

WHERE HAVE I BEEN ALL MY LIFE? A HERMENEUTIC CONVERSATION FOR
WELLNESS AND CHANGE IN EDUCATION

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Abstract

Building on the idea that narratives are intimate and collaborative spaces rich with the potential for instigating changes in our lives, in this thesis, I explore the reach that entry into such spaces can have in effecting change on an individual and more widely, on the relationships in which that individual is involved and with potential reverberations in the society in which that individual moves.

The thesis is based on inquiry into two pressing questions: What are we doing that interferes with 'healthy' human development? What can we do to rehabilitate ourselves as individuals and improve our society and contemporary culture? Using one's own life as a starting point for inquiring into social progress is a form of productive remembering as social action in that there is an intent to "look... for ways for the past to inform the future" (Strong-Wilson, Mitchell, Allnutt & Pithouse-Morgan, 2013, p. 4) and thus contribute to individual and social well-being.

The attempt to answer these questions involved immersing myself in theories of wellness drawn from such diverse areas as existentialism, attachment theory, interrelational neuroscience and somatic integration as well as practices of phronesis, all being theories which offered important perspectives on journeys of personal and relational health and wellbeing and helped inform the subsequent writing of a narrative.

Supported by H.-G. Gadamer's (1960/1998) writing on the relation between truth and method, the thesis takes the distinctive methodological and representational form of a fictional hermeneutic conversation and Socratic-type dialogue between a narrator and a woman. The narrator, an established assistant professor, embarks on a multiday

dialogue with her mentor, a woman who represents a 'possible future-self.' The woman is someone the narrator joins forces with for guidance on how to relieve her discomfort and in expanding her horizon of knowledge (Gadamer, 1998). In the resulting constructed narrative (Barone, 2007), the two characters explore themes of relationships, vulnerability and resiliency by way of a hermeneutic conversation, a form of conversation that, as Gadamer (1960/1998) explains, focuses on a subject of common concern between interlocutors, which in this thesis, comprise the research questions. A hermeneutic conversation allows for in-depth investigation into how the clashing of the known with the unknown can trigger a desire to restore equilibrium while the Socratic-type dialogue, performed within a shared, social construction of knowledge, helps empower the narrator/an individual to take responsibility for her relations to herself and others.

According to Barone (2007), one benefit of using constructed narratives in educational research is that this methodological approach can reach a wider audience than can more traditional ways. Another, he explains, is that its novelty acts to critically question traditional educational discourse practices and thus open the door for more voices and perspectives to be heard and, thus, validated. The thesis tries to show, as well as enact, a process of well-being by pro-actively grappling with life-long effects of the past in the present, especially how that history impacts on our ability to relate: an ability that is foundational to education in promoting the healthy development of teachers, students, educational leaders; in short, all of those involved in education.

Abstract

Partant de l'idée que les récits sont des espaces collaboratifs et intimes, susceptibles de provoquer des changements dans nos vies, j'étudie dans cette thèse la portée que cette entrée peut avoir pour apporter des changements chez un individu et plus largement, dans les relations dans lesquelles cet individu est impliqué et avec des répercussions potentielles dans la société dans laquelle il évolue.

La thèse est basée sur l'enquête de deux questions urgentes: Que faisons-nous qui interfère avec le développement humain «sain»? Que pouvons-nous faire pour nous réhabiliter en tant qu'individu et améliorer notre société et notre culture contemporaine? Utiliser sa propre vie comme point de départ pour se renseigner sur le progrès social constitue une forme de mémorisation productive en tant qu'action sociale dans la mesure où il y a une intention de «rechercher... des façons pour le passé d'informer l'avenir» (Strong-Wilson, Mitchell, Allnutt & Pithouse-Morgan, 2013, page 4) et contribuent ainsi au bien-être individuel et social.

Pour tenter de répondre à ces questions, je me suis immergée dans des théories du bien-être tirées de domaines aussi divers que l'existentialisme, la théorie de l'attachement, les neurosciences et l'intégration somatiques interrelationnelles ainsi que les pratiques de la phronèse, autant de théories offrant des perspectives importantes pour des parcours de santé personnelle et relationnelle et de bien-être et ont contribué à l'écriture ultérieure d'un récit.

Soutenu par H.-G. Gadamer (1960/1998) qui a écrit sur la relation entre vérité et méthode, la thèse prend la forme méthodologique et représentative d'une conversation

herméneutique fictive et d'un dialogue de type socratique entre une narratrice et une femme. La narratrice, professeure assistante établie, entame un dialogue de plusieurs jours avec son mentor, une femme qui représente un «soi possible dans l'avenir». La femme est une personne à laquelle la narratrice se joint pour demander des conseils sur la manière de soulager son inconfort et d'élargir son horizon de connaissance (Gadamer, 1998). Dans le récit construit qui en résulte (Barone, 2007), les deux personnages explorent les thèmes des relations, de la vulnérabilité et de la résilience à travers une conversation herméneutique, forme de conversation qui, comme l'explique Gadamer (1960/1998), est centrée sur un sujet commun entre interlocuteurs, ce qui, dans cette thèse, comprend les deux questions de la recherche. Une conversation herméneutique permet d'enquêter de manière approfondie sur la manière dont le conflit entre le connu et l'inconnu peut déclencher le désir de rétablir l'équilibre, tandis que le dialogue de type socratique, mené dans le cadre d'une construction de connaissances partagée et sociale, aide à responsabiliser la narratrice / un individu à assumer la responsabilité de ses relations avec elle-même et avec les autres.

Selon Barone (2007), l'un des avantages de l'utilisation de récits construits dans la recherche en éducation est que cette approche méthodologique peut atteindre un public plus large que les méthodes plus traditionnelles. Un autre, explique-t-il, est que sa nouveauté agit de manière critique sur les pratiques du discours éducatif traditionnel et ouvre ainsi la porte à plus de voix et de points de vue pouvant être entendus et ainsi validés. La thèse tente de montrer, ainsi que de promulguer, un processus de bien-être en s'attaquant de manière proactive aux effets du passé dans le présent, tout au long de la vie, en particulier en ce qui concerne l'impact de cette histoire sur notre capacité à

l'éducation pour promouvoir le développement sain des enseignants, des étudiants et des responsables de l'éducation; en bref, tous ceux impliqués dans l'éducation.

Acknowledgements

I have a compelling desire to divulge something: writing a narrative as my thesis happened by accident.

I have always been drawn to use poetry and prose to navigate my life experiences – the thoughtfulness needed in choosing the right word, critically imaging the feelings I wanted to present and evoke, a concerted attempt at making sense of what felt slightly unfamiliar. Thus, when it was time to present the data – the collection of information from the literature review I had done – and after other more traditional ventures, I was compelled to write a story. That's why, looking back at how my thesis developed, although it seemed to come about somewhat haphazardly, in the end I used prose to carefully and intentionally make transparent what my experience was. I am so grateful for Dr. Teresa Strong-Wilson, and to the program at McGill University, for helping me feel as though I could make this anything I wanted it to be and for giving me the time, resources and space to follow my inquiries. This thesis (the process and the product) is a full expression of who I am. And to be completely vulnerable, it is the first thing (other than my children) that I took care of and nurtured with all that I had. I loved it. I truly loved everything about the process and the result. And so, the gratitude extends to myself, for having embarked on and completed something that has affected the trajectory of my life, from the inside out.

My children. I tell them often that they are pieces of my heart living outside of my body. Mostly because I want them to understand, without confusion, that they are unconditionally loved and that I am always with them. There's a sense of home that they have taught me, and I believe this home we have built together is the fundamental

catalyst for the choices I (have) take(n) to care for myself. In my unconditional love for them, I will do everything I can to create space for their existence to be self-directed, as much as possible. And in order for them to feel unconditionally loved while feeling their world can be whatever they want it to be, I have to make sure that I, an element of their foundation, is equally constructed. To be fully supportive of their self-actualization demands that I be fully anchored to who I am. That although we share a home, we are individuals whom are wholly independent and luckily interconnected.

I relish in the perspective that these two girls have unintentionally influenced me. They have, like my writing, been accidental methods of knowing and expressing myself. Which is why gratitude is often a lopsided interchange. My children, Dr. Strong-Wilson, McGill University, my family, my friends, and all the other players have, by living and doing things their own way, unintentionally helped me build my dream house. The gratitude I have for them, that acts like the cement in my foundation, will always be something I feel but that they will only know of. So, I will live with an added purpose of showing them that their existence in my life has been monumental. And that the things that I do, the things that I create, are forever in their honour.

Introduction

Most educational experiences are not formally received

Grumet, 2004

The process

About a year into my Master's degree, I recognized a pattern emerge. Everything that I was drawn to read and write about was focused on how people related to one another. My curiosity was primarily driven by two questions: (1) how are personalities created? and (2) what is it exactly that influences how we act, feel, and perceive?

The art of human interaction has been looked at from various perspectives, such as philosophical, linguistic, psychological, anthropological, sociological, political, and biological. It is a primary theme of song lyrics and literature. Last year alone, the 'personal discovery' industry generated approximately ten billion dollars in the United States.

And I get it. People are looking for new ways of understanding themselves and one another.

I began my studies at McGill University a mere four months after having asked for a divorce. I was estranged from my father for the third time, and I was raising two daughters under the age of five. My most intimate relationships were at stake, initiating a sort of academic call-to-action. Driven as I was to understand what had gone wrong and what I needed to do to make it all right, I sought out guidance to uncover what was unknown to me and to integrate as much as I could.

The breaking down of the human spirit and watching it rebuild itself through the rubble is a most inspiring experience. I highly recommend it.

I embarked, like research that is guided by experience does, on a very unpredictable and extremely rewarding research journey: one that allowed for immense self-discovery and healing as well as a creation of a thesis that can hopefully help explain and thus reduce the relational pain and dysfunction our contemporary culture can often seem to be embedded in.

The theories brought together in these pages help draw a picture to show a basic truth: people need people. We appear to be biologically wired for it, and critically, all aspects of our development are impacted by the quality of our relationships. My original questions of inquiry coupled with the theoretical research resulted in the following two revised research questions: (1) What are we doing that interferes with 'healthy' human development? and (2) What can we do to rehabilitate ourselves as individuals and thus improve our society and contemporary culture?

Within the education community, we care about topics such as victimization and bullying, learning abilities and dysfunctions, and sustainability. Money is spent on curriculum reform and implementation, teacher training, support staff innovations, and technology. All of which are important.

What if?

What if bullying and victimization were products of our contemporary culture? What if the way we understand learning differences is a product of how we learned to value (or not value) human differences? What if instead of developing and implementing

treatments for symptoms of dysfunction, we found ways to locate the root causes and put our attention there?

Could resiliency and connectedness ultimately be what heals relational pain so that our collective human legacy could become kinder, more authentic and fulfilling?

At first, I approached writing the thesis as a life history and an autoethnographic account, situating myself in my cultural upbringing. I had written over a hundred pages of autobiographical anecdotes and over a hundred pages of reflective journaling. And although the methodology supported the research questions, it brought up some ethical complications that provoked further inquiry. Subsequently, I tried my hand at writing a traditional critical literary review to address the research questions. I had made an outline with three sections; the first dealt with sociological and philosophical influences, the second with psychological and neurological reasoning, and the third with somatic integration and healing. I went so far as completing a chapter in the second section about attachment theory. It was a tedious process and I feared that since I was uninspired to write it, people would be under-stimulated when reading it. This evoked two reflective questions: who am I writing this for? What contribution do I want to make?

If by writing my story I am also indirectly addressing my family's story, is it not better to create fictional characters so that I may instead tell a story that incorporates all the theories? My thesis then turned towards the interweaving of theories and data within a fictionalized conversation. It was something my mother said that inspired this format. A conversation during which I was explaining some of the data and its implications for people's general relational health led my mom to say, "It's too bad you can't present this orally." And that's when I thought that using prose was a wonderful way to demonstrate

the accessibility and universality of this research. A conversation between two people at different places in their lives would be an ideal platform from which to relate what I had learned, with the hopes that it could be a seed for growth in its reader. I wanted to tell a relatable story of pain, resilience and relationships.

It was therefore important for me, in an ethical sense, to ensure that I was backing up the claim for resilience by offering the reader theories and data to help in the process of healing. I pull heavily from existentialism, attachment theory, interrelational neuroscience and somatic integration (as well as from other theories in lesser ways) and hope to convey the message that an individual is not alone in her journey for (and of) growth. There is an entire support system that can be found, as is proven by the varied and passionate research being conducted; people in our society whose many ideas can help expand knowledge, skills and approaches to living. This thesis, a conversation between a narrator and a woman, helps demonstrate, and perhaps invites, a person's engagement with data and its effect on how she comes to understand herself.

There is freedom in conversation that I can easily get lost in. I love the back-and-forth of ideas, the subtle pauses and eye rolls, the inflections and speed at which the words leave one mouth and enter another ear. It's a playground rich with emotional reactivity; humans being human together.

We meet the narrator at a very significant time in a person's life that spiritualists, like the Dalai Lama and Eckhart Tolle, call the Awakening. It can also be referred to as a mid-life crisis. It is when you question your existence and purpose.

An established assistant professor at the city's university, the narrator had gotten word that her (secret) virtual mentor would be coming to town on speaking engagements. As the former editor-in-chief of her department of education's journal, she had volunteered to write an article about how teachers can benefit from a spiritual practice; the article was the cover she needed to reach out for help. Vulnerability had been an uncomfortable and avoided state for this woman.

Our narrator sought someone out whom she believed would have answers, despite not actually having any questions or clarity about what to ask. What drives her is what rings true for many others who have shared their story: an unshakeable and pervasive feeling of discomfort and a desire to be relieved from the pain. It's a nagging state of being that starts off quietly and over time amplifies until it overtakes the ease of life. It can intrude on sleep patterns (trouble falling asleep or staying asleep), take over thoughts (rumination, distraction), or cause major conflict in relationships (trouble in professional and/or personal spheres).

In contrast, the other woman, our second character, symbolizes emancipation from pain. She is the representation of what could possibly be the narrator's future. An example of someone who lives her life with integrity by outwardly expressing her principles. She represents the people walking the earth who are self-determined and kind. Because of this, she travels the world sharing the fruits of her knowledge and wisdom. She is a healer.

The thesis, in its attempt to make these ideas accessible, takes the form of a fictional hermeneutic conversation between the narrator and the woman.

What I propose is a simultaneous, two-pronged approach to living. On the one hand, it involves being anchored in one's body of knowledge and accrued memories and schemas. On the other hand, it entails searching for what is elusive and being open to changing one's perceptions and beliefs.

The reasoning

Building on the idea that narratives are intimate and collaborative spaces, rich with the potential for "changing our lives" (Formenti, 2015, p.12), I explore the reach that entry into such spaces can have in effecting change on an individual (e.g., author, reader) and through an individual, more widely: on the relationships in which that individual is involved, in the society in which that individual moves. Using one's own life for inquiring into social progress is very much like what Strong-Wilson, Mitchell, Allnutt & Pithouse-Morgan (2013) refer to as "productive remembering and social action". There is an intent to look "for ways for the past to inform the future" (p. 4); a wish for a better tomorrow so that each today can be more peaceful and joyous requires work to be done about our yesterdays. Such a vivid use of 'imagination + action' is what those entering some sort of therapy often play out. The importance for those working in the education system is that a teacher's past has a significant impact on the development of her students' lives. This is the cycle of human development - our identities grow within the structure of relationships. Indeed, it reaches far beyond the classroom. We all influence one another which furthers the argument that the "interconnections between memory-work and... reflexive study" (Strong-Wilson et al., 2013, p. 2) have social implications that can move us toward a reconstructed way of relating to one another.

As researchers, “our task... is to try to get as close as possible to apprehending, understanding, and rendering elements of a life as it is influenced by and intersects with pervasive and subtle forces or influences of context” (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 71). The use of theories and literature to understand the effects of a lived life offer the potential to ignite a spark for change, or what Annette Kuhn (2000) describes as “revisionist autobiography”. By revisionist autobiography, she means to critically supervise the creation of the self by reflecting on how we construct these narratives of self. In my own case as researcher, the overlapping experiences of remembering and using key theories to frame my past, ignited an ability to revise my self-understanding, to gain a needed perspective on those who played major roles in my life, and to reframe my narrative. The theories in which this thesis is grounded are not located in a separate chapter; rather, they become the subject or focus of the conversation between the narrator and the woman, even as they act as tools that help move that conversation forward.

In my personal pursuit for new knowledge and a rehabilitated truth, my practical goal was to stop the cycle of relational pain that had rooted itself in my and my ex-husband’s families. The sense of responsibility was personal and motivated by a mother’s desire to do right by her children. But to write a thesis about it sprouts from a second sense of responsibility - that of being an active member of the human community.

This sense that individuals have a moral responsibility to act in the interest of the collective stems from *phronesis*, a virtue introduced by Aristotle. Often explained as ‘prudence,’ Aristotle described *phronesis* as “the eye of the soul” (1999, p. 98) for the

good of humanity. Since virtues are the sources of our actions, a deep reflection on our identity, aka. truth, requires us to be clear on how to apply our principles in particular situations (Aristotle, 1999). MacIntyre (1966) explains this by saying that “a man may have excellent principles but not act on them or he may perform just or courageous actions, but not be just or courageous, having acted out of fear or punishment. In each case, he lacks prudence [*phronesis*]” (p. 74).

When we approach a situation or thought with an intentionally open and inquisitive mind, we can interrupt our everyday thinking process. We do what Schön (1992) suggests by using reflection to know-in-action and to converse-with-the-situation. *Phronesis* trains our ‘soul’s eye’ to look for ways to better exemplify our principles and what we desire for our collective human experience by making all necessary changes. According to Socrates, in the dialogue “Gorgias” (Plato, 1967), the most important lesson for human beings to learn is how we ought to live. What form of life do we want to pass on to children, and is this form of life good for the children?

Our role models can help us monitor the relationship between our virtues and our actions. They can act as our external *phronesis* until we have internalized our lessons well. Zagzebski (1996) explains the importance of role models to help us to know “how persevering one should be to be persevering, how careful one should be to be careful, how self-sufficient one should be to be autonomous” (p. 271). In the throes of growth, where things are unclear, we need someone as our sounding board, someone who has developed a deeper and more expansive sense of *phronesis*. If not, we can fall prey to stagnation or false growth, as seen in those who can talk the talk but who have not well-developed the walk.

The understanding and acceptance of how one came to be is empowering and may be what allows one to re-become.

There is a sequence to growth that my research sought to highlight. Each moment, from the time we are born, is as if collected. Experiences become bits of information integrated by our brains and minds and bodies, which eventually inform our truth, or what Sartre (2007) calls our subconscious and conscious selves. What is our truth? Different for everyone, it is all the little and big proofs we gather along the way to arrive at conclusions ('biases') about what things and people are. It is how we make meaning of everything. Searle (1995) described this as our 'background' knowledge, a general know-how which allows us to function in everyday life. Frederic Bartlett (1958) referred to these clusters of knowledge as schemas and his work in memory shows that even the act of remembering is itself influenced by our attitudes, interests and social standards. Our lives are constructed but also are limited by our understandings, interpretations, beliefs, desires and experiences since it is these elements of our 'everyday thinking' that fill in perceived gaps of information.

When these ways of understanding and being are challenged, we come to a proverbial fork-in-the-road. We are faced with an opportunity to interrupt our 'everyday thinking'. The way in which we understand things is such that we look for confirmation of our biases, and that in seeing (so-called) 'proofs', we reinforce our understandings (Bartlett, 1958). Life, therefore, becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Challenging our truth is intentional and slow work. What is required is a heightened policing of perceptions, beliefs and actions. A constant questioning of validity and context, always moving towards the version of ourselves we are trying to

become. This necessitates seeking what is unknown, sourced in 'other', in both ideas and people. By engaging with life in these intentionally open and inquisitive ways, by reflecting on our practices to incorporate the 'new', we can reframe our 'everyday thinking' process.

Methodology and Representation

The methodological approach in the thesis is two-fold: it is a narrative (a fiction) and it is a fiction in the form of a hermeneutic conversation. While the thesis departs from typical formats, its originality of interweaving theories and data directly into a narrative has the distinct intent of providing a hermeneutic experience. Gadamer (1960/1998) refers to a hermeneutic conversation as a critical process, in which experience leads to knowledge. The following section will address and unpack the narrative, the hermeneutic conversation, and the use of a fictional hermeneutic conversation as a methodology.

Narratives

We find ourselves in stories and we come to know ourselves in new and multifaceted ways by becoming intimate with the characters on the page. And while words bring our imagination to life, it is our own sense of self and of the world we live in that gives meaning to the story. It can be through this process that we come face-to-face with shadowy spaces we have yet to explore.

Goodson and Gill (2011) explain that "narrating and constructing narrative forms [are] an important part of a learning process of transforming understanding" (p. 58). Such forms can help explore "in what ways a person's narrative character can be a

vehicle or a hindrance in his or her... meaning-making” (p. 56). As researchers, “our task... is to try to get as close as possible to apprehending, understanding, and rendering elements of a life as it is influenced by and intersects with pervasive and subtle forces or influences of context” (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 71). By coming face-to-face with hidden impactful experiences and acknowledging that “identity is a question” (Formenti, 2015, p. 15), narratives can become a tool for both author and reader to “move forward into new spaces, into new identities, new relationships, new, radical forms of scholarship, new epiphanies” (Denzin, 2014, p. 67). This allows for opportunities of interconnectivity, empathy, compassion, respect, support, patience, forgiveness, and acceptance for our self and for others.

Here, in the thesis, reading the intersection of these two characters’ lives (the narrator and woman) can become a catalyst for growth. The reflection that follows on connecting with a story can become an act of understanding our life’s context in turn because we “listen to what... stories tell us” (Hampl, 1999, p. 33). The themes that come up when remembering can help us understand where our own perspectives originate from. Eber Hampton (1995) insists that what we remember, and the feelings associated with the memory itself and in the act of remembering, hold insight as to who we are. The overlapping experiences of remembering and using key theories to (re)frame a past ignites a desire to revise our self-understanding and perspectives of people who played major roles in our life, and to rewrite our overall narrative.

Hermeneutic Conversation

The selection of theories interwoven into this narrative thesis constitute my virtues in action; my *phronesis*. The integrity of the research depends on the integrity of

the researcher. What is it that is propelling me to dedicate a portion of my life to research? Will I be contributing to the greater good? Why have I chosen this to research? How have I come to have my perceptions in the first place? In which ways do I value this research? Should I revise or not revise my perspective? The theories were discovered in investigating the research questions: (1) What are we doing that interferes with 'healthy' human development? and (2) What can we do to rehabilitate individuals and improve our society and contemporary culture?

The decision to make the inquiry public in the form of a narrative, with an emphasis on a fictionalized conversation, was due in part to the universal, simple relational act of speech. Storytelling is what humans naturally do—talking, sharing, watching, teaching. From birth, this is how we learn. We learn from each other and we evolve through our relationships. I wanted this thesis to be an extension of those fundamentals of human development. By interweaving theories into a conversation, I could demonstrate how we can use research to address cultural issues from the ground up, in everyday ways.

Though I will not address in great length the theoretical understanding and evaluation of language in this thesis, it is an important angle for social understanding and healing. I want to thus briefly touch upon the delicacy of the structure of dialogue. The spoken word is a symbolic representation of one's internal workings (Searle, 1995). Feelings, emotions, and certain thoughts precede the spoken word and exist independently. However, we are social animals and have developed tools for interacting over time, such as, but not limited to, language. We learn language within socio-cultural contexts. A practice of critical self-reflection makes us aware of the mental constructs

that produce the specific words we choose to symbolically represent our feelings, emotions, and thoughts in the social sphere. Searle (1995) makes a distinction between language-independent-thought and language-dependent-thought. This distinction can be an important lens to use during critical reflection. It can help separate that which is innate from that which is conditioned – i.e. could I have thought this had I never learned any words?

A hermeneutic dialogue allows for shared meaning making. It has the capacity to shed a light on the unknown, to strengthen knowledge already in place, and to influence behaviours and choices. The methodology used in this thesis represents an approach to exploring how “truth” can be understood, and how individuals create meaning through conversation (viz., language). Gadamer speaks at length in his book *Truth and Method* (1960/1998) about the power of conversation as a method for exploring truth. He describes the hermeneutic conversation as a tool we can use to understand ourselves and others.

To be considered a hermeneutic conversation, certain elements must be present. There are the participants, which Gadamer calls interlocutors. They must enter and be present during the conversation with a hermeneutic awareness of their constructed and limited knowledge and bring enough humility to foster an openness and a willingness to learn from the other.

The thought that initiates the hermeneutic conversation is phenomenologically situated. It represents the bias of the asker. A hermeneutic conversation, however, is dependent on the individual’s ability to hold space for herself (her own perceptions), for the other (other’s perceptions), and for the subject matter (which is common to both,

and neutral in its existence yet mediated through our own interpretations and thus, biased): “All understanding is interpretation, and all interpretation takes place in the medium of a language that allows the object (subject matter) to come into words and yet is at the same time the interpreter’s own language” (Gadamer, 1960/1998, p. 389).

One’s ability to be subjectively objective constitutes empathy at its core. It is not about being able to put yourself in someone else’s shoes, it is about extending permission to be exactly who you are to oneself and to all. When one can be in this space, a potentially infinite “horizon of consciousness” (p. 212) becomes possible where everyone’s experience can be considered valid.

In *Conversations: Hermeneutic Inquiry Unearthing Pedagogic Relations* (2006), Kevin Wood writes that “as the path leads, the inquiry unfolds, and that which was unseen, may be made visible. Hermeneutic inquiry follows a force that moves one ‘down a path’ but there is much unseen, much to unearth in order to bring about understanding” (p. 17). Wood stipulates that hermeneutic inquiry is a type of questioning that unearths the essence or nature of a topic. The hermeneutic conversation, as Gadamer puts it, “has a spirit of its own” and allows “something to emerge” (1960/1998, p. 327), which becomes the bridge between what is known and what has yet to be understood. A conversation is a tool for (self-)awareness and subsequent (self-)analysis and (self-)discovery. This art of inquiry is a cycle of questioning and reflection, offering perspectives on the subject matter to create a deeper understanding.

