorporate what I had learned from the literature and other readings, and to appreciate on a deeper level the experiences of my co-creators.



## **Ethical Framework**

I adhered to the St. Stephen's College, 2002, "Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans." In following the guiding ethical principles I had a duty to conduct the research to the best of my ability and knowledge. My other responsibilities were to do no harm and to "protect the dignity and preserve the well-being of" ("Ethical Conduct Involving Humans" p. 1) my co-creators. I also adhered to Ruthellen Josselson's, 2007, ethical considerations as outlined in "The Ethical Attitude in Narrative Research: Principles and Practicalities" and *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Noddings, 2003). These other references are incorporated in the eight guidelines from St. Stephen's College.

**Respect for human dignity.** To "protect the multiple and interdependent interests of the person, from bodily to psychological to cultural integrity" ("Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans," p.1). This entailed sensitivity to the individuality of the co-creators. They were not subjects to be studied but individuals participating in a research project with me. "In narrative inquiry, people are looked at as embodiment of lived stories. . . . People are seen as composing lives that shape and are shaped by social and cultural narratives" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 43).

**Respect for free and informed consent.** "The principle of respect for persons translates into the dialogue, process, rights, duties and requirements for free and informed consent by research participants" ("Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans," p. 1). I obtained a signed "Informed Consent" from all co-creators (for "Informed Consent," see "Appendix A"). Co-creators were free to opt out at any time during the research.

Josselson (2007) speaks of explicit and implicit contracts with the co-creators. The explicit contract covers the roles of the participant and the researcher, i.e., presentation of the purpose of the study which was explained in person, co-creators' freedom to participate or not, freedom to withdraw at any time, taping of interviews, telephone calls to keep in touch and obtain feedback, number of meetings and duration of each, and who would have access to material. I followed Josselson's suggestion and explained "the general nature and purpose of the study" (p. 540) so as to not influence my co-creators in a certain direction.

**Respect for vulnerable persons.** Respect for vulnerable persons "entails high ethical obligations towards vulnerable persons" ("Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans," p. 2). All of my co-creators had overcome some form of adversity. I was vigilant, at all times, to monitor my co-creators' feelings and reactions. I listened to the tone of voice and monitored facial expressions and body language. My co-creators were informed that they could stop the conversation at any time.

**Respect for privacy and confidentiality.** It is understood that "standards of privacy and confidentiality protect the access, control and dissemination of personal information" ("Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans," p. 2). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) mention that some participants wish to use their real names. This was the wish of my co-creators. However, the Ethics Committee instructed me to preserve anonymity. I conveyed this information to my co-creators. They were disappointed and so was I.

Following Josselson's (2007) advice, I reminded my co-creators to bear in mind the impact the research might have on their families and communities. I informed my co-

creators that I would “do all that is humanly possible to keep material confidential” (p. 558). All names were changed, not just the names of the co-creators. I kept a code book to help me keep track of these changes.

With regard to who would work with the material, Josselson (2007) suggests that “material will only be shared with people involved in working with me on the research project and then only with all names, places, and identifying information removed or disguised” (p. 542). I shared with my supervisor and two editors for final submission. All pertinent information was kept in a locked file.

**Respect for justice and inclusiveness.** I believe that this flowed naturally in the narrative inquiry as it was an I/Thou relationship. I approached my co-creators with respect and reverence. I came to them with humility. We engaged “in a dialogue involving each other’s whole being” (Scott, 2002, para. 2). It was not a relationship of researcher and subject.

**Balancing harms and benefits.** “Foreseeable harms should not outweigh anticipated benefits. . . . Harms-benefit analysis thus affects the welfare and rights of research participants” (“Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans,” p. 2). Each of the participants was enthusiastic about participating in the research. They were informed of the benefits to themselves and to society. They were informed of the possible risks with regard to the emotional consequences of relating some very painful experiences.

**Minimizing harm.** I adhered to the principle of “non-maleficence, or the duty to avoid, prevent or minimize harm” (p. 2). Narrative inquiry is relational. The implicit contract Josselson (2007) refers to is, “the development of the individual, personal, intimate relationship between researcher and participant” (p. 539). The terms of this

implicit contract “are difficult to foresee or make explicit and the arena for differing assumptions, expectations, and contingencies” (p. 539). The contract requires the researcher to be “empathetic, nonjudgmental, concerned, tolerant, and emotionally responsive as well as her/his ability to contain affect-laden material. The ‘data’ that result reflect the degree of openness and self-disclosure the participant felt was warranted and appropriate under the relational circumstances she/he experienced” (p. 539). Gilligan encourages researchers to operate “from an ethics of care rather than rights” (as cited in Josselson, 2007, p. 540) in their relationships with participants. I found this last point to be particularly relevant.

Nel Noddings (2003), a prolific author, and Lee Jacks, Professor of Education at Stanford University, have a similar perspective. They believe that “when we behave ethically as ones-caring, we are not obeying moral principles—although, certainly, they may guide our thinking—but we are meeting the other in genuine encounters of caring and being cared for” (p. 175). The key to the relationship with my co-creators was engagement with them from a position of genuine caring, as one learning from and with them, rather than relying solely on a code of behaviour.

The co-creators were in control of what they shared. Josselson (2007) is quite right when she says that “the challenge is for the interviewer to be able to maintain equilibrium, go on listening and contain (i.e., calmly bear) the emotional experiences being recounted or expressed” (p. 543). This was particularly relevant to me when interviewing the first co-creator who suffered so many tragic losses. I had the names of counsellors in town, to whom I could refer the co-creators should they have felt the need to consult someone.

Dialogue with my thesis supervisor as well as the coordinator of the Master of Psychotherapy and Spirituality Program at St. Stephen's helped me deal with any unforeseen circumstances.

**Maximizing benefit.** Maximizing benefit is guided by the principle of “beneficence. The principle of beneficence imposes a duty to benefit others and, in research ethics, a duty to maximize benefits” (“Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans,” p. 2). The purpose of my research was to understand courage and resilience in the lives of ordinary people. It was an opportunity for my co-creators to be heard, to be validated, and to share their stories. I felt it was a celebration of their accomplishments.

**Validity and Trustworthiness.** I was responsible to my co-creators to be faithful in relating their lived experiences, to share with them throughout the process of doing the thesis, and to incorporate their learning and discovery into my research. I was responsible to myself to do my best in writing my thesis, *Standing in the Tragic Gap: Courage and Resilience in the Lives of Ordinary People*.

With regard to this personal responsibility, Jean McNiff (2007), in her article, “My Story is my Living Educational Theory,” starts by telling budding researchers that the stories they write will inevitably reflect some of their values. McNiff explains that validity in narrative inquiry is achieved through “experienced realization of one’s values. . . . Validity of research can be established by explaining how the researchers have realized their values and how this realization has given meaning to their lives” (p. 320). Please refer to Chapter 3, “Situating the Inquiry in a Philosophical Framework.”

Critical feedback, a necessary component of narrative inquiry, takes two forms: “First, by subjecting the account to the test of commensurability with one’s own internal

commitment and, second, by subjecting it to external public critique to establish the commensurability of the research claim with publicly agreed norms of validity” (McNiff, 2007, p. 320). The first test entails “having faith in the rightness of one’s capacity for personal knowledge” (p. 320). The second test requires the researcher be honest, sincere, and truthful in the submission of his/her research.

In their article, “Locating Narrative Inquiry Historically: Thematics in the Turn to Narrative,” Stefinee Pinnegar and J. Gary Daynes (2007) remind researchers that narrative inquiry “allows wondering, tentativeness, and alternative views to exist as part of the research account” (p. 25). I entered the research as a learner, not as an expert attempting to prove a hypothesis. My role was to receive/hold the lived experiences of my co-creators. I was not speaking as an authority on the subject of courage and resilience, but demonstrating how courage and resilience were experienced by my co-creators. I gave voice to each co-creator’s experience. I questioned and reflected on the experience and related it to my own personal experiences, learning, and professional life, as you will see in Chapter 7, “Situating the Inquiry Within the Narratives.” Clandinin and Connelly (2000) speak of “wakefulness. . . . A kind of inquiry that necessitates ongoing reflection” (p. 184). They speak of the need to be vigilant throughout the entire process of inquiry.

With regard to voice in the research text, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) propose that “voice may be thought of as belonging to participants, researcher, and other participants and other researchers for whom a text speaks” (p. 146). They speak of the challenge of composing texts that:

Express one's own voice in the midst of an inquiry designed to tell of the participants' storied experience and to represent their voices, all the while attempting to create a research text that will speak to, and reflect upon, the audience's voice. (p. 147)

My co-creators read my analysis of the field texts in order to ascertain that they felt that the analysis was indeed reflective of their experiences/stories. They felt that my interpretation of their stories was true to their lived experience. Minor changes were made as to dates, ages or locations.

Josselson (2007) states that although the researcher gives voice to the participant's experiences, ultimately, the text is the researcher's understanding and interpretation of those experiences. The researcher is ethically bound to be honest in his/her reflections. "Biases, aims, and positioning of the knower and the circumstances under which the knowledge was created" (p. 549) must be evident. The researcher is responsible for the final text: "From this point of view, the report is not 'about' the participants but 'about' the researcher's meaning making" (p. 549).

I will finish the section on validity and trustworthiness by answering the following questions from Clandinin and Connelly (2000):

"For whom will we write?" I wrote for myself, my co-creators, my supervisor, the review committee, and those who will subsequently read my thesis.

"Who are the characters in the study?" They were my-co-creators, members of our families and communities, and me.

"Why are we writing?" I wrote as part of the requirements of the Master of Psychotherapy and Spirituality Program (MPS) at St. Stephen's College. Courage and

resilience are subjects that have fascinated me for a very long time. I wrote in homage to the people I have been privileged to meet who have demonstrated courage and resilience. I wrote with the hope of consolidating what I learned from the MPS program through my courses, readings, papers, and practica. I wrote to contribute to the existing literature on courage and resilience.

“What are we trying to convey?” I wished to convey the lived experience of courage and resilience in the lives of ordinary people who overcame adversity. I explored courage as a theological concept and resilience as a psychological concept. It was my hope that readers would be reminded of their own narratives of courage and resilience, and celebrate them.

“What personal, practical, and theoretical contexts give meaning to the inquiry and to its outcomes?” On the personal level, it was the influence of my paternal aunts, the women of my women’s group, and the experiences of two friends. It was what I learned about myself when faced with adversity. On the practical level, it was the experience of my practica: what I learned from my clients, supervisors, supervision team and counselors, and how to use this knowledge with future clients. On the theoretical level, writings on resilience, courage, moral integrity, psychology and philosophy greatly contributed to give meaning to this inquiry and to its outcomes. (p. 121)

One of the greatest gifts we can give to others is our undivided attention: To listen to them, with our minds, our hearts, and our being. I have experienced this with my women’s group, my clients and friends. Each one of us was changed in the process. They had a better understanding of themselves, I of them, and of myself. In undertaking the task of researching the lived experience of courage and resilience in the lives of



ordinary people through narrative inquiry, I hoped that my co-creators would gain an appreciation of what they had survived and accomplished, and that they would perhaps gain new insights. I hoped that the sharing of my co-creators' experiences in the thesis would give readers a better understanding of courage and resilience in overcoming adversity. I viewed this work as a celebration of the human spirit. I hope to use what I have learned to improve my skills as a counsellor. The final outcome of this narrative research will be found in Chapter 8, "Situating the Inquiry Within Concluding Comparisons and Conclusions."

## Chapter 5

### Situating the Inquiry Within a Theological Framework: Courage

#### O Spirits Gather Closely

*O Spirits gather closely  
And wrap me in your wings  
Let me feel you deep inside  
Infuse the love and faith it brings*

*O Spirits gather closely  
Shine your light to lead my way  
Soothe my troubled soul  
And repair my feet of clay*

*O Spirits gather closely  
Let me know you'll never leave  
Guide me with your gentle voice  
Give me the courage to succeed*

*O Spirits gather closely  
Help me not to go astray  
Or lose the dreams that inspire me  
To fight on another day*

(Johnson, 2008, p. 55)

#### Courage and Character

A thematic article in *The Everyday Study Bible* (New Century Version) dealing with spirituality, states the following on character:

If spirituality is rooted in our essence as human beings, then it is exemplified through dimensions of our personhood: integrity, morality, fidelity, among others. . . . These qualities include love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. As we reflect on each dimension, it is important for us to remember that the spiritual life is ultimately validated by who

we are. From the bedrock of character we move to express inner qualities in outer activities. (p. 1163)

The article continues, “The spiritual life is expressed in never-ending devotion. While it is possible to counterfeit the spiritual life in neurotic *perfectionism*, we are nevertheless engaged with God and others in ways which call forth our best” (p. 1164). People who have overcome adversity with integrity and dignity have called forth their very best. Individuals make mistakes, falter, and lose their way in the journey through adversity, yet they persevere. Courage and resilience have their roots in this “bedrock of character”.

As I mentioned in the introduction chapter of my thesis, the words courage and resilience are used interchangeably. The word courage frequently refers to the moral, ethical and spiritual qualities involved in overcoming adversity. The word resilience frequently refers to the psychological traits involved in overcoming adversity. Both can be viewed as theological and/or psychological concepts. For the purposes of this narrative inquiry, I have chosen to look at courage under the framework of theology and resilience under the framework of psychology.

### **Courage and Self-Affirmation**

Theologian Paul Tillich (2000) describes courage as:

self-affirmation ... [which] presupposes participation in something which transcends the self. . . .It takes a great deal of courage and imagination to believe that God is on your side when you are suffering or losing. To believe in love in the face of hatred, life in the face of death, day in the dark of night, good in the face of evil. (pp. xxii-xxiii)

It takes courage to face adversity with integrity, dignity, and to continue to live life fully with meaning and purpose. Climate change is causing unprecedented and massive destruction through fires, floods, tidal surges, and drought, killing thousands of people and displacing millions. The conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Nigeria, and Libya are characterized by unimaginable horror and unspeakable acts of inhumanity. Millions have lost their lives and many more millions are displaced. The world is severely challenged by Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the extremist Islamic group, forging a path through Iraq and Syria and threatening the world. World leaders need to exercise tremendous caution in their response to these threats. Wouldn't it be wonderful if world leaders would be guided by Tillich's principles of courage? Individuals also need to access Tillich's courage in order to not succumb to despair, despondency and inaction:

Courage as a human act, as a matter of valuation, is an ethical concept. Courage as the universal and essential self-affirmation of one's being is an ontological concept. The courage to be is the ethical act in which [individuals] affirm [their] own being in spite of those elements of [their] existence which conflict with [their] essential self-affirmation. (Tillich, 2000, p. 3)

Tillich (2000) associates courage with Plato's notion of striving toward what is noble. In modern parlance, this would be referred to as striving toward "the-best-version-of-yourself" (Kelly, 2005, p. 29)

### **Courage and Vocation**

Palmer (2000) in *Let your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of vocation*, considers courage, or as he describes it, vocation, as the voice within, "calling me to be the person I was born to be, to fulfill the original Selfhood given me at birth by God" (p. 10). During

my last practicum, one of my clients was struggling with her relationship with a man she loved but who did not love her. She suspected him of seeing other women. She checked his emails and phone calls. She was jealous and her self-esteem was low; she could not bring herself to leave him. I asked her to ponder how she felt about herself in the relationship. Did she feel good about herself? Was the relationship connecting to her best-version-of-herself? Unfortunately, I was not able to pursue with this client as my practicum ended soon after initiating this conversation. It was a question that I had asked myself in a similar relationship and that helped me to end it. The break-up was very painful. I eventually regained my self-esteem.

### **Courage and the Ideal Self**

I believe that we are born with courage. Most individuals have an image of the “ideal self” (Cyrulnik, 2005, p. 96). This was very evident to me during my practica. Most clients came to counselling because of a split between the ideal self and the actual self. I was amazed that despite severe abuse, neglect, and trauma, they sought to connect/reconnect with the ideal self: their soul. “In the act of courage the most essential part of our being prevails against the less essential. It is the beauty and goodness of courage that the good and the beautiful are actualized in it. Therefore it is noble” (Tillich, 2000, p. 5). My interest in researching courage and resilience in the lives of ordinary people stems from my belief that many, many people do listen to their souls and live with nobility: nobility as understood by Plato.

Tillich (2000) speaks of virtue as “the power of acting exclusively according to one’s true nature. And the degree of virtue is the degree to which somebody is striving for and able to affirm his own being” (p. 21). Being true to one’s self. “Self-affirmation

... is participation in the divine self-affirmation” (p. 21). Self-affirmation entails love of one’s self and love of others. Tillich includes love of God. Nouwen (1992) in *Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World*, claims that as God said to Jesus, “You are my Son, the Beloved; my favor rests on you” (p. 30), we are to believe that we are Beloved. I believe that living with courage and resilience is being true to one’s essential self. Fischer (2006), in *The Courage the Heart Desires: Spiritual Strength in Difficult Times*, states that “the link between self-worth and tolerance explains why the injunction to love oneself is at the core of so many spiritual traditions. The conviction that we are loved empowers us to love ourselves” (pp. 100-101). I would add that it empowers us to love others, life, and empowers us to live with courage.

### **Courage and Death**

Individuals live with the permanent anxiety of death. In the spring of 2013, the world reeled with news of the Boston Marathon bombings. Three people lost their lives and countless others had their lives forever changed. This was fate: They happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Especially poignant was the picture of an eight-year old boy holding a poster with the word *peace* written on it. He, his mother and sister were at the finish line to greet his father. The father was killed; the mother and sister critically injured. What is so terrifying about fate is “the lack of ultimate necessity, the irrationality, the impenetrable darkness” (Tillich, 2000, p. 45). Such tragedies can lead individuals to experience “emptiness and meaninglessness” (p. 47). Tillich believes that to combat these feelings, “courage has to be created through many internal and external (psychological and ritual) activities and symbols” (p. 43). There will be many examples of these “internal and external (psychological and ritual) activities and symbols” that

create meaning in Chapter 7, “Situating the Inquiry in the Narratives.” I will explore further the exercise of creating meaning when I discuss Viktor Frankl’s *Man’s Search for Meaning*, later in this chapter. I would like to continue with other authors and their concept of courage.

### **Courage and Vulnerability**

Fischer (2006), proposes that it may seem strange to speak of courage and vulnerability.

Courage is not the absence of fear, or the pretense that we are totally adequate and impervious to threat, [rather], it is stitched together from those moments when we wish we had possessed it and instead found ourselves wanting. . . . Courage does not demand that we deny this awareness. (pp. 113-114)

This ties in well with Tillich’s (2000) “in-spite-of” (p. 4). During WWII, throughout countries occupied by the Nazis, many ordinary people overcame their fear moment-by-moment in order to shelter Jews. Hundreds of doctors and nurses are overcoming their fear as they attend to thousands of victims of the Ebola outbreak in many countries in Africa. I am currently reading *To End All Wars*, by Adam Hochschild, a book on the evolution of WWI in England. Conscientious objectors demonstrated enormous courage in opposing the war. They were perceived as unpatriotic and cowardly. They were despised. How difficult it must be to be that lone voice speaking for what is right. More recently, in Canada, many people demonstrated moral courage in appearing before the Charbonneau Commission, looking into corruption in the construction industry in Quebec.

### **Courage and the Courage to Dare**

Robert Neville (2002) in his article, “Courage: Heroes and Antiheroes,” speaks of “*the simple courage to dare*. . . . The courage to try something in life, to identify with something and risk failure” (p. 119). Courage to dare: to be fully present to your life, invest in your family as opposed to having a family, invest in friendships rather than making friends (especially in this day of Facebook and the practice of *friending* and *unfriending*), and have a vocation versus having a job. Neville characterizes the courage to dare first and foremost as an investment in life. Courage to dare is an:

Investment in ordinary human relations where you make a difference to family and friends, commitment to a job so as to find some meaning and accomplishment in it. . . . The simple courage to dare means taking ordinary citizenship seriously, caring for neighbors, schools, social institutions, and the rest. (p. 120)

Neville’s (2002) definition of courage entails consistency. Courage is not defined by a single act. Courage requires “stick-to-itiveness” (p. 123). This stick-to-itiveness is demonstrated at the long-term care facility where my mother resides. Three women are there every day; they are present to their husbands and helpful to the staff at meal times, in the evenings, and on special occasions. They are cheerful, thoughtful to, and kind to all the residents. Stick-to-itiveness requires vigilance to be alert to what may deter individuals from their goals, and the heart to make changes when necessary. Neville explores courage to dare under a number of dimensions.

“*The courage of self-identity* is the heart to accept and build a life upon elements of life that are both given in some sense and problematic” (p. 124). Examples of this type



of courage would be indigenous people or those of colour, those with physical/mental handicaps, and those with sexual orientations that differ from the norm. A very close friend and a relative of mine are gay. They came out at a time when being gay could cost you your family, your job, and, in extreme cases, your life. It was an ever-so-delicate balance to be open, honest, be themselves, and be careful to not lose everything. I think of the struggle of our indigenous people to not be defined by the scourge of residential schools.

*“The courage to face random harm”* (p. 127) is what allows someone to carry on when his/her life is turned upside-down by a natural or man-made catastrophe, war, death, accident, disease or any type of unexpected trauma. I lived in a very poor neighbourhood in Montreal that was severely flooded in 1987. I was a member of a group that fought for compensation. Many of the flood victims on the committee had suffered through previous floods. They lost their possessions, their homes, and their neighbourhood. However, what stood out during the meetings was the courtesy, perseverance, and humour of these victims.

