

YOU ARE MY MIRROR: ONE TEACHER'S AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL  
NARRATIVE INQUIRY INTO MENTAL ILLNESS

by

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## **Abstract**

This research is presented as an autobiographical narrative inquiry about one teacher's experience of living with mental illness. The main objective of this research is to contribute to expanding our understanding of how our education systems must include acceptance and inclusion of the large number of students, educators, school trustees, education bureaucrats, parents and administrators who live with mental illness.

According to the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, mental illness will impact one in two Canadians by age 40 with the onset of symptoms occurring during adolescence, making the school system an important public institution for recognizing and treating mental illness. Yet, there continues to be stigma and fear around mental illness, which may hinder peoples' ability to recognize it in themselves or others, or to seek help.

The autobiographical texts contained in this dissertation emerged as I, the researcher, examined my own context in relation to who I was as a researcher, and in particular, as an educational researcher, and specifically, as a teacher, and even more specifically, a teacher with mental illness. My particular illnesses were anxiety and eating disorders. The texts are a collection of stories, journal entries, and report card comments interspersed with and analyzed in relation to literature that includes academic theory, research, poetry, and fiction. I am following in the tradition of others such as Pelias (2016) who puts themselves on display as a researcher "in the belief that an emotionally vulnerable, linguistically evocative, and sensuously poetic voice can place us closer to the subjects we wish to study" (p. 1). In this study I put mental illness on display to examine it from the perspective of curiosity and openness rather than from a place of stigma or fear.

I surmise that if a teacher's educational responsibility is to be open to what Biesta (2013) pens is the call to act in the intervention of others, then one such act is showing up as a human being, with one's struggles and vulnerabilities, and being open to those of others.

## **Lay Summary**

Through the means of storytelling, memory, and reflection, as a researcher – who is also a teacher, an education bureaucrat, a mom, a wife, a sister, a daughter – I explore what it was like to have mental illness as a child and as a teacher. Through all these years I attempted to hide the mental illness out of fear, yet the fight to hide the illness almost cost my life. Through publicly sharing, I hope that others fearing the stigma of mental illness might be able to say, “me too” and find the means to seek help. The other hope is that teachers may be able to recognize symptoms of mental illness in their students to facilitate diagnosis and treatment, and support mental health overall in the classroom.

## **Preface**

This dissertation is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, V. M. Rego.

Family members have given permission to have their names, stories, and images shared in this dissertation.

Names of other people (students, teachers, work supervisors) have been changed.

Names of schools I attended as a K-12 student have been changed.

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To Michelle Stack, my supervisor, who encouraged me through many versions of my proposal, and who created space for writing retreats in which I was able to practice the discipline of steady writing.

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To colleagues, notably Mary, Kristin, Anne due to frequent interactions, and others who perhaps ventured across my path briefly – you've all had impact on this dissertation and on me through showing up and sharing stories time, laughs, and frustrations; your support has been appreciated deeply.

## **Dedication**

To Pedro, my patient husband who kept me fed; to Julia, my daughter for whom I first became healthy; and to my sister Siobhan who provided me with a home away from home while in Vancouver for my studies.

## Chapter 1

### Sharing a story of mental illness

“Let all those come who want to; one of us will talk, the other will listen; at least we shall be together” (Konrad, 1969, p. 172).

Because I tend to dance around the edges, let me get right to the research topic upfront: my doctoral dissertation is an autobiographical narrative inquiry about my experiences—as a student, as a teacher, as a colleague, as a member of society—living with mental illness, in particular, anxiety and eating disorders. My justification is to increase awareness in teachers, in students, in families, in schools, in the workplace, and in communities about mental illness. I propose that by being understanding and accepting we may contribute to an environment in which those living in the grips of mental illness can find release through acceptance of the illness and compassion towards themselves. Furthermore, my justification is to contribute to expanding our understanding that our education systems must include acceptance and inclusion of the large number<sup>1</sup> of students, educators, school trustees, education bureaucrats, parents and administrators who live with mental illness.

I chose to begin my doctoral dissertation with the last sentence from George Konrad’s 1969 novel, *The Case Worker*, about a bureaucrat working in a state-run organization, for two reasons. First, I believe that it is by coming together, by talking, by listening, that we can relate to one another in our shared humanity—as a teacher and as a person this is a concept I value. In fact being with people is so important to me that it was one of the factors that led me to apply to the University of British Columbia’s Doctor of Education program. I valued the cohort model that facilitates a community of educators to undertake the praxis of

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<sup>1</sup> According to the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, 1 in 2 Canadians will have experienced a mental illness by age 40.

critiquing and theorizing one's own educational practice in order to improve one's practice for the benefit of students and others connected to our arenas of practice.

A second reason why I chose Konrad's final sentence from *The Case Worker* is because, similar to Konrad's bureaucrat, I experienced distress culminating in a health crisis while performing my role in a government ministry. At the time I postulated that my distress was because the Ministry of Education ethos was at odds with my teacher-identity and I wondered if, like Konrad's (1972) "skeptical bureaucrat," the best I could hope for was to be "a medium-rank, utterly insignificant civil servant" living, as far as possible, with eyes wide open" (p. 168). Konrad's image of a civil servant articulated the struggle I was living: I showed up each day for work at the grey, concrete building of my ministry and tried to retain some semblance of what I called my "teacherness," my grasp of whom I thought I was, while performing my duties as a civil servant. This account seemed both dissertation worthy and made sense to explain why I felt every day at work was what I described at the time as "crazy-making," as in I wasn't crazy but my workplace experience was chipping away at me and leaving me hollow.

Convinced that my distress was because I was in the wrong role and not acting in accordance with my identity, I explored identity and role theory. I clung tenuously to this explanation over the next two years of coursework followed by two years more of submitting draft research proposals to my supervisor with working titles such as: *The lived experience of teachers' transition to government-based practice*; *Navigating the dual role of teacher and ministry education officer*; and the alliteratively catchy, *From classroom to cubicle: Understanding the meaning that teachers employed as civil servants in ministries of education make of their roles and professional identities through narrative inquiry*. Each

time the draft was returned to me with the comment, “you’re getting closer.”

As I skirted around the edges of my research problem I kept returning to the key questions posited by the Doctor of Education program that focus on critiquing, shifting, and improving one’s educational practice. I queried: Did I have an educational practice if I was no longer in a classroom? Was I even a teacher anymore? What defined me as a teacher—a classroom with students? Who was I if I wasn’t a teacher? And the masks began to fall away. And I experienced again the fear, echoed in other moments of my life, when I thought that I would be revealed for the fraud that I thought I was—appearing to be healthy on the outside but unhealthy, and therefore not good enough or competent enough, on the inside. The fear I felt at no longer being seen as a teacher I now see as a fear that one of my last masks would be stripped away, leaving only me behind, a me that was not good enough; I was without accomplishments and achievements to prove that who I was was alright. I was fearful that my craziness would be revealed, which would result in my being disregarded, ignored, and rendered irrelevant. I put much energy into trying to hide and control what I thought was my inner and flawed self, living in fear that my efforts wouldn’t be enough. I had a history of not feeling good enough, as I outline below.

When I first started teaching I was excited to finally be a teacher, but worried that I was not a good enough role model to my students. I was ashamed of my eating disorders that I couldn’t control. If revealed, would I still be allowed to teach? I hid it and kept teaching. When I entered government I began experiencing what I now know to be anxiety disorder which at the time I attributed to an inability to transition to my new role perhaps with a bit of midlife crisis thrown in. If my weakness was revealed, would I still be trusted to come to work each day? I hid it and kept working. When I began my doctoral journey I learned that

as a researcher I had to ‘locate myself’ and so I located myself as a teacher. Yet the question of “who was I” kept persisting. If I revealed my condition, what I know now is a mental illness, would I be able to continue in the doctoral program? My hiding stopped after my breakdown that resulted in my being under a doctor’s care. I began treatment and got permission to continue my doctoral studies. A shift occurred after I stopped hiding in my doctoral journey. I felt compelled to continue to write about what I knew, my experience living with mental illness and its impact on me as a student and as a teacher, yet I still feared that my story would not be good enough or accepted by the academy just as I had feared through my other life experiences that I was not good enough as I was.

#### **Arriving at methodology: Autobiographical narrative inquiry**

This book does not claim to be an account of facts and events but of personal experiences, experiences which millions of prisoners have suffered time and again. It is the inside story of a concentration camp, told by one of its survivors.... It will try to answer this question: How was everyday life in a concentration camp reflected in the mind of the average prisoner? (Frankl, 1959, p. 3)

This is how Viktor Frankl began his story, *The Meaning of Man*, about his experiences as a prisoner in Nazi death camps during World War II. I do not mean to compare my experience with mental illness to being a Holocaust survivor, other than for the comparison of being imprisoned—in my own mind rather than behind external fences. Frankl’s opening sentences speak to me because, like him, I do not claim this dissertation is an account of facts and events. Instead it is the inside story of an average person experiencing mental illness. For those who have not experienced it, reading this story may challenge the illusion that mental illness is about lack of motivation or intelligence. For those who have in

the past or are currently experiencing mental illness, reading this story may provide some reprieve knowing that you are not alone. As you will see in the upcoming chapters, I believe that not feeling alone in this regard is important. I kept my illness hidden for so long because I thought I was “crazy” and feared that if anyone knew, then I would be cut off—from work, from school, from society—and be disregarded. My illness broke out through a crack when I no longer had the energy to fight. Once the illness was unmasked, I acknowledged its existence and treatment could begin. People told me that I was brave for doing so but I maintained that the choice was to either accept it or die fighting, and, as my stories in upcoming chapters will demonstrate, I was a fighter<sup>2</sup> who wanted to live.

I moved past my fear of using my own story as research in part due to a positive experience of presenting one of my stories, included here as the chapter entitled “Attending to Attendance” at a research day at my university. I considered my audience a critical yet friendly group of academic peers, and two of my committee members were also in the audience. This was a significant turning point for me as a researcher as I felt validated in what my thinking and research could offer the academy, and that my format could be in the form of story, my own story. Leavy (2013) states that “in the academic world, researchers are storytellers” (p. 35), and whether we are using others’ stories or our own as data, researchers “are charged with telling the stories of others [and ourselves] in creative, expressive, dynamic, and authentic ways” (p. 35) in order to impact readers. As a teacher, I appreciate

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<sup>2</sup> Another of my defining characteristics is that I am a positive person. Growing up my family called me a “Pollyanna”, a term that came from a children’s book series where the main character, Pollyanna, is an exceedingly optimistic person. Perhaps these two traits, being a fighter as well as an optimist, contributed to my survival when in the depths of my eating disorders and bouts of anxiety; I knew that I would come out of the darkness and held on until my joy and laughter returned.

Leavy's sentiment that "just like with good teaching, we hope our research is written well enough to make a lasting impact" (p. 35).

What I was doing that day when I shared my story as research was a form of what I now know is narrative inquiry, "a way of understanding and inquiring into experience." The "use of narrative inquiry is inspired by a view of human experience in which humans, individually and socially, lead storied lives" (Clandinin, 2013, p. 13). Clandinin explains that narrative inquiry, the research methodology of my dissertation, can allow readers to "rethink and reimagine the ways in which they practice and the ways in which they relate to others" (p. 51). The concepts of practice and relating to others within a research methodology appeal to me because being in relation to others through my practice speaks to the values I have held throughout years as an educator.

While all narrative inquiry locates the researcher in the inquiry in order to clarify the context of what is being studied and to shape the theoretical and social justifications of the study, when the research stays focused on the researcher, then the methodology is known as *autobiographical* narrative inquiry. If the researcher's context is one of many actors, then the methodology is considered to be *autoethnographical* narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2013; Hawkins, Falconer Al-Hindi, Moss & Kern, 2016). The form of narrative inquiry I am engaging in is autobiographical as the stories are organized around my own experience of living with mental illness.

### **On selection of stories to form the research text**

I wrote more stories than are included here. The ones no longer here still exist in the white spaces between the paragraphs. Akin to a display cabinet in my home where I occasionally clear it of the knick-knacks collected over time, the collection of stories was



organized, with some being boxed away for another time, in order to create space for the ones that more clearly illuminated the theme of being a student, then a teacher, and then a government bureaucrat, with mental illness. There may still be an occasional dust outline where a now boxed story once sat, the hint that as the researcher and the subject “I am still in the midst” (Clandinin, 2013) of the research text.

The stories that stayed were carefully and intentionally chosen keeping in mind the concept of connecting my own particular biography to a larger, context (Leavy, 2013; Clandinin, 2013). In the writing and rewriting of my stories pulled from old journals and memories, I was aware that with each rewrite, with each decision to include or not include elements, I was composing stories anew: the ones that ended up here as chapters represent my dissertation, yet “there is no final telling, no final story, and no one singular story” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 205) that I could have written.

A metaphor for the selection of my stories is by way of my collection of photo albums compiled when I was a child, when film was bought in rolls of 12 or 24, or even 36, and pictures taken carefully as you didn’t want to waste the limited shots available. How I arranged those photo albums created their own stories; each picture was akin to a sentence in the story contained in the pages of that particular album. Over time I have peeled away individual pictures from the sticky pages for various reasons—perhaps to bring a baby photo to work for the “Guess the baby” contest or to make a duplicate to send to a sibling in a birthday card—and they don’t tend to make it back into the albums in the same way they once were, leaving instead tacky outlines and a memory of what had once been there. Those pictures, peeled away and re-used, formed new stories; from a research perspective, this reliving and retelling to form new stories is part of the process of narrative inquiry.

Clandinin (2013) describes the process of writing research texts as having a quality of unexpectedness, which I would suggest is a quality of research overall, meaning that as the researcher one cannot know the outcome of the research until it is done; otherwise, why bother engaging in research? This unexpectedness in narrative inquiry is, according to Clandinin, one of its goals, to create possibilities for growth, and “to tell and live what at least seems, in the moment, to be better stories” (Downey & Clandinin, as cited in Clandinin, 2013, p. 203).

Clandinin (2013) emphasizes Richardson’s (1999) claim that we write to learn as a method of inquiry, and that “form and content are inseparable” (p. 206), similar to the photo albums compiled in my childhood. I would add that as researchers we write to understand as much as to learn, to understand. As Clandinin writes:

the ongoingness of lives lived and told over time makes researcher commitment to understanding lives in motion...understanding lives in motion creates openings for new relationships to emerge, for lives to unfold in unexpected ways, and for surprise and uncertainty to be always present. (pp. 204-205)

Understanding my own life in motion has been an unexpected outcome of my research. The stories I included as chapters as part of my research and data collection for this dissertation helped me to understand how I could have lived for so many years with undiagnosed mental illness, which negatively impacted me and others, but at what cost? All those years I thought I was strong and competent, fighting to keep my mental illnesses controlled and hidden. What if I had felt safe enough to seek help before I crumbled? What if one of the many caring adults in my life had recognized the mental illness and known what to

do? What if my particular story of mental illness can bring knowledge to others so that my particular story does not have to repeat as often in the larger society?

### **In defense of methodology: Who cares and so what?**

Research, and in particular qualitative social science research, has to respond to the “who cares” and “so what” questions, (Clandinin, 2013, p. 193). I ask myself these questions: “Who cares about my story?” and “How can my story be of value to an academic or educational community?” However, through reading other narrative inquiries that include an autobiographical element, such as Cardinal’s (Clandinin, 2013) article on being an Aboriginal student becoming an Indigenous researcher, and Robinson’s (2016) doctoral dissertation on being simultaneously a mother, nurse, and researcher of people with eating disorders, I felt supported enough by the academy and others who have gone before me to offer my own story of mental illness from my various educational perspectives as student, teacher, bureaucrat, and researcher.

It is through “sharing my knowing” (Cardinal, as cited in Clandinin, 2016, p. 187) that I claim to make an original contribution to the academic community. I am following in the tradition of others such as Pelias (2016) who puts himself on display as a researcher and “brings himself forward in the belief that an emotionally vulnerable, linguistically evocative, and sensuously poetic voice can place us closer to the subjects we wish to study” (p. 1). Pelias (2016) states that his words have value as they can change the world and change lives due to their influence beyond the writer; I claim that my words, my original story, framed in a research methodology recognized as autobiographical narrative inquiry, might change lives by furthering dialogue and alternative ways of making sense of mental illness and its impacts on individuals. I relate to Pelias’ claim that his writing “is simultaneously the most selfish

and selfless thing I do” (p. xxi): my writing has allowed me space to make sense of my life narrative, which has been influenced by mental illness. The selfless aspect, or the act that makes this document a dissertation rather than a memoir, is through publically sharing my story, particularly with those who are entrusted with the care of children, or with those who may be trying to understand their own mental illness and perhaps fear the stigma around mental illness that it hard to seek help. My story publically shared could also be valuable to higher education institutions that offer programs such as doctoral and teacher education as some of its members may themselves experience mental illness, and will likely have peers or students with mental illness. Finally, policy makers will find this study useful in order to understand a perspective of mental illness and its impact on education both from the position of students and of educators.

It is through the public act of publishing my story as a dissertation that I intentionally attempt to link my particular story to a broader arena, in order to be scrutinized, analyzed, and turned over as my autobiographical text “exposes and challenges oppression, trauma, and cultural norms” (Kadar, Warley, Perreault & Eagan, 2005, p. 5). While at first glance the terms oppression and trauma may seem harsh, upon reading the stories the reader might begin to recognize the unwitting oppression imposed on a vulnerable child that stirred up and worsened symptoms of mental illness, as described in the chapter “Broken Bones.” The trauma experienced by the girl through her formative years is described in “A Pleasure to Have in Class.” The impact of oppression and trauma internalized over the years is visible as that girl moves into positions of power and authority as a teacher as she controls her environment as witnessed in the chapter “Attending to Attendance.” Finally, it all comes

crashing down as the woman fights to understand her world in the chapter “Hell,” and she re-examines and analyzes her life story to reimagine possibilities for future stories.

The autobiographical texts contained in this dissertation emerged as I examined my own context in relation to who I am as a researcher, and in particular, an educational researcher, and more specifically, a teacher. The question I grappled with at the beginning of this academic journey was “what is my voice”? Over time and with much thinking and reading and writing, my voice emerged, and it emerged loud enough to crack open the mask behind which I had been functioning for over four decades. One of my doctoral supervisors, Shauna Butterwick, was reminded of the words from Leonard Cohen’s song *Anthem* (*Differance1’s channel, 2012*), in which he penned, “There is a crack, a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.” Not being familiar with the song, I looked it up and resonated with the line that comes before, *Forget your perfect offering* for two reasons: first, because my stories of mental illness portray someone striving for perfection, and, second, because at some point I have to complete and present this dissertation as my own offering, which will also be less than perfect. From this less than perfect and cracked place the texts began to present themselves to me—dusty grade school journals, yellowed report cards, young adult poetry, and lingering memories—to be turned over and examined. The conceptual framework that has loosely held these texts together has shaped into what you see here now: an autobiographical narrative inquiry centred on the theme of mental illness.

The “so what” and “who cares” of my research was justified to me when a colleague, upon hearing some of the stories in this dissertation, said that she could picture different students that she’d had through the years from my portrayal of my own experience. She saw others through me and what mental illness could look like: my research had opened her eyes.