Understanding can realize its full potential after the individual approaches the subject matter with the intent to build upon her prior knowledge, rather than seeking evidence to change her mind. “A person trying to understand... is prepared for it to tell

him something. That is why a hermeneutically trained consciousness must be, from the start, sensitive to “the possibility of what will be found in what is being presented” (Gadamer, 1960/1998, p. 238). A hermeneutic consciousness is having a dual system for knowledge: on the one hand you are aware of what you know, and simultaneously aware that there are other ways to know what you know. It is the readiness to expand your current self by being comfortable in the tension between what *is* interpreted versus what *can* be interpreted. The hermeneutic relation between the narrator and the other woman in the present thesis constitutes a dwelling together. In unearthing her teacher, the narrator is acknowledging and acting out the element of knowing-she-does-not-know. It is the conflict between both characters’ knowledge that creates an outlet for new insights and their conversing breaks open the limits of what she once believed to be possible. This invites a deeper understanding with the inclusion of ‘other’ theories to help construct a new horizon of perspective.

Gadamer also talks about conversation as a kind of Socratic dialogue, which this narrative very much is. He writes that in a Socratic dialogue, where the teacher guides understanding through intentional questioning, the student can “pursue what consistently follows from the subject matter” and “bring out what lies in it. It is the thing itself that asserts its force,” but only if the student relies “entirely on the power of thought and disregard[s] obvious appearances and opinions” (1960/1998, p. 383). In this narrative, the other woman acts as a kind of Socrates and the narrator is (both) a resistant and open ‘learner’ with respect to this subject that concerns her closely. The hermeneutic inquirer (our narrator) is seeking to live better. It is as if hermeneutics encourages interconnectedness between understanding and living (*phronesis*), and

once the hermeneutic scholar finds understanding, her being-in-the-world will evolve, and her living will become more informed and reflective. On Gadamer's terms, we seek to study that which is familiar in some sense; something we have 'lived' through. But the reason we inquire is because we crave more understanding, more awareness, and more meaning. We wish to know more about our place, our experience, and our being.

From a hermeneutic perspective, a conversation concerns a subject that is also of interest to both interlocutors (Gadamer, 1960/1998), which is aptly demonstrated by the two characters in this thesis' narrative. We witness the evolution of new understanding. The two women come together because they are ready for such an experience. This translates, over their days of conversing, into a greater openness to "hermeneutic consciousness" (Gadamer, 1960/1998, p. 362). Our narrator takes a leap of faith and follows her drive for understanding. It is when she recognizes, accepts and takes actions that she exemplifies "the knowledge of not knowing" (p. 362). The evolution of her questions follows the spirit of the Socratic conversation. Her questions reveal the ambiguity of the subject matter ("her" research questions) and her openness, despite her biases, to what is possible, for what can be true (Gadamer, 1960/1998). She learns how, as Gadamer puts it, to ask a question "rightly" (p. 363). She develops the skill of constructing the kind of question that invites knowledge, which represents the Socratic dialectic.

As so eloquently put by Bojesen (2018), "we interrupt ourselves by means of conversation" (p. 8).

Constructing Narratives

The narrative is the form in which I chose to present the questions and problems that arose during the hermeneutic conversation; narrative, in the form of a fictional conversation, offered an opportunity for meaning-making leading to transformation (or healing). Barone termed this qualitative research process a “narrative construction” (2007, p. 456), meaning a textual arrangement that synthesizes a collection of data. The data in this case consists of my literature review (reading deeply about various theories) as well as a process of autobiographical writing. A narrative construction methodology widens the breadth of readership (Barone, 2007). It allows an opportunity to address adversities found in the formal education system, but that are also rooted in, and pertain to, our wider contemporary culture. It can portray a fork-in-the road and introduce remedies applicable in the functioning of the society, which in turn can affect the workings of the education system.

Barone (2007) brought up interesting concerns that question the integrity of narratives in educational research, one of them being that despite “the democratic impulse of narrativists to rectify historical wrongs... how do we judge whether a particular narrative construction is useful?” (p. 463). The answer, he suggests, lies in recognizing that a narrative serves a different function than more traditional methodologies. A second answer is that its untraditional format simply breaks through the mundane, even expected, flow of research, and in its novelty, has the “power to lift the veil of conventionality... subtly rais[ing] disturbing questions about the necessity and desirability of comfortable, familiar, educational discourses and practices” (Barone, 2007, p. 465). Socialization and conditioning are present in research communities as well. Acceptance, or even welcoming, of non-traditional approaches to understanding

educational phenomena are necessary, rebellious acts against predetermined parameters of growth. In Gadamer's eyes, limiting how we question (and restricting how we define 'appropriate answers') reduces our "horizon of understanding." His suggestion to use conversation as a valid methodology emanates from his belief that hermeneutic understanding begins with the resistance to the universalizing claim of scientific knowledge (Gadamer, 1960/1998).

The Characters, The Setting, The Plot, The Conflict, and The Resolution

Amongst those who walk the path of resilience, there are some who actively seek guidance to heal themselves. They have accepted their role as the curer of their pain and are prepared to learn how to rehabilitate old truths. Our narrator represents the people who want to feel better yet are skeptical of its possibility and are protective of themselves. She will challenge and resist change because she requires convincing before consciously accepting what she subconsciously knows: that she alone has the power to admit that the challenges in her life are unnecessary and it is time to rehabilitate herself. The narrator reminds us that fear is a powerful emotion.

Because we watch her experiencing these changes as she is experiencing them, she is unable, as the narrator of this story, to explain her feelings and conflicting thoughts. It often reads as though she is fluctuating. But the inconsistencies are to highlight that the metamorphosis period is a struggle between the mind and the heart, between the brain and the body, between tomorrow and yesterday. It is a struggle between the authentic and the conditioned, and it is not a linear path. She is meant to remind us that humans are messy. We aren't always able to consistently act on our

moral beliefs and sometimes our emotions make us appear illogical to others who try to understand and classify us.

Building on the ideas that people need people, and that we develop within relationships, the second character—the other woman—acts as the narrator's role model. She is someone the narrator believed possesses the traits she desired to embody. The adage fake it till you make it is rooted in Aristotle's writings that the way to become virtuous is to mimic a virtuous person. We need partners to help us enact the changes we want to make. People with whom we can practice our new ways of thinking and acting are important. We need people who help us express who we are, and also to help us continuously become who we could be by reminding us of the malleable limits of our selves. Our uniqueness enriches the collective and the matching of the narrator and the woman is that story.

At times, you may notice that the narrator's self-description is plainly and painfully obvious, as though thought by a child. Though the use of inference would be more fun for the reader, I opted for this style of writing to make explicit that we think and feel in simple and concrete ways.

Using this character as the narrator allowed me to explore how a person's private self is not necessarily brought out in a dyad. The narrator allows us to understand aspects of her personality and relating style that wouldn't otherwise be showcased if this story were told from the other character's perspective. In doing so, the reader can develop a fuller and deeper conceptualization of this character's layered reality, further highlighting the complexity of an individual's existence.

Oftentimes, the other woman speaks for long periods. As the teacher in this dyad, there are reasons for imparting knowledge without engagement from her student, which is why some portions read more informatively and less narratively. Those sections of the narrative are interwoven with the extensive research and literature review I did in neuroscience and biology, subjects that are less familiar to the narrator, but essential to the overarching theme of resilience.

In the first chapter, the narrator confesses that she has an internal voice that she calls Mal. In French, *mal* means bad or evil; however, if used as an adverb it means hurt. We all have internal voices that act like a governing body over our thoughts and behaviours—a sort of judge to keep us in line. For the narrator, Mal has had a somewhat constrictive and pessimistic opinion. Throughout the narrative, thoughts written in italics are Mal's voice, the narrator's co-pilot. Mal demonstrates in obvious ways that we each have conflicts and struggles within ourselves, and sometimes despite ourselves.

The inspiration to use the name Mal came from my youngest daughter, whose favourite literary character in the Disney franchise called the Descendants is Mal (Taylor, & Ortega, 2015). Mal, the daughter of Maleficent from the story of Sleeping Beauty, and the other children of the evil characters in the land, had been banished to live on an island. The newly appointed king, Ben, wants to bring them to the mainland, believing that children should not be punished for what their parents have done.

As Mal and her three friends acclimate to their new culture, we watch her slowly leave behind her old tendencies of treating others negatively. She begins to trust again -

to trust herself and her new friends. In the movie, we watch her learn and grow through her new relationships.

Considering that this story is being told from the narrator and Mal's perspective, it is important to remember that what is woven between the dialogue is the narrator's interpretation of the situation. We are privy to her bias. In chapters 2 and 3, I explore the concept of perspective using theories from philosophy, psychology, and neurology to go into some depth as to how we make meaning of ourselves and the social sphere we occupy.

Each day's conversation is a segment of the long and quiet road of personal evolution. I took what I had learned over the last four and a half years, all the little and large lessons, the formal and informal ones, and tried to organize them in a coherent way. There were many attempts at writing these chapters, and their order was rearranged several times. A first attempt was to assign a theory to each chapter, but it created a contrived conversation. It seemed much more realistic to have the flow of the conversation dictate how the theories would be used and so the theories are sprinkled throughout the chapters as needed. The result, inadvertently, is a conversation that can be categorized in two parts: the first few chapters explain how we become who we are, and the second part showcases how we can heal ourselves, thus addressing the two research questions.

As readers, we are privy to observe an evolution of intimacy, both between the women and between the narrator with herself. Either type of relational intimacy is built over time due to repeated exposure, deeper trust, and a commitment to weathering whatever comes up. Each conversation invites the women to explore ideas and

perspectives, some of which require our narrator to expose herself and then to critically reflect. The other woman, who is grounded in this way of being, creates a safe space for our narrator to take her first steps to a revised way of being. Her ability to not take things personally allows an objective space for the narrator to explore from. And a lack of making things personal means there are no expectations. As the narrator begins the process, we notice her letting go of the armour she wore, which was once an essential tool for her protection and growth. Oftentimes, these two types of intimacy feed the other; as the level of intimacy with oneself deepens it oftentimes allows for greater intimacy with others, and vice versa. Where in the beginning the narrator engaged with the other woman from a professional standpoint, as her personal self develops, their ways of relating become more intimate as well. Their conversations become more personally revealing and their interactions become supportive.

The characters are loose representations of who I am and who I have been. I drew inspiration for the narrator from friends and family members who were skeptical of the changes I was making during my own transformation. The 'other woman', however, is created more closely to how I currently think and speak, although I took literary liberties for both characters. This thesis is not meant to be an autobiography. Nor a memoir, although the characters and the development of the narrator are birthed from my life.

Although I use a narrative as my format, the setting has minimal importance. Apart from the first day which takes place in the narrator's office at the university, the women meet for daily conversations in the narrator's home, most of them taking place in her living room. Meeting in her office was purposefully chosen because it was a way for

the narrator to set the tone for their talks. She wanted it to be on her turf, which evoked for her a certain degree of empowerment. She knew she was about to embark on a highly vulnerable journey, and meeting in her office, at a job in which she excelled at, allowed her to feel as though she had some say in how this was going to develop. She could draw from the confidence she had amassed over the years as a university assistant professor to prove to herself, and this woman, that despite having existential questions she had not squandered away her life.

Because of the events that take place during the first chapter, the narrator quickly realized that meeting in her office included a visibility that she did not care for. Being walked in on by a colleague amid a mini breakdown was enough for her to see that the depths their conversations would take her to were too sensitive for public viewing. She suggested that they meet in her home, also on her turf, which would allow for a degree of privacy she relished more than the empowerment her office offered.

The story does not involve much physical action. Instead it explicitly demonstrates the intellectual, physiological, verbal, and emotional aspects of this rite of passage. Meeting in her living room proves to be both a comfort and a vulnerability for the narrator. This is to symbolically mirror the potential states in deep human relationships.

A focus of the thesis is to highlight a universal human experience: conflict and resolution. As previously mentioned, the narrator contacted the woman because she had been encountering some internal conflict and was searching for relief. In the months preceding their meeting, our narrator had stumbled upon the woman online, and had begun to read her articles, listen to her interviews, and watch her YouTube videos.

Then came the day, after accumulating enough evidence, she knew she could safely engage with her and so she made contact. Over the course of five days, their conversation covers themes and theories, and attempts to scaffold the information in an accessible manner for both the narrator and for anyone reading this thesis. Although each woman has other obligations, their synergy is most compelling, and their meetings easily become a priority. Conversations had within the safety of secure relationships are effective ways that our typical modes of operation are tacitly and explicitly challenged. And reading another's process can be equally effective.

Please read this story knowing that “stories, like the lives they tell about, are always open-ended, inconclusive, and ambiguous subject to multiple interpretations... for there is no way to stuff a real-live person between the two covers of a text” (Denzin, 2014, p. 6). The magic of the ‘bridge’ is that “a story that is told is never the same story that is heard. Each teller speaks from a biographical position that is unique and, in a sense, unshareable. Each hearer of a story hears from a similarly unshareable position” (Denzin, 2014, p. 55). In the spirit of hermeneutic consciousness, the conversations are intended to arrive at a common subject matter that can help shed light on the characters’ lives (and especially, that of the narrator). This happens even as the characters come to recognize and claim their interpretations, thus taking responsibility for the lives they choose to lead.

Chapter 1: Monday

"You seem to be like an open book," he tells her.

"Well, we all have layers. People are like buildings with lots of floors. When we meet, we all get in at the top. There's lots of light, an open floor plan. It's nice."

"How many floors do you have?"

"I don't know but it's more than I am aware of. I keep finding hidden passageways, little nooks. We all do. It's a question of if we're willing or able to go exploring without getting lost or stuck."

Stephanie Katz, 2018, unpublished personal writing

"Have you met her yet?"

The crosswind rustles the papers on my desk, and as the door to my office closes I look out the window. Wisps of clouds woven across the blue make it impossible to see the sun in its entirety. He's standing to my left and places his hands on my desk.

"Well? Have you? I hear she's asked about you too."

I'm not sure why I'm avoiding eye contact but as long as I stare out the window there is space to breathe.

"Hello?"

My head jerks up.

"She has office hours until 10, if you can get here by then..." he trails off. My internal voice, I call her Mal, is chastising him for answering my phone, especially since he knows how much it irks me when people do things 'for me', just assuming I want it done. "I'm sure she'll have time for you," he's smiling now in the same way he does when we're flipping channels and come upon one of his favourite movies. He places the receiver back on the console and he's showing me all his teeth now. I know he wants me to join in his bubbly excitement, but annoyance and pride hold my ground. I raise my

eyes to his, and my expression tells him that there's only a small window for him to speak before I do something to erase his eagerness.

"She's on her way, like, right now," his words fall onto my desk and lay in disarray, like a mosaic that hasn't yet been put together. Colours and shapes dance upon my desk, and my imagination takes me to that place where she and I are friends, and we are sitting together in silence, having already said all there is to say.

He puts his hand on my shoulder and I jerk hard enough to shake loose, an instinct I know hurts him. I can't help it. I just don't like being casually touched, not even by him. I drop my gaze to my hands that are in my lap, and the whites of my knuckles mean I've had them clenched for some time.

"Well, she's on her way. You had better get ready to wow her. Like you say, *come out of the gate already cruising.*" He doesn't usually speak to me like this, intentionally cutting into my insecurities to see how much I'll bleed. I watch as his back disappears into the hallway. I wonder why he sticks around because I seem to leave him exponentially in worse spirits. *How long does it take someone to lose hope? How long does it take a happy person to become infected with realism?*

I stare back out the window to find that the wisps of clouds have joined hands and made unidentifiable shapes over the blue. They're moving rapidly, the wind having picked up, turning the sky into a dance floor. Is Mother Nature trying to tell me something? I smirk ever-so-slightly, thinking that's something *She* would ask.

"Knock knock," she's layered her voice over the soft rap—rap—rap of her fingers strumming the wood. I stare at her from my chair, taking her profile in, painting a portrait

in my mind. Her short brown curls frame her face, giving her a Shirley Temple-like attraction. Her eyes smile, which instantaneously have me unclench my hands. Her blue dress mimics the blue in her eyes, which are still smiling at me as she walks towards me. I feel the heat rise and I know that my cheeks are betraying me. *Small talk is the worst*, Mal teases me and I feel as though She and I will never get far enough to ever become friends.

She takes my hand in hers and holds it in such a way that I feel we've done this before. For the second time, she demonstrates her ability to affect my body's sensations. *She may be a witch, or at least dabble in the art of alchemy*. We stand face-to-face, though I'm a good four inches taller than she is and I let out a short chuckle, enjoying the irony; *she seems so much bigger than I feel*.

"I am crazy excited to be with you!! Finally!!" Her voice is just like on the phone and in her interviews and from her podcast, easy and light, dancing through the soundwaves and into my ears. Something is different about hearing her in person, though, and I am overcome with a sense of fullness. For the first time in my life I don't fight being absorbed into someone else's space. I can't describe the feeling well, but it's the same as when you dive down under the surface of the water and you look down so that all you see is nothing; you are surrounded by the infinite. And the sounds you hear are both far away and up real close. And you're baffled by not needing to take a breath to stay alive.

She turns away, and for a split moment my stomach tightens, and my mouth goes dry. I instinctively think she's leaving, that *being in her presence for a minute or two is all I'll ever be afforded*. I watch her move towards the small couch that's tucked

against the back wall of my office. She slides her dress under her and sits on her legs, leaving her feet jutting out. *How can one person smile with her eyes for this long?*

I desperately want to sit back down in my chair. There's a sort of intimacy the couch will offer us, and I don't think we've earned that yet.

"What a view," she says as she scans the room. "And the clouds are just magnificent, right?!" I let out a sound. It's a mixture of acknowledging that she's spoken and confirming that we both appreciate the beauty of the sky.

"It's odd to meet someone you feel as though you already know well," her body is still and silently drawing me over to the couch, where I sit cross-legged beside her. There isn't much room, it being a two—cushion couch, and our knees are almost touching. I wonder if she notices, and if she's going to scooch backwards. Instead she leans in, smiles with her whole face and sings, "hi," a playful melody that has me smiling with her. Third demonstration.

"Are you teaching today?" she asks me. I can tell she's being genuine because she emanates curiosity. I mean, on her podcast and in her interviews and in her writings, she herself proclaims to be a curious person, so maybe I'm projecting onto the real-life her. *Maybe she's just killing time until ten am rolls around.* This way she can tell people she tried to connect with me, but we just didn't have enough time.

"I, ah—I am," is what I utter.

"Ah, what course?"

"Um, well, today it's an undergrad course, English literature for elementary-aged kids."

Her face lights up. *Really? English lit excites you?* She claps her hands a few times, as though her whole body must join in with her face's liveliness. "Oh, I loved assembling the fifty-title assignment when I took the course, back in the late '90's. I remember sitting on the floor in the children's section of the Cote-St-Luc library. I remember imagining to myself that people must think it pretty weird to see a grown woman without a child, pulling off all those books from the shelves, just sitting there and reading them all." Smile intact, she laughs. She has become one of those people watching her younger self and I am struck by how vulnerable she is in real life. *She leaves herself open to ridicule* but mesmerizes you with her enthusiasm.

"Will you tell me about the content of the course? What types of students you have? How does the time pass?" She bites her lower lip and pulls the corners of her mouth outwardly. "Yikes, sorry. I have the tendency to ask lots of questions when I'm excited. Feel free to pick which one you want to answer."

"Ummm," nothing comes to mind and I panic for a second because what am I supposed to say to this woman? *Anything I say will be mundane and will surely come across as though I don't care about her questions.*

"Haha, I get it. Silly questions. It's just that I can get quite into things that seem to have little importance. People fascinate me. I can talk about the human condition until my last breath." And there it is - the opening for me to jump on in and ask her how she is who she is.

"Well that's a great segue to what I want to talk to you about. Why people?" I sit there, hands back in my lap, waiting for her to open the blinds so that I can see everything behind the curtain. I imagine endless amounts of shelves with colourful

boxes stacked upon them, each one containing ideas and words and memories. Each box a window into who this person on the couch with me is.

She laughs big, as her head arches backward, and I feel foolish. I've been waiting for this moment for years and my opening question is two words!! My cheeks betray me once again, but her smile forces me to maintain eye contact.

"What a great question!! Haha, of all the amazing things to be interested in, right?!", she claps again, rests her hands on her knees and as she ponders her answer, I notice that her breath lengthens, abnormally.

"You've changed the way you're breathing." The words escape my mouth before Mal has a chance to lock them up, you know, for my own good.

Her expression changes from joy to... well, I'm not sure.

"You don't know what it means to me that you noticed," her voice softer than before. I am surprised at her answer. I've never witnessed such a gentle response to experiencing my observational skills.

"Well, I've been described as an astute observer. It's served me well in the qualitative research I've done over the years."

"I bet it has. As for me, I'm recovering from a deeply-rooted belief that I'm not important - not of value, so when someone notices something that is unequivocally 'me', I feel seen. It's a rare interchange, and even less common amongst people who have known each other a long time. It's just the way our brains are wired. We simply categorize that person as someone we already know, and so we stop paying attention. We stop wanting to learn new things about them cuz our brain has already stored them

in the lower half, into our monkey brains, the part that's automated (Tatkin, 2016a, 2016b)."

My heart rate quickens and my skin tingles because here I am, the moment has come. She has said something so profound and so elusive, but this time she's sharing the same air as me. And my suspicions are turning out to be spot-on. She is both wise and happy. She has survived trauma and is comfortable in her own skin. And now I can ask her what I've been aching to know. I want to know how to be her.

"So, your brain really does dictate the way you interact with another person? I thought it was socialization that did that."

"It's pretty amazing how closely intertwined socialization and brain development occur, like root beer and ice cream." I stare at her, *I mean, who uses a root beer float as a simile?!?! "You can try to isolate the two, but once they've been put into the same space, they become something new. It's no longer ice cream and root beer, it's a root beer float. Think of Gestalt (Sharps & Wertheimer, 2000). The sum being greater than its parts. A human being is more than just psychology - just philosophy - biology - neurology - sociology - ecology - etc. A human being is the result of all these things. That's why a holistic approach to growth is the only way to go. It's not the quickest, but it really is the only way. You can't segregate - I mean you can, of course, but if you do, you run the risk of waking up years later and finding out that your body is really sick, or that you've closed yourself off from ideal love. You're looking outwardly for the right 'fix', when what you really needed to do was assemble your own pieces to make your whole, you know, finish the puzzle. Hmmm, maybe not finish the puzzle, not in all people's cases. Sometimes it's more like removing all the puzzle pieces that got mixed in by*

accident. YES! That's it! Life has a way of adding puzzle pieces to your box and then it's up to you to get rid of those extra pieces so that your whole is so clear, the picture can be seen from outer space!"

"Ok, pause. I need to digest cuz you've said... a lot."

"Hihihi, yeah, there's a lot to unpack, but the amazing thing is once you have, you've got the foundation of knowledge and then you're only adding beautiful ways of understanding."

"Please stop talking. I can't..." I get up. I can't sit anymore. My body can't digest in this position. I can't even swallow. I grip the edge of my desk and let my head hang. I'm trying to make sense of what she's said. I'm trying to think of my life in those categories... *what's my life's philosophy? Do I have an ecology? Am I really a greater sum than my parts? Do I have extra puzzle pieces?* My head is swimming and part of me thinks she may be a bit nuts. I mean, she's brilliant and happy, but I can barely make sense of what she's saying, *and it's only been, what, five minutes. How does this make sense in her own head?* I don't think I can keep up with her.

My office door swings open and my colleague stops short of entering the room. "Um, are you ok?" I turn my head to see him standing there and as the passing seconds indicate I'm missing something, he adds "Your class started five minutes ago and the students are getting antsy."

"Shit," I mumble. "Shit," I say as I gather papers off my desk into a makeshift pile. "Shit," I gasp as I look back at the couch. She's smiling with her eyes again, and the corners of her mouth join in.

“I’m here for another week, if you want to spend more time together.” She walks over to my desk and I can tell by the way she’s locked into my eyes that she’s a hugger. I make no motion toward her so instead she puts her hand on my arm and tells me, “I had a most incredible time with you. I feel as though I drank twenty cups of green tea!” I watch as her back disappears into the hallway and I finally exhale, not realising that I’ve been holding my breath since I gasped. I also realise that I didn’t shake her hand off my arm. I didn’t even flinch.

Chapter 2: Tuesday

“The greatest obstacle to discovery is not ignorance—it is the illusion of knowledge”

Daniel Boorstin, 1984

“How does one become a butterfly?” she asked. “You must want to fly so much that you are willing to give up being a caterpillar”

Trina Paulus, 2014

“But how does that make sense?!” I’ve gotten out of my seat and am moving away from her, an invisible repulsion and I need space, as though the coming-to-terms is sourced from outside of myself.

“I’m telling you, it makes total sense.” She is still resting her arms on the back of the oversized chair. She positioned herself there twenty-five minutes ago and has been staring at a framed photograph I took of some street art in my neighbourhood. “I just 1000% love the blending of mediums in this piece. There’s creativity in all the right places,” she chuckles, as she does when she says something with hints of disbelief and wonder. I’m coming to learn this about her.

“Yeah, yeah,” my attempt to swat away her distraction is pointless - it’s me who’s bidding for time.

“The brain is plastic. We know now from imaging technologies like fMRIs that the brain’s structure can change (Boyd, 2015; McEwen, 2001; Siegel, 1999). We can alter the pathways our neurons had, and create new synapses, heck we can even create new neurons! But that really comes with practice. ‘What fires together, wires together’ and so you can give your brain a new way of operating by doing things differently.” She’s repositioning herself to sit with her legs draped over the arm of the chair. “But

change is hard. You really have to want to be different... as though there isn't any other option for you. And you must believe that you can be resilient. You have to trust that things can be different, and that you will figure out how to do that." She leans her head back and her curls fall over the other armrest. She is both open and being cradled, like a child. "Otherwise when the tire slips back into the old trail's groove—and it will—and if you leave the tire in the groove, your brain will go back to firing the way it used to. You'll lose any progress you've made if you stop retraining your brain (Boyd, 2015)." The words spill onto my living room floor, a cacophony of syllables that have me scrunching my face in the raucous timber of their movement.

"Brain rehab? Aren't you just who you are? Your likes and dislikes, how happy or angry you are, your level of patience, whether you're an optimist or a pessimist, it's your genetic makeup, no? Like, after a certain age, aren't you just destined for some sort of outcome?"

"Well, it isn't just your genes. Nurture is involved in developing one's personality too (Fisher, 2009; see also Bleidorn, Kandler, Riemann, Angleitner, & Spinath, 2012; Bowlby, 1977a, 1977b; Davidson, 2004; Hopwood et al., 2011; Howe, 2011; Perris & Andersson, 2000; Siegel, 1999). And if you consider that your personality is shaped by what is out of your control and at the hands of the 'other': your family, your culture, the economic or political state of your geographic location... then your personality can be (re)shaped by you. It's possible."