*“The courage to be alone [is] to press on with life in recognition of the fundamental ontological loneliness of personal existence”* (p. 128). In January 2013, my best friend lost her life-partner to (ALS), a disease she had been valiantly battling for three years. As with anyone grieving, my friend lived many very difficult moments. Although there were many people to comfort her, it did not alter the fact that she was alone with the pain. Neville (2002) speaks of each person’s uniqueness, the longing to belong, and the tension between conformity and being true to one’s self. Courage is required to take one’s place in the world.

“*The courage to love* [is] the courage to be alone without sulking requires giving yourself to the world in all its fragility, otherness, and need of constant creative input” (p. 129). Love is giving of yourself to people, playing an active role in institutions, and living when you know that you will die. Most human beings suffer periods of aloneness and devastating losses. They choose to love again and “carry on” (p. 130). A perfect example of this courage to love is found in Catherine’s narrative in Chapter 7, “Situating the Inquiry Within the Narratives.”

“*The courage to love God* involves loving the life that has suffering and death within it, the life that comes to fullness only in the embrace of inescapable loneliness and in the love of what perishes and ultimately cannot be touched” (p. 130). Loving God is a choice, and involves work as in daily acts of openness, creativity, and acceptance. It is the courage to start anew. I would add that it entails spending time in solitude, quiet, and prayer. It is expressed in gratitude.

### **Courage and Hope**

In Chapter 1, “Situating the Inquiry Within the Researcher’s Autobiography,” I mention that Viktor Frankl’s *Man’s Search for Meaning*, has been an inspiration to me for most of my adult life. I would like to take a look at what I find to be most significant in Frankl’s work. In the course, “An Exploration of Hope,” with Christina Cathro, I wrote a paper, *My response to Viktor Frankl’s, Man’s Search for Meaning*. I wondered how anyone could sustain hope of surviving, and/or hope of returning to some sense of normalcy having lived through the experience of life in Nazi concentration camps. Frankl (1946/1963) sustained hope by thinking of his wife and his love for her. He proposes, “Love is the ultimate and highest goal to which man can aspire. . . . *The*

*salvation of man is through love and in love*” (pp. 58-59). He elaborates, “Love goes very far beyond the physical person of the beloved. It finds its deepest meaning in his spiritual being, his inner self” (p. 60). Frankl’s hope originated in an intensification of his inner life. This inner life is the repository of hope. It is a place one can turn to when everything in one’s life seems to be going wrong. Hope and love are intertwined. If there is no love; there is no hope. It therefore may be said that freedom is choosing between love and hate or, as many would say, fear. Hope is born in that choice.

Numerous little blessings nourish hope: a call from a friend, a chance encounter with an acquaintance, a smile from a stranger, a bird singing, a beautiful sunset, a piece of music, and the smell of muffins in the oven.

I was particularly impressed with Frankl’s (1946/1963) concept of freedom, “The last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way” (p. 104). Frankl considered choice, as:

A decision which determined whether you would or would not submit to those powers which threatened to rob you of your very self, your inner freedom. . . .

Fundamentally, therefore, any man can, even under such circumstances, decide what shall become of him—mentally and spiritually. He may retain his human dignity even in a concentration camp. (p. 105)

Individuals do not choose what happens to them. They choose their response. That response can make or break them. People who overcome adversity make choices to make something of their suffering and retain their human dignity. In the introduction chapter to my thesis, I spoke of Palmer’s (2009) thoughts on the U.S.’s response to the tragedy of 911. The U.S. chose to fight rather than seek justice. This choice led to

destruction rather than creation. I believe the same choice is now present in the current situation with ISIS. Destruction is also a problem in the way that the Israelis and Palestinians address the problem of occupation. How many more innocent men, women, and children must die before the Israelis and Palestinians realize that revenge is not the answer? These conflicts must be addressed with thoughts of human dignity first and foremost: human dignity of the victims, as well as human dignity of the perpetrators and decision makers.

I heard a quote on CBC radio (although I do not have the source): “Torture says more about the torturer than it does about the person being tortured.” This quote was in reaction to the report published on the actions of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) during the war on terror after 911.

Frankl (1946/1963) believes that hope is found in purpose and meaning. He quotes Nietzsche: “He who has a *why* to live for can bear with almost any *how*” (p. 121). People in the Nazi concentration camps had to learn that “*it did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us*” (p. 122). Meaning and purpose are particular to each individual. Frankl gives the example of how meaning differed for two inmates who were contemplating suicide. For one inmate, hope was the thought of his young child waiting for him in another country. For the other inmate, a scientist, hope was the thought of his unfinished book.

Frankl (1946/1963) affirms, “No one can relieve him of his suffering or suffer in his place. His unique opportunity lies in the way in which he bears his burden” (p. 124). This is at the core of courage and resilience. “Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfill the tasks which it

constantly sets for each individual” (p. 122). I think of Nelson Mandela, imprisoned for 27 years, who became president of South Africa. The president of Brazil, Dilma Rousseff, imprisoned and tortured under the military regime, champions the reconciliation efforts in her country. Malala Yousafzai, the young girl from Pakistan who nearly died from an assassin’s bullet, is the youngest Nobel Peace Prize winner. She fights for education of all children. These individuals suffered terribly and chose to devote themselves to alleviating suffering in the world. They bear their burden with extraordinary grace.

The following two quotes, I feel, are beautiful descriptions of courage:

Ultimate courage, I believe, is to live, love, and work when your heart is broken because you’ve befriended the God whose singular creating is infinitely more loving and lonely than yours. (Neville, 2002, p. 131)

Oh God, I thank You for having created me as I am. I thank You for the sense of fulfillment I sometimes have; that fulfillment is after all nothing but being filled with You. I promise You to strive my whole life long for beauty and harmony and also humility and true love, whispers of which I hear inside me during my best moments. (Hillesum, 1983, p. 74)

Hillesum, imprisoned in Westerbork, an internment camp in Holland during WWII, does not pray to be spared her suffering; she prays for strength to endure her suffering with grace. A courageous act indeed!

## Chapter 6

### Situating the Inquiry Within a Psychological Framework: Resilience

#### Resilience

Mathematicians have worked out  
how to calculate the bounciness of a ball:

(the coefficient of this x the cosine of that)  
+ the differential of today's weather all ÷ by  
a piece of string (and the speed of the train)  
= the same as dropping different balls together  
and seeing which ball has the longest bounce

Measuring how well a person will rebound  
after being dropped on is still being worked on:

some believe it has something to do with  
the *thickness* of their skin whether their *stretching*  
reaches a breaking point or results in *withstanding*  
whether they can fight *and* flee how many times  
the person has returned to a *vertical* position before

(Westwater, 2013, <http://tuesdaypoem.blogspot.ca>)

#### Definitions of Resilience

The American Psychological Association defines resilience as, “The process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or even significant sources of stress—such as family and relationship problems or workplace and financial stressors. It means bouncing back from difficult experiences” (American Psychological Manual, 2014, “What is Resilience,” <http://www.apa.org>)

Thomas Moore, (1992/1993) in *Care of the Soul: a Guide for Cultivating Depth and Sacredness in Everyday Life*, speaks of the “gifts of depression” (p. 105). Moore is not speaking of clinical depression, but of those times when life seems futile. He

ponders, “What if ‘depression’ were simply a state of being, neither good nor bad, something the soul does in its own good time and for its own good reasons?” (p. 210). He suggests that periods of depression are exhortations from the soul. Viewed in this manner, depression could be perceived as a tool to building resilience.

Steven Southwick, MD, Faith Ozbay, MD and Linda Mayes, MD, (2008) in their article, “Psychological and Biological Factors Associated with Resilience to Stress and Trauma,” claim that resilience is “multidimensional in nature” (p. 131). Some individuals, when faced with adversity, will cope in some situations, but not in others. “Domains that have been identified as essential for optimal functioning include educational resilience, emotional resilience, behavioural resilience, and relationship resilience” (p.131). Individuals cannot be expected to perform optimally in all aspect of their lives, or throughout their lives. “Resilience is also dynamic rather than static” (p. 132). Individuals may be resilient at one time in their life and not another, or resilient in one situation and not another.

Boris Cyrulnik (2005) is a French doctor, ethologist, and psychiatrist, known for developing and explaining the concept of psychological resilience. Cyrulnik’s parents were Jews who were arrested and murdered during World War II. Cyrulnik was entrusted to a foster family at the beginning of the war. He was taken by the Nazis in a raid in Bordeaux, but escaped detention by hiding in a washroom. He spent the rest of the war working as a farm boy under a false name.

Cyrulnik (2005) describes resilience as “a strategy for struggle against unhappiness that makes it possible to seize some pleasure in life despite the whispering of ghosts in the depths of our memory” (p. xvii).

“We can’t speak of resilience unless there has been a trauma followed by the resumption of some kind of development, a mended rip” (Cyrulnik, 2005 p. 2). Cyrulnik compares the trauma that individuals suffer to the whispering of ghosts. The trauma can never be erased and the individuals are forever changed. I know of a family who lost their two young daughters to a tragic accident. Life will never be the same; they will never be the same. The loudness of the ghost’s whisper is determined by the individual’s resilience. Trauma is “the feeling of an event, a reality [which causes] a surprise and a meaning that make the thing salient, conspicuous. Without surprise, nothing would emerge from reality. Without salience, nothing would come into awareness” (p. 4). Trauma consists of a psychic near-death event followed by the representation of that event. “Resilience calls for a repairing of the real blow followed by a repairing of the representation of that blow” (p. 32). Attending to the physical needs of the [traumatized person] will help in the present moment but if there is to be a real healing the care must be “imbued with meaning and direction” (p. 32). Cancer support groups address the immediate crisis and cancer survivor groups address the representation of that crisis.

Trauma is a “psychic near-death experience” (Cyrulnik, 2005, p. 36). Any trauma can become a tragedy. It is the individual’s representation of the traumatic event that determines the effect that event will have on the person’s life. This connects with Viktor Frankl’s idea that individuals do not choose what happens, only their reaction to what happened. Cyrulnik believes that “we have the power to make something out of it” (p. 12). In order for this to happen there must be “bond and meaning” (p. xvii).

In *The Whispering of Ghosts*, Cyrulnik (2005) studies resilience in street children, children suffering from abuse, survivors of trauma, and celebrities who experienced



trauma and abuse. He presents the various components of resilience as mini chapters. I will present these components in paragraph form. Many of the Cyrulnik's components as well as those of other authors will be found in Chapter 7, "Situating the Inquiry Within the Narratives."

### **Moments of Light**

Moments of light that appear in times of the dark night of the soul contribute to resilience. Cyrulnik (2005) coins the term "privileged receptor" (p. 29) to describe the ability of the individual to capture a moment of light in the dark night of the soul. He gives the example of a young street child who, upon seeing a group of well-bred children in white smocks, went to school and eventually became director of a prestigious school. This child had a "life project. His ideal self, his aspirations, and probably his daydreams revealed what could still make him happy although he had known only an incredible series of misfortunes" (p. 29). Moments of light can manifest as little sparks and they can be very insignificant. In 1971, I was living far from home when I ended a relationship. I felt miserable, confused, and very lonely. Hearing Neil Diamond's song *Cracklin Rosie* cheered me up each and every time.

### **Hope**

Traumatized children who have hope are able to dream of a better future. Although their past and present realities are dreadful, they dream to protect themselves or to imagine themselves in a better world. There is a twofold aspect to daydreams: passive daydreaming acts as "a balm when reality is painful, whereas active daydreaming is a sample of the way to make ourselves happy, a creative activity pinning down hope in a desperate world" (Cyrulnik, 2005, p. 31). Resilient street children will do anything to

survive: steal, use drugs, and prostitute themselves while “[projecting] onto the screen of their inner theater an ideal dream in which they assign themselves the role of the loved child, the renowned hero, or the adult who is simply happy” (p. 31). Resilience “springs forth in the imagination” (p. 31). A story from Viktor Frankl’s (1946/1963) *Man’s Search for Meaning* gives a poignant example of the loss of hope. A prisoner had a dream that the war would end by March 30, 1945. It was February. The man, a well-known composer and librettist, was full of hope and convinced that his dream was an omen. However, the day drew near and there was little evidence that the war was going to end. On March 29, the man became ill and feverish. On March 30, the day he thought the war would end, his condition drastically deteriorated. He died on March 31.

Hope is acquired at a very young age in the relationship between the child and his/her parents. Hope is nurtured in experiences in which the child, teen, young adult, and adult learn competency. Flach (1997) is an internationally recognized psychiatrist and author who spent 30 years in practice, scientific research, and teaching, all contributing to his perspective on resilience. In *Resilience: The Power to Bounce Back When the Going Gets Tough*, he states:

Hope is born of faith, the kind of faith that makes us believe that our lives serve an ultimate purpose in the scheme of things, that there is a higher power to whom we can turn in search whenever we must pass through the ‘strange, gray land.’ (p. 24)

He gives the example of young prisoner-of-war soldiers not faring as well as older, more seasoned soldiers who had more training and life experiences.

## Storytelling

For there to be resilience, traumatic events must be made coherent. This is made possible through “*narration*” (Cyrulnik, 2005, p. 37). There must be an awareness of the traumatic event. This traumatic event is set in memories. The memories are connected and organized in time, and must be shared with a significant other. In this “*narration*. . . . Even [in] the smallest account each person is a co-author of the story (p. 37).

Cyrulnik (2005) uses the term “splitting” to “describe [a] narrative process that, in the face of a threat, divides the account into two incompatible parts. One part is confused . . . while the other . . . becomes a source of light” (p. 38). Cyrulnik discusses the film *Life is Beautiful*, in which the main character, Guido, uses stories to bridge between the sweet life he and his son had, and the horrors of the Nazi concentration camp.

In the course, “Lifespan Psychology,” my professor, Colleen Mac Dougall, spoke of *either, or, and*. She was a marriage therapist who counselled couples who often found themselves in intransigent *either/or* positions. She felt her work was to introduce *and* in order to help bridge the gap between the partners. I think that storytelling can be the *and* between what was and what is now, with now being the time period after a traumatic event. It can facilitate the transition from life in the traumatic situation to life after the trauma:

We are all co-authors of the personal accounts of those who have been wounded in their souls. When we silence them, we leave them in the death throes of the scarred part of their self, but when we listen to them as though we were receiving a revelation, we run the risk of transforming their story into a myth. . . . There is only one way to care for a traumatized person and calm the people around him:

understanding. Immediately after an accident, just being present and speaking to the victim can be enough to make him feel safe. It is only later that the coherence of the narrative will bring coherence to the event. (Cyrulnik, 2005, pp. 38-39)

Cyrulnik (2005) has an interesting observation on the role of storytelling:

Memories evolve with time and with storytelling. But the inner world of trauma also depends on the inner world of the person who is confided in and on the emotional charge that the culture assigns to the traumatized event. This means that the way everyone—absolutely everyone—speaks of the trauma is part of the traumatization, whether bandaging it or ulcerating it. (p. 41)

One needs only to think of the victims of rape in the military to understand the relevance of this statement. In this past year, a number of professional athletes have come out regarding either their sexual orientation, the trauma of repeated concussions, or their battles with mental illness. Each spoke of excruciating pain and anguish, of suffering alone and in silence, and the liberation and healing that came with sharing their story. They were unanimous in their hope that this would benefit others.

### **Despondency**

“Many people have begun to blossom out after a period of despondency marking the end of a costly lifestyle and a defense mechanism that did not respect the personhood of the injured party” (Cyrulnik, 2005, p. 88). Many women and men find new meaning in life following very painful divorces. Many widows suddenly join clubs, travel and have a wonderful time following the death of a controlling, manipulative husband.

## **Daydreaming**

Individuals in distress will invent a story; i.e., daydream of an idealized situation. This daydream helps to heal and acts as protection. For there to be resilience, “daydreams must coexist with the ideal self” (Cyrulnik, 2005, p. 95). The resilient individual will use daydreaming to imagine and act on the idealized situation. A non-resilient individual will simply continue to daydream.

Cyrulnik (2005) explains the two sides to daydreaming. As a temporary stopgap, in an unbearable situation, it is acceptable, even necessary. Prolonged daydreaming may become detrimental if it acts as an escape from reality. What is required is the integration of the stopgap with the unpleasant reality. I remember an article by J. Philips (1995), “The Psychotherapist as Spiritual Helper,” for the course, “Explorations of Hope.” The article, which perfectly exemplifies daydreaming as a stopgap, discusses the situation of people diagnosed with cancer. At the time of diagnosis, the patient hopes that the diagnosis is wrong, that the illness will never develop. When the illness sets in, the patient hopes for recovery. As the illness progresses, the patient hopes for times free of pain, the ability to move about, and for visits with loved ones. When the illness reaches the terminal stage, the patient hopes to die peacefully, to have loved ones with him/her, and to be free of pain. At each painful step in the process of declining health, the patient entertains hope (stopgap daydreaming) that things will be not be so bad, and readjusts the daydream as the situation deteriorates.

Daydreaming is a representation of hope. It gives hope shape and texture. Daydreaming, hope, and being heard allow the traumatized person to “regain control of his history” (Cyrulnik, 2005, p. 97).

## **Falling Apart**

Flach (1997) has a somewhat different perspective. He proposes that falling apart may frequently be the healthy response to adversity. The failure to fall apart leads to illness. Illness persists:

if we cannot put ourselves and the pieces of our lives together again in a new, more effective synthesis afterward. I have termed the strengths we require to master cycles of disruption and reintegration throughout our lives *resilience*; and it is resilience that is at the heart of what we call mental health. (p. 43)

Flach (1997) proposes three tactics to help when falling apart. The first is diversion: removing the self either mentally or physically from the situation in order to provide a temporary sanctuary to pull the self together. The second is taking steps to regain as much control over one's life as possible. I am reminded of the serenity prayer: serenity to accept what cannot be changed, courage to change what can be changed, and the wisdom to know the difference. Along with control, Flach recommends self-discipline. People make hundreds of decisions a day, choices between doing what needs to be done and procrastinating. His third and final recommendation involves empathy. "There is perhaps no more effective way to relieve psychic pain than to be in contact with another human being who understands what you are going through and can communicate such understanding to you" (p. 31).

From his many years of practice helping clients overcome adversity, Flach (1997) assembled a list of resilient attributes: strong self-esteem, independence, flexibility in thought and action, establishment of a network of friends, cultivation of confidants, discipline and sense of responsibility, recognition of special gifts and talents, open-

mindedness and receptivity, an ability to dream, possession of a wide range of interests, a sense of humour, insight, and a high tolerance of stress.

### **Resilience Factors**

Karen Reivich, Ph. D., and Andrew Shatté (2002), Vice Presidents for Research and Development with Adaptiv Learning Systems, offer resilience training courses for corporate, education, health care, sports, and military markets. In *The Resilience Factor: 7 Keys to Finding Your Inner Strength and Overcoming Life's Hurdles*, they state, “Everyone needs resilience, because one thing is certain, life includes adversities” (p. 1). Adversities present in many forms, from being stuck in traffic, looming deadlines, and disagreements with significant others, to major life upheavals such as illness, job loss, divorce, and the death of a loved one, to name a few. Resilience “is the basic ingredient to happiness and success” (p. 1). According to Reivich and Shatté, although most people are less resilient than they believe, they can learn to become more resilient. “How we analyze the events that befall us has a profound effect on our resilience” (p. 3). The individual’s response to adversity is prescribed by that person’s thinking style.

Thinking style is like a lens through which we view the world. . . . Your thinking style is what causes you to respond emotionally to events, so it’s your thinking style that determines your level of resilience—your ability to overcome, steer through, and bounce back when adversity strikes. (p. 3)

Reivich and Shatté (2002) believe that people can teach themselves to be resilient. In fact, it is necessary to do so. “Resilience enables you to achieve at the highest levels at work, to have fulfilling, loving relationships, and to raise healthy, happy, successful children” (p. 4). Resilience allows you to balance work, family, and leisure. It allows

you to rebound after crises at home or work, handle trying situations with family and work, and deal assertively with co-workers, bosses, family, and friends. Resilience is absolutely necessary when making quick and vital decisions in very stressful times.

“What’s more, it grants you the ability to do so with grace, humor, and optimism.

Resilience transforms. It transforms hardship into challenge, failure into success, and helplessness into power. Resilience turns victims into survivors and allows survivors to thrive” (p. 4). Resilient people overcome adversity. They face challenges with enthusiasm. They enjoy new experiences. Resilient people have learned that “it’s only through struggle, through pushing themselves to their limits, that they will expand their horizons” (p. 3). Everyone can boost their resilience.

Salman Akhtar, MD, and Glenda Wrenn, MD, (2008) in their article, “The Biopsychosocial Miracle of Human Resilience: An Overview,” propose that resilience:

(1) can involve both physical and psychological realms, (2) is not only a response to trauma but to change in general, and (3) consists of either a return to the psychosomatic status quo or to a more or less harmonious adaptation to the altered inner or outer reality. (p. 4)

These authors explore resilience in the lives of Stephen Hawking, Christopher Reeve and Michael J. Fox. Their findings are discussed in, Chapter 7, “Situating the Inquiry Within the Narratives.” I would like to close this section on resilience with a quote from these authors, which I believe sums up resilience beautifully: “It is love (from others, for others, for oneself, and for life in general) that ultimately underlies the phenomenon of resilience” (p. 15).



## Chapter 7

### Situating the Inquiry Within the Narratives

#### THE JOURNEY

One day you finally knew  
what you had to do, and began,  
though the voices around you  
kept shouting  
their bad advice—  
though the whole house  
began to tremble  
and you felt the old tug  
at your ankles.