## **The format of my inquiry**

For my narrative inquiry I have taken as inspiration Pelias' format in his book, *If the truth be told* (2016), a book that is informed by social research but written in a literary form, and *Fiction as research practice* (Leavy, 2013), a book containing a variety of texts. This dissertation is divided into chapters depicting significant moments and timespans of my experience living with mental illness through various phases of my life: the early years as a good but anxious student; the young adult developing into a teacher while wracked with insecurity and eating disorders; the new teacher holding tight to structure and control; and the middle-aged woman fighting to make sense of her own life.

The chapters are made up of stories, poems, diary entries, photographs and memories. According to Clandinin (2013), it is important to understand when writing memories in narrative inquiry that “memories are recollections not exact duplications of original experiences” (p. 194) and subject to new interpretations. Clandinin (2013) suggests that shifts over time, place, and audience occur with each retelling of the remembered experience, and “what meaning we make—that is, how we tell those remembered stories—are told from the now” (p.195). This retelling and shifting of one’s stories, derived from memory and imagination, is “embodied knowing,” a type of imagining and role taking that is “part of the total context from which persons decide how to live their lives” (as described by Sarbin, as cited in Clandinin, 2013, p. 196). Clandinin shows us through Freeman (2010) that narrative inquiry can help us “refashion” or re-imagine our past. I would argue that this is not solely to rewrite our histories, but also a way to re-interpret the meaning of events in the unfolding of our personal and collective histories. Clandinin (2013) helps me to see the value of this

process as “through the possibility of imagination and memory the future, too, is open to being shifted, to being changed by being able to imagine other possible narratives” (p. 196).

### **Accepting mental illness, and why my story matters**

My current state of mental health<sup>3</sup> is linked to my ability to accept the diagnosis of an anxiety disorder after four decades of fighting with myself to keep the mental illness under my control. As part of that acceptance I have learned that I am not defined by my illness, and it is through this understanding that I am able to be open about my experience.

According to the Public Health Agency of Canada (2015), “Mental health and mental illness are not mutually exclusive concepts, i.e. someone with a mental illness can experience good mental health, while someone without a mental illness can experience poor mental health” (p. 3). Currently I am being treated for a mental illness, and consider myself in a good state of mental health<sup>4</sup>. I state this loudly as for decades I denied needing help because I wanted so badly to be seen as healthy, competent and in control. If I were only stronger, I told myself, I could power through “my own crazy,” and “get over it,” “it” being the thoughts that I fought so hard to control. In the chapter “Hell” I describe what led to my acceptance of diagnosis and treatment of a mental illness, but at this juncture suffice it to say that my acceptance came about suddenly after having a panic attack one morning at work.

After decades of fighting I had no more fight. My body said, “Enough, stop.”

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<sup>3</sup> PHAC defines positive mental health as “the capacity of each and all of us to feel, think, act in ways that enhance our ability to enjoy life and deal with the challenges we face. It is a positive sense of emotional and spiritual well-being that respects the importance of culture, equity, social justice, interconnections and personal dignity” (2015).

<sup>4</sup> The Public Health Agency of Canada (2015) uses the World Health Organization’s definition of mental health as being “a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community” (p. 3).

Once I had accepted that I was not functioning as well as I could be—an understatement—I was ready to accept the notion that I had a mental illness, and ready to begin to understand what that meant. I found this description from the Public Health Agency of Canada (2015) who, in a couple of sentences, provided an explanation for what I had been living with for decades:

Q. What is mental illness?

A. Mental illnesses are characterized by alterations in thinking, mood or behaviour associated with significant distress and impaired functioning.

Q. How do you get a mental illness?

A. Mental illness arises from a complex interaction of genetic, biological, personality and environmental factors.... specific risk factors include: family history of mental illness, age, sex, substance abuse, chronic diseases, stresses (family, workplace, life events).

Of interest to me is this statement from the Public Health Agency of Canada (2015), “early recognition of mental illness and appropriate response can minimize the impact of the illness” (<http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/mh-sm/index-eng.php>). Could my anxiety disorder and eating disorders have been minimized if there had been a response from my teachers, from my family, from anyone in my community? I can only speculate on what could have been different for me if mental health and mental illness had been more on the public’s radar; however, what I can do now is contribute a perspective on mental illness based on my experience of living with it, undiagnosed and untreated, in the classroom, in the workplace, and in the home, and in both public and private spaces. My dissertation includes examples of both public and private space through inclusion of events that occurred in public and in the



company of others, and in private space as depicted by diary entries and poetry. My intention is to help the reader understand the stigma around mental illness and how this might impact the way we see students and colleagues who might be dealing with mental illness. My story may illustrate what mental illness can look like in your students or colleagues who at first glance may not appear to be at-risk or vulnerable, or who may appear “crazy”. My intention is to help the reader see others from a different angle. My particular angle is anxiety and eating disorders.

### **Considering the link between anxiety and eating disorders**

Research has suggested there is a link between early childhood onset of anxiety disorders before the onset of eating disorders; furthermore, symptoms linked to anxiety disorders and eating disorders (anxiety, harm avoidance, obsession, and perfectionism) may show up as behaviours or tendencies before the onset of either disorder (Kaye et al, 2004). Robinson (2015) focused on the correlation between early onset anxiety disorders and the development of eating disorders, as I have done in my own narrative inquiry in “Broken Bones.” I am not claiming that I developed an eating disorder because I was a worrier, but the tendencies of anxiety as a precursor makes as much sense as any other explanation at this time given that the experts do not agree on what causes someone to develop an eating disorder. Current theories include sociocultural influences, emotional or personality disorders, genetic factors, and family dynamics (Robinson, 2015). The experiences in “Broken Bones” suggest links to any of these other factors, and perhaps my own eating disorder, came about as a combination of some or all of the theorized causes. I have the benefit of time and space while writing this narrative inquiry to reflect back on my history to suggest links and correlations. Such reflection has contributed to my acceptance of a

diagnosis and treatment of mental illness. In my experience, acceptance of and being able to name the illness has allowed me to finally take control, or, as the next section will show, gaining control by letting go of control, of the illness.

### **Mental illness: Complicating a diagnosis**

#### ***Losing to Win***

I win if I lose the soft belly. Concave, feel the hollow space.  
I win if everyone is pleased with me. Do you see me as good? Are you happy with me?  
I win if I get perfect scores. It's not about beating you; it's about beating me.  
I win if I eat all the food then get rid of it.  
Empty cupboards, empty fridge. Emptied into the toilet bowl and flushed away.  
The brain satiated. The body exhausted. Numb.  
Progress measured in numbers.  
108 pounds. Lower is good. Higher is hell.  
Lose control lose the fight.  
I lost the fight.

My poem, “Losing to Win”, depicts my experience of fighting what I thought was myself but was really the mental illness—not me, but part of me. The day I admitted, or accepted, that I needed help was one of the most terrifying moments in my life as it felt like I was admitting to being broken, not only less than perfect but not even good enough.

The concept of good, of being good and seen as good, drove much of my thought processes and behaviours throughout my formative years and indeed through adulthood. What I now see as manifestations of mental illness, I saw then as proof that I was not good enough, not capable. For four decades I fought the mental illness. In the chapter “Hell” I describe the fight as disconnection between my brain and my body. I thought that if I were only smart enough, disciplined enough, had enough willpower, that I could outsmart it, that I

could “just get over it”<sup>5</sup>. I describe how I became hollow and had nothing left with which to fight and how one day my body stopped. I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t get oxygen from my lungs to my brain. I couldn’t think. There was no fight left. And that same day I finally heard.

Since being diagnosed with an anxiety disorder and being on medication, the endless ruminating and worrying in my head has stopped; it feels like my brain can actually turn off when I want it to. I now know what it means to be no longer fighting the illness. I now know what it means to no longer be hurting myself. Yet the mental illness always lurks. I do not know what it is like to not live being controlled by, or trying to control, the mental illness. The medication feels like a Band-Aid that controls the mental illness artificially. When I first went on the medication I acquiesced thinking that it would be short-term, maybe a year, until I got myself back which for me meant when I could laugh again and when I could feel love and joy. Then it became two years, and now it’s five years. My acupuncturist, who describes herself as less into western medicine and more into Chinese medicine, said that while she doesn’t normally encourage the use of anti-depressants, for me it seems to work. So, while I would be pleased, I suppose, to one day to no longer need the medication, for now I accept that it seems to be working.

The way I understand how the medication works is that it keeps certain neurotransmitters, essentially mood regulators, at a higher level by preventing them from being reabsorbed back into the body. The way I feel the medication works for me is that the increased neurotransmitter, in my case the serotonin, is a chemical defence that deflects waves of anxiety when they start to rise up like a tsunami—the serotonin intercepts the

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<sup>5</sup> A family member articulated to me while we were listening to a news story about a recent spate of youth who had committed suicide that they “sucked at life”. It is this type of thinking that I hope to challenge with my dissertation.

tsunami of anxiety and reduces it to a harmless but still noticeable inshore wave that rolls around and over me. However, I remain vigilant to stay as mentally healthy as I can as protection against the mental illness in case the medication stops working as well as it has been. I hope over time that I can say that I am free of the presence of mental illness, but for now I know it is still present. The tug of anxiety persists, but the medication keeps it at bay.

I wrote in my journal in 1991 when my mother was dying of cancer, “Mom gets support for her illness and all I get are hassles.” When my mother was throwing up because of her chemotherapy, she was nurtured. When I was throwing up while in the grips of bulimia, I felt chastised, either by others or in own mind that was fuelled by anxiety, guilt, and shame. Cathrine Robinson (2015) writes about her experience of being a nurse caring for patients with eating disorders, “I had to admit I simply preferred to care for patients I felt were more worthy of care [such as someone with cancer], instead of a patient with an eating disorder who did this to herself” (p. 59).

I remember my dad asking me how I could damage my body. I can still feel the hurt of his words, although he doesn't recall the conversation. I did not have a way to explain it to him, as I did not understand it myself. If I could eat without fear of getting fat or eat without suddenly taking in mounds of food, then purging, didn't he think I would? Didn't he know that this wasn't behaviour I chose? That I wanted to stop the behaviour, and stop the agony inside my head? My actions did not make sense to someone looking in, least of all to myself, and could not be rationalized or reasoned away. If I was so smart, as the chapter “A pleasure to have in class” will allude to, why couldn't I outsmart this?

I stopped purging in my late twenties but the anxiety continued. When I was in my mid-forties my family doctor referred me for cognitive behaviour therapy rather than

prescribing me medication: he told me that I was smart enough to be able to figure this out with counselling, as described in the chapter “Hell.” These interactions between me and my dad—and years later with my doctor—may appear to be typical. As noted by Robinson’s (2015) research, those caring for someone with an eating disorder struggle with lack of information, or conflicting information, about the illness and how best to help, “We are scared we will say the wrong thing” (p. 80). In my doctor’s case, perhaps he had good intentions when he didn’t give me medication when I went to see him. I trusted his expert advice that I would be fine with some effort. I trusted him even though I knew I was sliding back into the dark pit that I knew so well. At the same time, his words played into my need to be seen as competent, as capable. When the counselling didn’t fend off the impending breakdown that I was to experience a year or so later, this may have only added to the fight. I felt myself losing the battle and feared that this battle could be the end of my hope, my joy, perhaps even my life. Only once before had I experienced such a place of fear and that was when I was in the darkest moments of eating disorders.

There were times when I was aware that I was not mentally healthy, but I did not know how to access appropriate help. The help I did find provided coping strategies, but not the relief I was looking for, the relief of understanding. So, I kept fighting to try to control the thoughts and feelings that at times overwhelmed me. I feared that if I didn’t keep fighting I would end up in a ditch, not metaphorically but literally. I actually pictured myself lying as if dead in a ditch. This fight was my hell: I was losing, losing myself. As I wrote in my diary at age 23: “I want to die if I can’t be free of the pain of food.” And two decades later I was still trying to fight but was losing hope: “It’s hell because I don’t know anything. Everything

I've done hasn't worked. I'm lost. But if I find myself, what if that doesn't work. Where's the bottom? And do I just get a rope up to fall again."

Upon reflection, it may be that my approaches to recovery from the symptoms of anxiety prior to 2012 were not effective for me and perhaps even detrimental. Vøllestad, Nielsen, and Nielsen (2011) conducted a meta-analysis of mindfulness and acceptance interventions for anxiety disorders, approaches that have moved away from cognitive-behaviour therapy (CBT). In CBT "anxiety is conceptualized as a disturbance in information processing that leads to an overestimation of danger and an associated underestimation of personal ability to cope," whereas with mindfulness and acceptance interventions the distress of anxiety is "decreased through a set of interrelated processes facilitating a mode of present-centred awareness wherein the individual relates to experience with acceptance and compassion instead of avoidance, control, or suppression" (p. 240). The approach in mindfulness and acceptance interventions is to encourage "a shift in the patient's relationship to his or her anxiety" by allowing distress "as opposed to trying to remove it or gain control over it" (Vøllestad, Nielsen, and Nielsen, 2011, p. 240). In my experience it wasn't until I was guided, after a panic attack in 2012, in how to practice self-compassion and acceptance that I began to feel the grip of my anxiety disorder lessen. I felt light and space inside me where before there had been a dark pit. I felt joy and love and laughter dancing in that space where before the dark pit had sucked the colour out of my being.

This dissertation, however, is not about treatment or recovery, but rather about awareness. I hope to bring awareness so those who are fighting their own mental illness battles, or those who care for them, can have some understanding of and recognition of the illness, in order to minimize its impact and offer hope regarding mental health. If you are the

teacher or the caregiver of someone with what may be a form of mental illness, be the beacon of understanding and compassion.

### **Awareness in the classroom and in the home**

When I began this dissertation I was an education officer in the Ministry of Education, a ministry charged with oversight of the education of half a million children in the province of British Columbia (BC). Previous to that I was a teacher in a northern BC school district charged with delivering educational programs to students in the various classes to which I was assigned. Most of these children were considered mainstream; others had individual education plans for diagnosed behaviour or learning disabilities, while others were identified as *at-risk* or *vulnerable*. As a teacher I learned to look for students with vulnerabilities as determined by learning disabilities, behavioural issues, or socio-economic factors such as poverty or coming from single-parent families. I learned early on, both as a teacher and even as a student, how to identify others from a deficit perspective focusing on whether students were poor in terms of money, grades, or social skills. I would not have placed myself, or others like me<sup>6</sup>, into an at-risk or vulnerable category. I did not need help. I was competent and capable.

In my own childhood I internalized messages about what was good and what was not good enough. For example, in grade one I was in the “Rabbit” reading group, which in my child-mind I knew was a better reading group than the “Turtles”; rabbit and turtle were code words for good readers and bad readers. My self-worth came from being placed in the top group, or what I saw was top, and staying there. In my mind rabbits were the top group. These were strong thoughts of judgment that I was articulating at such a young age. I saw

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<sup>6</sup> In my view, *others like me* were the well-behaved and academically strong.

evidence all around me that validated my judgmental views. For example, I observed that the bad, or poor, readers were taken out of the classroom for extra help. I saw not just poor readers being taken out of the classroom but also students who needed help in other ways; I saw them as the 'misbehaving', the 'socially inept, the 'misfits'. I did not want to become one of these children who I identified as not being good enough.

I did not need to be better than other people; I just had to reach the top measure, whatever that was. For example, I have vivid memories of racing through a reading program, the SRA Reading Laboratory, in elementary school. For those of you that did not experience SRA in school, let me explain the concept. There was a box, about the size of a file box, with 100 reading passages on heavy cardboard divided into ten colours, 10 passages per colour, with comprehension and vocabulary multiple-choice questions at progressively more difficult levels denoted by the 10 colours. An assessment would place a student at the appropriate starting level and then they would work their way through the levels by reading the passages then completing the questions, using the answer key to mark their own work, tracking the results in their record books.

As a student, I was aware that I was starting several colours ahead of most of the other kids, which was my validation that I was already performing well on the measure. Shading in the bar graph with corresponding colour-coded pencil crayons produced a feeling of pleasure and satisfaction. As I put away the coloured pencil, I then reached for the next reading passage to quickly scan, then race through the comprehension and vocabulary reading exercises. My goal was to read exactly three stories, record results above the line, and move on. I recall though a tiny twinge of regret that I couldn't bring myself to slow



down and enjoy all the stories in each colour—my drive to reach the top colour, the top measure was stronger than my desire to experience pleasure.

From a teacher's perspective, the point of the SRA reading program was to allow each student to read at their own level and to progress at their own pace. What would I have done, as a teacher, if I had had a student like me? Would I have even been aware of the emotions and feelings going on in the head of the child driven to reach the top? Or perhaps I would have said something like "Good job, Virginia. Now that you've reached the end of the levels, you can help some of the other children in the lower levels." And Virginia the student would have been validated knowing that she didn't need help. She felt rewarded by being recognized for being capable, not needing help, for being independent. Her teacher was pleased. And this pleased Virginia the student. Comber in Tuten (2005) describes the "ideal student" as being a self-regulated individual who relates to the teacher through compliance, is prepared to work, whose behaviours suggest commitment and enthusiasm, and contributes to the classroom community (p. 52). By all appearances I was the ideal student, validated by the comments made by teachers in my report cards outlined in the "A Pleasure to Have in Class" chapter. My corresponding diary entries reveal the cost of keeping up this ideal appearance. The perfectly masked student was likewise masked at home, as revealed by my father, who recently commented that when I was a child he never worried about me as, unlike my older brother and younger sister, he could always count on me to get my chores done, do my schoolwork, do what needed to be done. When he told me this as an adult, I still felt the warm glow of being recognized for being good: a warm glow held simultaneously with some sadness for the little girl who hid her fears of not being good enough inside. And at what cost were my good behaviours? I learned that behaviours that might suggest a weakness or

dependency were best kept hidden; unfortunately the behaviours that I suspected as being abnormal in me were symptoms of a mental illness that I controlled, or attempted to control, for decades. According to Peter Smagorinsky (2011):

Mental illness remains a human construct that is designed to separate normative from extranormative psychic makeups in order to provide appropriate treatment for those who fall outside the normal range. At times, these diagnoses can be beneficial, such as when a person has extremely atypical characteristics that can lead to harm to oneself or others. Yet at other times, the designation of one as having a mental illness can produce stigmas long associated with insanity that themselves become at least as debilitating as the extranormative condition itself. (p. 1720)

Smagorinsky's position is that children who are identified as being different, or "disordered," can have more consequences from the diagnosis than from the original disability, disorder, or difference that got them labeled in the first place. However, he cautions that there can be negative consequences for disorders that aren't treated. We know that "people with mental disorders experience a high burden of mortality at the individual and population levels" (Walker & Druss, 2015, p. 340). For example, anorexia nervosa has the highest mortality rate of any mental illness—10-20% of those diagnosed will die from the illness, either from medical complications or suicide (Canada Mental Health Association, 2014). Mortality rates for other mental illnesses are difficult to determine, as explained by Walker and Druss (2015):

The link between mental disorders and mortality is complicated because most people with mental disorders do not die of their condition; rather, they die of heart disease and other chronic diseases, infections, suicide, and other causes. Another

complicating factor is that mental disorders are associated with risk factors for mortality. People with mental disorders have high rates of adverse health behaviors, including tobacco smoking, substance use, physical inactivity, and poor diet. In turn, these behaviors contribute to the high rates of chronic medical conditions among people with mental disorders. (p. 235)

My own adverse health behaviour was abusing food, as outlined in the chapter “Hell.” Earlier in this section I recalled my dad saying that he didn’t understand how I could physically harm my body through eating disorders when I also appeared as someone who purported good health – he saw the contradiction and called me on it in an attempt to understand and perhaps try to help me. Guidelines for family members of individuals with eating disorders, easily found in the 21st century on the Internet, were not available to my family in the 1980s. If they had been, he likely would have found the following advice helpful, “avoid trying to reason with statements that seem unrealistic to you” (Canadian Mental Health Association, 2016). What I heard from those around me was that I didn’t make sense, which only added to my shame, guilt, and confusion. Using whatever rational thought I had on the topic, I knew that I had to hide my behaviours, thoughts, and feelings from others in order to maintain my own functioning and sanity.