I can feel my upper chest begin to heave, hyperventilation settling in. I am confronted by the truth that in all these years I have argued fervently in favor that

changing is impossible. *And she's making a compelling argument against that. Watch out.*

When I regain the sharpness in my vision, she is patiently waiting for me, no expression on her face, none other than of stillness.

"Have you heard about Dr. Achor's results?"

"You mean positive psychology?" I ask as I roll my eyes. Here we go, she's swallowed the yellow pill and we're going down the rabbit hole.

"Yes!" she turns and claps her hands as she faces me. "Even psychology has a branch dedicated to rewiring the brain for happiness. Some adults, and I would argue most of us in the western hemisphere, must be RE-taught how to cultivate joy and, more importantly, how to connect to their genetic ability to be happy. Our culture has either taken it for granted, or gravely underestimated its role in a society's success."

I can't really argue with her, I mean, in a very real way I wanted to meet her because I envied her display of happiness.

"Wait, though, happiness is genetic?"

"Yes. Humans are all born with emotions (Davidson, 2004; Kohler et al., 2004). And happy is one of them."

"Uh-uh." I shift in my seat. "Um, just out of curiosity, what are the others?"

"There's also sadness, fear and anger. You can throw disgust in there too, a la movie *Inside Out*¹ (Rivera, Docter, & del Carmen, 2015)."

"That's it? What about frustrated and surprised and stressed?"

¹ *Inside Out* is an animated movie by Pixar that, using research from developmental psychology and memory work, tells a story of how we have a 'control center' in our minds from where our five emotions guide our thoughts and behaviours. The movie also suggests that we have 'personality islands' that represent our core beliefs. The core beliefs and the five emotions all work together in creating the individual.

“Those are subsets of the universal four. Emotions and feelings are super fun to talk about.”

“Uhuh, well, maybe we’ll come back to that later.”

She nods her head, but I can tell that she’s doubtful. She really is a dazzling person to look at, and perhaps part of her charm is that she always seems to be thinking something she doesn’t say.

“Well, Shawn Achor (2017a) found that if you change your habits and adopt a growth mindset, then you can move away from your genes, your environment and your childhood experiences. His work shows that you can have a different life.

“He said that the researchers in Positive Psychology found that 90% of our long-term happiness is how your brain processes the world you find yourself in (Achor, 2017b; see also Watkins, 2012). And well, my dear, that’s all perception. That’s where Sartre and Deleuze enter the conversation, with a bullhorn and a huge spotlight. And a spear at the end of a long stick, with which they can jab you. They’ve even tied a pretty ribbon to it to remind you that it really is a gift. And it is. What a way to shake things up, huh?!”

“Sartre? Deleuze?” my mind is spinning. “We were going to talk about neuroscience, but then you brought in psychology. And now you want to talk philosophy??”

“Gestalt, my dear.”

We sit in silence for a few moments, long enough for me to hear the low-level hum of the air conditioner. I keep thinking of the old saying *you can’t teach an old dog new tricks* and it’s been my experience that people don’t change.

Despite the cool air, I am feeling flushed and it feels like the air conditioner won't be able to beat the heat wave just outside the window pane. I'm about to offer her something cold to drink, but she seems content and not at all bothered by the temperature.

"Okay," I say in an attempt to regain my composure, "can we spend some time talking about perceptions, because I think that's something that can be a bit touchy for people."

"Yes, you're right. It's a critical part of relationships, of any kind—even between teacher and student... even between you and yourself! And because of that, it has a direct impact on the quality of one's life." She certainly has a way of honing right to the gravity of whatever we're discussing.

"So, perception means how you understand the situation, right?"

"Essentially, yes."

"And so, misinterpretations are simply misperceptions?"

Her smile is different than before. There's a wildness behind her eyes this time and I get the sense that with the harshness in her voice she is getting into a rhythm, that she's in her happy place. It's the same way I feel when I'm approached after a conference to discuss the key points from my presentation. Expertise and Passion can produce a delicious cocktail.

"What accounts for the differences between two people's perceived realities, two people who are physically and simultaneously experiencing the same event, is that it is the *mind* that fills in the blanks (Krueger, 2007; Vago, 2017), and that is a completely

personalised and solitary act. My mind has a different tool kit than yours and so there will be differences in the ways we understand what is transpiring.”

“Hehe, so there’s a chance you would disagree that this is an apple...” my immature sarcasm rears its head, a tactic that’s come through for me during board meetings when time is being wasted.

She purses her lips, a reaction much like a teacher... or a mother.

“We may agree that it’s an apple, but we’ll have much else to say about it. That’ll be due, in part, to our varied pasts. Did you know that I never go apple picking? It’s because once, as a child, an apple from high up on the tree fell directly on my head. I had an ache for a week. Because of that, I really dislike eating apples, but apple juice is fine.”

My mouth drops open before I can stop it. “Really?! I’ve never heard of that ever happening. So that’s simple psychological association...”

“It also never happened,” she’s tilted her head down, a mischievous look in her face matched by her smile.

“You sneaky...” I am completely taken by surprise. “I did not think you had that in you, miss enlightened one.” I stare at this woman through a changed lens.

“What made you think you know all of me?” The air stills and though there is a softness about her I freeze nonetheless.

“You made a construct of who I am, and mostly without my direct and voluntary involvement to boot. Trouble for me now is that I am faced with a lose—lose, or—maybe—win situation: I can conform to your impression of me thus making you happy and help you feel safe cuz you think you’re able to correctly predict what I am to do and

think, or I can confront your expectations of me and possibly cause fissures between us that may run too deep for easy repair. Expectations can be really damaging (Ruiz, 1997). Best to use with caution.”

“I guess so is conformity, then.” I have always worn my independence as a badge of honour and am reminded here that it’s best not to rely too much on others.

“I agree with you here. Although I don’t think dependence and reliance are interchangeable.” With that she positions herself in front of the window and *I wonder if she meant to symbolise herself as my access to what’s beyond my reach.*

“So, neurology?” I nod, encouraging the progression of this conversation, welcoming the release from emotional anguish.

“You need to consider that there just isn’t enough time for the five senses to transmit to the brain all the information it takes in during a nanosecond, nor for the brain to process that information (Vago, 2017). Thus, the mind, and your automated nervous system (Porges, 2007, 2017) fill in the blanks and do so by relying on classifications it has already made (Bowlby, 1977a, 1977b; Eurich, 2017; West & Sheldon-Keller, 1994). So, if in your life, a raised hand alongside a loud voice meant you were going to be struck, you may perceive any future, similarly-styled sounds or movements as threatening, even when the intention of the doer is not to strike at all. Your mind and neuroreceptors fill in the blanks based on your previous experiences and the meanings already attributed to them. And we can be soooo sure that our own experience is the same as the other’s, sooo sure of the other person’s intent, that we are willing to fight over it.

“This isn’t to say that your perception of reality will most often misinterpret the other person or the situation. Sometimes your mind and automated nervous system will correctly fill in the blanks. But sometimes you’re just off, and you’ll suffer the consequences for feeling so sure that you’re right.”

I am trying desperately hard to fight the urge to go down memory lane and to see what this all means for me. I can feel the sensation of tears wanting to form but this moment isn’t a therapy session and I did not want to be sitting on the proverbial couch.

To stop this sequence of events, I stand up and move to the coffee table where some books for leisure have been displayed. I rearrange them so that they are stacked, but then decide to fan them out, like a deck of cards. And the visual symbolism strikes me cold: you can see just enough of the book below to know that it’s there but not enough to know what its pages contain. I have spent most of my life knowing there’s so much below the surface, and content in that kind of knowing. Safe in the limited knowing.

“So,” I whisper, “why is it so instinctive to defend our perceptions?” I hope she hears me, I don’t want to ask for help a second time.

“Because how I see the world is fundamentally who I am. It’s hard to separate ourselves from what we see and think and feel. It’s how we share ourselves with the world. So, when someone challenges your perception, it feels like they’re not accepting you.”

And there it is, in plain English. *How does she do that?*

“I think that’s what our ego does, right? Protect itself. Humans can be fragile creatures. But, you know. there’s also another reason—mind you, it’ll bring us back to neurology.”

She awaits my acceptance. “Your stress response system. The second you feel unsafe, your response system gets activated and then it’s hard to get off the ride. They’re both very powerful. The ego can have a tight grip on our thoughts and actions and beliefs which influence the brain, press repeat (Siegel, 2001).”

“So, Freud.”

“Maybe, but my teachings about the ego came from yoga. More than one of my teachers, and it’s impossible they know each other so I respect the coincidence, refer to the ego as the wild horse that is running free but causing chaos (Khalid, personal communication, 2017; Brady, personal communication, 2016). They said you want to learn how to ride your horse and teach it to work for you and not against you.

“But here’s how I assimilated it so that it was a therapeutic and healing agent for me: The ego is designed to bear the voice of your biggest fears and insecurities. Got it? Your fears and insecurities are your wild horse causing chaos.

“When I was teaching myself to distinguish between my authentic voice and that of my ego, I began to feel in my body how each voice materialised. My authentic voice usually carried with it a sense of calm and openness and caring. It seemed to be deeply rooted. Meanwhile my ego was accompanied by anxiety, a certain sense of urgency and pride, and at times, a sternness about it, telling me what to do. My authentic voice was unwavering, despite my mood whereas my ego made itself loudest when I was at my most vulnerable.

“Now, there isn’t anything inherently wrong with the ego nor with heeding its voice. The strength of one’s relationship to the strategies we developed to protect ourselves is the result of a survival strategy that worked (D. J. Siegel, 2018; J. P. Siegel, 2013; Watkins, 2013). But once one is ready to recognise that the environment has changed, that the reasons - the threats from before - are no longer requiring a defense strategy, then one can move away and let go of what doesn’t serve her anymore. She can soothe her ego and comfort it, as though she’s caring for her child-self. She can take care of herself now. She’s tamed the horse and that reduces the perception of enemy, and thus defensiveness. If you can calm the activation of your autonomic nervous system, then you can retrain your brain around what is safe versus dangerous.”

“Geeze. It’s a bit weird to think that there are essentially two different versions of me, all the while hearing you talk about wholeness and gestalt.”

“Aren’t you ever in conflict with yourself? Do you ever struggle with deciding what you want?”

Her words hang in the air, suspended on a line before me, causing me to hold my breath for fear of inhaling a new way of being.

“The internal struggles we engage in are precisely that: the tug—of—war between our authentic voice versus the conditioning we carry with us. Time spent trying to figure out which consequences we are willing to bear.”

She sits on the floor. Her gaze travels the perimeter of the room. We seem to be at odds, her and me, and I feel like a stranger in my own living room.

“Once you tend to and soften your ego and get more comfortable with your authentic self, it’s easier to manage your perceptions. There won’t be as many tug—

of—wars. And when you do experience them, the recovery time is a lot shorter. It's pretty liberating."

We look at each other for a moment, and I wonder what life for her was like before her liberation. *Does she have any idea how far-fetched she sounds?*

"You can ask me anything," she tells me, and I marvel anew if she is a witch. Instead, I pick up my pad and scan my notes, a rough outline of how I wanted to direct our conversation. I realise I am terrible at this type of interacting and let the book fall to the floor beside my chair. Through gritted teeth and a furrowed brow, I set myself up.

"Well at some point I'd like to circle back to the automated nervous system that you've name-dropped a few times but right now we'll remain tasked to exploring perception." With a renewed sense of authority, I continue, "what's the relation between perception and Sartre?"

"Perception *is* related to the nervous system."

I can win this staring contest. Just watch me.

An inhale to signify defeat. "So, Sartre was rooted in the belief that reality "exists only in action" (2007, p. 37). Think about it, the preface to owning my reality is that I can only make choices for myself after I have concluded that I have the power to make those choices. Freedom for authenticity can only exist once this realization is put out into the shared realm of experience. You can have a gazillion ideas and principles, but Sartre reminds us that Self is in the act—otherwise it's just your imagination.

"Thus, perception is imagination to a large degree. And it's only once you bring your perceptions into the shared sphere that you exist. Which is really empowering!!!"

“Ha. So, someone living off the grid doesn’t exist?” *A loophole in this insane version of reality.*

“Living off the grid is an external act, thus making a reality of one’s internal realm.” *Darn it.*

“So, consider then the space right before action is taken. These few moments are incredibly powerful, in the conscious and subconscious, and can exert control over an individual. And this loops back to Achor’s work: that you can move away from your genes and your social conditioning if you can press pause in that space. That’s when you can choose something different and that’s how you can change.”

“But you’re proposing that we’re always in some sort of denial of who we really are? In your theory, we’re either in control or not. We’re either conscious or not. We’re either authentic or ego driven.”

“What I’m saying is that if we take things for granted and accept what seems to be real, then we’re doing ourselves a disservice. Sartre (2007) and Deleuze (1997, 2004) implore that each individual fully expresses one’s power, to go to the limits of one’s potential, rather than to judge what exists by non-empirical and transcendent standards. To exist in our shared reality, which is constantly changing anyway, we must be open to shedding established identities, so we can become all that we can become—though it’s hard to know what that is in advance.”

“How in the world are you supposed to tell the difference between who you are and the parts of your identity that weren’t yours to begin with?” The depth behind her eyes is like a beacon that I’m still avoiding. “This is such a third world problem.” This time, she did see me roll my eyes and a sudden sense of shame quickly closes in on

me. *I hesitate to think of what it would be like to be her daughter—such high standards to live with.*

“In your quieter moments, look for repetitive labels you heard when growing up. Those will be traits that may not necessarily be innate.”

Childhood? No thanks.

“Speaking of children, it must be late morning already cuz I can hear the little kids’ voices from the daycare down the block. They go to the park every day, rain or shine.” *I don’t mind kids but I’m ok not having any of my own.*

I step closer to the window to watch their little faces.

“You know there’s a book over there on my shelf that I can fit in my purse easily. I must have read it a dozen times,” I tell her. “It’s a memoir and the stories the author tells of growing up are sometimes outrageous, somewhat unbelievable really.

“There’s this one line that I think I’ve read more than anything else. It’s such a peculiar way of speaking. She’s taking a bath with her older sister and says, “wasn’t it weird [...] how we thought of trees having leaves as being “normal”, when in fact six months out of the year they were necked as jaybirds” (Karr, 2005, p.282).” A warmth emanates from her and I can’t help but think that she’s read it before, too.

“What do you think she meant by that?”

Even though I know there’s no right answer, my palms still get a bit clammy. “I think she means that sometimes you’re gonna be the black sheep.”

“Hmm, I like that. Yeah. You know, the pinnacle of Deleuzian (2004) practice is creativity, seeing what others don’t see. Maybe this author read a bit of philosophy?” I chuckle at her desire to link all things together. “It sounds to me,” she continues, “that

this author, at an early age, questioned the status quo. That she wondered why people needed to define things, instead of acknowledging spectrums of possibilities.”

“Hehe, I doubt it. Not everyone understands the world like you.” I’m teasing her, much like I imagine the sisters in the book did.

“Spectrum of possibilities... we’re onto something here!” The magic behind her eyes and the harshness in her voice signal that she’s sipped her cocktail once again. “You find this particular teaching across so many disciplines, and Deleuze (1997) calls it the sleeping secret: we are to bring into existence and not to judge.”

“Not judge?!?! Umm, that’s kind of inherently human. It’s a precursor to cognitive assimilation (Bistricky, Ingram, & Atchley, 2011),” I remind her.

“Cognitively yes, I agree. Our brain is programmed that way. But philosophically, don’t we have a moral responsibility to judge carefully? If passing judgement is necessary for making choices, that only means there is a *time* when judgment is required. So, we must take heed, for even in mathematics you must first bring the fractions to common denominators before combining or separating them. And as Deleuze defends, judging can be a disgusting act, “not because everything is of equal value, but on the contrary because what has value can be made or distinguished only by defying judgment (Deleuze, 1997, p.135).”

“I used to want to be a ballerina,” I let slip out. “I used to have these ornate daydreams about it. I had some real talent for it, but we didn’t have the money.”

“When I get nostalgic for missed outcomes, I take refuge in quantum physics. The idea that there are multiple parallel universes where other realities are being played out brings me so much comfort (Naini & Naini, 2009).”

“You may be the strangest and most interesting person I have conversed with.”

We sit together, holding each other’s exposed, guarded selves for a moment, taking a break from a conversation that has shown me the boundaries of my comfort zone.

“This position of ‘self as the center for the better of the whole’ means that we must engage in genuine thinking, so we can confront reality, to modify *truth* (Sartre, 2007; Searle, 1995). Our truths affect what we think; they alter what we think is possible. So, we must become open to seeing things from a different perspective. That’s when you know you’re transcending where you came from, by understanding that even the idea of self is dynamic.”

I am becoming excited at the chance to volley with this guru and my face begins to tingle. “This seems like an over-complication of things, and in doing so it serves your position well. This particular line of thought promotes an idealised version of individuality, yet we make up a stew of conformity: the human race.”

“Ah, well said. Are you saying that there is no true self? That our individuality is limited because we cannot exist without the whole?”

“In a sense, yeah. Sartre and Deleuze’s ideas of self-actualisation imply that we are first individuals before we were in a group. But you’re born into a family, aren’t you? And a family is a group. So maybe the tug—of—war is merely wanting to take a step away from the collective, but not because the collective obliterated your authentic self. You didn’t really exist without the collective in the first place.” My elbows rest on my knees, my chin pushing down on my fists. I look at her and wonder if perhaps there is a hole in her theory.

“So, a person’s consideration of which consequences to bear really just means: how can I best contribute to the whole?”

“Wait, I’m confused,” I say. “We’re in agreement?”

“I think so. Contemplating the human experience is so multifaceted. If we’re not saying the same thing today, we surely will at another time.”

There’s been a shift, *in my direction!* and I see her more like someone I recognize. The elusive woman I read and listened to seeming more like a dream that I’m slowly forgetting.

“Then how do you recognize your self while swimming in the stew?” I ask.

“Well, in addition to recognizing labels that were used by others as a means to raise us in good faith, another good way to know is to check the frequency of ‘shoulds’ in your mental programming (Brown, 2006). ‘Shoulds’ are just fancy ways of judging or shaming ourselves and so the more you’re saying ‘*I should*’, the higher the chance is that’s the conditioning you endured.” She looks at me dead—on, expressionless. I’m not sure if she’s searching for herself in me or if she wants me to talk about myself.

“Can you give me an example?”

“Well, can you tell me a negative thought you have about someone? You don’t need to tell me who that someone is, that’s irrelevant to the exercise.”

“O.K. well this person is always tardy and will apologise each time but doesn’t really care enough about how it affects others cuz, well, keeps being tardy.”

“Where’s the negative part of this thought?”

“What? Is this a trick question? They’re inconsiderate and disrespectful. They think their time is more valuable and...”

“So those labels are your interpretation of this person’s actions. You are attributing the meaning, but those meanings are grounded in you and might not be reflective of the person. These values you speak of are ones that you have been conditioned to. To judge someone through the interpretation of their actions tells me about your perspectives. And taking these judgements as fuel to charge how you value the person reflects your ego.” I feel as though the air has changed, it’s gotten thicker. *I hate that I didn’t see this coming.* The criticism is circling my head.

“Aren’t you now showing your colours? I mean you’re interpreting my actions via your constructs, no?”

“I thought I was answering your question.” I watch her stand and move, turning her back to me.

“No, no, please go on.” *So much contempt.* “I’m curious to hear your interpretation of me.” She pivots on her heels and rests her palms against her lower back. *Why is she hesitating? I guess she’s not all that she claims to be.* “It’s ok. We can move on if you prefer,” I say and scoop up my notepad from the floor.

“I’m getting the sense that I have been somewhat offensive.”

“You’re telling me that I’m wrong about this person always being late. Which is a fact and can be corroborated by others. It’s black and white but you seem to think that I’m being judgemental. I have no high horse in this.” *Calm down, you’re getting emotional.*

“I am not here to judge you, only to repeat ideas and thoughts. I wish I had not put you on the defensive.” There is pity in her eyes, distraught mixed in and I suddenly

feel uncomfortable. The hum of the air conditioning is louder now, and I can feel my hands getting clammy again.

Through a dry mouth I am able to mutter, “well, then, let’s just agree to move on.” I look down at my pad but the letters bleed together and I’m trying hard to regain my footing but I can’t remember what we were last talking about and so I begin to doodle in the margin, bidding for time. Seconds become minutes, but she waits patiently, a kind act I don’t think I merit right now.

“Ok, I want to come back to existentialism for a bit. It doesn’t quite seem to apply well to the 21st century.”

“I need water for this,” and I follow her into the kitchen, denying the ache on my tongue to spit my arguments. She runs the tap for a moment before tilting her glass to catch the flow. She lets out a short laugh and turns to look at me. “Residual muscle memory from my bartending days! There’s no CO₂ in water!” She smiles as the water overflows and splashes on the sink’s metal. I laugh and realise this is what she means when she talks about being present. Short chances for happiness and connection.

We walk to the dining room and she sets her glass down before her favourite chair; the one opposite the window. “Light sources your brain to produce serotonin (Fisher, 2009). And isn’t that a wonderful, multi-use hormone!” I wish I had a second self, one to take notes on the little her-isms that she slips in. I find it difficult to stay on task while taking in her nuggets. And so, I make a mental note to try harder.

“Sartre’s writing in particular came at the perfect time in my transformation. It empowered me to take a deeper responsibility for my life: my choices, my ideas and the

themes that coloured it all. I didn't want to automatically continue to function as I had been. The impression of having to play the cards I was dealt had worn me down.

"Listen, I have to be honest, it was an excruciatingly difficult transformation. Lots of pain, lots of tears, lots of fears. But I take comfort in knowing that *that* pain, *those* tears, *those* fears, I chose. I mean I was suffering already, see? I was already in pain, crying and scared. But that was at the hands of accepting what someone else had decided my life would be like. Part of becoming self-aware and conscious is the powerful act of taking 100% responsibility for your mind, body and spirit.

"So, I forgave everybody, my parents, the people I had been in romantic relationships with, anyone who had left a mark on my mind/body/spirit. And I forgave myself. Then, once I let go of the narrative of being a victim or a saviour, there was only space for being my own superhero, for being my authentic self. Because if we are left to make all choices, we get to define what **good** is. And I'm still learning how to be who I am. It'll be a lifelong process, though it gets easier all the time."

I feel as though I've just pressed pause on the audio version of an elder's diary. I savour the simplicity in the act of listening and wonder if children ever wonder why adults have such a hard time hearing what's between the lines. *How old was I when I stopped noticing?*

My attention comes back to her and she is smiling at me. I realise I have been smiling this whole time.

"A penny for your thoughts?" she raises her eyebrows and dips her head to the left, but she quickly breaks eye contact, saving me from having to decline.

“You had a question or were wanting to make an argument about how existentialism doesn’t relate to the 21st century. Let’s hear it.” She’s taken the last sip of water and has begun to trace her index along the rim. I imagine the sound it would produce if water remained.

“Right. Yeah. So, Sartre (2007) says something to the extent that there are no omens in life, no hidden messages, and authenticity cannot be gotten from an outside source. So then why do we spend so much money on therapy? Why bother?” I pick up my pen, armed to assimilate how to untangle this confusion. It is only in the pause between our voices that I recognise she has just spoken of people she turned to in her healing. The redness creeps up my neck and envelops my face, showing her my regret, though I do not retract my question. I wait for her answer, hoping that it hasn’t erased any fondness she has felt from me.

“Sartre wanted us to be aware and to be wary of who we turn to for advice, for the act in choosing *who* we ask often parallels our ideas to begin with. We have an idea of what that person will advise and thus we are seeking permission instead of critical examination. The latter comes when faced with an idea or perspective that challenges our consciously and subconsciously held self. So, when you seek out a therapist, you want to find someone who is kind-natured, grounded in herself, and will help you question your beliefs. Not to disprove you according to her own agenda but to see if there is a stone you have yet to turn over *for yourself*. Any therapist who is unwilling or unable to guide you to see what’s plainly in front of you isn’t a good match.” She is serene in her posture and voice, unharmed by having to explain her choices to me. *Meanwhile I’m still waiting for the rise and fall of my shoulders to slow.*

“You seem to be ruminating quite deeply. What has your experience with therapy been?” Her words dangle before me, quite like a wind chime hung on the porch outside your window might call you to look up. I am having trouble making sense of the experiences I’ve had, and the perspective of existentialism as interpreted by this woman acts like a magnetic force I desperately want to break.

“Not like yours,” is what I can muster, and she nods softly, acknowledging our different pasts.

“Do you ask for people’s opinions, when it comes to things you are struggling with?” The question leaves me baffled. I haven’t really struggled with anything, let alone needed anyone’s help to figure it out. *Not the personal stuff anyhow.*

“Do you tend to keep people at arm’s reach?”

And there it is. My first a-ha moment. My breath quickens and my heart speeds, readying me for... I’m not sure what. But this is what she’s been talking about - taking a moment to question my preconceived perceptions. *Do I keep people at bay? Who do I rely on? Who is my helper? Am I even supposed to have someone to turn to?*

And it is in this moment that I develop a new understanding of what intellectual candour is, what patience is, what permission is.

“I’ve... never really benefited from someone’s advice so I found my own ways for figuring things out. For the better or for the worse.” I take a sharp inhale and let the gravity of my words fill my lungs, pushing uncomfortably against my ribs. I’ve never considered the ‘for the worse’ side until this moment. *What if I had someone in my life to bounce ideas off? What if there was a person I could have turned to to go through things with, and not simply alongside of? Would it had made any difference, though?*

“Bringing someone into our most vulnerable places is an act best reserved for members of our tribe, and it can take a long time before we meet these people. Or it can take a long time before *we* are ready to meet them.” There’s a sense of knowing coming from her and her reclined position in the chair gives off an air of passive power.

“My father wasn’t around a lot when I was growing up. He worked long hours to put “food on the table and clothes on my back.” And even when he was home, he didn’t talk to us much. He mostly just ate his dinner and then watched tv.” It’s the first bit of personal information I’ve shared with her and although what I said is nothing unique or interesting, this woman can easily connect the dots between my childhood and today’s version of who I am. And I’m not ready for that.

“He obviously cared about you and your siblings. Have you considered what his distant style taught you about love? It would be –”

“Tell me more about Sartre,” I interrupt her tangent. I haven’t thought about my dad in years and the sting from how she acted to my tardy example is still bouncing around under my skin.

“Sure.” She looks at me for a little while. *Maybe she’s checking for signs of a breakdown?*

“Well, I can summarise. You are the sum of your actions. Create the life you want. And it’s not about what you deserve or don’t deserve. Nothing is owed to you. Life doesn’t work that way, and anyway expectations can be a dangerous framework (Ruiz, 1997). Things happen. Plain and simple. You are the variable in your life you can control so make yourself into whatever it is you can be.” She has slowed her speech

and I can see that her fingertips are pressed against its match on the other hand, creating a geometric shape that she is moving through the space above her head.