“Mend my life!”  
each voice cried.

But you didn’t stop.  
You knew what you had to do,  
though the wind pried  
with its fingers  
at the very foundations,  
though their melancholy  
was terrible.

It was already late  
enough, and a wild night,  
and the road full of fallen  
branches and stones.

But little by little,  
as you left their voices behind,  
the stars began to burn  
through the sheets of clouds,  
and there was a new voice  
which you slowly  
recognized as your own,  
that kept you company  
as you strode deeper and deeper  
into the world,  
determined to do  
the only thing you could do—  
determined to save  
the only life that you could save.

(Oliver, 2001, pp. 9-10)

### **Catherine's Narrative**

I see a small, well-dressed, smiling lady, in her early eighties, in church, at concerts, in the library, at gallery openings, or just walking about town. She is greeted by many and always has something nice to say. Her laughter is deep and frequent. She loves to talk about books, travel, music, and art. She engages people. She is loved and admired by many. This lovely lady has an incredible story.

I met with Catherine in her home. She was preparing to move out of town in a month. I was amazed that she was able to sit with me and relate her story at such a stressful time. Her home was bright, warm, comfortable, and filled with paintings and books. On the table was a beautiful card of a kite given to her by her grand-daughter, Sunshine.

Catherine's parents were exceptional people. They met during WWII. Catherine's mother was a nurse in the hospital where Catherine's father was being treated. Catherine's mother had worked briefly in the U.S. prior to joining the French Red Cross and working as a nurse in France. Her father was 45, her mother 35 when they married. "I think my mother was in a marrying mood. She was 35 and she wanted to have children." They had one daughter Jessie, followed by twins, Betty and Catherine, two-and-one-half years later.

Catherine's father was a minister involved in church expansion, in Canada. The family moved frequently. Summers were spent in small rural parishes with the father preaching sermons on Sundays and presiding over funerals and weddings during the week. His income was low. Catherine's mother owned businesses and some real estate. She took care of the finances. She was quite avant-garde for her time. The family took

in lodgers. Catherine remembered expressing surprise when she found one of the lodgers painting a bedroom in the house. She said to her mother, “Oh! I didn’t think that needed painting,” to which her mother replied, “Well, he can’t pay the rent, so he might as well do something.”

Catherine describes her father as very understanding. “He worked with a lot of down-and-outers in the last part of his life.” He was a minister during the time of the Temperance Union, therefore well acquainted with the ravages caused by drinking. In the last 10 years of his life, he worked as chaplain with the police corps. He attended police court every morning, and spent the afternoons visiting people who had been in court. He would help them get their glasses, inform their wives or pay for their release. This was quite an inspiration to young Catherine.

Catherine describes her mother as a brilliant woman, very literary. Catherine’s mother finished grade eight and went into nursing in 1908. She travelled extensively, and had seen the world by the time she was 35.

Catherine admits to there being frequent arguments between her parents. “I think, we have to recognize two strong-minded people getting married in their late ... 35 and 45, there are bound to be differences.” Catherine felt that her mother put the children ahead of her husband, and that she belittled her husband. Catherine loved her father deeply and admired him for his kindness and understanding. He once said to her, “Catherine you’re the only one who really understands me.”

Catherine describes her twin sister as being very intelligent. Catherine had dyslexia and repeated grade one. Although no one questioned the reasons for Catherine’s twin

sister being a year ahead, Catherine felt that she lived in her sister's shadow. Catherine excelled in sports, particularly tennis and badminton.

Catherine's twin, Betty, and the eldest sister, Jessie, attended university. Catherine went into nurse's training. Jessie became a teacher, married and had four children. "She never made any waves that would disturb my mother," Catherine said laughing. "So that was a comfort to my mother."

Betty became a librarian. She was the adventurous one in the family, working across Canada, travelling extensively, and living in Europe for a period of time. Betty was single. She had two pregnancies. The first child was put up for adoption. She had twins in the second pregnancy; they were also put up for adoption. She reunited with them many years later. They had been placed with a very nice family and given an excellent education. The reunion was successful. Betty helped her grown children financially and they are very supportive of her now that she is in a nursing home.

I felt it important to spend this time relating Catherine's earliest years and describing her family in detail, as they played a crucial role in helping Catherine survive the tragedies that befell her. Cyrulnik (2005) in *The Whispering of Ghosts: Trauma and Resilience*, stresses the importance of structured families: the displays of affection, talking of household tasks, prayer, storytelling all give meaning. "This family belief in internal control creates the equivalent of secure attachment, an inner force that allows the child to escape the stereotypes of his social group" (p. 53). The families are "functionalist ... each element of the family system adapts to the others so as to accomplish a joint endeavor. This is not sacrifice but consideration" (p. 54). "A surrounding emotional envelope and ritual structures ... [enable individuals to] turn

misfortune into creativity and the desire to excel” (pp. 56-57). Catherine concluded this part of her story with, “My mother had me to worry about.”

It is seven in the morning. Catherine is in the kitchen preparing breakfast. The children are still in bed. Catherine is particularly happy this morning. She hears her husband, David, up in their bedroom getting ready to return to work following an extended absence. Suddenly she hears a loud bang. David has shot himself in the head.

David had struggled with alcoholism for years. He had tried a number of treatment options, but would not join Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). David was not prepared to admit to being an alcoholic.

Catherine and David met in 1946. He had just returned from serving as a pilot overseas. “I was attracted to the fact that he was a little older and that he had a rather courageous career in the air force. I must admit, he was a very handsome man, and that appealed to me.” Catherine explained that it was probably an irrational love, but definitely romantic. She was 24 and David 27. In a subsequent conversation, Catherine mused, “Maybe I married, well it was a case of real romantic love and if I had analyzed it really well, I probably would not have married David. Well, you make mistakes in life.” She added, laughingly, “but it was you know, young love. After the war, and of course those that came back from overseas were always a little more glamorous than the ones that were around.”

Two years and one child into the marriage, Catherine had to admit that something was very wrong. David suffered from radical mood swings. Catherine suggested that he consult a psychiatrist. Catherine accompanied David on one occasion and questioned the psychiatrist about the mood swings. The psychiatrist replied, “Oh! Don’t you know?”

He's an alcoholic." David drank at home. He never went to bars. Catherine thought that David's alcoholism could be attributed to his service in WWII.

Alcoholism probably was a contributing factor. Thousands of service men suffered from alcoholism. There was talk of Shell Shock following WWI, but it wasn't, I think, until many years after the Vietnam War, that there was serious talk of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Alcoholism was first recognized as a disease in 1956.

Catherine eventually learned that David's mother had been an alcoholic. Catherine had observed on one occasion that her mother-in-law "appeared quite under the influence." At other times, Catherine observed that her mother-in-law, a very neat, tidy woman, would appear "very untidy, slovenly and very uncommunicative. If she was talking about anything it was a derisive kind of discussion." When Catherine mentioned her observations to David, he told her that his mother had had bouts of drinking during his high school years. David said, "Oh! She was a binge drinker." Catherine's father-in-law would say that his wife had the flu. Catherine laughed when she said, "I got very tired of hearing the term flu." Catherine's mother-in-law got drunk, fell down the stairs, suffered a stroke, and died.

Catherine says that in a lot of ways living with David's alcoholism, "was like living on a yoyo string: good times and then bad times. Keeping my hopes alive that it would get better." During the worst times, there was verbal abuse, "never anything terribly physical but mental torture, verbal." Catherine relates an incident when she and her young son, James were hiding from David who had been drinking and was being verbally abusive. James said to her, "Mother, you shouldn't let him say those things about you,

you know they're not true!" Catherine replied, "Well there's no point in arguing when he is drinking. There'll just be more trouble. He is not in his right mind."

One can see the influence of Catherine's father's understanding and compassion and her mother's common sense.

Catherine admits to these early years being very difficult for her children. She questioned her choice to stay in the marriage. Her mother encouraged her to leave, saying "You'll stay and there'll be a homicide." Catherine said ruefully, "Instead of that, it was a suicide."

Catherine and David owned a business. Catherine, much like her mother, was the one who ran the business. It was difficult financially. Catherine's mother helped financially, but David resented this. Catherine and David eventually sold the business. Catherine was hopeful that David wouldn't "go to work under the influence if he had to take a regular job." She hoped this would be a turning point and that David would conquer his drinking. Life on the yoyo string continued. Catherine gave David several ultimatums. Finally, Catherine and the two children, nine-year-old Jean and four-year-old James, left and moved in with her family. Her mother babysat while Catherine went back to nursing. Catherine was very grateful for her mother's constant support.

David experienced brief periods of sobriety. He joined an association and sought counselling. "We would go in and have counselling together with other people and it was always a nice occasion." These were good, stable and, fun times for the family. When sober, David was very capable. "He could pretty well turn his hand at anything." He helped plan and build their house. He was very athletic. Catherine credits David for their children's abilities in sports.

They loved the home that they had planned and built. They loved the town they lived in. They participated in many sports activities. All these factors fuelled Catherine's hope that the situation would, one day, change permanently.

Catherine had obviously given much thought to David's suicide. She said:

I think that took some nerve. I'm not like a lot of people who feel suicide is a very sinful thing to do. I think he realized he wasn't going to master this. He didn't want to go on with it. And he knew life, he knew we would have to leave again. Things had become too unstable. So that was, as they say, quite a relief for Jean and James. Jean was 14, James was nine, quite a relief in lots of ways. We would know from day to day how things were going to go instead of things being up and down. I think he knew that I was going to leave. I feel his suicide was well thought out. He felt it was the only, he tried all kinds of treatment. He was quite sober the night before he did it. He felt he'd given it all he could. I feel his suicide was a release for him and for us. The children and myself, we were no longer living on a yoyo, good one day and bad another. So, even though it was very traumatic, and I think it affected both my children, after he died there was a period of great relief but also of sadness. I think he did it really because he knew it was better for us.

Her words caused me to reflect on suicide. In one of my narratives, a young woman commits suicide to end her suffering following a very valiant battle to overcome her demons. This suicide could be perceived as an act of deliverance. David felt he could not conquer his alcoholism. He was aware of the devastating effect on his family. He chose, what he probably thought, was the only way to bring peace to his family. His suicide could be perceived as an act of benevolence. I know of an elderly woman who



upon diagnosis of a recurring cancer, put stones in her pocket, walked into a very cold river, and drowned. Her two daughters lived at a great distance. She did not want to burden them with her illness. Could her suicide be perceived as an act of thoughtfulness?

The courage that Catherine exhibited during her marriage and following her husband's suicide fits well with Katherine Platt's (2002) definition of courage as presented in her article "Gut is a Habit: The Practice of Courage." Platt believes that courage is practice; it is having the guts to face problems and adversities. The practice of courage involves "the doing of something repeatedly by way of study for the purpose, or with the result, of attaining proficiency" and it is "spiritual practice, as in a dedicated and mindful orientation to life" (p. 132). This type of courage involves "heart, spirit, intention, desire, liveliness, and confidence" (p. 133). According to Platt, courage is not innate. She admits that some people have more of a propensity to courage than others. Courage is not a character trait, an emotion, or an attribute. "It is action" (p. 134). Platt gives the example of a Nazi concentration camp prisoner who continues with his daily hygiene in spite of having to cleanse himself with filthy water and without soap. This man believed that by doing so, he preserved some measure of human dignity, in spite of the dehumanizing actions of the Nazis.

Catherine admitted that perhaps she should not have married David. She dealt as best she could with his alcoholism, at first coping, and then seeking professional help. She chose to leave David, and then to return to him. Catherine bravely admitted that David's suicide improved the family's life. Catherine wanted a stable home life for her children. She and her children moved in with her mother and Catherine returned to her career in nursing. Platt (2002) explains courage as practice as, "bothersome little acts of

daily courage” (p. 143). Catherine had many days where she had to practice “bothersome little acts of daily courage.” I asked Catherine what sustained her during those difficult years with David. She replied that the good times nurtured her hope of continuity.

Catherine’s career in nursing sustained her:

I remember the nursing was one thing that kept me sane because I would go to work and see people in such bad shape. I worked on a burn unit for a while. And that was very traumatic and I used to think, “Well at least,” when I would walk home at night, “I have two healthy children and I should be thankful.

Cyrulnik (2005) states that, “empathy, the ability to put ourselves in someone else’s place, is surely an essential component of resilience” (p. 34).

Catherine’s commitment to nursing and her devotion are perfect examples of Neville’s (2002) courage to dare mentioned in the chapter on courage. Neville speaks of the importance of committing to a job, finding meaning in one’s work, and a sense of accomplishment. Catherine credits her mother with being a huge support during her marriage to David and following his suicide. “My father had died before all this trouble happened with me and I was sort of glad that he never knew I had ended up living, marrying an alcoholic. It might have been hard on him.” Her family background gave her strength and resilience. She developed friendships and a like-minded community through her church. Her faith sustained her. “I think I just luckily have an optimistic attitude that would go on no matter what and for the children’s sake of course.”

Tragedy would strike again.

Catherine moved back east five years after David’s suicide. She had taken a course in postgraduate psychiatry and was working in a mental health institution. Her children

were in their early twenties. Jean was working and married. James was “still feeling his way.” Like his aunt, he was very “adventuresome. . . . He would do things that had not been taught him, but would just experiment. . . . He did things that others never tried.”

He was very athletic.

I phoned home on Mother’s Day when I came off duty at 11:30 p.m. I was working evenings, came off and thought, “Well, I’d better phone the kids. They probably have been trying to phone me. . . .” A friend of mine, an older man . . . he was there at Jean’s house and he said, “Oh! There’s been a terrible accident. We were just trying to go and get ya. . . .” They had trouble with the plane and had to make a forced landing. The plane touched a wire as they were descending and it went up in flames. So the four boys were killed immediately. And one was my son-in-law. . . . James, my son, was just really, just 21.

Catherine’s son, James, and her son-in-law were with two friends. One friend was a pilot and flying the small aircraft.

Catherine’s sister, Jessie, and her husband drove all night, picked up Catherine and drove her to the airport for what must have been an agonizing trip back west.

Catherine wanted to be a comfort for her daughter. She remained out west and worked. “We were both two distressed women,” she said, “We weren’t really helping each other much.”

Catherine’s insight, even at the most traumatic of times, impressed me greatly. No matter what she was going through personally, she related and empathized with others.

Catherine had been granted compassionate leave from her nursing job back east, and eventually returned to this position.

When I asked her what had helped her at this tragic time, Catherine replied that she took comfort in the fact that James had been having a wonderful time “experiencing life and enjoying so many things.” Catherine’s oldest, sister, Jessie was a great support to her. “My nursing was a great help during that period because it was always a source of income. I enjoyed it and saw other people’s troubles.”

Jean was very depressed at the loss of her husband and her brother. She moved several times, but couldn’t settle down. She eventually moved to the U.S. and secured an excellent job. The depression persisted and she began to drink.

Catherine believes that the tragedy of losing her brother and her husband at the same time was too much of a blow for Jean. “I don’t think she ever quite got over it.” Jean remarried five years later and had a daughter, Sunshine. The marriage lasted seven years, eventually ending in divorce. Jean moved back and forth between Canada and the U.S.

The final tragedy in Catherine’s life occurred in 1990. Jean and an on-coming driver died in a collision. Both had been drinking. Catherine believes that although her daughter had been so averse to drinking, she succumbed to alcoholism due to heredity and depression.

Catherine’s life turned around when she met her second husband, “who brought a great deal of comfort, support and pleasure into my life.” She added, “So the adversity happened but the end results have been a real blessing.” When I asked her what pseudonym she would like to use for her second husband, she instantly replied, “Comfort.” We had a good chuckle. She added, “because he was a comfort.” Catherine, was in her fifties and taking a post-graduate course in psychiatry, focusing on addictions.

I was curious as to how Catherine felt toward men prior to meeting Comfort. “Well I always kind of missed a man. . . . I never really turned my back on men. I thought it would be nice to have a man and when Comfort came along, I was very ready.”

Comfort had been in a very difficult marriage. Eventually, his wife filed for divorce. According to Catherine, the ex-wife would have Comfort do errands for her and ask for his help. She was clinging not wanting to let go. She became particularly difficult upon learning that Comfort had a new partner, and resentful when he remarried happily.

The early years of Catherine and Comfort’s courtship were difficult, with Comfort’s ex-wife continuing to make many demands. “I would be off hopeful, then I would be down in the dumps again. But I was busy. . . . So it was a very hopeful, but rather a very questioning time for a while. Then we married.” There was repetition of the pattern of upheaval as in her first marriage, but fortunately things worked out.

Sunshine once asked Catherine if she loved Comfort more than she had her first husband. Catherine replied, “Well, Comfort, we’re kind to each other. We both have had rough times, so we were both understanding and kind.” They had a lot in common: medicine, gardening, and music. Their marriage was built on trust and on readiness. Catherine says of her second marriage, it “was such a blessing that I felt very fortunate that I could put the other all away.” I said to Catherine that I thought they deserved each other. “Yes,” she laughed, “I quite agree. We really deserved each other and had many happy years. . . . So he was a great blessing in my life.”

Cyrulnik (2005) asserts, “It is not crazy to want to live, to hear at the bottom of the abyss a light breath whispering that, like an unthinkable sun, happiness awaits us” (p. 170). Catherine dared to believe that she could be happy and accepted that happiness.

Reivich and Shatté’s (2002) research reveals “four fundamental uses for resilience” (p. 5). Resilience may be necessary to overcome the adverse effects of very difficult childhoods. Resilience is needed to steer through everyday challenges. At some point in life, resilience will be necessary to bounce back from major life-altering events. And finally, resilience is necessary to reach out in order to find meaning and purpose in life, “to be open to new experiences and challenges” (p. 15). Resilience is vital in order to be the best-version-of-ourselves.

Catherine is moving to be closer to her granddaughter, Sunshine. She loves her deeply and admires her. She describes her granddaughter as being very thoughtful and loving. Catherine feels fortunate to have her in her life.

Sunshine experienced a difficult childhood and adolescence. Her mother’s alcoholism and her parents’ divorce affected her. She was about 15/16 when her parents divorced. She rebelled. Catherine feels that Sunshine, now in her early twenties, is reconciled with the past. These experiences have made her into an understanding, caring person who is now very supportive of Catherine.

I feel that Sunshine is very fortunate to have such a wonderful role model in her grand-mother. Interesting how resilience can appear to be hereditary. Is it nature or nurture or both?

Darling-Smith (2002) in *Courage*, believes that if we think that courage is only associated with soldiers, we would be abnegating our responsibility “to be courageous in our everyday lives” (p. 1). She observes courage:

In family members and friends [and] their determination to go on living with grace and love even in the face of severe suffering. They courageously refuse to give up or to give in to gloom and despair, despite terminal illness and excruciating pain, or deep depression, or grief and loss. (p. 1)

She speaks of people in the Twelve-Step program “who pursue and somehow find the courage to take the difficult steps required in dramatically changing their lives” (p. 1). I am privileged to know people who have overcome drug and alcohol addiction. I believe that courage, as defined by Darling-Smith (2002), applies to people who seek counselling. I will never forget the feelings of humility and admiration I experienced when I took the intake calls at the Calgary Counselling Centre. What on the surface seemed a routine task was, in reality, a moment of tremendous courage for the person calling. In Catherine’s narrative, one generation demonstrated courage to the other.

Catherine, her mother and Sunshine are excellent examples of courage as defined by Darling-Smith (2002). They had suffered and refused to give up. They are fine examples of courage as action.

Sunshine works to support her love of travelling. Catherine describes her granddaughter as being very intelligent, attractive, and very capable. Following a period of estrangement, Sunshine and her father are now quite close.

Catherine is very excited at the prospect of living close to her granddaughter.

As we were approaching the conclusion of Catherine's story, I asked Catherine to elaborate on what gave her the strength to carry on despite these many tragedies. There were many constituents.

Sunshine is a comfort to Catherine now. Catherine's family was a great comfort to her in earlier times. She had a happy childhood. She was very close to her father. Her mother was very supportive. Catherine said that her children were very important to her and that is what kept her going following her husband's suicide. Her eldest sister and her husband were of great support to her when she needed them most, at the death of her son and son-in-law.

Catherine effortlessly detailed what gave her strength. There were no pauses in search of an answer. Cyrulnik (2005) proposes that it is the individual's representation of the traumatic event that determines the effect that event will have on the person's life. Catherine has chosen to focus on what was good rather than the trauma. Frankl (1946/1963) determined that individuals cannot choose what happens to them, only their reaction to what happened. When I was reading Frankl's *Man Search for Meaning*, I felt that he was relating the story of a terrible time; he was not dramatizing the story. I had the same feeling transcribing Catherine's story. I would refer you to Bradt's (1997) definition of story, "story does not claim to "represent reality;" instead it seeks to explore it, to reconsider its possible meanings and significances. (p. x)

Friendships contributed to Catherine's strength. "Well, the friendships I had were very important to me and have been always."



I was curious to know if Catherine was ever angry with God. “No, I never felt angry at God. Actually, I am a realist and I don’t think that God actually dictates what happens to us. I’m a bit of a fatalist here.”

Kushner (1978) in *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, describes a God that is not out to punish, teach lessons, react in anger, or act on a whim. God is not responsible when bad things happen to good people or not-so-good people. Kushner quotes Jacob, “God I have no claims on You and nothing to offer You. . . . There is only one reason for my turning to You now because I need you” (p. 131).

In Chapter 1, “Situating the Inquiry Within the Researcher’s Autobiography” I spoke of my crisis of faith where I lost my belief in God. I remember driving to work one day and thinking, “I either choose to embrace life and do what I can to help alleviate suffering, or I can choose to end it.” On that fateful day, I decided that I *needed* [emphasis added] to believe in a higher power.

