

**COMING OUT: A STUDY OF SELF-REVELATION:  
DIVESTING MYSELF OF MASKS, COSTUMES AND COVERINGS,  
ON A JOURNEY TOWARD WHOLENESS**

Jeremy James Bruno Bisson

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE  
DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

NIPISSING UNIVERSITY  
SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES  
NORTH BAY, ONTARIO

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SCHULICH SCHOOL OF EDUCATION  
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SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES  
CERTIFICATE OF EXAMINATION

Certificate of Examination

Supervisor(s):

Carmen Shields

Examiner(s)

John Portelli (External)

Heather Rintoul (Internal)

Supervisory Committee:

Sean Wiebe

Tara-Lynn Scheffel

The \_\_\_\_\_ dissertation \_\_\_\_\_ by

Jeremy Bisson

entitled

COMING OUT: A STUDY OF SELF-REVELATION: DIVESTING MYSELF OF MASKS, COSTUMES  
AND COVERINGS ON A JOURNEY TOWARD WHOLENESS

is accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

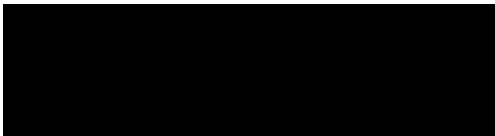
Doctor of Philosophy

Tuesday, November 19, 2019

Date

Douglas Gosse

Chair of the Examination Committee



## **Abstract**

This self-study narrative inquiry is focused on the emerging story of my coming out process as a gay man. I reached midlife before circumstances prevailed upon me to take the necessary steps toward living my life without the costumes and disguises I have used to cover my sexual identity. I employ a narrative framework in order to take the backward, forward, inward, and outward storytelling path across time and situation that allows me to share my experience in a research venue with others. In my dissertation, using a chronicle of life experience, I constructed in a doctoral course, I move from the past, where I share stories of childhood when I first learned the necessity of masking my sexuality, through young adulthood to the present, where I awaken to the reality of what is lost living life in the closet. I conclude by naming attributes that I now understand are essential for living a life that encompasses my whole being, where I no longer hide who I really am. I draw upon Connelly and Clandinin's definition of curriculum as all of life's experiences to highlight the ways the personal and professional are intertwined in the individual. The unmasking process I experienced writing this study opened my eyes to what it means to live a life that is whole and sustaining. As is the case in self-study research, my contribution to the field of education rests in adding one person's experience and insights to the body of literature on life lived in the closet and the emotional and sometimes turbulent path of the coming out process. It is my hope that this study will be of use to professionals who teach, support, and counsel students struggling with coming out, as well as others interested in learning what it can mean to a life to make the decision to come out.

## **Acknowledgements**

Words will never be enough to describe the gratitude I hold for all of the people I have met throughout my journey as a doctoral student. To the many members of my community who provided the gift of insight and wisdom every step of the way, my thanks.

I owe a tremendous amount of gratitude and respect to my friend and now colleague, my dissertation Supervisor, Dr. Carmen Shields, for sticking with me throughout this journey. If it were not for Dr. Shields, I would not know what it means speak from my heart. Many thanks for all the ongoing conversations.

To my Mom, Nellie Bisson, who took me in with open arms and let me move back home to finish this research study, I cannot thank-you enough for providing me with a warm bed to sleep in and fridge full of food to eat. Without a home to come home to, I would not have been able to complete this study. I will forever remember in my heart, the time I was able to spend with you while composing this study.

My thanks to my older brother, Vern Bisson, for providing a place to stay while I moved between Nipissing University and home while composing this dissertation. The time spent on campus while composing this study is something I will always cherish. Thank-you to my younger brother, Benjamin Bisson, for saying to me at the beginning of my journey as a doctoral student to “Keep my eye on the prize.” And to my sister in law, Jennifer Bisson, for being so accepting of my sexual orientation.

A very special thank-you to my Dean, Dr. Carole Richardson, for her words of kindness and genuine concern in times when I was unsure whether I had it in me to complete this study. She taught me what it means to show compassion for those around us who might be struggling.

Another sincere thank-you to Dr. Jim McAuliffe for providing the extensions needed so that I could finish this research study. Through these wonderful people, I now understand how the Nipissing University community cares for its students.

I do not know if I would have completed my doctorate if it were not for the generosity of my very good friend, Maire Leigh Sheppard, also known to many other students over the years, as their Library Mom. You have been a mentor for a good portion of my life and I cannot thank you enough for your words of wisdom throughout the many conversations we have had throughout my entire post-secondary journey. I have learnt through you to always be available and willing to help others in any way I can.

A very sincere thank-you to Jennifer Mercer and Beth Brisson in the Student Awards and Financial Aid Office at Nipissing University for provided support and encouragement throughout my entire journey as a student at Nipissing University.

Lastly, a very sincere and heartfelt thank-you to the members of my committee, Dr. Tara-Lynn Scheffel (Nipissing) and Dr. Sean Wiebe (University of Prince Edward Island), my Internal Examiner, Dr. Heather Rintoul (Nipissing) and my External Examiner, Dr. John Portelli (OISE).

## **Dedication**

I dedicate this research study to the many gay individuals who, through no fault of their own, have struggled or continue to struggle to come out of the closet. It is my hope that this study will provide support and encouragement to others who are working to come out and be given the gift of feeling as human as everyone else in mainstream society.

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## Prelude

*But there comes a time – ... this is one of them –  
when we have to take ourselves more seriously or die;  
when we have to pull back from the incantations,  
rhythms we have moved to thoughtlessly,  
and disentrall ourselves, bestow  
ourselves to silence, or a severer listening, cleansed  
of oratory, formulas, choruses, laments, static crowding the wires. We cut the  
wires,  
find ourselves in free-fall, as if  
our true home were the undimensional  
solitudes, the rift in the Great Nebula. (Rich, 2013, p. 89)*

*Adrienne Rich, Transcendental Etude, 1977*

## Prologue

I have come to recognize how my journey as a doctoral student moves beyond the words that are written by other academics and into the depths of my own being. While the process of writing reflectively brought me to such a special place in my thinking during my graduate years, I struggled to transition into composing a research proposal to conduct a narrative inquiry into my identity because I was relying on the literature I had embraced as a graduate student to speak for me. For many years, I made the mistake of thinking that external truths and societal norms could speak about my authentic nature rather than speaking for myself. Of the many different ways that I have been able to experience a sense of freedom in this world, I have yet to experience the freedom of speaking in a voice that reflects my wholeness, the core of my own being as a person who is gay.

I do not know if I would have even found my way into my proposal and subsequent dissertation if my thesis supervisor did not think to say, “Jeremy. You are becoming the author of your own work.” To move into this author role requires that I learn to speak in a language that is no longer solely based upon others’ thoughts and perspectives nor the socially prescribed masks, costumes, or coverings that I have adopted in the past. By convincing myself into thinking that I had missed something in the required readings in my PhD program, the literature that had once opened my mind to an increased depth of insight into understanding myself became a barrier, derailing my ability to take the final step in my doctoral journey — writing my dissertation. Little did I know that the answer to becoming the author of my own work was not possible living a life that is hidden from others. It took me many months to realize that I needed to develop a language of my own to express what I wanted to say in my work—I could not speak using other scholarly voices alone. I did not realize how donning masks, costumes, and coverings was my

way of playing out what I perceived as socially acceptable scripts. Masks, costumes, and coverings convey both my ways of hiding or concealing my gay identity and as a means of protecting myself or seeking safety. Little did I know that the cost and consequence of living a hidden life was my inability to be my self.

In conducting an inquiry into my own self-identity, I consider the connection between masking my sexuality to gain acceptance, covering painful memories of rejection, and attempting to live from behind a professional role. It does not seem surprising now that I could not begin the process of speaking my own story. The words that were needed to express my own experience were also hidden behind the masks, coverings, and costumes that I chose to represent myself to others for many years. My motivation to achieve in an academic sense did not incorporate my whole self as a gay man, and as a consequence, my learning was extraneous to myself as a person, detached from my life experience. I find now that it is hard to find direction that holds meaning; hard to seek meaningful relationships; hard to be with myself. I know I have conditioned myself to use the voices of others as a means of speaking for me instead of speaking for myself.

In the chapters that follow, I begin the journey of writing my way to a more authentic self—that is, myself without the masks, costumes, and coverings I have adopted to hide my gayness from others. My aim ultimately is to let go; let go of the trappings that have come to hold me captive, quite literally trapping me in a life I devised to fit into a world as someone I am not. I am ready to come out.

## CHAPTER ONE: EMBARKING ON A NARRATIVE JOURNEY

*Empathic scholarship 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)*

*Ronald Pelias, A Methodology of the Heart, 2004*

In this chapter, I describe the rationale and justification for my study and I begin to delineate my coming out journey. Following Atkinson (1995), I hope to engage in the power that narrative holds as I share aspects of my life story. He writes, “In telling our life story, we gain new insights into dilemmas, human struggles, and human triumphs, while also gaining a greater appreciation for how values and beliefs are acquired, shaped and held onto” (p. 4). I weave in literature that has helped me begin to see the depth and breadth of what it means to come out as whole person.

### **The Phenomenon of Coming to Understanding Who I Am**

What does it mean to “come out,” to step away from the secret stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995) that, in the end, have not made my place in the world safe, as I once assumed was the case. What will it mean in my life going forward to put down the masks, take off the costumes, and divest myself of the coverings and cover stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995) that I have learned to speak with such ease over the years of my life? At 39 I have reached a juncture where my disguises are heavy and my energy is depleted. It is time to open myself up to the world. Rhoads (1995) writes:

Coming out involves taking all the negative things that you’ve heard about yourself – heard about *those* people -- and just say to yourself that none of it matters as much as

you do. It means opening up the door and letting out all the internalized hatred, fear, self doubt, and self worthlessness. (p. 67)

I understand that to be well and content, I can no longer continue to put my efforts into not being myself. I can relate to Rhoads (1995) when he says: “I think it’s the point of breaking. You either come out or you sort of die” (p. 67). In this study, I use narratives of my past experience to write my way into a present where I can begin to know myself for who I am. Without this knowledge, I find now that it is hard to find direction that holds meaning; hard to seek meaningful relationships; hard to be with myself.

I recognize now that the process of coming out is as much about becoming more comfortable with who I am as it is about healing from the costs, consequences, and regrets of hiding my sexual orientation from others for so many years. In the present, the face I see before me is not easy to recognize because of the many disguises that I have used over the years as a means of gaining social acceptance.

In order to conduct a narrative inquiry into my own self-identity, I pose the following initial questions:

- What masks and coverings have I worn without knowing I was doing so? How have they impacted my life?
- How do I understand the costumes I chose to wear at different points in my life now?
- How have my masks, coverings, and costumes impacted others’ lives?
- In what ways will my voice be affected as I reinterpret stories of experience from the past from a societal, relational, and personal perspective?
- How will the process of divesting myself of disguises impact my way forward in the

world?

I want to strip away the coverings that I have used to hide the pain I have experienced as a result of being rejected by my peer group because of my sexual orientation. I want to leave behind the costumes that I have clad myself in as a means of trying to gain professional status by wearing those costumes for every waking minute of my working life. And perhaps most of all, as I reconstruct past events, situations, and experiences in the present, I hope to reveal the person I am underneath the years of camouflage so that I am able to know and connect my own theorizing and practice together in a life that has a strong platform to stand upon. For me, travelling Connelly and Clandinin's (1988) curricular path of "education as all of life's experiences" (p. 1) creates an opening and a direction forward in both my personal and professional life.

### **Snapshot: Remembering Solitude in Nature: A Friendly Covering**

*I remember a time where I felt as though I were alive. It was a simpler time – a time well before the distractions of the world-wide-web, cellular phones, and social media. Today the snow is falling ever so lightly. I am reminded of my childhood and the time I spent marvelling at nature at the local ski hill. There, alone in the freshly fallen snow, I could forget the masks I wore to survive rejection by my peers. The hours I spent alone in nature in any season provided me with a cloak of safety where I could drop my guard, escape my surroundings, and feel alive. I am a child from a Northern Ontario mining town, so the out-of-doors was never far away. Along with my winters spent skiing, my summers were interspersed with trips to the family camp my father created for us. There too, by the lake and the woods, alone on my bike, I felt alive.*

## **Explaining Why This Study Matters**

*I invite you into a project that gives a voice to those afraid to speak or who have ended their lives for feeling less than human. I invite you into a work that encourages us all to acknowledge and appreciate one another. (p. 8)*

*Tony Adams, Narrating the Closet, 2011*

### **A Personal Perspective**

Looking back, I know I have restricted my ability to see the “angles of vision” that Peshkin (2001) described as key for qualitative inquirers. My focus has been to give others a socially accepted version of myself—a one-dimensional cover story that I fabricated in the communication process between others and myself. A memory does not need to repeat itself in similar situations too many times before it becomes something that can be spotted from off on the horizon. I learned from a very young age how to deflect similar situations from occurring in the way a certain look or tone in an individual’s voice made a particular experience unmistakably similar to another. Since the message being delivered from others did not change over time, I learned how to respond so as to dodge or deflect what I was being asked. For example, in the present I am often asked why I do not have a wife and children. I remember how this question first came into existence when neighbours would often compliment my strong work ethic around my mother’s home by saying that one day I would have a happy life with a wife and kids. Hearing this comment many times, I have grown accustomed to answering this question in a standardized way by smiling and simply saying, “Not yet.” Since I have not had the courage to say that I am gay and that the possibility of marrying a wife and having children is highly unlikely, I have been living a hidden life in several ways. Seidman (2002/2013) writes:



Passing is not a simple, effortless act, it's not just about denial or suppression. The closeted individual closely monitors his or her speech, emotional expression, and behavior in order to avoid unwanted suspicion. The sexual meaning of the things (for example, clothes, furniture) and acts (for example, styles of walking, talking, posture) of daily life must be carefully read in order to skilfully fashion a convincing public heterosexual identity. (p. 31)

I covered my identity as a gay man and put on the mask of living as a straight person, and to this day, I will often reply in this same manner as above because I do not have the courage to say I am gay to those who assume I am heterosexual. I have disregarded how I truly feel and replaced my feelings with what is socially acceptable throughout most of my life. I have spent many years manufacturing my identity in an effort to conform to what is socially acceptable amongst my peer group and home community.

I failed to see the need to conduct a thesis or master's research paper (MRP) while pursuing my master's degree because over those years of study, I had convinced myself that I would be able to utilize my newly minted professional designation to mask and cover aspects about myself. I should have known better: in the years prior to completing my M. Ed. through course work, I had completed my B. Ed, a degree in Business, and diplomas in Accounting and Marketing. Across these years, I felt that by wearing a tightly fitting mask or a nicely decorated costume to represent my personal and professional identity, I would finally be accepted as an equal in a professional community. All I thought I had to do was read from the script and wear the costume that the degree provided.

I have come to recognize that for as long as I am alive on this planet my identity will always be in a state of flux until I learn how to be more truthful with people about my sexual

orientation. I feel I am now at a crossroads, no longer able to take the route to a life of pretence as I have before, yet not able to travel forward with any certainty along another path. I believe that *coming out* is of utmost importance in that it will enable me to choose a direction that can move me toward wholeness and a fulfilling life.

Even though I sought to live from behind a cover story (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995) so as to hide my gayness from others, I was not prepared to deal with the way graduating from postsecondary institutions seemed to implicitly groom me to live behind a professional persona. Respective to each program I took, I was left with the sense that my role as a professional was all-encompassing and continued after work, on weekends, and during vacation. Holding this perspective, I drifted further and further away from recognizing the importance of being able to speak in a voice of my own because living a scripted life based in heterosexual privilege seemed to be a norm of some sort for the professional class. Over time, I tried so desperately to wear the costume of *expert* to represent an aspect of my inner identity. I dressed for interviews as my straight peers did, in crisp shirts, casual jackets, and ties, but I see now that while these costumes were an attempt to cover aspects about myself that I was mocked or ridiculed for during my childhood and adolescence, I was not fooling others who saw beneath my disguises. What I do see now at the crossroads is that the only person I was fooling was myself.

I am ready for people to see who I am when I am in solitude. Without a personal or professional cloak, I believe I will no longer be thinking ahead about what I am saying as a means of decoding what others would like me to be saying. Without a mask, perhaps I will no longer feel as though I am always performing for others.

### **A Social and Historical Perspective**

*The field of philosophical historical inquiry proves to be caught up in the most basic  
Socratic task, that of self-knowledge. (p. 5)*

*Peter Warnek, Descent of Socrates: Self-knowledge and cryptic nature in the Platonic dialogues,  
2005*

As this quote suggests, my motivation to conduct a self-identity study is linked to a process that humans have been engaged in since ancient times. Before there was a meshing of cultures from around the globe, culture and social morals in the West were constructed from a set of beliefs arising from the Enlightenment. As Hargreaves (1994) explains:

Modernity is a social condition that is both driven and sustained by Enlightenment beliefs in rational scientific progress, in the triumph of technology over nature, and in the capacity to control and improve the human condition by applying this wealth of scientific and technological understanding and expertise to social reform. (p. 8)

Truth was based on a single belief system, where the creation of universal principles and metanarratives was used as a means of externally anchoring people's lives in a sense of purpose and meaning. Hargreaves notes that "in modernity, there is a system and order, and often a sense of collective identity and belonging too" (p. 8). However, the certainty associated with modern metanarratives has proved destructive to many because it silenced the individuality of peoples' voices. Cultural tales had a sense of certainty about them; my own was premised on a French Canadian Catholic history with all the expectations associated with each one.

In my Northern Ontario home, I learned the "joie de vivre" of French Canada, living life as my father did, enjoying his work, teaching his trade, the outdoors, and being with friends and family. Even though I was never enrolled in a French-speaking school because the language spoken at home was English, I still exhibit aspects of being born into a family where one of my

parents is of French Canadian descent, and my neighbourhood had a distinct French-Canadian influence. Looking back, I am reminded of specific traits that were exhibited in my growing up years: a strong need to be externally validated through athleticism; a strong work ethic; and pride for a job well done; and an appreciation for being alive. I remember that while hockey was the chosen sport of choice on my father's side of the family, my being a downhill ski racer seemed to equate to an expectation to be involved in a winter sport for my grandparents. In terms of living in a predominantly French-speaking neighbourhood, being seen as a good son by the neighbours came in the form of shovelling the driveway in the winter and cutting the grass in the summer.

The street I grew up on was fairly affluent, with home owners ranging from miners, owners of local businesses, an accountant, a few who worked in nursing, several teachers, a doctor, and a pharmacist. Just as one might assume of mining towns in Northern Ontario, the neighbourhood that I grew up in was tightly knit. For the most part, everyone knew everyone on Lynwood Drive.

While I learned Catholic beliefs and practices from both my parents, my Polish mother in particular, who came to settle in Canada with her family after World War II, brought many of the Catholic celebrations, traditions, and rituals into our family. With my brothers, I attended Mass, learned about original sin, and absolution. I remember that visits to my Polish grandparents marked special festivities such as Mass on Easter Sunday. Other Catholic traditions and rituals were celebrated on both sides of my family including communion and confirmation. Other than switching from a Catholic to a public high school for my final year, I attended Catholic school, from preschool to grade 12.

Recently, I asked my mother what it was about being Catholic that she wanted to impart in my development and growth. She said it was “to be able to know right from wrong.” Although I have not attended church for many years, it was only the summer before last at the age of 38 that I first became aware that in the eyes of the Catholic Church, there was no place for me as a sexual aberration—by being who I am, I could not conform to the expectations of the Catholic view of acceptable human behaviour.

During my years of study, I have learned that the motivation to break free from the oppressive structures of modernity such as the Catholic doctrine requires that individuals construct an epistemology and ontology of their own. Pinar (2011) describes the scope of individuality as the following:

Each of us is different, meaning we each have a different makeup, genetically, as well as different upbringings, families and caretakers, significant others and, more broadly still, in terms of race, class, and gender, inflected by place, time, and circumstances. (p. 2)

I know my own search for identity is a shared story with others who experience their perceived difference from others through being sidelined in some way in community, family, school, and culture. In my study, I seek to move beyond the oppressive walls of modernity and travel to a place where learning extends beyond the bricks and mortar of what has been indoctrinated into me as representing the only *valid* way of thinking about education and living a meaningful life.

Postmodernism, which has permeated the socio economic fabric of our culture, is often described as multifaceted and complex. Several terms coming from different contexts have been coined to describe how this movement has emerged. Hargreaves (1994) has illustrated how each of these terms stemmed from the same trend: “Whether the transitions we are experiencing are described in terms of postliberalism, postindustrialism, or postmodernity, most writers agree that

at the heart of the transition is the globalization of economic activity, political relations, information, communications and technology” (p. 47). Slattery (1995) adds to this perspective writing that “integral to postmodernism is the critique of reason, totality, universal principles and metanarratives” (p. 42). Based on my own experience in recent years, I know that aspects of our world that were once separate and operated in isolation from each other have been brought closer together. In my generation, people from different cultures and with different histories have been able to enhance their communication through technology, communicating with one another on multiple platforms as the dynamic nature of globalization has filled houses and neighbourhoods with a wide array of cultural and individual identities.

In order to reach beyond my own stories of experience to the notion of self-identity more broadly in both education and culture, I know that listening to a diversity of perspectives in an educational setting such as I experienced in my graduate courses, can provide an ability to reconstruct an identity that can coexist with the identity of others who are very different from ourselves. As Greene (1995) writes:

We should think of education as opening public spaces in which [individuals], speaking in their own voices and acting on their own initiatives, can identify themselves and choose themselves in relation to such principles as freedom, equality, justice, and concern for others. (p. 68)

I believe that in the postmodern world of today, we have an opportunity to consider curriculum as all of life’s experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). We can make new meaning from the events and situations we have lived through reconstructing past experience in the present, and we can share our learning with others both like and unlike ourselves with an openness that was not possible in the past.

Now, moving on from the sociocultural awakening I experienced during my Master's degree, I am eager to explore what has been lost through living much of my life as a cover story (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995). Whatever role I assume and whatever community I choose to live in going forward, for my existence to be sustainable, I know I must put down the masks and coverings, pack up the costumes, give up being a fraud, and join in with others as I continue to move in the direction of becoming authentically myself. My choice to take this path opens me to my own autobiographical journey, where I can undertake a reconstruction of events and situations from my past in order to see where I can make a difference for both others and myself in a postmodern context.

### **Turning to the Discourse on Coming Out**

*Although coming out is a crucial process in the development of a positive sense of gay identity, there is little research about the coming-out experiences of lesbian, gay, and bisexual college students. (p. 68)*

*Robert Rhoads, Learning From the Coming-Out Experiences of College Males, 1995*

Even though the above quote was written more than 20 years ago, the academic literature on the coming out process for individuals is still quite limited. The studies I found are mainly comprised of surveys or question and answer formats rather than actual stories of individual experience. I can understand this situation because, perhaps like the participants in the study quoted above, I have never publicly admitted that I am gay because I am not sure if coming out will yield a positive or negative experience in my life. Rhoads (1995) writes: "Even those students [in the study] who described coming out in positive terms suffered some negative consequences after coming out" (p. 71). I believe my struggle to come out stems from both a conscious and subconscious fear of reliving all of the same ridicule and bullying that I received

while growing up. Despite my reluctance to share my sexual orientation, I have had a number of acquaintances and friends from the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ) community make their sexual orientation known amongst their family members, within their social circles, at their workplace, and through their social media.