### **Awareness in society**

As a researcher, as a teacher, as a citizen, I endeavour “not to justify [or judge] or rationalize but to understand” (Maté, 2008, p. 333). Maté is a physician who writes about his work with people living in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver, a few city blocks, many of whom are severely addicted and facing complex issues including abuse, poverty, and mental illness. I empathize with Maté’s description of addiction, both his own and those of his

clients, and recognize that my binge and purge cycles fuelled by an insatiable need to feed, then experience release, are no different. Maté reminds me that my own good mental health benefits not only me personally but those for whom I am responsible in my various roles, professional and personal:

When I'm reasonably balanced in my personal and spiritual life, I don't have difficulty finding compassion for my addicted patients. I'm curious about their life histories and self-perceptions and, for the most part, I'm able to avoid imposing judgments on them.... Things are very different when it comes to my own self in the midst of an addicted phase. Suffused with corrosive shame, I attempt to hide the self-loathing from my own sight with feigned joviality or self-justifying combativeness...this slush of pitiless, negative self-judgment only intensifies the desire for escape and oblivion. (p. 332)

While this dissertation is not about addictions per se, it is about the impact of mental illness. For example, as a teacher my students were impacted, as I describe in "Attending to Attendance," when I was rigid in my thinking and unable to be empathetic to their life histories or their life hopes. My colleagues at the Ministry of Education were impacted, as I describe in "Script the Crazy" when I lost perspective at work which in my mind resembled a factory floor with workers focused on their own component or piece of the machinery: eyes down, fingers tapping. I was rapidly losing perspective and the ability to discriminate, differentiate, assess, and evaluate. I felt my work world becoming grey and two dimensional; I feared becoming like the character in *The Case Worker* (Konrad, 1969):

I shuffle back and forth between tottering stacks of paper, I move eternally pending files from drawer to drawer and shelf to shelf, I turn into a cantankerous old

bureaucrat who locks up his rubber stamp when he goes to the toilet, and refuses to lend anyone his book of regulations.... (p. 168-169)

I describe in “Script the Crazy” my panic attack that knocked me out, decimating me after a long build-up of increasingly more intense anxiety. The price was high to me, my family, and to society in terms of lost productivity at work and on the healthcare system. The price is high indeed: according to the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, the economic burden of mental illness in Canada is estimated at \$51 billion per year. My own tally sheet of direct expenses includes a week of sick leave from work (gold star to me for only missing a week!) and years of anti-depressant medication and medical appointments with a psychologist and my family doctor. Other costs that can’t be as easily tallied on a budget sheet include the emotional and other burdens on family members and lost opportunity costs during times when my physical, mental, emotional energies and resources were focused on the impacts of the disorders.

As humans looking to explain, justify, and make sense of our own particular journeys, it has become apparent to me, thanks in part to my doctoral studies where I learned to re-search, challenge common sense, and “make the familiar strange” (Kaomea, 2004), to not cling too tightly to what at first blush seems to make sense. At the time of my mental and physical breakdown I attributed my workplace as a cause—it may be that my transition from teaching to government sped up the crash but today I don’t believe it was the cause. In fact, I don’t think the cause is as important as the recognition that over time and perhaps as a result of the confluence of a series of events—mid-life, mid-career, undertaking a doctoral program—a pre-existing medical condition erupted, and I lost the fight—ironically, lost the

fight to win? But it's not about winning or losing; it is now, for me, about living. And I am one of the vulnerable.

Returning to the sceptical bureaucrat in *The Case Worker*, Konrad (1969) claims that his “highest aspiration is that a medium-rank, utterly insignificant civil servant should, as far as possible, live with his eyes open” (p. 168). In doing so, he waits for those he calls his clients—the children, the abandoned babies, the children in institutions, the run-aways, the prisoners, the maniacs, the tyrants, the depraved, the underdogs, the bungling mechanics, the neglected, the underprivileged, “let all those come who want to; one of us will talk, the other will listen; at least we shall be together” (p. 173). I offer the following chapters from the perspective of sharing stories in the midst of living (Clandinin, 2013).

## **Chapter 2**

### **Attending to attendance**

In this chapter, my educational identity is that of a K-12 teacher; the setting is an alternative education classroom for pregnant and parenting teenagers, the majority of whom are of Indigenous descent, in a small northwestern BC town in the year 2000. The theoretical understanding is how I re-enacted classroom structures that felt familiar but that did not serve my students well, that in fact served to control rather than educate those for whom I was responsible. Through reflection I layer current understanding on past practice with the hope that I would think and act differently if in a similar situation again.

Students are expected to attend school, teachers are expected to take attendance, and schools are expected to track attendance, a commonplace practice—this was the belief I had as a student and as a teacher. In the elementary schools where I learned to teach as a student teacher and then began my practice as a ‘real’ teacher, attendance was taken first thing in the morning and either that week’s student helper, or a student with an abundance of energy, would ‘run’ the attendance slip to the office. In one school the attendance slip was tucked in the wall pocket secured outside the classroom door; then someone from the office collected the slips. The rationale was twofold: track attendance, as presumably regular attendance was a contributor to student success, and support safety, since the office would follow up on missing students to make sure they were safe.

I carried, without thought, the practice of attendance taking from my elementary classrooms into the alternative school for pregnant and parenting teens. In this school there was me, as the teacher, and a rehabilitation worker whose main responsibility was taking and tracking student attendance, and then phoning students in the morning when they didn’t show

up. She did a lot of phoning. She was also supposed to pick them up if they needed a ride, but she chose not to do that, citing something about wanting to teach the students personal responsibility. One of our stated reasons for wanting students to come to school on a regular basis was to demonstrate readiness to transition to the 'regular' high school across the parking lot for their senior years and eventual graduation. I expect that the board office also wanted attendance for the purposes of funding a relatively expensive program.

I recall one day walking with one of my students from our little standalone classroom across the parking lot to the main high school and noticing a visible change in her posture and demeanour as we walked, almost as if she was retreating into herself, slouching, becoming quieter. We strode resolutely across as surely this was in the best interests of this student, getting used to the regular high school. Maybe this was my goal or the school's goal for the students, to graduate, but not necessarily their goal for themselves at that time. I don't know though because I never asked.

This next part of my story could be subtitled, "A Tale of Two Funerals." One of my good friends had a death in her family. I took time allowed as per the workplace collective agreement to attend the funeral: it was during my non-instructional time so I didn't need a supply teacher making it convenient to take the half-day for the funeral followed by a brief visit with fellow mourners. I was back at the school after lunch. That same year one of my Indigenous students (I will call her Stephanie to protect her identity but also to give her a name other than "student" in this story) had a relative pass away in her home territory, a fair distance out of town. Stephanie's attendance at the funeral would be a two-week affair. I recall thinking that this was a student whom could least afford the time away from school, especially as she already had a poor attendance record, and was not, in my estimation, a



strong or ambitious student. I equated ambitious with wanting to graduate. I thought, accepted, that the commonplace practices of school provided the path that was in the best interests of students, therefore I reproduced practices such as enforcing attendance. I could not understand then that there were other paths, and timelines, in school, and life, than what I had internalized through my own school years, teacher training, and teacher practice. I did not ask my students what their paths were for themselves, nor did I ask why I was implementing practices in such a ‘wholesale,’ systematic, and now, I realize, unexamined manner.

It wasn’t until recently when I read a passage out of *They Called Me Number One* (2013), a memoir by Bev Sellars about her years in an Indian residential school, that I was able to question whether Stephanie’s attendance at the funeral may have served her interests better than attendance at school, and that as her teacher I didn’t understand nor have compassion in this regard. Sellars tells the story of when her grandmother’s mother died and the husband’s attempt to pull his two daughters out of school for the funeral:

Gram’s dad, John, went to the Mission to get them but was told he would not be able to take his girls home for the funeral. He would not give up, and finally he was allowed to take Gram and Annie to their mother’s funeral. Gram says that lots of Marguerite’s people paddled downriver from Quesnel for the funeral. Gram says that many, many canoes lined the banks of the river that day. (p. 7)

Upon reading this passage I thought of Stephanie’s need to go home for the funeral, and had the realization that my attitude was not far removed from those at the school in Mission. Upon further reflection, I recognize that I was replicating colonial thinking that informed much of my practice as a teacher: thinking internalized and reinforced both as a K-

12 student and as an education student in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

If I were a teacher at the alternative school today, how would I meet the requirements and policies of my school, such as taking attendance, while meeting the “best interests” of my students? A hypothetical question, but one that now I ask. Another question that I can ask is how did this teacher become who she was? As they say, let’s start at the beginning, as narrated in the next chapter.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Broken bones**

So goes the 19th century children's rhyme, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me"; however, in this chapter I will share words that did hurt me. I appear stoic and brave on the outside but my journal entries and memories suggest I was hurting on the inside. I invite you as reader to "participate in the memories...to understand the context in which the memories were both formed and expressed" (Kadar et al, 2005, p. 6). I am storytelling from the perspective of a child through to being a young adult; the setting is primarily my family home in Victoria, BC. Family members and other characters move in and out of the narrative influencing and shaping my sense of self. As I develop physically, my mental and emotional states become more impacted as I interpret real or perceived expectations of school and society as pressure to be perfect and good. I am beginning to show symptoms of anxiety at an early age that becomes more pronounced over time, and over time I get more adept at hiding what has become mental illness in the form of anxiety disorder and eating disorders.

I write the following chapter in the tradition of Leggo (2012) who notes that narrative research is "connected to understanding how stories present possibilities for understanding the complex, mysterious, even ineffable experiences that comprise human living" (p. xix). As a researcher writing an autobiographical narrative inquiry, I draw confidence from Leggo's (2012) guidance that in order to make my stories effective, they "need to be told in creative ways that hold our attention, that call out to us, that startle us, so we know our stories and the stories of others with renewed attentiveness. This is the heart of narrative inquiry" (p. xiii). It is with these hopes that I share my stories about mental illness and its

impacts on me as a child, student, teacher, wife, sister, and mother. One does not just “get over it” when in the throes of mental illness, but perhaps we can help one another “get through it” if we understand and have compassion for others’ experiences. The following chapter is my experience.

### **The setting: My upper middle-class family home**

This chapter opens in a busy household in the early 1970s in urban Victoria, BC. I am the middle child in between my big brother, Nigel, and my little sister, Siobhan—each of us born four years after the other. Completing our household is Pussy, our tortoise-shell cat, a hunter of birds and bunnies, and Sam, our black Labrador dog, a hunter of snakes and garbage; both will live to old ages for pets, 19 and 12 respectively. Our animals roam outside exploring during the day, then wandering home in the evenings for dinner and bed. Pussy’s bed of choice is curled up under my covers: my own security blanket and teddy bear in one purring package. My dad is a naval officer at the navy base in Esquimalt and my mom looks after the household, volunteers at her children’s schools, and works part-time as a canvasser for Statistics Canada. Nigel is in Air Cadets, which eventually leads to a career in the Canadian Air Force, and Siobhan and I are involved in a variety of recreational activities such as dance, gymnastics, Brownies, swimming, and piano. We are encouraged to sign up for extracurricular activities but with one caveat – no quitting midsession or midseason.

### **Scene 1: The broken baby bottle**

My earliest memory is located in our kitchen with its avocado green appliances, burnt orange wallpaper patterned with stylized coffee pots, and cuckoo clock on the wall with Swiss milkmaids chiming out the quarter-hour. I linger in this story in a manner described by Leggo (2012)—my story is part dream, imagination, fantasy, and indeed memory (p. xiii). In

a moment everything goes wrong. Sam's big tail knocks my baby bottle out of my toddler hand. The bottle breaks as it hits the floor. It is my last bottle. I look up at my mom in both desperation and hope: desperation for the loss and hope that she will fix things and bring me comfort. However, she decides that rather than replacing the bottle, this is a natural time for me to be weaned. "Sam broke your bottle; you'll have to use a cup." I think otherwise as I cry out to her, "Go shopping, buy goggle!" (goggle being what I called the baby bottle). My lament became a family meme, although the source of it is not known or remembered by family members.

My mom is long deceased and my dad has no memory of the baby bottle incident. However, I know this story is true. I verified it recently with Nigel when I asked him for his version of the story. He remembers the phrase "go shopping, buy goggle," but not why it was uttered or even by whom. For my part, I can still conjure up the sentiments of that moment, and my unrequited plea. My brother jokingly commented that maybe it was a good thing that mom did wean me from the bottle. In all seriousness, I am not so sure. With no evidence to suggest otherwise, I claim this moment as the first manifestation of anxiety— the fact that I've clung to the feelings evoked by it both validates and reinforces its significance.

There is more to any story than just the moment recorded. The baby bottle scene is set in a complex milieu that fades out of significance for some, but continues to shift and hold meaning over time for others. Revisiting my family home, a private space, as an autobiographical writer and scholar, I am considering not only my home's role on identity formation and location of self, but also what Mezeio (2005) calls the domestic effect. While the home is generally viewed as private space, "domestic spaces are the product of society; they express and reinforce its norms, social practices, and ideologies" (p. 81).

## Scene 2: Being a Brownie

I should have quit Brownies. But I knew the rule about not quitting, a rule reinforced each week by the motivational poster on the wall at my gymnastics club: *Quitters never win. Winners never quit.* I wanted to be a winner, not a quitter! The first year had been fun because my best friend was with me. We both signed up for a second year; however, she quit within a few weeks. That wasn't an option for me. And so I collected merit badges to sew on my sash—"Dear Diary, Today Brown owl<sup>7</sup> is going to give me a certificate to try to get my book lover's badge. It's harder to get than you think it is"<sup>8</sup>—and I lived the Brownie Promise, recited each week by a pack of little girls dressed in brown circling the fairy toadstool, "I promise to do my best, to do my duty to God and the Queen, to be someone who thinks of others before herself...." The weekly Brownie rituals held in the church's basement hall were ingrained in me as systematically and tightly as my merit badges were check-listed off and sewn onto my sash. The threads were bound even more tightly around duty to God and Queen each school day as we started our morning standing by our desks all in a straight line reciting the Lord's Prayer and, on occasion, singing "God Save the Queen."

On Brownie days after morning prayers I'd sit at my desk in my brown uniform with its orange scarf and brown nylon belt to which was attached a little yellow pencil and a coin purse containing my weekly dues of 10 cents, "Dear Diary, Today the class are having the year picture taken. Denise and I Have to get

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<sup>7</sup> To differentiate report card comments and journal entries from the rest of the manuscript, I have opted to use the Courier New font, a font that reminds me of the era before the advent of word processors and when documents were formatted on typewriters.

<sup>8</sup> Journal entries and other artifacts are included in their original form; spelling and other errors have not been corrected or "fixed". My rationale is that the form is as much of the artifact as the words.

pictures in our uniform.” Teacher’s comment, “Don’t you like wearing your uniform? I think it looks sharp!” No, I thought, I did not like wearing my uniform because I did not like what it represented, which was going to an activity that made me anxious. However, I did not have the means to express this other than through my attempt in my journal, and through getting physically sick, as the next reflection illustrated.

To my teacher I may have looked sharp on the outside, but inside I was losing breath as I watched the clock on the classroom wall tick closer to 3:00 signaling end of the school day and time to walk to Brownies. One week I worked myself into such a state of worry that I went home sick. The downside was that I’d miss that week’s Sing-Out<sup>9</sup> broadcast into my classroom from 2:30-3:00. As I climbed into the family station wagon, avoiding Sam’s drool as it rolled down the channels on the vinyl backseat, I was able to breathe again and felt cocooned. My mom gave me a warm-to-my-tummy snack—then I tucked myself into the chair in the living room’s sunny spot. I balanced my book and a cup of tea gingerly on my knee so as not to spill on Pussy who had also found the same sunny chair in which to curl up. And joy! I realized that as Sing-out was broadcast on the radio, I should be able to find it on my home radio. I rested until 2:30, then demonstrated enough wellness to be able to switch on the radio and sing along, but kept my dancing minimal so as not to appear too well. That ended up being a good day. But the core of the memory, feigning sickness and skipping school in order to skip Brownies, stayed with me as surely as the badges sewn for posterity

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<sup>9</sup> In the words of Lloyd Arntzen, the teacher/musician who led Sing-out, “It was a weekly series designed for elementary school teachers who were expected to teach music but did not have any music in them. It was called Sing out (Like the folk music magazine SINGOUT!). The ministry of education financed it and booklets were sent out with all the lyrics to the songs to the schools” (Harrison, 2011).

onto my sash. The entry from my home diary for that day reads, "Today at two a clock I has to come Home. I couldnt go to brownies today."

This particular memory stands out as a negative image does in photography, as an inversion, calling attention to itself. The process of narrative inquiry allows this memory to draw attention to the particular in what Leggo (2012) says are our abundant lives. The particulars of that Brownie day are plucked out of the abundance of all my days to consider some possibilities of meaning that lie within the "tangled messiness of lived experience" (Leggo 2012, p. xiii). The Brownie memory has surfaced in this narrative inquiry not as a confession of guilt but rather as a way to understand what were the domestic influences, those of home and school and society, on me, Virginia, as a child.

What makes this memory stand out? Through critical reflection, I see the memory from a more compassionate perspective. I see a young girl experiencing ongoing distress appearing to have no outlet to express her feelings other than being sick and going home. Her worry threatens her physical being, as noted by the losing of breath. She focuses her energy into trying to re-establish safety and does that by thinking through and implementing a solution. The calm came in the form of physical comforts—hot lunch, cozy chair, cat, book—which allowed her to dispel the worry and bad feelings and restore mental and emotional well being. I also see Virginia as a child resisting being controlled and being told what to think and believe. My grade two teacher wrote in my report card, "Virginia is a very happy, self-assertive child who has already formed definite likes and dislikes and opinions of the various subjects or things in her environment." I retained my self-assertiveness but lost my happiness as I got older.



### Scene 3: Sailboats, horses, and divorce

During my elementary school years my dad was the ‘captain’ of our 32’ sailboat. Luann. We puttered around the gulf islands on weekends and during summer vacations. “Joy! Siobhan and I slept under the stars last night.” I wrote in my journal. When the mainsail went up my sister went below to the galley where it was warm and safe. We’d read, play cards, and drink hot chocolate. Sam curled his big body around the table’s centre post to stop sliding during tacking and Pussy nestled into a jumble of blankets and sleeping bags. When the anchor went down we’d zip up our life jackets and row ashore for beachcombing adventures, and to give Sam and Pussy a chance to put paws on solid ground. My diaries tell of adventures that would rival those told in *Swallows and Amazons*<sup>10</sup>: “This morning we went on the beach and found the body of a dead sheep. Later on we went to Cabbage Island. At Cabbage, a sailboat got stuck, freed itself, and got stuck again!”