Kushner (1978) asserts that God does not cause misfortune. Misfortune happens. God gives people strength in times of trouble. God provides comfort when tragedy strikes. “God inspires people to help others who have been hurt by life” (p. 146). Thus, the people who have been hurt no longer feel alone and abandoned; they are comforted and protected. During the devastating floods of 2013, in southern Alberta, the first responders in my community were amazed at how few people required shelter. Most of the evacuees were taken in by friends and neighbours. In October 2014, the world saw a woman comforting Corporal Cirello as he lay dying at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Ottawa. God brings out the best version of ourselves. God is manifest in the courage people show in times of adversity.

Faith is vital to Catherine's resilience.

Catherine questions the existence of God. She believes that Christ is a great role model and that we should follow His teachings:

I can't say it was a very deep Christian faith. I don't believe some of the things, you know in the Bible. I'm almost a Unitarian in that way. But the spirit of always looking for the best in other people. I think Christ's life is the important part of my religion. His life and his actions. The Old Testament is full of wonderful stories ... but not exactly what you would want to live your life by. It's interesting but it's almost folklore. But I think the New Testament is what we should live by.

I asked her if she prayed. She responded that she did not pray regularly, but if there was a real problem, she always did. She didn't expect answers. She felt that prayer offered a more sensible approach to what the problem was.

Kushner (1978) believes that people should not pray to God to relieve suffering, but pray to God to be present in the suffering. I always wondered how some people could believe that God would heal them but not heal others. We are all equal in God's eyes. Adversity is not God's work. Adversity is fate. God is the faithful companion through the adversity.

Catherine champions a moderate approach to faith:

I think extremes, any religion that goes too far to the right, too far to the left, is dangerous. Lots of people feel that religions have caused a lot of the problems in the world. They say man is always in need of a faith and if he doesn't have a religion he'll have something else, money, success or something like that.

I think of the time Moses went up the mountain to accept the commandments and the people of Israel turned to idols. I know for myself, when I do not turn to God in prayer on a regular basis, I turn to the God of consumerism.

Church was a comfort to Catherine:

It always was there so I always went. During the really troubled times it was a comfort and the songs, and music. That's always been very important. [Her denomination] is luckily more logical [she chuckled] I always say, no extremes and very, very looking at the world today. That's what I like about it. It's recognizing the problems in society today and if we became more thoughtful of our neighbours and such there would be less diversity – wealthy people and poor. So it's been an important part.

Catherine mentioned a play that was very meaningful to her *The Bluebird* by Maeterlinck:

In it there are two little children. Their grandparents that they loved very dearly both die. They feel they can look up and when there is a little parting in the clouds, "there's grandma and grandpa communicating with them." And I love that interpretation and I feel that sometimes I can look up and communicate.

Cyrulnik (2005) states that "resilience springs forth in the imagination" (p. 31).

Church provided Catherine with a sense of community. We had a chuckle when Catherine told the following story to describe church friendships:

We had a minister's wife and she used to tell the story about a horse that always went to the fair even though it was just a farm horse. It wanted to be where all the fancy racing horses were. When he was asked why he went to the fair, he said,

“Well I’d like to be with those people.” Those horses, and I think it’s the same, you meet such compatible, nice people in church. I never found much bickering which some people claim goes on in the churches.

The relationships that Catherine formed in church, influenced her to be “understanding of other people and to go ahead and to go forward no matter what was happening. To keep moving forward.”

Fischer (2006) remembers the many instances of “the courage of ordinary people” (p. 112). She speaks of the widow who forces herself out of bed, the son who initiates a difficult conversation with the father who terrified him as a child. People who change careers, speak up in class, and who support causes. People marry, have children, and support aging parents or dying friends. These are all acts of courage:

Courage enables us to brave dangers and move through obstacles, endure suffering or lift ourselves out of it. It may benefit self, or save another from peril or even death. . . . What we most want for ourselves is that quality of spirit called moral courage, the virtue by which we act with integrity in spite of fear. Moral courage reveals us at our best, and it calls to those depths in us desirous of such graced humanity. (p. 112)

Catherine experienced a deep sense of community with her nursing friends. She believes that living in residence during the three years of training helped forge these strong, deep bonds. The nurses had very little time off and what time they did have, they spent together. They had yearly reunions. In addition to her nursing friends, her current friends are neighbours and people from church.

Catherine mentioned earlier how important her nursing was to her. “It gave me other people’s view and of the tragedies. Some of nursing is sad but not all. You do see a lot of sickness that is tragic. It certainly takes your mind off yourself.” She resumed nursing when needed. Nursing provided a good income and security for herself and the children. She enjoyed the work. In her fifties, she decided to train in psychiatric nursing.

Fischer (2006) explains, “If we cannot get rid of suffering, we are to find in it the seeds of transformation for ourselves and others” (p. 143). Cancer support groups, AA, Mothers Against Drunk Drivers (MADD) are fine examples of transforming suffering.

“Putting outside oneself the traumatic crypt forming a cyst in the psyche is one of the most effective resilience factors” (Cyrulnik, 2005, p. 102). According to Cyrulnik, 50% of women writers and 40% of male writers were severely traumatized as children. This perhaps explains why many resilient people embark on careers in the helping professions and why reaching out to others is so vital.

Humour helped Catherine through some of those tragic times. She relates the story of a woman she knew whose husband was an alcoholic. “I was talking to her about my husband’s problems.” There were many nights when Catherine’s husband would leave the home and drink in a shed. The woman replied, “Well, at least it’s cheaper than the hotel!” Catherine said, “I realized there was a sense of humour.” She continued:

That’s one thing if I had a choice of abilities, I’d have asked for a better sense of humour. I remember one girl I worked with. She could make me laugh like nobody else could. She could turn things around in our nursing and make them real funny. So it’s a sense of humour I would ask for, a bit more of it if I had a chance.

Frankl (1946/1963) mentions humour as “another of the soul’s weapons in the fight for self-preservation” (p. 68). He tells the story of prisoners, including himself, who were put on a transport that they thought was going to Mauthausen, an extermination camp, but was destined “only” (p. 70) for a camp associated with Dachau. Dachau had not, at that time, been designated as an extermination camp. The journey to Dachau was two days. The prisoners had to stand and take turns squatting on urine-soaked straw. They laughed and cracked jokes at their good fortune of being in a camp that did not have a chimney like Auschwitz.

The ability to laugh is a gift. Fischer (2006) states, “Humor affords a glimpse of transcendence, a suggestion that terror, pain, and death do not have the final say. It takes lightly the gap between how things are now and what we believe to be possible” (p. 159). Humour is a tool that allows one to stand in the tragic gap.

I was listening to a documentary on CBC. They were interviewing German women who had been raped by retreating Soviet troops at the end of WWII. One woman had been raped on two separate occasions. A daughter was born as a consequence of one of the rapes. During the interview, the woman turns to her adult daughter and wonders aloud how such a beautiful daughter could have been born from such an ugly man, and they laugh. I was speechless and in tears, awestruck at this woman’s marvelous spirit.

I was curious to know what character traits Catherine thought contributed to her overcoming such tragedy in her life. Catherine describes herself as always having been optimistic, looking on the bright side of things.

Her attitude reminds me of Etty Hillesum’s (1983) attitude. She was a young woman who, in the prime of her life, lived in Westerbork, a holding camp for Jews in

Holland. She was deported to Auschwitz, where she died. Her collection of journal entries and postcards is assembled in *Etty Hillesum: An Interrupted Life and Letters from Westerbork*. Etty became quite unconcerned as to whether she would or would not survive the war. What became important was to live in the present moment, the minute, the day to its fullest, to believe that “life is worth living” (p. 19).

Gratitude was ever present in Catherine’s story. She was grateful for the moments of respite when her husband was sober. When her husband committed suicide, Catherine was grateful for her two healthy children. Hope was present even in the most difficult times, “I had hope. There were good times. That always came back but maybe I was an optimist.” Catherine was ambitious and motivated. She took courses in psychiatry in her fifties. Catherine had a profound understanding of people and acceptance of them. She inherited these traits from her father whom, she said, could always, “See the good.” She experienced many trials in her life, yet she could empathize. During her years of living with David’s alcoholism, she was able to appreciate the moments of respite when he was sober. When the situation at home deteriorated, as it frequently did, she would remember the good times and hope that they would return. Catherine was very resilient.

Confidence is another character trait that contributed to Catherine’s overcoming these many tragedies. I asked how she managed to survive her husband’s verbal abuse. “I knew it wasn’t true what he was saying. I had confidence in myself.” Tennis, skiing and competition “were always important things for me.” Amanda Ripley (2008) in *The Unthinkable: Who Survives when Disaster Strikes—and Why*, believes that resilient people have an abundance of confidence. I believe Catherine’s abundant confidence is attributable to her parents’ strong personalities and the sense of worth they gave her.

At one point during our conversations, I said to Catherine, “When I am transcribing, I am always amazed: there is no bitterness, no pity, and no resentment, how do you explain that?”

Catherine answered that she thought that it was due to her upbringing. She elaborated saying that her father never looked back. He always had plans and was engaged in making a difference in the world. As for bitterness, she felt that it is important to take what you are handed in life. This resonates strongly with Frankl’s (1946/1963) statement, “*it did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us*” (p. 122). Catherine said of bitterness, “It serves no purpose, nor does it benefit anyone.” When referring to the tragic deaths of both her children, Catherine said, “I don’t know why I am still,” she laughed, “able to be positive.” I queried, “You never felt resentment?” “No. What’s the point?” and again she laughed. “A lot of people would be asking why me”, I said to Catherine. “No what’s the point?” she replied laughingly. She credits her nursing with helping her to see that everyone had problems: some more than others, some much worse than hers. She added chuckling, “Well, I may have thought, why me, but no, bad things happen to everyone at some time. I don’t think I’m selected out for having had a bit more trouble than lots do.”

Catherine exemplifies Nouwen’s (1992) “putting it under the blessing” (p. 96) as acceptance. There is no “Why, Why me, Why now and Why here” (p. 97). Christine Robinson, (2014) Minister, First Unitarian Church of Albuquerque, New Mexico, wrote an interesting article in “Quest,” a pamphlet published by the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Larger Fellowship. Fifteen years had passed since her original diagnosis of cancer. She had had surgery and chemotherapy treatments. The doctors told her that her



type of cancer should not recur. When the cancer returned she started asking “why me?” She explains:

“Why me?” We ask that when things are not going our way, and it is not a bad question. It is part of trying to assert control over a situation that seems out of control—a very healthy thing to want to do. It is part of trying to accept responsibility for the things that happen to us, and that is a good thing as well.

“Why me?” however, is a question with an attitude. It has an assumption behind it, which is that Somebody ought to be in control around here, and that Somebody ought to be able to keep a handle on things: a good and fair Somebody who doles out consequences in some kind of proportion to the goodness and badness of each person. (p. 1)

She wonders why she asks the question. She believes the choice is to exercise influence.

When we have influence, we can shape a desired outcome, but not assure it. We can influence our health, but not control it. We can eat right, exercise, watch our stress levels and wash our hands—and all of those things make a difference, but doing them offers no controlling guarantee. (p. 1)

I believe it takes courage to accept that we are not in control and to take the necessary steps to have influence in our lives. I was in the Cayman Islands for a course two years post hurricane Ivan. Many areas had not recovered from this devastating event. Yet, many people rebuilt knowing that another hurricane could happen the following season and they would have to, yet again, rebuild. The citizens cannot control the weather. They exercise influence; they rebuild in the hope that it is not in vain.

*Fiddler on the Roof* has always been one of my favourite movies. Tevye, in one of his many conversations with God, says something like this, “They say we are the Chosen People. Couldn’t You have chosen someone else once in a while?” I do wonder why some people, such as Catherine, are so challenged, and why some nations are continually challenged. I think of Russia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Poland and Bangladesh.

I wondered if Catherine regularly counted her blessings.

I didn’t literally count my blessings, but I didn’t resent what was going on. . . .

When I met my next husband, he brought a great deal of comfort, support and pleasure into my life. So adversity happened but the end results have been a real blessing.

In our final conversation Catherine offered these musings:

Now that I am reaching the end of my life and I am wondering, I’ve always been one that felt you had to be a useful part of society and, really, I don’t want to go on too long and be a care for anyone or anything like that. I believe, I’m a firm believer that euthanasia should be, should come into an aspect of it. We choose when we’re born in a way, at least the parents do. We should be able also to choose when we leave this world. And when all of your friends, your best friends have died and if you become handicapped in any way. I’m very lucky, I got very good health. Still the best parts of your life have gone and I still, I still enjoy the out-of-doors very much. I walked down to the bake shop this morning, and the fall colouring and just the fall vegetation just beautiful. All the rosehips. It’s a nice little walk along the creek to the bakery.

To this I say, “Amen.”

## Lee's Narrative

Picture this: a restaurant/bar in small town, northern Canada, late 1950's. You see a young woman, tanned, long blond hair. She is wearing a blue and white pansy-flowered top, knee-length denim skirt, and flat sandals. She is attractive and the picture of wholesomeness.

She approaches a table with a tray full of beer. She picks up bottles on the table and shakes them to see if there is anything in them. If there is, she puts them back. Sometimes she doesn't get it right and takes away a customer's beer. Sometimes she knocks the bottles over. One evening, she spills beer on a customer. He says, "Come back tomorrow night and bring your glasses." Lee does not return. Lee is legally blind.

Lee was in her mid-fifties at the time of our interviews.

Lee first noticed problems with her sight when she was in grade three. She had difficulty copying things from the blackboard. She was prescribed glasses. By the time she reached grade five she couldn't see the board even with glasses.

Stargardt disease, or fundus flavimaculatus, is an inherited juvenile macular degeneration that causes progressive vision loss usually to the point of legal blindness. The onset of symptoms usually appears between the ages of six and thirty years old (average of about 16-18 years). Several genes are associated with the disorder ("Stargardt Disease," 2015, para. 1). . . . The main symptom of Stargardt disease is a loss of visual acuity, which ranges from 20/50 to 20/200. Those with Stargardt disease are sensitive to glare; overcast days offer some relief. Vision is most noticeably impaired when the macula (center of retina and focus of vision) is damaged, leaving peripheral vision more intact. Symptoms usually

appear before age 20. Symptoms include wavy vision, blind spots, blurriness, impaired color vision, and difficulty adapting to dim lighting. (“Stargardt Disease,” 2015, para. 2)

Lee’s sight is now between zero and five percent. Her proprioception is very good. [Proprioception is the ability to perceive the position and movement of the body.] Her visual acuity of forms, shapes and colours is dependent on light.

Lee claims that her upbringing was very different from that of “ordinary people,” as she termed it. She was the youngest of five and raised by her grandparents. She spoke of her father: “He’d go to the store for a pack of cigarettes or a quart of milk and show up in another part of the country because he was a binge drinker.” She thinks her father suffered from a mental illness. Her parents were a loving couple and Lee’s mother tried to follow her wayward husband for a number of years.

Lee’s maternal grandmother came to get her at birth. Lee’s father had left the family permanently. Lee lived with her grandparents until she was five. Lee’s grandparents lived in a small town about 100 miles from Lee’s mother. Although Lee felt very well cared for, she longed to go and live with her mother and siblings and go to school.

When she moved back to her family she saw her grandparents on weekends, summers, and holidays.

Single mothers were uncommon at that time. Lee says she felt no stigma, “It was what it was.”

Lee’s mother found it difficult both logistically and financially to raise five children on her own. Lee had two brothers and two sisters, including a set of boy-and-girl twins.

The girl twin also had Stargardt disease. Lee says that they were wild kids, unrestrained. Lee feels that their life was very stable in spite of all the upheavals. Lee describes her older brother as being a father figure, very dedicated to the family. The middle sister was the mother's helper.

It is not the structure per se that determines the strength of a family but the love. I certainly credit Lee's resilience to these resilient roots that were set early in her life. Her early childhood experiences very much resonate with the life of my aunts that I spoke of earlier as my inspiration to write about courage and resilience. More will be said of the influence of Lee's family later on.

From a very young age, Lee learned how to compensate. She was gifted with a strong body. As mentioned above, Lee's older sister was afflicted with the same disease. The sister found it difficult to cope. She got into trouble; she acted out. She couldn't read the blackboard at school, or do what she had to do. She was teased a lot. Lee did not experience these difficulties. Lee believes that her mother had learned much from the experience of the first daughter with this disease. She was better able to cope and help Lee. Lee never felt different. She didn't let her blindness stop her. She admitted, "You know, [it was] my blessing and my danger too: just keep pushing, pushing, doing, doing and doing and finally realizing, 'Oh! This is not as easy as you think it is'." She would exhaust herself. This occurred on a number of occasions in her life.

This determination accompanied by periods of extreme exhaustion is characteristic of resilience according to Flach (1997), the internationally recognized psychiatrist and author. He viewed his patients, "as being among the healthiest people I knew" (p. xiii). He explains that what had appeared as a failure to cope or, as he terms it, "falling apart ...

was . . . evidence of resilience. The temporary state of confusion and emotional anguish in which they found themselves represented a singular opportunity to resolve old wounds, discover new ways to deal with life, and effectively organize themselves” (p. xiii). I found this hypothesis very interesting and encouraging. When a person feels that he/she is falling apart, there frequently is a sense of failure. This easily leads to feeling inferior and can ultimately, lead to depression. However, viewed as a time to sort through confusion and anguish in a time of stress or trauma, allows the person to take stock and keep going:

I came to realize that significantly stressful events, by their very nature, must shake us up and often disrupt the structures of the world around us as well. Moreover, such turbulence has to be accompanied by distress, which can range from mild unhappiness, anxiety, or impatience all the way to a state of profound anguish in which we might seriously question who and what we are and the nature of the personal worlds we inhabit. (Flach, 1997, p. 12)

He explains further:

I began to see falling apart as a normal—in fact, necessary—response to significant changes within ourselves or in our environments; this would hold true even if such episodes became dramatic enough to permit doctors to make traditional medical or psychiatric diagnoses. (p. 13)

He believes “this process might well be nature’s mandate, forcing us to forfeit obsolete perceptions and ways of viewing things in favor of new, more complex homeostasis more suited to our present and future survival” (p. 13).

Flach (1997) refers to these times in life as:

Bifurcation points—a term derived from the language of contemporary physics representing moments of extreme change. This is when we become severely destabilized. Our internal or external structures may disintegrate into chaos, and the eventual outcome of such chaos is totally unpredictable. For at such times, we are at great risk. (p. 13)

During these times of chaos the person may remain forever destabilized or this chaos may present itself as an opportunity “for reintegration into a new and more effective level of personal coherence” (Flach, 1997, p. 14).

Individuals go through many such bifurcation points in their lives: loss of a job, loss of a relationship, a move, coping with a major disease, and/or financial difficulties to enumerate but a few of life’s challenges. How much more so for the individual with a handicap who must face challenges each and every day.

Lee describes herself as ingenious, conniving (though not in the negative sense of the word) and unstoppable. Her coping mechanisms were very creative, as will be seen throughout the narrative. She said she could be manipulative. “I learned to do and I survived by the goodwill of many, many people.”

Lee was 22 and attending a community college when she was first assigned a learning aid. Prior to this accommodations were made without Lee ever having been labelled as handicapped. The teacher would place her beside someone who could help her, or Lee would sit herself beside someone and, “we would work it out.” Carbon copies were made of notes from the blackboard and her family would read these to her at night. Exams were read to her before or after school. We shared a laugh when Lee told of times when she and a friend would go out to read a novel or short story. They would

read perhaps half the story and then spend the rest of the time horsing around. This sense of fun while coping permeates her story:

It was a time when people just did things. There was no big boundary saying, “Okay this kid is marked special needs.” People just helped. I remember vividly those situations, just the way everybody rolled with it. It wasn’t just me, it was other people rolling, too; teachers rolling, kids rolling, just going, “Okay, this is how we’re going to do this.” I was not classified.

Her mother did not wish for Lee or her older sister to attend a school for the blind. She worked with the public school. She would ask for darker copies of mimeographed sheets, larger print, or different seating in class. Lee speaks of her mother as being a great advocate, but not one to coddle her children.

Having taught for 23 years, I now wonder if we, perhaps and with good intentions, coddled children who had special needs. Did we take away some of their resilience by being too hasty with accommodations? Accommodations were necessary, but did we overdo it? I once heard a psychologist question whether it was right to immediately send in a team of psychologists when a tragic event occurred. The psychologist questioned that perhaps the individuals were not being given sufficient time and opportunity to find their own resources. He wondered if perhaps individuals were being set up to feel helpless. Cyrulnik (2005) states that trauma can become a tragedy. It is the individual’s representation of the traumatic event that determines the effect that event will have on the person’s life. I think that this concept applies to a handicap. Is the handicap perceived as crippling or as a challenge? You will notice throughout Lee’s narrative that she experienced her blindness as a challenge. She not only adapted; she thrived and enjoyed



the challenge. Cyrulnik says of trauma: “We have the power to make something out of it” (p. 12). In order for this to happen, there must be “bond and meaning” (p. xvii). Lee received much nurturing: the love of her grandparents, the devotion of her mother, the accommodations made by teachers, co-workers, bosses, and friends.