Corrigan, Kosyluk, and Rüsç (2013) describe coming out as an opportunity to begin the process of “announcing to the world one’s sexual orientation proudly to assert control over one’s life” (e1). However, they also shed light on my identity as being “under threat.” They define “identity threat” as “the harm that occurs when one’s sense of self is challenged by association with a stigmatized group” (p. e1). It is through statements like these in the coming out literature that I have recognized that, regardless of any potentially negative circumstances that may arise as a result of coming out, I will not be living a life that is authentic and whole if I do not share my sexual identity in a more open and public way. By doing so, along with living a life attuned to my whole being, I hope as a scholar I can make a contribution to the body of literature devoted to coming out.

Just as a course entitled *Business Ethics* represented the most impactful and meaningful course at the undergraduate level for me, I see now how my passion for the study of ethics has resurfaced in my doctoral program. It became clear to me that my renewed gravitation towards ethics began inching itself into my research as I read an article by Sears and Williams (1997). They write, “Many tenured full professors who are gay or lesbian continue to cower cowardly in the closet” (p. 4). I do not want to become the coward amongst the LGBTQ community in academia. My intrigue with the study of ethics went beyond learning right from wrong to the way we can choose to fabricate our identity or give a more truthful account of ourselves. Even though it took several years before I was able to link my interest in ethical reasoning with living



an ethical life, I struggled to see how my decision to come out was also an ethical decision. By hiding my sexual orientation, I now know I am not being ethical because I am not giving a truthful account of myself—choosing instead to live as a fraud.

I think coming out and publicly admitting that I am gay has been the challenge of my life. As Rhoads (1995) notes: “The pervasive attitude that a heterosexual relationship is the only legitimate expression of human attraction and affection is the essence of a heterosexist society and highlights why coming out is never ending” (pp. 69–70). Looking back, I see that by experiencing an unrelenting climate of shame and ridicule towards the LGBTQ community throughout my high school years, I was without a safe space to learn how to come out to people. I can easily relate to the coming out literature I have read as part of my research, which is filled with reports from the LGBTQ community who feared for their lives while attending college. Rhoads (1995) interviewed one individual who stated, “You just never know when a group of frat boys or jock types—you know those who are probably most closeted—are going to beat your face in because you remind them of what they can’t admit to” (p. 71). Without a culture of acceptance, I intuitively thought that coming out was something that should never be done in a public forum. Much like the gay students that Rhoads studied, it took many years for the benefits of coming out to outweigh my perceived risks. Not only did I fear being rejected, I could not see beyond a heterosexual relationship because of the shame I felt for being gay. In Rhoads’s study, one student recounted losing one of his best friends.

“We were talking about our lives, our fears, our wishes, and I ended up letting him know I was gay.” His friend completely withdrew from him. “He just couldn’t deal with it.” The friends of one man changed their minds about sharing an apartment

with him. One of his friends said that she couldn't live with him because she was applying for a job with the federal government, and if they found out that she lived with a gay man, she might not get the job. (p. 71)

Even though I have always had similar fears as the ones shared in the aforementioned quote, I wish I had found the strength to share my sexual orientation at a much earlier age. Rather than running away from bullying and ridicule I experienced in high school, I wish I could have confronted and stared down the swirling accusations about my sexual orientation. As Rasmussen (2004) notes though, "the pedagogical implications of the decision to come out in the classroom will surely vary according to the teacher, the school, the parents, and the community who are all drawn into and impact on this act of coming out" (p. 148). In my case, homosexuality was not spoken about openly in school or in my home or community, and so no discussion ever took place.

While there was a time in my past when I allowed a heterosexist perspective to override my gay identity, my experience as a graduate student has led me to begin speaking in a voice that is more authentic. While I cannot go back in time in a literal sense, I can reflect upon the past and reconstruct stories of experience in the present and use them to change the trajectory of my life in a direction that celebrates my identity. By inquiring into my self-identity, I can retrace the borders and boundaries of my psyche that have prevented me from being open about something as natural as my sexual orientation. Brookfield (1995) notes what Mezirow (1991) refers to as "premise distortions." These are the deeply embedded internal injunctions that define the boundaries of what we allow ourselves to think. They are self-censorship devices – nagging voices of denial that set out acceptable interpretations of events that remind us constantly of what practices are off-limits. (p. 45)

As Rhoads (1995) writes, “for gay and bisexual students, reflections on the past often bring new insights about their sexual identity and help them make sense of confusing childhood experiences” (p. 70).

Through this narrative self-study research, I have come to recognize that I was losing myself in the process of trying to achieve acceptance amongst my friends and my family. Everything from being an athlete in a downhill ski racing program, to achieving academic success, and then entering into the graduate studies program at Nipissing University, all stitched together with an unmistakable distinctness that I could not see until now. I explore each of these examples in detail as I reflect on how much these seminal moments in my life were in fact moments of disguise, acting as a repellent for coming out and being more public about my sexual orientation. In a paradoxical sense, I understand Rhoads (1995) when he states: “Although the developmental implications of coming out are significant, the process must also be understood in terms of its negative consequences” (p. 72). I can now see the tension between coming out and being accepted by mainstream society, and I also understand that coming out is an ongoing process. Through this narrative self-study, I move away from seeking the acceptance and validation of others and instead engage in the coming out process where I begin to celebrate my identity as a gay man in a more public way.

### **The Decision to Come Out**

I grew up in an area without a gay community and was mistreated and bullied by my peer group because of my reputation for being gay. Growing up, I always felt in my heart that moving to a place where there is a gay community would represent a positive influence in my life. The following snapshot brings me to a time and place before gaining social acceptance amongst my peer group after switching from a Catholic to a Public high school. In my Catholic school, I was

without many friends and I was mocked for being a gay person on the ski team. At the time all I wanted to do was move away so that I could be around other people who were gay.

**Snapshot: Daydreaming about living in the city.** *Daydreaming. It was while visiting my older brother in Ottawa where he was pursuing post-secondary studies that I first began daydreaming of what it would feel like to be gay in a city where there are other gay people. Prior to my brother's move to Ottawa, I did not know what it was like to live in a place where gay culture existed. I always felt in my heart that I would come out once I moved away for school, and yet here I am, still in the closet at 39 years old; I am still living in my Northern Ontario mining town and am not yet comfortable enough with my sexual identity to name it for others.*

**Snapshot: Questioning my hesitation.** *How did I allow 20 years to pass by before dealing with my sexual orientation? Over the course of the years that I have been studying at the postsecondary level, I have put my drive for academic success ahead of focusing my energy on my sexual orientation. I have stayed in two Northern Ontario communities to study and work, where I have walked a line, dodging situations that might leave me open to the questions of others about my sexuality. I have maintained a pleasant and happy outer appearance while working hard at my studies and jobs outside of the university for my livelihood. My Northern Ontario university town especially has provided me with a sense of safety, where my carefully constructed persona has allowed me to represent myself as friendly and studious. I have been able to maintain enough distance from others so that in large part I am unknown beyond surface level conversations. Perhaps if I had gone away as my brother did, far from home, I could have been open about my sexuality and lived a very different life.*

This research study moves beyond coming out in a personal sense by including how coming out might influence my ability to relate to others in different cultural and social settings.

While I took small steps toward coming out in years gone by, I did not recognize that making the decision to fully come out was a journey of its own. For a little over 20 years, I remember situations and events that shone a light on the tension between coming out or staying in the closet. Seidman (2002/2013) explains that “coming out does rid us of feelings of shame and guilt, and that visibility alone does not threaten heterosexual privilege” (p. 7). Whether woven from societal, relational, or personal perspectives, my past experiences have become seminal to my decision to come out. In the past, I could not see that there was a demarcation between the decision to come out and the process of actually coming out. In situations where I was called out for being gay, I found myself falling deeper into denial rather than accepting that these experiences were pointing me in the direction of accepting my gayness. I was afraid of the negative consequences.

Manning (2014) summarizes that coming out studies are noted to be lacking in three areas: culture, community and relationships. In the following sections, I consider how my experience of hiding my sexual orientation has impacted my gay identity from a societal perspective and from a relational perspective. By viewing these areas, I can see beyond my personal stance that has kept my sexual orientation hidden for so many years. I did not understand that my choice to live my life behind masks and costumes was a means of trying to manufacture a heterosexual identity. I could not have predicted the way a closeted life became a way of utilizing a professional persona to bury my sexuality even deeper. Manning, referencing Diamond (2003) and Peplau and Garnets (2000), explains:

Many cognitive coming out studies are flawed because they almost always place a single

person into the core analysis, allowing culture, community, and especially communicative relationships to be ignored or minimized in developing coming out scholarship. (p. 32)

### **Coming Out from a Societal Perspective**

Through the privileging of a culture of heterosexism, homosexuality has largely been hidden in North American society historically, and although publicly recognized today, is often condemned or stigmatized by members of the straight community. “The alternation between invisibility and hostility is readily apparent in four societal institutions: religion, the law, psychiatry and psychology, and mass media” (Herek & Berrill, 1992, p. 90). I learned from a very young age the costs and consequences of being perceived as gay in a heterosexist society. Since the pain of being rejected ran deep within me, it is no wonder that I mistakenly perceived my retreat to living a closeted life to be a refuge of some sort. Seidman (2002/2013) writes, “The closet is about individuals making decisions about love, work, residence, and friends in order to conceal an important part of who they are suggests that it is more than an inconvenience or minor nuisance; it is a condition of social oppression” (p. 8). In hindsight, I could not see the negative social and psychological repercussions that accompanied my choice to live a closeted life.

Over time, my perception of what it means to live in a safe space inhibited my development and growth. Unlike the pain I felt from being rejected or the torment I endured from hearing hurtful words, the costs of living life in the closet are not easily seen because the closet signifies missing or absent parts of a life. What was missing was my development and growth as a gay man. By living a closeted life, my gay identity has been woven with the same

stereotypes and stigmas that are sometimes used by the heterosexual population when defining homosexuality. As Herek and Berrill (1992) illustrate:

At best, gay people are perceived as basing their identity and lifestyle upon a trivial pursuit, namely, sexual pleasure. At the worst, homosexuality is stigmatized as inherently sick or dangerous and worthy of punishment through legal (the criminal justice system) or extralegal (in the form of anti-gay hate crime) means. (p. 96)

Though I felt safe from the ridicule of my younger years, living in the closet prevented me from being able to see the complexity of my gay identity and my interaction with others in today's sociocultural fabric. Concealing my gay identity was a way of constricting my perceptual lens to finding openings where I could possibly coexist in a heterosexist society. With too narrow a lens, I could see society and culture only in the ways that I learned them in childhood. What if coming out from a societal perspective is not about waiting for an opening, but rather creating an opening of my own? The masks, costumes, and coverings that I have worn in my life were a way of filtering out and circumventing my gay identity so that I was actually not seen or heard in the cultural fabric of my home and academic community.

Looking back, I can see how in my mid-30s, I was driven to live a closeted life to avoid ridicule socially, while at the same time I created an opening for understanding the link between my identity and society and culture by becoming involved in Toronto's gay community. It is my belief that my transition into understanding the notion of coming out in an academic sense came into existence when a friend provided an invitation to write and publish narratives of experience in a magazine for the LGBTQ community. Interviewing people and sharing their stories was a way of meeting many people from that community who had taken the time to establish a relationship with themselves. As Seidman (2002/2013) explains, for such individuals,

“homosexuality [is approached] as a natural, good part of themselves; they have integrated it into their daily lives; they have lovers and partners; they are out with some co-workers, kin, and friends, and openly participate in mainstream social life” (p. 9).

**Snapshot: The night before the magazine goes live.** *Magical. I will never forget how I felt the day the magazine first went live. It felt surreal. I remember thinking to myself that I never thought life could feel so good. I felt on top of the world. For one of the first times in my life, I felt lucky to be born gay. The moment represented a turning point in my life where I no longer felt as though being gay was less worthy than being straight. I felt happiness surge through my veins in a way I was never able to experience before. I will never forget what it felt like to go grocery shopping at midnight at the underground Metro with two of my friends who were also working on the magazine.*

This invitation was an opportunity to begin relating to gay others, and within a short period of time I began to see how my life in the closet had stunted my growth and development from a social and relational perspective. By becoming involved in the LGBTQ community, it became clear to me that I did not know how to relate to myself and to others because I only knew how to speak in a masked voice. While I thought this voice served me well for so many years, I am now able to recognize that in fact, neither the straight nor the gay community was hearing my voice because I did not speak my truth to anyone.

**Coming out in a relational sense.**

*Identities are navigated, varying from context to context. Self-ness is always in process in some sense. We are always becoming. This is a relational view of the self – the self not as stable, but as made and remade in relation to others and available categories. (pp. 28-29)*



*Kate Evans, Negotiating the Self: Identity, Sexuality, and Emotion in Learning to Teach, 2002*

Stepping back in time, I remember that a simple switch from my Catholic high school to a public one provided an opening for me to be accepted. Even though the acceptance came at the expense of hiding my sexual orientation, I was willing to disregard this aspect of myself because of how much I craved positive human interaction. While the rejection amongst my peers in my younger years influenced my inspiration to move away from my hometown, it was also acceptance that diminished enough of my discontent to live in places with a nonexistent LGBTQ community. Experiencing almost daily rejection in high school, I felt that a change of high schools would improve my ability to make friends, but it was not until I fell behind in my studies and needed an additional two years to graduate that I made the decision to actually switch high schools. Little did I know that a whole other world existed a few kilometres away at a different school.

Through tacit acceptance, I found myself with friends for the first time in my life, and by my second year I had a girlfriend. Even though engaging in a relationship with the opposite sex violated my decision to protect my sexual orientation, I could not resist being socially accepted. I did not take off the mask I had learned to wear at my previous high school, but rather I devalued my gay identity to be accepted among this new student body. Thinking I was in control of the mask I wore in high school, I failed to see how a heterosexist school rhetoric had socialized me into wearing a mask and living my life in the closet. As Seidman (2002/2013) remarks, “the closet refers to a state of gay oppression produced by a condition of heterosexual domination” (p. 8).

The mask did not come off as I thought it would after my final year of high school. Instead, I began living a divided life, concealing my gay identity so that I could continue to

represent myself as heterosexual. In order for the charade to continue, I avoided interacting with anyone who was known or perceived to be from the LGBTQ community. This way of being negatively influenced coming out in a relational sense because it closed off opportunities to connect with other gay people—the only way I knew how to relate to others was through the persona of a heterosexual person. From my position in the closet, I was, as Du Bois (2016) noted, “[experiencing] a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at [my] self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (p. 3). I was busy constructing a persona that I thought others would accept, but I failed to recognize that I was manufacturing my identity according to social norms.

It was the summer after completing my Master’s degree that I began to explore my sexuality. By engaging in my first same-sex relationship at the age of 30, I had allowed many years to pass, and I felt as though I could not engage with others in an intimate sense. At the time I could not understand why some of my boyfriends would question whether or not I was gay. I learned that the mask that I thought I had put down for relationships was negatively influencing my self-esteem in a covert sense. De Cecco (1988) states: “Gay males who have fully internalized the gay consciousness and are truly ‘proud to be gay’ are less likely to suffer the lack of self-esteem that is a common predisposing factor toward a manic love style” (p. 28). I did not see that coming out in a relational sense is actually a much deeper experience than becoming involved in an intimate way because part of forming a meaningful relationship would require sharing the choice to hide my sexual orientation for so many years and what was sacrificed along the way. By not sharing my past, I think intimate relations felt fraudulent to my partners. I did not take the time to consider the multiple complexities associated with coming out. As a result,

communication between others and me was often lost in translation because I did not speak my whole story. The following snapshot provides a glimpse of such an interaction.

**Snapshot: Struggling to connect.** *While attending community college, I established a cordial relationship with the person who was President of the college at the time. Since I was always treated with such fondness by him, I remember visiting his office for advice because no matter how hard I tried to find a job after completing my Master's degree, nobody was willing to give me a chance. I remember asking him with watery eyes what was wrong with me. While I was looking for answers that went beyond my qualifications to personal traits that he might verify I was lacking, and in spite of the fact that my world was crumbling, I did not share in enough depth for him to provide any insights or solutions to my dilemma. He spoke more about the persons doing the interviews and their inability to see me for my worth.*

For many years I placed blame onto the other person throughout most of my interpersonal struggles. It was not until I was without a job and could not find another that I had no choice but to accept that part of my struggles of connecting to others had more to do with me than with others. Manning (2014) writes, “[recently] on the cognitive front, studies [have] begun to explore the impacts of coming out on an individual level as they related to others” (pp. 34–35). It makes sense that now I am unable to live my former masked life with one foot in and one foot outside the closet. I see that my struggles to come out in a relational sense stem from the fact that I never came to understand my sexual orientation in a personal sense.

### **Coming Out in Personal Sense**

*The closeted, as captives, suffer such profound psychological trauma that they develop a relationship to their closets similar to that of hostages to their captors; they defend them – lulled*

*into a false sense of security and blind to the trauma they experience – and are – threatened by those who are out. (p. xxii)*

*Michelangelo Signorile, Queer in America: Sex, the Media, and the Closets of Power, 2003*

I believe I do not know what it means to come out in a personal sense because of how I came to understand my sexual orientation. Even though experiences from a societal and relational perspective led me towards the decision to come out, they could bring me only so far into the coming out process because they were external to my being. Adams (2011) writes: “The closet functions as a perpetual, constitutive metaphor that prohibits an LGBTQ person from living as an out person everywhere” (p. 8). The journey leading to my decision to come out has been complicated because some of the masks and costumes that I have worn throughout my life have had less to do with my sexual orientation and more to do with the dominant and influential nature of a heterosexist culture. I did not realize how my willingness to sell my soul for a job in the field of education was linked to my willingness to hide my sexual orientation in exchange for social acceptance.

To come out in a personal sense is especially challenging, because so far I have not been able to come out and admit publicly that I am gay. While I had coming out experiences from a societal perspective by becoming involved in Toronto’s LGBTQ community, I began to see how, with that involvement, I was losing my life of living in the closet. While interviewing individuals from the LGBTQ community for the gay magazine I contributed to provided a pathway to celebrate their authenticity, I had deceived myself into thinking that my involvement was about my coming out from a societal perspective. I could not see how I needed to share my own story personally as a gay man in that magazine. Even though I had overcome my fears and anxieties of being associated with the LGBTQ community, I could not make my gay identity visible because

of those same fears and anxieties. This position that I found myself in represented a pivotal turning point in my life, where I began believing the lies I told others about myself. I had convinced myself into thinking I had come out of the closet, when, in fact, I had gone nowhere. I think of the following quote by Palmer (2004):

Live behind a wall long enough, and the true self you tried to hide from the world disappears from your own view! The wall itself and the world outside it become all that you know. Eventually, you even forget that the wall is there – and that hidden behind it is something called “you.” (pp. 43–44)

I now understand that the journey of coming out in a personal sense is far-reaching and will be something that I strive towards throughout my entire life. At this juncture I recognize Rhoads’s (1995) words: “Because most people in our society assume others to be heterosexual, coming out is a never-ending process” (p. 72).

### **Conclusion**

Ending this chapter, I believe I have provided the background to my story and insights into the complicated world of the coming out process. The justification for my study is embedded in my desire to begin to come out so that I can include my sexuality in an open way as an aspect of who I am.

In Chapter Two, I move from setting the stage for the reader to describing the methodology and methods I use to conduct my research, and the framework I employ to share my data.

## CHAPTER TWO: METHODOLOGY, METHOD, AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

*Therefore, difficult as it may be to tell a story, the more difficult but important task is the retelling of stories that allow for growth and change. We imagine, therefore, that in the construction of narratives of experience, there is a reflexive relationship between living a life story, telling a life story, retelling a life story, and reliving a life story. (p. 71)*

*Clandinin & Connelly, Narrative Inquiry, Experience and Story in Qualitative Research, 2000*

In this chapter I describe the methodology and methods I use to gather and share my research data and I touch on aspects of qualitative research that apply to my study, such as ethical considerations and narrative knowing in postmodern times.

### **Narrative Knowing in the Postmodern World**

The postmodern world of today allows the conversation around the development of curriculum and the research that supports it to be socially constructed. As Slattery (1995) notes, “[in a postmodern context] knowledge will be understood as reflecting human interests, values and actions that are socially constructed” (p. 36). Recognizing how identity varies from one person to the next suggests that if we come to know ourselves individually, we will be able to complicate the conversation (Pinar, 2011) between students and teachers in the construction of curriculum away from one that is solely teacher directed. As Pinar writes, “curriculum conceived as a verb—*currere*—privileges the concept of the individual in curriculum studies” (p. 2). Slattery elaborates further, writing that “postmodern curriculum will encourage autobiographical reflection, narrative inquiry, revisionist interpretation, and contextual understanding” (p. 36).

I recognize postmodern curriculum as one of the defining characteristics of a sustainable education, and I believe that developing my research in a constructivist manner ensures a greater likelihood that education conceived as all of life’s experience (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988) will

remain relevant and meaningful for me because it draws directly from my own unique lived experience.

In curriculum development in the West over the last few decades there has been a shift toward the postmodern, which has meant stepping into an era of uncertainty and change, and this shift warrants considering alternative ways of interrogating the relevance and applicability of many aspects of qualitative research, including narrative research. As Hargreaves (1994) illustrates:

Even narrative-knowing itself, as something which seeks to understand and articulate the allegedly inherent “narrative unities” that make up people’s lives, has been subjected to vigorous criticism on the grounds that people’s lives and biographies are characterized as much by inconsistency, contradiction and fragmentation as they are by any purported unity. (pp. 56–57)

I know that the research I am undertaking in this dissertation would not be possible without stepping into a postmodern context where I can open myself to my own storied experience in a metacognitive way and share what I find there with others. I have chosen narrative inquiry self-study as my methodology because writing autobiographically about events and situations I have experienced in narrative form offers me a way to construct new knowledge from the past; I believe it can provide me with a pathway to uncover what I have hidden from others—being gay—and myself, as I begin to step out of a closeted life that no longer provides me with the comfort I once found there.

### **Narrative Methodology and My Narrative Framework**

As Clandinin (2013) writes, “Narrative inquiry is an approach to the study of human lives conceived as a way of honouring lived experience as a source of important knowledge and

understanding” (p. 17). While individual experience is central to narrative methodology, Clandinin writes that narrative inquiry “is also an exploration of the social, cultural, familial, linguistic, and institutional narratives within which individuals’ experiences were, and are, constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted” (p. 18). Perhaps more simply put, Clandinin says, “Narrative inquiry is a way of understanding experience” (p. 17).