My sister and I continued our adventures in our teen years but now on horseback instead of on sailboats. What began as one lesson a week turned into owning our own horses. Luann was sold as money and time shifted from sea to stall. The house in Victoria was sold to buy a horse-friendly acreage in North Saanich. Family vacations were replaced with weekends hauling truck and trailer to horse shows.

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<sup>10</sup> *Swallows and Amazons* is a book written in 1930 by Arthur Ransome about a group of children on holidays in northern England who embark on a series of outdoor adventures as they sail in dinghies around the islands in the Lake District.



The family home dissolved the summer my little sister completed high school. At that time my mom initiated what apparently had been a long-in-the-planning separation from my dad. I was surprised by the separation, my sister was not, and my brother makes the claim that our parents divorced because of the horses; however, my dad suggested otherwise, that it was the horses that kept the family intact for as long as it was.

**Image 1. Picture perfect family. 1973.**



**Image 2. The family Christmas photo, that's me on the right wearing my dad's hat, 1980.**

### **The kitchen table: Serving up food and more**

The kitchen table was for eating, but it was also the setting for carving pumpkins, colouring Easter eggs, removing splinters from fingers, polishing riding boots and military dress boots, sewing ballet ribbons on ballet shoes, playing Monopoly, sharing confidences over a cup of tea and biscuits, doing homework, preparing tax returns, and folding laundry. There were only a few years when my brother, sister and I were all at home preparing our own breakfasts, which in our household meant pouring cereal into bowls with swimming pools of milk. We had what I suppose could have been considered fun or treat cereal and the everyday or sensible cereal—the variety pack, the ones with the little cardboard box that you ate out of, were the fun cereals saved for overnight trips on the sailboat and the cereal cupboard at home was full of our “healthy” favourites: Rice Krispies, Shreddies, and Cheerios. We created cereal box walls so we didn’t have to look at each other across the table. My parents were not present at the breakfast table—my mom stayed in bed with the morning paper delivered to her along with tea and toast by my dad before he got ready and then set off for work.

The lunch table was playful. My mom would quip when we got silly, “You wouldn’t do that if you were dining with the queen!” and “You don’t see your mother falling off her chair!” (the latter quip as a result of my brother making me laugh so hard sometimes that I couldn’t breathe and would literally fall off my chair). At the lunch table we were allowed to blow bubbles through straws in our chocolate milk and stir our ice cream. “You’re allowed to stir your ice-cream?” our friends would ask incredulously when over for lunch. We sang songs at the lunch table. One song in particular left an impression on me, a catchy 1966 tune by Jerry Samuels about the funny farm, code for mental institution: “they’re coming to take

me away, ha-ha, to the funny farm, those nice young men in their clean white coats"! At the lunch table I learned about crazy people and what happened to them—in Victoria they went to the EMI, or the Eric Martin Institute. While we laughed and joked about crazy people, I did not know of any, although my mother threatened to commit herself to the EMI when we children were driving her crazy.

The tone of the supper<sup>11</sup> table was constrained. My father seemed to be in charge and with sternness would instill lessons no doubt learned through his military training: elbows off the table, finish all your food on your plate, don't reach for seconds without being offered, no singing at the table.

My brother seemed to take the brunt of my father's lectures during the evening meal, although my brother doesn't recall it as being as severe as I recall. Sometimes my mom would try to intervene on my brother's behalf, but my dad would not be deterred and she would back down. After dinner my sister would often be left sitting in her high chair, and when she was older sitting at the table, all alone long after the rest of us had finished and been excused from the table. Maybe it was only a few minutes that she was left there, and maybe only once a while, but the image imprinted on my mind was that she was trapped in her high chair often and for long periods of time as a consequence and punishment for not finishing her food.

I asked my sister recently what she recalled. She had no memory of the highchair, which is not surprising given that she would have been fairly young, but she remembers sneaking food to Sam to empty her plate so she could be excused from the table when she

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<sup>11</sup> In my family we used the term "supper" when referring to our regular evening meal, and "dinner" for more formal evening meals such as Sundays when we ate in the dining room, or if we ate out at a fine-dining restaurant.

was older. We have different meanings of this reoccurring scene. While I recall our meals as uncomfortable, and could easily overplay what was going on to make it appear that the problem was not me but rather my parents, she said that she wasn't traumatized by the incident and has no problems now finishing her food! Her response reinforced for me that we weren't living a *Mommie Dearest*<sup>12</sup> scenario; instead as children we interpreted the situation differently. To her it might have been a game but to me it was punishment and control.

One more scene reveals what was undoubtedly simply meant to be a teachable moment in my family household, but remains as a memory of shame and guilt in my critical and anxious mind that tended to overanalyze situations. This story takes place in the formal dining room where we usually had our Sunday dinners eating off of fine china and learning how to dine with proper place settings and cloth napkins. For dessert one night there was a pan of freshly baked brownies that my mom put on the table in front of her and began to cut. I was excited, and in a moment of fun and silliness said impetuously that I wanted the big corner piece! The lesson I was about to learn was that it was not proper to ask, that I should have waited to be offered, and that I was being greedy. My mom gave me the full piece that I had asked for, and then told me that I had to eat it all. I felt shame and embarrassment. I started to eat the brownie that no longer tasted good. I felt small. I don't think she made me eat it all. But I had learned another lesson about how to behave at the dinner table, and that food wasn't always pleasurable and that controlling my exuberance was needed if I wanted to avoid getting in trouble and the awful feeling of shame.

How else might I have told the story of mealtimes in my family? I could have sugarcoated the dinner table experiences, suggested that maybe I was too sensitive, that my

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<sup>12</sup> *Mommie Dearest* is an autobiographical book released in 1978 depicting alleged abuse of Christina Crawford at the hands of her movie-star mother, Joan Crawford.

parents were only trying their best to raise us well. I could rationalize those experiences by saying that it wasn't so bad, and that at least I got fed, or at least I wasn't beaten. Yet, it may be that the rationalizing is part of the reason why I discredited my own needs for so long, telling myself to "get over it" and being hard on myself for any transgressions, real or perceived. I learned not to trust my feelings or my instinct. My final diary entry for grade three illustrates a disconnect between what I felt was expected of me and what I felt. I wrote, "Dear Diary, Tomorrow is the last day of school. I thought we were'nt having a party tomorrow but we are." And my teacher responded, "I'm sure you're glad about that!" No, I wasn't. I don't like parties.

### **The parental actors in my story: Love lost**

Who were the actors in my story? I write to understand, I test out words on paper, then delete, move them around, then land on something that seems true enough to stand as a story. This next story describes the early impressions I held of my parents. Both my parents were born in 1935: my father into a military family in Western Canada and my mother into a family that my father describes as coming from "old money" and included professionals and business people such as cotton brokers, accountants, hoteliers, and publicans in Northern England. Carol Hilditch was many things before she was my mom: socialite, model, cigarette girl, stage actor, and pursuing a career as a flight attendant, when she met George Jackson, a Canadian naval officer serving on loan to the British navy in their submarine service. Despite not having finished high school due to frequent moves during World War 11, she, like my father, valued education—he for the credentials and she for the learning.

The portrait I hold of my mother is one of glamour, adventure, and liberal thinking: in my memory she was gregarious and full of passion, but also one never to leave the house without “putting on her face”—or make-up. My father’s influence on me, by contrast, was one of practicality, mindful of doing one’s duty, “One must not only *be* honest”, he would say, “but also *appear* honest”. The two photos below capture the images that I hold of my parents: my glamorous mother and my responsible father.



**Image 3 My glamorous mother. That’s my mom in the car as a “cigarette girl” at a car show, circa 1958.**



**Image 4 My responsible dad. My dad as a young Canadian naval officer, circa 1958.**

My parents married during a snowstorm in northern England on December 30, 1961—my ever-practical father states that this date was chosen so that he could claim my mom as a dependent on his tax return that year. My Roman Catholic mother was allowed to be married in her church only if she and my father, an Anglican in the Church of England, promised to raise their children in the Catholic faith. They raised my two siblings and me, yes in the Catholic faith, and then divorced after 27 years of marriage—my mother initiated it saying that she wasn't ready to settle and wanted more. She told me that she wanted someone to hold her hand again. I thought that was strange, as I had never seen them hold hands. But



I've been told that my dad held her on a pedestal in their early years together. That position of worship changed in an instant, as depicted in the story below.

### **The fall of the ashtray and the fall of the household**

Both my parents smoked—I remember my mom sending me to the corner store to buy her a pack of cigarettes and being given an extra quarter to buy my favourite Jersey Milk chocolate bar. In elementary school we made glazed ceramic ashtrays as Christmas gifts for our parents. On the rare occasion that our family went to a restaurant for dinner my siblings and I would sag in our chairs letting out audible moans as my mom replied “thank you, that would be lovely” to the server’s offer of an after-dinner coffee. As the coffee was served the cigarettes were lit up, and we children would flop about in our seats, playing with the plastic straws in the candle or dumping salt and pepper into our water glasses, itching to get back into the Volvo station wagon and drive home. At some point both of my parents quit smoking; I don’t recall anything about that process other than one day they were smokers and seemingly the next day they weren’t.

A turning point, I believe, in my parents’ relationship was when my Gran in England died from lung cancer as a result of smoking. Years later my mom told me about what happened when she returned home after the funeral.

The death of her mother had been stressful and she’d hoped for comfort and empathy from my dad. She got neither. His comment to her as she walked off the plane was that she smelled like a dirty ashtray. With all of her English relatives smoking in the pub, in the house, in the car, and coping with the death of her mum, she started smoking again. My father was disappointed in her and did not see justification for her lapse. Perhaps that was the day they stopped holding hands. They kept up the illusion of an intact marriage and happy

family unit for the next ten years. I believed the illusion of our happy intact family and was surprised when they separated the summer my little sister graduated from high school. What I hadn't noticed over the years were my parents' twin beds slowly moving further and further apart. The separation and divorce were long in the making but, like holding hands, the next moment happened in an instant. Let me explain.

One evening in the summer of 1988 my parents hosted an engagement party for my brother and his new fiancé. Everyone seemed to be in good spirits. When the party was over the spirits, as in alcohol, continued to flow. That was the last time my parents shared a home: they physically separated that night, then soon after divorced. I had a role in their physical separation. My dad was upset and began physically provoking my mom. I wanted it to stop so I steered my mom out of the kitchen to the driveway, and then phoned the police. My dad refused to leave the house voluntarily and the police made him leave. The next day the dismantling of the physical house began. And my little sister and I moved out together and became roommates in addition to sisters.

What I do not know or understand, even to this day, was what had simmered all those years after the dirty ashtray comment, nor do I know how difficult it must have been for the two of them to live a life pretending to their children and to the outside world that all was well. What I do know is that my own increasing challenges from anxiety disorders and eating disorders, documented in my diaries, develop as my own parents' marriage disintegrates. Similarly to naming the baby bottle incident as the moment my anxiety begins to be visible, without evidence to suggest otherwise, I believe that my mental health symptoms were exasperated by the disorders happening beneath the happy exterior portrayed by my family

unit. The purpose of noting such occurrences is not to lay blame but rather to bring awareness that a person's mental development can be impacted by external stressors.

Both my parents married new partners within two years of their divorce. My father, 82 years old at the time of this writing, holds hands with his second wife. My mother died within a few months of her second marriage, at age 55. My sister had been living with our mom at the time. The day after the funeral her new husband changed the locks on the house and my sister had to find alternate accommodation. And he gave all of my mom's clothes, shoes, and other personal items to his daughters. His actions severed him from the family that had been willing to accept him even after mom's death; however, this was not such a loss.

When my mom and this man started dating, she was undergoing treatment for the cancer that would kill her a few months later. Before they married, this man took my mom and me to a diner off the side of the highway for lunch. He often took us out using the coupons and perks he got as part of his sales work; this diner with its plastic booths and menus the size of a small town's phone book was chosen for the discount, not the ambience. I sat on the sticky vinyl seat across from them. My mom sat strangely silently, with downcast eyes. He played with the cutlery, scratching his ear with the fork. Then he asked me to give them my blessing for their upcoming marriage. My reply was direct, "No, I will not, I cannot, and you do not need one from me anyway."

A few days later it was just she and I; I was driving her to run errands on one of the days when he wasn't around. I asked her why she was marrying him. They were already living together, and I did not see the logic of getting married while she was sick—I wanted to understand. His intentions seemed clear after she died when he severed ties and challenged her will in court. But that day she didn't give me an answer. I believe that she married him

out of Catholic guilt, fearing perhaps that she wouldn't go to heaven as she had been living in sin, the sin of living with a man out of wedlock; this is my own interpretation and to date I have not discovered any information to suggest otherwise.

**Plot analysis: Untangling the knots of religion that bind**

My mother's faith in God and the Catholic Church compelled her to make a final attempt at a cure, a miracle cure for the faithful, in Lourdes, France. This small French town is a pilgrimage site for believers and a tourist attraction for non-believers. While my mom was not physically cured, she appeared to be in a state of acceptance upon her return. As we sat on her couch drinking tea, I asked her about the trip. She noted that while there she looked around at other people, some very young, with their various ailments, and she concluded that she had had a good life, and was ready to die. She gave me a plastic bottle of the holy water, perhaps as my own healing power, as a souvenir.

I used to comment that being raised in the Catholic faith is not like wearing your religion as a cloak that you can put on and take off; rather it meshes and entangles itself into your being. It would seep out similarly in superstitious beliefs that swayed my actions, words and thoughts, unexamined yet influencing. How, for example, was reciting the Hail Mary during airplane takeoffs and landings, as I did, any different than people who wear their favourite team's jerseys on game day, or people who fear a black cat crossing their path? As I began to separate the actions, words and thoughts influenced by my mental illness from when I wasn't under that influence, I also began to untangle the religious knots that influenced me.

One prayer, the Penitential Act, referred directly to my thoughts, my actions, and my words:

I confess to almighty God, and to you, my brothers and sisters, that I have sinned through my own fault in my thoughts and in my words, in what I have done, and in what I have failed to do, through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault.

I recited, “I confess...” every Sunday. Church prayers washed over me and leached into my veins, into my bones, passing my ears and over my lips, lodging into my brain. I understood intellectually that any transgressions or omissions of duty were my own fault, and I was critical of any shortcomings—I could always do better, be better. Any criticism I received—real or perceived—I took to heart and took as evidence that I was not good enough. And if others weren’t critical of me, my anxious mind played back conversations and deeds to find faults myself. I was never good enough, never okay. However, the Sunday mass itself was a comforting ritual of sameness, of routines, of predictability, that soothed my restless mind.

I remember when my friend, of the Christian Reformed ilk, warned me that yoga and meditation practices were the work of the devil as it led to a spirituality that wasn’t about Jesus or the Trinity. Years later, I know that yoga and meditation provided me with the calm I craved when I had my nervous breakdown. Yoga saved me, I assert, and taught me how to live in the present, how to bring my being and thinking into the present rather than dwelling on the past or worrying about the future. I am rediscovering my own soul separate from authority figures and through that process, I have begun examining my own spirituality separate from religion<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> Further discussion about the idea of the separation of spirituality and religion is out of scope for this dissertation, but certainly would be relevant as follow-up research.

I believed for a long time that my mom, now long deceased, was still with me. She is in my memory; this I can say is true. She died a few weeks after her trip to Lourdes. The last night I saw her alive my brother and I were visiting her in the hospital. My brother helped her with her toileting needs while I watered her many plants. She didn't want us to leave, it seemed, as she pointed to other plants, already dripping wet but that she said needed water. Finally it was time to go as it was getting late and I had work in the morning. As I hugged her goodnight I had tears in my eyes and my mom asked, "What's wrong?" as a mother would. What was wrong? My mother was dying of cancer! Her last words to me were, "Don't worry, sweetie, I'm not going anywhere". She died that night.

## Chapter 4

### **A pleasure to have in class-and what the teachers didn't see**

In this chapter *A pleasure to have in class*, I am a K-12 student; the setting is various schools in Victoria, BC. To the outside world, to my parents, my teachers, and my coaches, I appear to be a confident, healthy, and happy child. I'm a good girl who causes no trouble. However, there were troubles that I kept hidden, revealed only in my thoughts and in my words.

The text in this chapter is primarily a collection of diary entries—both school diaries and home diaries—and comments written by teachers about me on report cards. I agree with Tuten's (2005) claim that “report cards impact students' self-images and inform the views of them held by teachers and parents” (p. 6). As a teacher, as well as a mother, and now as a researcher, I am more aware of the power of those comments on children and their families. In this section I am considering the impact of words on the heart. In the words of Pelias (2004), “Beneath the head is the body; beneath the body is the heart; beneath the heart is what matters” (p. 35).

## Fixing Virginia



**Image 5 Virginia in kindergarten, 1972.**

According to my kindergarten report card (1972-1973), I began my school journey in good form, the kind of student that teachers like to have in their class. I was what Comber in Tuten (2005) describes as the ideal student—a self-regulated individual who relates to the teacher through compliance, is prepared to work, whose behaviours suggest commitment and enthusiasm, and who contributes to the classroom community (p. 52). But one problem was identified on my report card—I suppose it wasn't a problem until school said it was.

Fall term, 1972: Virginia is a friendly, vivacious, busy little girl. She has tried hard to please me, and is popular with her classmates, too. *She expresses her ideas*



*well in spite of her stutter, which is less apparent than at first [italics mine].*

Spring term, 1973: Virginia's good progress has continued. She is cheerful without exception, busily involved with her friends (usually with books and make believe) and interested in learning. *I am so pleased that the stutter is gone!* [italics mine]

I was not troubled by how I spoke until my teacher raised it as a problem. Clandinin (2013) was less impacted than I was by other's opinions of her, "I recognize that having teachers story me in these ways was neither troubling nor important to me" (p. 71). I, however, was troubled by how my teacher storied me, as evidenced by the fact that the stuttering, evoked through text and memory, stands out as the first instance of something in me that was broken and needed fixing. Considering Tuten's (2005) assertion that "report cards are a textual intersection of schools, teachers, parents, and students" (p. 6), I know that I attempted to be thoughtful in my selection of text when I wrote comments in report cards for my students; however, I did not always make the mark<sup>14</sup>. The truth is that I did not have my current lens and accept that there may be some students and their families either still troubled by what I wrote about them in my authoritative teacher voice, or even accepting without question what I wrote as truth about them.

Perhaps Clandinin (2013) wasn't troubled by what was written in her report cards because her family stories supported her own view of self more than what was written in the

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<sup>14</sup> During my teaching career I had only one instance of a parent challenging me on a comment made about her child, but I wonder how many others questioned but did not confront? That one challenge however was fruitful as I attempted to write future comments with more sensitivity to context and intention for all my students.

report cards and school stories: “My usual response to these stories, when my parents read my report cards or came home from parent-teacher interviews, was disinterest, unless my parents responded in such a way that I knew I had to change” (p. 71). However, my response to these stories was of great interest. I perched on my bed with my brain aglow—waiting for its fix of cognitive calm—with visions of my mom and teacher conferring in my classroom. Was I okay? I’d hear the car in the driveway, then my mom would walk down the hallway to give me hugs and a few sound bites from the parent-teacher interview. The golden-rod coloured report card had been brought home in its manila envelope a few days before the interview, addressed to Mr. and Mrs. Jackson (my maiden name). Our teachers made it very clear that our parents were to open the report cards, not us. It was a big event, at least in my memory, when the envelope was opened. The first thing we looked at were the grades. Then my mom, or my dad, would read out loud first the teacher comments then the scores for behaviour and effort. Finally, recorded lates and absences were mulled over eliciting commentary such as: “The October absences were when you had an ear infection” or “The November late was when we drove your dad to the airport”. Following the reading of the report card, our usual but not assumed reward was going to McDonald’s<sup>15</sup> for dinner the next evening.