Although Cyrulnik (2005) is speaking of trauma, I believe his principle applies to handicaps as well. Akhtar and Wrenn (2008), in their study of resilience in the lives of Michael J. Fox, Christopher Reeve and Stephen Hawking, relate how each of these men thrived in spite of their handicaps. Stephen Hawking, confined to a wheelchair, unable to move or speak, is an international authority on theoretical physics and cosmology. Christopher Reeve, a quadriplegic, did speaking engagements with subcommittees and advocacy groups, and shared his story through these engagements and books, advocating for the rights of people with handicaps. Michael J. Fox raises millions of dollars to combat Parkinson’s disease and continues with his acting career. These men exemplify Cyrulnik’s (2005) premise that:

Every trauma shakes us up and sets us on the path to tragedy. But the representation of the event enables us to make it the turning point of our personal history, a kind of dark guiding star showing us the way. We are no longer protected when our bubble is shattered. The injury is real, of course, but its outcome is not independent of our will, since we have the power to make something out of it. (p. 12)

Lee spoke of the social stigma of being Roman Catholic in a small, northern town, with a single mum and no dad. “There was something a little weird about the family in the community’s eyes.”

I asked Lee if this made them feel like a clan. She replied, “It’s not like we were super close to each other and sweet like the Waltons or anything” We both laughed:

We fought like devils. We realized that we are very much a clan even though we would never talk that talk. . . . When I married at 31, and I go to change my name, I couldn’t do it. It wasn’t that it made me feel repressed as a woman, or that I had to be cool and have my own name. I think it was more my clan, ya, I just could not leave that.

The family consisted of two daughters with Stargardt disease and a son who suffered from a massive brain tumour with many health complications requiring numerous life-threatening surgeries. Lee relates that although this was very intense and disruptive, life continued and there was still time for fun.

I asked Lee if all of these situations gave her home life an intensity that maybe wouldn’t be present in the home life of people facing far fewer challenges.

Lee replied that they were an intense household. She was an emotional teenager. Her sister, with Stargardt disease, ran away from home, an event that made the local news: this being a small town. Lee said “We just lived.”

I think that this ability to cope with many challenges was very typical of life in these small, remote communities. It was typical of the life of my aunts that I mentioned in Chapter 1. People, at that time and in those communities, didn’t question whether they were happy or not, and whether life was good. They coped. There was an acceptance of life’s challenges. I return the reader to Tillich (2000), as his definition of courage mentioned in Chapter 4, *Situating the Inquiry Within a Theological Framework: Courage:*

Courage as the universal and essential self-affirmation of one's being is an ontological concept. The courage to be is the ethical act in which [the individual] affirms [his/her] own being in spite of those elements of [his/her] existence which conflict with [his/her] essential self-affirmation. (p. 3)

Tillich (2000) continues "Courage is the affirmation of one's essential nature, one's inner aim or entelechy, but it is an affirmation which has in itself the character of 'in spite of'" (p. 4). Everyone carried on in spite of the many challenges. The teachings of the Catholic Church, at that time, greatly emphasized that people were not to expect or seek happiness on this earth. There were no earthly rewards. Adherents were to seek heavenly rewards through suffering. Did this make it easier to accept the challenges in life? I wonder.

I was teased a lot, teasing, lots of teasing. . . . I would come home crying sometimes. My mum would say, "Oh! Just take the high road! And you know, talk to me about it." Then I'd go out and play and forget about it. There was a boy with some kind of palsy and he'd tease me. "Hey, Lee, blind bat." And I'd say, "Shut up, shaky!"

We had a good laugh. "You know it was just like none of us were super sensitive. We would still play together. Like it was just, I was a blind bat and that's all there was to it."

At the same time, Lee wanted very much not to be perceived as different. She did not want to look blind. In school, she would not look at the board; she would look out the window and listen. She said she did weird things. People wondered. These behaviors caused people to think that she was mentally handicapped. When she was

older, they thought she was drunk. Lee admitted, “So sometimes there is something to say about fessing up at the beginning.”

She elaborated on her deceptions/coping. She refused to use a white cane. She would say to people that she had forgotten her glasses. She would stand at the back of a room and case the place to determine how she would get around. She would avoid certain social situations.

I mentioned to Lee that while transcribing our conversations, I had the impression that she never perceived herself as different. She replied that, for a very long time, she didn't, but does now. I inquired as to what accounted for that change. She thought that it was greater acceptance of herself. When she was younger, she felt desperate in her desire to not be perceived as different, sometimes to her own detriment. Lee laughed and said “If I fess up, then the cards are on the table.” I shared with her that not “fessing up” made her very gutsy, to which she replied, “Well, it was a bit too much, maybe. But that's what made my life a lot of fun, too.”

I said “That's the point! When I listen to you and when I transcribe, I feel that it all sounds like fun. It doesn't sound like you are working with, a certain handicap, if you want. It just sounds like fun.” Lee responded, “Most of the time.” I told her, “You were daring.” Lee, replied wearily, “I was scared. I didn't try to be daring. It was in my nature. I had this streak in me of not being different.”

I told Lee that I had written connivance versus handicap in my notes. I asked her how she felt about the word handicap. Lee answered:

It doesn't hurt me anymore. They're just words aren't they? You know, really, no I might have been [makes a grrr sound] might of shivered at it before, but no, no. We

don't use that. We use "challenged." But you know what? Sometimes when people speak too politically correct, it kind of irks me too. So, you know what? You can say whatever is wrong as long as you don't keep on it. You say it, then you just go along, but ya.

Lee stated, "I wanted to be good at things." She wanted to be good in school. She wasn't one to worry. She would get angry when she would reach an impasse in spite of her repeated best efforts. At one such time in school, she had what she qualifies as a nervous breakdown. She left school and stayed with her grandmother. They patiently waited till she recovered.

I refer you to Flach's (1997) "falling apart" that I mentioned earlier in this narrative. Falling apart is part of the resilience continuum. It is normal to fall apart at times of great stress. On the other hand, family structures enable individuals to "turn misfortune into creativity and the desire to excel" (Cyrulnik, 2005, p. 56-57). Cyrulnik continues, "The feeling of inner freedom, of a capacity for self-determination, is acquired early on, probably at the time of the imprinting of secure attachment" (p. 67).

In a conspiratorial tone of voice, Lee laughingly told me how she caught up when she returned to school. A friend allowed Lee to submit the friend's essay as her own. "I did it. I got by and I got back on track and I did fine. I knew how to get what I needed."

Lee spoke of having several of these "big crashes" throughout her life. I asked Lee if she ever said to herself, "This is my condition, I'm blind."

Lee answered:

I was not that comfortable with my situation when I was young. In hindsight, I was in certain ways but I just, you know, I just kept rasling around things, rasling

around things, conniving, figuring things out. . . . No, I didn't learn how to do that until I was 40. It was really hard coming out. . . . I'm still learning to relax with it. . . . There's times when I use my white cane and there's times when I, I seem to choose to wind up falling into a hole. . . . The worst thing is not going somewhere because, because you don't have the physical capabilities to do that . . . instead of seeking the help, you don't go.

An incidence of this unspoken co-operation happened when Lee attended a school reunion three or four years ago with one of her best friends:

We worked the room like we used to. She would be next to me and she would go, "There's so and so over there, like at ten o'clock." We had all these things, you know, we had all these tricks that we did, you know. Tricks for everything, too. I loved to wear make-up. I was terrible at it cause I couldn't see what I was doing. So you know, she'd look at me and take me to the bathroom, fix me up, get the spots all off my face, and then show me where this was and where that was. We had all these little things figured out, you know, and that's just people's kindness. She added, "I had a good group of friends to help me. I don't think they ever thought of me as being handicapped. We had a good laugh when Lee related this incident.

I remarked to Lee, "You had tremendous ingenuity. No wonder you would get tired, because your brain would always be thinking, trying to circumvent."

Lee worked at part-time jobs in high school. She wanted to be like her friends who had jobs. She worked in a restaurant as a waitress. I was stunned and inquired as to how she coped. A friend or side-kick, as we came to call her, helped her get an idea of the set-up of the restaurant. Lee would memorize it. She would pretend to write things down on

her pad and memorize the orders. As she said, she had many tricks up her sleeve. Lee felt that because it was “a burgers, fries and pop type of restaurant, things never got too out of hand.”

At another job, Lee washed dishes in a hotel that served large banquets. Her boss soon realized that she could not see; he moved her into a situation where she could cope.

This type of unspoken accommodation came up time and again in our conversations. I told her that I found it amazing that she did all these things without there ever being any discussion of her being blind. I also commented on her gumption.

Lee acknowledged the gumption. She humbly said that she had a little star above her:

I think I have a lot of luck. I do believe in luck and so I bump into these people, like that boss, “Well, we’ll just put you there” and we’ll do this and we all just humped along. Did we not know any better? There was never a thing about, you know, a person’s rights or disabled’s rights or anything like this. We just did. We just did what we had, we just did stuff.

According to Reivich and Shatté (2002), resilience transforms hardship into challenge, failure into success, and helplessness into power. Resilient people face challenges with enthusiasm. They enjoy new experiences. Resilient people have learned that “it’s only through struggle, through pushing themselves to their limits, that they will expand their horizons” (p. 3).

Lee and I went on to talk about the people that played a role in her life. Lee said that someone once said to her, “You have a lucky star.” Lee replied:

I think they're right. I've had really, really good friends, good acquaintances. You know, I've had some situations that weren't always the best, but I've some real good people in my life, from casual acquaintances to dear friends, to professional associations and working associations, to schools that have been beneficial. That's given me a lot of confidence and freedom. It comes from those people.

Lee gave several examples of how people have helped her cope in her daily life. She did, however, stress, "If someone makes me feel like they're helping me out, really I won't ask them again. I like doing things with people when there's mutual benefit." She added, "It's really hard for me to ask, 'Can you do something for me?'" A friend gives her a lift to the pool, Lee shows her some exercises. Perhaps that friend will stop at the bakery and Lee can pick up some bread. Another friend picks her up in the afternoon to take the dogs for a walk. Lee said that her life consisted of going from task to task.

Reivich and Shatté (2002) refer to this type of resilience as resilience to "steer through everyday challenges" (p. 15). Platt (2002) would describe this going from task to task as "bothersome little acts of daily courage" that define courage as practice (p. 143).

Lee emphasized how much she loves doing things by herself, but admitted she required a little support for many tasks. She finds it difficult to ask her husband to run errands. She prefers to wait till he is planning to go out. She is very independent.

I reflected that I thought most people struggle with asking for help. I will mention two resilient attributes from Flach (1997) that I think apply in this instance:

Independence of thought and action, without fear of relying on others or reluctance to do so. The ability to give and take in one's interactions with others, and a well-



established network of personal friends, including one or more who serve as confidants. (p. 99)

Lee is very grateful of all these wonderful people in her life. She stressed the importance of reciprocity. “I go skiing with friends who want to go skiing. I don’t go skiing with someone who wants to take me skiing. I ski with someone who skis to my ability so that we both have a good time.”

She would like to write a book about the people who have helped her. “It was nothing that was legislated or anything like that. It was just people’s ability to move in situations. I never remember one of my friends asking me, “What’s it like being blind?” She laughed. “I just don’t remember being asked that.”

I said in agreement:

There are a lot of good people out there. I experience that with my mother. When we’ve gone on our big trips overseas, or into town or whatever, I’m always pleased to see how nice people are. I’m juggling the wheelchair trying to get up or down stairs, get in through a door, and someone will always offer to help. It’s a good feeling to experience that.

In October 2013, I was taking my valise down the outside stairs and fell. I fractured eleven ribs and sustained three pelvic fractures. I had a walker for three months. It boosted my morale enormously to experience people’s kindness and thoughtfulness. I joked with friends that I would keep the walker and use it on those days when I felt I needed a dose of human kindness.

Lee said:

It is a very good feeling to live in it and that cooperation gives me a lot of comfort. And then whatever is bugging you, you don't feel so alone in your situation when you see that kind of cooperation between people. You feel good.

I asked her if she felt that there is something in her that draws out that good side in people. She replied, "You know somebody said that to me once. It's like, success breeds success. When somebody's nice to you, you're nice to them back."

Kindness breeds kindness. I imagine the ripples in a lake when you throw a stone. Was just thinking of St. Francis of Assisi's prayer where he says that it is in giving that we receive. I wonder, could it be that in receiving, we give?

Lee worked as a security guard at a Canadian Institute for the Blind (CNIB) residence for seniors. There were break-ins and robberies. Lee's assignment was to stand at the front door, do rounds every half hour, and check the custodial closet for prowlers. She would roam the halls and be a presence. She enjoyed her work and loved the seniors. She said laughing, "If I ever see a prowler, I'm just going to pretend I'm stoned-blind and walk away." It was at this time that she started classes at the local community college. She continued working at the residence a few months, maybe a year, until the prowler problem was resolved. Following this, she worked with the federal government as an elevator operator. It was a quiet building and the days were very long. Administration built a desk, put in a chair, and changed the lighting, enabling Lee to study in the elevator. Lee enjoyed swimming at lunch. She placed a sign on the elevator saying "Out of order." "They knew I was gone." Lee spoke fondly of the people that came and went in that building.

Lee began her collegiate studies in behavioural sciences. She quit after a year-and-a-half, feeling unsuited to this line of study. She received special funding for her studies, but in spite of this, continued to try and hide her vision problems. Lee was living on her own for the first time.

While attending the college, Lee met a person who introduced her to what would become her chosen profession. Although she was close to obtaining her diploma in behavioural sciences, she quit the program, and moved across the country to study in her chosen field. We shared a laugh when she told me that she chose the college not for its accreditation and testimonials, but because it was situated near a nice lake.

Lee emphasizes that changing programs was the best thing she ever did. It was a thirteen-month certificate program. Accommodations were made; exams were either oral or in very large print. Lee met many “like souls, interesting people, really, really interesting people, very different, very nice people.” She felt comfortable. There was no need to pretend that she could see. She felt relaxed. The academic portion was challenging but the practical portion was easy. Lee no longer needed to disguise herself, to work around situations. She no longer had to expend energy conniving.

I said, “So you could just be.”

“Could just be, ya, ya!” Lee replied.

She rented a room in an old rooming house. She had a hot plate. To Lee’s great pleasure, the house had its own beach. She swam every day during the summer. Lee walked the five kilometres to the college. She also rode a bike. She would ride the bike a certain distance, leave the bike, and walk the rest of the way.

I said to her in astonishment, “You rode a bike?”

Lee laughed saying:

I knew the road real well so I rode my bike along that road. I ran into something, then I stopped doing that. So you know what, it wasn't fool proof. When it worked it was great. When it didn't work . . . ?

She walked in the winter and at times skied through fields.

"Through fields . . . ?" I said, dumbfounded. They were farmers' fields and when necessary she would climb over the fences.

Lee, "Oh! It was a wild time. I did this for fun. Was it fun? I don't know."

On weekends, she worked in a halfway house, as a night supervisor for people who are mentally challenged. She would take the residents on outings: once to a wrestling match, other times to street dances where they danced and had a great time. She took them to one of her school parties, which was a little wild.

Lee was about 26 when she finished her studies. She moved back out west and started work in a very busy clinic. Being blind was not an issue. Lee became more confident. She hired a person in the clinic to fill out the many forms. Although able to write brief notes in the charts, Lee relied mainly on her memory. I asked her how she had learned to write. She wore magnifying glasses, hunched over, nose on the page. She added that she liked writing. "You do?" I said rather surprised.

"I still like writing. I like handwriting."

Lee earned good money but felt disenchanting with the bureaucracy associated with the position. Living in a large city was stressful. In the small town where she had lived previously, Lee had spent a lot of time skiing and hiking, and had participated in ski

races. Her ski-guide suggested that she move back and start training. He said he would help her find a place to live. “Then I married him,” she said, laughing.

Upon her return to the small town, Lee lived in a garage with a small stove, sink and running water, but no toilet. Lee used the bathroom in the main house. She worked as relief in various clinics. She used taxis to get from one clinic to the other.

One of the clinics was exceptionally busy. Lee’s boss realized that she needed breaks. He would put the kettle on. She would have a cup of tea and return to work. I asked her how it felt to finally be in a career where she could function with ease:

Oh! Just crazy good, and still does. When I walk into my little work room I feel good. I just don’t work to any, to the same degree that I used to. But I love my work. I love to close my eyes and do my thing. I listen to music. It’s really easy. I don’t have to pretend I’m something else.

Cyrulnik (2005) noticed that many resilient people choose careers in the helping professions. Reaching out to others is a vital part of resilience.

I said to Lee, “Tell me more about your skiing — besides skiing over those fences when you went to college?” Lee had skied a little in high school. She was 24/25 when she returned to skiing. She described herself as a recreational skier:

but I always liked to go in, if there was a little race in anything. I went into a couple of swimming races because I swam all of my life. And I saw these little racing things you know, and so if there was ever an event like that, I liked to go in it.

I wondered how she managed. “I had a guide,” she said. “I always had a guide.”

In college, Lee heard of a ski group for the visually impaired that included transportation. “So I put up with the blind part because I got the bus and I also got a guide out of it.” She joined the Canadian Association of Disabled Skiers (CADS). They combined cross-country and alpine skiing, and held a national meet every year. Lee was a very fast skier but had no technical ability. She skied for fun. She eventually became very serious about cross-country skiing. She worked with a coach. He suggested that she try a few races. Lee discovered that she loved to race and was very good at it. I was interested to learn about the relationship between visually impaired skiers and their guides:

Well, skiing with a guide is a real special relationship. It’s very challenging and the guides spend lots of time with you. The guide doesn’t have to be just a little faster than you. The guide has to be a lot faster than you if you’re going to go in a race. If you are skiing in a race, that person, that guide has to be prepared to move you around quickly. If you overtake another skier or if another skier overtakes you, they have to be able to ski around you, or sometimes, just pull you out of the way. They’re not supposed to touch you, but sometimes they have to grab you and just move you because there’s somebody else there and it’s, there’s some huge safety factors involved when you’ve got a lot of blind people skiing. They have to be much more competent.

I asked her how she knew where the guide was. She said she could see him as he was out front. The skier sets the pace. The guide’s sole responsibility is to guide.

I remarked to Lee, “One of the things that stands out for me when you say that you’re following a guide, is, wouldn’t you have to have an enormous amount of trust?”

Huge. Huge. Even when you go recreational skiing you have to have trust. Your guide will say, “Slow down and this and that.” You can stop. They’ll tell you, “We’re going to come up to a turn, now we got a big downhill, now we got this.” But when you’re racing you don’t do that. So you learn, I learned my race, when I raced I knew, I did my best to learn my race courses.

I went cross-country skiing shortly after our conversation. There was a group of visually impaired skiers on a straight stretch of trail. I closed my eyes to see what it would feel like. Unimaginable! My balance was off, I couldn’t feel my surroundings. I couldn’t move.

Lee commented that her strong self-reliance trait was somewhat detrimental when it came to competitive skiing. She had to learn to rely on her guide at all times.

Lee became very proficient. She raced in disabled and able-bodied races. She joined a team that travelled to the U.S. and to Europe. Eventually she became a member of the national team. She explained some of the logistics of big international competitions: the crowds that need to be navigated, the very busy course with many teams of guides and skiers. She mentioned having to rely heavily on others, having to be very dependent to be able to compete in world championships. She trained for five years. She won medals at two international championships. When I commented to Lee that I thought these accomplishments were an amazing feat, she said that it had been exhausting, and that she had had lots of fun. She continued skiing competitively for another year following the birth of her first child. Lee now skis with friends and participates in a couple of races a year. Another activity that Lee shares with her friends is running. She runs alongside friends. She had tried running on her own but stopped

when she twisted her ankle one too many times. Again, I told how incredible this all seemed to me. She said that she had had a lot of opportunities. I said that she had a lot of determination. She commented that she is not as determined now. I responded, “No, because you’ve done it all.”

I wanted Lee to tell me more about her family. Lee started by saying that it was never quiet at the table. There were discussions, laughing, and fighting. She mentioned again how strong her mother was. Lee is not quite sure what gave her mother strength: perhaps a Catholic upbringing, an inherited faith from her mother. What stood out for Lee was her mother’s sense of humour. She had the ability to laugh at the circumstances of her life and at herself. I remarked that I thought her family was very effervescent, dynamic, and resilient. She agreed.

It is of utmost importance to children that “in the course of their early interactions a trace was set down in their memory, the feeling of having already been helped in their ordeal when they were very small” (Cyrulnik, 2005, p. 30). “Hope, once learned and imprinted in memory, creates the ability to dream of the future” (p. 31). Interesting to note how there seems to be a certain hereditary component to resilience: first the grandmother, the mother and then Lee. Added to the hereditary factor, the following are a few of the environmental elements present in Lee’s upbringing: “a human network, tolerance of change, acceptance, responsiveness to new ideas, tolerance of conflict, and hopefulness” (Flach, 1997, p. 184).

I was curious about Lee’s feelings toward her father. She said that it was only recently that she started to have feelings for him. She knew he had left the family. She hardly ever thought of him when she was little. For most of her life, he was a non-issue.



She never met him. He died when she was 14. When Lee first became a parent, she experienced negative feelings toward her father. She spoke with her maternal grandmother about her father and was very surprised by what her maternal grandmother had to say about Lee's father. She spoke of him as being a very nice, kind man, and good with the children. He was loving and good to be around. The grandmother told her that he changed diapers, this at a time when most men didn't do such things. Lee said that she was amazed that her grandmother would speak of her father in this way because "she saw her daughter so wronged by this man."

In the last five years, Lee has started to see her father in a different light. She suspects that he suffered from major mental issues. "He wanted to make this life for my family and he couldn't." When the father was able to temporarily get his life together, the mother would follow him. This took its toll on Lee's mother and the children. Her mother eventually refused to have him back. Lee thinks this was a blessing. Her mother finally had stability in her life.