Historically, sharing stories with one another is one of the most important rituals for us as humans, and there are many dynamics that come into play when conducting an inquiry that involves story. While some of our stories are handed down from one generation to the next, others are created from our day-to-day experiences. When we internalize what a particular experience means for us, we attempt to make sense of that experience. Dewey (1938) speaks to the influence of lived experience when he states that “the principle of continuity of experience means that every experience both takes up something from those which have come before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after” (p. 35). In conducting this narrative self-study, I gain a deeper understanding of how experiences from my past influence experiences unfolding in the present, as well as those that have yet to occur in the future. In my life so far, much as Shields (2005) explains about herself in the past: “I had never viewed my own stories critically, and so had missed the meaning they held for me in the present. I found myself in the midst of a life of ‘issuing communiqués,’ and realized that I could not change the way I related to others without first relating to myself” (p. 186).

Stories are temporal because we can interpret experiences from the past in the present, and because experiences from the past and present influence the future. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) illustrate their narrative framework by describing how an inquiry simultaneously moves in four different directions:



[There are] four directions in any inquiry: inward and outward, backward and forward. By inward, we mean toward the internal conditions, such as feelings, hopes, aesthetic reactions, and moral dispositions. By outward, we mean toward the existential conditions, that is, the environment. By backward and forward, we refer to temporality—past, present, and future. (p. 50)

Because of our ability to remember particular events and situations in the past, our stories become temporal in nature. Since we are able to move across time in our storying, we are able to consider ways that the past plays a part in subsequent events and situations we encounter. By reflecting on my past in this inquiry, I engage in a process of simultaneously looking inward to my own experience and outward to others to make meaning of my experiences. Dewey (1938) describes this view as “the situation,” and asserts that the personal and the social go together, as one cannot exist without the other. For example, an innate drive to establish a sense of community has threaded itself through much of my life. As I move through time and critically reflect upon experiences from my past, I simultaneously look inward and outward to try to gain a deeper understanding of this drive.

It is important to recognize that making new meaning by critically reflecting upon past experience comes at the expense of certainty. Clandinin and Connelly (1991) make this distinction: “Meaning and certainty tend to be inversely related in social inquiry so conceived. Deliberation and reflection are methods for charting a meaningful though uncertain course in social affairs” (p. 263). Even though uncertainty is an inevitable by-product of conducting personal experience research, the chance of misinterpreting what an experience means for a particular individual is reduced in such research. According to Polkinghorne (1988), “despite the fact that there can be no certainty, an intersubjective consensus minimizes the likelihood of

arbitrariness or even outright falsity in interpretation” (p. 116). The way such things as time, place, and historical background come together with such uniqueness when we tell our stories to ourselves or to others suggests the many different ways of living in this world.

### **Research Methods**

I use the following six research methods as I transform my past experiences into field text to be reconstructed into present-day research text: (a) rereading and rethinking autobiographical writing from coursework throughout my graduate years of study; (b) rereading and rethinking scholarly writing that has informed my graduate studies; (c) engaging in and reflecting on conversations with my supervisor and doctoral colleagues; (d) journal writing, and writing stories of experience; (e) including artefacts such as a Chronicle of Experience from a doctoral course, a pamphlet, and snapshots of experience. Clandinin and Connelly (1994) explain: “Some documents that became field texts may have been created prior to the inquiry, or even during the inquiry but for a different purpose” (p. 419). One example of choosing such artefacts came from an elective course I took during my doctoral program where I created a chronicle of my life’s experiences. I use this project now to build upon what I created then to help me establish a beginning point to organize stories of events and situations that I want to explore in this inquiry. Iannacci (2007) explains that “reconceptualization is realized through a process of construction, deconstruction and re-construction” (p. 57). Engaging in a process of continual interpretation supports me as I uncover additional layers of complexity regarding the dialectical relationship between my social context and the construction of my Self.

### **Internal Conditions**

While constructing field text from an experience captures my voice as the participant, the conversion of field text into research text requires that, as researcher, I carefully consider what

Clandinin and Connelly (1994) call the “internal conditions” of “voice and signature” (pp. 423–424). Clandinin and Connelly illustrate the challenging nature of establishing a balance between participant voice and researcher voice as follows:

This struggle for research voice is captured by the analogy of living on a knife edge as one struggles to express one’s own voice in the midst of an inquiry designed to capture the participants’ experience and represent their voices, all the while attempting to create a research text that will speak to, and reflect upon the audiences’ voices. (p. 423)

Not only does an inquiry harness the experience and voice of the participant, it must also speak to an audience so as to “foster reflection, storying, and restorying for readers” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1991, p. 27). In order for the voice of the researcher to be heard, the conversion of field text into research text requires delicacy in the way the researcher presents his interpretation of past experience in present-day form. Clandinin and Connelly explain how the signature of the researcher produces an identity and reputation in the research community and warn that “too vivid a signature runs the risk of obscuring the field and its participants: too subtle a signature runs the risk of the deception that the research text speaks from the point of view of the participant” (p. 424). As I am both researcher and participant in my study, I must remain attentive to these words as I story my experience and construct my research text.

### **Existential Conditions**

While this research is a self-study narrative inquiry, it cannot be positioned as a purely idiosyncratic endeavour; minimizing or disregarding important elements that provide context to this inquiry can prevent field text from transitioning into research text. I guard against the therapeutic aspects of a self-study overshadowing or silencing altogether my voice as researcher, for as Clandinin and Connelly (1994) write, “in research our responsibility goes beyond those

with whom we work [as participants] to a larger field and research community” (p. 424).

Continually noting how field text plays out in a social context while conducting a self-study is a much more natural process than one would initially presume. Conle (2000) comments, “seemingly idiosyncratic conditions, it turned out, were not idiosyncratic at all, but were embedded in socio-cultural contexts” (p. 207).

Even though conducting a narrative self-study is about creating an epistemology and ontology of my own, I envision a co-constructed text between the audience and myself emerging, as I understand that we each interpret experience based on our own unique past experience. Dunlop (2001) illustrates what I am trying to convey: “The reader fills the gaps with imagination, as does the writer” (p. 12). Reframing difference from a paradoxical perspective assumes that humans are inherently composed of qualities and preferences that are not always similar to one another. I consider ways that other individuals have in some way, shape, or form dealt with difference. As Tejada, Espinoza, and Gutierrez (2003) write:

To reduce the numbing sense of divisiveness permeating the public sphere of education requires the solidarity of a community of difference rather than a simple celebration of a community of differences perceived to exist, more or less, independently of each other as the multiple sites of isolated or marginalized subjectivities. (p. 3)

Along with engaging in this work to release myself from living a closeted life, I write to provide a connection between my narrative and the personal experiences of readers. Clandinin and Connelly (1994) write about this transcendence of individual borders: “Personal experience research is a form of public inquiry that has the potential for transcending the specialties of research in particular subject fields” (p. 425). Rather than merely speaking to an audience through field text, converting field text to research text can support a personal connection to an

inquiry. As Conle (2000) writes, “it is not only the writer who gets drawn personally into the inquiry. Reading and listening to stories of experience involves the audience in an aesthetic way” (p. 208).

### **Rigour and Trustworthiness**

As I reflect upon ethical issues to attend to in my study, I think of the concepts of validity and reliability as they pertain to my work. I turn to the book *Naturalistic Inquiry*, by Lincoln and Guba (1985), as their text has provided a touchstone for qualitative researchers over many years. The publication of this distinguished text has been important in improving the credibility of qualitative research. As Schwandt (2007) writes of Lincoln and Guba’s work:

For those of us who have, in the past twenty years, subsequently wrestled with the problem of the nature and justification of interpretations, their work has remained a touchstone for both disagreement on the part of some scholars and elaboration and extension on the part of others in many fields of study. (p. 12)

I recognize that the parallel validity criteria established by Lincoln and Guba emerged from positivism; however, they managed to create qualitative axioms that shifted the nature of validity in research that is interpretive in nature. Firestone (1987) states, “quantitative research is based on a positivist philosophy which assumes that there are social facts with an objective reality apart from the beliefs of individuals” (p. 16). Lincoln and Guba “turned the story” (Creswell, 2018) toward qualitative, subjective interpretations of what constitutes validity, offering parallels to qualitative researchers. The benefit of utilizing parallel validity criteria is illustrated by Whittemore, Chase, & Mandle (2001) who state, “Creativity must be preserved within qualitative research, but not at the expense of the quality of the science” (p. 526). Lincoln and Guba (2007), write:

We have suggested *credibility* as an analog to internal validity, *transferability* as an analog to external validity, *dependability* as an analog to reliability, and *confirmability* as an analog to objectivity. We shall refer to these criteria as *criteria of trustworthiness* (itself a parallel to the term *rigor*). (p. 18)

I believe that creativity and rigour should be embraced and held in balance when conducting research in any qualitative genre. Using axioms, Lincoln and Guba (1986) have pointed out their applicability when developing validity criteria:

While much remains to be learned about the feasibility and utility of these parallel criteria, there can be little doubt that they represent a substantial advance in thinking about the rigor issue. Nevertheless, there are some major difficulties with them that call out for their augmentation with new criteria rooted in naturalism rather than simply paralleling those rooted in positivism. (p. 19)

For me, using criteria rooted in naturalism embraces the value of establishing rigour, as well as ensuring ample levels of creative licence when conducting a narrative inquiry. Lincoln and Guba outline the theoretical underpinnings of criteria that are rooted in naturalism that I embrace:

- The axiom concerned with the nature of reality asserts that there is no single reality on which inquiry may converge, but rather there are multiple realities that are socially constructed, and that, when known more fully, tend to produce diverging inquiry. (p. 17)
- The axiom concerned with the nature of “truth” statements demands that inquirers abandon the assumption that enduring, context-free truth statements—generalizations—can and should be sought. (p. 17)

- The axiom concerned with the explanation of action asserts, contrary to the conventional assumption of causality, that action is explainable only in terms of multiple interacting factors, events, and processes that give shape to it and are part of it. (p. 17)
- The axiom concerned with the nature of the inquirer-respondent relationship rejects the notion that an inquirer can maintain an objective distance from the phenomena (including human behavior) being studied, suggesting instead that the relationship is one of mutual and simultaneous influence. (p. 17)
- The axiom concerned with the role of values in inquiry asserts that far from being value-free, inquiry is value-bound in a number of ways. (p. 17)

Examining parallel validity criteria suggests that it is a process that must be completed individually and cannot be systematically established. Iannacci (2007) illustrates this process in his doctoral work:

Although I have utilized a combined set of criteria to develop the validity of my own research, I have also critically examined their effectiveness and limitations. This is necessary since any determined set of criteria established in the design of research may not in fact lead to a better understanding of what 'valid' narrative inquiry might look like or how it may be fostered. (p. 62)

Not only does a process of interrogating criteria provide an opportunity to discard criteria that might lessen the value of what I am trying to accomplish in my study, it also provides me as researcher with the authority to establish credibility that is authentic to the direction of narrative research.

### **Self-Study and the Issue of Trustworthiness**

In a landmark piece “The Researcher Himself” which addresses the “inner drama” of (re)search, Mooney (1957) writes:

Research is a personal venture which, quite aside from its social benefits, is worth doing for its direct contribution to one's own self-realization. It can be taken as a way of meeting life with the maximum of stops open to get out of experience its most poignant significance. (as cited in Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001, p. 13)

While I do focus on my own coming out journey in this research and the self-realization that comes with writing such a text, I am concerned with issues of trustworthiness because I understand that my work as a doctoral candidate is to add to the social/educational, cultural realm beyond myself in this academic work. Mishler (1990) suggests the importance of “a process through which a community of researchers evaluates the trustworthiness of a particular study as the basis for their own work” (p. 415). To this end, I turn to a number of the points noted by Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) that offer guidelines that I can follow for trustworthiness in self-study autobiographical research. While they offer 14 points, I consider the following five in particular as the most central to my narrative inquiry self-study research:

- Autobiographical self-studies should ring true and enable connection.
- Self-studies should promote insight and interpretation.
- Autobiographical self-study research must engage history forthrightly and the author must take an honest stand.
- The autobiographical self-study researcher has an ineluctable obligation to seek to improve the learning situation not only for the self but for the other.



- Quality autobiographical self-studies offer fresh perspectives on established truths. In self-study autobiography there is always a tension between the self and the self in action in relation to the other. (pp. 16–18)

I keep these guidelines in mind as I engage in my research process.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have set the stage for my self-study research in terms of methodology and methods. I have touched on how I will attend to ethical issues such as validity and rigor in the texts I write. I am mindful that as Connelly and Clandinin (1990) write, “Stories function as arguments in which we learn something essentially human by understanding an actual life...as lived” (p. 8). For arguments to be solid, they must aim to be rigorous and truthful. My intention is to represent my actual life as I delve into the stories that comprise the data for my study.

I move now to Chapter Three, where I engage in writing field texts that I reconstruct as research texts as I move backward and forward in time, and inward and outward, sharing my present-day interpretation of stories I have live in the past. I introduce the reader to my closet and the costumes and masks that I have kept there as a means of both hiding my sexual identity and using to try to fit in to a heterosexist culture.

## **CHAPTER THREE: EXAMINING THE CONTENTS OF MY CLOSET: MASKS AND SUITS, BACKPACKS AND TAGS: A SERIES OF COVER STORIES**

*The lie, the perfect lie, about people whom we know, about the relations that we have had with them, about our motive for some action, a motive which we express in totally different terms, the lie as to what we are, whom we love, what we feel with regard to the person who loves us and believes that she has fashioned us in her own image because she keeps on kissing us morning, noon and night, that lie is one of the only things in the world that can open a window for us upon what is novel, unknown, that can awaken in us sleeping senses to the contemplation of universes that otherwise we should never have known. (pp. 622–623)*

*Marcel Proust, Remembrance of Things Past, 2006*

In this chapter, I explore the contents of my closet by focusing on the masks and costumes that I have worn in my attempts to belong in a variety of social and professional communities where I thought I could excel while concealing my gay identity. I describe instances from my past where people were able to see through a mask or costume that I thought was impenetrable, and I share my sense of confinement after many years of amassing the contents I had to choose from as I opened my closet door every day.

### **Describing My Closet and Its Contents**

Metaphorically, if you were to open my closet door, you would be opening a door to my life. It is possible to track my life experiences by reviewing what I have hanging in my closet. For example, you would find neat rows of hangers holding the athletic suits I have worn to excel at skiing and working out at the gym. You would find business suits and casual jackets that I have worn for interviews and to work at occupations in banking and teaching. You would find dress shirts, casual shirts, and pants ready for any circumstance to shape my day. My backpack,

which has been full of academic books for many courses and degrees, hangs on the inside of the door, and pictures I have saved hang on the walls above my clothing. On the far wall is a full-length mirror that enables me to see that many of these costumes no longer fit or are not of use in the life I lead today.

I know that to move into an authentic life, one that dispenses with the cover stories that these costumes represent, I have to pack a few items that hold meaning, find a way to close the door and leave the closet behind. I believe that sharing the stories in this chapter will be integral for learning how to pack and clean away the inauthentic aspects of my existence in the closet that have been the driving force behind living a life of fragmentation.

Earlier in my doctoral journey, I constructed a chronicle of life experience that marked specific times and places on a timeline where seminal events took place. Working from that assignment in this study, I have chosen three different periods in my life that cross time and situation to illustrate the initial construction of my closet. I foreground my naiveté at doing so, and describe how gradually, that closet became full of costumes and masks that I thought provided safety and security for my identity to remain secret from others. Several themes are visible in these stories that I have only become aware of in this dissertation process, as I have engaged in many conversations with my supervisor. In this chapter, I reflect on three particular stories, two of which were initially written as assignments during my master's degree, and I reconstruct them now to highlight the coverings, costumes and masks that they represent in my life in the closet.

Following Clandinin and Connelly (1994, 2000), I call the story segments I have previously written and the description of initial events or situations my *field text*, and my reconstruction of the meaning I find in each story in the present, my *research text*. My field text

is comprised of my own autobiographical writing, which Clandinin and Connelly (2000) say “is a way to write about the whole context of a life” (p. 101). In the research text, with the help of the method of conversations with my thesis supervisor, I reconstruct a new interpretation of my previous experience, emphasizing what I see now in the field text stories that can help me make meaning in the present and can take me into the future with new perspectives that I can use every day.

Prior to beginning my first story, I offer two snapshots that reflect upon ways I simultaneously protected myself and isolated myself up to the age of 11 as a defense against the ridicule of my peers.

#### **Snapshot: Hiding In Plain Sight**

*Because I was alienated throughout my years in elementary school, I became quite resourceful in my ability to remain hidden, out of sight of those who bullied me. For example, I walked with the parents who volunteered to watch over students during morning, lunch, and afternoon recess, or with the “lunch lady,” who provided me with an escape from being taunted by peers. During my seventh and eighth grade, though, I had to find a new way to hide from the bullies who continued to harass me. Then, although students were not allowed in the library except in class time, I sought shelter by sneaking into the school library during recess and noon hour. I found facing detention a much easier choice than facing peers who continued to ridicule and humiliate me for being gay.*

At home during these elementary years, I kept to myself, finding tasks to enjoy alone, as the following snapshot illustrates.

#### **Snapshot: Looking Back on the Sandbox**

*As soon as early spring hit, I spent from morning to night in the sandbox in my backyard. During this time, I constructed a recreation of the town and street where I lived growing up. With sand still partially frozen from winter, I began by constructing the street I lived on, and by midsummer my town was complete. From that point onward, I would spend time maintaining the roads and structures in the sandbox. I never really played in the town and would get upset if my brothers tried to build something else in the sandbox. Unlike the other kids who played in sandboxes with cars and trucks, I would sit quietly and admire my work.*

*I remember how my imagination came alive in the hours I spent playing in the backyard. Eventually, I would find myself building a cabin during the summer months, and in the winter, instead of a cabin that I built with the leftover material from previous construction projects I used the snow to build something similar. With a warm snowsuit and a good pair of gloves, I would often play outside until my parents called me in for bed.*

**Field Text: Story 1: Covering the pain of rejection: Groundskeeping on Lynwood Drive**

I began working around the yard at our family home on Lynwood Drive the summer following grade 7, when I found myself much more aware of the limits of my choices in community activities after being bullied throughout seventh grade. With nowhere else to hide from the taunting of peers, I found myself retreating to my yard as a means of trying to distance myself from the pain of being a social outcast.

Since I was not interested in video games like my older brother and did not have athletic ability like my younger brother, I found myself with nowhere to go but outside in the yard. That summer I took on a role that has followed me to the present in my family story; I became a groundskeeper, spending countless hours trying to make our yard look like every other yard on our street. As I wrote in a paper during my M. Ed, “I was driven to make our yard look exactly

the same as everyone else's on our street. I became more and more devoted to making our yard look like every other house on the block. All I had to do was make the grass green, keep the yard clear of sports paraphernalia, wash and seal the driveway, clean the pool, wash and wax the cars, and I also dusted and vacuumed the house." I spent my days in this way while my parents were at work. I persisted in these tasks, even though not one family member seemed to share my philosophy of trying to make our yard like everyone else's in the neighbourhood.

I remember running to the back of the house, hiding when people passed by, feeling embarrassed, wondering if they thought spending my time alone perfecting our yard was somehow wrong. I thought that by hiding in this way, my work was not being seen by anyone. However, comfort came in the form of neighbours' complimenting my work to my parents, who relayed messages that gave me the confidence to remain in the front yard when people passed by. These positive messages also fuelled my drive for perfection; it became important for me not to just get the jobs done as neighbours' yards were done, but to have the perfect yard, surpassing every other home on the block.

While I was busy creating distance between my peers and myself, I was also revelling in the accolades of the grownups who saw my work. Receiving praise was not something I was used to in my life. I realize as I write that I also enjoyed the freedom I experienced of being outside by myself, without criticism, attending to the weather and the green of the grass and trees.

### **Research Text: A Groundskeeper's Costume**

Looking back now, I think that the groundskeeping role that I began that summer following grade 7, which persisted over many of the following summers, provided both the cornerstone for the building of my closet and the first costume I kept in it. While those garments,

which really were only shorts, tee shirts, rubber boots, and a jacket, provided safety from bullying, I felt protected on Lynwood Drive. Not only did I take pride in these duties, but I also knew that I was safe as the kids my own age as well adults would never cross into our yard to pick on me.

While there is value in recognizing that hiding in the backyard had to do with protecting something that I enjoyed from being remarked on by critical others, I began to see that my desire to hide had its origins in being a social outcast at school. Reconstructing my experience now, I see that by absenting myself from others I would have been unable to begin the process of correcting what Mezirow (1990) describes as the “presuppositions on which [my] beliefs have been built” (p. 1). Only now am I able to see how this experience instilled a life-long belief in me that there is something wrong with interests and activities that come from within.

In the present, I see the correlation between the time I spent isolating myself in the yard and the trauma associated with being socially cast out by my peer group at school. I also recognize the ways that this correlation represents the impetus for hiding my sexual orientation. While I have spent most of my time living a closeted life, the process of reconstructing this early experience has been especially difficult because hiding my gay identity for so many years placed a strong emphasis on my outward gaze and inhibited my ability to look inward when reflecting on my own life. While I knew I was gay prior to taking on the role of groundskeeper, I never thought to ask myself how the groundskeeping role caused further disconnection between me and family and community members. I was unaware that this role was causing any disconnection in the first place. I suspect that I did not have the strength or insight to name my suffering at school because of how young I was at the time.

I see too that the way I focused on family members throughout this reconstruction indicates how I have used others as a means of keeping myself distracted from understanding my gay identity with greater depth. Instead of pondering what I might have missed in others' stories, I made assumptions about my own story without knowing I was doing so, which resulted in rendering them partial or inaccurate. In the present, I think I was desperate for those gold stars that others received for their work at school—not being able to achieve that status, my gold stars were achieved in my yard where I excelled at my job and received the praise I hungered for from others. I see that striving for perfection became a life-long habit then; overachieving became my desire in the roles I adopted, which allowed me to both hide behind various masks acceptable in the straight world and receive praise for my pursuit of excellence.

Shields (2005) writes: “I could not change the way I related to others without first relating to myself” (p. 186). Her words provide me with a window to see, as she refers to it, “anew” (Shields, 1997). As a result, I see that the role I once thought occupied a single costume in my closet was not the case; by moving more deeply into the reconstruction of meaning process, I can see how I used this role as a means of donning other masks as a way of creating the illusion that I was achieving social acceptance.

While the role of groundskeeper represented a costume that kept people at bay, I see now that I collected another type of covering, a mask that has remained hidden until now: the mask of perfection. Next to dusting and vacuuming the house for my mother, I was known in my neighbourhood for doing a perfect job of washing and waxing my parents' vehicles. I found myself taking pictures of the things that I excelled at. I posted anything and everything that provided external validation of my successes. In essence, the pictures helped to illustrate why my life had value. Now, attending to the pictures that I have hung in my closet, I observed something



peculiar about all of them. While in one picture the grass is greener than green, in another, the cars gleam with shiniest of shines, I can see how the mask of perfection was a way of deceiving myself into thinking that working to the point of excellence was related to behaving with integrity—which might gain me social acceptance.