I scrunch my face, a silly attempt to erase the image of my father in his armchair.

Why are you still thinking of him? Don't fall for her shenanigans!

“Oh, one more thing! I recently read Kant’s (2005) *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals*, and though I’m no philosophy major, there does seem to be a recurring theme: We each have a moral responsibility for the greater good of humanity, but that responsibility begins with what you personally put out there. I really like this thread, a commitment to self-development for global improvement! I mean, you’re with yourself all the time anyhow! So, there’s always an opportunity to turn the reflective and thoughtful eye inward. And not in a navel grazing sort of way. But in a removed, almost detached way so you can neutrally observe and unconditionally accept (Eurich, 2017).”

I chuckle, readying her for my next question. She’s poised, sitting in her chair and looking out the window. “Okay, seeing as who you are plays such a significant role in your reality, how do you change your perception of things? Especially if, like you’re saying, you’re not even aware of some of them. It seems like a tall order to fill.” I’ve allowed the weight of my words to sit upon the table, on the tablecloth I inherited from my mother a few years ago after her passing. I watch the threads beneath my fingers worm their way over and under each other, a magical tapestry that has participated in many meals, had by three generations. “*This tablecloth came across the ocean with your Bubby. It has seen things we will only know in our dreams,*” she told me when I was young.

“Quite simply, you succumb to the understanding that perception is malleable, despite it seeming to be iron wrought. You accept that Truth, aka perception, is a personal act and it’s not shared by everyone—nor was it ever meant to be universal. And that perception, or personal truth, was originally built on how the experiences you lived impacted your emotions and feelings, and vice versa. And then you have to be open and brave enough to choose to do the work to change.”

I am not sure where the closest exit is, but every nerve ending is screaming for me to run. I put my left hand up in the air, silently wanting to stop the conversation.

“I’ll give you an example. When my kids were toddlers, tantrums rang through our home on the regular. It was common in my family and circle of friends to perceive tantrums as disrespectful to others. What was certain was it was a behavior that had to be eliminated. But punishing my kids while they were tantruming didn’t really sit well with me and I found myself wondering if there was a more compassionate way of handling those moments. But man, **during** the tantrums, every cell in my body screamed for me to make them shut up.”

I couldn’t help but flash back to the sounds of my siblings while they tried to muffle their cries, so as to avoid, or stop, being hit. *‘No one wants to hear you whining’*, and, *‘if you don’t stop that right now’* were common in our household. When your parents are tired, and with 6 kids, well, you don’t have to stretch the imagination too far to understand.

“And then I read something that stopped me in my tracks: *my kid isn’t giving me a hard time, she’s having a hard time*² (Ringmasterof3, 2014). And, boom! that was the

² Versions of this quote have been widely used online without an individual to credit.

lens I started to use. I reflected on what would be a compassionate and kind way to show up for my kids in that moment. Along with what attachment theory (Bowlby, 1970, 1977a, 1977b; see also Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Edelstein et al., 2004; Folger et al., 2017; Waters, Cromwell, Elliott, Corcoran, & Treboux, 2002) taught me, I started to be the lighthouse in their mini storms.”

I look down on my paper to see I’m doodling a lighthouse. I haven’t drawn since fourth grade.

And I’m beginning to see what she means. You can’t teach an old dog new tricks—unless you are that dog.

As I put away the plate she’s just dried, I remark aloud, “Hmm, so perspective-taking can indicate how empathetic you are.”

“Ahh, now we’re getting into the art of mindfulness and meditation.”

“Really?! Not yet. Rain check?”

She looks amused. “Absolutely, it’ll surely come back into the conversation.”

I stand in front of the framed art in my living room, the same one she stared at for oh-so-long this morning. I’m relishing in the newness this viewing offers me. This time I’m drawn to the lines the artist has made that frame the woman’s face: leaves instead of hair. A green afro so large that I think, for the first time, she may be Mother Nature.

“What is it about the brain that renders us powerless?” Though I cannot peel my eyes from the strokes of colour, her surprise is palpable. “A stroke and your quality of life forever reduced. A concussion and you’re looking for refuge inside a dark closet.

Brain dead, you're essentially gone. And now, from what you've said about brain plasticity (Boyd, 2015; Siegel, 2012a, 2012b), we're really at its mercy."

"First, let's recognize that *we* are working *with* everything. That can begin to eliminate any feelings of powerlessness. We have symbiotic relationships with each enchilada."

"I don't think that's the right expression." Her all-encompassing theme of interconnectivity is getting slightly annoying, but I'll let it go, for now.

"No matter. But with respect to the brain, it's our computer, our hard-drive. Without it, we're not human." A scene of bumbling bodies running around aimlessly has me smiling to myself. "A penny for your thoughts? You could have two pennies by now!" she joins my smile without the joy of my explanation. "Okay," she winks.

"So, our perceptions are stored in the brain. But the brain is malleable. I'm just - it's just - "

"I know," she says, "It's abstract."

"So, our personalities are stored in our brains, then. And that means that who we are in our relationships is the brain too. But then who they are in our relationships is in their br - ."

"Okay," she interrupts, "you're getting into some really important stuff." I spin impulsively away from her, unsure if I really want to get into it or not. She can't tell all that from my pacing of course so she picks right back up.

"When it comes to relationships, for better or worse, your brain is set to the patterns already encoded (Tatkin, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c; van der Kolk, 2018). The brain

seeks out what is familiar, even if what it's accustomed to is not entirely good for you. The automated part of the brain will not differentiate that for you.

"If you want a different kind of relationship, you'll have to rewire yourself, which remember, is possible! A practice of awareness, a development of new strategies, and loads of discipline and forgiveness will absolutely change your brain's patterns (Boyd, 2015; Siegel, 2018; van der Kolk, 2018; West & Sheldon-Keller, 1994)."

"What if you don't want a new relationship? Um, what if you just want to maybe, make the one you're in, uhh, a little bit easier?"

Her own pensive expression tells me that some calculations are taking place, making me feel like I'm in the opening scene of a bitter romantic comedy. *I hate the spotlight!*

"Absolutely. Same recipe. Just means you have a little less time to prep your ingredients before the meal."

"I don't—what—what are you saying?" *This woman can be so elusive when she wants to be.*

"You'll be figuring it all out with your partner, I mean."

In addition to the sweaty palms and dry mouth, a faint ringing in my left ear intrudes my thoughts. I nod, nonetheless, needing to stay with the flow.

"Depending on what aspects of relating you want to change -"

"Not me specifically, right. I was asking in general."

"Of course." *There must be a running commentary going through her head about me.* I'm not quite sure how much longer I can sustain this level of personal representation in our conversation.

“Difficulties in relationships can usually be attributed to stress hormones and misconceptions, really. The facets that are at the root of those reasons need to be explored, but this is a good place to start.”

“So, stress management and keeping an open mind. That sounds manageable enough.”

There’s that smile again, dummy. You must be missing something obvious.

“Most of us underwent some social conditioning that is really deeply encoded, so much so we’re not even aware of how it’s impacting our relationships (Bowlby 1970; Bremner et al., 2006; Ogden, 2017; Tatkin, 2016c, 2016d). Ever had a plan on how a conversation is going to go only to come out of it on the other end completely infuriated at how badly it went? That’s because one of the results of having experienced some kind of trauma is dysregulation, which makes managing emotions and behaviours tricky, which makes thinking tricky (Beauchemin, Gatzke-Kopp, & Mead, 2007; Brothers, 2014; Davidson, 2002; Davidson & Slagter, 2000; Felitti et al., 1998; Heleniak, Jenness, Vander Stoep, McCauley, & McLaughlin, 2016; Holsen et al., 2012; King et al., 2017; McEwan, 2001, 2006; Peckins, Susman, Negri, Noll & Trickett, 2015; Stefan & Avram, 2017). It’s unfortunate to think that your automated nervous system is conditioned to expect a certain level of threat, even if the person in front of you isn’t behaving at that level of danger (Davidson, 2004; Porges, 2007, 2016). But it is. That’s what it does.”

It’s become difficult to assess if the relaxed speed she’s going at is her doing or mine. “Woah. Um, I think you took a turn back there and forgot to signal.”

“Did I?” She stands opposite me, leaving the coffee table as our referee.

“Typically, when we’re stressed, the ways we seek to regulate are outside of ourselves.

We use meds, blame, rage, even types of self-punishment (Barnes, Vogel, Beck, Schoenfeld, & Owen, 2008; Dube et al., 2003; Fairbank, van der Oord, & Costello, 2018; Schilling, Aseltine, & Gore, 2008). It'll offer immediate relief but if you want healthy and long-lasting success, you've got to get to the root. Mindfulness, somatic healing... it's amazing what other symptoms get healed in the process: health ailments, relational woes, even life span (Angeletti, 2016; Dale, 2014; Duan & Ho, 2018; Froeliger, Garland, Modlin, & McClernon, 2012; Kerr, Sacchet, Lazar, Moore, & Jones, 2013; Lyon, 2016b; Ogden, Minton, & Pain, 2006; Sullivan et al., 2018)."

I guffaw at her proposal. I mean, *is she really this much of an easterner in her theoretical framework?* She catches sight of my furrowed brow and smiles largely, positioning herself as the jovial one, me as the pessimist and oppositional brat.

"Baby steps," she tells me. "Remember Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development? If something is too many degrees removed from your current state of knowledge, assimilation of new information is almost guaranteed to be impossible."

I am annoyed at her righteousness, as though she is better than I am. My lips tighten, and I shake my head from side to side, frustrated at my inability to direct the flow of this conversation.

"We have made this personal, and I feel as though we are pitted against the other. I'm sor —." I cut her off before the apology... before the nausea sets in. *People's rush to diminish discomfort is weak and I don't want to sully her reputation.*

"You seem to have an interesting construct of the workings of a human's personality, I'll give you that." I tell her. "Brain, mind, body... an example of gestalt again, I suppose?"

Her smile warms me to her once again and I am in awe of how meek I am behaving.

“You see, our nervous system plays a very delicate and intricate role in our day-to-day lives. I think every human needs to learn about her nervous system.”

“U-huh, I see. We need to know this because...” I ask, not because I wish to know the answer but, because I question her authority.

“Learning about the autonomic part of the brain drastically changed my perspective on best approaches for therapy and growth. Without getting into too much jargon, it has three parts. A vagal nerve, which runs from the brain stem to almost all our organs (Porges, 2007, 2016). The sympathetic nervous system comes from the center of the spinal cord and flows to specific cells in the body, and the parasympathetic nervous system comes from both ends of the spinal cord to specific cells (Furness, 2009).

“These function automatically, without conscious thought, okay. Keep that in mind. You can’t control this part of your system with thoughts.”

Exhaustion is starting to creep into my bones, into my eyes. I flop into my chair and sigh at the same time. She, on the other hand, seems to be running on solar power.

“Now, the vagus nerve perceives safety or danger and then activates whatever is needed next. The sympathetic nervous system triggers the fight/flight response. The parasympathetic system is responsible for lowering your breathing and blood pressure, it’s the rest and digest state.

“Part of any recovery plan needs to include strengthening the vagus nerve and the parasympathetic system. If your autonomic nervous system is out of whack, then so is your personality. And vice versa (Sargunaraj et al., 1996; Wells et al, 2016).”

“Oh,” is all I can muster, unsure if I should focus on the technical or try to make meaning of all this. All I can do is stare at her blankly. I have no more words for her. I have dried up.

“I think this may be a good place to stop, right? We’ve been talking for -.” I am brought out of my detached state when the clock informs me that I’ve had her here, locked up and feeding me what she knows, for five hours. “Oh my god! I’m so sorry. I lost complete track of time!” I rise to my feet, butterflies in my stomach from the nerves. *I’ve kept her so long.*

“We covered a lot, you and I.”

I nod, leading her to the front door. My mouth remains dry and no words produce themselves for our goodbye. I grip the door after it’s swung open, putting a barrier in between me and the hugger.

“Thank you for opening your home to me. It was the third person in our chat.” Without tending to the confused look upon my face, she turns and walks toward the elevator. After I close my door I realise that everything looks different now. My space is being forever changed.

Chapter 3: Wednesday

Every truth and every action imply an environment and a human subjectivity

Jean-Paul Sartre, 2007, p. 18

*Thus the problem has always seemed to me not whether to study a patient's family environment
but to decide what features are likely to be relevant, what methods of inquiry are practicable,
and what type of theory best fits the data*

John Bowlby, 1977a, p. 205-206

perhaps

i don't deserve

nice things

cause i am paying

for sins i don't

remember

Rupi Kaur, 2015, p. 147

“I have always placed the origin of a personal issue in the way she was raised.”

She's shaking off the rain from her hair. “Your family of origin, even the lack of one, really shapes you into *how* you are *who* you are (Hopwood et al., 2011; Howe, 2011; Kafetsios & Nezlek, 2002; Levine & Kline, 2008; McGrath, 2015; Runyan et al., 1998; Sameroff & Fiese, 2000; Siegel, 1999; Sinha & Sharan, 2007; van Dijk et al., 2017; Vygotsky, 1978).”

I lead us into the living room, ready to continue our conversation from yesterday. My original goal of using my evenings to prep the next day's questions didn't happen for me last night. Our day together was so wrought with the struggle of being outside of my comfort zone that it left my brain completely fried. I even slept for 11 hours.

“So, you’re saying you had to struggle against the effects of being raised in your family?” I sit in my armchair, expecting her to take her seat on the couch but she’s not here. A sensation rushes through my body, from my feet climbing up to my head, which leaves me feeling alone and stupid at the same time.

“We can’t escape it, though. Humans are social creatures and we need relationships in order to develop (Tomasello, 2009).” She saunters into view and stands just past the doorway, unaware of my illogical panic. I’ve learned well how to stay calm on the outside. “It just seems so random, you know? The luck involved in being born into a “healthy” family dynamic. The haphazard privilege only some of us are awarded; a lottery of sperm and egg!”

I can see soft pain in her eyes, dulled over the years, but the residue is still there. I assume those memories are the motivation she draws from to continue moving away from where she came.

“Resilience can sometimes be dormant in a person though, until a significant struggle is endured and overcome. Sometimes the most grateful people are the ones who started with less than they have now.” I surprise myself with the tone of my message, whereas typically I would have opted for formality. I think she’s softening me, and I’m not sure what that will mean.

“You remind me of my cousin, a wise soul who also showed himself to be a phoenix in disguise.” She says to me and her smile carries us off for a moment, bringing with it a familiarity that is still uncomfortable for me to be with.

“I’ve always been a curious person. That was the ace up my sleeve. My desire to know more is what got me onto the Net to figure myself out, and it still does. Which is

why, when I was experiencing the final blows of excruciating pain at the end of my marriage, I set off to understand what I was doing that encouraged and accepted that pain. And that's when I learned about codependency (Lancer, 2012). Gotta love the internet and Prime Shipping!!" She is pacing the room, talking with her hands, as though she has a captivated audience of 300 before her.

"And once you have access to new knowledge, then you have a grander framework within to understand yourself. And at the same time as you're beginning to comprehend your life history, you'll have access to what better/easier looks like." Like a child awed by the simplicity of new-found knowledge, she looks at me as though we've had these moments together before. Instead I stare at her, unwilling or unable to corroborate. And I am reminded at how fundamentally different we are.

With a wave of her hand, she moves to the couch and settles in. Feet tucked under her, she drapes her magenta peasant skirt over her legs and for a moment it looks as though someone has stuck a torso atop an open umbrella.

"You see, children develop a sense of self in relation to other people (Bowlby, 1970; Howe, 2011). And then kids begin to see themselves on that limited spectrum, because that spectrum of '*who am I?*' is co-constructed with the people they encounter in their early lives. Who they think they are is dependent on their caregivers' mindset, perspectives, behavior, self-talk, well you get my point there. It's inevitable that a child begins to plot herself on that limited spectrum: I am good... I am smart... I am annoying... I am fat... I am helpful... Unless, UNLESS, the caregivers can put the child as the center of their own development and create enough space and freedom for the child to fully express who she is. If the child's character is protected, then the child has a

much better chance of growing up as themselves as she moves through the world. It all starts with the foundation the caregivers lay (Dale, 2013)."

Her talk of family of origin has me thinking back to sitting at the dinner table with my sisters and brothers and mom, waiting for dad to come home. The food smells so good. Mom made shephard's pie and she put in the creamed corn this time, my favourite. My mouth is watering, and I'm hunched down, trying to get eye-level with the layers in the dish on the table. We're all a bit antsy, but we don't say anything. We wait for dad, as we always do.

"I think the biggest limiting factor for adults is that we can be naively ignorant. We don't see that the spectrum of being human is infinite, but also so extremely personalised. We grow up having a certain working model of what a person is, of who we are, or are supposed to be, and can be somewhat oblivious of all the social norms our society, including our family, had put upon us to ensure a certain amount of conformity, so that we could be of value to the collective. Now, the degree of conformity will vary from parent to parent, culture to culture. Hence the adage: the apple doesn't fall far from the tree." She's leaning forward, elbows on her knees. I've never seen her like this and the professional look she's emulating is a bit odd.

"Wait, this again makes it sound as though we are at the mercy of our parents, and our culture. That we ought to be fighting against conforming to the collective. Don't you think we just blend together in effective and functional ways? Plus, you're painting a picture of how well we ought to know ourselves. That's, just, pardon me but, weird to think about. It's like... meta-being. Is it really necessary?"

“Yes.” I can’t help but chuckle at her simplistic answer. She can certainly minimize a moment. “Understanding how we develop is empowering. You don’t have to become an expert in the field but be somewhere in the middle. Know enough so that you can make informed choices. There is something to knowing that you don’t know.”

“But that’s never ending. There’s always going to be something you don’t know. When do you stop searching?”

“Maybe it’s more in that you don’t stop asking. That way you’ll be open to the situation if ever an answer pops up.” And with that she leans back in her chair. *I guess that’s that then.*

I sigh and resume, “so your family of origin.”

When she looks at me like this, with a knowing behind her eyes, I want desperately to ask her what her problem is. “My point is that we develop via the experiences we are exposed to, and if in our early lives those experiences are constricted or followed a certain theme, then our development has a dangerously high probability of remaining within those parameters for the rest of lives (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bremner et al., 2006; Burke Harris, 2015). Unless... inertia!”

My hands suddenly feel heavy in my lap. I catch a tear and watch it pool in my palm. Her voice is muffled, swirling around, as though there’s a door between us. My mind is replaying a memory: I am just walking into his place, and he’s obviously upset. “*Dinner’s cold.*” I sit down at the table at my usual spot, but my appetite’s gone. He won’t look at me. “*That’s fine,*” I say, scoop some pasta onto my plate and force myself to take a bite. Indignation and self-righteousness make it so I won’t apologise for being

late. He knows what work is like. And pride makes it so that I won't thank him for waiting for me, anyhow, you don't thank someone for doing what is expected.

Flashback over, I look up to find her looking at me, pensively.

"Life has an interesting way of playing itself out, don't you find? Like, when you get far enough along, you have this wonderful opportunity to look back and take notice of the themes that have shaped it all. Those themes, that's where you can find the inspiration for your future choices (Caruth, 1995, 1996; Connolly, 2011; Haug, 2000; Kuhn, 2000; Strong-Wilson, Mitchell, Allnutt, & Pithouse-Morgan, 2013; Treacher, 2000; van der Kolk & van der Hart, 1995)."

Her voice floats poetically around my head and though the idea is abstract, I find myself with the beginnings of longing. I think she can smell vulnerability and it scares me quiet.

I contemplate putting the radio on so that there can be a melody to fill our silences but that would require getting up and my legs are filled with lead.

"You speak of introspection as if it were ammunition for the destruction of the parts of yourself you don't like. As though you have things that you're ashamed of that need to be eradicated." I stare at her with more anger in my skin than I realised was there.

"Is that what I'm saying?" is all she volleys back, and I suspect there's something for me to find between the lines, of which I don't have the nerve to look for. So, I push forward.

"First of all, conformity is necessary. It is widely documented that conformity has much value and benefit for cohesiveness and collectivity (Krueger, 2007; Tomasello,

2009; Tong, Tan, Latheef, Selamat & Tan, 2008; Xiao, 2017). It's what allows an individual access to a group and then to reap membership benefits. And you know, it seems that your position doesn't give the individual much credit. One can easily comply with the norms of the group without identifying nor internalising them." *I've got this.*

"I suppose, then, it is our duty to pay attention to the details and take note of the difference between conformity and obedience, and not mistake the latter for the former." *She looks so relaxed while I'm sitting here in battle-mode.*

"Loop back to what we talked about yesterday," she continues, "and let's take Sartre's (2007) and Deleuze's (1997, 2004) advice. Especially in democratic societies, where perhaps people are most vulnerable, where people think they are conforming when really it's obedience."

"Wait. You're saying that democracies are breeding grounds for trickery?"

"Only that we can develop false identifications of power," she says. "When we are led to believe that we have rights, yet final decisions are made by a representative or a select few, that institutional system is set up so that power gets funnelled and amplified, and it can certainly be abused."

"Like in a family," the words fall out of my mouth, half statement, half profession.

"Like in a family," she repeats. Her eyebrows and intonation lead me to think it is as if she's welcoming me home; as though she meant to take me here all along.

"But let's give the benefit of the doubt. Parents aren't necessarily to blame for abuse of power or the blind use of conformity/obedience. They aren't always aware of the generational inheritance families have in the DNA of their dysfunctionality (Bennett, 2013; Brothers, 2014; Connolly, 2011; Folger et al., 2017; Sirikantraporn & Green,

2016). And, they may not understand the biological and psychological implications that 'strict' or 'loose' parenting has on their children's basic rights. And if they are aware of all that, they don't necessarily connect that the imagination we're all born with is the same imagination that can help us create an alternate reality - one in which we motivate ourselves to change our life." *Boom! And it's all just a little too much to bear.*

"Oh god, I think people are tired of this rhetoric of self-help. And anyway, it may be better practice to make the best with what you've got. Personal evolution doesn't always have to be intentional. It can happen when we're not involved." I am showing my cards now, proudly, and she'll see I'm a realist. It has served me well and I am happy to go on being a card—carrying member.

"Yes, yes, that is wise." She steps towards the window and her stalled speech has me wondering if she really agrees with me or is being compliant.

"How do you handle conflict? I'm curious." It has come out more forcefully than I anticipated but this woman before me is still somewhat of a mystery and I'm itching to be convinced that she's got the answers.

"Oh! My reactionary style is still moving towards what I want for myself—and it's already been a long and arduous road. You see, my instinct was to avoid it at all cost. Which meant that I was on hyper alert to see the signs of, or for, conflict—you know, so I could avoid it. I often ended up assigning conflict to situations where there wasn't any to begin with! And thinking that there might be conflict ended up creating a conflict! I was my own worst enemy. I created the very thing I was avoiding."

"Like a self—fulfilling prophecy."

There's that smile of hers, telling me I did a good job. *She reeks of condescension.*

"It's why I had social anxiety as a young adult. And it's also why I give myself time to build trust with someone before inviting them in. And," she emphasizes with an added twinkle in her eye, "it's only recently that I learned that retreating is still a form of conflict! So, I've had to stop my worry by reminding myself it's only a conversation that needs to be had. And to remember that I trust myself enough to be able to manage what will transpire. I can handle it."

I am surprised at her openness and can't help but think her naivety is her weakness. She shares way too much. It's ammunition for the ill—intended. Plus, her self-righteousness is somewhat hard to take seriously.

"And this you learned from your family?" I inquire. "This avoidance of conflict?" She has turned from the window and is making her way across to the opposite wall, stopping in front of my bookcase. My breath catches in my throat. The spines she's running her hands over will expose parts of me no one knows. *She'll know what I think about when I'm alone.*

"It isn't so much that my family explicitly taught me to avoid conflict, step by step. It's more that there was a lot of conflict in my house growing up and, in an attempt to dissipate the tension, my personality style opted for withdrawal. It seemed logical to this young person that the way to stop the fighting was to not give any reason to fight. Naturally, I learned to walk on eggshells with great hopes for peace. But then I would oscillate between keeping quiet and accepting punishment or pushing back in an attempt to stand up for myself. Neither of my reactive methods were able to get the

fighting to stop in the long run. But again, a child is not an empty vessel. She and her caregivers will shape each other (Bowlby, 1977a, 1977b)."

"Wait, what do you mean 'shape each other'?" *Is there anything that will make sense?*

"Parents influence their kids and kids influence their parents."

Why does she insist on oversimplifying things for me?

"Development happens within relationships, on both sides. Even for the members of the family who are watching the interaction between other members. That's family dynamics for ya. I like to think of the family as an emotional structure with relative day-to-day autonomy. No one comes into your house and checks on the sanity of the family.

"But the family **is** invisibly tied to non-obvious forces, like the parents' families of origin, the current economic and political state, or even the state of things from when the parents themselves were kids. Religion, marketing, education, access to ideas and the freedom of expression all influence the family system (Bowlby, 1977a).

"And then here comes this infant, pre-programmed to be in a relationship. She has rudimentary communication skills, like crying and eye contact, and is much more dependant than giving, but hardwired for a relationship nonetheless. Being a member of a group offers protection, right, like you said, it has membership benefits (Boas, 1920; Bowlby, 1970a; Stocking, 1966). Like food, warmth, shelter, skill acquisition, reproduction, but in addition, the family also offers us the ability to become socially skilled, and part of that will depend on how your family develops your psychology and neurology (DiCorcia & Tronick, 2011; Howe, 2011; Siegel, 1999, 2012a, 2012b). Attachment theory along with interrelational neurobiology relate the affectional bond

between infant and caregiver to understanding adult health and adult relational functionality.”

“Wow. Press pause for a minute. You’re introducing concepts here that I’m unfamiliar with, but whatever, we’re back to the brain?” I am beginning to feel annoyed with this woman’s train of thought. *She’s just like a sneaky salesman: overwhelm the potential buyer with loads of information in a short amount of time just to make the sale.*

“Yes. The holistic approach to human development resonates the most with me.”

We are at odds; one sitting—one standing; one asking—one telling; one cynical—one sure-footed. It’s only day three and I can’t see us bridging the gap before the end of the week.

“So, you’re saying that the kind of relationship a kid has with his parents will decide the quality of his adult life? It seems harsh and quite frankly places a huge amount of responsibility on the parents.” I am finding it difficult to acknowledge her argument, the implications of what she’s saying would require attention and time, both of which I am happy to continue devoting elsewhere.