Where Clandinin writes that over time she became disconnected and associated less with school and school narratives, I, over time, associated more with the stories and judged myself according to school marks and letter grades. Clandinin’s “textual intersection” was akin to operating without traffic lights and “bumping up between and among stories” (p.72)

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<sup>15</sup> In the 1970s McDonald’s fast-food restaurants were new on the landscape, and going to one was a treat.

whereas my textual intersection was a smoothly operating round-about where I entered and exited according to the rules of the road, or the rules of school.

Furthering the traffic metaphor, according to the first guiding principle on my kindergarten report card (see image), school was a bridge between the home and the larger world.



**Image 6 BC's  
kindergarten  
report card, 1973.**

But here lies the snarl—a bridge is a crossing between destinations—the kindergarten claims to be the bridge between home and the larger world, but it negates the reality that the classroom, the school, is not a bridge but a destination unto itself. School has its own culture and context—it is as real and as constructed as the home and the so-called larger world (Kadar et al, 2005). Clandinin (2013) notes that we “live by stories” (p. 21) and that our “stories of school profoundly shape us” (p. 22). With that view, school is not merely a bridge but a storied place that shapes us as profoundly as tree roots cling to landscapes, “intertwined, interwoven into who we are and who we are becoming. These stories live in us, in our bodies, as we move and live in the world” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 22).

The stuttering subsided, which, according to my report card, pleased my teacher. However, the sting to my soul persisted and festered as evidence that I wasn’t good enough, that I was innately flawed. And then a new problem revealed itself in grade one—an inability to pronounce the letter ‘r.’ I remember being taken out of class and walking through the hallway to the sick room for speech lessons. The speech lady was very nice and the one-on-one attention made me feel special. I didn’t have a problem with my speech but was happy to play along to make the adults happy. The speech lady and my mom worked so hard to fix my problem using Randy-the-rabbit- lesson at school and again at home: they’d enunciate ever so carefully, “RRRRR...Randy the rabbit ran around the tree.” I would respond “RRRRR...wandy the wabbit wan awound the trwee”.

The home and school lessons subsided—maybe they gave up? Or funding for lessons ended? I will never know as there is no record of the speech lessons in my report cards and my mom is deceased so all I have left are my own recollections, and an anthropomorphized image of Randy the rabbit running in endless loops around the tree. I can relate to Pelias’

(2004) speech lessons: articulate, make sure you have all the correct pronunciations, don't speak too slowly or too quickly, use pauses for dramatic effect, but remember slow speech gives the impression of a slow mind (pp. 34-35). I developed my own strategy to fix the "r" problem by making substitutions and "insisting on a linguistic style" that was on my side (Pelias, 2004, p. 34), and when I couldn't find replacement words endured the teasing from my family. It became a family joke when my brother made it into Royal Roads Military College—not that he got in but that I couldn't pronounce it—"where does your brother go to school?" "Woyal woads" I would say, as if on cue.

I still can't pronounce my own name properly, in my mind and to my own ears, even after years of conscious effort. If I manipulate my tongue and throat muscles just so I can get a close semblance to a proper pronunciation, whatever that may be, but I hear "Voy-ginya." I enjoy hearing other people say my name. I no longer try to learn the mechanics of speech but attune to the corporal calm, like an injection of endorphins, when I hear my name uttered by another human in whatever beautiful pronunciation is used. My "ear is most attuned to the heart" (Pelias, 2004, p.35). My heart soars a little bit when you say my name.

I protected my name on the first day of school most school years. Perhaps you too recall this tradition of roll call, most awkward on the first day, when the teacher took attendance, commenting on a name now and then—"oh, another Johnson, I taught your older sister a few years ago," or "Robert, you're the third one in the class, we'll call you Bobby," and on more than one occasion I was asked if I preferred to be called Ginny. Never having heard that as a nickname for Virginia I thought it was a strange question—what, I wondered, was wrong with my name and why did they want to change it? I kept my identity—I was Virginia, even if I couldn't pronounce my own name. I acknowledge here my own power in

being able to retain my name, not so for all. In “Attending to Attendance” I recalled Bev Sellars’ (2013) experience growing up as an Aboriginal person in British Columbia during the time of residential schools. This is Sellars’ experience of name and identity: “We were given a number that became our identity throughout our years at school. I became Number 1 on the girls’ side. Although the other kids all continued to call me by my name, ‘Bev Sellars’ ceased to exist for most of the nuns and priests. Instead they would say, ‘Number 1, come here.... “(p. 32).

I was able to hold onto my name, but not my body. My body, like my speech, was subject to scrutiny and intervention. For example, I have the scar from the smallpox



immunization typical of people my generation; however, my scar is hidden on the underside of my arm rather than visible on the upper arm. My mom had instructed the doctor to administer the shot in a way so as to hide the scar, a blemish to avoid, she told me, should I decide one day to be a swimsuit model! I think she was jesting about my being a model, but not about hiding the imperfection.

**Image 7 Happily imperfect, 1975.**

Next to be addressed was my face. The location of this next memory is in the doctor’s office—the players, like the immunization scene, include my mom, the doctor, and me. I am

sitting on the exam table while the doctor performs a procedure to remove two red spots on my face. The doctor uses a needle to inject something into the spots – one on my cheek and one on my nose – and they fade away. The hidden inoculation mark and the lack of extra spots on my face don't bother me as much as the next physical fix. The gap between my front teeth was closed. It was a cosmetic fix; I know this because my parents said that they'd pay for my brother's braces only if needed for medical reasons whereas my sister and I could have them for cosmetic reasons. I look at women now with a gap between their teeth and wonder what I would have looked like if mine had not been removed. I don't fault my parents but rather consider that they were responding to the social and cultural norms of the day and doing the best they could with what they knew. What they couldn't have known was how my busy mind was internalizing and interpreting the messages I was receiving, or how powerful the words were that my literal mind chose to latch on to as I sought certainty in an otherwise vague world<sup>16</sup>.

### **Please see me**

One of my features in my control was my size—I was small, little, petite. This I know because I was told so. In class photographs I was always in the front row—not right in the front as that person held the sign saying what class we were and the sign would have hidden me—but flanking that person. My body became my tool—I could manipulate it and use it to manipulate. My physical presence was seen. No one could see my thoughts or my feelings. I separated my body from my brain and focused on results acceptable to others; such acceptance I found soothing. But like an addict, I relied on external stimulus as the opium that brought calm to my brain. The heart was left behind for the most part, although

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<sup>16</sup> Interested readers may choose to follow up on the concepts of gender and expectations from family and society.

occasionally I would feel what Pelias (2004) portrays as “moments, pure as communion, when body and soul were one” (p. 43). Join me in one of my moments when body and soul were one, when my brain and heart rested, “Since Nigel was at cadets and Daddy at drill, Mommy, Siobhan and I were alone. So we made a fire, drew the curtains, made cocoa, and knitted before the fire. What Fun!!” (diary entry, age 10). Compare this moment to when my mind and body and soul were troubled, and my heart was nowhere to be found:

I got really upset last night thinking about the world coming to an end. This morning, when I did #2 there was what looked like blood spots on it. I hope it's nothing bad. ... I have decided that I would like to be a nutritionist. But God shall show me one day what he wants me to be. (diary entry, age 13)

An early memory of being aware, and feeling pleased and special, about my size took place during one of many clothes-shopping trips with my mom. On this particular trip we were at the Mayfair Mall in Woodward's department store. The salesclerk's comment, as she brought in increasingly smaller sizes to the changing room, “she's so tiny,” lodged in my psyche as a quality that defined me. I interpreted events to validate my self-image. For example, a boy at school a few years older than me called me Minnie Mouse—it could have been for any feature, I suppose, but I took it as meaning mini, or small. In high school my desk was flipped upside-down by some of my classmates to create a mini-desk. I liked the prank, even mock-sat in my upside-down desk for fun before they flipped it back up. I needed to be seen,



acknowledged; otherwise I panicked in fear of disappearing—being noticed validated that I was okay and that I existed.

As I reflect on my desire to be seen through size, small size to be specific, I consider the opposite — that as a female being overweight and large is akin to disappearing in our society—if you're overweight you are disregarded, overlooked (Tartakovsky, 2017; Rice, 2007). My own experience of this phenomenon lived out in my elementary school. There were two big girls: one was tall and broad and the other was short and rotund. I never talked to them but was always aware where they were—I was both repulsed<sup>17</sup> by and curious about them. I grouped them as a pair, although not sure if they were actually friends or bonded in their position as outcasts. I felt sorry for them, as if they had been dealt a bad lot in life, rendered invisible by their large statures. The fat body was like the mute body, “ignored, dismissed in a glance. It knows it shouldn't show itself, shouldn't be where it doesn't belong, shouldn't try to speak. It sits in the corner searching for a friendly face. It is never seen” (Pelias, 2004, p. 37). While I felt pity for the two large girls, I also viewed them as warning signs of what I feared: to be forgotten. To be fat was to be forgotten.

What does this fear feel like? The fear of being invisible bubbles up as panic; my blood runs ice-cold, my chest clamps up, my brain solidifies into a cement-block. I lose feeling and the last gasp of breath is focused on not disappearing. I understand now that what I was experiencing was a panic attack<sup>18</sup>. I am known as a fighter, and I believe that my earliest fights were against the panic that threatened my survival.

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<sup>17</sup> I am curious about my own repulsion—while not an excuse for being unkind to other people, this is an example of the distorted thinking and lens through which I viewed the world when under the influence of anorexia nervosa.

<sup>18</sup> Panic attacks are not considered the same as panic disorders, but the scope of my research precludes analysis of these conditions other than sharing my own experience with panic.

An early recollection of the fight re-enacts itself in my mind like an old film-reel. I am about eight years old and I am sitting on the side lawn in-between our driveway and the neighbour's house. Likely I had been playing with the cat or dog and now was sitting, happily content. I see my big brother and little sister interacting with the neighbours. And in an instant I flip from warm calm to icy fear then to anger—was I invisible? Why was I not being included? I wasn't the cute little baby or the cool big brother. To an outsider looking at the scene, I may have appeared content, a little girl sitting cross-legged on the lawn while her siblings played. I was not content on the inside but instead silent and troubled. "The mute body is still, without breath. It never looks like itself, there, on display, waxed and set"



**Image 8 Perfectly poised. The Jackson siblings in the tent trailer during summer holidays, circa 1973.**

(Pelias, 2004, p. 37). I said nothing. I was silent. But my voice was screaming inside my head. And as long as I was screaming, I had breath; as long as I had breath I could scream.

The picture, image 8, is of me and my brother and sister the summer of 1973. We are on holidays camping in the tent trailer. What do you see? I look happy, sitting upright with my hands crossed. But I didn't feel happy. I felt alone. I was sad on the inside.

This picture and the feelings it evokes reminds me of a passage from Frankl's (1959) *Man's Search for Meaning*, one of the few books I have returned to multiple times. This particular passage reminds me not to assume that the image tells the story, despite the common phrase "A picture is worth a thousand words"—the words that are missing might have a different meaning for the mute figures posed in the picture than meaning assumed by the photographer or viewer. Frankl's (1959) passage reads:

Somebody showed me an illustrated weekly with photographs of prisoners lying crowded on their bunks, staring duly at a visitor. 'Isn't this terrible, the dreadful staring faces – everything about it.' 'Why?' I asked, for I genuinely did not understand. For at that moment I saw it all again....' (p. 48)

Frankl (1959) explains how the image took him back to his own similar experience of lying crowded on the bunks, but this time in sick bay and therefore not having to do physical labour that day but being able to rest, and having a bit of extra food; to him the image evoked contentment and happiness. As Frankl explained, "My listeners understood why I did not find the photograph so terrible: the people shown on it might not have been so unhappy after all" (p. 49). Likewise, when I look at my photographs of me as a child, I might not have been happy on the inside although to the viewer, and perhaps even to the photographer, they might have thought otherwise. What if I had had listeners, when I was a student in the classroom, or a Kelpie in Brownies, or a child in the home, who asked me how I felt on the inside? My teachers thought they knew, as one wrote in my report card, "Virginia has worked

hard to achieve the standard and she finds it a *very satisfying experience* [italics mine]." The teacher assumed she knew why I worked hard, perhaps even projected herself onto me. What the teacher saw, her image of me, may not have been what I was actually experiencing.

### **Soothing myself**

My first memory of anxiety around food was in grade one. At lunchtime we were allowed 10 minutes to eat lunch then were sent outside to play. I opened my Snoopy<sup>19</sup> lunchbox and took out the Thermos bottle. In it I had either Campbell's tomato soup served with Saltine crackers or a steamed hotdog wiener served with a white bun. For dessert I had either a Wagon Wheel or a Jell-O chocolate pudding cup. And suddenly the 10 minutes were up. The lunch monitors, two boys from the seventh grade, tried to hurry us up—likely they wanted to get outside to play with their friends, not babysit the grade ones. My hands shook trying to put away my thermos with most of its contents uneaten. I was sad and felt hollow and dark on the inside. I would not have displayed any outward signs of worry at school but no doubt my mom figured out what was going on as I ate at home for a period of time. For a time she arrived each day promptly at noon and brought me home and fed me in our avocado-applianced kitchen with its burnt-orange wallpaper featuring kettles and coffee grinders, then drove me back in time for the 12:55 bell. Reflecting back, I think the midday break served up more than food in a relaxed setting. While the break fed my body, it also fed my brain some calmness and familiar security (Mom, kitchen, Pussy, Sam), which in turn

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<sup>19</sup> My Snoopy lunchbox had an image of Snoopy holding a lunchbox with an image of Snoopy holding a lunchbox with an image of....it was quite mesmerising to view the image of the image of the image.

soothed my heart, and allowed my body to go about its business of supporting my brain and heart, and my soul was happy.

The other significant reminiscence from Mrs. Martin's grade one classroom features a rooster and a bulletin board. At the front of the classroom beside the blackboard, to the right under the wall clock, in-between the blackboard and the classroom's front door, Mrs. Martin posted our work samples on the bulletin board under the big rooster's voice bubble: "Cock-a-doodle-doo, what lovely work from you!" Sitting in my desk, I would stare at that bulletin board, noticing only my own piece of work displayed upon it, reading the rooster's catchy message and feeling a glow permeate my body. As a teacher, I wonder now if Mrs. Martin rotated work so every student got his or her work displayed? At the time I assumed it was only the good kids, the smart kids, who had their work posted—to me the rooster bulletin board was public validation of...of what, I think now I was interpreting it as validation that I was okay, accepted, noticed for my achievements. And what drove me was less a desire to be noticed for being good and more a fear that one day my work would not be displayed. It was during grade one that I decided my future career and life path, as I wrote in my school diary, "When I grow up, I am going to be a grade one teacher, or maybe a cat or a painter<sup>20</sup> but I think a teacher most of all." When I had bulletin boards every one of my students had his or her work displayed. I wonder now if any had thoughts as I had as a child, that you had to be good enough to get on the board.

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<sup>20</sup> Cats symbolized comfort, warmth, and security—they could be themselves, contrary as the Rum Tum Tugger in T. S. Eliot's book of cats, and were still loved just as they were. However, the desire to be a painter, as in art not as in painting fences, I don't understand as I do not like art—as in doing it, looking at, learning about it—even to this day!

As a student I learned how to judge, like I thought a teacher should. In grade two I wrote in my school diary, "I am in grade two. It is fun been in grade two. We do lots of work... I am glad I didnt fail. Theresa failed grade one because her grade one teacher didnt teach her very much. it was like a kinder-garten for her. Mrs. Penrith is a very nice teacher. She is very good because we are never playing around only sometimes we make things and play games." And this is what Mrs. Penrith saw in her student, "Virginia is a very happy, self-assertive child who has already formed definite likes and dislikes and opinions of the various subjects or things in her environment."

I was learning how to appear to others and liked how I was being noticed. It may be a bit of a stretch to suggest that my seven-year old self was thinking so reflectively when she wrote the following poem, but perhaps there was a bit of intuition and self-knowledge bridging her inner world with the world's expectations of her:

***The Halloween poem***

A punkin is a punkin,  
A skeliton is a skeliton.  
But how bout a witch?  
Yao can never tell who's behind the ~~face~~ mask.

I needed to be seen, and I observed that I was noticed for being good. Good to me meant obedient and well-behaved. And the language of good permeated my senses through words and traditions. I wanted to be very good, like the girl in the verse I read in my nursery rhyme books, "There was a little girl, and she had a little curl right in the middle of her forehead. When she was good she was very, very good, and when she was bad she was horrid" (a 19th Century poem by Longfellow found in children's books of nursery rhymes). I

read the captions carefully in my monthly Highlights magazine to see what bad behaviours Goofus was up to compared to good Gallant so that I could mimic Gallant. I professed in my annual letter to Santa Claus that I had tried to be a good girl that year; the letter was written knowing that a lump of coal always dangled as a possibility. I was rewarded for my goodness Christmas morning with a full pillowcase of toys left at the end of my bed.

As I advanced through the primary years (K-3) and into intermediate school (grades 4-7) my demeanour and work habits and continued to be noticed and recorded in my report cards, "a cheerful, efficient and well-behaved pupil." And I began to give myself letter grades, "Today has been a 'C+' day. I like 'A+' days best though." And my report cards start to be a litany of results: "In recent spelling, Arithmetic, and Social Studies tests, she made perfect marks"; "Virginia's progress in arithmetic this term has been excellent, as indicated by her test results"; "Results in the weekly spelling tests have been excellent".

But I was not perfect all the time, as this report card entry indicates, "I feel that she needs to prepare more for tests in social studies and science." Perhaps I didn't know how to prepare, so instead I got sick. I had been trying to understand longitude and latitude and could not figure out which way the lines went around the globe. After the instructional part of the lesson we were given the assignment. I sat at my desk staring at the worksheet: the words and pictures blurred and swirled. I got out of my desk and walked over to Mr. Jone's desk. He sat at his desk, which was set up on the side of the room instead of in the usual front or behind position, rubbing his chin with one hand while the other moved papers about. He looked up as I approached the open side of his

desk that was farthest from my desk at the front of the room – the side closer was shoved up against a bookcase so I had to zigzag past other students’ desks as there was no direct route. “I don’t understand”, I said, “how to find the lines and which way they go.” He explained again. I still didn’t understand. I felt hollow. I walked back to my desk. And in that moment I got sick and needed to go home. I zigzagged back to Mr. Jones’s desk and said I had a tummy-ache. He asked me if it was because of the social studies lesson. I said no, which of course was a lie. My mom picked me up and I went home to bed. I still get confused with which way the lines go. However, I put lots of effort into my social studies, even if I detested it, as revealed in my diaries:

-Today I felt so tired in school after lunch because the sun was shining hot and bright on my desk as I was doing socials notes and I felt so bored, especially since I hate social studies.

-Today we had a Socials test. It was easy. I don’t know my mark yet though. Today has been a ‘A’ day.

-My mark on my socials test was...23/33. 23/33 AWFUL!!!!!!  
Today has been a C+ day.

Mr. Jones was pleased with my results, as reported in my report card that June, “Virginia has made very good progress in social studies and I am very pleased to see this. I have enjoyed Virginia’s courteous and responsible attitude.”