Lee eventually learned a few things about her father: he had been adopted, he was good looking, he sang, and wrote songs. It is suspected that he had established other families. Lee was unable to search for information on her father, as there were no records of the adoption.

Lee describes her maternal grandfather as a very good man. He took Lee out walking and hiking. She told me the story of when she hitchhiked 100 miles to get her grandfather a dog from the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA). She hitchhiked the 100 miles back with the dog in a box wrapped with coloured paper. Unfortunately, she had to take the dog back as her grandparents were unable to care for it.

“A 100 miles. . .?” I exclaimed. I continued:

In a way though, that kind of spontaneity helped you do a lot of things. If you had thought them out, perhaps you would not have done all of these fantastic things that you did. So there’s something to be said.

Lee, “There’s something to be said.”

Lee speaks very lovingly of her grandmother. She describes her as, “very, very huggy and we were always sitting on a chair together. She’d just hold me. I sat on her lap till I was a ridiculous age, ridiculous.” I felt enveloped in warmth as Lee told me this. They walked a lot. This love of walking remains with Lee to this day. Her grandmother was all touch. On her deathbed and in a coma, the grandmother held Lee’s hands in hers and stroked them. Lee says that her grandmother wasn’t the type to tell her what to do or not do. She didn’t tell her to pursue things, or to be strong. It was her presence. When she reprimanded it was with a laugh. Her grandmother asked for nothing. She had no official schooling.

Lee’s grandfather was a good man, but he could be unkind and unpredictable. “I know she would have liked to do things. She would have liked to dance more, sing, and have people.” Lee’s grandmother expressed no bitterness.

Lee feels she was the recipient of all of her grandmother’s love. I remarked that I was amazed that neither her grandmother nor her mother closed down emotionally. They were extremely warm and loving. Lee agreed.

I commented to Lee that it appeared that she rarely worried, especially when she was young. She said she learned to worry when she turned 40. Her grandmother passed

away at this time. Lee summed up by saying, “I guess realizing immortality and seeing my kids grow up and realizing that things aren’t always as you think they are going.”

People have been very important throughout Lee’s life. There was always someone there in times of need.

I referred to these people as her guardian angels. I asked Lee, “Do you think you may have stronger bonds than most people because of needing help at times?”

I don’t know. I don’t know. I don’t know if my bonds are any stronger. I just enjoy people. I enjoy people and I can really work hard, but I like to have a good time with my friends, too. I encourage them to do things that are fun or that they want to do. . . . I like bringing people out of themselves sometimes, you know. . . . I’m a good judge of character. I don’t know if I have any stronger bonds. I think we all have strong bonds with people and I love my bonds with people.

She said emphatically:

It means everything, doesn’t it? Doesn’t matter how nice a place you live in, how nice the scenery is, or the home or anything. It’s the people that you enjoy yourself with and that you share with too because it’s not all fun and games. So when you do have the opportunity to have fun and games you might as well, especially as we move into this time of our life.

I shared with Lee that it seemed a little ironic that she wouldn’t tell people that she had trouble seeing, when she is so open in every other aspect of her life.

She replied that she had not always been open. She was very self-conscious as a teenager. However, her indomitable desire to do things helped her overcome this.

I asked her to explain her indomitable spirit. Lee believes it is more work to not do something. She knows what she wants and finds it very easy to go after it. If she needs someone to help her she will ask. She is not offended if they say no. She has a very strong sense of self. She was self-conscious about her situation, but learned to work around it. This gave her confidence and agency.

I mirrored to Lee some characteristics that I thought accounted for her resilience: a huge sense of fun, mindfulness, a deep sense of gratitude, the ability to ask for help, taking pleasure in little things, and planning for the future. Of course, her courage and resilience are two exceptionally strong traits.

At the time of our first interview, I asked Lee to describe her concept of courage and resilience. Lee does not consider herself courageous. She says that she is resourceful. She defines courage as when a person, “goes into a situation that they don’t want anything to do with.” She defines courage as doing something selfless, as coping.

She said she had resilience, “I keep banging my head against the wall,” she laughed. “Resilience is to keep trying.” I asked Lee to tell me how she would define these terms now, at the end of our interviews. Courage is used to define people who are “faced with real hardship. I find courage is when you cannot do things.” She felt it was courageous to keep going on, in spite of adversity.

I shared with Lee the story of my best friend’s partner, who was diagnosed with ALS in April 2010. Her excruciating decline began with the inability to fasten her blouse buttons, lift her coffee cup, and tie her belt. She walked with a walker. She eventually was put on a respirator. She carried on, good natured, a smile on her face, and with hope in her heart. She passed away January 2013.

I asked Lee if she had changed her mind about resilience.

Lee replied: “Someone who rolls with the punches.” It was very interesting how she described herself as being more resilient now. It has come in the form of acceptance. She would never have owned a Seeing-Eye dog, or used a white cane when she was younger. She said, “I’d just as soon walk into on-going traffic, just as well get killed rather than be seen as somebody visually impaired. So that’s a huge resiliency for me.” Although Lee has used a white cane for many years, she only recently acquired her Seeing Eye dog.

I explained to her that there seemed to be two components to her resiliency: acceptance that she needed help, and acceptance of that help.

I wondered aloud why it was that her handicap had never been discussed with friends or people close to her. Lee stated that it was a case of there being more important things to talk about than her individual problems. I think Lee’s resilience is also a function of her incredible spirit, zest for life, sense of adventure and fun, and her love of people.

She said of her friends, “We have great joy laughing at stupid things.” Lee’s resilience is also a function of the great joy to be found in unimportant things.

In *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* by Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the main character describes a very good day where he happened to get an extra potato in what passed for soup, and was luckily the one who got an extra pair of foot warmers off the body of a deceased prisoner. This is an extreme picture but nonetheless very pertinent. It is something that has remained with me for a very long time — something I try and remember when times are tough.

Remi Brague (2002) in "Facing Reality," speaks of loving life as loving oneself and as:

fostering it. Some sort of courage is required not only for us to live as individuals, but for us to further life as a species. And we can't do that unless we think that life is not only fun, but good. Good period. (p. 52)

Our society is very focused on achievement, status, money, and possessions.

Unfortunately, this focus fails to recognize the contributions of the worker at McDonald's or Walmart, the intrinsic value of the person on welfare or the homeless.

Lee is happily married and the mother of "two wonderful sons." There is an addition to Lee's family: a Seeing Eye dog. Lee welcomed her Seeing-Eye dog shortly before our last interview. Her sister owned a Seeing Eye dog and found it very difficult. Consequently, Lee was nervous. Some of the criteria to be eligible for a Seeing-Eye dog are visual acuity, mobility and lifestyle. Inactivity would disqualify a person. The dogs come from the Lion's Foundation of Canada. Personnel from the Lion's Foundation of Canada do a home visit. The dog and the blind person learn how to behave in a crowd, use crosswalks and road crossings, turn left and right, navigate intersections, escalators and elevators, and walk in busy malls, to name but a few of the challenges.

The dog has given Lee a greater sense of independence. She goes for walks, does errands, and goes downtown: things she did not do previously. The dog walks her to the pool. He is a wonderful companion.

I have always said a car is an expensive ticket to freedom. Perhaps a Seeing-Eye dog is a blind person's ticket to freedom.

As you will have noticed, laughter is very prevalent in Lee's narrative, the laughter we shared so many times, and Lee's mother's ability to laugh at herself and life. The ability to laugh is a gift. Fischer (2006) states, "humor affords a glimpse of transcendence, a suggestion that terror, pain, and death do not have the final say. It takes lightly the gap between how things are now and what we believe to be possible (p. 159). Fischer gives the example of St. Teresa of Avila who complained to God when her cart overturned and she was dumped into some muddy water. A voice from the heavens replied, "This is how I treat my friends." "Yes, my Lord" replied Teresa, "and that is why you have so few of them" (p. 160). Thomas More, a Catholic saint condemned by the King of England in 1536, said to his guard as he climbed to the top of the scaffold, "I pray you, Master Lieutenant, see me safe up, and as for my coming down, let me shift for myself" (p. 16). Laughter and tears frequently appear at the same time.

Patricia Livingston (2000) in *This Blessed Mess*, tells of an airport agent who decided to lighten up boarding procedures. The agent said, "Please remain seated and passive and obedient until it is your turn. Avoid any form of milling and thrusting forward until your row is called. Then say, 'Mother may I?'" (p. 96). This will now bring a smile to my face each time I board a flight. Humour has staying power. It is present in that particular moment and it is carried forth to future times.

I get many humorous emails and they always make my day. Where would we be without laughter?

I was curious to know how Lee imagined the future. She will continue training with her dog. She is interested in doing volunteer work. Over the past few years, she has started to ride horses. This is proving a little more of a challenge, as she does require

help and does not have friends who share this interest. She continues with her work but at a reduced scale. She would like to take dancing lessons with her husband.

Picture this: Small-town Canada. A statuesque, blond woman now in her mid-fifties, dancing in the arms of her handsome husband.



### **Mark's Narrative**

Mark is a tall, slender, young man. He dresses in jeans, low on the hips, the style that is popular with young men his age, and T-shirts with logos. He presents in a confident and friendly manner. His mother referred Mark to me when I was searching for a young male who had overcome adversity.

Mark and I met in my home. We shared a coffee in my dining room. He was quite at home. He was always eager, very frank, and open. He frequently told me how much he enjoyed our conversations. I felt very privileged that this young man would be willing to talk with me. I had seen him as a little child when I taught his sister, Mary. Who could have predicted what he was to face?

One of Mark's earliest memories is that of shielding his younger sister Mary's eyes, to prevent her from seeing their father strike Susan, the eldest sister. Mary is 18 months younger than Mark, and Susan 10 years older than Mark. Mark was nine when his father was court-ordered to leave the home, 15/16 when he learned that his father had been sexually abusing Susan, and 24 when Susan committed suicide.

Our interviews began less than a year following Susan's suicide. It is thought that Mark's father suffered from bipolar disorder. He was court-ordered to consult with a psychiatrist. There were many arguments in the household. According to Mark, his father, who drank, would behave very aggressively, shouting, pounding his fists, and barking orders. The sexual abuse was never spoken of until many years later.

Mark recalls Susan as being a parental figure. Susan used to say, "You guys were never thankful to me for what I did." Mark at first thought she was referring to rearing

them. He realized much later that she felt that their father abusing her – which he began doing when she was around five or six – stopped him from abusing them.

One day Mark's mother saw this note on Susan's bedroom door: "If you don't sleep with me tonight I'll be crushed." She immediately notified the authorities who ordered her husband to leave. Several days passed before the children realized that something was wrong. Mark's father had left in the family camper; the children thought that he had gone camping. Mark remembers his mother sitting down with the children and telling them that their father had left because he had done some bad things.

Mark's father left the province. Mark and Mary would have supervised visits with him on birthdays, Christmas, and summer holidays. Mark knew that something was wrong but not what. When Mark was 14, his father moved back to town and the kids saw him occasionally. He was prohibited from attending Susan's memorial service. The family later arranged a private service for the father and family only, but he never came. At the time of our interviews, Mark's father was gravely ill. It was sad to hear Mark say that he did not know whether his father was dead or alive. He felt that if his father had passed away, the authorities would have notified the family.

Susan sought help and appeared to cope well for a time. However, following the break-up with her most recent boyfriend, she fell/jumped from a second floor balcony, fracturing her ankles and injuring her back. Mark does not know whether she fell, or jumped in an attempted suicide. Susan suffered from chronic pain, and unfortunately, developed an addiction to narcotic painkillers. Her life spiraled out of control. She committed suicide at 30.

As a child, Mark played video games with his father. Mark learned his tech-savvy skills helping his father fix Nintendo games. As mentioned above, Mark and Mary would see the father at birthdays, Christmas, and summer holidays. Mark said that he was always happy to see his dad, "Of course, being the only guy in the house after he was gone, it was really nice to see another guy." Mark knew something was wrong with their family life. He felt an inexplicable sense of resentment toward his dad. Mark's sense of responsibility and desire to protect his younger sister helped him cope at this young age.

Cyrulnik (2005) refers to this type of adjustment as "adultist. . . .The child who has real, and hence imperfect, parents learns to come to terms with them, enduring their small injustices and abandonments, which gradually takes him in the direction of autonomy" (p. 76). Cyrulnik uses the term "adultism" to explain the phenomenon of a child taking on adult-like qualities in the face of immature parents. Adultism is more prevalent in families where there is incest. Children can "break free and become resilient," (p. 79) as they assume the role of parent to their siblings.

Mark was diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) in elementary school. Learning was difficult; he was taunted and teased. He felt alienated and got into fights. Mark realized that he needed to find a more positive way to stand up for himself. He stopped fighting. Mark began to consider ADD as a gift allowing him to excel at multitasking.

I recently heard on the radio that many people with handicaps describe themselves as being very happy. Those who were born with the handicap say they never knew anything else. Those who became handicapped and after a period of mourning, readjusted their world and learned to live very happily in these new circumstances.

Mark once said to one of his friends that having ADD did not prevent him, Mark, from being a friend to him.

Mark's dogged determination to not be defined by ADD reminds me of what was said of Stephen Hawking, the world-renowned physicist. He "refused to allow ALS to penetrate his psychic structure and define him and his identity. This ego stubbornness in part accounts for his resilience" (Akhtar & Wrenn, 2008, p. 8). Neville (2002) in the article "Courage: Heroes and Antiheroes," describes the courage of self-identity as, "the heart to accept and build a life upon elements of life that are both given in some sense and problematic" (p. 124).

Mark's adamant desire to be other than his father is a recurring theme throughout the interviews:

Everything I do is to prove my father and my family wrong about what can happen based on what you're brought up. . . . I want to show my father up. I'm going to show you the way my father was and that I can be a better person.

Cyrulnik (2005) explains:

An event is not what we can see or know about the past but what we make of it in our need to become someone. The blandest commonplace can contain the seed of a major internal event if it offers the wounded person a foothold and a procedure for seeking lost memories. An event is what we make of what happened to us, be it despair or glory. (p. 92)

Mark felt very responsible and protective of his mother and sisters. He feels this way with friends and in intimate relationships.

I remind the reader of Neville's (2002) idea "the simple courage to dare. . . .The courage to try something in life, to identify with something and risk failure" (p.119). He speaks of investing in your family as opposed to having a family.

Mark was living out of town when Susan fell/jumped from the balcony breaking her ankles and injuring her back. He was not informed of the accident. When Mark heard of the accident, he put aside his feelings of hurt and anger for not having been informed, and came home to help.

Mark and his girlfriend broke up while we were doing the interviews. Although he loved her deeply and was very hurt, he chose to let her go in love. He understood her not wanting to commit at this time in her life: She is only 20. He thought that perhaps his intensity and protectiveness could have contributed to the break-up.

Courage entails love. Etty Hillesum (1983) speaks of "one small heart" (p. 198), a small heart that can experience so much love and so much suffering at the same time. Love is giving of yourself to people, playing an active role in institutions, living when you know that you will die, as Neville (2002) suggests. I was rather shocked when Mark said that he felt, and has always felt, that he would not live a long life. He expresses no fear. Rather, this feeling motivates him to make the most of his life. It fuels his determination to experience life to the fullest.

I was curious to see if Mark had had positive male influences in his life. He spoke very fondly of one of Susan's boyfriends. Mark was 12 when he met him. "I looked up to him like crazy, like crazy." Mark and the boyfriend would do things together. The boyfriend would discipline Mark when necessary. Although the relationship was short-lived, it was a very positive experience for Mark. When Susan died, this man offered to

pay for Mark's first year of university. Mark appreciated the gesture but could not accept the offer.

Cyrulnik (2005) stresses the importance of providing "developmental support for an injured person" (p. 26). It is of the utmost importance that the injured person has opportunities to form "different bonds" (p. 26). Teachers, neighbours, and extended family can help forge these different bonds.

Mark uses the metaphor of fire to explain his determination:

It's a fire that shows me my way. No I can do better and there's my family. No I can show them better. No and I can prove to you I'm a good friend. I am trying to prove to my parents that you don't need to be the way you are because my dad is an abusive dad so now I'm going to be an abusive dad.

I think of the phoenix rising out of the ashes. Fire destroys and fire brings new life. Mark's determination to not be like his father is symbolic of the destructive aspect of fire. Mark was closed-in on himself. His view of life was limited. He lost friendships and intimate relationships. Mark's determination to resolve the past and to forge his own identity: not one founded on being other than his father, is symbolic of the positive aspect of fire. Mark mentioned to me that had I approached him to do our interviews a year earlier, he would not have accepted. However, "I love it now because I am learning so much from being able to open it." Mark had rarely spoken of the incest and his sister's suicide.

In church one Sunday, I saw a banner with the words "refining fire, sustaining grace." I feel that Mark's journey epitomizes these words.

Nouwen (1992) invokes the concept of “our brokenness” (p. 87). He postulates that people who have found a way out of brokenness have been able to befriend it and to put it under the blessing. They have been refined.

Anger helped Mark cope for many years. “I know for a fact all my strength comes from hating. Hating, hate. Suffering leads to anger, anger leads to hate, and hate leads to suffering.” Mark felt that living with hate and anger made things easy. He did not think about his actions. He was driven by a feeling of, “I’ll show you, I will get through this.” He felt that his sadness lead to anger. Lately he has been working on allowing the sadness to sit, and separating it from anger. He is befriending his sadness. In doing so, he is no longer driven by anger and hate.

Nouwen (1992), when speaking of brokenness, states:

What seemed intolerable becomes a challenge. What seemed a reason for depression becomes a source of purification. What seemed punishment becomes a gentle pruning. . . . Here joy and sorrow are no longer each other’s opposites, but have become the two sides of the same desire to grow to the fullness of the Beloved. (pp. 98-99)

This reminds me of the *either/or, and* concept presented by Professor Colleen Mac Dougall in her course, “Life Span Psychology.” She spoke of the difficulty of overcoming intransigence in couples’ counselling. According to Professor Mac Dougall, a way out of the *either/or* impasse is to introduce *and*, a place of connection. Life isn’t either joy or sorrow but both. A character trait of people who demonstrate courage is their ability to stand in the “tragic gap” (Palmer, 2009, p. 13) the tragic gap being, the *and* in the reality of living with the *either/or* of joy and sorrow.

Mark's secure attachment is rooted in his mother's love. He speaks of his mother as an extremely compassionate person. He greatly admires this quality and feels that he has inherited it. In spite of this strong bond, he has always felt very alone.

I believe that the silence endemic to situations of incest, Mark being the only male and the middle child, and the lack of a constant male figure in his life, contributed to this feeling. Mark probably received little attention. Susan was 10 years older and the victim of incest. Mark's mother would have been very protective of the youngest daughter. His mother would have felt very overwhelmed and distraught.

Although Mark felt that he was an important member of the family, he did not feel a sense of belonging. This solitude led him to much reflection. He spoke frequently of "opening up his mind," "blowing his thoughts apart" and reconstructing his thought patterns.

Throughout all of our conversations, I was most impressed by Mark's intelligence, his ability to constantly question his thoughts, beliefs, and actions. Cyrulnik (2005) believes IQ is a principal determinant of resilience:

IQ measures not the intelligence of the child but the rapidity of his development in a given milieu. . . . IQ continues to be an indicator of resilience as long as it is not hijacked ideologically, as though intelligence were a feature of the brain or the characteristic of a social group. (p. 25)

I think that Mark's intellect is a prime example of Cyrulnik's (2005) definition of intelligence. Mark said that whenever he opened his mind, or blew his thoughts apart, he did this with friends. Cyrulnik believes IQ develops in a relational environment.



Amanda Ripley (2008) in *The Unthinkable: Who Survives when Disaster Strikes—and Why*, posits that people with higher IQs are more resilient. “Perhaps intelligence helps people think creatively, which might in turn lead to a greater sense of purpose and control. Or maybe the confidence that comes with a high IQ is what leads to the resilience to begin with” (p. 92).

Mark is trying to break the silence typical of families living with sexual abuse. Following his sister’s suicide, Mark lashed out at his mother for what he felt was her failure to act earlier. He knew his words hurt her. He said: “I’m just going to let you know because it’s been in me, I want to tell you and I need to let it out.”

Summoning the courage to initiate a difficult conversation with a parent is part of, “the courage of ordinary people” (Fischer, 2006, p. 112).

Shortly after Susan’s suicide, Mark confronted his father in a vain attempt to have his father admit to the abuse. Mark felt tremendous anger at his father. He wanted his father to seek help. In spite of these feelings, Mark was able to say, “I love the guy but I could not tell you why.”

“Resilience calls for a repairing of the real blow followed by a repairing of the representation of that blow” (Cyrulnik, 2005, p. 32).

In striving to break away from the toxic silence present in families where there has been abuse, Mark is hoping to let go of the hate, anger, and sadness.

This reminds me of a story in Paula Todd’s (2004) book, *A Quiet Courage: Inspiring Stories from All of Us*. Doug Dane was a young boy adopted into an abusive, alcoholic family and lured into a ring of pedophiles. Dane knew he needed to be able to trust. The therapist told him, “In order to trust, you need to have faith, and the key to

faith is letting go. If you let go, you can live” (p. 67). Dane felt this was impossible. In desperation he cried out to his therapist, “I can’t get over there. It’s too far. I can’t jump that far.” She replied, “Don’t jump, Doug. Fly” (p. 67).

Mark characterizes the feelings of anger/compassion as his emotional/logical self. These sides are in constant battle. At the conclusion of the conversation cited above, Mark said to me that he really enjoyed it, “Saying these things to someone and then seeing their reactions, watching, tells me whether or not I’m loopy.”