“In a sense, yes. The other more global factors I referred to before are also significant, but they are significant only in as much as how gravely they affect the people in the relationship (Tatkin, 2016b, 2016c). Some people can weather the storm more easily than others which really means that it’s less about the storm and more about how the individuals and the relationship manage the storm.

“That is the basis of attachment theory. How do the child and the caregiver manage stressful and joyful situations? How does their bond qualify?” Her pause gives me the impression that she has found the explanation she was searching for.

“Attachment theory is in psych?”

“Yes, it’s a developmental psychology theory. Do you know of John Bowlby?”

I shake my head, annoyed yet again that I am unable to do my fair share of talking. I make my way over to the window, hoping the scene out there can balance out what’s happening in here.

“He’s the father of attachment theory. How about Mary Ainsworth or Mary Main?”

My silence urges her to move on.

“Ainsworth was Bowlby’s student and research assistant and later Main was Ainsworth’s. Do you know about the Strange Situation? (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Ainsworth, Bell, & Stayton, 1972; Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Ainsworth & Wittig, 1969).” I’m feeling dumb now and can feel my face muscles tighten. I avert my gaze and my stomach cramps up. *How can a woman who is so insightful go on and on, knowing this isn’t my field of expertise?*

“Well John Bowlby moved away from the common ways of understanding human development at that time, which were psychoanalysis and learning theories (Bowlby, 1970), and he began to incorporate control theory, psychic energy, cognitive psychology, neurophysiology and developmental biology (Bowlby, 1977a).”

All I can think of is the storm. I feel like my whole life, I lived surrounded by that storm and I can’t understand why, why there are people who don’t like it. The wind, the noise, the movement - it’s all so comforting. *I’d take a storm over people any day.*

“You can spare me all that technical stuff. What seems most important to address right now is how an infant develops a sense of safety in the first place.” She’s in her zone - her happy place - *and I’m just trying to keep up.*

“Great question!” she comes over and stands next to me, and we watch the scene on the sidewalk below play out: the driver is attempting, for the third time, to parallel park. I wonder if he’s young or old...

“Babies communicate with their caregivers all the time, albeit their style is difficult to discern at times because there’s no common language being used yet. Nonetheless, the baby is telling us that she needs something. The carer’s ability to respond in a sensitive manner affects the baby’s development of safety (George & Solomon, 1996).”

“So, it *is* always the mother’s fault!” We let those words pause our conversation, and the air turns stale. What was meant as a joke ended up pointing a finger at the life cycle of dysfunction.

“Nature and Nurture,” she says, her attempt at smoothing out the ridges. “It really is a dance between child and carer. How connected are they? How well do they know each other - how much in sync are they? How well can the carer self-regulate before responding to the infant? (Siegel, 2013).”

“Dumb question coming at ya,” maybe humour can break the growing malaise. “What’s self-regulate?”

“Oh yes, self-regulate. In short, it’s how you deal with stress. Your ability to notice when your body is in distress. What strategies you use. How long it takes you to repair. If done effectively, you develop resilience. If you never learned how to regulate, then you may be more fragile or rigid (DiCorcia & Trinock, 2011).”

She is so judgemental.

“Uh-uh. And by ‘learned how to regulate’, let me guess, you mean with mom?”

“I do. There’s so much research out ther - .”

I chuckle to stop her from preaching. “Yeah, I’m sure there’s loads.” *My mom...*

“The more the child feels understood/heard and the better able the carer is to meet the child’s needs, the more trusting the child becomes in the world she finds herself in, and consequently, in herself. And not a blind trust. But a true sense that she is of value, that she belongs, and that when things go awry, she can handle it (Siegel, 2012a, 2012b).”

“You paint quite the idyllic scene.” I chuckle, attempting to invite a reciprocal tease. *As if there are kids out there who have a childhood like that.*

“Imagine a baby is playing on the floor with her toys. She’s managed to clasp a doll’s ear in her palm. But when she shakes her hand, the doll flies off and she now can’t reach it. She becomes distressed since she really wants the doll back. So, she whines. She rocks her body. She looks for her caregiver. Imagine now that the caregiver talks to the baby in a soothing way, picks up the doll and hands it back to the baby and rubs the baby’s back. The baby is able to calm down: the rocking stops and the whining ceases. Because of her caregiver’s quick and accurate responsiveness, the stressful moment ceases, and baby regains her ability to play and learn.”

“Wait a second. If her caregiver was making supper, or helping a sibling with homework, what... the kid becomes over-stressed and eventually develops some sort of OCD problem?” My annoyance with blaming parents shortened my patience, but even I cringe at how insensitive I sound.

She smiles, albeit a small one, and I have noticed a pattern emerging, that in moments when someone might roll his eyes or snap back with some retort, she smiles. It’s a mix of compassion and pity which leaves me feeling angry and distant.

“No, you’re right. It’s not solely the mom’s fault. How much she contributed to the kid’s future mental health can be debated, but, true, she is only one variable out of all the factors that influence a person.”

I hate how easily and quickly I’m swinging from angry to calm. I’m like her puppet and she’s holding all the strings.

“If the baby is able to communicate effectively with the caregiver and invites attunement, AND the caregiver attunely responds to the baby’s proximity-seeking behaviours, the child will be comforted and feel safe and her stress-response to the perceived or real danger will be tended to and deactivated. But you’ve described the opposite. If there is a communication deficiency - child is physically unable to move limbs, use voice or eyes appropriately; caregiver is unresponsive or inappropriately responsive, meaning avoids child or even punishes, then the child’s stress-response system will stay activated and the child learns over time that the environment is unsafe and that she is essentially alone (Bowlby, 1970, 1977a; Diamond & Marrone, 2003; Howe, 2011). With enough *frequency*, a pattern of being and of relating is set. This is one way that anxiety and depression are socially and biochemically created in an individual (Bowlby, 1970, 1977). So, you weren’t far off with your conclusion about developing OCD.” *I feel like a child suddenly, being put in her place and then getting patted on the head.*

I walk toward the doorway, needing to put space between us. I need to move away from her words. *I can’t seem to shake this underlying aggression.*

“Excuse me. I’ll be right back,” and I walk out of the room.

I lay a glass of water on the coffee table and take my seat in my armchair, balancing my glass on my knee. “I needed to take a moment,” is as close to admitting I was about to lose my cool that I can offer.

“I can feel the change of energy already.” As though on cue, we simultaneously take an exaggerated breath, and I’m uncomfortable with our synchronicity.

“I think I only need to say one last thing about attachment theory: the dance between the child and caregiver sets the mold for the child’s future relationships. Whatever the child experienced becomes what he is conditioned to, from the linguistic, social, and psychological perspectives.”

I hate when people pause for dramatic effect. I get it, you want me to pay attention. I already am!

“And here’s the most important connection of this theory to human overall health: your experiences shape your brain and nervous system. The primary relationships you had as a kid have encoded that particular relational style as safe, not because it is healthy but because it is familiar.”

I get it. Parents mess up their kids. We’re all messed up.

“Neurologically speaking, it takes a considerable amount of energy to run the brain so it’s always looking to mainstream information. That way it doesn’t have to work so hard (Boyd, 2015; Siegel, 1999; Tatkin, 2016a).” She takes a sip of water and slowly traces her index over the rim. It must be the lightest touch because no sound comes forth.

“So, if a kid’s been raised with an abusive parent, then he’ll likely date abusive people? Is it really that simple, that strong of a correlation?”

“Maybe he will date an abuser or maybe he will become the abuser. But before even earning one of those labels, he will, because of his relationship with his family unit coupled with his personality style, have developed deeply—rooted cognitive and physiological concepts of relating (West & George, 1999). Which means that whenever the dynamic from his family of origin presents itself in a new relationship, he (his brain—his language—his body—his socialization) will say: *hey! I know this. This feels right.* It’s basic conditioning (Ainsworth, Bell, & Stayton, 1972; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Brown, 2006; Diamond & Marrone, 2003; Edelstein et al., 2004; Fisher, 2009; George & Solomon, 1996; Heleniak et al., 2016; Lerner, 2014; Perris & Andersson, 2000; Porges, 2016; Sinha & Sharan, 2007; Tatkin, 2016a, 2016d; Waters et al., 2002; West & Sheldon-Keller, 1994; Young & Klosko, 1994).”

She takes a sip of water. “You know, I grew up with a lot of stress and I developed strategies to deal with the stress, very useful survival skills. When that’s what you know, it ends up being what you consider normal.”

Without a sound, she puts her glass back on the coffee table. The cushion, still concave, welcomes her back. I can’t seem to empathise. *Don’t ask her about her life. Don’t think about yours.*

“But what about the other parent? Or what if both parents are loving and caring? It can’t be that all dysfunctional people exist because they also had dysfunctional parents.”

“You know what, you’re absolutely right! Perhaps the family of origin is quite healthy, but there was a traumatic pregnancy or birth. That could mark a person. Maybe the family of origin is healthy, but they experienced a flooding and lost everything. That

trauma could severely mark a person's relational abilities. It too could shape the architecture of the brain and stress-response system (Lyon, 2016a; Yehuda & Meaney, 2018)."

"So, let me see if I understand. Your primary relationships inform your identity, an identity that will essentially direct all future friendships and relationships."

"Yes."

"And..."

"The dynamics when growing up will influence the architecture of your brain and hormonal system. It will have set the baseline of your nervous system. It will set how you engage with stress (Ganzel, Morris, & Wethington, 2010; Holsen et al., 2012; Davidson, 2004; Heaney et al., 2014; King, Sacchet, Lazar, Moore, & Jones, 2013; McEwen, 2001, 2006, 2007; McEwen & Gianaros, 2010; Nakazawa, 2015; Peckins, Susman, Negriff, Noll, & Trickett, 2015; Porges, 2016, 2017; Schilling et al., 2008; Siegel, 1999; Teicher, 2007)."

"Haha, that's all?!" *Extremists never stop surprising me with the lengths they'll go to in the name of starting their revolution.*

"For the rest of your life, whenever you experience a sense of danger, your attachment system kicks back in. Play and exploration immediately stop. In fact, because fear and survival are so basic, activation of the attachment system generally means other important behavioral systems—exploratory, affiliative, social, sexual—are deactivated (Howe, 2011; Perris & Andersson, 2000)."

But I have no control on how my parents raised me... The feelings of helplessness start seeping in. *I never asked for any of this.*

“Developmental psychology implores us to recognize the longevity of our attachment styles and recognize that they run into adulthood (Doyle & Cicchetti, 2017; van der Kolk & van der Hart, 1995). It’s why people can feel so misunderstood in an adult relationship. It’s because their partner is more likely assimilating them into their original construct, attributing similar relational styles as found in their attachments made in childhood. If you were threatened with abandonment in childhood, or were abandoned, your working model of relationships is distrustful, and you’ll see signs of abandonment in your partners, even if there aren’t any. You neurologically, psychologically and socially understand people in this schema. And that will cause major conflict and pain.”

I rise out of my seat, an instinctual defense. “It’s not a parent’s job to constantly monitor and control a child’s responsivity to stressful situations. That, in itself, predicates obedience and conformity.”

“Emotional regulation and responsiveness from a parent allow a child to develop their own secure sense of self. A parent who is present and attentive while a child is struggling ensures that the child has a safe space from within to develop the skills necessary to cognitively construct understanding, to emotionally regulate, to hormonally calm oneself, and to positively influence social relations. It happens for a kid within a safe parental relationship, not with the lack of it (Boeldt et al., 2012; Heleniak et al., 2016; Siegel, 2012a, 2012b).”

I watch as this woman rises out of her seat and my heart races. I find my mouth getting dry and my feet and hands feel as though they’ve just been wrapped with concrete bandages. She meets my gaze and I am frozen.

“Uncertainty about whether or not your attachment figure will be available and responsive to your needs leads to general feelings of insecurity (Bowlby, 1970),” she says as she inches towards me. Perhaps she can tell that I am prey. “People who don’t feel they have a secure relationship, lack confidence and a sense of value and worth. This has profound developmental consequences. They essentially learn that people, more so relationships, are painful.” The touch of her hand on my elbow is the spark that I needed to break free from my shackles.

I turn around, somewhat dramatically, and move toward the bookshelves; a wonderful backdrop to prove my intelligence.

“What you’re saying goes against the basic principles of Western ideology on what makes someone successful, which is independence. What you and attachment theory are proposing insinuate that parents who rear their children to self-soothe and reach their goals are creating dysfunctional mates.”

“Well, there isn’t anything inherently wrong with self-soothing or being driven. And the theory doesn’t profess that if you do those things then you are more likely to be unsuccessful in relationships. The proposition is that the skills needed to self-soothe and to be successful are developmentally grown, and that it’s done enmeshed with the caregiver, for better or worse (Ainsworth et al., 1972; Bowlby, 1977a, 1977b; DiCorcia & Tronick, 2011; George & Solomon, 1996; Heleniak et al., 2016).” I roll my eyes as she puts her hands over her heart. Her ease at embodying the emotional is... embarrassing.

“Babies are not born with the ability to self-soothe, their brains just aren’t formatted yet in that way (Lyon, 2016b; Siegel, 2012a). It would be like asking a ten-month old to do a 1000-piece puzzle; they just couldn’t do it, not without first developing

fine motor control, depth perception, pattern recognition. Humans need decades before they are fully mature. It's our culture that desires cutting corners."

Accepting what she's serving is proving to be quite difficult and I'm at a loss at how to deal with my bubbling inclination to argue against her, "I don't have any kids."

"Yes," her voice softens, "even if you don't have kids yourself, you were once a child. Hearing all of what I'm saying invites confronting our own past and present."

My anger quickly transforms and now I have tears well up in my eyes. I feel almost helpless, having already committed to speaking with her. I am so unaccustomed to feeling this way. I usually find some reason to escape long before whatever is happening to me right now happens.

She's standing next to me now and the warmth emanating from her body feels both intrusive and welcoming. *This is all too much to make sense of.*

"The ways in which parents regulate their own emotions and those of the children in their care, in times of joy and distress, will affect the child's neurological, physiological, and psychosocial development in pretty significant ways (Boeldt et al., 2012; DiCorcia & Tronick, 2011; Heleniak et al., 2016; Loughheed et al., 2014; Sameroff & Fiese, 2000; Sanders, Zemen, Poon, & Miller, 2015). That's why I bring it up – because knowing this means we have an added way to answer some questions about adults' behaviour. It ties in with so many other branches of the developmental sciences like stress regulation, brain development, social understanding, personality differences, and emotional intelligence (Bowlby, 1970, 1977; Howe, 2011; West & Sheldon-Keller, 1994)."

“Hehe, so you’re saying we’re all a bit f***ed up.” I rarely swear in my professional life, but this moment needs a comedic break of sorts.

She chuckles, and her smile returns to her lips, bringing with it an increased sense of calmness and unity. “We sure are. What differentiates us is how we express it... outwardly or inwardly. Do we punish others or ourselves?” She offers me another tangent to explore. But I’m exhausted.

“Let’s stick to attachment theory for a bit longer, shall we?” I shoot her a look, and her tilted head lets me know she got it. “So, we’re either securely attached or insecurely attached. I’m surprised you’d be drawn to a theory that offers us a binary spectrum.” And with that I regain my position in my chair, arms draped over the rests, assuming renewed authority.

“Interesting interpretation, and Bowlby (1977a, 1977b) certainly presented attachments in that way. However, Ainsworth (Ainsworth et al., 1970; Ainsworth et al., 1978; Ainsworth & Wittig, 1969) and then Main’s (Hesse & Main, 1999; Main & Cassidy, 1988; Main & Solomon, 1990) research found that there are four attachment styles, though some of today’s experts use three. And interrelational neuroscientists like Seigel (1999, 2012a, 2012b) and Tatkin (2016b) have discovered we can demonstrate signs from more than one style because the relationships we are in trigger different thoughts and emotions and behaviors. You may classify as an ‘avoidant’ attached person, but one relationship will have you act more anxious, while a different relationship will have you act more avoidant. Or in a long-term relationship, you may at one point behave more anxious and at other times more avoidant (Tatkin, 2016b).”

I hear everything she is saying, and I still feel as though she's speaking a different language.

"Harm may come from what transpires in a relationship, but healing also occurs in relationships (Siegel, 2012; Tatkin, 2016b). You don't have to be perfectly secure in order to have a securely attached relationship. Because there is an opportunity for you to become a securely attached person in that relationship. How beautiful!"

My heart rate picks back up and my breath is catching in my throat. I pick up my notepad and pen, armed with my academic defenses and a chance to put distance between her words and my emotions.

"Your attachment style as an adult is just a natural outcome of your relationship experience (Tatkin, 2016b). The main point is to understand how you act and react in intimate relationships, so you know what you are selling when you are dating or married to someone."

"Before we get into adult attachment, fill me in on the childhood part. The Mary's? You mentioned there are four styles?" Despite wavering on whether or not to ask for answers that may be a bit too revealing, there's something less threatening about childhood than adulthood.

"Sure, makes sense." This woman is as perplexing as she is free, and I am surprised at how suddenly amused I feel, watching her lie down on my sofa, as though we're settling in for a movie or a sleepover.

"Even though Bowlby brought this theory to the forefront, Mary Ainsworth and Mary Main went on to gift us with some truly helpful insights into the psychological conditioning done through parenting (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Ainsworth et al, 1972;

Main & Cassidy, 1988; Main & Solomon, 1990). Now, attachment theory has really spread into neighbouring fields of human understanding, like neuro, bio, socio, ed.”

“The types...” I pull her back, this is clearly a woman whose brain is like a spider’s web.

“Yes, yes. Well, let’s start with the style that can be considered *winning the lottery*: ‘secure’ attached. And I’m just gonna go ahead and run through them, bullet-point style, if that’s okay.” I nod, grateful for the view from the sidelines.

“This group is trusting and trustworthy, and they are explorers and playful. When they feel insecure or unsafe, they believe that others will be there to offer protection, help, comfort, support, and advice. And as adults, they have many effective self-regulation skills and report to have rich social lives. Because they were protected, comforted and loved in the past, they perceive themselves to be of value and worthy in the present and that means that they typically create a good and meaningful quality life for themselves.

“Then there are the ‘ambivalent’ attached, also known as ‘anxious’ or ‘preoccupied’. They crave connection and use major proximity-seeking tools. But there’s a deeply rooted belief that love and commitment is conditional and temporary. Though they are generally generous and happiest when around people, they’re worried people will abandon or reject them. They limit how far they explore the world and how supportive they are of their partner’s freedom, in fear of being discarded. So that limits their ability to be vulnerable, because authenticity means there’s a chance they’ll be alone. They’ve learned to morph into what is wanted in order to be chosen and kept.

“There’s the ‘avoidant’ attached group. They are independent and haven’t quite developed the skills required for deeper levels of intimacy and vulnerability. They will value freedom over interconnectedness and when they feel they are being confronted, they retreat or defend. They can take really good care of themselves and don’t like to appear needy, and other people’s neediness will challenge their autonomy. And that further feeds their discomfort with, and dismissal of, intimacy.

“Based on Ainsworth and her colleague’s findings from their Strange Situation study (1970, 1978), some researchers include a fourth group called the ‘disorganised’ group. They demonstrate the extreme qualities of both anxious and avoidant groups. They crave closeness but are simultaneously fiercely independent. This group experiences the most internal and outward struggles. They are the most unpredictable in their relating to others, since they swing back and forth from clinging to withdrawn and resentful (Hesse & Main, 1999; Main & Solomon, 1990).

“I’ve also come upon two sub-groups of the ‘avoidant’ group, fearful and dismissive. Fearful Avoidants have a negative model of self and other, while the Dismissive Avoidant has a positive self model but a negative model of others³.

“And that’s all, folks!”

“This is such a strange attempt, wanting to put people into categories. As though we could walk into a grocery store and head over to the department that best suits us.”

Her laugh catches me off-guard and it fills the room, threatening to push me over.

³ References for attachment styles come from: Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Bowlby, 1970, 1977; Hesse & Main, 1999; Howe, 2011; Kafetsios & Neale, 2002; Main & Solomon, 1990; Sinha & Sharan, 2007; Tatkin, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c; Waters et al., 2002.

“Imagine if people were that obvious! Hi, my name is Blah Blah and I am a securely attached person, though I have heavy inclinations towards the anxious style too. So, if intimacy or reassuring me scares you, don’t pick me!” She is laughing at the simplicity of my awe and astonishment. But I’m left feeling worried again, and the possibility that I could disapprove of my own choices is beginning to seem more real.

“How did you come to find attachment theory?” *A safe question helps settle the nerves.*

“Ahh, well from a very young age emotions intrigued me. I was both scared and obsessed with the power of emotions and I eventually stumbled upon affectional bonds. Wondering why people act/say/think in the ways they do, especially when it causes pain, led me to find Bowlby and the others.

“And then I began to ask new questions like, what causes the variation of how we display our emotions, what are emotions even for, and what problems affect the development of emotions?”

“And this is what your free time looked like? Didn’t you have hobbies?” She laughs big and I immediately feel the need to apologise and clarify. “I didn’t mean to sound judgemental... I was only...”

“Oh, not at all. I’m happy to talk about myself. And I don’t have the sense that you’re judging me, only that you have a certain way of understanding me. Humans are programmed to categorize and assimilate information, it’s how we’re wired (Boyd, 2015; Siegel, 1999, 2012a, 2012b; Tatkin, 2016a; van der Kolk & van der Hart, 1995). But these perceptions, they’re meant to be challenged from time to time, yes, to revive curiosity and humility?”

She stands up, her curls extra bouncy due to the humidity I'm sure. And though the lines around her eyes and mouth confirm her right to wisdom, I can't shake the feeling that I am the adult, and her the child.

"Being a parent can be overwhelming and stressful, with or without this information. Maybe it's best to borrow from Bowlby (1977a) some simple guidelines: recognize and respect your child's desire for security. Be intuitive and sympathetic and learn how to interpret your child's attachment behaviors.

"And then... respect his desire to explore the world. Let him try, make mistakes or choices that differ from what you want for him. Welcome him when he checks back in and support him.

"Basically, protect his rights to be himself."

I am startled to find myself wondering about what she is not saying, and I somehow have courage I didn't know I had, to bring a question to my lips.

"Do you know what causes the different types of attachments?"

"Yes. It's in the literature. I can summarise for you..." Her pause causes me to look up. "If you think we have time." I'm not sure what she's doing but my instinct is to dismiss her clause as a means to show I can handle it.

"Sometimes it's simply that the parents, though loving towards their children, just aren't responsive to their child's communication style. Or in other cases the unresponsiveness is intentional, and the parent is purposefully distant, punishing, rejecting or making disparaging remarks. Perhaps the parent becomes unavailable due to sickness or incarceration or divorce. Maybe the mom, while pregnant, was exposed

to violence either as a victim or a bystander. Maybe the parent threatens to leave or claims not to love the child⁴.

“But what I found that most colours the way a parent impacts her child is her own unresolved fears and anger; from passive-repressed anger to full—on rage, and from feelings of inadequacy to fear of being insignificant (Boedlt et al., 2012; Edelstein et al., 2004; Hesse & Main, 1999; Levine & Kline, 2008; Lyon, 2016b; Pervichko, Zinchenko, & Martynov, 2013; Sameroff & Fiese; Sanders et al., 2015; Siegel, 2013; Sirikantraporn & Green, 2016). When we are at our most vulnerable—and our most intimate relationships bring us there - we revert to our relational styles. We treat ourselves and others in ways that can be so unkind. That is why this knowledge is so important. This is why you and I are here right now.”

“So, psychotherapy works then? To undo the social conditioning? Everybody just needs a shrink.”

“Well, to a certain degree, yes. But who we are is made up of three parts: the mind, the brain, and the body. In addition to our belief/perception/behavior systems, we are neurologically programmed (Folger et al., 2017; Karr-Morse & Wiley, 2012; Porges, 2016; Siegel, 1999, 2012b; Tatkin, 2016a, b, d). And since it’s stored in our autonomic nervous system, it’s stored in our body, without conscious awareness. That’s why psychotherapy is limited. The critical piece to fully heal is that you also need somatic healing (Levine, 2010; Levine & Kline, 2008; Ogden, 2017; Porges, 2007).”

⁴ References for parental causes of children’s attachment styles see: Boeldt et al., 2012; Bowlby, 1977a; Folger et al., 2017; Heleniak et al., 2016; Karr-Morse & Wiley, 2012; Stefan & Avram, 2017; van Dijk et al., 2017; Yehuda & Meaney, 2018.

“So, you’re saying you don’t need to know your whole story? To interview your parents? Have them fill in the blanks of what you don’t remember?” *Relief.*

“It isn’t necessary for healing purposes, really. How you remember an experience is more significant and has more of an impact than how it ‘really’ happened (Boyd, 2015; Siegel, 2001; Strong-Wilson et al., 2013; van der Kolk & van der Hart, 1989, 1995). You see, when you remember something from your past, you exist in two moments: the you from when the memory took place, and the you in the moment of remembering. Truth is, the you from the memory is influencing the now-you and the now-you influences the you from the memory (Caruth, 1995, 1996; Siegel, 2001). So, accepting your memories without judgement is the first step. Next you decide if your version of the ‘truth’ is serving you well or not. After, you decide what you want your life to look like, and then, well, then you hop on the magic carpet!”

“Huh, you make it sound to easy, so doable.” I am laughing at her, I’m not even able to hide how ridiculous she sounds. “I mean this with the utmost respect, wouldn’t one be required to have a background in science before making these claims?”

“I’m not quite sure we share the same definition of ‘rights’. Excuse me.” And with that, she leaves the room. *Did I go too far? Did I insult her?* The solitude amplifies my self-criticism and it isn’t until she comes back, holding a bag I don’t remember seeing her arrive with, that I begin to tremble, ever so slightly, but tremble nonetheless.

“I brought something for you.” She hands me a small Tupperware and lifting the lid lets the infatuating smell of apples and cinnamon escape. “I baked it last night and sharing is caring.” She giggles, with a twinkle in her eye, helping release the tightness in my stomach.

“Thank you. It smells... like home.”

The constant ups and downs I’ve experienced today alone, at the hands of this woman, a woman who is feeding me as though I were her own, is more than I can comprehend. She is not typical of the types I usually find myself engaged with. And I now understand why we’re meeting at my home, in my space. It would be awkward if I left. And it would be professionally dangerous if I asked her to.

So, we sit together, the sound of the fan as our music, and eat this apple cake she has supplied us.

“Were you aware of the impact your research would have on you, while you were researching?” *It’s all right to use some generic questions from time to time to jumpstart a conversation.*

“Yes. The reason why it took me as long as it did was partly due to the breaks I took along the way. I had to stop the forward momentum so that I could fully dive into and digest a single part. It was all so monumental.