The next school year I continued to focus on results, as evidenced by my home diary entries:



-We had a vocabulary & comprehension test today. I scored highest out of all 60 of the grade sixes! A! Excellanto! ALL RIGHT! GREAT!

-Today I achieved 46 on the flexed arm hang<sup>21</sup>. That's 2nd best of all the girls.

-Today for the sit-ups I got 54! (in 60 seconds). I now have 2 silvers & 1 gold.

And my teachers continued to find me a pleasure to teach, "Due to Virginia's delightful personality and conscientious effort it has been a pleasure to have had her in my class." This teacher noted that I worked very hard and wanted to do well. How did he know what I wanted? Did he ask me? Did my good results serve as evidence of this? Did he, or anyone, consider that I might have had a different motivation other than getting good grades for working so hard and doing so well? As "the body protects the heart with its bones...each rib a theoretical stance" (Pelias, 2004, p. 9), my brain protected my body.

### **Being lost in high school**

By all appearances I was doing well in my first year in high school. My teachers wrote, "A pleasure to have in class; Very pleasant in class; Works hard and is easy to teach; A FINE STUDENT!" And this is what I wrote in my diary, "Except for my family life, my social life is one

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<sup>21</sup> These physical challenges were for the Canada Fitness Awards. Rice explores the impact on these types of fitness challenges in schools in the 1970s in her article, 'Becoming "the fat girl": Acquisition of an unfit identity'.

big blah. I don't know, I usually feel so depressed and...and empty. I have to try to sort out my life."

I did not transition well from my grades K-7 elementary school surrounded by horse pastures, ball fields and house-lined residential streets to the grades 8-12 high school on the edge of a busy thoroughfare surrounded by industrial and commercial buildings. The difference between the schools was stark not only in physical appearance but also in the organization of people. I attended my elementary school for all eight years – the structure was clear. Each grade had two classes and it seemed like I knew all of the teachers, if not personally at least by name and grade. One wing of the school was for the primary grades, the other wing was for intermediate grades; the playground was where the mixing occurred yet it seemed that pockets of students still gravitated predictably to certain areas. I often “walked around the school” at recess or lunch, sometime with the teacher on duty and sometimes in small groups of students. I felt safe.

Grade 8 did not feel safe. I was blocked into subjects with teachers and students I didn't know and never got a chance to know due to the daily shuffle of homeroom followed by five classes in different rooms with different groupings of people. My only consistent and familiar space was my grey locker two-thirds of the way down one of the many busy and noisy hallways. Mornings began with homeroom with mixed grades. There were maybe four other kids my age that had come from the other elementary schools; there were none from my old school. If the intent was to mix students up by schools or grades for mutual support, it didn't work for me. I didn't know anyone in the room, not on day one nor all year. I noticed how big everyone was, and that the girls looked very grown up with big breasts and big presence, and I no longer felt special for being small, but just, small. I was invisible. When I think of that school now I think of what almost seems cliché for the 1980s—girls smoking in

the bathroom, big muscle cars in the parking lot, crowds of cool but tough looking kids hanging out in front of the school, big leather purses and big feathered hair. I can almost picture a boom box or two, but that might just be my imagination.

I did not get pushed into lockers, but may as well have been. One day while standing at my locker a couple of boys walked past me. One asked if I was a girl, and my clever retort that came out wrong was, “as much as you’re a girl”! I think I meant to say, “as much as you’re a boy” but got confused, and in hindsight it was not that clever of a comeback anyway. They carried on. I was left kicking myself and replayed the taunt for years to come. I guess that was being bullied, but there was no language for bullying back in the 80s. Writing this story inspired a memory of a favourite childhood storybook. *Crowboy*, published in 1955, tells the story of a little boy regarded as odd and left to his own devices until one teacher notices him. What I recall loving about this book was how the boy related to crows. What I did not realize until I reread the story as an adult is the strong bullying theme, bullying not only by other students but also by the teachers. Teachers in grade eight did not bully me, but neither did they notice me, other than the fact that in class I was well behaved and hardworking, like the ideal student as described by Tuten (2005).

I recall sitting at the edge of what seemed like a massive school gymnasium reading the 1000 plus pages of *Gone with the Wind*. As I sat there, I was aware of myself, how odd I looked. But it was easier to sit there by myself, with a book, rather than just to sit there by myself. Apart from those two boys in the hallway that day, no one really bothered me, nor noticed me. I did not eat lunch at school but instead walked the two-kilometer round trip home each lunch hour. I remember one walk home in particular. I cradled the baking I had done that morning in home economics cooking class and presented it to my brother—this

would have been around the beginning of controlling my food intake. The appearance was that I was sharing the yummy food, the reality was that it was how I was able to justify to others, if I needed to, why I didn't eat it at school, reason being that I was taking it home. And at home I could say that I didn't want any as I had already had some at school. Of course this was lying, a big no-no in our family, yet the way I was able to hide the bit of control and agency I was claiming for myself that no one could take away.

**No**

That summer I went to a Christian summer camp. I figured out quickly that dessert every evening was some form of Jell-O. So I said that I was allergic to Jell-O and this stopped anyone from bugging me about why I wasn't eating dessert. In this way I was able to get through most meals managing to control one aspect of my food. I wrote in my diary in July, "All day my lower ribs have really been bothering me." And in August I wrote, "I think that I am getting too skinny, but I have a very small appetite all of a sudden, & I am afraid of getting fat. I try to eat healthy nutritious meals, but I can't eat sweets or anything anymore."

I became fixated on fat—not getting fat, not eating fat, fat people. And I became fixated on food and planning on how to avoid it. I would look at people who I considered fat and could not understand how they could live each day with their size. I would die before I got to that size. I was both fascinated and repulsed by their physiques. And at night I lay on my back and ran my hands across my stomach feeling the tips of my hipbones becoming more pronounced and the dip of my stomach more concave.

My mom took me to a nutritionist at the hospital; the hospital was in the same block as the Eric Martin Institute, the place where people went to have their craziness revealed. It reinforced my resolve to not reveal what thoughts and feelings I had as did not want those subject to scrutiny any more than my body had been and apparently was about to be. I don't know what my mom knew about eating disorders, if anything, although in 1983 Karen Carpenter<sup>22</sup>, died to great media interest of anorexic nervosa, also called the "slimming disease"—such an appealing moniker, as if some maiden caught a virus that caused her to be slim. Like me, apparently Karen was also a goody-goody, she along with her musical partner and brother, Richard who, it was learned years later; suffered from depression and panic attacks. By all appearances they were "on top of the world"<sup>23</sup>, as I appeared to be. Anyway, what I recall from the visit to the nutritionist was feeling violated and probed into my private self. I wrapped myself in a cloak of pleasant obedience so as not to set off any more alarm bells for these adults. The nutritionist recommended that if I continued to lose weight that my mom feed me high-calorie milkshakes. I vowed silently to eat just enough to allay my mother's concerns so that she'd leave me alone about my food intake. It seemed to work. I put on a bit of weight.

For grade nine I switched to a small independent Christian<sup>24</sup> school, also within walking distance but the other direction. I burned my breakfast calories of one slice of dry toast with the walk. I was enamored with Shannon, a blonde anorexic, so beautiful and gaunt,

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<sup>22</sup> Karen Carpenter and her brother Richard were an American high-grossing musical duo in the 1970s.

<sup>23</sup> Reference to the Carpenters' 1972 hit song, "Top of the World."

<sup>24</sup> On the school's website they claim to be a non-denominational Christian school, but its roots are in the Christian Reformed Church. This dissertation does not have the scope to delve into the influence of religion on me in depth; however, I recall my mom sharing the story that one of the other moms made the comment, upon learning that we were Roman Catholic, "Oh, they allow Catholics here?!"

at my new school. The teachers at this school saw a similar Virginia as my previous teachers had, although rather than being seen as cheerful I am now seen as quiet: "Virginia is industrious and competent in class"; "Her quiet determination is appreciated"; "Virginia is a polite, shy girl who has excellent attitudes and attentiveness in class"; "A well-earned A! Virginia had the highest mark on a difficult exam".

I didn't worry about my grades anymore—getting high marks was easy. Getting high marks was not satisfying or pleasing. Losing ounces on the scale and not taking in calories warmed my insides, pleased me. But there were two report card comments that I believe hinted at teachers who wrote with heart and who saw more behind the student other than behaviour and grades. The drama teacher wrote, "Virginia is still very hesitant about acting in front of others. She makes an effort to put aside her reservations and I am sure she will gain in confidence." The English teacher wrote, "I encourage her to be herself - always." I felt seen. How did I want to be seen? What did my teachers see?

## Chapter 5

### Hell

#### *Writing through darkness*

It is the living way  
In matters of the soul  
To hope beyond experience

The verse above is from a poem I penned in my journal in 1991 while I was in my teacher education program. In this chapter I invite the reader to my experience of mental illness and to read my accounts of darkness—what I call my hell as my joy was lost while my mind spun and my body was harmed. Leggo (2012) quotes Margaret Atwood that “writing has to do with darkness, and a desire or perhaps a compulsion to enter it, and, with luck, to illuminate it, and to bring something back out to the light” (p. xix). What Atwood calls the light I call my joy. The reader, or the critic, may ask, “Do you want sympathy or a therapist?” And I quote Pelias (2004) in my reply, “I want neither. I want to tell what I know. I want to say how I feel” (p. 41). As an educational researcher, I offer the following chapter in the spirit of what Pelias calls empathetic scholarship that “connects person to person in the belief in a shared and complex world. While it recognizes that no two lives are identical, it celebrates when one says to another, ‘Me too.’ It welcomes identification, the witnessing of commonality, as well as separation, the claim of difference” (p. 12).<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Me too! Since sharing my story, I have learned that mental illness may have touched, on my father’s side, my great-grandmother, my grandmother, an uncle, and other family members. I understand myself better, and revisit family stories from a different perspective, with each thread of new information.

## **Revealing the invisible battle of bulimia nervosa**

The following is my account of a decade of bulimia nervosa (bulimia); however, not the eating and throwing up version—there are enough of those accounts available in the form of books, TV movies, and salacious articles in grocery store periodicals. In these versions of story the viewer is shown an image, usually a young woman, alone in her upscale kitchen, emptying the fridge and pantry of anything edible, leaving empty containers in the sink and garbage, crumbs on the floor, food on her face. In the movie versions they usually don't show you the next part, but you can hear the retching and the vomiting and then the toilet flushing.

I heard my first bulimia joke last month at work, something about the cake jumping out of the girl rather than the girl jumping out of the cake—I am not sure which offended me more, making light of a serious illness, or the sexualized image of a female performing as an object. The joke teller objectified the person with bulimia, focusing on one part of the eating disorder, the visible part. My account is what you don't see but what I feel. The hell was not in the spectacle of empty food containers in the sink, crumbs on the face, or fingers down the throat. The hell was the fight playing out in my brain and heart before the first morsel was eaten and after the last bit of bile had been retched out of my stomach. To the viewer, the bingeing and purging may appear traumatic, violent, frenzied, perhaps rubbernecking the scene in curiosity. Or perhaps the viewer feels for the person with bulimia, and projects him or herself into the scene thinking how awful. Yet, like the photograph in Chapter 4 that evoked positive associations for Frankl (1959) while others who had not experienced Nazi concentration camps saw misery, the binge and purge scenario provided a temporary relief



from the fight, when the brain would be appeased with calmness achieved through a numbing of the body.

I numbed my body and mind with food; huge mounds of garbage<sup>26</sup> food, until I was stopped either because there was no more food to consume or because I could not physically swallow another morsel. When I was completely spent and in physical pain the vomiting would begin until I was physically emptied. At this point I would be drained, literally and figuratively: this moment was peace.

Stirring out of my numbed stupor I would face emotional pain and intellectual shame as I rationalized and argued with myself, trying to guilt myself into not doing it again. Logically I knew that succumbing to the fight was wasting energy, time, and resources but I could not rationalize myself into health. My brain physically hurt as the battle raged on between the part that clicked on to start the crazy, and the other part that critiqued the crazy. According to research, “binge eating may be considered by some to be a compulsive behaviour designed to reduce distress” (Rosenbaum & White, 2013, p. 88), and for me I did experience temporary reduction of distress. But, the reduction was short-lived as I would come around out of my stupor back to “normal-person mode,” sweeping a cool cloth across my bloodshot eyes and gummy mouth, and re-appear in life—in public, at work, at school—as a functioning person. A pause before the urge hit my brain and the cycle starts again. The time interval in-between the binge and purge cycles was as brief as a few hours to as long as a few weeks, but typically this would be a day or two. This is the physical scene of bulimia playing out—the binge and the purge. The part that you can’t see but that I experienced was the numbing to the point of sedation, so calming for my brain. Research has validated my

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<sup>26</sup> Garbage seems a suitable description for food during a binge as I ascribed it no value other than filler that would be expelled as waste.

experience—indeed, “binge eating may function as a type of self-soothing behavior” (Rosenbaum & White, 2013, p. 88).

It felt like I had two cycles operating in my mind. One cycle was when my brain would start spinning and to stop it was to succumb to a binge and purge session. The other cycle was the one that kept me trapped, like *The Twilight Zone*'s episode of “Five characters in search of an exit” trapped in a grey cylinder. The narrator's description of their experience could well describe my own experience of mental illness: “No logic, no reason, no explanation; just a prolonged nightmare in which fear, loneliness, and the unexplainable walk hand in hand through the shadows” (Houghton, 1961).

I tried to escape my nightmare. Come with me on one attempt: It is my first year at the University of Victoria of the two-year post-degree professional program (PDPP) for teaching. On the bulletin board outside the counselling office I notice a flyer for an eating disorders group. At this point I had been forcing myself to throw up for several years. I recall the first time: I was in my house, still living with my parents and little sister, and was feeling anxious – something to do with my boyfriend and unsure whether or when I would see him that day. The cause of the anxiety was common enough for a young woman in a relationship, but it is in how I dealt with the feeling that was the problem. I found myself walking, as if under direction of some unseen commander<sup>27</sup>, to the downstairs guest bathroom, closing the door, and forcing myself to gag and then vomit. It was easy as the food that I had just eaten, a bowl of cereal, was liquid enough to come up without much physical effort. The physical

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<sup>27</sup> The commander image may bring to mind to some the concept of the “eating disorders voice”, abbreviated to the ED voice. While in the grips of the disease I experienced what may resemble this concept; however, research around eating disorders is complex and out of scope for this study. Readers with an interest in the topic are encouraged to seek out current research.

effect of the vomiting was a calming sedative to my brain and to my chest that had been breathing so shallow but now was able to draw deep breaths. Over time as I continued vomiting when feeling anxious, and when I started to eat food with the intention of vomiting, I came to realize that my eating disorder, previously anorexia nervosa, had returned in the form of bulimia. Now, several years later, I did not know much about the disorder that I was living with, other than my own experience. Curious, I go to a meeting. As I look around the circle of participants I am pleased with myself; I have bulimia so I can get rid of the food and not be fat<sup>28</sup> – I pity the other participants, the chubby ones, and think they are weak. Their weakness is physically evident. The skinny ones I am drawn to with envy. Anorexia seemed so much easier than bulimia, less messy, cleaner and simpler. My journal entries around this time document this time that I call hell, a time of struggle without reprieve.

*Dec. 02, 1990*

I've just finished 19 days of abstinence<sup>29</sup>, yet I blew it twice today. It's my best abstinence since last July, but still I want total. I'm scared of being anything other than thin, as that would signal loss of control. Of course this is loss of control too, but at least I'm thin. The scale is my god, anything under 110 lbs. makes me happy. Am I willing to lose my ego & be fat? No. Thinness gives me power. Everything else can go wrong, right now Mom's cancer & all my school work piling up, but at least I'm thin. Sounds ridiculous. It is. I live in a ridiculous world. Sounds like an excuse for sure, but I'm grasping. I'm too aware of myself all the time, like I'm watching myself from the outside. I do watch myself.

I didn't return for a second meeting with the group at the university, but did attend at least one meeting of Overeaters Anonymous, as evidenced by my journal entry below. I think

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<sup>28</sup> Referring to people as fat is offensive. My use of the word is in context with my lived experience of eating disorders when I was both judgmental of and devoid of compassion for others and myself.

<sup>29</sup> Abstinence in this context meant for me not bingeing and purging.

the meeting was held at the YMCA. I can picture sitting in a circle of chairs but I can also picture rows of chairs; my memory may have merged the eating disorders meeting and the Overeaters Anonymous meeting. Regardless of circles or rows, what I do know is what I felt and thought as I regarded the other participants: they were weak failures and fat because they didn't commit to the step of purging. I bought the 12-step manual and completed step 4 that was to do something called a "moral inventory". Here is my recorded inventory:

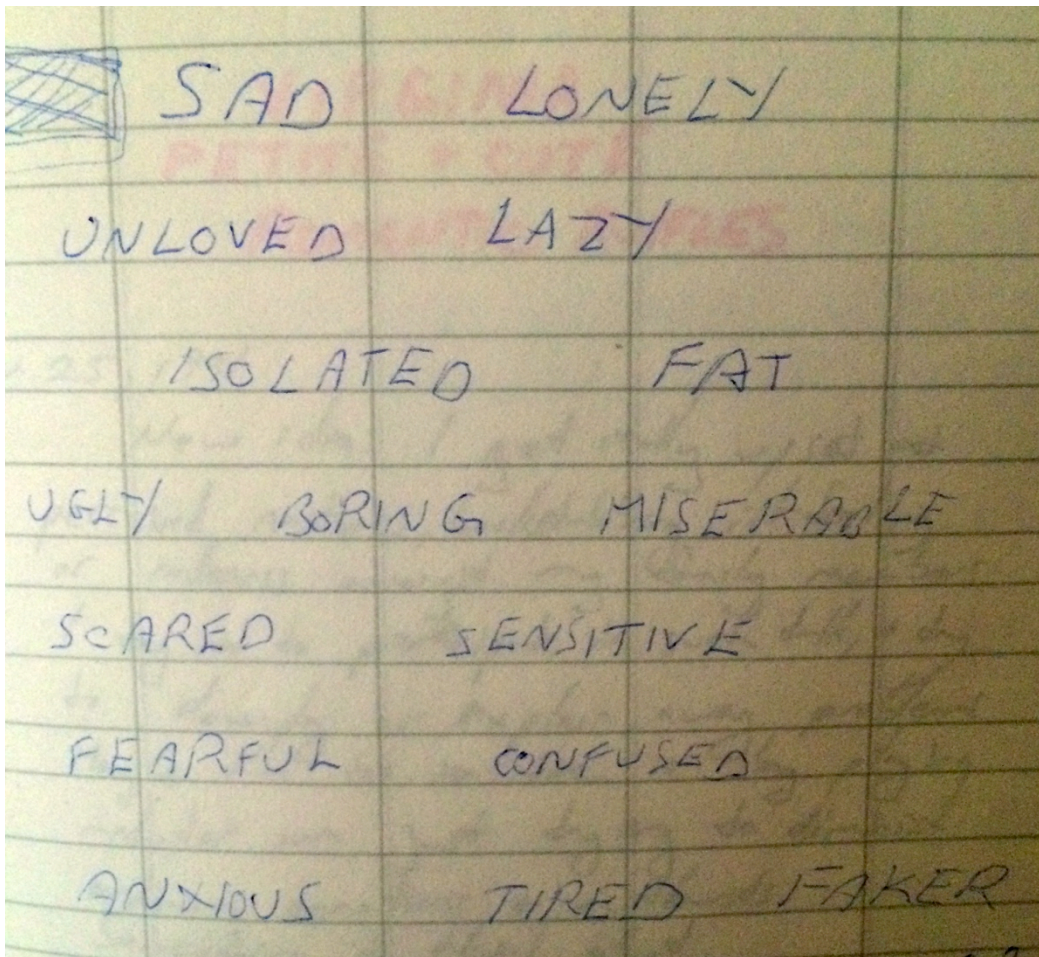
I'm scared of food.  
I'm scared of free time.  
I'm scared of failing.  
I'm petrified of fat.  
I'm scared, no panicked of men out to hurt me, trick me,  
or control me.  
I don't like my temper.  
I don't like my cool mask.  
I don't like having to keep up living forever, or 60  
years, like this.