Mark is at a junction. According to Cyrulnik (2005) he can choose to look back in paralysis and become a prisoner of the past, or to continue “along a lateral course” (p. 100). Cyrulnik characterizes this junction as “a precipice. . . . If we stand up to the absurdity of life before nothingness forces itself on us, we will be able to fill the void and become creators” (p. 100). Everyone has his/her fair share of trials and tribulations in life. However, a traumatized person has faced a complete disruption of the world as he/she knew it. “The traumatized person’s path is broken. There is a hole, a collapse that leads to the precipice” (p. 100). The lateral course integrates the past with hope of a future. Perhaps the reader has heard of the story of Frank O’Dea, co-founder of The Second Cup chain of coffee shops in Canada. He was sexually abused as a child, turned to alcohol and drugs, and ended up a homeless panhandler. He reached rock bottom and contemplated suicide. He is now an author and inspirational speaker. I would say that he was able to integrate the wounded-self with the ideal-self when on the edge of the precipice.

Mark spoke of the precipice as “I feel like I am in the past and I’m trying to change the future.”

While Mark was telling me his family's story, I was struck by the pain each endured, that no one spoke of their pain, the weight of that pain, and the misery. It resonated deeply with me. I shared with Mark the situation my family faced when my father was diagnosed with terminal cancer. He was given six months to live. He lived two years. My brother and his wife took my parents into their home. My father was a very difficult man, very short-tempered and controlling. He constantly interfered in my brother's life. This created a lot of tension between my brother and sister-in-law. My superbly thoughtful mother was caught between my brother and father. My sister and I would travel to Quebec to offer respite care. We would fight with my father. My father, this massive, imposing, and very capable man was losing his strength ever so slowly, to the point where he just sat and stared at the wall for hours. He was terribly alone in facing death. Originally, it was hoped that my father would die at home. Unfortunately, the situation became intolerable and my father was placed in palliative care. He died three weeks later. The pain of the situation and the pain of each individual was unbearable and made worse by the silence. To this day, my siblings and I have never spoken of that time.

Mark shared his feelings regarding his sister's suicide. There was anger because of how she behaved at home in the months prior to her death. He felt her to be very demanding, hard on their mother, and selfish. He originally believed that suicide was the coward's way out. He mentioned that many people had suffered far worse than his sister, and had found a way to overcome their adversities. "They are going on and they're teaching people how to be better people." In the same breath, he said, "I never gave

Susan the credit she wanted or the sorrow she wanted.” He feels Susan is better off now. “She’s not hurting anymore.”

I decided to Google courage and cowardice with regard to suicide, and found a very interesting paragraph from the Centre de prévention du suicide et d’intervention de crise du Bas-St-Laurent. I will translate:

When thinking of courage and cowardice we think in terms of choice, and we project our personal concept of suicide on the other. However, individuals committing suicide do not do so by choice, but rather by lack of choice: when their life becomes unbearable, when they have reached the limit in their capacity to endure suffering, and when they no longer see an alternative to end the suffering. For the individual contemplating suicide it is not a matter of courage or cowardice; this judgment is passed by others. (“Les mythes et réalités à propos du suicide,” 2015, para. 4).

Mark eventually was able to recognize Susan’s extraordinary effort and courage to carry on as long as she did. “No matter what happened to her, no matter how much she felt like she was losing it, she always had that, that fire to go forward.”

Mark is determined to overcome whatever challenges come his way. His attitude is that there are no problems, just opportunities. When Susan committed suicide, he was able to put aside his feelings of hurt and anger, and be present to his family. He thrives on performing well at work and being of assistance to other staff. He is dependable. His motto, “It’s never too late to change your life. It’s never too late to do what you want.”

Platt (2002) would define this determination as courage: having the guts to face problems and adversities. The practice of courage involves “the doing of something

repeatedly by way of study for the purpose, or with the result, of attaining proficiency.” It is “spiritual practice, as in a dedicated and mindful orientation to life” (p. 132).

I inquired as to the source of his determination, “I’m still here,” he said, laughing. “I’m still here.” He has been through so much, yet he feels that others have suffered much more than he has. “If they can get up every day and do what needs to be done. . . . Why can’t I and why shouldn’t I?”

Frankl (1946/1963) wrote, “The last of the human freedom—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way” (p. 104). Individuals do not choose what happens to them, only their response to what has happened.

Mark spoke of gratitude. When friends asked how he was doing following the break-up with his girlfriend, he replied, “I’ve got food in my stomach. I’ve got a roof over my head and I’ve got friends I can call. I’m doing fantastic.” He adds, “You know, really, I could say I have had a pretty shitty six months. Actually, I’ve had a really crappy year.” He reiterates his blessings and closes with “I can’t complain.”

Gratitude opens the way to reverence.

Fisher (2006) speaks of a time when she broke her ankle and the difficulties this presented. She came to realize what a blessing it is to walk. In 2009, I broke my leg, and suffered a terrible sinus infection where I lost the ability to smell or taste for two months. It is very easy to take these extraordinary gifts for granted. I, unfortunately, do not remember to consistently include the wonders of the human body in my daily prayers of gratitude. People see beauty in life, enjoy the blessings of life, relish what life has to offer, and bow to the majesty of Creation. Noticing and being grateful for the small

things in life creates peace of mind and a sense of plenitude. Gratitude paves the way to reverence.

Mark senses a developing spirituality in the aftermath of his sister's suicide. He believes in the energy of spirits. He spoke of two incidents that exemplify this. A few days after Susan's memorial, a close friend of Susan's took a picture of his mother. On the picture, his mother is looking up at the sky and there is a dot on her face. Mark felt this to be the presence of Susan. He explained that he had heard somewhere that "sun dots" in a photograph can signify the presence of someone. Susan was an avid photographer. Mark had the identical feeling of presence when birds flew overhead 30 seconds after Susan had passed away.

I shared a similar story with Mark. I was in the hospital chapel when my friend's partner, the one with ALS, was taken off life-support. Suddenly, the stained glass window illuminated. A few minutes later, I discovered that this happened at exactly the moment my friend's partner drew her last breath. These small, seemingly insignificant incidents open the mind and heart to the mysteries of life.

Mark elaborated, "I feel that there's just an energy, we know today that energy cannot be created or destroyed and that's where I feel spirits are, in that when someone leaves, their energy is still here."

I relate to this concept of energy. My mother's brother, a bachelor, would live with us when between construction jobs. He loved classical music. He introduced my siblings and me to classical music at a young age, and much to our dismay. I now love classical music. When I listen to Pavarotti, for example, I feel my uncle's spirit. I do not believe in heaven or hell. Much like Mark, I believe in the everlasting presence of spirit.

Faith is an important component of courage. Mark used to be quite pragmatic in matters of faith. His attitude was, “If I don’t see, it ain’t true.” His concept of the divine is unclear. He is not affiliated with any religion. He is open to the mystery. He wants to believe, to have faith in something greater than himself: not to save himself, but to lift some of his burden.

I feel Mark is looking for God/Spirit as a companion. I am reminded of the following sentence by Kottke (2009) in the article “Ministry in the Tragic Gap,” from *Weavings*, “The good news is that life with God is manifested not only in the life of a saint, but also in life in the muck” (p. 25). If God cannot be found in the muck, where can God be found? The saying, “There is no atheist in a foxhole,” springs to mind. Mark has felt weighed down for much of his life. Chittister (2003), author of *Scarred by Struggle, Transformed by Hope*, believes that struggle can help us find God. God does not send adversity. God, “is waiting for you someplace else now, to go on again to something new” (p. 107). What a comforting thought!

I return to Kushner’s (1978) concept of God. God is not responsible for when bad things happen to good people, or not-so-good people. Kushner quotes Jacob, “God I have no claims on You and nothing to offer You. . . . There is only one reason for my turning to You now—because I need you” (p. 131).

Mark has experienced many challenges in his life. It is difficult for him to enjoy the good times. He constantly fears that something bad will happen. I asked him what makes him persevere. “Pride. I want to show my father up. One of the main excuses I remember him saying to me about his problems, or for his being a jerk his entire life, was that his father was that way.” Mark is adamant that he will be different. Another of

Mark's motto is, "Well, this is the life I was given. This is what I grew up with. Look what I'm able to do with it!"

I mentioned the following article previously when I spoke of Mark's perception of his ADD. I think it is relevant here. In "Courage: Heroes and Antiheroes," Neville (2002) explains, "the courage of self-identity – is the heart to accept and build a life upon elements of life that are both given in some sense and problematic" (p. 124). He gives the example of the challenges of being born black in the United States, homosexual, or being born with biological and/or psychological conditions. This type of courage entails acceptance of one's condition on the one hand, and yet not being defined by it on the other hand. I think this is especially true of people who have survived trauma.

In one of our interviews, Mark mentioned that it felt as though he had been at war all of his life. I agreed with him saying that I felt that he was constantly pummeled: difficulties in school, violence and sexual abuse at home, and his sister's tragic death. He said, "You can't pull a vet out of war and expect him to trust or melt into the world." I responded, "You haven't been at war, but in some ways it is almost as though you have PTSD."

I shared with him the story of a visit when my father was dying of cancer. It had been an exceptionally stressful, painful, and difficult visit. Upon my return home, I went to Edmonton for one of my courses. We were given a questionnaire that enumerated the symptoms of PTSD and told to tick off those we felt related to us. I ticked off nine out of 10. I laughingly said to Mark, "I don't believe this. I have post-traumatic stress disorder from visiting my family." This struck a chord with him.



I just finished reading *Thank you for Your Service* by David Finkel (2013), in which he narrates the experiences of PTSD among young, American soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. Many of them are struggling with alcohol and drug abuse. In his teens, Mark experimented with drugs. In his later teens, he became a binge drinker. This may or may not have been a coping mechanism for Mark at that time.

Flach (1997) believes that individuals who ignore emotional pain may turn to substance abuse to alleviate such pain. The individual may be unable to recognize the triggers of the pain. Taking drugs, illicit or prescribed, prevents the individual from taking time to pass through the pain, to gain insight, and to put the pieces together into a new and meaningful whole.

Fortunately, music and art have always been important to Mark. Since his sister's passing, Mark has taken to writing. He spoke of his writing "I was pulling this crap out of my head." He was, for the first time, looking at the tragedies his family faced and the tumult of his emotions. He will read his journal when "I have the courage to face it." I perceive his writing as a repository of his past and a bridge to his future. Mark has found a way to stand in the tragic gap.

I return the reader to Cyrulnik's (2005) description of resilience as "a strategy for struggle against unhappiness that makes it possible to seize some pleasure in life despite the whispering of ghosts in the depths of our memory" (p. xvii).

Mark is struggling to find happiness. He spoke of having a piece of metal between his shoulder blades and of it feeling comfortable because it has always been there. He spoke of "deserving a chance for things to change but I'm not there yet because I don't frankly know what change means in my life and what needs to be done to *put that*

*genuine happiness inside my chest* [emphasis added]. He felt happy with his girl-friend. It felt good having someone who cared about him. He thought he needed to be more selfish as opposed to selfless; he has always prioritized other people's needs. Seeking advice from friends lifts some of the weight from his shoulders and allows him to feel less alone. According to Mark, a feeling of belonging is essential to his finding happiness. Mark wants a career. He would love to go to university, but is uncertain as to what field of study to pursue. His interests are psychology and technology. Happiness would mean peace of mind. He admits that this may be a challenge for him, as he finds it difficult to "fully enjoy everything." He spoke of being "hard-wired to be in that constant [state of] trying to figure things out." I said to him that it was understandable, as he lived through constant super-charged, gut-wrenching experiences.

The term resilience is used synonymously with overcoming adversity. Perhaps, in this instance, resilience has as much to do with learning to live without adversity.

Flach (1997) states that human beings are "self-organizing systems. We have the capacity to restructure ourselves after disruption and achieve fresh, different, more meaningful levels of order and coherence, if we know how to activate it" (p. 18).

Mark's frame of mind is, "Don't be ready for everything to go wrong, but don't be ready for everything to be fine. And then, that way, anything in the middle you can move on." Sometimes good enough is the good place to be.

Mark told a friend that I was interviewing him for my thesis. She was curious, Mark said to her, "It's just nice to know that I'm able to talk to someone." He had mentioned earlier that he had never been so open. Being open was a relatively new experience for him. It felt good because he had been in denial most of his life. He

realized that when he got angry, it was because he ignored his feelings. He felt that our conversations were slowly helping him to deal with the trauma and his feelings. “It’s not so much well, okay, what can we do about it? It’s just bringing to light and not just ... putting it on the back burner and forgetting about it.”

Interviewing Mark was challenging. As mentioned earlier, he has ADD consequently, his mind would race a mile a minute. I found it difficult to follow and to get a sense of chronology. He spoke very quickly and that contributed to the difficulty, as I am hard of hearing.

Two generations separate us. Many of his references were alien to me. However, this was most stimulating, as I had to dig deeper with him in order to understand. The phrase that comes to mind is Gadamer’s “a fusion of horizons,” which “involves the opening of the horizon of our understanding to admit the intrusion of the world of the other in the hope and expectation that something truly new may be shared in the encounter” (As cited in Gerkin, 1984, p. 45). It was quite the learning curve. At the conclusion of our time together, I thought how wonderful it was that two people, with such a difference in age and life experience, could relate to each other and feel connected.

Interviewing Mark felt like I was talking to someone who was finding his courage and resilience: someone standing in the tragic gap finding his way out. I felt I was journeying with him, as he coped with the terrible tragedy of his sister’s suicide and the pain from the past. I felt very privileged that he wanted to share his story with me and that he felt good doing so.

The day after Susan’s suicide, Mark got a symbolic tattoo on his arm representing Psalm 23. I will close Mark’s narrative with those words:

The Lord is my shepherd;  
I shall not want.  
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:  
He leadeth me beside the still waters.  
He restoreth my soul:  
He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.  
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil: for Thou art with me;  
Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me.  
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies:  
Thou anointest my head with oil;  
my cup runneth over.  
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:  
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

## Chapter 8

### Situating the Inquiry Within Concluding Comparisons and Conclusions

#### Glimmer of Hope

Shattered lives and shattered hearts  
 Shattered worlds torn apart  
 Tattered clothes and tattered dreams  
 Life blown asunder, so it seems

From the dark of night, all is lost  
 Devastation too high to count the cost  
 Yet amidst all the misery that abounds  
 A glimmer of hope can somehow be found

In an open heart and an outstretched hand  
 A compassionate smile helps us understand  
 We're not alone in our desperate plight  
 Someone can help us win our fight

With a little faith and a little hope  
 We'll find some peace and a way to cope  
 Thanks in part to someone who cared  
 Who was willing to give and willing to share

(Johnston, 2008, p. 51)

In the introduction chapter to my narrative inquiry *Standing in the Tragic Gap: Courage and Resilience in the Lives of Ordinary People*, I stated that I would address the following in this, my concluding chapter: comparisons of themes within the narratives, narrative themes compared to the literature, my contribution to the existing literature, and further questions and conclusions.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, "Situating the Inquiry Within a Research Methodological and Ethical Framework," I chose to interview people who would represent a diversity in age, gender and lived experience of adversity. I was amazed that none of the co-creators perceived themselves as being different from other people, people

who have had far fewer challenges. Their *ordinariness* [emphasis added] was a revelation. Their experiences were very different.

This chapter is divided into four main headings: “Comparison of Themes Within the Narratives,” “Narrative Themes Compared to the Literature,” “My Contribution to the Existing Literature” and “Further Questions, and Conclusions.”

### **Comparison of Themes Within the Narratives**

#### **Theological framework: courage.**

*Courage.* Catherine returned to work following her first husband’s suicide. She took courses to enhance her career. She moved to be closer to her daughter following the death of her son and son-in-law. Her last move was to be closer to her granddaughter. She continues to be very active. Lee’s creativity helped her cope in school, despite being visually impaired. She tried a variety of jobs one would not expect a blind person to consider. She pursued many interests: daily walks, horseback riding, dancing, and riding a bike. She became an international champion in cross-country skiing. Mark assumed the role of male parent when his father was court-ordered to leave the home. In spite of the hurt and anger he felt at not having been immediately informed when his sister had an accident in which she fractured both her ankles, Mark returned home to help.

*Practice.* Catherine went back to work following her first husband’s suicide. She took courses. She moved across the country to pursue her career. She resettled to be closer to her granddaughter. Lee sought help from classmates. She walked, rode a bike, and skied to school. She worked many jobs that seemed completely foreign to someone who is blind. She engaged in many sports. Mark confronted his father on a number of occasions regarding the sexual abuse of his sister. He confronted his mother following

his sister's suicide. Platt (2002), in the article "Gut is a Habit: The Practice of Courage," coins the term "bothersome little acts of daily courage" (p. 143) to describe courage as practice. Sometimes courage is putting one foot ahead of the other when the individual has no idea of the outcome. Courage calls for a "stick-to-itiveness" (Neville, 2002, p. 119). This "stick-to-itiveness" is evident in all three narratives.

**Gratitude.** All three co-creators expressed gratitude. Lee is especially grateful to the wonderful people in her life, "from casual acquaintances to dear friends, to professional associations, and working associations." Mark explained his gratitude in these terms: "I've got food in my stomach. I've got a roof over my head and I've got friends I can call. I'm doing fantastic." Following her first husband's suicide, Catherine was very grateful for her healthy children. When her son and son-in-law were killed in an accident, she was grateful that her son had been "experiencing life and enjoying so many things." She was grateful for her nursing career. Following her daughter's death in a car accident, Catherine met her second husband, Comfort. "He was a great blessing in my life." She concluded, "So adversity happened but the end results have been a real blessing."

**Choice.** Catherine focused on her children's welfare in the aftermath of the shock and grief at her first husband's suicide. She chose to return to work and to study. She remarried. She chose to move to be nearer her granddaughter. Lee chose adventure. Her blindness was not a handicap: it was a challenge. In her younger years, she chose to cope without admitting to having a handicap. She now chooses to enhance her freedom of mobility with her Seeing-Eye dog. Mark is choosing to make sense of the past and to forge a future for himself.

**Laughter.** Laughter dominates Lee's narrative. She relates many difficult and challenging situations, laughing. We shared many laughs together because of the humorous interpretation she gave to situations. Catherine mentioned, "That's one thing if I had a choice of abilities, I'd have asked for a better sense of humour." Laughter was not present in my conversations with Mark. Perhaps this is explained by his intense nature and the ongoing struggles of coping with his family's situation. We started our interviews less than a year following his sister's suicide.

**Self-determination.** Catherine's determination was to ensure the welfare of her two children and to pursue her career. She faced challenges resolutely. She coped admirably with tragedy. She was determined to live life to its fullest. Lee's determination originated in not being classified as handicapped. She tried anything and everything. She lives life with a great sense of adventure and fun. Mark's determination was to not be like his father. Mark sees challenges where others might see problems. His father made excuses for his behavior. Mark counters this with, "It's never too late to change your life. It's never too late to do what you want." What may appear as a negative motivation — the desire to *not be* [emphasis added] something — ultimately serves to bring about a positive outcome. For example, when Mark mentioned that he strived to not be like his father, I asked him what kind of father he would like to be. He answered:

I want my child to know that I care about them. . . . I want to be there for my child.

I just want my child to know that, regardless of where I am or whatever. I just want my child to know that I am fully with them and that they are my child. . . . I don't want to use excuses with my kid. . . . I want to be true to myself and I want to be true to my child. If I am true to myself then I can be true to anyone.



Lee's determination was to not be classified as handicapped. She is gutsy, creative, and daring. I had said to her that it seemed that she never saw herself as different. She said that she didn't. I asked her if she did now. She said, "Yes." I asked her what had changed. She replied that it came from accepting herself.

Seeing myself as being different may be a good thing. [She elaborated]: I was so desperate, I was too much like that. I think that it's a good thing for nobody to think of themselves as too different, but I was too adamant, and in doing so, you create more of a situation because people don't really know what it is. [These are her exact words.]

***Spirituality/Faith.*** Catherine's father was a minister. She attends church regularly. Catherine's faith has been a great support. She questions the existence of God. She believes Christ is a great example, one that should be emulated. Catherine believes that looking for the best in people is an important component of faith. Although she enjoys the stories from the Bible, Catherine does not take the Bible literally. She is very weary of extremist attitudes in any religious tradition.

Catherine finds comfort in church: the songs, music, and friendships. She believes that faith and church attendance are beneficial; they contribute to a better society.

Mark is on a spiritual quest following his sister's suicide. He explained, "I feel that there's just energy, we know today that energy cannot be created or destroyed and that's where I feel spirits are, in that when someone leaves, their energy is still here." He is open to experiencing mystery.

Lee and I never spoke of either faith or spirituality. I think that Lee's spirituality is expressed in her love of life, her gutsiness, her love of the outdoors, her love of people,

and her humour. Although we never spoke of spirituality, I felt its presence throughout our interviews.

***Selfhood.*** Tillich (2000h) explains, “Courage is the affirmation of one’s essential nature, one’s inner aim or entelechy, but it is an affirmation which has in itself the character of ‘in spite of’” (p. 4). Mark, in spite of his sister’s sexual abuse and subsequent suicide, is integrating the wounded self with the ideal self. “I feel like I am in the past and I’m trying to change the future.”

Catherine, in spite of her first husband’s suicide and the loss of both her children to accidents, found happiness in her second marriage. When she became a widow for the second time, she continued to enjoy life through friendships, church, and the arts.