“Like when I watched Nadine Burke Harris’ TedTalk (2015) about the ACE study (2005), it fundamentally changed my understanding of the impact experiences from childhood have on our long-term physical and emotional health⁵. The findings from that study were pro—found.”

“The ACE Study? (2005).”

⁵ Links made between adverse childhood experiences and adult emotional and physical health are also discussed in these articles: Bremner et al., 2006; Bucci et al., 2016; Chartier et al., 2007; Doyle & Cicchetti, 2017; Dube et al., 2003; Felitti, 2009, 2017; Felitti et al., 1998; Runyan et al., 1998; Schilling et al., 2008; Thompson et al., 2015.

“Yes, it was conducted by Drs. Anda and Felitti in the mid to late ‘90s (Dube et al., 2003; Felitti et al., 1998). Felitti was working at the Kaiser Permanente Institute in California, on a specialised program for weight loss. But the stats bothered him greatly, so he joined forces with Anda from the CDC to interview the participants and see if they could discover why they were relapsing. What they found was monumental, yet heartbreaking. And that’s when the ACE score was born.”

“Wait, were you obese?”

“No. Why do you ask?”

“I just thought that’s why you were interested in that study.”

“Oh. I came upon it from a different angle.”

“I see, yes, of course.” *Honest assumption, no?* “Why did they relapse?”

“Well, it’s not due to the reasons you’d typically assume. The cultural norm of the ‘90s reasoned that it was the individual’s lack of motivation and grit coupled with over-indulgence as reasons for weight gain. And/or perhaps it was genetic. But the ACE Study found another link, and it is changing medical care. The question are why are these people’s motivation and grit compromised?, what is it about them that make them more vulnerable to obesity?, and what are we missing?

“They found a causality between abuse in childhood and adult obesity (see also Rhode et al., 2008). And what they essentially found was that adverse childhood experiences lead to a slew of mental and physical health problems. It’s as simple as that, but still, Oh My God.”

“I don’t get it. Like, having a tough childhood causes cancer?” I’m grappling at straws here, but only because *this seems so outrageous*.

“Yes.”

“Yes.”

“Yes. It does.” I chuckle, because this can’t be right.

“Okay, gestalt and all, but seriously. Why? How? Sadness causes cancer?”

“I know. It’s a much more personal position to view illness from, and it can be a breeding ground for blame and guilt... feelings that could foster even more pain. Gabor Mate (2004) writes about it in his book *When the Body Says No*. It’s a really sensitive matter—to raise the possibility that the way people have been conditioned to live their lives may have created their illnesses. It’s much more obvious and universal to agree that smoking can cause lung and mouth disease. But it’s much more delicate to say the way you were raised, the beliefs that childhood embedded in you and the specific way it developed your nervous system, are the reasons you now have multiple sclerosis. Not only are you suffering from a disease, but now you’re blamed for having it.”

“I am almost certain that geneticists would disagree (Hubner, 2005).” I simply cannot wrap my brain around what she’s saying. I just can’t.

“Of course, there are diseases that are viral or erupt from genetic and chromosomal abnormalities. And diseases that are environmentally influenced, like from the sun or pollution. But, the findings from the ACE Study, they are unavoidable.”

Her eyes, the placement of her hands on her lap, the way her curls cover her ears, she looks like a doll set on my couch, a life-size doll.

“Having had a parent with a mental illness, being raised in poverty or war, or being abused, be it physical, emotional, sexual, or verbal, are directly correlated to your health. Insomnia, drug use, the inability to hold down a job. ADHD, hypertension, IBS.

Reproductive complications, impaired memory, suicidal thoughts (Bremner et al., 2006; Bucci et al., 2016; Chartier et al., 2007; Heleniak et al., 2016; Runyan et al., 1998; Schilling et al., 2008)."

I am suddenly aware of my eyebrows. But I can't seem to unfurrow them. I can hear the air move in and out of my nostrils, but I can't seem to open my mouth.

Her voice lowers to a whisper. "The ACE study was like finding another character in my story... a piece of my narrative that inspired calmness, perspective and understanding. It was as though I was now able to emancipate myself even more from the pain and hardship my life was wrought with. It brought knowledge, yes, but actually what it gave me was more hope."

"Was it that you didn't like yourself?" I wonder if she felt like I do, afraid of ending the day knowing that the quiet of the night means my demons can come out to play freely. That if, for her too, moving means quiet.

"I just had this sense that it could be easier. That life could be better. That my life didn't have to be this way."

"So, it was more that what you were doing wasn't working anymore."

"Right. The toolkit I had amassed was efficient, thank goodness for that! Humans are designed in that way, we naturally employ allostasis to our surroundings (Ganzel et al., 2010; McEwen, 2006; Tatkin, 2016c)."

"Wait. Allo—what?"

"Hehe, allostasis. It's the brain's ability to adapt to its environment... how, after stress, we move ourselves back to stability (Ganzel et al., 2010; McEwen, 2006; Tatkin, 2016c)."

“Okay.”

“And my life wasn’t only bad, of course. I got to travel. I always had a job. It’s just that at a certain point, I realised that being me had a heaviness to it that I couldn’t escape. Even the fun times were accompanied by that heaviness. It was like I was always trying, and that became exhausting.”

My breath catches in my throat – *she’s describing me*.

“Your kids, right? They’re the ones that got to you.” *Focus on her*.

“My kids.” Her voice breaks slightly, and I can tell that her thoughts have left this room, sought out her daughters and the resulting tears are what I’m left with.

“I just couldn’t do to them what my ex and I were doing to each other. I couldn’t do to them what our parents had done to us, which I understand now was essentially their best with the means that they had. I had to try something different. I had to save them from a life of the pain I knew so well.”

And for the first time in my life, I wished I had had it different.

“The ACE Study, attachment theory, it all just told me that my body was a bit broken, that’s all. And since we know about brain plasticity, it could be healed, just like a bone. There was a way, and I just had to find out how to do it.”

I look at this woman, who has talked about philosophy and psychology and neuroscience, but instead of seeing her as the woman from her marketing profile picture, I see her, the woman sitting across from me, as relatable. And for a short moment, I can see that we aren’t too different. But that kind of relatability is overwhelming, and I can’t bear the discomfort.

“How does it do that, though?”

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

I shake the cobwebs from my brain. “How does your childhood cause illnesses? How can experiences change the makeup of your cells?”

“You’ve heard that stress can cause eczema or sleeping problems?”

“Well, yes, but that’s because your mind is over-busy. It’s more a matter of strategies to calm the mind so that you can fall asleep. You know, like make a to-do list for tomorrow so that you can quiet the mind.”

“Mhmm.”

I can tell that her pause is an attempt to have me bridge the gap between us, but there’s nothing for me to build with.

“Why don’t you enlighten me,” my sharpness... *I can switch emotions so quickly.*

“Eczema may present itself on your skin, but your skin is one organ that makes up your whole.”

“Uch, gestalt again?”

“Yes. Always.

“The ACE study, and all research inspired by it, prioritise healing the residue of trauma from childhood so to really ensure a better quality of life. It’s what confirmed the understanding I got from my wedding band—eczema problem... that going to the g.p. or dermatologist is a band-aid solution. I’m not saying that modern specialised medicine is hokey, just that it’s incomplete—it’s one piece to the treatment puzzle. We have this blind allegiance to specialists that went to modern medical schools, and who oftentimes never attempt to understand the whole person before moving forward with treatment.

It's one of the points Nadine Burke Harris makes in her speeches. It's what Felitti and Anda found in their massive study."

"Eh, um, your eczema thing? What was that?" There is so much to consider and the weight of what she's saying is clanging around in my heart.

"Oh, right. Well a couple of years before I separated from my ex I started to develop a terrible case of eczema... but just under my wedding band! That little patch of skin would get inflamed and really itchy. I would take my ring off, it would heal after a few days, I'd put the ring back on, it would flare up again. I tried leaving it off while I showered and washed my hands. I tried moisturising more than normal. The only remedy seemed to be when I took it off and kept it off.

"So, I went to the dermatologist who was dumbfounded. He said there was no reason for this type of eczema to present itself. And that's when I stopped wearing my wedding band. It was only a few years later when I developed deeper spiritual and intellectual practices that I concluded it was my body whispering what I was avoiding - how I felt about my marriage." With that she sits down, sighs, and looks at me. She lets the silence in the room be a symbol that *we are too busy to know ourselves, and too scared to know why we're avoiding ourselves.*

"Were there other physical signs?" and before she could answer, my thoughts drifted to all the people in my life. The list isn't long, I've kept mostly to myself. Chronic fatigue, anxiety, workaholics, obesity. *Can all of it be somehow linked to childhood experiences?*

"Stuff I only realised in hindsight? Yeah. I used to wake up in the middle of the night and be up for a couple of hours. That was exhausting. Um, I was overweight and

suffered from binge-eating. I had other digestive issues, which I don't need to get into. I had anxiety and would spend most of my time worrying about things real and imagined, trying to come up with coping plans. Oh, I had a spending problem, in that I used buying stuff to get a 'high'. I wasn't in debt, but I was buying way more than I needed. I had asthma and symptoms popped up with some frequency, although I hadn't been hospitalised since my youth."

We sit together, the whirl of the fan filling the space. I don't know of anyone else who has helped herself in this way. But honestly, it's hard for me to consolidate the who she's describing she was as the same person spitting out these words of wisdom.

"So, time doesn't help all wounds. You're saying that the traumas we endured as kids stay with us in ways we're not even aware of (Burke Harris, 2015; Bremner et al., 2006; Chartier et al., 2007; Lanius et al., 2010; McEwen & Gianaros, 2010; Nakazawa, 2015; Siegel, 1999; Thompson et al., 2015)."

"Yes. There's this simple quote from Nakazawa (2015, p. 25): "your emotional biography becomes your physical biology." Pretty much sums up the ACE study revolution. And everything I've come to understand about our neurological system."

The things she's saying are starting to come together and I'm pulled back into a memory: we're at a work function and he's being honoured for his research. I can remember being overwhelmed by how many people are in the room—there's hardly any air. I'm holding my hands to resist the urge to bite my nails or peel the polish. He catches my eye and beams, so happy that he is surrounded by our friends and colleagues, so proud that he has reached a long-time goal of his. My stomach is in knots and when I see someone walking towards me I turn around and head out the

door. I need a smoke. By the time I walk back in, I've missed his speech. He's sitting at our table with the award in his lap, head down. "*Congrats,*" I tell him and rub his back. "*I'm so sorry I missed your speech. I didn't even know you were at the podium.*" He's silent. "*Someone should have come and gotten me... Why didn't your research assistant come and get me?*" The impending fight was put on hold. Later, back at my place, I aloofly remind him that I wasn't going to be held hostage inside a banquet room, that I had a right to go have a smoke. I was indeed supportive of him and that missing his acceptance speech wasn't my fault. What was blind to both of us was that I had to go out to smoke, so I could escape the anxiety that was taking me over by being in the room.

"You see, the ACE study and attachment theory go hand-in-hand. The way parents regulate their kid's physical and emotional arousal, meaning how they deal with their joy or distress, have profound impacts in the kid's neurological, physiological and psychosocial development (Boeldt et al., 2012; Doyle & Cicchetti, 2017; Howe, 2011; van Dijk et al., 2017)."

I put my hand up in the air, signalling her to take a break.

"You're coming back to the brain, aren't you?"

She lifts her shoulders and brings her hands to her cheeks, a look that takes 40 years off.

"Yes, yes I am." She giggles and I smile, a smile to demonstrate that I concede to her insatiable desire to revisit what she likes. And for a split moment, I wonder why I resist each time she brings it up...

“When kids sense danger or feel unsafe, it triggers a stress response and elicits fear (Porges, 2017; see also Bowlby, 1977a), right? Biologically speaking, that fear is there so we can make any adjustments needed in order to return to a sense of safety. That’s regulation. It’s how we’re wired. That’s the role of the autonomic nervous system.”

“Listen, what you’re saying makes sense... in English. But I don’t have a background in science. I can’t imagine how feeling unsafe comes from your brain.”

“Yup, no problem, I too had to learn all of this. If you’re willing, we can try and dive into it a bit.” *Why do I keep going along with her?*

“I’m going to strip down what I know for now, which means I’ll be leaving some stuff out.” *There’s that intentional pause again. What am I doing?*

“Its whole purpose is communication: ways to get bits of information from one spot to another (Watkins, 2012; Siegel, 2012a). We’ll start with the brain and the spinal cord, okay. Now, all animals share some parts of our nervous system. But human brains are larger and have evolved to develop certain higher order functioning, which you would mostly find in the top half of our brains. This is where we regulate our emotions, develop and access empathy, analyse information (Siegel, 2012b), and make goals and figure out how to reach them (Davidson et al., 2012). Also, humans have a cerebral cortex, that’s what ‘covers’ the brain, and it looks like a wrinkly blanket. The cortex is important because the front part is the hub of human cognition and motor functioning and speech production. It’s where we interpret the information our senses bring in - it’s where we decide what to think and do and say. It’s also where we monitor the

consequences of our actions and engage in problem solving (Davidson et al., 2012; Jung et al., 2010; Siegel, 2012b).

“There are two crucial things to be aware of about the top half of the brain. One, it isn’t fully developed until your mid-twenties. That’s a big reason why its development will be impacted by life experiences (Siegel, 2012a). Two, it is only fully accessible when you’re calm, well rested, well fed... basically when you’re feeling safe (Porges, 2017; Siegel, 2012b). So, if your first 20 or so years have been challenging, then it most probably affected the top half of your brain. You’ll have a damaged brain, to some extent.”

She pauses and seems remorseful. I realise now that my mouth is agape, and my brow is furrowed. I’m... appalled.

“Holy crap. You realise what you’re saying, right?”

Of course she realises. It’s just easier for me to substitute her for myself.

“Ready?” I nod. “Now, there are two ways for a person to decide she is in danger. Let’s say, something that was safe has now become dangerous. For example, she was playing with her friend. They were half-way through a game of monopoly. Everything was going well. They were having fun. But then her friend started to buy more and more property, and she started to land on her friend’s squares. She starts to run out of money. She’s thinking that she’s going to lose. She is now experiencing stress. If she doesn’t think she can cope with this stress, if she doesn’t think she can problem—solve her way back to homeostasis, then she will cognitively trigger her stress response (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bistricky, Ingam, & Atchley, 2011; Brown, 2006; Davidson, 2002; Jung et al., 2010; Main & Solomon, 1990).

“Okay, remember ‘stress response’⁶. That’s important and I’ll come back to that in a second.”

I nod, transfixed and unable to take notes. *Thank god for audio recording apps and unlimited storage.*

“The other way your stress response system can get activated is through your autonomic system. Your autonomic system is the three-branch system that Stephen Porges’ research is all about (2007, 2017). First line of defense is the vagal nerve. It uses info from the five senses to determine threat. Pitch of voice, facial expressions, smells, et cetera.

“If the vagal nerve detects danger, then the sympathetic branch gets activated through adrenaline, noradrenaline and cortisol. That’s our fight or flight response.

“When the stressful event is over, then your parasympathetic system kicks into gear. That’s our rest and digest response. You come back to normal.”

“Kay. So. Sense danger. Fight or flight. Feel safe. Relax. That’s the sequence?” / *guess I’m a better student than I thought.*

“Yeah. Nicely done. It’s the very stripped-down version.” *Another pause.* “There’s just another part that’s important. If... if the stressor remains and your nervous system becomes overstimulated, it will shut off, commonly known as going into a freeze state. You faint, you go numb, essentially you disassociate yourself from your environment. Your nervous system does this to help you, it’s a survival mechanism that all mammals have. You sometimes see it in animals that are being chased. The play dead.”

⁶ For more about the stress-response activation cycle, see: Fowkes, 2015; Furness, 2009; Ganzel, Morris, & Wethington, 2010; Holsen et al., 2012; McEwen, 2001, 2007; McEwen & Gianaros, 2010; Peckins et al., 2015; Shirtcliff et al., 2012.

Her hand clasps the other and rests them in her lap. An overt sign that that's that.

"So that's it. That's the whole system? Are we done?" My palms are sweaty and I'm eager to move on. I have never liked the sciences.

"Not quite, though I've just given you a short summary, it's important to know what happens to the nervous system when someone does feel stress. It's a huge piece to the puzzle."

I glance up at the clock. "We've been talking for three hours already. Do you want to take a break? Let's take a break. Yeah."

"Let's dance!" She's jumped into the middle of the room before I turn my head and I find her looking around. I think she's searching for a radio or even a stereo. I am saved from humiliation by the fact that this woman doesn't stream her music. "We need to move -- I need to move (Angeletti, 2016)."

"Hehe, well, you're more than welcome to. Meanwhile, I'll use the little girls' room."

"Your autonomic nervous system, what's done without conscious perception and instead is done through neuroreceptors (Porges, 2017; see also Breit, Kupferberg, Rogler, & Hasler, 2018) is the link between our external experiences and how it is processed internally," she says through the bathroom door. Our boundaries for privacy differ, that's obvious.

"Just a second! Still washing my hands."

I walk into the room, startled to find her sitting in my chair. “Ooh, I’ll move. I just wanted to know what it was like to be you.” I can’t help but laugh at the impossibility of that statement - we couldn’t be more different.

“What I’m about to describe to you is called the limbic system and it’s in the lower half of your brain. Now don’t worry, I won’t make it too technical.”

“Wait a second. A question did come to me while I was... well, while I was otherwise occupied. How does information from outside of us get transformed to be inside of us?”

“Fantastic question!” she squeals, not like the pigs on the farms by the house where I grew up but more like a teenage girl at her first boy band concert.

“Okay, I’m very excited. This is so interesting, isn’t it?!” We clearly have different definitions of fun.

“The interpretation of information is all about how energy is sent and received (Siegel, 2012a; Watkins, 2012). Always. That’s all communication is. At its most fundamental. Before interpretations and mental schemas. Before Sartre and Deleuze, there is chemistry.

“So, with the youngest people, with our babies and toddlers and children and teenagers, how their caregivers communicate with them is imperative. How our young people receive energy is imperative. The quality of what we send out will affect how it is received, in its most fundamental state.”

“Oh. I see now what you meant about parental responsibility. I would have absolutely messed up my kid, if I had had one. I know none of this.” Nauseated and horrified, I think of my students. There are always one or two every semester, sending

me emails asking for an exception, for special consideration. Grown adults. Unable to manage their time and responsibilities. *I feel as though the wind has been knocked out of me.*

“Biologically, social communication is processed by the frontal vagal nerve, which means that as soon as I’ve got my daughter’s attention, her nervous system is unconsciously scanning for signs of threat or safety. She will see me. She will hear me. If I’m touching her, she will feel me. She could smell me. All these things. All five senses, right? Energy—information—is initially perceived by the senses and autonomic nervous system (Porges, 2017; Siegel, 2012a).

“And then, well, the cumulative effect of her life experiences and memories will influence her perceptions and behaviors, that’s what is stored in her upper brain and in her body. Now we’re talking secondary interpretations. What has life taught her nervous system? (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Ainsworth & Wittig, 1969; Belsky & Cassidy, 1994; Howe, 2011; Porges, 2017; van der Kolk & van der Hart, 1989; Young & Klosko, 1994). How are you making sense of the external?”

“So, the question really is, *what would life for me be like if, as an infant, I had a secure attachment?*”

“Now that is a very powerful question indeed.”

She puts her phone back in her purse and lets out an impressive exhale.

“Just wanted to reschedule that phone interview.” She smiles, and I feel obliged to tell her that she doesn’t owe me an explanation.

“So, some people refer to the bottom half of our brains as the lizard brain, others call it the monkey brain. Just remember that it’s a very old part of our nervous system⁷.”

“Uhuh.”

“Okay, so we have a thalamus. It’s really small and kinda looks like an almond. It receives info from your five senses. It sits right on top of your brain stem and takes the incoming info and sends it to the appropriate part of the cortex. Think of it as your brain’s relay station.

“Sitting right in front of the thalamus is the amygdala. It’s super important. It comes up a lot. Aggression and violence... fear and anxiety... all come from the amygdala. The amygdala signals environmental threats to survival, and it’s the go-between for the central nervous system and the endocrine system. The way it lets your body know it’s in danger is by producing epinephrine and norepinephrine. We commonly say adrenaline and noradrenaline. These hormones trigger the immediate stress response.”

I think I’d be better off with a diagram to look at.

“The adrenal glands sit atop our kidneys and will release cortisol when the stress response system is activated. Cortisol’s main job is to moderate your body’s metabolism of glucose, but it also regulates your body’s stress response in the long-term. Meaning, it’s a slow acting stress-response hormone.

“How are we doing so far? Any questions?”

Am I supposed to have questions? “I’m fine, go on.”

⁷ For the limbic system and its relation to stress, see Bucci et al., 2016; Davidson et al., 2012; Jung et al., 2010; Physiology for Hippies, 2016; Porges, 2016. These sources informed the information in this section from pages 115 to 116.

“Okay. Adrenaline wakes up the sympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system, which we know as our fight or flight response. Now remember, this happens in an instant, before you even realise what’s happening. Your pupils will dilate so you can see better, your mouth will dry up cuz your digestive system will be suppressed, your breathing and heart rate will increase to distribute oxygen faster to your body, your alertness increases as does your body temperature, and you even secrete a hormone that acts like an analgesia, which is why we won’t feel the cut or broken bone until well after the accident. All these things happen so that you can fight or flee. It all happens to mobilize you.

“The adrenal glands’ release of cortisol into your bloodstream is what gives you a surge of energy, which you’d need to fight or flee. What is slightly oxymoronic is that cortisol will also suppress your immune system in an attempt to cancel out the adrenaline’s overproduction of inflammation, which seems like a good thing, because inflammation is not good for you, but the consequence is your immune system is down, so your body is less able to fight off viruses and other ailments.

“Okay, how are you doing so far?”

“Huh, I think I got that. I mean it makes sense. Just don’t ask me about the names and parts tomorrow, okay.” We take a moment, and I laugh at the absurdity of my life. Never in a million years would I have ever considered myself to have a sound, biologically—scientific mind.

“Yes, it’s a lot more accessible now that we have YouTube!”

My jaw drops. “Is that really where you learned all that?” The inflection of my voice edges up, and she’s now laughing in her cheery, carefree way; unapologetic at revealing her less-than-academically—worthy sources.

“Not entirely. But there is such a wonderful sense of connectedness in the online community. People, within the comforts of their home or office, are willing to put the time and energy and resources into making these 15—minute videos so that people like me, in the comfort of my home or office, can learn something. There is such a sharing of wealth that is going on. I am incredibly humbled and grateful for this community. The type of growth that I have experienced because of them. And I can never repay them personally, no to the same degree. It’s really astonishing and loving. Mr. Rogers was so right. Look for the helpers. They are there.”

There are tears in her eyes, and I am embarrassed at how small I’ve built my world.

“Okay, back to business. The nervous system... this sequence of events, the release of these hormones which translates into overt actions, is innate to all humans - we’re all born with this. So, it’s safe to say that we are fully programed to handle mild to moderate stress.”

“I think I see where you’re going with this.”

She smiles at me, her all-knowing smile.

“After the stressor is gone, it’s time to come back to normal. Your nervous system, your vagus nerve to be specific, releases a hormone to rebuild called acetylcholine (Breit et al., 2018; Jung et al., 2010; Porges, 2017). This triggers the parasympathetic system, otherwise known as ‘rest and digest’ system. Your pupils

return to regular size, your heart and breathing rates return to normal, your digestive and reproductive systems come back on, stuff like that.

“Here’s the caveat: your PNS is the foundation upon which we develop how capable we are to regulate ourselves and our emotions. And the degree to which we are able to regulate those things is fundamental to how we function cognitively, socially, and emotionally (Diamond & Cribbet, 2013; Porges, 2017).”

“Wow.”

“I know.”

“Regulate...”

“Regulate, yeah, from before... means being able to stimulate yourself if you’re down, or calm yourself if you’re up, so that you can return to your base, your normal. The normal you were born with, which may be different than the normal you developed once life experiences got a hold of you.”

“I see. And you mean how we were raised. Attachment theory and ACEs and all that.”

“And all that. Yes.”

“Gestalt.”

“Hehe, yes. Gestalt.”

“And so, you’re telling me that in addition to all this hormones stuff, it’s also how safe we perceive ourselves to be... a perception which was set by the quality of our primary relationships. Aaaaaall that impacts our ability to regulate?”

“You have listened well, my little grasshopper.”

“Haha, okay master.”

“But that’s the thing: It is **all** connected. We learn how to regulate ourselves when we’re young in our social relationships, that’s why our regulatory abilities are fully contingent on the quality of that relationship. Regulating is a cocktail made of socialisation, biology, psychology and neurology! Nature and nurture!” She huffs, still amazed by the delicacy of the human existence. While I sit here completely dumbfounded.

“But think about it: an insecure attachment bond between child and caregiver causes stress hormones to be released, and that’s neurology. It’s also sociology, how we’re conditioned, and psychology; our cognition and schemas. All that, acting simultaneously. And then, as an adult, it presents itself as philosophy; our perceptions and beliefs, in our politics; how we engage in power dynamics, and also in our economics; place in the workforce, dependency on welfare.

“What if the state of our current society is wholly based on how we were raised? John Lennon famously said, ‘All we need is love’, but what if the expression of love is contingent on feelings of safety and a sense of being of value. Then, all we need is secure attachment.”

“Not as catchy, though, huh.”

Her eyes really do sparkle when she smiles.

“I think I’m missing some critical pieces,” I continue. “I mean you’ve said enough for me to believe what you’re saying is true, but for my own sake, there’s something missing.”

“Try stomping your feet.”

This woman is nuts.

“Okay, I can tell you’re not comfortable with that. How about squeezing your fingers? You could try that. Small movements. Unnoticeable.”

“Why? Why would I do that?”

“Oh, it’s just a little game I play when I’m feeling overwhelmed⁸.”

I can hear the seconds hand tick softly, marking missed moments to progress our conversation. *How will I know when we’re done?*

“Okay, think back to the types of stressors we’ve already talked about: poor responsiveness from caregiver, emotional or physical or sexual abuse, neglect (ACE study, 2005; King et al., 2017; Peckins et al., 2015). Other than relational factors, it could also be chronic pain, food allergens, infections, exposure to heavy metals or to toxins in your environment (Just in Health, 2014).”

“Wait, hold on. Is the stress I feel mentally the same as the stress my body experiences?”

“Yes. Your body and brain can’t tell the difference between real and perceived. Hormones are released in all stressful situations.”