I did not continue with the group, not sure if I even attended a second meeting. However, I wrote a second list a few weeks later. This list appears both exhaustive and exhausting to me now, reading it 26 years later from my current perspective as someone who has found ways to manage her anxiety and eating disorders. At the time I would have justified my list by framing it as healthy living, juxtaposed against my mom's rapidly increasing cancer. The items, or rules, on my list, may have been attempts to distract myself to stave off the binge and purge cycles, as well as the imposition of more rules on myself to try to control the eating disorder that was controlling me.

*Dec. 23, 1990*

I sure have had a lot of food for thought lately with Mom's illness. Some tidbits:  
\*sleep with fresh air  
\*eat only living or raw foods: fruits, vegetables, nuts, seeds, grains  
\*avoid microwave ovens & tv's

- \*avoid detergents or other chemical agents
- \*drink plenty of water
- \*remain vegetarian
- \*remain moderately temperate
- \*nap when needed
- \*cultivate quiet time
- \*enjoy baths or daily showers
- \*love myself
- \*walk 20 min. daily
- \*at least weekly visit natural areas
- \*enjoy museums, art & other beauties
- \*fill room with growing plants & flowers
- \*practice meditation
- \*continue aerobics - cultivate strong body



**Image 9 Words on a page. A page from my diary, 1991.**

I attempted to escape what I called my sessions of bingeing and purging. I knew how harmful they were to my mind and body and soul. The physical act of bingeing and purging was a temporary reprieve from the mental battles going on in head—both the battles of trying to stop, and the battles when my mind started spinning with worry. Some research suggests, “that cognitive patterns that emphasize worry influence the maintenance of both anxiety and eating disorders” (Rosenbaum & White, 2013, p. 88). I have evidence that as a child I was a worrier, given not only my journal entries but also that one of the nicknames my family bestowed on me as a child was “worry-wart.” For me, the worrying, when unchecked, flowed down into my body entrenching itself into my physical being as anxiety. Did the anxiety lead to eating disorders, or was it a risk factor? According to Rosenbaum and White, “research has found that anxiety disorders typically precede eating disorder diagnoses, with anxiety disorders originating in childhood in many cases” (p. xx). During my years of bulimia, I berated myself for not being well, despite my attempts to use logic and willpower to escape from the eating disorder and feelings of anxiety. While I never contemplated killing myself, I did think that the release from my pain would come from death, as I wrote in my journal:

Jan.07, 1991

I know what's good for me, I know how to cultivate & experience joy, even in the mundane. But every once in a while I willingly sabotage my spirit & my body & it's killing me, killing me. I hate these sessions more than I love the happiness.

I want so much to be happy that the unhappy, not just is unhappy, but as in killing, is enough to make me want to die.

My personal hell is creating these sessions & having to go through them before I return to my happiness. What purpose do they serve? They only take up time, money, energy, dishes & makes me ugly.

I weigh 110 lbs. Time for drastic measures again. The holiday season is over, time to get back on track. Organized. Busy. Productive. I used to say anything under 112 lbs. was fine. Now I say under 108 lbs.

Why is my life so bloody awful? There's no excuse for it. I want to die if I can't be free of the pain of food. Mom gets support for her disease. All I get are hassles.

My mom died a few days before Mother's Day in May 1991. In my diary I captured dreams experienced the following month:

One glimpse of Mom: In her stripped preggy<sup>30</sup> suit lying in the hospital bed.

Mom sleeping on a couch wakes up when I come home. Can't remember what she said.

I was changing in the washroom of a rec centre. A woman passed by one of the stalls on her way out of the W.C. As I looked through the crack in the door I thought it was Mom, but no she's dead. I said "Mom?" anyway & she stopped. It was Mom, looking beautiful like she always does when she goes out. We didn't say anything as the dream ended.

I am a vivid dreamer so the fact that I was dreaming about my mom with such detail is unremarkable. However, what strikes me is our silence, and the symbolism that I subscribe to the dream sequence. The night before she died, as I leaned over her distended belly and shrunken shoulders for a goodnight hug and kiss, she told me that she wasn't going anywhere. Yet she was going to die. But at the time I took her words to mean she would always be here in spirit. At the time I interpreted the dream sequence as evidence that she had essentially risen from her hospital bed, rested on the couch, and was now moving about as a ghost in the world, present but dead. Now I interpret the dream sequence to mean that she has

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<sup>30</sup> A month or so before she died my mom sent me to Woodward's department store to buy her a couple of maternity nighties as the cancer in her liver had distended her stomach – hence the dream reference to her “preggy” suit.

gone away. She was present after her death, but as a memory, as a figment of my imagination<sup>31</sup>, not as a spirit. I wrote the following in my diary a few months later, my final year of the PDPP program to be certified as a teacher:

Sept. 16, 1991

Well, Mom died May 16, 1991. Real Shitty. I've only puked once since then, & it was pretty minor. I've got major schoolwork though. Not even sure where to start. Just jump in I guess. It's the navigation that I find so hard. Nothing's in any working order.

The following poems were scribbled in my notebook, when nothing was in any working order, when I was unsure about many things. The writing may have been a form of release when I allowed by mind and heart to ramble, without stopping it midstream by binging and purging.

#### **On the Page**

Don't ask me why for I have no answer.  
Right or wrong, judgments or instincts  
Nothing's ever 100%, so aim in the dark  
Shot in the night without a target.  
A life without editing, not even poetry  
Poetry, so abstract, is a perfected craft.  
In the heart it's tumbling rambling  
On the page so neat and finished.  
Poetry on the page is finished.

#### **Matters of the Soul**

I'm wary at this turn of things  
This is how they begin  
The smiles, meals, nights, conversations  
The feigned and the forced.

No regrets, just disappointments.  
Adjusting of the soul.  
Not even stepping stones, just slips.  
Left with a lingering sigh.

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<sup>31</sup> Religion and spirituality as themes are out of scope for this dissertation. However, in order to provide context, if I was forced to label myself, I would say that currently I am agnostic bordering on atheist after having been raised in the Roman Catholic faith.



(It is the living way  
To hope beyond experience)  
In matters of the soul.

### **You Sent Me Away**

From out of nowhere  
Came the lines of poetry  
That subsided to the body

From one unconsciousness to another  
"Like sleeping," you said  
Maybe, there was no mind

All selfish, no time no body  
From the first lines of poetry  
To the ending

I wanted out, little Death  
Scary & violent, let me go  
Let me go midway & I'd disappear  
The ultimate trust, & you held on  
Let me go, away, just one  
But you held on.

### **Script the crazy**

The following section provides some context between the bouts of bulimia that subsided with the birth of my daughter and the anxiety that gained strength in my mid-forties. I will use as my starting point the year I began teaching, a somewhat arbitrary starting point but one that helps to pave the storyline.

I graduated with my teaching degree in spring 1992. By September I was on teacher-on-call lists in the three school districts on the southern tip of Vancouver Island. I abhorred the delivery-of-muffins-and-cutesy-business-cards-to-staffrooms routine that seemed to be the route to getting teachers to request people for subbing. I also found not knowing whether or not I would be working each day was a bad fit for me as someone who thrives on certainties, control, structure, and routine. To mitigate the anxiety of the unknown I made

two plans for each day: Plan A meant I was teaching and Plan B meant I wasn't called to teach so could do whatever interesting activity was on that day's agenda. The problem with Plan B was that the activities were not that interesting as all I really wanted to do was teach.

I was jumping-off-my-chair ecstatic to be offered a 10-week teacher-on-call temporary contract for a teacher on sick leave in a small mining town, population approximately 1,000, in the northwest part of the province. The 10-weeks turned into the rest of the school year, followed by more temporary contracts and teacher-on-call jobs that eventually turned into a full-time continuing teaching contract in the school district. And I met and married Pedro. We had a daughter, and went about entrenching ourselves in the community as young families are wont to do. However, despite laying roots, I missed my hometown.

I recall the day that I knew I had to return home. I had parked my SUV<sup>32</sup> on the dusty street outside the now-closed nightclub, Hanky's, to pop around the corner to the post office. As I walked across the street it occurred to me, in that moment while doing the most mundane and ordinary of activities—going to the post office—that Terrace would never feel like home. I missed the ocean. I missed the two seasons of weather in Victoria even as I had grown to appreciate what four seasons could look like. I appreciated Terrace's weather but had never figured it out—I would wake up in the morning and have no idea what the day would bring in terms of weather—it made me feel strange, like a stranger. Home to me was where I could feel and hear and smell and touch and even taste the weather in the air.

As I knew that I would never get a teaching job in Victoria due to seniority, I decided that my way back home would be through the administration route, ideally as a vice-principal

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<sup>32</sup> "SUV" is the common term for a sport utility vehicle. Trucks and truck-like vehicles were common in small or rural northern British Columbia towns.

with a teaching assignment. The plan worked well with my desire to keep advancing in my career and education; I set about earning my Master's Degree in Education and was appointed a vice-principal in a distributed learning school in the district. The effort to then find a job and move our family from Terrace to Victoria a few years later is a story in itself, but suffice it to say that it eventually all came together.

And that was how it came about that in 2006, following 14 years of teaching in northern BC, I came home to Victoria and entered the grey, concrete Ministry of Education building as an education officer, the position in government most comparable in terms of authority, responsibility, education, and remuneration, to teaching. This was a slight divergence in the plan as I chose a job offer in the Ministry over an interview for a vice-principal in a local school district. My husband encouraged me to take on something that he saw as less stressful and time-consuming, and I saw it as an opportunity to take on a different kind of role, but still in education, and to see education from the governance perspective. This decision, to accept the education officer role in government over pursuing my plan to being a teaching vice-principal, turned out to be a significant turning point in my trajectory as a teacher and as a person.

As a new education officer in the Ministry of Education, I wanted to learn how to navigate what seemed to be an invisible world where people worked behind their laptops, had many meetings, and then somehow work funnelled through the hierarchy and got out to the public. This was very different from my years of being a teacher where the work was the action and the action was the work: in the classroom feedback loops were immediate and planning and analysis happened often at times concurrently. The slower pace in government with farther reaching impacts and consequences was different from my classroom work, but

the physical act of sitting behind a computer screen for much of the day at times was mind-numbing.

Staff was encouraged to seek out mentors so I sought out one. I deliberately chose a mentor from another ministry to learn more about the workings of government but disentangled from my immediate work in my own ministry. During one of our early meetings we were sitting outside in the fresh air at a picnic table beside the old school house in-between our two ministry buildings. She asked me what was my voice; I didn't know how to answer. I mumbled something along the lines that I can wear any hat and take on any role—so I guess my voice was whatever the role needed it to be. This reply had chalkboard dust all over it as it could be attributed to my teaching days where I had many roles—elementary teacher, alternative education teacher, resource room teacher—but always a teacher. Each new role validated and reinforced what I called my teacherness, and contributed to the formation of my teacher identity. When I joined government in an educational role I had seen an opportunity to add another layer to my teacher tapestry, a quilt with each role adding a patch of experience—same role, different context. However, it was not the same role. What was my voice? And the threads began to unravel.

As I picked at the frayed edges of my teacherness, I wondered if I could still call myself a teacher if I wasn't teaching. Who was I if wasn't a teacher, an identity I'd first penned for myself at age six? Did I need the trappings of a classroom, students in rows, teachers in staff rooms, cardboard letters on bulletin boards, and rhythms of a school year in order to call myself a teacher? My teacher identity was left balled up in the corner, a discarded quilt, and a mockery of whom I thought I was. I became hollow, stopped laughing,

lost my joy, feared losing myself, and feared losing my soul. Did I need to return to a classroom to restore my joy? Or was there something else going on?

### **Losing myself**

At first I had been impressed with how professional and courteous people were in government compared to the sometimes-boisterous teachers' world, but realized over time that this was a surface politeness, couching a subtle reining in or controlling of behaviour. One of my early lessons was that as a public servant I could be the recipient of 'wrist-slaps' and advice on how to behave, or how to be, how to appear. For example, one of my supervisors told me that my superiors perceived me as needy. I was told to "stop feeding the dragons" and to "leave behind my baggage." What I heard was: "You're not good enough to function here without addressing these flaws, don't cross the line, don't be too much, tone it down, be compliant." It was about trying to fix me.

I tried to follow the advice, but the more advice I was given, the more unsure and unstable I felt. The combination of control without context I experienced as "crazy-making," and the harder I tried to make sense of my environment and to find my place within it as a teacher, the more I lost in terms of identity, of self, of soul.

### **Mechanisms to mould**

At first, as a new public servant in the British Columbia Ministry of Education, I knew what my work was: it was to perform my role as an education officer providing expert advice, drafting policy, and managing programs to serve the public. Then two events shook up my perception of the role: I was coached on whom I should be serving; and I experienced my first ministry re-organization. These two events set in motion a rethinking of my professional practice in the roles of a public servant and as a teacher.

The shift in thinking occurred during my annual performance review. I earned a rating of ‘solid’ for service<sup>33</sup>. Reverting to my role as a student looking to make the top grade, I asked my supervisor what I needed to do to earn a rating of ‘outstanding’; she told me that I needed to shift my focus from serving the public to serving the internal workings of government and the political masters. I then asked for clarity on what serving my political masters looked like in practice. She did not give me any concrete examples but instead suggested I observe and pay attention.

Ever the obedient student and pleaser, I turned my focus from the external public to the internal workings of the ministry and the bureaucratic hierarchy<sup>34</sup>. I began to make subtle shifts in my practice; for example, despite believing that a particular book program was benefitting a vulnerable but small population, I took the direction of fiscal restraint to justify a recommendation to end the program. On my next performance review I earned a rating of ‘outstanding’ for service. As my supervisor said during my review, “I believe you are understanding the difference between field and bureaucratic work. You have been here long enough to know how things work, so go ahead and exercise your leadership” (personal correspondence, 2010). What I actually understood was that my role was not to serve the public inasmuch it was to fall in line with the hierarchy and follow the political cues – while I felt clever for having figured out how to earn top grades in government. I also felt myself

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<sup>33</sup> Acceptance of the use and measurement of values (service, courage, teamwork, passion, accountability, and curiosity) for performance management was mixed across the BC Public Service, and they were dropped in 2012 with the rollout of a new performance management process.

<sup>34</sup> The bureaucratic hierarchy is the pyramidal organization of positions with clear lines of authority leading to the ultimate executive officer (Freidson, 2001, p.49) or, in provincial government, the deputy minister.

turning hard inside as I shifted my focus from the field to the bureaucracy and shifted my practice from serving students to serving my “political masters”.

The next event that disrupted my professional practice and identity was a ministry re-organization, known informally as a re-org. The official rationale for a re-org would subscribe to this position: “Should the occasion demand or a new efficiency arise, administrative authority is empowered...to reconstitute the tasks composing jobs and the titles attached to them, to eliminate or revise them, and create new ones” (Freidson, 2001, p. 50). The re-org I experienced in 2011 eliminated the Literacy Branch, and moved responsibility for the file into the Libraries Branch, which renamed itself Libraries and Literacy in an effort to represent its new responsibilities. It has since dropped the literacy moniker and the literacy file has become a wisp of what it was. With the Literacy Branch disbanded but with me still with the job as Literacy Advisor, I was moved into the Libraries Branch. What had once been a high-profile program in government, literacy had essentially been dropped, and I felt like an advocate fighting for direction from senior staff in order to connect my work to the organization’s and my new branch’s goals and priorities.

In an effort to understand, I asked for role clarity: what did the organization hope to achieve with the role I was in? No clarity was forthcoming. But what an opportunity this was to design my own work, I was told. On another occasion my supervisor said, albeit glibly, “We’ll make a librarian out of you yet!” The comment may have been intended kindly, but the impact on me felt like a devaluing of my teacher experience and knowledge. How would she, a librarian, have felt if I said, “We’ll make a teacher out of you yet!” This felt like further erosion of my teacher role and identity.

I continued to observe in order to try to understand how to function. New ways of operating without clear direction continued to reveal themselves to me. For example, I learned that the power of influence can get things done as well as or better than a written plan, as illustrated by the following anecdote. Sitting in our open workspace in the Ministry, an executive-level senior public servant coached me on how to make something happen through inter-ministerial efforts, “we have to get them [another ministry] to think it’s their idea” (personal communication, 2012). She was letting me in on a mode of operation, and subtly charging me with the responsibility of seeing it through. I was becoming aware that public servants can influence direction, “in a world shaped so much by uncertainty, much of what a government does depends on the individuals who happen to occupy critical positions” (Levin, 2009, p. 50<sup>35</sup>). This casual conversation informed my practice as a public servant; I was being tutored to influence while being influenced. I was learning some new scripts and behaviours. However, these scripts and behaviours did not feel authentic. I was again wearing masks to appear okay on the outside, but I was sad on the inside.

The following excerpt is from my annual performance review. Upon rereading it several years later, I am struck by the level of blame and responsibility I lay on myself:

I am much more aware of both the organization’s limitations, as well as my own. Last year I was attempting to power through and do it all until I physically burned out the main indicator being an inability to sleep. This required me to make adjustments both in my behaviour and my expectations, and to develop strategies to be able to function within the limitations. My learning includes an understanding that the work of government and the issues are complex, and my role is to

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<sup>35</sup> I hesitated citing Levin after he was convicted in 2013 and charged in 2015 with making and distributing child pornography. However, his writing about operating within a government bureaucracy continued to ring true for me even though his actions against children are horrifying.



uncover the layers of complexity and then reframe them in order to create understanding.

I went to see my family doctor as the sleep deprivation made me feel fragile in my body and woozy in my brain. I remember my doctor telling me that for some of his other patients he might prescribe sleep medication, but he figured I was smart enough to manage my sleep issues with some counselling and a bit of melatonin<sup>36</sup>. I dutifully went to counselling sessions—we seemed to spend most of the time strategizing how I could be more poised in the workplace and more patient with my daughter. The counsellor used cognitive-based therapy, which I believe made me feel even more anxious about my inability to figure things out. I began losing bits of myself—first the sleep, then laughter, and the world turned grey. The following journal entries were written a week or so before I had what I call my breakdown, or crash, but which was more likely a panic attack. I am starting to shut down:

June 5, 8am, 2012

Going to a conference. Arriving in Vancouver off the floatplane at 8am, I feel hollow, like a shell. I brace myself and turn off my brain. Go into autopilot.

Same day, 4:30pm

Arriving home. I am drained. Feeling tentative about the conversations I had that day, and unclear on how to move forward. Did I speak when I shouldn't have? Did I have permission or authority?

June 6

I am scared, have no control. I can't breathe; my stomach is nervous and jittery.