Even then, there was something else about the pictures hanging on the wall. By recognizing that I incorporated masks of invisibility while in the closet, I can see another mask with such certainty—it would have remained hidden indefinitely if it were not for re-examining the picture of how I cleaned the house as part of this yard-keeping story. My mother gave me such praise—my mask of seeking approval—insisting that my father pay me for completing the chores with such proficiency.

Since the groundskeeping costume has been hung in my closet the longest, I could not see how this role has impacted my whole life because I began using it to hide behind from such a young age. I could not recognize how this role is akin to what Brookfield (1995) means when he writes of the struggle to decipher externally woven experiences from those that “spring from [my] own experiences” (p. 45). Recognizing that at the heart of living behind the role of groundskeeper, the psychological turmoil of experiencing rejection for my sexual orientation suggests how I had confused this role with my true self. It is clear to me now that my pursuit of gaining social acceptance began here in my yard, before I had unknowingly used this role as a covering for myself. I was too young to understand how the role of groundskeeper was preventing me from speaking in a voice that Greene (1988) describes as “my own,” because I wore this costume from such a young age that it did not feel as though I were wearing a costume at all. With this newly found revelation, my thinking has deepened. In Chapter One, I shared: “In the present, the face I see before me is not easy to recognize because of the many disguises that I

have used over the years as a means of gaining social acceptance.” Now, I begin to see beneath the disguises and can name them with some clarity.

In the present, I still find myself reaching into my closet and grabbing the clothing to do yard work for my mother. Earlier in this self-study process, I made the mistake of thinking that the role of groundskeeper was in the past. I did not see that the groundskeeping role still plays an influential part in my personality and behavioural traits. Even as the reconstruction of this story represents my journey into self-authorship, I can see how the mask of praise is still visible; for example, I am naturally inclined to seek the validation of my thesis supervisor. I can see that I have never hung up the role of groundskeeper in a permanent sense and, as a consequence, my identity has been woven with the characteristics I have lived in that role. I see I have come to depend upon an identity that is too heavily anchored in an external sense, giving credence to what Bruner (1997) means when he says that: “But it may well be that there is a limit to how much world change any given Self can absorb without undergoing a pathological crisis” (p. 146). Making this distinction, I am beginning to identify how much of a stronghold my role of groundskeeper has had on my life and how it continues to keep me from speaking in a voice of my own.

### **Shifting Walls, Changing Shape**

As I move to a story about another covering that I have hung in my closet over many years, I am aware that the space I have always counted on to feel safe and away from harm is beginning to feel more and more precarious. In my closet now, the ceiling feels much higher than I once thought and the walls are much wider apart. I realize that along with my costumes and masks, the pictures I have hung of myself completing tasks that I have used to reassure me of my gold star status really were beacons beckoning me to see that I was living an imposter syndrome

(Brookfield, 1995) life—the mirror at the end of my closet reflected only what I wanted to see. I realize the depth and degree I have gone to in order to build my closet as a kind of fortress for my own well-being, and I recognize the way the masks of praise and perfection thread themselves throughout many of my past experiences. I see that the act of reconstruction gives credence to Marcel Proust’s (2006) notion that, “the real art of discovery consists not in finding new lands, but in seeing with new eyes” (as cited in Barth, 2002, p. 66).

**Field Text: Story 2: Describing the ski hill: A place where I masked my identity**

I am told that the ski hill where I grew up had humble beginnings, but during the 1980s it gained such popularity with many from the town that the parking lots needed to be expanded, lifts needed to be updated to adequately handle the crowds, and seating space in the main chalet was in dire need of an expansion. Cars were often lined along the one-kilometer road leading out to the highway. It was a special time where night skiing was offered four out of seven nights each week and special events brought crowds for fun and excitement. The days at the hill felt magical because annual events became rituals, and the private chalets brought a sense of community where socializing continued well after the lights to ski at night were turned off.

There was a tradition of offering a banquet at the end of every season, where stories were shared from the early years. One special story I remember was the involvement of a local family doctor as instrumental to the growth of the hill. Without Dr. Kreiner, the ski hill might never have gotten off the ground. That era of the ski hill was very special because Dr. Kreiner’s two daughters ended up skiing in the winter Olympic games in Innsbruck, Austria.

I learned to ski during the florescence and polyester of the ‘90s. This time was so special to me. It was a time when I carried my packed lunches from home in my pocket so that I could eat at the top of the cliffs all along the east side of the hill. Once I learned how to fasten my poles

atop of the bindings, a makeshift seat was available to devour a pop or two and a few sandwiches, which made for a more picturesque lunch than sitting in an overcrowded chalet. It was a time when local ski resorts in Ontario were experiencing their biggest boom, second only to their inception in Canada's post-World War II economy. From my first season on snow to my third, a snowmaking system was installed and the main ski chalet rebuilt. With a complete facelift to the hill, I no longer needed rock skis, nor did my feet need a rest from the T-bar lifts.

Though it was many years ago now, I remember the feeling of frustration I felt on my first day of skiing, which was the same feeling I always had before giving up on something. Initially, I found myself putting more effort into falling than trying to stay upright while taking the ski lift up to the top of the hill. Despite this beginning, I did make it the top of the hill just before lunch, and by midafternoon I was making my way up and down the hill without falling.

I remember feeling so excited that I was able to learn how to ski. I couldn't wait to tell everyone at home and at school about it. As a result of my enthusiasm, my parents got me a season pass so that I could be at the hill as often as I wanted during the winter months.

I remember how the days and nights I spent out at the hill represented an escape from my everyday reality at home and at school. Little did I know then that my skiing story signified place—a place where I could cover painful memories of rejection by classmates, a place where I could establish a role that provided me with a sanctuary where I could don a mask and costume that was accepted by others, where I could hide in plain sight.

I do not think I have another story with the same dynamics as my skiing story because I cannot name another experience that spans more time in my life. Skiing has been with me through the years of being bullied during my adolescence, my intermediate and secondary years of study, and throughout the many years I have lived in the closet. My skiing has followed my

trajectory so closely that most of my seminal stories are linked to my experiences associated with learning to ski.

### **Excerpts From a Master's Course Assignment (First Version: 2009)**

When I look back on my first attempt to share my skiing story with my Master's colleagues, I see that I was a long way from engaging in a process of coming out. What I wrote then was a long, descriptive account of my time skiing and the freedom I felt on my days at the ski hill. I am including excerpts from that version here to display what I understood about engaging in a narrative process then—I see now that I wanted to hold my audience's attention with an interesting story, but I also see that I offered little about what the skiing experience meant to me then, and the reasons why it did. I was able to share a “cover story” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995) that day, painting a picture of bright, cold days where I was in my element.

**Excerpt 1:** What I find most compelling about my story is how I seemed to just barely cling to survival in school, and yet out at the ski hill, my life seemed to come alive. I certainly did not need an alarm to get out of bed on the weekends. Before the sun was up, I was already out brushing the snow or scraping the ice off the car. Despite my father's many threats not to kick the garage door open, I would, without a second thought, give it a kick. I remember that even at eight o'clock in the morning and not a soul around, it was still not cool for an 11-year-old to wear gloves or a hat when loading a truck in the cold of winter. Until I smartened up, I loaded the ski equipment with my bare hands for most of my adolescent years.

**Excerpt 2:** At a distance of about 15 kilometres, taking approximately 18 minutes, we arrive at the hill. I jump out of the truck, slam the door closed, grab my skis and make my way to the chalet to put on my ski boots. There is a faint smell of diesel fuel in the air as the snow groomer is making its final rounds on the hill. Off in the distance you can hear a throttling sound

as the operator of the groomer shifts the gears and uses the hydraulic lift while manoeuvring up and down the hill. I was that boy in school that could barely look sideways, let alone find enough courage to make friends at recess, a complete contrast as I walk confidently into the main chalet waving to everyone. I am not thinking about how to act or worried about what other people are thinking.

**Excerpt 3:** My days at the hill represented an escape where I had the freedom to explore and the ability to lose myself in my thoughts. I loved to think as a child, not something that very many friends my age seemed to enjoy doing. While I was thinking about the different aspects of life, mostly everyone I knew was into anything except thinking. Just as at school my desk represented a sanctuary where I could be with myself, the ski hill represented that same disconnection from places where I could not connect to others. The dynamics associated with being part of a ski club, a racer for the local ski team, and later, a coach for the team and an instructor for the ski school turned out to be that place where friends provided that bridge to social interaction and development.

**Excerpt 4:** That was when it happened! I hadn't taken more than one run and a rush of adrenaline entered every part of my body. I felt I was connected to the hill like I was as a child. All my worries of balancing my studies with running the store completely melted away. The sky looked bluer, the snow like the icing on a cake, and the air as sweet as sugar. In that moment, everything faded away and yet everything seemed charged with vibrancy. I carved into the snow like teeth biting into ice cream, transitioning from one turn to the next as if I were gliding across a dance floor. As the sun collapsed off into the distance, the lights to ski at night made me feel as though I were on centre stage. It seemed as though every run represented a chapter, every turn a paragraph to an unread book that I had put down and been meaning to read for quite some time.

## Research Text: My Skiing Costume

**Though captivating, my skiing story did not come from my heart.** By underestimating the metacognitive depth I would need to dive into in order for learning to be, as Doll (1993) describes, as transformative in nature, I needed to move beyond composing a cover story to captivate the attention of an audience. After rereading my skiing story in the present, I can see how I used *thick description* (Geertz, 1973) to distract and deceive myself into thinking that I was constructing research text while pursuing my Master's degree. I can now see how the ridicule and humiliation of my younger years created internal injunctions of such strength (Mezirow, 1990) that I was willing at all costs to live a hidden life. My drive to conceal my sexual orientation was unwavering—I saw no issue with using anything and everything to conceal aspects of myself that were not socially acceptable to others. What began as a seemingly innocent costume at the ski hill became an elaborate attempt to conceal my sexuality—so elaborate, I could not admit that my attempt to prefabricate my identity was a lot more challenging than I experienced in my groundskeeper role.

In the present, I can see that after I had constructed a socially acceptable covering as downhill skier, I found myself entering the downhill ski-racing program, where the costume of expert skier became another tale working to reinforce and strengthen my life in the closet. I thought I had started with a clean slate at the ski hill away from my reputation of being gay at school. Once again, much as I did with caring for the grounds at home, I was not content to just ski: I had to push myself to be the most perfect and competitive skier I could be.

Through considering all the articles of clothing that are required for skiing, I can see that I exchanged the security and safety of working within the confines of my yard for a costume that provided a thick layer of protection against more than just the cold temperatures—it provided

protection against a strong and ever-present element of homophobia that I began to see filled far more than the hallways at school. Looking back, I can see that I was literally covered from head to toe in my ski suit, helmet, and boots—even my hands were covered in the gloves needed in the cold. In the years prior to joining the racing program, I never considered that my motivation to be seen wearing the most expensive ski suit at the hill had much to do with living life as a cover story.

**A retracing of the perimeter that houses my thinking.** By looking beyond the coverings and costumes that I used as a means of softening the hurt of being rejected, I see now that I constricted my vision so that I actually could not identify the origins of my stunted development. I understand that the long-term effects of living a closeted life have contributed to my lack of growth in an emotional and spiritual sense, and lacking development in those areas has left me struggling to come out in a personal and relational sense. In keeping with Vanier's (1998) illustration of becoming human as a journey of living our own lives first, I see that my skiing story signifies a seminal moment where I stopped living out my own story at the ski hill because living the cover story was so much more important to me.

In similar fashion, I could not face up to the reality that no matter the covering, the mask, or costume, the gay jokes that followed me to the hill were trying to signify something I was unwilling to accept—that regardless of how elaborate the façade may have been, I was not convincing enough to be seen as someone who was straight. By making this distinction in the present, I have come to recognize that I was in denial about what the gay jokes were suggesting I face up to about myself, which brought me further away from feeling as though I belonged in this world. Vanier (1998) argues that an integral element to feeling connected to humanity requires that we feel a sense of belonging amongst others.



**The only person I was fooling was myself: An uncloseted ‘Closet’ story.** My decision to include my skiing story in the chapter devoted to stories that I have lived and continue to live from inside the closet suggests to me now that the only person believing my fabricated story was myself. Regardless of my elaborate attempt to orchestrate an inauthentic life from a series of costumes and masks, none of it mattered because, in the end, my reputation for being gay re-emerged a few years after joining the ski team. I see now that allowing the hurt of being at the centre of everyone’s gay jokes caused me to run away from facing up to what the jokes were trying to say to me. I have had to look critically at the experience of being inundated with gay jokes to see that I was completely oblivious to the way these jokes comprised the unwritten language of innuendo. Just as the masks and costumes that I wore as a means of indirectly implying to others that I was straight, gay jokes were a way of conveying to me in an indirect way that my attempts at pulling the wool over everyone’s eyes did not convince anyone to think of me differently.

Looking back at those skiing years, I think that the hurt associated with all the gay jokes prevented me from taking what Shields (2005) describes as “making the meta-cognitive leap inward as part of the inquiry process” (p. 184). What began as a cover story with a positivist trajectory of certainty and continued towards what Clandinin and Connelly (1994) describe about inquiry as providing “a meaningful though uncertain course” (p. 263) kept me in a place where I failed to see that my focus on concealing my inner identity was hindering my pursuit of gaining social acceptance. The result was a toxic drive within causing me to lash out at those who hinted that I was the butt of a particular gay joke.

Sadly, I recognize how my insistence on being covered from head to toe in the most expensive ski wear provided an opportunity to wear a mask of being well off as a way of

justifying why I was not liked by anyone at school. I am only now beginning the process that Bateson (1993) defines as “discovering threads of continuity” between my life at school and at the ski hill. Bateson goes on to say, “You cannot adjust to change unless you can recognize some analogy between your old situation and your new situation” (p. 45). At that time, I could not see any similarity between previous situations and those I found myself living at the ski hill; I continued the charade of believing I could mask my gay identity.

In the reconstruction of my skiing story, I have now found myself in the description Atkinson (1995) provides that defines a good story, which he says “allows [us] to wrestle with [our] demons, dance with our angels, make plans with our inner guide, and, ultimately, connect with our soul” (p. 5).

### **Field Text: Story 3: Fifteen Years As A Post-secondary Student**

Next, I open the door to my closet to share my years as a postsecondary student. In doing so, I find myself walking past the first hook, where my groundskeeping costume is hung, and I take a moment to reflect upon the narrative threading of my life. My first and second stories revealed the origins and extent of my drive for perfection and praise in areas where I felt successful—traits that followed me into my postsecondary years. I find myself peering at the hook where the backpack I have used throughout my years as a postsecondary student hangs still. The wall above the hook where my pictures are hung is plastered with accolades that indicate my ability to succeed in an academic sense. I have saved stacks of assignments, which are piled on shelves below the hook in such a way that I can read the comments from professors at the end of particular assignments. There are a number of books piled in the corner that I have kept because they hold a considerable degree of sentimental value. As I look now, I think all these artefacts

provide evidence of my insatiable appetite for praise and validation, which seemed to only grow stronger during these academic years.

### **From College Diploma to Master's Degree: A New Costume in an Old Guise**

Following my years of angst and failure at high school, my first postsecondary experience took me to my local community college, where I enrolled in a diploma program in Accounting and Marketing in 2000. I was acutely aware that my peers viewed college as a place for the less intelligent, for those who had failed to gain academic success. I remember that instead of meeting new people from class and socializing, I developed the habit of crossing the street to the coffee shop while I waited for my next class because I did not want to be associated with those who, like me, attended college.

While at that time I had no idea that I was replicating a pattern where I both isolated myself and worked for perfection and external praise, I completed my College program with a perfect score—a 4.0 average—and I gave the valedictorian address at the graduation ceremony in 2003. However, from the misery of academic failure in high school to the glory of becoming a top academic achiever came a deep-seated fear of ever failing again in an educational setting. I carried this fear through a number of degrees once I entered the university system. I enrolled in a degree in Adult Education at Brock University in 2003, and following completion in 2005 I made a move to North Bay, Ontario to take a Bachelor of Business degree at Nipissing University from 2005 to 2007. While I did engage in part-time work managing a store during my years of continuous study, my hunger for continuing my success in an academic area where, much as in my skiing story, I had become comfortable, saw me enrolling in a Bachelor of Education degree in 2007 and a Masters of Education in 2008. Graduating in 2010, I had little

actual teaching experience and could not find a job in my chosen field in spite of sending out numerous resumes and sitting through a number of interviews.

### **Research Text: My Postsecondary Story**

**Uncovering fear as a driving force.** Through all these years, I never thought to consider the way my drive for excessive achievement became toxic, where my anxieties and fear associated with succeeding academically took over and prevented me from being able to consider elements other than the grade itself to be important. In the end, while I acquired the costume of potential teacher for job interviews, and my resume listed my past academic achievements and my ski coaching experience, my actual understanding of what comprised a teaching life was superficial—I had little substance of my own to offer—rather, I had adopted what I thought would be important and expected by others who would judge my competence. My costume was not enough to cover my reliance on the perspectives of academic others to answer questions that should have been spoken in a voice of my own. The fear of failure I had carried through all these years of study became front and centre in my life.

**The wildfire within.** In addition to recognizing that my postsecondary journey did not provide the academic covering that I thought it did, I have to confess that my choice to remain for so long in an academic setting also provided shelter from having to address my sexuality. I think now that part of my choice was an elaborate attempt to “un-gay” myself—I was not convinced that living a double life combining scholarship with sexual encounters would have been an option. Though it may sound outlandish to think I would ever be willing to shut the door to my closet and seal myself in permanently, I identified a pattern of disregarding my gay identity throughout the years that I have been in the role of postsecondary student. The disregard I showed for my sexual orientation throughout the first 10 years of my journey as a

postsecondary student illustrates the degree to which I was willing to mask my gay identity. I know now that fear—fear of not achieving top marks and fear of letting anyone know that I was gay—ruled my life. In the end, since I did not get a job for which I was willing to sell my soul, I can only ponder who I would have become or what I was willing to give up in return for permanent employment.

Only in the present am I able to recognize how my willingness to give up anything and everything in order to maintain my status as top student began after completing my first semester as a postsecondary student with a perfect grade point average. Feeling as though I was an academic, winning awards, diplomas and degrees became my reason for living. I remember the time that I would spend in my room and, just as I had done in my earlier years while playing in the sandbox, I would find myself sitting on the edge of my bed in awe that I was able to achieve so much academic success as a postsecondary student. Just as I found myself protecting all that I built in the sandbox, the same behaviour to protect and maintain my history of achieving academic success was the same. My postsecondary journey seemed endless in the way I structured the years and degrees. I could not see that my failure as a high school student was the guiding force behind many of the decisions that I have made, taking years of my adult life and spending them in academic settings.

### **Conclusion**

In the stories that comprise this chapter, I see that I was unaware of what would be lost as a result of living a cover story (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995), which ultimately, was the ability to speak in my own voice (Greene, 1988). I have come to recognize that over the years I was intent on seeking the approval of my family, my ski contemporaries and coach, and my professors and classmates rather than making sense of my identity as a gay man. Even though this revelation

comes with much sorrow, being able to reconstruct these experiences after a distance of several years between graduate degrees has provided an opportunity for me to see what was impossible at the time. Rather than trying to charm an audience as I did in my original skiing story, I know now that I can use my ability to write as a tool to uncover revelations about myself that can help change the course of my life. In narrative terms, as Clandinin (2013) writes, I see that “story...is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made meaningful” (p. 13). I also see as Clandinin and Connelly (1995) write, “Stories are not icons...but inquiries on which further inquiry takes place through their telling and through response to them” (p. 156). Sharing stories of experience provides an opportunity to “think again” (p. 156) about the past. Engaging in this process, I can see that my closet has been a place of constriction.

In Chapter Four, I focus on my initial steps to come out of the closet and I describe two situations that provided me with opportunities to name myself as gay. While that was my desire, in the end I found that I was unable to do so.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FIRST STEPS OUT OF THE CLOSET: STORIES THAT MOVE ME TOWARD A NEW BEGINNING

*I have been working to change the way I speak and write, to incorporate in the manner of telling a sense of place, of not just who I am in the present but where I am coming from, the multiple voices within me. (p. 146)*

*bell hooks, Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics, 1990*

In this chapter I share two stories that focus on my initial attempts to reveal aspects of my self as a gay individual. One is a coming out story where, for the first time in public, I take a step toward naming myself a gay man to my doctoral cohort. Another describes a trip I took to attend a conference in the desert where, once again, I could not quite name myself as gay. Looking back, I see that in these tales, I took a step away from my need for external praise and perfection that I was so desperate for in my stories in the previous chapter, but I was not yet prepared to leave the closet behind.

I begin with the first summer of my doctoral studies.

### **Field Text: Story 4: Sitting Around a Graduate Table: Summer 2012**

I do not think I will ever forget the way it felt to walk outside my closet without having to orchestrate my life first by choosing a mask or costume, as I had grown accustomed to throughout my life. With exuberance I could not name using words, my experience of (almost) coming out for the first time is a story that I hold deeply within—it illuminates my soul and sparks my desire to move forward living my life in my own skin.

On the first warm July day of my doctoral studies, the 10 individuals who comprised our doctoral cohort sat with our two professors, and we began by introducing ourselves in some detail. Stories of each person's life began to unfold—their previous studies, families, children,

jobs—until one very fair-skinned and red-headed woman placed her Aboriginal Band Identity Card on the table for us to see. She also spoke of her Master’s thesis, which was a narrative inquiry into her own mental illness. Another woman followed, sharing her story of embracing her Metis heritage after spending four decades avoiding speaking of it. She too, placed her identification card on the table. Through these quiet and moving moments, I sat waiting for my turn.

In my backpack I had a copy of the gay magazine for which I had been writing. Slowly, as my turn approached, I took it out to share with the class. I spoke about my association with the magazine and the quality of the text and photos, and I passed it around the table. I don’t remember questions, but I do remember a sense that although I didn’t name myself as gay, the cohort understood who I was in a way I had never experienced before.

I also remember that immediately after classes ended that day, even though we were no longer in a relationship, I called my first boyfriend to tell him that I had come out in much of the same way as he had done at a much earlier stage in his life. I recited what he had said to me about his coming out experience: “My palms were sweating all the way to school and when I was asked to stand up and introduce myself because I was the new kid, I told them that I was gay.” He replied, “You Didn’t. No you didn’t,” and I replied “Yes I did. Oh Yes I did.”