I shake my head, grunting at how disgusting it all is. *It’s too much.*

“Regardless of the source, if you’ve been exposed to chronic stress, meaning you’ve experienced stress over a long period of time, your stress response system becomes overused and/or damaged. Since your limbic system is connected to both your body and your mind, you’re likely to be left with some health problems. I mean, there’s a really long list. Humans aren’t built to be walking around with high, and/or

⁸ Somatic Experiencing is a body-based therapy to treat the trapped energetic residue from traumatic experiences [see Pat Ogden (2006) and Peter Levine (2010)].

constant levels of adrenaline and cortisol (Bucci et al., 2016; Just in Health, 2014; Physiology for Hippies, 2016)."

Is this the apocalypse?

"Right. You had mentioned obesity as a consequence."

"Yes! Exactly. Other consequences on the list that are body-based are type 2 diabetes (Just in Health, 2014; King et al., 2017), osteoporosis (Just in Health, 2014), suppressed reproductive abilities (Bucci et al., 2016; Just in Health, 2014), thyroid disease (Bucci et al., 2016), cardiovascular disease (Bucci et al., 2016; Felitti et al., 1998; Peckins et al., 2015), lung and liver disease (Felitti et al., 1998), autoimmune diseases, arthritis (Bucci et al., 2016; Peckins et al., 2015), IBS (Bucci et al., 2016; King et al., 2017), and skin diseases like psoriasis (Brouwer et al., 2014)."

"Holy crap, that's quite a list." She stops to smile. "Sorry. I don't typically curse during meetings I conduct."

"Oh, I hardly think what we're doing is typical."

She may have a point there.

"Brain-based consequences are equally devastating: psychiatric illnesses and criminal behavior which can translate to not being able to hold onto a job or by socially isolating yourself (Copeland et al., 2018), anxiety, depression (Bucci et al., 2016; Davidson et al., 2012; Heleniak et al., 2016; King et al., 2017; Peckins et al., 2015), substance abuse (Dube et al., 2003; Heleniak et al., 2016), externalizing behaviors, rumination, self-harm, impulsivity deficiency (Heleniak et al., 2016), suppressed growth hormone release, altered perceptions of the external world and ability to express emotions (Davidson et al., 2012; Just in Health, 2014), over-assumption of threats,

imaginary or ill perceived fears, bipolar disorder, borderline personality disorder (Bucci et al., 2016; Davidson et al., 2012), lowered ability to pay attention and reason, impaired memory and learning, suicidal thoughts or attempts, anorexia, OCD, over exercising, PTSD, (Bucci et al., 2016), chronic fatigue syndrome (King et al., 2017; McEwen, 2006), aggression and delinquency (Boeldt et al., 2012, Bucci et al., 2016), poor mood regulation (Holsen et al., 2012), flatter circadian rhythms like our body temperature cycle, and even the secretion of hormones (Bucci et al., 2016; Gunnar & Vazquez, 2001; King et al., 2017; Shirtcliff et al., 2011)."

The air is thin, and things are going out of focus.

"Your list, um, what you say the research shows, I mean..." I think I might be hyperventilating. "That's like every kind of illness or disease... I mean, governments and non-profits invest millions - maybe billions of dollars - into policies or community surveillance, um, prisons, mental hospitals... pharmacology!" I am definitely starting to lose it.

"I know what you're feeling. It's immense."

"Stop for just a second!" I protest. "This laundry list of consequences, it's like out of a sci-fi book. You're essentially saying that you become this sick, paranoid shell of your former self. Which, when I look around, I don't see. If it's really that pervasive, then where are these people? Is she you? Is she me?"

And that's when the room begins to spin, angled just enough to dilute the edges, like the pictures my mom used to take with our Polaroid.

"We're all her, to different degrees."

“This can’t be. It’s not possible. How have we had the progress that we’ve had... Google, electric cars, missions to outer space... these ideas came from people. If we’re all walking around chronically sick and damaged, how could we possibly have made the advances we have? This doesn’t make sense.”

“You can be an insomniac and compose a masterful concerto. You can be infertile and raise funds to research Alzheimer’s.”

“One doesn’t preclude the other, fine, but still.”

“The problems we have, well, we don’t always understand how closely our lives are interwoven. If we did, maybe we’d collectively be better at healing.”

“But people don’t know this stuff. How can you acknowledge what you can’t even fathom could be true?”

“That, my dear, is *the* question. It’s the one that starts every new journey. It’s the question that got us Google and electric cars and missions to outer space. *What don’t I see?*”

“So, why aren’t more people asking themselves that question?”

“Ahhh, well that’s like putting someone in front of a closed door. Telling them that on the other side will be everything they’ve ever wanted, but that in order to open that door, they’ll have to spend years facing their deepest fears.”

“So you’re saying we’re a bunch of stupid, ignorant, cowards?”

“Hehe, maybe we are. Maybe some of us just have a very complicated relationship with the unknown.”

“And that’s because...”

“Maybe it’s because of our sense of security overall. And that brings us back to when we first started to interact with the world, our very first relationships, to our attachment styles.”

“You’ve got to be kidding. Gestalt again?”

She smiles tenderly, knowing that I’m inching my way across the divide.

“There’s something I need to tell you”. I hear her moving about the room behind me, and I catch her reflection in the window, the night sky having started to settle in.

“What’s that?”

“I’m not sure what I’ll do with our transcripts after the week is done.” My fingertips have found their spot along the sill. This is a place I like to stand in, as my muscle memory can attest. There’s something effortlessly voyeuristic about looking out a window onto the street below. Permission naively granted to have a stranger study your movements, something even our friends have probably never given.

“Hmm, I see. It’s not quite obvious yet what will come. But I am incredibly energised by our talk. Wednesdays can be quite surreptitious.”

Perplexed by what she’s said, I spin on my heels, only to find her in the plank position on the floor next to my coffee table.

“What with half the week behind you and half in front of you, secrets hide between the ticking seconds, wanting to hold on to the fun a little longer.”

“What kind of fun are you referring to?”

“Oh,” she lowers herself onto her elbows and hips onto the rug, “the fun of not yet knowing how it comes together.”

I don't think I will tell her, but she is the strangest person I know.

Chapter 4: Thursday

If you don't heal what hurt you, you'll bleed on people who didn't cut you
Self-healing meme, 2018

Be the love you never received. Be the acknowledgment you never got. Be the listener you always needed. Look at the younger versions of yourself within you and give yourself what it is you always needed. That is the first step of healing. If you want others to see you, you must see you
Vienna Pharaon, 2019

what i miss most is how you loved me. but what i didn't know was how you loved me had so much to do with the person i was. it was a reflection of everything i gave to you. coming back to me. how did i not see that. how. did i sit here soaking in the idea that no one else would love me that way. when it was i that taught you. when it was i that showed you how to fill. the way i needed to be filled. how cruel i was to myself. giving you credit for my warmth simply because you had felt it. thinking it was you who gave me strength. wit. beauty. simply because you recognized it. as if i was already not these things before i met you. as if i did not remain these once you left.
Rupi kaur, 2015, p.138

"Hmm," a wave seems to come over her. She's ever—so—slightly moved her head so that she's looking beyond what's really there in the room with us.

"I'm guessing it was pretty monumental," words spoken to try to alleviate the burden of answering my question.

"It was the final catalyst for everything."

I stare at her, wondering if what I'm about to hear sounds familiar enough to my own story. I wonder if now is the moment we become sisters.

"I mean, of course the point-of-no-return is cumulative, but this is the moment that caused me to ask different questions."

I slide onto the floor and rest the back of my head on the seat of the chair. As my hands lightly pass over the smoothness of the rug, the cobwebs wrapped around the chandelier catch my eye - such a pretty design.

“Things had been deteriorating for a while, obviously things like this don’t happen overnight. But anyway, we were in the kitchen,” she breaks character and looks at me. “Hey, how dramatic do you want the telling to go? I’ve got several renditions of this story...”

Shocked that she has versions, I eventually say, “tell it to me the way it felt to you when it was happening.”

“Excellent. I can do that.” She resumes her far-off focus and takes a few deep breaths and I wonder if that’s what meditation looks like. “Even better.” She gets up and pulls some papers out of her bag and hands them to me. “Read the highlighted portion starting on the third page. It’s written in the third person, but it’s me. It’s my moment.”

I read:

With the wooden spoon in her right hand, she glances at the clock on the stove. 5:02. She stirs the pot, willing science to move faster, urging the ingredients to bond faster, hoping his work call will run late.

It doesn’t.

His footsteps grow louder as he bounds up from his office on the lower floor. His presence shares her space and she is overcome. He is beside her now. She feels his heat meld with the steam from the pot. She is surrounded by fire. Her insides are already in knots, and her head begins to swarm. Her thoughts slow painfully, and she tries her best to avoid eye contact. Her senses are already strained. Her breathing

quickens, her heart speeds up, she can hardly make out the words he is using. "Why isn't supper ready?" She thinks she offers an explanation. "Why did you use so many pots?" Does she show him the recipe to justify her actions? This is a dance they have danced before.

The wooden spoon is now in his hand, so he can attempt to speed up science and bond the ingredients faster.

She takes a few steps away from the stove and moves around the corner of the kitchen table. He is speaking to her but at this point everything is garbled. She is in survival mode.

He leaves the beloved spot by the stove and they are circling the kitchen table, spoon still in his hand, her brain still unable to hear his words. How many times do they go around it before they stop? Three? Four? Five?

Somehow, she has a moment, when she becomes a viewer instead of a participant. She moves slowly, though the scene before her is in real time. She sees him as a husband who is being irrational and taking it out on his wife. Fine. She's seen that acted out numerous times. Though, as she glances to her left, a full 90 degrees, everything becomes clear again. Her heart skips a beat and then returns to regular rhythm. Her eyes widen and then relax to their normal shape. Their two daughters, aged 2 and 3, stand in a clutched embrace, cheeks and bodies blended without clear distinction. They are watching her.

And it is in this moment that she is saved.

“Do they remember this? Do they remember watching you?” I can’t lift my eyes off the paper, knowing very well that if I look at her, the tears that are within the confines of my lids will splash down onto my cheeks, and we are not here to witness that.

“I don’t think so, but like we covered yesterday, research indicates that they’ve stored that stress somewhere in their nervous system and body (Caruth, 1995; Levine, 2010; Ogden, 2017; Porges, 2017; Siegel, 1999, 2018; Tatkin, 2016d; van der Kolk, 2018). Like I said, moments like those accumulated for them too. It’ll all make itself known at some point, I imagine.” Her voice lags speed, and I know that there is pain in her mouth. I find myself at a precarious spot, wondering whether or not to ask another question in order to propel the conversation, which right now seems a bit selfish and rude. I inhale, in preparation to breathe life into the stagnant space between us.

“How did you do it? How did you know what to do to change... change it all?”

She huffs, eyes rolling to the side. “My god, at first I didn’t have a clue how. I only knew things had to change. Period.

“Today, I can tell you the short version. I used reading, listening, meditation, talk therapy, body therapy, theories, journaling, producing and sharing autobiographical studies, and really really getting to know myself and being honest and clear on who I am and want to be in this world, and then practicing it until it became second nature.

“The even shorter version is that once I decided things had to change, it all fell into place, like the Law of Attraction⁹ (Blavatsky, 1960), though I didn’t know that at first. How can you know what you don’t know, until you know? And even then, you don’t know it all.”

⁹ The Law of Attraction is the belief that the universe creates and provides for you what your thoughts are focused on.

I am biting my tongue, not only because I feel the question I long to ask is intrusive and potentially explosive, but also because I am not sure if I really want to hear her full story.

She lays flat on her stomach, cheek on the back of her overlapped hands. She's closed her eyes and I wonder what she's thinking, if she's thinking *what her kids would be like had she stayed in the marriage*.

"How did you end up in that kind of relationship?" The words slip through my teeth, hoping I don't sound judgemental... greater-than-thou.

She rolls onto her side, placing her palm under her cheek. The great sigh tells me that this is still a heavy topic for her to face.

"Partly because of my character, and partly because of the circumstances while I was growing up. Nature and Nurture, at its best." I nod, *of course, what else could it be*.

"Yesterday we touched upon Attachment Theory, the ACE study and how the nervous system is developed by our experiences, right?" I nod. "Well here's a bit about the nature half. Helen Fisher's (2009) research taught me that your character is about 50% responsible for how you move through life. It assimilates your experiences in very specific ways. Her work in the fields of anthropology and neurology is a really helpful and interesting perspective!

"Shawn Achor's work (2017a, 2017b; see also Boardman & Doraiswamy, 2015; Duan & Ho, 2018; Ho, Duan, & Tang, 2014a; Ho et al., 2014) in the field of positive psychology speaks to character as well, though not through the same scientific lens as Fisher's."

All I can think of is Jane Goodall and the chimps, and so I chuckle. Her smile makes me blush, and I realise that I've sidestepped our talk and feel a bit shameful, a bit unprofessional. "What's got you giggling? I wanna laugh too." She has sat up, cross-legged on the floor, like a schoolgirl ready for her teacher to begin reading the picture book to the class. *She really does embrace the child from within.* I shake my head and let the smile evaporate from my face.

"Ah, no problem. I get it. Some internal jokes don't translate so easily." She has gotten up off the floor and, as though music has filled the room, and begins to twist and move around the space. She sighs a few times and rubs her chin, her shoulders, her elbows.

She sees me follow her hands. "You know, Isaac told me about half way through our treatments that it was time that I started giving attention to my skin. He said, "I want you to start putting lotion on again. Take care of yourself". I hadn't even realised I wasn't. And when I started, I noticed that it really did help me feel all the good things I was striving for: important, valuable, sensual, alive. I am such a kinaesthetically—driven person, but life had me forget that."

"I don't know who Isaac is."

"Oh, right. We haven't talked about him yet." She climbs onto the couch and drapes over her legs the blanket I place there as decoration. "Isaac was the man who made all my healing possible. He held my hand as I shook myself apart, much like one does to a snow globe, and then he helped me rebuild myself as the pieces started settling down."

"He was a boyfriend?"

“No. He was a massage therapist! And then Isaac became my guide and saviour. With his tutelage, I learned how to get used to the feeling of my own feet taking the next step. Inertia can be frightening for some of us.” She smiles ever so slightly. I’m beginning to know that smile well. Gratitude mixed with wonder and encouragement. That kind of smile.

“You know, one of the very first questions he ever asked me was why I was anxious. I can remember how naively surprised I was. I found his question somewhat incredulous because I didn’t think I was stressed at all, and I even told him so. It took months of talking and practicing every single day for me to unwind. I only noticed it then, right, the lack of stress. It’s amazing what you become accustomed to and how it becomes your normal state of being. You don’t even question what kind of state it is because you’ve got all the tools to be in it. It’s just your life... gosh! I’m still in complete awe of how subtle and significant it is. It’s so humbling. The brain really is programmed to survive. Of course, it makes sense that we allocute (Ganzel et al., 2010; McEwen, 2006) to our surroundings, notably the emotional environment. What’s really awe inspiring is how we aren’t aware to what degree our self—awareness is limited to until we are confronted with what else is possible.”

“You don’t know what you don’t know until you know.” I give her a wink.

We sit together in silence, knowing that we are invisibly weaving a bond. A sense of sisterhood beyond blood.

“But how did he do it? How did you get you a new momentum? I mean, we’ve talked a lot about ideas and theories and perspectives these last few days... but the tangible, real, dirty, human, hands-on stuff. What about that?”

“Hehe, well I can tell you but again, it was personalised for just me. Even if you had met him, and he had taken you under his wing, the story would inevitably be different.”

“Yeah, I get that.”

“Okay then. At first, he gave me artifacts, routines to do on the daily. Ooh, there was this short leg massage I was to do every night. It was to help with circulation, but really, I assume that request had an ulterior purpose. But again, maybe not! That’s why the process is so personalised! You get out of it what you see!” Her excitement is so endearing that *in these moments I often feel the freedom only childhood affords*. I move to the window and take in the shapes and colours from outside.

“Early on he gave me a small box. This is my most prized memory. When you pulled up the top, nestled in soft satin was a pyramid, the size of your hand. Every morning, before even getting out of bed, I was to look at the four sides. Then for each side, I got to make a wish. One for myself, one for someone I loved, one for someone I didn’t, and one for the world. I was to have my eyes closed while I wished and make it as though my whole body was sending it out into the world.

“Then I had to turn it upside down, point into the center of my left palm, right hand on top, balancing it. Moving my hands in opposite directions, I would twist it twelve times. Hm,” she tilts her head to the left, “I wonder why twelve.” *She’s always searching for hidden meaning. It seems exhausting.*

“What was special about the pyramid?”

“Well, just that. It was the foundation for my practice of gratitude. After a few weeks, he asked me to start invading my trains of thought by quickly looking for

something to comment positively on. I would do this on my daily runs. I'd stop thinking and look at the leaves on a tree instead or notice the different coloured mailboxes and front doors."

"It really is a practice, huh?"

"Yes, it may be a principle or an outlook, but at the very essence, it's a skill, an act. And that can be learned. That can become a habit."

I notice a driver trying to parallel park with much difficulty. But once he's made it in, intrigue sets in because he doesn't get out of his car. He's sitting there, both hands on the wheel.

"Hehe, do you think they offer classes, like 'couples gratitude practice'?"

I twist slightly from the window so that I can catch her expression and she's smiling at me with that smile again. The one with pity and vastness combined. A reminder that she is the teacher and I am still the student.

"It's really something, the interrelatedness of a person's development. The way everything synthesised becomes how we interpret body language and vocal intonations, it informs our tolerance level for discomfort, even our expectations (Levine, 2010; Porges, 2017). It's so powerful that despite the person in front of us giving us contradictory evidence, we will still understand them within our established constructs. We only see what we can see."

What does that have to do with gratitude?

The driver is now pacing on the sidewalk. He must be waiting for something. Not wanting to miss any of the saga, I remain rooted in front of the window a little longer.

“It sounds like there might be some truth to the phenomena of adults picking partners that resemble their parents, huh?” I am not entirely sure if *he’s* like my mom or my dad and I hesitate to dig deeper cuz then I would have to ask the question that I can’t bear to know the answer to: am I like my mom or my dad?

“Yeah, there is a strong belief in the neurological and psychological research communities that we repeat relational cycles¹⁰. It can be traced back generations, really.” She smiles, the kind of smile you give to someone who is grieving, and I think for a moment that she is the one grieving and so I smile back.

“Are you familiar with imago therapy?” I shake my head, once again in the dark, though the winds must be shifting because I don’t have the resistance I had with me yesterday.

“Hendrix’ imago therapy (1988) uses the relationship as the grounds for acknowledging the unconscious fear and pain we carry, and to ultimately be the arena in which we undo the conditioning we received by our parents and early relationships.”

“So, you use your partner to heal? That seems a little unfair. It’s not what most people sign up for when they start dating you.”

“You picked the person you’re dating because, relationally, they are familiar, similar to your earliest style. And that means that they act as a mirror held in front of your conscious self. Any time your partner irks you or hurts you, it’s a chance to discover what part of yourself needs attention and care. Think of it as them showing you what is underdeveloped.”

“Wow. That’s big. And insane. And... true? Is that true?”

¹⁰ For how patterns are intergenerational, see Bennett, 2013; Brothers, 2014; Connolly, 2011; Folger et al., 2017; Hesse & Main, 1999; Siegel, 2013; Sirikantraporn & Green, 2016; and Yehuda & Meaney, 2018.

“Only if you want it to be.”

Those words act like a big slap on my back, half congratulatory and half meant to knock the wind right out of me.

Out the window, the world below, in its vastness, is completely oblivious to what’s happening in my little apartment. Size can be such an odd concept.

“For me, the mirror was essential. It’s the practice that got me able to forgive. Everyone.”

My skin crawls hearing her talk like this, so syrupy.

“Anytime I had an emotional reaction, I took it as a sign, an opportunity to discover my fears, my insecurities. It takes two to hurt, you know. Understanding that I was hurting because of the way I was interpreting, even accepting that pain, was the empowerment I needed to do something about it. I could control that—I mean I could do something about me.”

I put my hand up in protest. “If they hurt you it’s probably because they were insensitive or did something disrespectful. You’re not alleging that being hurt in a relationship is all in your head?” Every relationship I have ever had or heard about, every relationship I’ve watched on screen or in a book, has shown me the callousness of war between lovers.

She rests her chin on her hands and as the minutes pass, I shift from foot to foot.

“Even though some might be tempted to go ‘after’ and retaliate, or in my case blame them and then victimize myself, don’t. Instead use that energy and take care of yourself. Be your own friend, step in and pay attention to what it is that is hurt. It may be related to a deep-seated belief you have about yourself being unworthy of love, or it

may be that you need to develop self-regulation skills or communication skills. I promise, in doing life that way, things get exponentially better, on the daily.

“Your face is really scrunched up.” I detest everything she has just said. As if people don’t react to their partner’s infractions. My hands instinctively find the grooves on the sill. Comfort in routine.

“So,” she takes a deep inhalation, “between Fisher and Bowlby and ACEs... Nature plus Nurture makes Personality. And with imago therapy and somatic experiencing you get transformation.”

As though on cue, the person the driver was waiting for arrives. The driver moves towards his friend, angrily. He’s leaning forward, throws his arms up to the sides. His friend is apologising, I think. His hands are up in front of his chest, motioning to calm down. The driver is absolutely not calming down. In a very dramatic unfolding, he gets back into his car and leaves. The friend is standing there, just watching him pull the car out of the spot. He stands there, and I wonder if they’ll recover from this incident and I guess they probably will. Cycles are quite predictable, it seems.

“Do you like Woody Allen films?” I ask her.

“No.”

“Well I have always been drawn to his style of storytelling. His movies come with a certain amount of dissatisfaction that I think appropriately represents the human condition.

“Anyhow, he made a movie called *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (Greenhut & Allen, 1989) and I never really considered the relevance of this one scene. His character Professor Levy says that:

what we are aiming at when we fall in love is somewhat of a very strange paradox... we are seeking to re-find all or some of the people to whom we were attached to as children. On the other hand, we ask our beloved to correct all of the wrongs that these early parents or siblings inflicted upon us.

"We attempt to return to the past and then we attempt to undo the past."

And suddenly I feel the air shift, and it brings with it an ease to breath.

"That's the whole foundational theory behind Hendrix's book *Getting the Love You Want* (1988) and imago therapy. That if you don't see the lessons and do the work, you'll keep choosing the same types of relationships, and you'll keep asking these new people to give you what you didn't get when you were young. And of course, how can they, if they've also chosen you to do the same for them? You'll each have potentially opposing agendas. You're doomed unless you recognise this and talk about it together."

And as I lose sight of the friend as he walks around the corner, I can't help but think this is all so symbolic.

"Were there other books that you'd recommend?" Not that there is any free space on my bookshelf, but it would be nice to know anyway.

"Yes. Reading this book had me put on my student hat—I took to learning what it had to offer fervently."

"What book?"

"*Reinventing Your Life*, by Young and Klosko (1994). Do you know it?"

"Can't say I do."

“Well, I had just read *Codependency for Dummies* (2012), in which I had highlighted and taken notes and memorised, so that prepped me well for the exercises within the pages of *Reinventing Your Life*. I wanted to know which lifetraps resonated most with me and understand the reasonings why. I tried taking a researcher’s approach to evaluate myself. Challenge and then adopt new ways of being! Despite the insanity of my life at that time, I remember feeling so... excited!!! Come to think of it, I think it wasn’t excitement as much as it was gratitude. I think I was happy that I had something to do to help myself.”

“What lifetraps did you pick?” I ask.

“Pick? I’m not sure what you mean by that.”

“Well, uhh, I mean which one was a match?”

“Oh. I’d have to go through my notes from that time but, let me think...”

“You really took notes?”

“Yes. I was really in it to learn. And I learn by writing,” she admits.

“Yes, of course.”

“Umm, the main one I remember was a trap that included the concept of control. Control was huge for me, and I suppose to a relatively smaller degree, it always will be.

“Control became interwoven with my desire to please others, to help them. I thought that being a good person meant helping people get what they wanted, even if it was at my expense. Coupled with being afraid of rejection or punishment, I would always choose to meet the needs of the other person, convincing myself that that in itself met my needs. And in very real ways, it did. It’s only that those needs came from

my anxiety. But because of my incessant need to please, I often felt like others controlled me. Like they knew I wouldn't be able to say no to them.

"Clear and simple, I had a lack of boundaries and got absorbed into my relationships. There was never any '*I've given all I want to give*' or '*this isn't my problem to solve*'.

"With the book's guidance, I took my first steps to becoming mindful to adhering to a hurtful belief system. I tried to notice when I had feelings of shame, inadequacy, fear of rejection, jealousy, envy, and defensiveness. I had a long list, as you can see.

"Then, as best as I could, I objectively evaluated myself to see in which ways I was feeding these beliefs I had. Like, was it really true that my boyfriend didn't let me choose what we did on our dates? Or was I telling him things like *I want to do what you want* or was it that I was sending him implicit messages that I hated making decisions. Essentially, how was I contributing to this lifetrapp? Because maybe I didn't cause it, but I sure was responsible for participating in it.

"There was a lot of my self-narrative that I had to change... have you read *The Four Agreements* by Ruiz (1997)?"

Can she hear the scratching that my toenails make inside my socks?

"I just have to say that I have never heard someone talk about themselves in such a way. It's as though you're talking about, well, your patient—a case study. I'm sorry. I hope I haven't offended you." My attempt at humility feels strange.

"Not at all. You're right on the money. I was my own patient."

The eye contact is too much to bear so I rub my eyes, feigning an itch. And it occurs to me I don't know how long I've used this trick.

“So, Starbucks, eh?” Such a big conglomerate for such a unique individual.

“Haha, yeah. Starbucks will always have a special place in my heart.”

“Haha, oh yeah? Is it their venti mochalachas?”

Her whole face lights up and we giggle together.

“You’d never guess, but it’s their parking lot!”

“What?! That’s absurd. It has to be their mochalachas.” *She’s smiling big and I’m happy to have helped her do that.* “What happened?”

“I had just dropped my eldest off at school and parked at Starbucks for my morning routine of latte and homework. But before going in, I wanted to listen to an audio post on the blog I was following, “The Smart Couple”. The host was interviewing this woman... Lisa was her name; pretty sure it was Lisa Dion (2016). She was talking about boundaries. And I had one of those moments, you know, that becomes seared into your memory. Jayson had asked her to describe when you need to set a boundary. I paused the audio and literally screamed out loud, ‘Yes! How?! HOW IN THE WORLD DO YOU KNOW WHEN TO SET A BOUNDARY???’ I couldn’t fathom the answer. I pressed play and she said, ‘It’s when your body is telling you that something is not right. You need a boundary when you: get agitated, feel tense, your muscles tighten up, get sweaty, your heart rate speeds up, or you feel angry or aggressive. Or you might also go in the opposite direction, meaning you start to shut down: you get quiet, you feel numb, you can’t find words, you can’t think of what to say next’.