Less than a week later I had what I describe as a complete shut down of my body.

Oxygen stopped going to my brain. I was hollow on the inside, grey on the outside. I was

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<sup>36</sup> Melatonin is a sleep-aid supplement available without prescription. I called it magic as the first time I used it I had a deep and long sleep. It does not work for everyone, and I would caution any from taking it without checking with their own health-care provider first.

alone at work while activity swirled around me. How did I get to this physical place, on the bottom floor of the grey concrete Ministry of Education building, eyes locked onto a computer screen surrounded by other people, mostly silent, doing the same thing? It was a factory floor of typing. I recorded the experience in my diary, written after my body forced me to concede, to stop fighting:

**Day 1 of Hell, June 13, 2012**

Yesterday Tessa and Linda<sup>37</sup> escorted me home. And phoned my husband to meet me there. I carry visions of the people in our Ministry who have been escorted out or who have fled never to return or who have been given a slip of paper. My body failed me when I could no longer breathe, and my shaking betrayed the professional machine-like demeanour that I was surviving through.

This is Public Service Week, and on Monday night I attended the Premier's Awards for work done in the Public Service. This is the week that I crash. A few weeks ago, on a Friday morning, I said to Linda that I wanted to jump off a bridge. I think it was just an ill-chosen expression but she had to do what managers do. On Monday she and Tessa pulled what they called "an intervention". Beyond reassuring me that I was okay, and that I had done everything I could have done over the past year, it was time for me to let it go. But what tangible thing came out? I tried to be patient and to trust, and a couple of times over the next few weeks did cautious check-ins.

Yesterday when I woke up Peter<sup>38</sup> asked me what was I mulling over. Already my mind was bracing for the day. As I got ready for work I felt my protective armour forming. As I biked down the bike trail my breathing got shallow and hard. I tried to form an image of what my mom was like at my current age, I think I was 13. I think it was the beginning of when things got worse.

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<sup>37</sup> I have changed the names of my supervisors. At the time of this journal entry, Tessa was my former supervisor and Linda was my current supervisor.

<sup>38</sup> Peter is what I call my husband as that's the name by which I first knew him, his Canadianized name given to him by his Portuguese grandmother when he and his family immigrated to Canada in 1973.

At work I found a space and plugged into my iPod. Couldn't breathe. In the morning didn't eat nor go outside for air. Staying on task. Had two meetings. Almost emailed manager to say that I'd like to take the review work home to work on in the afternoon. Can't work at work. Knew that was just a Band-Aid. Emailed Tessa, I can't breathe.

Took two melatonin then woke up after midnight and awake for hours. Scribbled these words: hollow, invisible work, fake, motions, machine, lost myself, no joy or laughter, alone, lonely, scared.

Where's the bottom? And do I just get a rope up to fall again.

It's hell because I don't know anything. Everything I've done hasn't worked. I'm lost. But if I find myself, what if that doesn't work.

#### **Day 2, June 14, 2012**

I have lost my perspective, don't trust my judgment. See but I can't see. Funny, I took the anti-depressant on June 12, and had no dreams that night or last night. I always have dreams so that was odd. But I did wake up frequently between midnight and 4 am, and wrote notes, such as written yesterday and today.

I am hollow like a shell. The work is invisible, Fake Going through motions like a machine, Lost myself, no joy or laughter, strongest feelings are alone, lonely, scared.

Today I reflect that I have no emotional or spiritual connection that I trust. When I'm on those modes, I don't know. When things don't work, the emotions fight out. When things do work, I am my best 'Monica'<sup>39</sup> self. As a kid, I was a worrywart, pot-lion<sup>40</sup>, made lists, stuttered, but was okay until anorexia set in.

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<sup>39</sup> Monica is the character I most identify with from the *Friends* TV show that ran from 1994-2004. I would characterize Monica as controlling, organized and competitive.

<sup>40</sup> Pot-lion was the term used by my grandfather to describe the face I made when I was sulky or mad.

**June 15, 2012**

I had no melatonin, and had the most non-disturbed sleep since this Monday night. Perhaps the medication and melatonin don't mix well. I even had normal dreams last night whereas I don't recall dreams from the previous two nights.

I have not been looking after myself. How do I do that without being called selfish? And apparently I need to control my anxiety. How do I do that without being controlling? I am black and white, and need to work in the grey zones more. That's my learning.

Is it all me? Internal? Or are there some external factors too?

How do I reach out and seek help without appearing needy? Perhaps choose my people well, and don't worry about rejection, as it's not about me in that instance, it's about them, and that's okay.

Yoga, journaling, meds - I sound so cliché.

**June 17, 2012**

-hollow, machine, reaching, fearful, not safe, fragile  
-can't keep multiple things organized, all online,  
nothing is tangible or real, the work is invisible, no  
inspiration, one way and empty  
-I had anger. Maybe that anger has left and now sadness  
is revealed.

**June 18, 2012**

-Good sleep, 11:30-8:30, only woke up one time and  
straight back to sleep, one melatonin. Woke with a  
start that I had to brace for work, and then remembered  
that I wasn't going in. relaxed. No thinking. No  
ruminating.  
-Got up, bored. Bored. Bored.

The day I was taken home by my supervisors, they called my husband to meet me. He and I went together that afternoon to the doctor. I knew that if I went on my own I would resist accepting medication as accepting meant admitting that I had failed and was weak. The

medication prescribed for my anxiety<sup>41</sup> was an anti-depressant<sup>42</sup> known as escitalopram, a form of selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs). The way I understand it, it's a mood regulator that keeps more of the "feel-good" serotonin in the body. I experienced relief from the hell in my brain within the first few days of taking the anti-depressant, relief that I had only been to replicate before by numbing it with bulimia-induced binge and purge sessions.

People tell me that I was courageous to come forward for help. For example, my dad told me that I should feel proud of myself for having the "courage to bare your soul so that others may benefit from your tortured journey" (personal communication, April 11, 2017). I did not feel that way at the time. I felt I had no choice. I feel myself lucky that my body stopped me before I stopped myself by means of taking my own life. At the time when I began my treatment I wondered where was the courage in having my crazy tempered by a little white pill taken each morning? I thought I was weak. I wonder, when people say that I'm courageous, would they say that to someone diagnosed and medicated for diabetes or cancer? Where's the courage in having the crazy edge lifted by a little white pill every morning? Maybe the courage would be in weaning off the medication, but the fear that the anxiety, currently reduced to a bit of wispy cloud that blows away as easily as a dandelion puff, might regain its presence and fill my brain with crazy.

And this is where part of my challenge with my diagnosis and subsequent treatment of mental illness comes up. When is someone displaying signs of normal human behaviour

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<sup>41</sup> The term "anxiety" was recognized medically around 1980, the year I turned 13, so worrywart was a close approximation as an attempt for my family to name something that wasn't understood yet at a societal level and only just beginning to be understood clinically.

<sup>42</sup> A discussion of the use of drugs, prescription or otherwise, is out of scope for this dissertation. My experience with medication is mine alone. Anyone considering its use for themselves or for a family member need to do their due diligence such as consulting with their health-care providers.

and when is it mental illness? At what point do behaviours, thoughts, or feelings cross “the line” to be now considered abnormal? As Keyes (2002) notes, “empirically, mental health and mental illness are not opposite ends of a single measurement continuum. Measures of symptoms (viz. depression) correlate negatively and modestly with measures of subjective well-being” (p. 209). Well-being is a value-laden concept, and even if one could measure mental health or well-being objectively, what would the “number” be to determine if one is ill or not?

The Canadian Mental Health Association (2016) makes a distinction between “normal” and “abnormal”, between mental health and mental illness, for two of the mental disorders that have plagued me: anxiety disorders and eating disorders. On anxiety disorders they state:

We all feel nervous or worried at times. This anxiety can be a helpful feeling when it motivates us or warns us of danger. An anxiety disorder, on the other hand, causes unexpected or unhelpful anxiety that seriously impacts our lives, including how we think, feel, and act. (<http://www.cmha.ca/mental-health/mental-health-brochures/>)

On eating disorders they state:

Every day, we are surrounded by different messages from different sources that impact the way we feel about the way we look. For some, poor body image is a sign of a serious problem: an eating disorder. Eating disorders are not just about food. They are often a way to cope with difficult problems or regain a sense of control. They are complicated illnesses that affect a person’s sense of identity, worth, and self-esteem. (<http://www.cmha.ca/mental-health/mental-health-brochures/>)

Wakefield (1992) made a similar argument around well-being and functioning when he argued that “disorder lies on the boundary between the given natural world and the constructed social world; a disorder exists when the failure of a person's internal mechanisms to perform their functions as designed by nature impinges harmfully on the person's well-being as defined by social values and meanings” (p. 373).

In my own experience, the medication allowed me to be *my* normal. I know this because before starting on anti-anxiety medication I had endless thoughts of worry ruminating in my brain but post-medication the worry still presents itself but now it wafts past me; I'm aware of the thoughts but don't have to fight them as they have lost control over me. I believe that I still have all of the symptoms that I had pre-medication but they are not as intense. It is as if the medication has removed the bite but left the bark, and allowed myself to be finally free of the disorder's control.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Conclusion, implications and recommendations**

I would like to leave this page blank. I am cautious of being too perfunctory, of tying up the loose ends too cleanly, of signing off with a happy ending. Yet, I would be amiss to not close with final thoughts and recommendations.

A feature of the Doctor of Education (EdD) program is to critique one's own educational practice, which I have done so using autobiographical narrative inquiry as my methodology. I arrived at this methodology through a process of reflecting on my practice and imagining a different way of showing up as a teacher. I wrote stories that were difficult to reveal and to share. Through the processes of reflection, writing, and sharing I began to experience compassion for the people I was writing about, including myself. I committed to narrative inquiry as it resonates with my urge to be in relationship with others, as well as my attraction to literature and story telling. I agree with Clandinin's (2013) claim that narrative inquiry "is inspired by a view of human experience in which humans, individually and socially, lead storied lives" (p. 13) and how we relate to one another. As a teacher, being in relation to others is one of my lived values. Many of the stories included in this study are about my experiences of mental illness and its impact not just on me but also on others as I live in relation to others. Exploring these stories has helped me to understand myself as a teacher and how I identify in that role.

The previous five chapters were written in three months; however, the writing flowed following three years of submitting multiple versions of the proposal. The dissertation was formed similarly to how I imagine a wood carver starting with the whole and chipping away at the edges to reveal a shape. I chipped away many more words than I left. I wanted to stop



the process when I felt stalled, but what kept me going was trust that I had a story to tell that was my original contribution to the academy, as well as curiosity about what I was creating. I heeded the words of Kristin, my mentor and colleague, to take my time and not to show up with the plan laid out, but instead to be open to the process of the dissertation.

Kristin also warned me that undertaking a doctoral program could be life changing, and unpredictably so. An early student of the EdD program, Peter Renner (2001) wrote about his own experience of life change, to which one of his supervisors responded:

An epiphany has struck on the road to your Ed.D. Not that the Ed.D is the only intervening variable. However, it is remarkably common that people in their doctoral program have some profound insight about themselves during their program. The most common one is that people are no longer interested in continuing a particular relationship; or they find it impossible to continue in their former occupation. (p. 201)

During the process of the dissertation I had what I called a breakdown but others have called a breakthrough, perhaps my own insight or epiphany about myself. My relationship with anxiety has changed, as well as my understanding of what it means to be a teacher.

In the early days of my dissertation I asked, “Am I a teacher if I am not teaching?” The critiquing of my practice has led to an understanding that teaching does not only happen in classrooms: perhaps teaching is not about the place but how we show up, as expressed by Rene, one of Renner’s colleagues, “Maybe the only teaching we can do is by example. Our actions, our lives become the ‘living textbook’ that we share with others. Maybe all we can do as teachers is, as you have done, be open, honest, and vulnerable about our struggle” (Renner, 2001, p. 207).

## **Implications for practice**

I recalled that I felt like a fraud as a first-year teacher, ashamed to be masquerading as a good role model for my students while being under the influence of an eating disorder. I feared losing the keys to the classroom if my condition was known, being stripped of my right to show up as a teacher. How could I be trusted with the care of children if I could not be trusted with the care of myself? So I kept that part of myself hidden, and the more I tried to control that part the more disconnected I became from my own needs. However, I presented in a way that did not illicit concern from others. My efforts were rewarded as I continued to progress in my teaching career. I wonder now what would have happened if I had revealed my illness. Would I have experienced support or compassion? Or been driven from the profession that I was drawn to?

I wonder now what would have happened if I had revealed my worry and anxiety and eating disorders as a student. Would my teachers have still seen the successful student, as documented in my report cards? Would I still have been “a pleasure to teach” if I presented myself with mental illness? I did not want to lose my status as a good student as feared being rejected so I kept the bad or weak parts of myself hidden.

When I first wrote the chapter “Attending to Attendance” I asked, “How did this teacher become who she was?” Now with some understanding of my own journey I can wonder what would have happened if I had looked beyond the attendance records and academic results of Stephanie, the young woman who went home for a two-week family funeral. Would I have seen more than a poor student, labeled so by me based on what I could see, by how she showed up? How could I have demonstrated support and compassion? How could I have been more open to the uniqueness of Stephanie, who in this dissertation could

be considered as representing all of my students, past, present, and future? Stephanie in the role of student and Virginia in the role of teacher – how do I create the space for us to show up with honesty and openness? Is there space in the education system for vulnerability and struggle? Is there space within myself for responding to what Biesta (2013) describes as “the call of another” (p. 19)? As a teacher, what is my educational responsibility? As I reflect on Stephanie’s story, I can see that I had a choice on how to respond. I responded then by maintaining a position that privileged the “smooth functioning of the system” (p. 19), in this scenario a colonial system, over “intervention of the other” (Biesta, 2013, p. 19). Stephanie interrupted the smooth functioning of my classroom and in that moment disrupted what I had taken to be the way for students and teachers to be. I consider Biesta’s (2013) claim that “it is precisely in these moments of interruption that the possibility of a different kind of existence, a different kind of being-human emerges” (p. 19).

In my current role as an education officer in B.C.’s Ministry of Education I find both joy and challenge in my practice. I no longer ask myself if I can still be a teacher if I don’t have students in a classroom as my educational practice is not about place but rather a way of being. Yes, my responsibility as an educator is complicated by currently being in a role as a civil servant in the Ministry of Education – government institutions do not, as a rule, seek disruption. Yet I believe that this is what Palmer (1998) meant when he wrote that a healthy society encourages interplay between organizations and movements:

Organizations represent the principle of order and conservation: they are the vessels in which a society holds hard-won treasures from the past. Movements represent the principle of flux and change: they are the processes through which a society channels its energies for renewal and transformation. (p.164).

My educational responsibility is to be open to the call to act in the intervention of others, and indeed in relation to and in the service of others, to move and to disrupt. By being open with my own struggles and vulnerabilities I am more open to the struggles of others.

**Who is this story for?**

My story is for those who suffer from a mental illness – my struggles and experiences may resonate, and through this sharing we know that we are not alone as we live our lives in relation to others and to our environments. Writing my story has facilitated my ability to come out from behind the shame and stigma in order to accept that I had a mental illness. This acceptance has allowed me to shift my energies from fighting the illness to finding wellness. I hope that others who suffer in silence, shame or fear are encouraged by my story to reach out for help.

My story is for family members of those who suffer from a mental illness. I know that friends and family are impacted, and that they may feel helpless and at a loss on what to do. They may fear being blamed. They may feel shame. From my own experience I can offer that it is was not easy for those around me, but the relief of having others accept my illness helped me accept it. I'd like to think that there relieved too when we could name the trouble.

My story is for teachers. In-between the routines and tasks of teaching, in-between the countless decisions teachers make in a day, there are moments in which, if they can hear them, they are called upon to intervene and to disrupt. I wonder if any of my teachers had moments when they saw me struggle with the anxiety and the eating disorders? And if they had, would they have known what to do? According to my report cards, I was “a pleasure to have in class”. Within the system I showed up as compliant and well-behaved, although there were some teachers who did note my anxiety but there is no evidence that they did anything

with this information to intervene on my behalf. I hope that through my story more teachers may begin to recognize signs of mental illness when it shows up in their students, and to make school a safe and accepting space for such students.

My story is for teachers who have a mental illness. I recognize that I did not share my story until I was no longer in the classroom – this was not intentional but rather due to circumstances of timing. However, I recall hiding my eating disorders when I was a new teacher in the classroom as considered it a sign of incompetence, of weakness. How could I be trusted with the care of children, I wondered, if I could not even care for myself? I do not know how open I would be with my students, their parents, my colleagues, or my employer if I were teaching in a classroom today. I do not think that I would hide it, but I also do not think that I would declare it. I like to think that I would treat it with compassion and acceptance, as I hope I would do with others. .

### **Recommendations**

Being understood, being seen, being able to show up, this is what I hope for students and for teachers experiencing mental illness or who are trying to improve their mental health. Having been both a teacher at the local level as well as a bureaucrat at a provincial level, I believe that one way to facilitate positive mental health in schools is through practice, at a local level, supported by policy, at a provincial level.

Recognizing that there is still, in 2017, fear, stigma, and shame around mental illness, I offer the following specific recommendations for practice and for policy:

- While there are many programs and initiatives in schools to support students around mental health, and programs available through workplace and community efforts, the stigma still exists. I believe it would be a powerful and welcomed gesture if a senior-

level educator currently active in the school system, such as a school superintendent, came out with their own story of mental illness. Policy could be developed to support teachers with mental illness following the senior educator's disclosure as that person could model the way to mental health. I would recommend that whoever comes out with their story be someone fairly established and secure in their position to remove the fear of losing one's job as a result of disclosure. Once the system accepts that it is okay to have a mental illness – preferably one that is diagnosed and under treatment – then others may feel more secure in coming forward with their own stories.

- Recognizing that the thought of a teacher with mental illness teaching one's child could be a scary for some parents due to the unknown, following the senior educator's disclosure, encourage other educators such as school principals and senior teachers to share stories at Parents' Advisory Council (PAC) meetings or through information-sharing evenings.
- Develop a network of teachers who are comfortable with sharing their experiences and stories of mental illness within school staff meeting venues.
- Use the network of educators to tap into those willing to share their experiences and stories with pre-service teachers. Through hearing the stories, pre-service teachers may see themselves, their students, and their colleagues through the lens of mental health which may influence their teaching practice which may help to mitigate the impacts of mental illness.
- As the discussions around educators in school experiencing mental illness continue:

- review existing policies and consider revisions or additions to facilitate mental health in schools not just for students but also for the adults in the system.
- ensure that there are mental health resources and experts available to people who may be ready to seek help for themselves or for others.

I encourage courageous and compassionate educational leaders to take action in both small and big ways, for the benefit of students and the adults who care for them, through some of the recommendations listed above.

In closing, I offer my dissertation written as story to portray an image of mental illness in a student, and in a young teacher, and in a middle-age bureaucrat. I have made my first step to sharing my story with others publicly. My future actions will continue on the path of mental health for self and others, and my future research and stories will likely include autoethnographic narrative inquiry “in search of the nexus of self and culture” and personal narratives that are shared “because they are meaningful beyond any teller” (Pelias, 2004, p.11). I hope you find your own meaning through the reading of this narrative about mental illness and mental health, meaning that develops with compassion and understanding in relation with others: “Let all those come who want to; one of us will talk, the other will listen; at least we shall be together” (Konrad, 1969, p. 172).

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