## **Research Text**

**Cautious steps.** When I consider this story in the present, I see that while I took a step toward coming out, I did not actually place my gay card on the table. Rather than completely naming myself as gay, I shared my involvement with the gay magazine that I passed around the table. In doing so, I opened the door to my closet enough to put a foot over the threshold. From that stance, I could choose to go forward or seek safety and go back, depending on the response I



received. I see now that I was still seeking approval—waiting for the positive murmuring that I received from my classmates before going forward. While no one responded negatively as the magazine went around from person to person, there were no questions, and while there were no negative comments, a sort of silence descended before the professors moved us to the next person. I had made myself vulnerable by speaking, which was a new experience, but the mask I wore to hide my sexual orientation never completely fell away that day, nor did I have the courage to lift the mask I had worn for so long completely away from my face. I think what I managed that day was a crack in the armor of my closeted self.

**Continuity amidst new direction.** When I consider my choice to come out through my involvement with the magazine, I can see that this story is threaded with many of the same stitches that resonate through most of the stories that I have lived inside my closet. While I wanted to emulate the honesty of my colleagues who spoke their truths, I also wanted the praise they quietly received from the class: Were they more perfectly themselves for having spoken? Would I be if I spoke my truth?

As memories associated with my fear of failure and lack of self-worth flood my ability to think, I find myself being swept away by the flow of a current that I have fought within myself for so many years. I think now that by speaking that day, I began to allow myself to disentangle from all the hatred, ridicule, and humiliation of the past. As I look back, I am left with a sense of floating up and over the walls of the closet that has imprisoned me and prevented me from dropping the mask even in my own (almost) coming out story.

**Field Text: Story 5: An In-Between Story: Longing But Unable to Come Out**

Following the completion of coursework for my doctoral studies, I attended a festival in the Nevada desert which was billed as “a place where one can be oneself.” Because I contacted

the organizers of the festival and shared that my research was in the area of self-identity for my doctorate, I was offered a ticket and invited to attend the festival as a member of the media. This gathering was focused on art and music and was advertised as a space reserved for those seeking authenticity in their lives. Tickets were distributed through a lottery system because of a global demand that exceeded the 68,000 available tickets.

Feeling honoured, I accepted the offer and, within a few days, several students studying art and music at the Master and PhD level, from across the United States contacted me by email. They were interested in my research and were excited to meet at the festival to discuss research together.

Shortly after arriving, I was greeted at the entrance with a hug and a pamphlet. Not thinking much about the pamphlet, I threw it on the passenger seat and drove in to the festival venue. My initial perception of this festival was that it was a journey to a faraway land, a haven of some sort where people could be authentically themselves. What really struck me was the way the people appeared to come together as a collective.

The site in the desert was breathtaking. So too were the many art installations spanning across the playa. The desert had a very magical feel to it. However, much like a mirage, the freedom I expected to encounter in a place where individuals were called to be authentic was shrouded in the principles that governed behaviour at the festival. Inside the pamphlet that I had been given upon entry listed the 10 principles of the festival. While the list itself did not speak to conformity per se, the way in which these rules were embraced by the attendees of the festival led into shaming those who did not abide by the 10 principles. Dialogue was reduced to enforcement and became counterintuitive to the premises upon which this festival came into existence. Upon reading, it was clear to me that in spite of the promise of living authentically, the

festival proved to be a step away from individuality and a step towards conformity. Not only did these principles inspire a more judgmental atmosphere at the festival, they encouraged divisiveness and an element of snobbery and an elitist attitude. Were the attendees trying to fulfill a void in their lives back home? Or were they trying to take a step toward being their true selves? I had a chance while there to come out to a stranger, a woman probably 20 years older than me who accompanied me on a bike ride to many of the festival sites. She asked if I was gay, and I said no. I remember I was very conscious of the way I was presenting myself as someone who is straight, hiding my gay identity as a means of trying to gain social acceptance from this person. Even though the 12 years of postsecondary studies that I had completed at the time had brought me to a place where I wanted more than anything to come out of the closet, I found myself in a place where my closeted life continued to provide a certain degree of comfort and safety that I could not find outside, even in a venue where I knew no one.

### **Research Text**

**Carnivals and masks.** As I reconstruct this story now, the pamphlet I haphazardly threw on the seat of my car comes to life and means something important. The title on the pamphlet was “A Carnival of Mirrors.” On the cover of the pamphlet were two people wearing plain white masks as they peered into a mirror. This image connotes several things for me now. The plain white of the masks offer a blank slate for individuals to decide what they might add to represent themselves to others for the duration of the festival. There is a suggestion of encouragement to mask a real identity in order to participate fully in the days spent in the desert. I think of the two parts of a “carnival of mirrors”— a carnival brings to mind ringmasters, clowns, dwarves, animal trainers—all in costumes that hide their identity underneath, and “mirrors,” where sometimes,

carnival-like, many images appear that distort the personal reality of individuals in terms of size and shape.

For me, while I went to this festival to share the process of locating a more authentic sense of myself with others, I found myself disoriented, in the middle of a dust storm of principles formed around the way one “ought” to live and must act during the festival. I entered the festival as Jeremy who is gay, but found I could not say I was gay to the woman who accompanied me to the festival sites.

**Inadvertently outing myself.** Many individuals I interacted with that week in the desert seemed to assume that any study focused on self-identity or personal authenticity meant a correlation with sexual identity. There were many moments when I got very defensive, which I see now was because I was not willing to name myself as gay. I did not realize then that my defensiveness was a form of a denial. Only as I engage in the process of reconstructing this story am I able to see how I misled myself into believing that my frustration with people’s assumptions that there was a clear link between self-identity and sexual identity had to do with their generalizing my research when, in fact, it had to do with my seeking social acceptance as a straight individual.

Even though the people at the festival were willing to socially accept me as someone who is gay, at the time I did not have the courage to come clean and step completely out from my closet because being socially accepted as someone who is perceived as straight was the only world I knew at that time. Looking back, I see I was completely unaware of the way my research interests were a way of outing myself.

**Staying with denial.** In the past, I was unable to see that my inability to be truthful about my gay identity at the festival ended in yet another story of fabrication. I was busy looking

outward at the other graduate students and was frustrated by their interpretation of self-identity. I failed to see that my mask of PhD student was decorated with many of the same beads and feathers as the masks they wore. I was so intent on remaining in the closet that I was unable to see that my drive for perfection and my drive for praise has been cross-threaded with my drive to gain social acceptance as a straight man. Ultimately, my desert story is a story of denial of my sexuality, and by association, of my life.

### **Conclusion**

As I end this chapter, I am conscious of the fact that these two stories represent the numerous times I had the opportunity to come out over many years in my adult life. Each time, just at the point when I had the opportunity to speak my gay identity to others, I was not able to do so. My anxiety and fear of adopting a life with unknown consequences has won over my desire to out myself every time. In *The Courage to Teach*, Palmer (2017) seems to name my dilemma with clarity, writing,

To reduce our vulnerability we disconnect [from others] and even from ourselves. We build a wall between inner truth and outer performance...we become caricatures of ourselves. We distance ourselves to minimize the danger [of connection] forgetting that distance makes life more dangerous still by isolating the self. (p. 18)

Narrative inquiry has offered me a supportive framework for storying my experience, but I see that to truly make the move to come out I will need to stop living my life as a performance and start sharing my inside self with others. The question is how to learn to be vulnerable, how to be courageous after so many years of hiding the essence of myself behind the false tales I have constructed to keep myself safe from anticipated harm.

In Chapter Five, I revisit the postmodern literature, choosing particular authors that meant so much to me during my master's degree to seek the support I need for coming out.

## CHAPTER FIVE: REVISITING THE SCHOLARLY LITERATURE: SEEKING CONNECTIONS TO MY STORY TO HELP ME OUT

*Self-reflection enhances and expands our experience. It can add greater meaning to the experience we have already had. Reflection and introspection help us put events and feelings in order. The more we reflect on what has happened, or how we feel, the clearer it all becomes.*

(p. 14)

*Robert Atkinson, The Gift of Stories, 1995*

Over my graduate years, I have made notes on poster board and in journals of many quotes that spoke to me from the scholarly literature. I literally have pages and pages of quotes from my reading, although I was not always sure why the messages that I recorded meant so much to me. In the past, I think I used recording quotes as a method of awakening to new, postmodern perspectives on the world in general, but I did not understand their power to help me name myself as gay and work my way out of the closet I had built for myself.

In this chapter, I return to authors who have been seminal in informing my world-view, and who now take me to a new understanding of myself as I interpret their messages with increasing depth. In the past, while my eyes were opened to a postmodern reality, I did not apply their messages to my own experience and thus missed the support they offer me now as I open the door to my closet and use their perspectives to help me step outside. These authors have been, in Heilbrun's (2011) terms, "unmet friends." Palmer's (1999) words resonate as I begin:

Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am. I must listen for the truths and values at the heart of my own identity, not the standards by which I must live – But the standards by which I cannot help but live if I am living my own life" (pp. 4–5).

## **From Women's Ways of Knowing to the Dialectic of Freedom: Coming to Voice**

In revisiting the literature that spoke to me so profoundly in my M. Ed. years, I realize that at that time I was experiencing an awakening from what Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1997) termed "living in silence." Until that time, during previous years of study, I was absorbing the required material without linking it to my own experience. My learning was external to my being, and I had not connected my personal life with my academic life. Reading assigned chapters from Belenky et al.'s *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* in a Master's course opened my eyes to this omission, and my excitement grew as I began to place myself in the text. I could see that, like the participants in the study, I too was living in "silence," or focusing on the "procedural knowledge" offered by others as a way to learn and live. The following snapshot illustrates how struggling to achieve academically in my younger years played an influential role in carving out several behavioural traits that never left my side as I continued my studies.

### **Snapshot: Remembering A Time When I Mistakenly Thought I was Inarticulate**

*As I think back and reflect upon my first semester of study at the graduate level, I am perplexed now at the way I felt the need to validate my worth to my professors and classmates by unconsciously putting myself down. I remember that I often apologized ahead prior to speaking in class feeling I was not being articulate enough to simply give my opinion about something in the required readings. I see now that in my thinking I gravitated back in time to my academic struggles and failures in high school. I wonder now why I kept returning to subjecting myself to reliving the pain from that time and also why I continued to discredit my voice and dismiss my intellect, much as I had done for so many years in regard to my studies and my sexual orientation.*



## **A Journey of Disorientation: Overcoming a Pathway of Cover Stories and Hidden Stories**

Just as with the proposal and development of every chapter of my dissertation prior to this one, I am once again moving an inch at a time. While I initially found this slow process to be especially stressful and at the heart of what has caused a considerable degree of anxiety, I am now able to see that coming to voice is a slow and gradual process that cannot be rushed when it comes to what I have kept hidden for my entire life. Only in the present am I coming to understand that my ability to remain in the closet for as long as I have rests upon my closing off from what my soul has been trying to say to me all along. Palmer (2004) speaks of the soul as wanting “to tell us the truth about ourselves, our world, and the relation between the two, whether that truth is easy or hard to hear” (p. 33). I am understanding that admitting I am gay has been a profoundly difficult truth to admit to myself much less anyone else over so many years. In this chapter I am just beginning the process of becoming acquainted with the person I see in the mirror beyond the parameters of an identity I have manufactured since I was a boy. I believe I am in the process of *waking up* for the first time.

### **My first awakening**

I no longer feel I am a complete imposter when I look in the mirror. I am gradually breaking free of what Brookfield (1995) describes as the *Imposter Syndrome* and beginning to meet myself in Bateson’s (1993) notion of telling my untold tales with creativity. It is at this intersection that I am moving into dwelling in creativity so as to, as Atkinson (1995) writes, “[make] plans with [my] inner guide” (p. 5). Rather than anchoring my inner guide to socially prescribed truths in a subconscious sense, I find myself taking an active role in leaving my imposter self behind and making plans to look across the horizon of my life through a lens of creativity. While I still cannot make out my face with as much precision as the masks that I have

worn in the past and continue to wear in some situations, I find I am much calmer and have a sense of serenity about my life that I have never felt before.

Returning to Belenky et al. (1997) I focus on the disconnection experienced when living a life of silence:

In order for reflection to occur the oral and written forms of language must pass back and forth between persons who both speak and listen or read and write - sharing, expanding, and reflecting on each other's experiences. Such interchanges lead to ways of knowing that enable individuals to enter into the social and intellectual life of their community.

Without them, individuals remain isolated from others; and without tools for representing their experiences people also remain isolated from the self. (p. 26)

Since I was very young, I have felt as though I did not have anything worthwhile to share with others. I was often criticized by family members and others for being too dramatic when I tried to describe something in the present, or told I was looking through rose-coloured glasses when reflecting on the past, or that I was not being realistic when envisioning the future. As I reconsider the quote above, I do so at the intersection of living in the closet and stepping out from it. In making this distinction, I am beginning to feel the sheer magnitude of learning that is transformational in nature—I am beginning to be able to see, once again in Shield's (1997) words, "anew."

### **Representational Thinking: A Fallacy Shared Amongst the Straight and Gay Population**

*Because the women have relatively underdeveloped representational thought, the ways of knowing available to them are limited to the present (not the past or the future); to the actual (not the imaginary and the metaphorical); to the concrete (not the deduced or the induced); to*

*the specific (not the generalized or the contextualized); and to behaviors actually enacted (not values and motives entertained). (pp. 26–27)*

*Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, Tarule, Women's Ways of Knowing, 1997*

As I think back across time, I believe I was unable to make new meaning as I lived my closeted life because I continued to bury painful incidents of rejection. Much like the description provided in the above quote, prior to this writing, it never dawned on me to see what it was I was actually covering all these years. I did not realize how the coverings or cover stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995) I created resulted in a distance between the life I was living and my inner voice so that I could not hear my soul speaking. I have travelled with my cover stories across the years of my life away from home and back again, having now moved to a new house in my hometown to live with my mother.

### **Snapshot: From Lynwood Drive to Hemlock Street: Moving back to my Homeplace**

*Looking back I can see that even in this writing, initially I still could not resist taking the path of least resistance. With a tightly fitted mask and custom-fitted costume covering my graduate student self, I was unable to accept who I was when looking in the mirror. Moving back home taught me that no matter how hard I try, I cannot fake living back on Lynwood Drive. I wonder now about the unknowns ahead, where my life will take me on Hemlock Street. Who am I to become on Hemlock Street in the absence of composing snapshots of a former life? Or who have I already been becoming since moving back home three years ago?*

More important than burying painful memories was the beginning of hearing my inner voice for the first time while engaging in this writing. I thought to utilize the same authors that helped me recognize that I had been living a life of silence to uncover my journey of coming to voice. Since recognizing the importance of seeking myself beneath my masks and my costumes I

have been able to make a turn in my thinking about Maxine Greene's (1988) notion of *Ways of Being* and Mary Catherine Bateson's (1993) notion of different ways to tell my story, which I describe next.

### **Articulating Greene's Notion of Ways of Being Through Bateson's Charge of the Telling of One's Story Through a Lens of Creativity**

Since the premise behind the revisiting of scholarly writing centres upon a revisiting of my past to inform my present, I am utilizing the scholarly writing as a means of transcending the borders and boundaries of the stories I have shared thus far so as to identify other coverings from my past that I believe need to be lifted. I move forward with the help of the words of Greene (1988):

The problems for education, therefore, are manifold. Certain ones cluster around the presumed connection between freedom and autonomy; certain ones have to do with the relation between freedom and community, most significantly moral community.

Autonomy, many believe, is a prime characteristic of the educated person. To be autonomous is to be self-directed and responsible; it is to be capable of acting in accord with internalized norms and principles; it is to be insightful enough to know and understand one's impulses, one's motives, and the influences of one's past. (pp. 117–118)

This quote provides an opening where I am able to locate myself. I know that the masks, costumes, and coverings I have worn all these years were a means of conforming to the heterosexist community that surrounded me as I tried to be accepted as an equal. But I never was accepted, perhaps because I was always trying to mimic the behaviour of those who seemed popular or connected to the community to which I desperately wanted to belong. I was far from autonomous, choosing instead to wear a mask of conformity. In Greene's terms, I gave up any

sense of freedom in order to mould myself into an acceptable other to the groups I attempted to join.

However, for the first time in my life, I recently took a walk around the lake near my mother's house without donning any of the masks I have worn and decorated all of these years. I found myself looking down at the mask as opposed to looking at my masked self through a mirror. I was amazed at how different the mask looked when I was able to tilt and peer into it from angles that would have been impossible if I had never taken it off.

Thoughts about the mask I left behind persisted for only a few minutes. As I entered the trail around the lake, I began to think about my study in a way that I would not have if I had gone for my walk with my mask in hand. While the world around me looked the same as before, there was something peculiar about this walk that speaks to the quote by Maxine Greene above. I found myself engaging with people along the trail as I normally do, but this time, I was no longer leaning upon a set script. The highly decorated mask that once preoccupied my time was no longer close at hand.

Reflecting on the way I represented myself to others while masked, I often subconsciously touched various parts of my mask to remind me of my accomplishments while speaking with others and, as a result, the conversation was often woven with a fairly noticeable degree of self-adornment with either my athleticism or academic accomplishments becoming a focus. I think of all the years that have passed while trying to prove my worth, and little did I know that, right from the outset, I had failed when it came to achieving a sense of moral community. By linking my experience to the quote above, I became a victim of what Greene (1982) notes: "There is a...danger in the idea of freedom as an indulgence of the instinctual and the irrational—a danger we see before us every day" (p. 7). With Greene's help, I see that many

of the conversations that I have had from behind my masks were centred on my own self-indulgence.

As a result of this walk, I recognized my inability to be present to myself as well as be present to others. By linking my personal experience to Greene's (1982) notion of *moral community*, I am beginning to merge my personal experiences with the scholarly writing of coming to voice so that I can begin the process of weaving together a self-identity that is whole and sustaining.

### **Snapshot: Dropping My Masked Life: Lost From Within the Greenest of Green Grass**

*Within a few steps I find myself looking back at all that can be seen from the blades of grass that encircle my masked self. All of these years spent moulding the perfect mask that becomes invisible from a few metres away. No one can see the beads I picked out—they were the shiniest of all beads, or the feathers I was certain were the longest and fluffiest of all. All of that work so I could be seen and heard as an equal, and it never happened. Why did I not know any better? Hours and hours spent decorating the masks to pass the time while living in the closet—for what exactly? All of these years, all of this effort, only to remain silenced and hidden from just a few metres away. I am left to ponder why I thought the more intricately I decorated my mask the more I would be seen by others.*

### **Thinking About Closet Behaviours Not Premised On My Sexuality**

If I am to move forward with a sense of continuity as suggested by Mary Catherine Bateson in her book, *Composing a Life* (1993), it would not be too outlandish to consider other aspects of my life besides my sexuality as being lived from within a closet of some sort. Through revisiting the scholarly writing of Maxine Greene, I also find myself reconsidering my love for learning business ethics as a way to unpack my changing perspectives.

## **Snapshot: My First Day as a University Student: My First Class, “Business Ethics”**

*Revisiting the scholarly literature has motivated me to reconsider some of the snapshots that I wrote about earlier in this study; one is my love for studying business ethics at the undergraduate level. By arriving at the crossroads between Belenky’s et al.’s (1997) notion of knowledge that is received and Greene’s complexities associated with a journey I am embarking upon—my journey of allowing my inner voice to guide and act as my compass—I know that I must move away from trying to always read from the script of someone who is straight. Instead of looking into a mirror and seeing only what I want to see, I must now look deep within myself and recognize that I was never going to catch the carrot I was trying to reach.*

When I think back now to my first class in Business Ethics, I see I was captivated not by the focus of the course, but by the welcome I received from the professor who noticed me circling the room to try to find a seat. His first words offered me comfort, and free of the belittling that still rang in my ears from high school, I was ready to do my best in his class. While my sexuality was not in question, I see that unconsciously I continued the behaviour I was used to: seeking external praise and aiming at perfection in order to gain acceptance. I know now that I continued this pattern through the degrees that followed, including the courses in my doctoral program. Perhaps only now can I say that the behaviours that linger in my closet are not all about my sexual orientation—some are about my continuing need to seek praise from those who offer me acceptance. The perfection I have sought in exchange for praise in my academic life and earlier, as illustrated in my skiing and groundskeeping stories, has been uncovered in my writing of this dissertation—I have found it such a humbling process and one I doubt I could complete without the support of my supervisor.

## **Stepping Out: Beginning the Journey of Becoming Whole**

I find myself, very cautiously, moving through the intersection of silence and coming to voice because I do not want to forget that while I am becoming the author of my own work, the journey into selfhood is not without its deceptions; I do not want to be guilty of silencing others in order to hear myself, or crafting another mask along the way. I think of Palmer's (2004) words here:

Afraid that our inner light will be extinguished or our inner darkness exposed, we hide our true identities from each other. In the process, we become separated from our own souls. We end up living divided lives, so far removed from the truth we hold within that we cannot know the "integrity that comes from being what you are." (p. 4)

It was not until my first doctoral residency that I was able to put into words my understanding of what it means to have lived in the closet. Even though I had already confided my true sexual orientation to one of the professors team-teaching the course I wrote about earlier, the other professor did not know. I remember the anxiety I felt and the fear that I would be penalized or judged for admitting I was gay in a final writing piece. Since I had already communicated to one of the professors that I was gay, I had mistakenly assumed that I had already fully come out. I remember the way I tried to position living in the closet through "rose-coloured glasses" by an attempt to classify the closet as a sanctuary where my attraction for the same sex would be protected. Just as the quote above by Parker Palmer suggests, sharing an intention to live a divided life as a means of protecting something special, I was explaining myself in a didactic sense. The consequence of not pondering why I chose to live in the closet was that I prevented myself from embracing the many parts of my being that were missed as a result of trying to represent myself as heterosexual and not someone who is gay.



My explanation of why I lived in the closet was also a closeted response because I was not critical about the way I came to understand myself. Just as I tried to cover my gayness because I was not accepted amongst my peer group, I see now that I continued the charade by using the closet as some in the LGBTQ community describe it, as “a condition of social oppression” (Seidman, 2002/2013, p. 8). I see that I persisted in thinking of my closet as a sanctuary, demonstrating how skewed and twisted my perception was of healthy and supportive safe places to dwell in my life. By not providing myself with any opportunities to ponder the impact of what it meant to live in the closet, I think I was trying to protect something that was, and in many places still is, not a socially accepted norm—my sexual orientation.

When I was first introduced to Parker Palmer’s notion of *A Hidden Wholeness* (2004), I was unable to fully grasp what he was trying to say because I was unaware that I was lost in a blizzard of my own making—a blizzard of confinement from within the four walls of my closet. Palmer writes:

There was a time when farmers on the Great Plains, at the first sign of a blizzard, would run a rope from the back door out to the barn. They all knew of people who had wandered off and been frozen to death, having lost sight of home in a whiteout while still in their own backyards. (p. 1)

When I was first introduced to this quote as a Master’s student, it did not dawn on me to consider whether or not I was connected to a rope that could save my life, because I did not think I was lost inside my closet. In hindsight I am able to see that the rope Palmer writes of has been dangling in front of me all of this time. It is left to me now to consider what I will attach the rope to as I begin to navigate between my old life in the closet and the one I am constructing as I write this self-study.