Lee, in spite of being legally blind, graduated from college, made a career for herself, is a wife and mother of two, and won medals in international competitions.

Tillich (2000) would say the following about these amazing, ordinary people: “In the act of courage the most essential part of our being prevails against the less essential. It is the beauty and goodness of courage that the good and the beautiful are actualized in it” (p. 5).

***Transforming suffering.*** An aspect of transforming suffering is the ability to relate to the suffering of others in the midst of one’s own suffering. It was remarkable that all three co-creators, when speaking of their challenges, mentioned that there were others who suffered more acutely than they did.

**Psychological framework: resilience.**

***Bringing to light.*** This is an expression Mark used to describe his experience of our interviews, as a way of dealing with the trauma of his sister’s abuse by their father

and her subsequent suicide. “It’s just nice to know that I’m able to talk to someone.” Sharing his inner thoughts and feelings was a new experience. He expressed that it felt good because, as he said, he had shut out so many things in his life. “It’s not so much, well, okay, what can we do about it? It’s just bringing to light and not ... putting it on the back burner and forgetting about it.” Mark’s reflections coincide with Kerby’s (1991) understanding of narrative and its power. “Life is inherently of a narrative structure, a structure that we make explicit when we reflect upon our past and our possible future” (p. 40).

A few weeks prior to our last interview, Lee became the proud owner of a Seeing-Eye dog. This is a milestone. It is a public acknowledgment that she is legally blind. Lee has more autonomy, security and freedom.

Prior to our conversations, Catherine had never shared the story of the tragedies in her life.

Cyrulnik (2005) theorizes that any trauma can become a tragedy. It is the individual’s representation of the traumatic event that determines the effect that event will have on the person. Mark, Catherine and Lee had the will and the power, “to make something of it” (p. 12). They turned tragedy into triumph.

***Family.*** Very strong family connections are present in the three narratives. Although Lee’s family structure was unusual for the time, her grandmother provided love, affection, and stability. Her mother was a tireless advocate and a very strong woman. Catherine loved her kind, compassionate father dearly. Her mother was an imposing figure intellectually, with an acute business sense and present to Catherine in

her time of need, as were her sisters. Mark credits his father for his intellect and his mother for his compassion.

Alcoholism and mental illness were present in the three narratives. Catherine's mother-in-law was an alcoholic. Catherine's husband's drastic mood swings led her to consult a psychiatrist with her husband. The psychiatrist confirmed that Catherine's husband was an alcoholic. Catherine and I wondered if perhaps her husband may have suffered from bipolar disorder or post-traumatic stress disorder. He had been a pilot in WWII. Her daughter succumbed to alcoholism. Catherine's father ministered to alcoholics. Mark's father was an alcoholic. Mark wondered if his father suffered from mental illness. Lee's father was a binge drinker and she wondered about her father's mental state.

Gabor Maté, M.D. (2008), worked 10 years as a staff physician at the Portland Hotel, a residence and harm reduction facility, in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. In his book *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts*, he states, "Chronic substance use is the addict's attempt to escape distress. From a medical point of view, addicts [sic] are self-medicating conditions like depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress or even ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder)". He continues, "Addictions always originate in pain, whether felt openly or hidden in the unconscious. They are emotional anaesthetics" (p. 33-34). In the summer of 2014, the brilliant comedian and actor, Robin Williams, committed suicide. It was said that he was suffering from a severe depression. It is believed that he suffered from bi-polar disorder. He tried soothing his pain with drugs and alcohol. Perhaps his greatest gift will be that his death has reignited the discussion

on the scourge of mental illness. Maté states, “The question is never ‘Why the addiction?’ but ‘Why the pain?’” (p. 34).

***Ups and Downs.*** Catherine experienced many ups and downs living with her first husband. Lee spoke of the many times she pushed herself to exhaustion. Mark experiments with odd jobs in the search of a profession that will fulfill him. Life is a series of ups and downs. There are times when individuals can navigate these without much turmoil. There are other times when all feels futile. Flach (1997) defines, “the strengths we require to master cycles of disruption and reintegration throughout our lives [as] *resilience*; and it is resilience that is at the heart of what we call mental health” (p. 43).

***Confidence.*** Catherine possesses a serene confidence. Her first husband was emotionally abusive. On one occasion, while Catherine and her son were hiding from her husband, her son said that she should not let the husband speak to her the way he had been. She replied, “Well there’s no point in arguing when he is drinking. There’ll just be more trouble. He is not in his right mind.” She did not internalize the verbal abuse. I asked her how she managed to survive this abuse. “I knew it wasn’t true what he was saying. I had confidence in myself.”

A keen intellect and ADD contribute to Mark’s confidence. He frequently spoke of “opening up his mind,” “blowing his thoughts apart,” and reconstructing his thought patterns. He constantly questions his thoughts, beliefs, and actions. He loves to do so with friends. Mark was diagnosed with ADD in elementary school. He was taunted and teased, and learning was difficult. Mark would get into fights. He soon realized that this

was counter-productive. He stood up for himself. He felt ADD was a gift that allowed him to excel at multitasking.

Lee was born confident. She played like other children. She coped in school with minor adjustments. During her later teens and early twenties, she worked as a waitress, a security guard, an elevator operator, and as a night supervisor in a halfway home for people who are mentally challenged. She took the residents out on excursions. She graduated from college and won a medals in international competitions.

### **Narrative Themes Compared to the Literature**

The many books I read for this study into courage and resilience in the lives of ordinary people were works of psychiatrists, psychologists, doctors and scholars. My study is the work of a retired teacher who is now a student in the Master of Psychotherapy and Spirituality Program. Aside from a 300-hour practicum, and my personal experience of counselling, I have no expertise in the field. I explored the lived experience of courage and resilience in conversations between myself and my co-creators. My goal was not to prove a hypothesis but to allow the components of courage and resilience to emerge from these conversations. I further explored the theme in the research, as a three-way conversation between my co-creators, myself, and with components of the literature. I refer the reader to Clandinin and Connelly (2000):

The contribution of a narrative inquiry is more often intended to be the creation of a new sense of meaning and significance with respect to the research topic than it is to yield a set of knowledge claims that might incrementally add to knowledge in the field. Furthermore, many narrative studies are judged to be important when they become literary texts to be read by others not so much for the knowledge they

contain but for the vicarious testing of life possibilities by readers of the research that they permit. (p. 42)

I think that the majority of the characteristics of courage and resilience presented in my thesis are comparable to what is found in the literature. The focus on laughter is somewhat different. I believe that laughter is an expression of courage when facing adversity. The literature emphasizes the importance of family, faith, character traits, and environmental influences in courage and resilience. I think that humour is just as important.

Jacqueline Bussie (2007) studies the importance of laughter in *The Laughter of the Oppressed: Ethical and Theological Resistance in Weisel, Morrison, and Endo*. She recounts an interview with Greg Rollins, published in the faith-based magazine, *Sojourners*. Rollins was a member of the Christian Peacemaker Team that was kidnapped by an extremist group in Iraq. He told the interviewer, “The team in Iraq has found room to laugh in the middle of this seriousness. Sometimes we can’t help it, it just happens” (p. 1). Bussie defines this as “tragic laughter” (p. 3).

Laughter interrupts the system and state of oppression, and creatively attests to hope, resistance, and protest in the face of the shattering language and traditional frameworks of thought and belief. . . . Laughter of the oppressed functions as an invaluable means of ethical and theological resistance. (p. 4)

Bussie informs us that “listening to the laughter of the oppressed teaches us much about what it means to be human, to live and to die, to believe and to doubt, to love and to lose” (p. 6). This laughter allows a measure of dignity, temporary relief from the

present suffering, and offers hope. It takes courage to laugh in such circumstances and it is a manifestation of courage to preserve the ability to laugh.

I present Bussie's (2007) study of laughter as explored in Eli Weisel's *Gates of the Forest*. Bussie was curious about the role of laughter for Jews during the Holocaust: laughter as a response to suffering, laughter as an aid to not internalize the dehumanizing actions of the oppressor, and laughter as a way of resisting evil. Laughter prevents the sufferer from descending into despair. It is an attempt to hold together God and unspeakable evil. (Laughter as the *and* in the *either/or* dichotomy of evil and good.) Engaging in laughter is a choice. For the Jews, choosing laughter was "to defy self-negation and the despair that welcomes death. It is to choose life over death-in-life" (p. 38). We often hear the term "the walking dead." In a situation of such degradation, laughter was seen as a way of preserving the self. Bussie includes this wonderful excerpt from Weisel's book, a scene in which Gregor, a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp, and Janos, a guard, are speaking of Gavriel, Gregor's fellow prisoner:

"Laughs a lot, did you say?"

"Yes."

"Why? At whom?"

"At everything. At himself, perhaps."

"I thought Jews couldn't do anything but moan and groan."

"You don't know them, Janos. They laugh at you. They laugh, but you don't hear them. You're too busy making them cry," Gregor said laughing. (p. 38)

Bussie's (2007) theology of laughter corresponds well to the idea of standing in the tragic gap. They are both bridges between the past, the difficult present, and the future:



A theology of laughter affirms that redemption's "already" aspect is as real as redemption's "not-yet." A theology of laughter underscores the fact that the not-yet, in-spite-of character of your hope is excruciating, yet hope is not to be relinquished. . . . A theology of laughter sees the world as what it genuinely is if *everyone's* life-story, including that of the marginalized, is taken into account; it sees the world as a place of radical cruelty and pain as well as a place of radical beauty and redemption. (pp. 185-186)

The ability to laugh at a situation, at ourselves, and with others is a precious gift. Suddenly what seemed so stressful, heavy, and crushing temporarily disappears. The bleak mood is lifted, the person uplifted, and the courage to keep-on-going-on returns.

### **My Contribution to the Existing Literature**

Courage and resilience are explored in a three-dimensional space: story — the narratives; theory — the literature; and interpretation — my thoughts, impressions and reflections. I believe that it is the narratives, the lived experiences of the co-creators that speak most eloquently to the topic. The reader's understanding of courage and resilience will derive from the narratives. There are many scholarly works on courage and resilience. They appeal to the intellect. My belief is that the narratives will appeal to the soul of the reader. The reader will be engaged and experience an opening of the heart that will lead to a cognitive and visceral understanding.

I chose to study courage and resilience with courage as a theological framework and resilience as a psychological framework, in part to fulfill the requirements of the Master of Psychotherapy and Spirituality Program. However, it is my firm belief that courage is more than character traits, and that resilience is more than actions. The practice of

courage and resilience is soul work. Phyllis Mathis is a licensed counsellor, spiritual mentor, life coach and soul professional. In her article, “What is Soul Work?” she expresses the belief that “there is a part of us that is purely and essentially us. The best version of all our attributes. The blueprint ... of who we could become. The soul” (n.d., para. 2). She explains that life causes us to lose sight of this essential part of ourselves. “Soul work is the process of bringing the essential self - the - soul out of hiding. It’s a fundamental shift away from occupying the constructed self, and toward the art of living from our soul” (n.d., para. 6). I believe that counselling is soul work. Counsellors use strategies and techniques to assist their clients. The client comes to an understanding of the issues and learns new coping mechanisms. The understanding and the actions must be grounded in a core belief. The core belief is the voice that is calling the client to be “the person I was born to be, to fulfill the original Selfhood given me at birth by God” (Palmer, 2000, p. 10). I believe that this grounding is found in the client’s spirituality, as defined by the client. I return to the thematic article from *The Everyday Study Bible*:

If spirituality is rooted in our essence as human beings, then it is exemplified through dimensions of our personhood: integrity, morality, fidelity, among others. . . . These qualities include love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. As we reflect on each dimension, it is important for us to remember that the spiritual life is ultimately validated by who we are. From the bedrock of character we move to express inner qualities in outer activities. (p. 1163)

I found it most interesting that the co-creators did not perceive themselves as courageous, though they readily admitted to being resilient. In the introduction chapter

to my thesis, I stated that the terms courage and resilience are associated with soldiers, firemen/women and police officers. The terms are used to describe people who rescue a person from a burning building or from drowning. I suggested that it was not a term applied to ordinary people. My inquiry demonstrates that ordinary people who have overcome great adversity do not perceive themselves as courageous, in spite of being very courageous. They admit to being resilient.

I reviewed my chapter on courage and found three statements that may explain why people do not recognize or admit to their courage. *The Everyday Study Bible* specifies, “spirituality is rooted in our essence as human beings ... it is exemplified through dimensions of our personhood: integrity, morality, fidelity” (p. 1163). Tillich (2000) states, “Courage is the affirmation of one’s essential nature, one’s inner aim or entelechy, but it is an affirmation which has in itself the character of ‘in spite of’” (p. 4). Parker Palmer (2000) understands courage to be the voice “calling me to be the person I was born to be, to fulfill the original Selfhood given me at birth by God” (p. 10). Perhaps it is the very sacredness of courage that makes it difficult to admit to.

It is my hope that the narratives in *Standing in the Tragic Gap: Courage and Resilience in the Lives of Ordinary People*, will inspire the readers to recognize and admit to their courage.

### **Further Questions and Conclusions**

**Questions.** In the summer of 2014, there was a new outbreak of hostilities between the Israelis and Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. Nearly 2000 Palestinians, mainly women and children were killed and more than 10,000 were injured. On the Israeli side, 66 soldiers and five civilians were killed. There was massive destruction of homes,

institutions, infrastructures and United Nations Relief and Works Agency safe havens. There are no words to describe the atrocities occurring in Syria and Iraq, as ISIS forges its terrible path in the Arab world. I wonder, is it possible for the embers of hope to be ignited, the seeds of resilience to be planted in the children in these conflicts? How can traumatized parents help their traumatized children under such circumstances? In so many corners of the world, there are now three generations of traumatized individuals.

My intent was to study the lived experience of courage and resilience in the lives of ordinary people. I had conversations with people of our Western culture. I chose participants so as to ensure diversity of age, gender and adversity. My sources are from Western, developed-world cultures. It would be most interesting to do such a study in Asian, African, and Arab cultures, the developing world, using the resources from these cultures.

What are the components of courage and resilience of survivors of the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia, the Nanking massacres, or the 1994 Rwanda massacres?

I wonder! What if “storying” was used as a tool for negotiating differences as to climate change, ending world poverty and resolving conflicts in the world?

**Conclusions.** In the introduction chapter to my thesis, I said that the terms courage and resilience were frequently associated with soldiers, firemen/women, police officers, and individuals who rescue a person from a burning building, or one who is drowning. Soldiers, firemen/women and police are trained to be courageous and resilient. Danger and adversity are inherent to their professions. Courage and resilience, as it applies to ordinary people, is called forth following trauma, or surmounting adversity. Cyrulnik (2005) emphasizes, “We can’t speak of resilience unless there has been a trauma

followed by the resumption of some kind of development, a mended rip” (p. 2).

Catherine survived the suicide of her first husband, the death of her son and son-in-law, and the death of her daughter. Lee overcame the daily obstacles and challenges of someone who is legally blind. Mark survived the trauma of the suicide of his sister, an incest victim. Each one had experienced bifurcation points causing enormous emotional pain characterized by fear, anger, and despair. They were resilient. “Resilience depends on our ability to recognize pain, acknowledge its purpose, tolerate it for a reasonable time until things begin to take shape, and resolve our conflicts constructively” (Flach, 1997, p. 25).

Overcoming adversity requires courage. Fisher (2006) suggests:

What we most want for ourselves is that quality of spirit called *moral courage*, the virtue by which we act with integrity in spite of fear. Moral courage reveals us at our best, and it calls to those depths in us desirous of such graced humanity. (p. 112)

Frankl (1946/1963) stated that, “it did not matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us” (p. 122). When I think back to my paternal aunts and the women from my women’s group, I now realize that they acted on the premise of what life expected from them. I think that my clients came to counselling searching for an answer to that question. Our present-day culture is driven by instant gratification. What is expected from life is enormous: a well-paying career, a home, car, vacations, expensive hobbies and sport activities. This individualistic/consumer-oriented culture is creating enormous disparity, poverty, and the destruction of our planet. What would happen if we were to ask what life expects from us? If we were to accept that life has a higher

purpose. Perhaps we would be inspired to share this planet with other people and species and to love our neighbour as ourselves. My three co-creators testify to Frankl's assertion that, "Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfill the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual" (p. 122).

There are times when coping itself is an act of courage and resilience. When a person has lost a loved one, a relationship, a job, or when the person's life is altered through illness or an accident, getting out of bed, going to work, and buying groceries are acts of courage and resilience.

This observation leads me to the concept of good enough. It takes courage to accept that a situation is good enough. The serenity prayer encourages us to accept the things we cannot change, to change the things we can, and to be blessed with the wisdom to know the difference.

When confronted with adversity it takes courage to just be. It takes courage to stand in the tragic gap.

## If

If you can keep your head when all about you  
 Are losing theirs and blaming it on you;  
 If you can trust yourself when all doubt you,  
 But make allowance for their doubting too:  
 If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,  
 Or, being lied about, don't deal in lies,  
 Or being hated don't give way to hating,  
 And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise;

If you can dream—and not make dreams your master;  
 If you can think—and not make thoughts your aim,  
 If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster  
 And treat those two imposters just the same:  
 If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken  
 Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,  
 Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,  
 And stoop to build'em up with worn-out tools;

If you can make a heap of all your winnings  
 And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,  
 And lose, and start again from your beginnings,  
 And never breathe a word about your loss:  
 If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew  
 To serve your turn long after they are gone,  
 And so hold on when there is nothing in you  
 Except the Will which says to them: "Hold on!"

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,  
 Or walk with Kings—nor lose the common touch,  
 If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,  
 If all people count with you, but none too much:  
 If you can fill the unforgiving minute  
 With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,  
 Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it.

(Kipling, 2002, <http://www.poemhunter.com>)

(For the purpose of inclusiveness, I have omitted "men" from the third line, changed "men" to "people" in the fourth line of the fourth stanza, and omitted the last line.)

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## Appendix A

### Informed Consent

*Project Title:* A Narrative Inquiry into Courage and Resilience in the Lives of Ordinary People.

*Researcher:* Margaret Claveau  
Personal contact information removed.

*Thesis Supervisor:* Janet Greidanus,

You have been asked to participate in a research study. The purpose of the study, terms of your participation, as well as any expected risks and benefits, must be fully explained to you before you sign this form and give your consent to participate. You should also know that participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You may refuse to participate or withdraw from participation at any time during the course of the study. Any data collected will not be included in the study. The data will be returned or destroyed as per your wishes. I am committed to do no harm. I enter into the research relationship with you aware that emotions may be evoked as our relationship unfolds. Research-induced distress may follow stories shared. I will discuss this with you throughout the course of the research. I am prepared to suggest names of appropriate professional resources if you need support beyond the boundaries of your research relationship with me.

I will contact you again to seek permission for secondary use of the data should such a situation arise. The same ethical provisions will apply. You will be asked to sign a consent form.

This research is part of the requirements of the Master's in Pastoral Psychology and Counselling program at St. Stephen's College. It is a subject that has fascinated me for a very long time.

*Introduction:* Courage and resilience are frequently associated with soldiers, firemen/women, policemen/women, or are applied to people who do spontaneous acts of courage i.e. rescuing someone from a burning building, someone who is drowning. It is my belief that many ordinary people exhibit courage and resilience by this I mean people from all walks of life who overcome adversity with integrity, dignity, and who continue to enjoy life with a positive attitude, and with gratitude and hope.

*Purpose of Research:* The purpose of this narrative inquiry is to gain a deeper understanding of what is the lived experience of courage and resilience in the lives of ordinary people who have overcome adversity. My inquiry intention is to listen to the stories my co-creators tell, verbally and non-verbally, of a time in their life when they overcame adversity. The goals of my research is to gain a better understanding of what constitutes courage and resilience, how do people develop these qualities. It is my hope

that my co-creators will gain an appreciation of what they have survived and accomplished, and that they will perhaps gain new insights. I hope that the sharing of my co-creators experiences will give readers of our work a better understanding of the role of courage and resilience in overcoming adversity. I am hoping to contribute to the existing literature on this subject. I view this inquiry as a celebration of the human spirit.

*Methodology:* The proposed research will use a narrative inquiry. Over an extended period of time, I will listen to your stories of a time in your life when you overcame adversity with courage and resilience. Our conversations will take place in a mutually acceptable location and will be tape recorded. Such conversations may also be in written form, such as letters, and emails. Data such as photos, journals, letters, anecdotes, music, literature, memory boxes and/or artwork will also be gathered when appropriate and if available. These materials will be returned to you when my thesis is completed.

Throughout our time together, I will ask for your feedback. I will share with you interview transcripts, notes, thoughts and the final draft for authenticity and accuracy.

*Anonymity or Named in the Study:* If you choose anonymity, you will be guaranteed that your responses will be treated with confidentiality and a pseudonym will be used in the writing up of the study. Your right to anonymity is paramount, and any information that might reveal your identity will not be included in the study.

Or

You may choose to use your first name in the write-up of the study. However, selecting this option and signing your name indicates that you understand the risks of using your own name. If you choose this option, it is important to consider the confidentiality and anonymity of relatives or friends whom you may mention in the research.

I will consult with a peer-review committee of three classmates, my supervisor and the co-ordinator of the Master's in Pastoral Psychology and Counselling Program. I do not know at this time if I will require the use of a transcriber. The terms regarding anonymity and confidentiality apply to these people as well.

This is to certify that I \_\_\_\_\_,  
understand the implications of participation and hereby agree to participate as a co-creator in the above-named project.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

If at any time you have questions regarding this research or your participation in it, you may contact me at (personal contact information removed).

Sincerely,