## **Snapshot: The Literature Becomes My Rope**

*Can it be that the literature devoted to the postmodern movement in the field of education is the very rope that I need to find my way out of the disorientating nature of trying to live life as a heterosexual when I am gay? What will it mean to actually grab onto that rope and allow the winds of veracity to pull the closet door from its hinges and bring down the four walls of all that I know that represents my life?*

### **A Little Poem . . .**

*From Parker Palmer to Maxine Greene I swing,  
from one hand to the next I swing.  
From Patrick Slattery to Mary Catherine Bateson,  
I cannot see the ground as I move away from the closet door.  
From Stephen Brookfield to Gwendolyn Webb-Johnson,  
unable to focus on the way one step merges with the next.  
From Jeanette Winterson to Jo Anne Pagano,  
I see the stormy snow globe of my cover story closeted life.  
From John Dewey to Michael Connelly and Jean Clandinin,  
the backward, forward, inward, outward vision—  
The rope of postmodern narrative theorists  
helps to pull me out from a closet I had sealed with permanence.*

## **Snapshot: Overcome with the Fear and Anxiety of Being Judged**

*I remember when I began doctoral studies I knew I had a second chance to complete the self-identity study that I was not ready to complete in my M. Ed.—a second chance to reclaim being honest about my sexual orientation—a second chance to begin living a full and honest life.*

*Little did I know that coming out of the closet is much more than simply admitting to friends, family, and workplace acquaintances that I am gay. I was completely dumbfounded while composing the fourth chapter of this study to find that I was still in the closet and had yet to accept myself. For all these years, I see that I was the one who disregarded my sexual orientation—and continued to condition the people I interact with on a day-to-day basis to dismiss me as a gay man.*

### **Becoming Human: Using the Post Modern Rope to Develop My Wholeness**

While in conversation with my thesis supervisor, I recognized that another integral piece for bringing me to wholeness was missing. Learning to engage in the *real dialogue* described by Freire (1993) in my interactions with those I cross paths with on a day-to-day basis is a critical step I need to move toward for adopting the way I want to live as my self, leaving the narrow confines of my closet behind. Before I can let go of aspects about myself that have prevented me from becoming whole, before the four walls that keep me imprisoned can come down—I must grab onto the rope that the postmodern literature has provided to help me into a world that I want to call my own—a world that I want to fill with integrity and honesty. Freire’s description of real dialogue is that dialogue follows a horizontal pole, where listener and speaker move back and forth in a turn-taking of mutual engagement. He contrasts that direction with the vertical pole he names anti-dialogue because it is not interactive but parallel in nature; both partners speak and listen, but do not engage in the mutual search that is interactive meaning-making with one another along the way. He writes:

Founding itself upon love, humility, and faith, dialogue becomes a horizontal relationship of which mutual trust between the dialoguers is the logical consequence. It would be a contradiction in terms if dialogue – loving, humble and full of faith – did not produce this

climate of mutual trust, which leads the dialoguers into ever closer partnership in the naming of the world...Only dialogue, which requires critical thinking, is also capable of generating critical thinking. Without dialogue there is no communication. (p. 73)

Belenky et al. (1997) further my understanding of real dialogue by making a distinction between the 'real talk' that constructivist knowing depends upon and "didactic talk," noting that

In didactic talk, each participant may report experience, but there is no attempt among participants to join together to arrive at some new understanding. "Really talking" requires careful listening; it implies a mutually shared agreement that together you are creating the optimum setting so that half-baked or emergent ideas can grow. "Real talk" reaches deep into the experience of each participant; it also draws on the analytical abilities of each. (p. 144)

I wonder what it will mean and where my life will take me when I engage in real dialogue. Who will I become? Where will I find the true dialogue that will provide the love, hope, and humility that can drive out conditions of loneliness and fear and end the darkness that has followed me for so many years?

### **Naming the Tools for Dis-assembling My Closet**

I know now that the tools provided by the authors above are the tools I need to open my closet door permanently and let my closeted life go. Moving into a life where I can engage in true dialogue, build a relationship with myself, and hear my own voice are like the braids of the rope that I can hold to take me out of the blizzard—to help me walk away from my closet toward relationship with others where I can share my own integrity and wholeness. As Belenky et al. (1997) write:

To learn to speak in a unique and authentic voice, we must “jump outside” the frames and systems authorities provide and create [our] own frame... knowing and viewing the world – a way of knowing we call constructed knowledge – begun as an effort to reclaim the self by attempting to integrate knowledge that felt personally important with knowledge...learned from others. (p. 134)

The following snapshot provides an image of the end of my closet.

### **Snapshot: My Closet Begins to Crumble**

As Palmer (2004) writes,

How can I affirm another’s identity when I deny my own? How can I trust another’s integrity when I defy my own? A fault line runs down the middle of my life, and whenever it cracks open – divorcing my words and actions from the truth I hold within – things around me get shaky and start to fall apart. (p. 5)

*The result of my new understanding of how to go about living a life of wholeness is that my closet, the safe space I have diligently created, is crumbling. The hinges on the door are no longer tight, and the handle is rusted. The boards have separated, and the light outside is breaking through. All my costumes and masks hanging on their hooks seem faded and tarnished, and I see that my coverings—my gold star papers, have been neglected throughout the writing of this self-study. Rather than adopting my former stance of filling every hole and hammering in new siding to keep my closet tightly sealed as I have in times gone by, like a bystander, I am watching it dissolve—letting it go.*

### **Becoming Acquainted: Looking Inward Narratively**

Somewhere between beginning this chapter and moving into this final section, I engaged in an important transition. Rather than looking outward to the LGBTQ community to help me

make sense of who I am as a gay man, I began looking inward to make sense of who I am myself. My “why” questions became “how” questions, switching from “why do I feel the need to wear a mask?” to “how do I go about making sense of my identity as a gay man and move forward in my life?”

I see now that every trip I took to Toronto’s LGBTQ community the summer after completing my master’s degree was a brief stepping out of my closet. But rather than remaining in that community, I always returned to what I perceived as the safety of my own singular closet, where masking my gay identity was paramount for living the life I had created in the heterosexual world. I did not realize then how much time, energy, and upkeep living in the closet took. Ensuring that the lies I told others were believable even to myself kept me peering into the mirror at the end of my closet at a frequency I can hardly imagine now. I made the mistake of working to maintain what Rogers (1995) describes as a static persona, without understanding that I was negating my very being. He notes:

To some it appears that to be what one is, is to remain static. [Individuals] see such a purpose or value as synonymous with being fixed or unchanging. [However] nothing could be further from the truth. To be what one is, is to enter fully into being a process. (p. 176)

I realize that continually checking my image in my mirror was a form of anti-dialogue. Rather than set out now on a quest to locate others who engage in *real dialogue* as I might have done in the past, I recognize that first and foremost I must complete this journey by engaging in real dialogue with myself.

### **Snapshot: A Chance Conversation**

*Instead of heading to the coffee shop to write as I usually do, I decided to first go for breakfast. As I sat down, I noticed an older gentleman that I've gotten to know over the years at the gym where I work-out. Even though I have known that he is gay for over a year, I hid my sexual orientation from him and never fully shared what my study is about. This day, though, we engaged in a real-dialogue conversation, and I shared my topic and read some of my work aloud to him. I shared the current state of my closet, and after listening he opened my eyes to a new thought, saying that really, the LGBTQ community might be viewed as just a bigger closet than the one I had constructed for myself. I am sitting with this thought in mind as I return to some of the LGBTQ literature, knowing that the last thing I want to do is leave one closet for another.*

## **Revisiting LGBTQ Perspectives**

### **Reflecting On Quotes From Earlier In This Study**

**1. Culture.** I begin with a cultural perspective that seems to still express current perceptions of gayness in many quarters, although this quote was written a number of years ago. As I noted in Chapter One, Herek and Berrill (1992) note:

At best, gay people are perceived as basing their identity and lifestyle upon a trivial pursuit, namely, sexual pleasure. At the worst, homosexuality is stigmatized as inherently sick or dangerous and worthy of punishment through legal (the criminal justice system) or extralegal (in the form of anti-gay hate crime) means. (p. 96)

In cultural terms, in present day it is still frightening and even sometimes life threatening to come out—hatred of gays seems not to have abated in spite of surface level acceptance by the straight community, at least in the West. Both in the street and online, it is not uncommon for hate to rear its head, especially online where individuals can remain nameless and faceless.

I have learned too that within the gay community, cohesion is not what it might seem to outsiders: friction among and between various groups and individuals exists, and support is not guaranteed.

### **Snapshot: Moving Away From the Toxicity of the LGBTQ Community**

*Prior to this chapter, I would have characterized the LGBTQ community from a much more negative lens and missed completely the way in which individuals from that community have been bringing me small insights all along that I can use as I construct my sense of wholeness. I would have made a very grave mistake had I painted the LGBTQ community with a broad stroke and allowed my cognitive self to overshadow my newfound metacognitive insights into all the “self” skills I am learning to attend to, such as self-reflection, self-talk, and self-awareness. I am now able to consider that individuals from the LGBTQ community have been providing me with gifts—it has taken until now to understand that from a cultural perspective this community has provided the gift of clarity, helping me see the different directions I would want and not want to go in my life.*

**2. Personal.** As I reflect on the personal, the following quote comes to mind:

*Passing is not a simple, effortless act, it's not just about denial or suppression. The closeted individual closely monitors his or her speech, emotional expression, and behavior in order to avoid unwanted suspicion. The sexual meaning of the things (for example, clothes, furniture) and acts (for example, styles of walking, talking, posture) of daily life must be carefully read in order to skillfully fashion a convincing public heterosexual identity. (Seidman, 2002/2013, p. 31)*

When I look back and consider this quote now and think about where I have travelled psychologically, emotionally, and physically over the years of writing this study, I think about all



the time spent in my closet practicing all the behaviours noted for “passing” as a straight individual. However, I see now that, in doing so, I was misinterpreting my attraction for the same sex, even at a young age. I mistakenly interpreted my motivations for pursuing intimacy with the same sex—using my attraction for the same sex as a tool for gaining friendship. I see now that while I was fragmenting myself to gain approval from potential friends, I was also moving farther and farther away from my own wholeness, losing my identity in the process.

I have also gleaned some clarity regarding the connection with friendships I gained in the past through the adoption of walking, talking, and dressing in a straight, standardized, and automated way. Looking back, it is quite simple. In order to be accepted as an equal, I thought I needed only to behave like them. As the saying goes, “If it walks like a chicken and talks like a chicken—then it must be a chicken.” I could not see that the elements of expression housed in my closet symbolized my drive for friendship and connection. Trying to standardize my actions and apparel turned me into a parody of straightness where I was willing to automate myself for friendship—and with automation came a sense of myself as a person with cracks and crevices running within. With wholeness in mind, my aim now is to move in the direction Greene (1988) notes, “to break with the ‘cotton wool’ of habit, of mere routine, of automatism, to seek alternative ways of being, to look for openings” (p. 2).

**3. Social/Relational.** Adams (2011) writes, “I invite you into a project that gives a voice to those afraid to speak or who have ended their lives for feeling less than human” (p. 8). Since I graduated from secondary school, before the advent of social media, the bullies who ridiculed me for being gay in my home community were no longer connected to my life. Social media was in its infancy, and I had yet to even subscribe to my first social media platform. While my engagement on social media began with a considerable degree of openness, I soon found myself

fabricating a persona that showcased the happiest of all happy lives—which was no different than the persona I fabricated while in the groundskeeping role or representing myself as more wealthy than I actually was while in the downhill ski racing program.

I see that there is a narrative pattern that has followed me into the present. As Amulya (2003) notes:

A person could reflect very frequently, bringing a high level of awareness to her thoughts and actions, but rarely stopping to look across what she has noticed, to consider what could be learned by exploring her patterns of thinking across different situations. (p. 1)

I am at the beginning of a process of amalgamation—considering the commonalities, in a narrative sense, between my role as a groundskeeper, my role as an expert skier, and my role as a postsecondary student. By asking myself how these roles have impacted my ability to come out of the closet in a relational and social sense, I believe I have widened my scope for seeking meaning into the factors that have inhibited my ability to come out.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have revisited the academic literature with a new depth, understanding that living in silence is not about being unable to speak, but rather it is about making my own meaning by connecting the literature to my own experience. Much like constructing research text from field text to achieve present-day meaning and new understanding, I see that interpreting the words and perspectives of authors through the lens of my own experience is the necessary ingredient for finding and sustaining my own voice. With this knowledge, I have understood that going back in terms of time and situation is not only not possible but is also not a direction I want to take as I leave my closet behind.

With the help of Parker Palmer (2004), I have also identified a new metaphor in relation to the power of the literature in my life now—I see it as a rope that can help guide me to a place of safety and wholeness as my closet continues to crumble; I can return to the powerful and hopeful words of the authors I have identified as needed. They are the knots in the rope that I can grasp when I am unsure of my direction for living an OUT life. I am already seeing more of myself when looking in the mirror at the end of my closet.

In Chapter Six, I continue the process of stepping out completely from my closeted life. It is in this next chapter that my perception of my gay identity begins to shift in a direction that no longer incorporates shame and embarrassment.

## CHAPTER SIX: REIMAGINING STORIES FROM THE RECENT PAST THROUGH A MORE HOLISTIC LENS

*We need trustworthy relationships, tenacious communities of support, if we are to sustain the journey toward an undivided life. That journey has solitary passages, to be sure, and yet it is simply too arduous to take without the assistance of others. (p. 10)*

*Parker J. Palmer. A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life, 2004*

In this chapter, I turn to Palmer's (2004) work on wholeness as I share two stories from my recent past. I consider a story of family friction and one of friction between myself and the LGBTQ community from varying angles and perspectives, which requires me to move beyond the borders and boundaries that have previously guided my thinking as I lived my closeted life. After sharing the field text of each story, in my research text I reconstruct these events and situations in the present, aiming to emulate what Palmer calls "a hidden wholeness."

With some trepidation, as I see that wholeness requires me to put down the masks and take off the costumes I am so used to wearing, I use the rope to help me find my way out of the blizzard I have lived in for most of my life. With Palmer's words ringing loud and clear, I take heart that in surviving the blizzard I might catch sight of my soul, which will help guide my way back to my hidden wholeness even amid the violence of the storm.

### **Field Text: Story 6: A Story of Family Friction from the not so Distant Past**

I was recently left with an empty house for a few weeks and, without consciously knowing, I started another kind of metacognitive journey into understanding the way I interact with others from a new standpoint. Instead of looking outward, the way I have been socially conditioned to make sense of my world, I began looking inward at my own role in a family story.

With this perspective in mind, I return to an argument that happened last December at the Canada-USA border.

For several months prior to Christmas 2018, renovations were being done to our home because of a flood. Throughout this difficult time, I was confronted by my mother about many aspects of my life for which I was not prepared. I was asked about whether or not my trips to Toronto involved using drugs, and experienced moments of interrogation where I found myself being grilled for the reasons why I had not yet completed my PhD. There was friction between my mother and me and, at Christmas, my brothers were not happy with me.

The culminating event of this family Christmas took place as my oldest brother, my mother, and I were in the midst of an argument as we were driving to Florida. A disagreement regarding the way the back seat was organized for the drive escalated when questions about my behaviour when I went to Toronto were raised. My brother pulled the car over at the Canada—USA border and I got out of the car. This family argument left me on the side of the highway - by my choice, because I felt I was being treated unfairly—not necessarily because I was gay. Experiencing tremendous hurt as a result of the argument, I took the bus from Fort Erie back to downtown Toronto. At the time, in my misery, I missed an act of love from my mother; she provided me with the means to get myself home. I doubt this experience will ever fade from my memory. I remember I grabbed my luggage and began to walk away. Within a few minutes I was no longer visible to my family, and I headed to a McDonald's to sit and think about everything that had just happened.

#### **Research Text:**

**Former reaction to such friction.** As I think back to that horrible day, I remember my defensiveness and being very vocal about feeling like I was being attacked by my family's

reaction to my life when I stayed with friends in Toronto. At the time, I did not understand why my mother and brother were so upset with me because I did not see anything wrong with being with others who were gay to help me understand what it means to come out. I was oblivious to their care and concern for me.

I see that my response to this experience followed a pattern that existed for many years. I took many messages provided by my parents and brothers about my behaviour as criticism, and my reactions were swift and often stormy. Over the years of being teased and taking abuse for being gay, I think I let my anger and hurt flow in family situations because it felt safe to do so. Even if I left the house in anger, I knew someone would come and find me. However, in this family friction situation, I found myself truly on my own.

As a result of this tumultuous experience, the place that I called home no longer felt safe and I decided to search for a place to stay in Toronto while trying to work on my study in the university library. I did what I only knew to do and sought out the validation of my gay friends. I remember feeling nervous on the bus and calling an old friend that I met 15 years ago. Out of everyone I called that night, she was the only one who answered. She provided a voice that I could grasp, and I remember I clung to this conversation for survival because I felt so numb inside, as if my entire world was crashing down around me.

After several days of staying with this person, another person opened his home to me so that I could extend my stay. He too, like many in the gay community, had suffered through stories of family friction. He provided me with warm meals to eat and a place to write. He ensured I maintained my focus, and in moments where I wanted to talk about the events that happened along the Canada—USA border, he was there to listen and share his own experience.

**Rethinking the story now through a reflective, holistic lens.** As I think about this story now, I see the divided life I was living, straddling the straight and gay worlds, donning costumes and masks along with the behaviours and moods that went with each of them. I was at a point in my life where I was beginning to take tentative steps to reveal my self to my siblings, and things were not going well. I know that in Palmer's (2004) words, I did not understand that what was missing was me—me without disguises. I know now that it is not possible to come out and wear disguises at the same time, but I did not know that then.

By moving back and forth across time now, I am able to stitch a narrative pattern across the intervening years of my life. Amulya (2003) notes, "A person could reflect very frequently, bringing a high level of awareness to her thoughts and actions, but rarely stopping to look across what she has noticed to consider what could be learned by exploring her patterns of thinking across different situations" (p. 1). In the chapter preceding this one, I drew attention to this quote, but I did not fully unlock its meaning until I began to write myself into Palmer's (2004) notion of the traits of living a divided life. I can now see that my life in the closet had been spilling out from the cracks and crevices between the boards before I knew that I had boxed myself into a life of pretense. As Greene (1982) expresses,

What we understand to be "reality" is interpreted or reflected-on experience. We live in continuing transactions with the natural and human world around us. Perceived shapes, colors, lights, sounds, present themselves to our embodied consciousness. Only as we begin moving into the life of language, thematizing, symbolizing, making sense, do we begin to single out certain profiles, certain aspects of the flux of things to attend to and to name. Once we begin doing that, we begin orienting ourselves to what

we think of as “real.” The patterns or schemata we use in the process of sense-making are those made available to us by our predecessors and contemporaries. (p. 24)

I can see that my sexuality could become visible only after I was able to unlock a life-long behaviour of walking away—a behaviour that had followed me into my most recent stories of lived experience.

By moving back in time and bringing myself back to the Canada–USA border, I can see that I walked away from our vehicle in much the same way I would often walk away or storm into my room at home. Sadly, I think I have spent my entire life walking away from any and all situations that I perceived as threatening the reality that I was trying to portray. Through a reflective lens that is more holistic and offers a wider gaze, I am able to unlock the psychological ramifications associated with living a cognitive, divided, and closeted life. Through this awakening, I believe I am beginning to travel to a place of holistic reverence, taking control of my life, which I now know I did not do in the past. My former behaviours no longer have a stranglehold on my life moving forward.

### **Snapshot: In A Little Over A Week . . .**

*Prior to my departure from my friend’s place, he urged me not to take a bus back home to Timmins and fly to Florida to spend time with my family instead. I remember the surprise I felt when I stepped out onto a street in downtown Toronto. A little over a week is all it took for the city to be covered by a blanket of snow. Not only does it take a little over a week for an acquaintance to grow into a friendship, I was able to pull a chapter together for this study in about the same amount of time.*



## **Field Text: Story 7: Stories of Friction in LGBTQ Communities: Blindly Anticipating Connection**

Earlier in this study I wrote about times in my younger years when I would daydream about living in a city where other gay people lived – a city with an LGBTQ community. In situations where I found myself attracted to someone of the same sex, they were, to the best of my judgment, always straight. I remember thinking to myself how great it would feel to meet someone one day that I was attracted to who was also gay. Even though I knew a handful of individuals who had admitted that they were gay, I remember I avoided them because I did not want straight others to associate me with them. I was hopeful that being in a community where being with gay others would offer me a place of belonging without fear of being mocked.

In the following excerpts, I return in memory to several different situations where, rather than acceptance in different LGBTQ communities, I found friction and, in some cases, hostility and even fear that I did not expect.

**Snapshot: Breakfast diner at three o'clock in the morning.** *When I think back to the first night I spent at a gay bar in Vancouver, my mind brings me not to the bar, but the walk I took with my friend to a diner to eat. We went for breakfast, not because he was hungry, but because I did not want the night to end. I felt elated to finally be in a place with other gay people. While experiencing the bar was exhilarating, the walk to my friend's apartment was even more exciting. Not only was this my first taste of a city's red light district, this was the first time I had ever been in such a large city by myself. My friend took me to a place where everyone went for food at the end of a night out on the town. Just the thought that I was in a place where other gay people were eating was enough to send my adrenaline soaring. I barely ate, and could not resist looking around at everyone in the diner.*

**Excerpt 1: Vancouver: Winter 2002.** My first interaction with an LGBTQ community occurred while touring universities in British Columbia, as I considered moving to Vancouver to continue my studies as a postsecondary student. While on this trip, I was able to connect with a gay friend from the ski-racing program back home and I went with him to a gay bar for the first time. Despite his hesitation to leave me at the bar alone, I convinced my friend to let me stay with someone I met at the bar. At the time I was quite intoxicated, but I do remember a drag queen telling the person I had just met to go easy on me. After several more drinks, I waited for this person to drive his car around to get me. I thought for a moment that he might have taken off and left me there, but shortly afterwards he came around with his car and I jumped in.

At this person's place, I remember feeling very tired as he talked on about his mother and how, one day, I would get to meet her. Because I had been drinking, I lost track of time and finally, in a panic, after this person said I had had too much to drink to be able to leave, I got up and left. Within minutes of his saying those words, my adrenaline rush to escape proved him wrong and I got a cab back to my friend's place. I remember the feeling of relief I experienced being back in my friend's apartment. His walls were painted red and, even though his light fixtures felt like I was at a restaurant or bar, I felt like I was back in a safe place. It did not matter that he was upset with me. I knew in this instance he would take care of me much like my parents had always done.

**Excerpt 2: Tampa Bay: Winter 2018.**

*First place.* Despite making myself clear that I could stay at his place only if I could work on my dissertation, things did not go as planned because he was looking for an intimate connection and I was not. Once I reminded him of that, he was not interested in my company and preferred that I leave his place in the middle of the night. After some convincing, he let me stay

until morning because I had nowhere to go. I chose not to continue keeping in touch with this person because it was clear that he did not care about my well-being or even my safety that night.

Being told to get out of someone's house in the middle of the night was a very sobering experience for me, and I remember trying not to let it show while speaking with my mother on the phone because she would have insisted I make my way back to Canada.

*Second place.* After getting picked up by a friend the next morning, I remember feeling relieved that he was willing to come to get me. Even though I wanted to stay with this person because I knew he respected wanting to just be friends, I struggled to get into my writing because I did not want to be rude or have him feel that I was ignoring him. We engaged in many conversations, ranging from his struggles being in the military as a gay man to comparisons about living in Canada versus the United States. After several enjoyable days, the time had come for me to leave and spend several days with another friend. I remember feeling nervous about leaving this person's place because of the way my first friend treated me. Despite my trepidation, I called my friend to expect me because I needed to stay at a place where I could focus on my dissertation. Even though neither of us were happy about my leaving, my friend was kind enough to drive me to where I had made plans to stay.

*Third place.* Initially, things went well with this friend. I had called him a few days prior and explained what had happened with my first friend. He was sympathetic and offered assurances to help alleviate my anxiety about getting back to work on my dissertation. Shortly after making dinner, I remember getting drawn into a conversation about my friend's interpersonal struggles, which led to him asking about my study. Just as with many other interactions with others in the LGBTQ community, my friend did not agree with my conducting

a self-study and took control of the conversation, explaining that quantitative research was the only valid way to research any topic. I remember outlining the advantages of conducting a self-study, and after I had gained his reluctant support, my friend decided to go to bed, but I could not fall asleep and began to work on my writing. Shortly after, he knocked on the door to communicate his disapproval. I remember getting very anxious and upset, but he could not cope with my being awake while he was trying to sleep, and he ordered me to leave.

Feeling my apparent lack of ability to connect with people, I left in the middle of the night and took a cab to a breakfast diner down the road from my mother's Florida home, knowing it was rented for the season. I remember I sat down and tried to get some writing completed. At sunrise, I walked to the ocean to reflect upon my interactions with these people and whether or not I should head back to Canada. It was the third week in January, and I was a week away from being able to stay with some other friends in Orlando.

**Excerpt 3: Spring 2012.** A few months prior to beginning doctoral studies, a friend who knew I had been accepted into a PhD program asked me to be a part of an online gay magazine that focused on individuals celebrating their choice to live an authentic life. My role was to interview individuals, gathering stories about their lifestyle choices. It was a very special time for me because I was finally able to interact with other gay individuals my own age.

After the first few months of being involved with the magazine, the editor, who had invited me to join the magazine team, grew critical of some of the people I wanted to interview, saying that some of them did not fit the types of men he wanted to showcase in the magazine. He began to criticize my being in a doctoral program, especially the purpose behind my desire to conduct a self-study.

I remember being upset when he began creating distance between the direction of the magazine and my contribution to it. Because I was taking doctoral courses at the time, I was not able to travel to visit him often and, over the duration of several months, I was no longer contributing to the magazine.

The result was that what was once an open invitation to stay at his place when I was in town was finished, an invitation he made certain my mother was made aware of, and one night I was left with nowhere to stay. He told me he wanted to entertain a guy he liked with aspirations of dating him. I remember walking to my car feeling devastated. Feeling hurt and embarrassed, I got into his elevator and headed to my car.

It was only after I returned to my car with a dead battery that I assured myself that this was my last trip to visit him. I was stranded in Toronto without a working vehicle. The city seemed a lot larger and colder than I remembered it. Too embarrassed to call this person for help, too insecure to ask someone in the parking lot for a boost, I decided to try to find a hardware store to buy a new car battery. I headed east and could not find a battery for my car until I reached a Walmart five kilometres from where I was parked. I ordered a cab and headed back to my car with the battery to try to get it running. Several tickets were written and placed on the wiper blades, with a final notice that it would be towed if I did not move my car from the property.

My car was parked in a private lot and was not being monitored by the city. I called the emergency number placed on the pay station to explain that my car was not operable, but was told I had exceeded the allowable number of tickets and that a tow truck would be called to take my vehicle away if it was still parked in this lot during their next set of rounds. Out of panic, I forgot about trying to replace my battery and began asking anyone and everyone in the parking

lot to give me a boost. At three o'clock in the morning, I was able to get my car boosted, and I drove to the nearest gas station on my way out of town to gas up. I slept in my car until the sun came up and I headed back to my university town.

**Former reaction to these stories of friction.** In the past, my reaction to the tension and angst I experienced with gay friends was to blame others for the predicaments I found myself in as I tried to become part of their lives and communities. Faced with rejection, my anger proved unpredictable, even lashing out months later through phone calls to a former friend. Much as in my family friction story, I felt I was the victim of other people's moods and desires, rendered voiceless by their decisions. My choice in family arguments was to walk away, which I replicated in many situations with my gay friends too. I can see my desire to hurry back to my closet to protect myself applied as much to the gay community as the straight world. Peril seemed to be around every corner, and my response was to hide my anxiety by isolating myself for recovery time. I lived as though on high alert, ready to fight off the barbs, real or perceived, that might come my way.

### **Research Text**

#### **Rethinking these stories now through a reflective, holistic lens.**

*Yet Khing resists the projections people lay on him. Why? Because he knows that as soon as we succumb to someone else's definition of who we are, we lose our sense of true self and of our right relation to the world. It makes no difference whether those projections make us the hero or the goat: when we allow others to name us, we lose touch with our own truth and undermine our capacity to co-create in life-giving ways with "the*

*other. (p. 102)*

*Parker Palmer, A Hidden Wholeness, 2004*

**Consequences of being named by others.** Much as Palmer suggests in the above quote, looking back across the two decades that I have been interacting with individuals in LGBTQ communities, I am coming to understand my relations with friends in these communities. In much the same way I lived my closeted life, I recognize that I have not actually experienced an LGBTQ community other than through the lives of other people. Whether it was in a diner after going to a gay bar for the first time, in a friend's Toronto condominium while working on an online gay magazine, or while looking for inspiration while composing this research study in Tampa Bay, I can see from this distance that I was never a part of any LGBTQ community. Rather, I was living vicariously through other people's lives and experiences in the gay community.

I also see that I did not know what constituted a good experience from a bad experience—except when there was a blatant violation regarding my safety or respect. And because no one from these LGBTQ communities came to visit me in my community, my interactions always felt one-sided, leaving me to make my way into lives that I really knew little about. And in terms of my life, I think now that these friends had little interest in my life other than in the moment. In each relationship, I was the subservient one, almost a foil for their stories to be told rather than mine to be heard except on a superficial level. Perhaps I exchanged my voice for inclusion into a community that I see now I never actually experienced beyond the borders of those friends' lives.

**A reliving of my past in the present.** I think that the rejection I experienced growing up taught me whether acceptance or rejection was coming my way in interactions with others. In regard to situations where I was unwilling to do what a gay friend wanted me to do, I knew to walk away before I was told to go. I consider these moments of friction to be moments where I

was feuding with others who shared my sexual orientation by projecting the same learned behaviour onto them as they were projecting onto me. In the end, my experience in the gay community has taught me that personal preservation is more important than actual relationships.

In situations where I found myself being rejected by gay friends, I was provided with an unwritten ultimatum. If I valued their friendship and if I wanted to continue the friendship, I would do as they said or be prepared to walk away. Unconsciously, I too adopted this behaviour, not understanding that working through my interpersonal struggles would have a beneficial effect on subsequent connections with others in the gay community. Relying on gay others to house me and take me into the community, I see that I denied myself the freedom to integrate myself into any LGBTQ community in a natural and organic way. I also see that I seem always to be seeking permission from others—to stay with gay friends, to stay in Florida with my mother, to always be doing what others wanted. I see now that I created the façade that I was in control of my own decisions when I was not.

**Seeing a pattern.** Looking back, I recognize that walking away has been my only strategy in numerous situations over the past number of years as I attempted to exert control over situations and events in my life. But by walking away, I did not realize what was at stake. I did not see the damage I was creating within myself. Rather than stepping OUT, I remained hidden in the shadows of other people's lives. Viewing this behaviour now, I see a pattern of both connection and disconnection between others from the LGBTQ community and me as I recognize that issues of control go hand-in-hand with living a costumed and masked life. Freire's (1993) notion of *real dialogue* is impossible to achieve between those who remain hidden from one another.



From this distance, I can see how my walking-away behaviour was adapted from my tendency to hide from potential bullying in my younger years in my yard and at school. I see that isolating myself has been a theme in my life, and walking away (or running away) is just a version of that same behaviour. While in the past I thought I was freeing myself from difficult situations, I see now that I was really separating myself from learning other, healthier behaviours that could have supported my own growth and development.

### **Patterns of Behaviour**

*Putting to Rest*

*Patterns of Behaviour of my Younger Years.*

*Putting to Rest*

*The Peaks and Valleys of Tomorrow's day.*

*Patterns of Behaviour*

*Are the Peaks and Valley that carry me into Tomorrow.*

### **Substantiating My Existence**

One pattern I see with clarity now is that while interacting with LGBTQ communities over recent years, I consistently tried to validate myself by talking about my education at the postsecondary level. By introducing myself and focusing conversations based on my educational background, I set the stage for where the conversations travelled. I think I wanted others to perceive me as a person engaged in important work, someone worth getting to know. While some acknowledged my education, others disregarded it; others who were also educated at the postsecondary level challenged the validity of my self-study research. In all these situations, I was too blind to see that such an introduction was an adaptation of my former behaviour where, within interactions with straight others, I steered the conversation away from questions that

might reveal my gayness. I was still hiding in the gay world, this time holding up my education as the topic that could focus and control the conversation.

### **Recognizing Predominant Emotions**

I continue to see now that fear and anxiety have been emotions that have driven many of my choices over the span of my entire life. I think being fearful of others' reactions to me and anxious about being teased and bullied relentlessly for being gay in my early years resulted in my adoption of these emotions, which became so automatic in my life in the closet that I failed to recognize how they influenced my behaviour in my adult life. I can see that fear and anxiety have been at the root of many of my interactions with others; my desire to control conversations; my desire for acceptance—even down to the people I have befriended or chosen to avoid.

Looking back, I can see that seeking safety has been a driving force in many of my choices. From playing in the backyard alone, to achieving top grades in my college program, to continuing my studies for many years at the university level, remaining in places I found to be safe has been of primary importance for keeping my fear and anxiety to a minimum. Having a sense of being accepted provided a sense of safety that was so strong, I was no longer conflicted with the trauma of dealing with my sexual identity.

### **Colliding with Like Others: Not Speaking from the Same Script**

It was not until graduating as a Master's student at the age of 30 that I began travelling to an LGBTQ community in search of people who, like myself, were gay. Without knowing it, much as Shields (1997) describes, I took my old story with me as I travelled a new route, expecting circumstances to be different in a new place. But I found the LGBTQ community to be woven with a similar threading. My script gave way to patterns of behaviour while, on my visits that did not coincide with patterns of accepted norms and behaviours in a gay village where

conversations were premised on gay issues and interactions. Consequently, the stories that I was used to sharing to armor myself and keep myself safe—my expert skier and my postsecondary student tales, were not shared by many others in the gay community. I was only visiting and did not understand the concept of speaking from a gay script. As I met more and more people who lived in gay villages in cities across North America, the pilgrimage that each of these individuals took was more often than not comprised of histories of anger and hurt, and of patterns of behaviour based upon fear and anxiety.

### **Moving Forward**

#### **Snapshot: Removing Myself from the Centre of Attention: Still One-sided, Not Yet Whole**

*Looking through a more holistic lens while composing the research text for the family friction story above, I was able to make revelations about myself by thinking about situations and events through others' eyes rather than my own. Previously, living in the closet, the only person I had to interact with was myself. Now I have opened my gaze to consider situations and events through the eyes of others. Just as my costumes and masks separated me from the pain and suffering of being the centre of everyone's gay jokes, I see that I also separated myself from others by thinking only about myself. Now, as I find myself inching closer towards a more open present, I am recognizing that I extinguished my own voice from being heard in my younger years. Because I was unable to break the behavioural pattern of seeking external validation from others, I did not realize what existed below this pattern.*

Now, perhaps it is time to speak from my own heart and from my own head, so that I am no longer speaking from a script. Just as Kthing the woodcarver in Palmer's (2004) book describes his route to moving inward to complete his task, I too see my way forward in some of his words:

I have no secret. There is only this: When I began to think about the work...I guarded my spirit, did not expend it on trifles that were not to the point. I...set my heart at rest...my own collected thoughts encountered...hidden potential...from this encounter came the work” (pp. 95–96).

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I considered stories of friction that I lived in the past through a more holistic lens. With a wider lens from which to understand my perception of events and situations, I have been able to see below the surface of my former reactions and name aspects of my behaviour that I was unaware of before because I was not thinking beyond the perimeters of my own existence. At the heart of the chapter is my understanding that to live my life outside the closet I must move into a space that includes others’ voices, where I engage in the real dialogue and interaction that Freire (1993) described so long ago.

In Chapter Seven, I take this lesson with me in order to name my new learning that has come from the narrative process of “telling, retelling, living and reliving” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) that I noted in Chapter two.

**CHAPTER SEVEN: TAKING STOCK OF MY EVOLVING IDENTITY: CHECKING  
OUT OF THE CLOSET, NAMING WHAT I HAVE LEARNED AS I MOVE TOWARD  
WHOLENESS**

*Sometimes we live for a long time with a certain belief, like the belief that it is best never to speak about pain and abuse in our lives. We hold fast to our belief and live by it. But then something challenges this belief. We see it may not be the best way to live. We defend our old belief, fearing that if we let go of it, our life will fall apart. But then we find we can't hold on. Life has asked us to let go. So we let go. We relinquish the way we have held our life together, the ideas that have guided us.*

*(p. 131)*

*Rebecca Parker in Mary Rose O'Reilley, The Love of Impermanent Things, 2006*

In this final chapter, I step out of my closet for the last time. While my new landing place is uncertain, as I end my self-study, I heed the call to relinquish a life of pretense where previously all my energy has gone into keeping my masks and costumes in order, fearing the uncovering of my gay identity. I think again about the questions posed in Chapter One, and I return to the narrative roots of my study to disseminate what I have learned that I did not know before writing my way through the stories that comprise my research data. I have bolded concepts I have learned that I take forward with me into the future. Referencing authors whose work has helped me name new learning, I lay claim to a new sense of living, where moving toward wholeness replaces the fragmented life I lived in the past.

**My Closet Empties: I am Letting Go**

In my years of graduate study I often heard or read that we are shaped by the stories we live, but until engaging in this self-study research, I did not understand the full meaning of that

perspective. Clandinin (2013), quoting Okri (1997), writes, “One way or another we are living the stories planted in us early or along the way, or we are also living the stories we planted – knowingly or unknowingly – in ourselves” (p. 22). Clandinin goes on: “We need to inquire into these stories, stories that have become intertwined, interwoven into who we are and are becoming” (p. 22). The closet I built so sturdily over many years has housed the biggest stories of my life. So many offshoots have come from my dwelling there that have affected, and I think inhibited, my development as a person. My closet, first constructed for protection against those who bullied and made fun of me for my sexual orientation, became a place where I kept my masks and costumes, stored my accomplishments, and most of all, where I felt safe from the world. But through this writing, I have outgrown it. Inquiring into my stories of experience narratively has opened my eyes to what it has meant to live an isolated life where anticipating harm from others has shut the door on forming deep and genuine relationships.

In Chapter Five, I wrote about the beginnings of disassembling my closet. This disassembling has contributed to the transparent quality of my construct that others may have seen all along. I have saved a few items in my backpack and closed the door for the last time. Since I am no longer hard at work patching the dents and bruises of my former life, I can let the structure go. The ever-enlarging cracks in my closeted thinking that have appeared over the course of writing this study have let in so much light now that I see the world in a very different way than I did prior. In the present, I think of my closet as a place of harm rather than a place of safety. Through examining stories from the past in this writing process, I have been able to see what I formerly thought of as stories of accomplishment were instead stories of camouflage, where I covered my fear and anxiety of being found wanting at the expense of developing

meaningful relationships with peers and others that were likely possible if I had been able to just be myself.

### **Building a New Structure for Living: Embodying Living Narratively**

In Chapter Two, I made reference to Connelly and Clandinin's definition of curriculum as comprised of all of life's experiences. I can say that along with understanding many authors' words in deeper ways than I did previously, I now have a profound grasp of this definition. Writing my stories, looking back across time, I came face-to-face with my boyhood, adolescent, and adult self—a self who had no idea of the importance of linking my experience to my ongoing learning. In the past, I compartmentalized learning (as well as living) and so missed the connections that might have made wholeness visible before the age of 40. I learned many skills: groundskeeping, skiing, studying various subjects—but I did not know to embody them in my being, and so they remained separate skills that I could apply in the right environments. Similarly, growing up in a French Canadian Catholic home with a Polish mother, many lessons were provided, but looking back, I see them floating in the air rather than forming meaningful connections to my life outside our home. So again, my assumption was that these lessons were place specific rather than connected to my overall life experience.

When I think of building a healthy structure for living, I think of the process of *constructing and reconstructing stories of experience* that narrative theorizing has provided me. I have learned that reinterpreting narratives that embody my experience provides openings for discernment, connection, and new knowledge. Where my closet literally padlocked the door to my personal understanding, narrative inquiry calls me to seek meaning among and between events and situations I have lived. Narrative inquiry self-study has given me a new platform on which to build my life.

I think of wholeness in narrative terms—the wholeness of connecting my thoughts and actions to my emotions, to my spirit. I see that in the past, I could not connect these elements within myself because I was not seeing life through a metacognitive lens where attributes such as self-reflection, self-awareness, self-actualization, and self-evaluation opened a space for embodying experiences in a holistic way. As Sinclair (2004) notes: “You are the embodiment of the information you choose to accept and act upon” (oral presentation). Since my inward gaze was missing as I processed information that surrounded me, hiding rather than embodying information seemed the only option to take in my interactions with others. Monk Kidd (2016) writes that “embodiment means we no longer say, I had this experience; we say I am this experience” (p. 254). In narrative terms, through writing this self-study, I see that I am comprised of all the experiences of my life, just as Connelly and Clandinin noted in their curricular definition.

### **Using My Narrative Framework to Make Connections**

In Chapter Two, I described the backward, forward, inward, outward framework of storytelling that Clandinin and Connelly (1994, 2000) outline as a way of sharing stories of experience that I used to construct my research text. I understood this flow in theoretical terms from writing graduate course papers and my proposal, but through this work, I embrace it more consciously as a way to share a story orally or in writing, to listen to a story being told, and to organize a story for an audience or for myself. For me, this structure provides a way of thinking through life tales so that in Gass’s (1994) terms, “when we remember a life we... remember to remember the life lived, not the life remembered” (p. 52). My example of this distinction can be found in my first and second versions of my skiing story in Chapter Three. In version one, I shared the life remembered and not the life lived, and for many years that is the way I thought



about the story and, by extension, my life. So I know it is possible to follow a narrative structure and miss the life that was actually lived.

I have learned that *self-reflection* and *inquiry* are necessary tools for helping me get to the depth that a story remembered holds. As I wrote in Chapter Two, Connelly & Clandinin (1988) note the first step in the reconstruction of experience process is delving into memory to retrieve seminal events and situations that inform our present understanding of the world. Then stories remembered can be reinterpreted and reconstructed using the knowledge we have amassed over the intervening years. New understanding can help inform our present and can provide a new path forward into the future. An example of this process lies in the research texts I have written following the stories that comprise my field texts. Each research text has been formed through questioning prior experiences and reflecting on new ways of understanding those experiences in the present. Ultimately, this process has provided me with the courage to step out of my closet and begin to join in conversations with others in the places I frequent in my community.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) also draw attention to the three-dimensional inquiry space that adds breadth to the framework of narrative inquiry. They write that “studies have temporal dimensions and address temporal matters; they focus on the personal and social...and they occur in specific places” (p. 50). In my stories of experience, I recognize these dimensions as I look back across time and think about each of the places I have written about and the social interactions that I have described that have affected me over so many years.

My first experience of considering these narrative dimensions came with the chronicle of experience I constructed for a doctoral course in 2012, which allowed me to see the seminal tales across time in my life that I carried with me that informed my epistemological stance on the

world. Bringing the past to a self-conscious awareness in my study has provided me with a way in to connecting my experiences holistically, enabling me to find cognitive and emotional patterns in my behaviour that I did not know were there. I see now that as Pinar (2015) writes,

Understanding is intellectual and we work toward it through our minds. These days we are reminded regularly that those minds are housed in our brains, and our brains are in our bodies, so we are quite clear that understanding is simultaneously intellectual and emotional, and that it is always embodied...that means that understanding is individual and social, directed to the present as it is informed by the past. (p. 112)

While I don't want to say that at times in my life I have acted mindlessly, as I reflect on the stories in this text, I know it to be true. As a graduate student I did not think of my work as intellectual, perhaps because I was removed from my emotional self for so many years, or perhaps because I did not see myself beyond a bodily existence. When I think about my graduate years, I think I embodied an absence to others, not quite in the class conversation, always a little apart from the group. My understanding was individual, but it was not social, in spite of classmates' words and the postmodern text we were reacting to. Because I was gay and closeted, and my past experience was constantly focused on keeping that fact to myself, I limited my social focus and shared in class solely through the words of curriculum authors.

In the present, I see that my understanding is both personal and social. In fact, through my writing I have grasped that my work is socially significant as a contribution to the curriculum literature, perhaps to gay others in the process of coming out, and perhaps to straight others interested in my topic. I have learned that self-study research is of value to the scholarly community and holds significance because, as Atkinson (1995) writes,

A life story gives us the benefit of seeing how one person experiences and understands life over time. In telling our story, we gain new insights into human dilemmas, human struggles, and human triumphs, while also gaining a greater appreciation for how values and beliefs are acquired, shaped, and held onto. In this way the story of one person can become the story of us all” (p. 4).

I see both Clandinin and Connelly and Pinar reflect the work of Dewey (1938), who writes that “amid all uncertainties there is one permanent frame of reference: namely, the organic connection between education and personal experience” (p. 25). For me, combining experiences into a whole story has resulted in my ability to see the educative significance of amassing and clinging to my masks and costumes and how my interpretation of single and successive tales has limited my learning opportunities over time. As Dewey notes: “Any experience is mis-educative that has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience” (p. 25). In their many publications, Pinar (1994, 2011, 2015), Clandinin and Connelly (1994, 1995, 2000), and Connelly and Clandinin (1988) have offered unique paths to considering the value of considering personal experience as the basis for curriculum development that is integrated across time, educative, and continuous over a lifetime.

### **Narrative Methods: Directions for Mapping My Experience**

In the narrative cycles of living, telling, retelling, and reliving stories of experience (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, 2000), I can say that my narrative understanding has deepened and strengthened. I have been able to shift my grasp of narrative theory from a paper description to a way of comprehending my world and living my life. Rather than hiding or dodging others’ real or imagined perceptions of a way of living day to day, I have been able to begin building an ontology to guide my thinking and decision-making based on the narrative

tools of *sharing stories, writing, chronicling experience, and engaging in conversation with caring others* to help me see my way forward.

In the past, when I have engaged with others, I have been the one working hard to initiate and then control conversations in order to have a sense of safety and security. Through the work of Freire (1993) that I described in an earlier chapter, I see that I was not engaged in conversation at all, but was occupied, in his terms, in an anti-dialogical, one-way interaction where the back and forth of real conversation was held at bay. As I work toward wholeness, I can adopt his version of *real dialogue*, where individuals speak and listen to one another in a caring, hopeful, and loving way. To engage thus, I know I will have to slow down, remind myself that hearing others' perspectives and ideas can open me to new knowledge and understanding, much as I have done in Chapter Five, rereading scholars' work with new eyes. New knots in my rope are always a possibility. Writing stories of experience in this self-study has shown me depth in the power and insight that is possible in following the narrative cycle noted above. Going forward, I can use this cycle to help me both seek and uncover meaning in the stories of others that has eluded me in the past when my aim was to live surface-level tales alone.

### **Highlighting Concepts I Can Take Forward as I Embrace a New Way of Living**

#### **1. Wholeness**

In Chapter 5 I described using my academic rereading as the rope I could hang on to as a guide to help me across the divide between living in my closet and living a more holistic life. Wholeness is a concept written about by many scholars including Tiberghien and Stein (2018), Jean Vanier (1998, 2018), and Parker Palmer (1993, 2004, 2018). Palmer references Thomas Merton, especially when he writes about wholeness. For example Palmer (2004) reports that, "Thomas Merton claimed that, 'there is in all things...a hidden wholeness'" (p. 4), and reflecting

Merton, Palmer (2018) says: “Wholeness does not mean perfection – it means embracing brokenness as an integral part of life” (p. 16). Brokenness is also a concept written about by Vanier (1998), both his own and those he lives with at L’Arche, the now worldwide community he founded for individuals with disabilities. In my life, I associate the notion of brokenness with hiding my sexual identity under coverings that represented a false self to others. I ponder the concept of brokenness now as a path I have travelled and will continue to travel on my way to wholeness, and I understand that embracing all my stories—ones that I can share with ease and ones that as yet I cannot—can help me walk a path to wholeness.

Both Vanier (1998, 2003, 2018) and Palmer (2001, 2003, 2004, 2007, 2018) describe avenues they have taken in their search for wholeness in themselves and in their work with others. They share evidence from their experience that helps heal brokenness that I can utilize in my own wholeness journey going forward. For example, they write about the *importance of community*. In his many publications, Palmer shares his belief in the Quaker circle as a way of teaching and learning about our selves in an atmosphere of trust. While I have sought community in the past through sports and various LGBTQ groups, I did not understand or live the “trust” part, and so have never experienced the sense of being surrounded by others willing to share on a deep and caring level. I know that I have been too concerned with my own fear and anxiety to allow others to see me without costumes or masks that covered my uncertainty.

Palmer (2004) notes three points about the value of community that I take with me moving forward. Having written stories of my experience in this study and spent much time conversing about them with my supervisor and others, I now understand the value of his statements. Palmer notes three points:

- The journey toward inner truth is too taxing to be made solo; lacking support, the solitary traveller soon becomes weary or fearful and is likely to quit the road.
- The path is too deeply hidden to be travelled without company: finding our way includes clues that are subtle and sometimes misleading, requiring the kind of discernment that can only happen in dialogue.
- The destination is too daunting to be achieved alone: we need community to find the courage to venture into alien lands to which we may be called. (p. 26)

Vanier's L'Arche communities work on circles of trust too, where those with disabilities live with those called to believe their lives are enriched through living with those living with mental and physical handicaps. It seems simple to say that to be in community is to belong in some way. A profound message for me as I move forward comes when Vanier (1998) writes, "Belonging is important for our growth to independence; even further, it is important for our growth to inner freedom and maturity. It is only through belonging that we can break out of the shell of individualism and self-centredness that both protects and isolates us" (p. 35). Finally, I think of the words of bell hooks (2003), who writes, "In [these pages] I work to recover our collective awareness of the spirit of community that is always present when we are truly...learning" (p. xv).

These authors also write about the *importance of self-acceptance* as a necessity for becoming someone who reveals who they are to others. In my experience, my life in the closet has not been about self-acceptance so much as it has been about self-protection, which seems a very inward turn away from those who might have validated my existence just as I am.

Palmer (2004) offers a childhood example of what he calls living a divided life because he could not accept himself as he was:

My own secret life started in the fifth or sixth grade. At school, where I wanted to fit in, people saw me as outgoing and self-assured. I made friends easily, knew how to get a laugh...but no one knew how anxious my public role made me. After school, I did not hang out with friends. I hid out in my bedroom...My room was a monastic cell where I could be the self with whom I felt most at home – the introspective and imaginative self so unlike the extrovert I played with such anxiety at school. (p. 14)

Vanier, speaking about maturity as a state of getting to know and accept ourselves writes, “with our gifts and flaws our yearnings for truth and justice, and our compulsions and blockages...we need some guidelines about what to accept and strengthen in ourselves, and what to change or re-direct” (p. 114). Both authors point out that without self-acceptance, our aim for living a whole and meaningful life is unlikely.

To me, wholeness means to not be fragmented or disjointed; wholeness calls for a move away from segmenting life into small, separate compartments, or what Palmer (2004) calls “a divided life.” He writes: “Wholeness is a choice. Once I have seen my dividedness, do I continue to live a contradiction – or do I try to bring my inner and outer worlds into harmony?” (p. 17). Now my goal going forward is to move in the direction of living life by including my whole self in my thinking and interactions with others.

## **2. Relationship**

Clandinin (2013) draws attention to the fact that attending to place as we story our experience means we also must be conscious of our relationship to those places as well as the relationships with people whom we remember as players in those places. For example, some of my stories in this text took place in schools, at the ski hill, in gay communities, and at home

growing up. Each place provided me with a cultural experience and a personal, emotional experience.

Clandinin (2013) writes that we live in familial, intergenerational stories where stories composed are handed down; in cultural stories where manners and mores are taught us; in institutional stories of school; in personal stories. She says that “as we engage in narrative inquiry...we need to inquire into all these kinds of stories...these stories live in us...as we move and live in the world” (p. 22). In these words, I see that *relationship with others and with myself* provides a key for living a whole life. I can no longer seek safety through distancing myself from others if I want to live a more whole life. As my stories indicate, I have engaged with others on a surface level in the places I have inhabited, which has kept me from forming deep and meaningful relationships. I also see that I have not understood the need to know myself in a deep way prior to writing this study, and a sense of sorrow has accompanied me as my stories have revealed this fact to me.

As I re-read texts by Belenky et al. (1997), Bateson (1993), and hooks (2003), I realize that their descriptions of working with co-researchers, research participants, and students rests in building a caring community within these groups. For example, Belenky et al. provide a moving description of how their four-women research team worked together when writing their study, *Women's Ways of Knowing*. Bateson, too, dedicates a chapter in her book *Composing a Life* to describing her four participant-researcher colleagues with great admiration for their talents and accomplishments. hooks's book *Teaching Community* offers examples of interacting with hope, love, and care for students, friends, and colleagues as the important ingredient for learning. Greene (1978) offers a perspective that I now understand when she writes:



Transformation to relational knowing requires a reconciliation with self in the past, with previous ways of being that compromised personal relationship rather than nurturing it. This reconciliation allows attention to shift away from past perceptions of interacting with others, to new possibilities that a script of awakening allows. Lastly, living a curriculum of personal relationship requires the courage to speak with others from the heart, putting aside the comfortable and often well-polished script of cultivated knowledge that can mark an easier course. (p. 18)

Knowing and working to reconcile what is in my heart and articulate what I find there has been a focus in my self-study—a difficult first step in learning to speak from that source after so many years of hiding my emotional and spiritual self.

### **3. Dialogue**

As I noted in Chapter Five, Freire (1993) writes of what he terms *real dialogue* as a necessary ingredient for coming to critical consciousness. Thinking about my stories, perhaps especially those in LGBTQ communities, I see that the dialogue I engaged in with others was actually an anti-dialogue—as he writes, it was mistrustful, often arrogant, certainly loveless, and a-critical. While I was trying to make inroads with others and fit into their communities, I was oblivious to the fact that, as individuals, what we were actually sharing was an issuing of communiqués, all focused on our own issues and desires.

Thinking of Pinar's (2015) personal take on identity, perhaps for a gay individual, anti-dialogue comes more easily than real dialogue in a straight world. He writes:

For many of us queers, it is the 'straight world' that kills us, or at least makes us over in its image...never able to shed the suspicion that my work [*and therefore my life*] has sometimes been dismissed due to homophobia and heterosexism, I have often felt, still

feel, victimized, a strange self-pity, I remind myself, given...the daily assaults queers suffer world-wide. Almost any provocation scrapes off the scar of my social wound, and my vision is refracted through the pain of old, ongoing injury. (p. 176)

While Pinar has been bravely naming himself gay or queer in print since at least his 1994 publication, I am new at this skill and at making the switch from anti-dialogue to real or true dialogue; I already know it takes conscious practice, but I also know it holds my path to wholeness.

#### **4. Consciousness**

Engaging in this self-study, I believe I have become a self-conscious person for the first time. In Greene's (1978) terms, I have become "wide awake" to understanding that as a gay, closeted man, I have constructed my own reality, one I felt necessary based on my interpretation of the world that surrounded me. She writes:

Consciousness thrusts toward the world, not away from it; it thrusts toward the situations in which the individual lives her or his life. It is through acts of consciousness that aspects of the world present themselves to living beings. These acts include imagining, intuiting, remembering, believing, judging, conceiving, and perceiving.

(p. 14)

I can see that across time, in all the acts Greene notes, my overall interpretations of the cultural and social situations I knew were based in anxiety and fear, which kept me from the emotional and metacognitive processing needed to *become self-conscious*. Like Pinar's (1994) character K (pp. 29–33), who found himself under arrest yet free to engage in his daily routine, I have spent much time searching outside myself for answers to my way forward in my life, rather than

looking inward to find the source of my own “arrested development,” and, like K, I found no answers forthcoming from the world outside myself.

In a chapter called, “Wide-Awakeness and the Moral Life,” Greene (1978) describes my path to consciousness when she writes:

I am suggesting that...feelings [of powerlessness] can to a large degree be overcome through conscious endeavor on the part of individuals to keep themselves *awake*, to think about their condition in the world, to inquire into the forces that appear to dominate them, to interpret the experiences they are having day to day. Only as they make sense of what is happening, can they feel themselves to be autonomous. Only then can they develop a sense of agency. (p. 44)

Engaging in narrative methods, writing my stories and reconstructing them with new eyes has provided me with a feeling of *agency and belief in myself*. I am beginning to learn to trust these feelings.

Developing a sense of agency means that I have the ability to divest myself of the culture stories that abound about being a gay person in straight society. As I leave behind my masks and costumes, I can also learn to leave behind the hurtful and damaging stereotypes that have followed me since I was a boy—gay as weak, affected, a sexual aberration, disgusting, drug dependent, someone to be shunned. I see that these perceptions are constructs that belong to others and are not inherent in myself. As Pinar (2015) writes,

Autobiography...not identity politics testifies to injustice and injury...If unconnected to those to whom they bear witness however, such totalizing phrases threaten to float as free-flowing signifiers, scraping the scars off injuries ancient and ongoing, injuries at once individual and collective. The recognition of self-difference to which autobiography

testifies is prerequisite to the multivariate complexity of experience and identity...autobiography makes plain that the Other is another person. (p. 178)

I can say that engaging in this self-study process I have learned firsthand the value for self and other of attending to stories of life experience from those who actually live the life they are describing. Too often it seems that those who do not fit the White, heterosexual, cultural norm are spoken about, turned into issues of the day, highlighted, and appropriated rather than listened to on an individual basis. For example, the LGBTQ community is spoken about now in popular culture as a grouping, but without hearing the stories of those who actually fall under that acronym, little is actually known about the complexity of lives lived under that banner. Stories may abound, but hearing the voices from those on the inside seldom seems to occur. We are branded and named, spoken about but not really known in the culture of the day. Being gay may no longer be a crime, but as in other sidelined communities such as the Indigenous, Black, or handicapped communities, hate for different others means that wounds remain open, and being watchful for safety reasons is recommended in many places in our present world.

Coming to consciousness has allowed me to see the loss in going through the motions of living in the same way over many years, staying with the same routine, perspectives, and fears without really thinking. I feel fortunate now to have come to ask why my life was at a crossroads during my doctoral years and stepping (with trepidation) into self-study work. My coming to consciousness has been a slow process, but I know my life is on a new track that holds the possibility for wholeness as I continue to use the narrative tools such as storying experience, engaging in conversations with interested others, and journaling that I have learned to trust in this study.

## **5. Compassion**

Underlying the work of authors I have noted above, is *a sense of compassion for others* and a desire to offer a way forward that is caring, kind, and welcoming of difference. I recognize that compassion is an aspect of living that I want to develop in myself going forward as it is important for living a whole and sustaining life—I see this clearly in the work of Palmer (2004) and Vanier (1998), who have built their lives on sharing their experience in community with others. Where previously I have been concerned with self-preservation, I have understood through writing this self-study that I am not the only one with stories of hurt, humiliation, and suffering. In my closeted life, I was not so concerned with others' predicaments as I was with my own.

Brown (2010) conjoins compassion with courage, saying it takes courage to address the suffering in our own lives as well as walk with others in their suffering. She writes, “We invite compassion into our lives when we act compassionately toward ourselves and others, and we feel connected in our lives when we reach out and connect” (p. 7). She adds that adopting such a sympathetic outlook takes putting our fear and pain to one side. Brown suggests that this is not easy: “I think our first response to pain...is to self-protect. We protect ourselves by looking for someone or something to blame” (p. 16). Looking back, I know she is describing my actions in the past. But in the present, I understand her words in a new way because I am feeling the beginnings of compassion as I reach out to others in my daily interactions without masks or costumes. I feel a new sense of lightness and happiness in simple dialogue with others as I move through my day.

Brown (2010) also describes an important connection between compassion and setting boundaries, saying, “if we really want to practice compassion, we have to start by setting boundaries and holding [ourselves and others] accountable for [our and their] behaviour” (p. 17).

In his book *To Know as We are Known* (1993) Palmer offers three characteristics of a learning space that includes boundaries: openness, boundaries, and hospitality. He shares that when these three components are in place, boundaries are what keep the learning space open for new ideas and insights to occur. I see in the work of these two authors that in order to work toward a sense of compassion, I will have to provide myself with an open and hospitable space where I set boundaries around my behaviour toward others as well as myself.

### **Seeing Story as a Way to Compassion**

Vanier's (1998, 2003, 2010) work includes many stories of individuals with severe disabilities that offer insight into both pain and compassion. I have learned that it is possible to begin to understand that a compassionate stance rather than a fearful and isolated one brings the hope and trust that Freire (1993) described as the basis of meaningful dialogue and relationship.

As Pinar (1994) shares in a chapter called "Working From Within," when we move our focus inward in our learning, we can discover a sustainable curriculum that is built on our life experience. Much as my narrative framework has shown me, we can then move forward knowing why we have taken the paths we have and knowing where we are heading with a certainty that is not possible when we live by adopting a role or roles that disguise who we really are from others. Atkinson (1995) writes:

Telling our stories may be the most important way we have of giving our lives meaning, healing those parts of our lives that need it, making peace with ourselves, and gaining the power from stories that they have for us. *Through telling our stories we can experience many forms of release, recovery, resolution, or renewal.* (p. 16)

Ultimately, this is the lesson I have learned engaging in this dissertation.

## **Conclusion**

In this final chapter I have looked backward at where I have travelled writing my study, and forward to the present. I have searched inward in order to name concepts I have understood I need to help me expand my outward view and take me into the future. I have described leaving my closet behind so that I can work at a life lived out in the world. Smith (2014), cited in Pinar (2015), provides me with an ethical vision I know I will continue to ponder: “To heal the world I must engage in the work of healing myself. To the degree I heal myself, so will my action in the world be of a healing nature” (p. 232). All the interactive skills that I have learned that are embedded in the concepts I noted in this chapter can support me in ways I did not know before I wrote this self-study. I am moving into a future where I can continue to embrace the work of becoming whole that I have begun in this research, healing myself as I go, learning to reach out to others to meet them as myself.

## **EPILOGUE: ENDING MY STUDY AND THOUGHTS FOR THE FUTURE**

*If the discourse of identity and education will continue and flourish, we will need autobiography to continue to proliferate and differentiate itself, hospitable to authors who will speak from the many places and positions that this wondrous world provides. (p. 238)*

*Pinar & Grumet, Toward a Poor Curriculum, 2015*

I once asked Dr. Shields how to end a narrative inquiry self-study, knowing that no claims beyond my own text were appropriate. She offered me the image of a mountain where, in writing all but the last chapter, I had climbed almost to the top. She advised that I stop at that point, turn around to look back to where I had come from, and take a few minutes to honour all that I had written to that point in time. The final step required a turning back toward the peak and continuing the climb to an imagined future. I think of this image now as a postmodern representation of my individual learning journey, as my climb has focused my attention on the depths of what I can claim to know about myself. Dwelling in the silence of my climb, away from the cultural noise below, I have been able to make some peace with myself and begin to map a new direction for myself in the world. I began my climb in confusion and disarray, but I end it with hope and a newfound sense of wellness. I am ready to share in the tales of other climbers and offer my experience as a support when needed.

Pinar and Grumet (2015) write that “education is about social action” (p. 234). I can see that writing autobiographically is both a personal and a social action. Writing my stories of experience has shown me that even choosing to live in my closet was a social action—my retreat from social interaction that I viewed as causing harm.

However, now I can say that hidden under my masks and costumes was a good person that I have unearthed through my writing, a person worthy of self-care and friendship. Currently, I



am meeting others in my community where they are in their lives and, as I am no longer seeking mainly gay relationships, I am finding pleasure interacting with a diverse set of individuals. I look back and feel compassion for myself in the past as a frightened boy and adolescent with what seemed like a mammoth secret to hide. But now I see that offering myself care can provide support for my emotional and spiritual self. Neff (2003b) as cited in Neff and Dahm (2015), has described “kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness” as the cornerstones of self-compassion (p. 4). While I have a lot to learn about each of these attributes in relation to myself, I am willing to learn.

### **My Final Story: Turning My Gaze To An Imagined Future**

I am imagining myself walking around the lake in my town as I do so often, being out in nature, enjoying the landscape with other walkers. Rather than talking and focusing conversation on myself, I listen with intention to their stories, learn about their lives, and begin to learn about the world from the stories they tell. I no longer feel the need to account for my existence by naming my role, occupation, or former accomplishments.

As I get to know other walkers, I become a calm presence, offering solace and compassion when needed, gradually building relationships that might take me beyond the lake, perhaps enjoying a coffee or a meal with these others in town. I am intent on the back and forth of real dialogue so that others know that I too, have been broken by life events, but that through brokenness I have found a path to wholeness in my life. I do not lie about my sexual orientation if asked, but I no longer make it the centerfold of my life. Rather, I share my love of the outdoors, childhood tales of being in nature, and my search for meaning in my life.

As friendships develop, I begin to offer the attributes described by Freire (1993) to others: love, hope, trust and even critique if invited through others’ questions. Like Khing in Palmer’s

(2004) story of the bell carver, I continue to search for the perfect bell within myself so that I can offer the best of myself to others.

### **Conclusion**

As I venture along the unknown landscapes of where tomorrow will bring me, I envision my identity from a more whole lens. I want others to see me for the person I have always been inside from a very young age. I want wholeness to overshadow the self-absorbed “closeted behaviours” that inspired many of my thoughts and motivated many of my previous behaviours. I have come to understand that the feeling of the warmth of the sun on my face or the soft reverberations of the music I enjoy listening to, can tell me more about who I am moving forward than any event or situation from my past that arrested my development because of my sexual orientation.

## Post Script: For Dr. Heather Rintoul

My Internal Examiner, Dr. Rintoul, passed away on November 14<sup>th</sup>, just 5 days before I defended my dissertation on November 19<sup>th</sup>. Defending my research was a very positive experience, only marred by Heather's absence. She was my teacher and I will miss her – she left me with many lessons on ethics and ethical leadership that I will carry forward with me. I am adding this postscript at my committee's suggestion to make explicit the significance of my study for others and myself. I know Heather would be pleased with this addition.

The question I am addressing is: *what would you want to add now that the defense is completed that reflects the power of your work for others and yourself?* To answer this question I turn to several areas I touched on as I wrote stories of coming out, and I weave in authors that meant a lot to me in each area.

First, of primary significance in my study is my focus on **self-identity**. While identity may change over time and place and social situation, my sexual identity is a constant thread that remains the same - it is central to the ways I have formulated my vision of myself at various points in my life. It is significant that at the completion of my study I can now claim my gay identity in a public way, which I could not do in the past. Corrigan, Kosyluk, and Rüsç (2013) describe coming out as an opportunity to begin the process of “announcing to the world one’s sexual orientation proudly to assert control over one’s life” (e1). This is a step I am in the midst of taking.

Taking an **ethical stance** to stop hiding this aspect of my identity has meant that I am able to practice what I have believed in for a long time; that living an ethical life entails speaking my own truth from my heart and sharing it with others. It is significant that at the end of my writing, rather than talking about ethics as a subject, I can now say that I am headed in the

direction of practicing living a more ethical life. Since I am no longer apt to lie and deny aspects about myself, I will be able to follow Seidman (2002/2013) and approach “homosexuality as a natural, good part of [myself]; [and] integrate it into [my] daily [life]; [where I will] have lovers and partners; [where I am] out with some co-workers, kin, and friends, and openly participate in mainstream social life” (p. 9).

In the **social and relational** realm, it is significant that I now understand that I did not build my closet in isolation from my community, but in partnership with it. We live in community with others who influence how we see ourselves and how we react in relationships from our earliest days. Now, with this knowledge I am determined to offer others an **open and heartfelt listening** other who can engage in real dialogue without fear for myself in any form of relationship. Friere (1973) notes that real dialogue is

Found[ed] upon love, humility, and faith, dialogue becomes a horizontal relationship of which mutual trust between the dialoguers is the logical consequence. It would be a contradiction in terms if dialogue – loving, humble and full of faith – did not produce this climate of mutual trust, which leads the dialoguers into ever closer partnership in the naming of the world...Only dialogue, which requires critical thinking, is also capable of generating critical thinking. Without dialogue there is no communication. (p. 73)

At the completion of my study it is significant that I know all this to be true.

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