“It sounds simple now but when I was sitting in my cold cold car that winter morning, in the Starbucks parking lot, it was as though someone had handed me a million dollars.”

“Haha, I often wonder what I would do with a million bucks. I might retire and go live on a beach in Bali!” *Ahhh, the beach!*

“I’d come visit, for sure.”

“I don’t think I ever learned about boundaries, either, to tell you the truth.” What I can’t really admit to her is that my whole life has been one giant boundary. *It’s been much easier keeping people away than having to deal with all the mess that comes with humans.*

“I think that is quite common, unfortunately. But topics like this one aren’t really prevalent in pre-parenting circles, are they?”

“What’s a pre-parenting circle?”

“Oh, nothing real. I just made it up. What I mean is that young adults aren’t really talking about the science of relating and relationships and of the social conditioning we’ve endured, nor the skills needed to preserve authenticity.”

“English, please?”

“Oh, well it just seems foolish to expect parents to know how to raise confident, loving and passionate people if there is little awareness as to what it takes to cultivate those types of people. And on the other side of the same coin, what is it we do that inhibits people from being themselves.”

“Example...”

“Well, you can’t teach your child how to set their own boundary while simultaneously raising them in a rewards and punishment environment. You can’t expect your child to not join her friends in a dangerous activity if you’ve trained them to finish all the food on their plate.”

“What in the world? Your example doesn’t even compliment itself. You’re not making sense.”

“Haha, you just set a boundary! Though instead of being vulnerable and honest about not understanding, you criticised my choice of words.”

“Uh... mmm.” The force of her words suddenly changing directions catches me off guard.

“I think it comes down to three choices. Say the raw truth; *I feel scared, I don’t understand*. Restrict inward; *I won’t answer, I won’t confront*. Restrict outward; *criticize or punish other*. Practicing mindfulness and awareness can help you see what you’re doing in the moments you are triggered, so that you can make any changes you want to make¹¹. Doing that breeds integrity.”

“You’re using inaccessible language again.” I press my lips together forcing the air passing through my nose to be louder than necessary.

She leans forward. “Okay. Being triggered is the same moment as when your body signals that you’re out of balance and may need a boundary set.”

In the in-between, I tuck my hair behind my ears and adjust the collar of my shirt.

“So, head rush, hyperventilating, stuff like that.”

¹¹ For information on meditation, see Dale, 2014; Damasio, 2011; Dierkes, 2017; Duan & Ho, 2018; Foeliger et al., 2012; Kerr et al., 2013; Kok, Waugh, & Frederickson, 2013; Lyon, 2016b; Renna et al., 2018; Siegel, 2018; Vago, 2017.

“Right. Your stress response.”

I clasp my hands in my lap. “Ohhh. I didn’t realise that was the same thing.” I trace her line of vision to find my white knuckles. “Before we continue, um, there’s just something I need to take care of. Um, it won’t take me long.”

“I understand.”

And as I make my way out of the living room, it occurs to me that I indeed will have to find something to do.

I am putting the dishes into the sink and this woman’s voice comes bellowing through the hallway to find me. Patience is not her virtue.

“But being able to follow your principles is near impossible for people with stored trauma, regardless of how well-intentioned and committed they are. Remember? Principles are constructed primarily in the mind, meaning after social conditioning has influenced your biological systems. And since integrity is about your actions and your principles being in sync it requires a sensitivity to your body’s signals. Only then can you have ‘true’ integrity.”

I am coming to learn to sit through her soliloquies, not because I have to endure them, but because the insights she presents come from a place I have not visited yet. *I think this foreign land is beginning to look more familiar*, and I take my seat in my chair once more.

“Stored trauma just means you’re alive!” I jest. “According to what you’re suggesting here, we’re all a bit traumatized. I don’t know one person who doesn’t use rewards and punishments: work out and then you get to wear that sexy dress; work

hard and then you get to go on an exotic vacation; treat me badly and then we break up!” I laugh, amusing myself. “And anyway, isn’t that literally our entire culture? School, jobs, the economy, politics...”

“Yes. These ‘old’ institutions were built on the back of collectivism, and collectivism requires a great amount of conformity. And in order to train a large mass of people, rewards and punishments are quick and easy and effective. Rewards and punishments literally teach you what parts of yourself to bring out and what parts of you to repress. Basically, you learn how you are of value. You learn who you need to be to be accepted.”

“Wait. This sounds an awful lot like attachment theory. Like how parents make love conditional. Like your acceptance is conditional to how you behave.” I’m appalled, yes, but I’m also a little bit proud of myself. *Am I really connecting the dots?*

“But things are changing, aren’t they?” *Whoosh*. “There are many more entrepreneurs in the 21st century. The upcoming generations are co-constructing a culture that asks for creativity and accountability. It will be quite interesting to see what life is like for my grandchildren!”

“You’re hopeful? Even after everything you’ve talked about these last few days? Even after knowing all the data?”

“Hope coexists with growth, doesn’t it? Can you have one without the other?”

Her words hang in the air, suspended, waiting to be claimed. Instead I am drawing arrows on my notepad, of all different sizes, heading in all directions, leaving from all directions.

“Integrity. So, if I’m understanding what you mean here, that means that my ability to have integrity is going to depend on how I regulate myself when I’m triggered.”

“Very good, litt - .“

“Don’t say it!” I say, teasingly. She smiles her consent.

“Okay. Holy cow. Okay. Wow. Well, I think this is a good point in the conversation to talk about emotions. I’m guessing attachment styles, ACEs and of course how our nervous system is impacted by it all, will be involved.”

She nods her head in agreement and I enjoy the momentary turning of the tables. *All the same, I can’t help cringing at my new vocabulary.*

“Okay, so generally speaking, feelings are universal,” I continue, riding the wave of my newly taken leadership. “We all have the capacity for happiness, fear, pride, and so on. But what’s challenging in relationships is that the triggers for these emotions are not universal. Like, I might feel exhilarated on rollercoasters while my boyfriend is scared silly.

“So, my question here is: seeing as we all have emotions, why aren’t we hard-wired to use them in the same ways?” I sit back in my chair, feeling very smart. I even put the end of my pen between my teeth, a move I saw an actress do which my mother had clapped at.

“Wonderful! You know my dear, your questions are quite revealing.”

I find myself suddenly cold before I understand why. I am still not used to her pulling me into the moments in-between, into those minutes where I’m not supposed to exist.

“Emotions and feelings are two sides of the same coin, but they aren’t interchangeable (Watkins, 2012).” She strolls over to the window. “Emotions are universal because they are neurologically rooted but then expressed biochemically (Hampton, Wirth, & Schramm, 2005; Shalom et al., 2006). They occur in the amygdala and the prefrontal cortex which causes hormones to be released which is then felt at the physiological level: your heart rate, your blood flow, brain activity, body language.”

I close my eyes and drop my head.

“Feelings, on the other hand, originate in the neocortical region of the brain, which is where we have saved our memories about the emotions we’ve experienced (Hampton et al., 2005; Shalom et al., 2006). Feelings, instead, are subjectively influenced by our beliefs and perspectives, which is why they aren’t universal.”

She’s pacing the room again, which I’m glad for. This way she can’t see the expression on my face.

“So, emotions are standard, and feelings are individualised?”

“Um, yes but there will be one subjective aspect to emotions. Emotions, since they are neurologically and endocrinologically experienced, will be affected by the architecture of your brain. And that architecture is shaped by the experiences you’ve lived. We all feel anger, but the intensity at the physiological level will differ from person to person. In that respect, it will be an individualised experience. Feelings, though, - .”

“Feelings will have the mental associations to them. Yeah, I was listening.”

“Oh, grasshopper.” She is beaming. I look away, to hide the smirk that insists on coming through.

“Which is why, if the two people in the couple have had significantly different childhoods, there may be a greater divide in how able they are to empathise and understand each other, since they’ve most likely constructed very different feelings to an idea or goal or desire or behaviour. Like in your example of the rollercoaster.”

“Riiight... so we should pick people with similar backgrounds, then.”

“No, no, that’s not really necessary. You’ll never be able to completely control the external factors that affect a relationship anyway. What you can do is use brain plasticity, emotional regulation and resilience in your favour!!”

I grunt. “Still with the brain, huh?”

“Inescapable! It’s a most magical organ!”

“Your love affair with the brain is inescapable!”

And with that muttering, she is off - a full belly laugh taking over the room, and soon enough my voice joins in the noise.

“How could you *not* be in love with the brain?!”

“Seriously though, brain plasticity is how your feelings developed in the first place. So that means it can be re-trained to make different associations (Boyd, 2015; Hampton, 2015; Siegel, 2001, 2015; Vago, 2017). When you change the associations you had encoded with your emotions, that leads to having different experiences, which then allows for even more plasticity. And evolution within one lifespan is had. Isn’t that exciting!!!” She’s rubbing her palms together, the joy electrified.

“Okay, great to know in theory but how does a person even do that? It isn’t as though you walk into a salon and say: ‘Hello there, I’d like a mani and facial. Oh, and throw in a brain reformat while we’re at it’.”

Electricity continues to pass between us as we chuckle at the image that conjures.

“Well, you need a two-pronged approach. You have to reformat your mind and also reformat your nervous system and body” (Damasio, 2011; Ogden, 2017; Levine, 2010).

I let out a rushed exhale, reminded at *how tiring this all seems*. An impossibility.

“Addressing your mind means to address your perceptions, like what we talked about on Tuesday and Wednesday. Would you like me to review that?”

“Nope.” *Was that too quick of an answer?*

“Look, there’s a ton of resources out there that speak to how to reformat the body¹², so I’ll give you only some ideas. First and foremost, the way we breathe influences our emotions (Wells et al., 2016), and it also strengthens the parasympathetic system (Diamond & Cribbet, 2013; Froeliger et al., 2012; Streeter et al., 2010), so that’s a double whammy. You can choose specific foods to eat, you could train your heart rate variability, or even do a series of exercises that target and fatigue certain muscles (Furness, 2009).”

“Oh, is that all?” She doesn’t seem amused.

“I’m only the messenger.”

“Right.” Teenage me came out to say hello, it seems.

“But no, it’s not all. The other part can be a bit more... sticky. Healing the nervous system also means to acknowledge that we have an autobiographical self (Damasio,

¹² For somatic therapeutic approaches, see Levine, 2010; Ogden et al., 2006. See also Diamond & Cribbet, 2013; Forester, 2007; Froeliger et al., 2012; Furness, 2009; Gard et al., 2014; Heaney et al., 2014; Kabel, [website]; Mocanu et al., 2018; Streeter et al., 2010; Sullivan et al., 2018; Thompson, 2014; van der Kolk et al., 2017; Wells et al., 2016.

2011), as weird as that sounds. Even though the nervous system is biological, it has been impacted and molded by our biography (Nakazawa, 2015). Damasio (2011), a neurologist, has this wonderful way to describe our autobiographical self. He says that it's based on our memories from the past and of the anticipated future. And the narrative we use to think of these memories further entrenches who we think we are and what we put into the social sphere."

"Uhuh. So, it's a self-feeding loop, then. You're telling me that breathing and stretching will change it all? Even after years of being who I am? I can breathe myself better."

Her contemplative look is nothing I can't match. Minutes go by before she eases right back where she left off.

"Which is why I think it's so great to also get some cognitive therapy. An outside force that will help you challenge your perceptions and beliefs so that you can change your habits, develop gratitude, and play to your strengths (Fowkes, 2015)." Her resolve is relentless.

"I can't help but circle back and question our current incessant propaganda of introspection as a path for redemption. Looking at yourself too much would strengthen the loop of this autobiographical self you described. It could have the opposite outcome."

"One of the dangers of offering 'yourself' cognitive rehabilitation is there's a good chance that at times what you think will be introspection will actually be rumination, which will inevitably get you different results. Introspection is neutral, while rumination

will feel good or bad. A difference between being mindful and judging (Pennebaker, 1997; van der Kolk & van der Hart, 1995; Watkins, 2015; Young & Klosko, 1994)."

Her melodic poetic voice thins before it reaches my ear, magnifying once again the sound of the air passing through my nostrils. As I sit and listen with my notepad balanced on my lap, an unmistakable portrait of what she must see when she looks at me materialises. The embers of gratitude start to burn at my throat and set in motion another call for escape.

"Oooh, all that water we've been drinking. I'll be back." *She must wonder, at this point, if I have a urinary tract infection.*

With a heavy heart, I put down the summary page on the ACE study she had me read. The statistics are bothersome and overwhelming.

"Like we learned from Felitti's study with obese patients at his clinic (ACE study, 2005; see also Rohde et al., 2008), self-control regarding eating isn't going to be what will drive long-term fitness and health. You have to, one, acknowledge you need help, two, be curious to know why you're hurting and then three, find people and approaches that work for you, to address the root 'cause' of the obesity. All the while, unconditionally accept yourself every step of the way."

"This is the same speech every yogi or spirituality guru spews. We're not all built that way... comfortable in the woohoo plane."

"Then paraphrase it so that it makes sense for yourself."

Although I am generally fond of taking the helm, there's something belittling when being told I have that option. And *I can't quite tell if there was a sharpness to her tone.*

“Can I make some tea? My soul’s a bit hungry.” She’s gotten off the couch and is walking behind me. *Of course she’ll need to come with me.* We walk into my gallery-style kitchen and she moves to open the top cupboards, making herself at home. After setting the kettle on the burner, and pulling out the tea options, I step back into the entrance way, too many cooks in the kitchen for no reason. I watch as she moves effortlessly in the narrow space. I am sure, although she has made zero claims to this, that she has effortlessly moved from extroversion to introversion her whole life.

“The university offers meditation every Tuesday afternoon for faculty and staff. I walked by the room and they were all sitting around with their eyes closed. It was as though someone has pressed pause on the movie they were watching and had forgotten to come back.”

The novelty of speaking with someone so different than me is starting to morph. I am baffled at how I’m taking advantage of the opportunity to ask unconventional questions.

“Is mindful the same as mediating? There was a flyer - .”

“No. It’s in the same wheelhouse, but those are two different practices.” The valence over her head sours my mood. It was left there from the last tenant and despite it being quite hideous, my lack of motivation to take out my ladder has forced me to live with it all these years. I honestly hardly notice it anymore but the reds in her shirt bring attention to the orange in the awful pattern.

“To be mindful means to notice without subsequent action. The noticing is the whole exercise. Notice the emotion or thought. Notice where it is in your body... my

shoulders are tight... my teeth are clenched... I am staring off (Froeliger et al., 2012).
You can be mindful even when you're not meditating."

The orange and purple and green threads of the hair of the porcupine on the valence make it akin to an Alice in Wonderland character. Not anticipating being the only one in the kitchen, I rush to the fridge and grab the first thing I touch before heading back to the living room. *It isn't necessary for her to think I wasn't paying attention.*

"So when would you do this? While waiting for the bus?" *Tongue in cheek, of course.*

"Sure. Anytime at all, really. Just practice noticing without an after."

Hey lady, I'm noticing me judging that I think this is insane!

"Okay, um, tell me about meditation then."

Her purposeful pauses are still uncomfortable, though the familiarity is more noticeable.

"You can't rush into dealing with your trauma. You have to prepare yourself to be able to sit with your pain (Dierkes, 2017; van der Kolk, 2011)."

Nestled back onto the comfort of my chair I notice that I'm holding a jar of relish. *This is what I grabbed from the fridge?* I quickly tuck it behind myself. *How did she not notice?*

"So, what, not everyone can meditate? There's an in-group and an out-group? I thought yoga and Buddhism and all this was meant to be accessible to all?" Again, the challenging tone in my voice creeps in and I can feel her closing off, calmly albeit, but

she is passively ending this conversation. “You speak in dyads, as though it’s one way or another. Isn’t there a whole infinite spectrum, like you claim?” *Why am I still talking?!*

“The question to ask,” *pausing for effect? nice tactic lady*, “is how do I prepare myself for meditation, not am I able to meditate? And yes, there are character traits that lend themselves better than others (Duan & Ho, 2018; Duan et al., 2012, 2013; Ho et al., 2014, 2016; McGrath, 2015). Someone who loves, who has concern for others, who is grateful, kind, fair, authentic, and forgiving is more inclined to maintain an openness and gentleness to what comes up. Someone who is curious, has a zest for creativity, who is funny, hopeful, has social intelligence, is brave can sustain the reflective aspects of meditation. Those who persist in achieving goals and exhibit self-control, good judgement, prudence, regulation, who love to learn and are modest will do well enduring their journey.”

I can’t help but compare myself to her long, long, list and wonder how many I can legitimately check off.

“The beautiful part is that it’s a renewable circuit. You already demonstrate some of these traits, or have the propensity for them, and then with meditation they become even more developed. A positive reinforcement for positive ways to relate.” Her smile, though minimal, is the same light that has shone through her each time she is overcome by a moment’s beauty. And to this, I soften.

“Meditation will allow you to know yourself through a new lens—you’ll be witnessing parts of yourself that have been tucked far far away. And you need to be ready for this new way of understanding yourself. For me it was through kundalini yoga. For others it’s Qi Gong or Tai Chi or dance. But, it’s prudent to get your nervous system

to homeostasis before you can get to the psychology and the neuro rewiring (Sullivan et al., 2018; van der Kolk, 2011)."

"Wait. There's a sequence to healing? I guess it *is* a good thing I didn't go into that meditation room, then! I helped myself by *not* meditating!" I am alone in my chuckle and settle sooner than I would have liked to. I quite enjoy my self-deprecating humour.

"I'm happy to have this conversation with you but I need to make something crystal clear: I am in no way talking so to convince you of anything."

"... I ... I ..."

"These practices, these mindsets that we've brought up weren't part of my life growing up. The culture I was in never uttered these principles. I found these, and they helped me shape my journey. But it's a journey I chose for myself. And I am completely okay that my stories don't interest every ear."

I find myself at odds. *Can one be interested while mocking?*

"I may not be completely on board, that's true, but it's as though I need to know." I imagine what it must be like for her to witness me in this moment. *A warrior fighting for her life?*

"It's my honour and pleasure.

"For someone whose affect and impulse control centers are badly effected, it can be a nasty cycle... during meditation she won't be able to successfully manage high levels of stress, and so her neuro-biophysical response will be triggered and then the pattern gets acted out again, which in turn reinforces the pattern (Caruth, 1996; Lyon, 2016a, 2016b)."

I really hate that she says her instead of him.

“Chicken or the egg, but emotional regulation and meditation are the two hands you hold when trying to change a conditioned fear response. You’ll need to observe what is happening internally from a somewhat ‘removed’ position (Dierkes, 2017; Kerr et al., 2013; van der Kolk, 2011). In research, it’s positivism, and it can be somewhat unnatural to do unto oneself at first, but your goal is to have the running loop in your mind be ‘I feel scared’. Nothing else. Not an OMG because that would imply judgement¹³. Stay present and keep the attention focused. That requires an incredible amount of conviction at first.”

I don’t want to imagine that. Yet, I am.

“You’re looking for the space between your active thoughts (Vago, 2017). In that space, in that stillness, you are free. You are free to press pause, to notice what’s been happening, to connect, and then to choose what comes next. Until your nervous system is relatively capable of experiencing stress without moving too far from homeostasis, and is equally relatively capable of returning to homeostasis, the opportunity for mindfulness is very short and nearly impossible to detect.”

There won’t be a test, will there?!

“So, let’s just say that a person can meditate and then all this stuff comes up; the dark, shadowy stuff he’s been ignoring all his life. First: that sounds like self-sabotage, actually. Second: then what? You just walk around with your demons all exposed? Honestly, though, this is difficult to link with a recovery of any kind.”

That smile again.

¹³ Meditation, though, has several forms and thus purposes, and is considered an important tool to develop in order to support self-work. In the sense used here, meditation is a practice of feeling and thinking non-judgementally. In doing so, a person can integrate parts of self that had been too stressful to accept.

“You’re right, on many accounts. That’s why meditation has to be an element of a larger picture. You meditate because you’re after something. You meditate because you want movement. Depending on where you want to move, what you’re after, well, then, you continue with the process. If you’re meditating for healing, for example, then after meditating, engage with whatever comes up. Attend to it consciously. Feel, mourn, process, cry, yell. Write, share, create. Don’t be passive with your meditations, or in your mindfulness (Dierkes, 2017).”

“You did this on your own?”

“Oh gosh, no! I went to meditation classes. I needed guidance to develop this practice. There are retreats and group work. There are options.”

“What if you want to do it at home?” *I don’t need someone else to witness what I can’t imagine doing for myself.*

“Hmm, well lots of people do. I would just suggest you have an after-meditation-practice. You could do some intentional writing (Graf, Guadiano, & Geller, 2008; Pennebaker, 1997). Twenty minutes maximum per day. Studies show us that simply writing about difficult experiences can reduce doctor visits by half (Pennebaker, 1997; Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999), and if you can evolve your narrative to become more impersonal and use less negative vocabulary, symptoms for anxiety and depression decrease (Brown & Heimburg, 2001; Graf et al., 2008; Travagin, Margola, & Revenson, 2015).”

“Yeah”, I guffaw, “and then, what, you’re saying to share what you write?” *Wallow in the gravity and despair and then shine a spotlight on it for others?*

“No. Yes. You can throw it away, keep it and reread it at your leisure, you could share it with someone. You’ll figure it out after. The sole purpose is to write.”

Write about myself? Then it would be out there...

“This type of intentional writing, I think, is directly related to the practice of being just as you are. It is, in all basic forms, witnessing a moment in time. The act of writing to honour what exists is the practice of unconditional acceptance. It is the essence of empathy.”

I twitch in my seat, understanding what ‘ants in your pants’ feels like.

“All of this is for what? Besides it being fashionable, I mean...”

“So you can heal.” *And there it is, in 4 words.*

We take a moment of silence and my mind can’t help but flitter from one thought to another, from one memory to the next. Again, the implications of her speeches over these last few days weigh heavily on me. *I’m just not sure if it’s enough to activate inertia.*

“The research is pretty impressive and hopeful (Baron Short et al., 2010; Dale, 2014; Holzel et al., 2007; Froeliger et al., 2012),” she says encouragingly. “People who meditate are better able to break and reduce negative thought and emotion cycles. Their brain becomes more capable in attention control, conflict resolution, and emotional processing.”

I might not be on board, but the things she’s saying are starting to make some sense.

“So, meditation requires mindfulness then, even though mindfulness doesn’t require meditation.” Her all-encompassing smile returns. “I know, I’m a grasshopper.”

“But don’t fret. Mindfulness and meditation lie dormant in all of us until it is cultivated (Dale, 2014), just like problem-solving or written language skills. If the culture you grew up in didn’t practice them, then you won’t have the skills nor the inclination to perceive things in these ways. If you want to embody them, then you just need to wake it up and then practice it.”

“But, I know you said to write to heal, but, in practical terms, it would be helpful...” *I don’t even know what I’m asking for anymore.*

“Oh yes, try this. I attended a Ted Talk once and a facilitator had us use Byron Katie’s program called “The Work” (n.d.). It’s accessible and you can spend as little or as much time as you’d like on the process. You find it all for free on her website.”

“That’s great, good for her, but what I was trying to ask is, umm, is there a tangible reason why you want to heal? I mean, assuming someone has some real stuff to work on.” *Please don’t think I’m asking for myself. Please don’t.*

Before answering me, I think I spot a tinge of sadness in her eyes. But I find myself questioning: *Is it her sadness I see or a reflection?*

“Developing these practices help us successfully manage conflict in our most intimate relationships. It’s what allows us to recover from them as well. And that’s what being human is founded on: healthy and fulfilling relationships.”

What if I am asking for myself?

“In a romantic relationship, for example, if my needs outweigh your needs consistently over time, then we won’t have a secure and healthy relationship. We’ll have a power imbalance. Since we’re consciously and unconsciously using our partner to heal the scars left by our parents, if it’s done within the framework of a healthy,

balanced relationship, it can work well. But if my partner is unable to help me regulate, and I don't take responsibility to grow and learn in all the ways we've talked about these past few days, well then, the relationship has an expiry date. The couple may not break up, but the relationship will end."

"Oh my God! That's why you left him." In my surprised state, I have stood up, as though the seat beneath me couldn't support the weight of it all. On my own two feet, I look at her, and to my amazement, she is smiling, not at all perturbed. "Oh my God." The empathy floats out with each syllable. "Oh my God." I notice my breaths are moving faster now, and my heart is quicker. "Oh my God." I fall back into my seat, unsure of which one of us I'm thinking about, and grab the armrests to steady myself. She has crawled over and has placed each hand upon each knee. She looks up at me, her eyes steady, her hands weighted. I know I am hyperventilating and my mind is racing, the words jumble and knock into one another. She puts one hand onto one of mine and I'm not sure if I'll be able to hold on.

"You dropped this." She lifts my relish. And it's enough to help the laughter subside the panic of moments ago. She wipes a tear from my cheek and says, "You know, I'm suddenly in the mood for a veggieburger. Let's go find one."

Without a flinch, we go.

Chapter 5: Friday

*In religion we call it spirits
In science we call it energy
In the streets we call it vibes
In the body we call it gut feeling
All I'm saying is trust it
Gut instinct, 2017*

Your mind, body, and soul operate on a system of signals. It's how you know what you need. If you feel thirsty, you need water. If you feel lonely, you need companionship. If you feel cold, you need shelter. If you feel hungry, you need food. And if you feel stuck, you need GROWTH.

That's all "feeling stuck" means. It's a signal that you stopped growing and your heart and soul need growth to survive. That's why you can "feel" stuck in a relationship, in a job, in the town that you live in, in a friend group.

*Whenever or wherever you feel stuck, it's just a signal... so follow it
Mel Robbins, 2018*

*Trauma is not simply an effect of destruction but also, fundamentally, an enigma of survival
Cathy Caruth, 1996, p. 58*

I place the teapot on the dining room table, and she smiles. Because I remembered she likes tea, which tea it was that she drank the other day, and that I made it for her means I have spoken to her primal self. Giddiness, a new sensation for me, suggests that old dogs can learn new tricks.

"So we have the stress loop, right?" She dives right into the tea and right into her teachings. *The woman wastes no time.* "Step 1) your mind perceives danger, Step 2) it activates the Sympathetic Nervous System which releases adrenaline and cortisol into your blood, Step 3) you physiologically respond, right, pupils and breathing and heart

rate. You're prepared to fight or flee and so, Step 4) the body sends a signal back to the brain indicating you're ready. Step 5) the brain interprets the message to mean that there's indeed a threat and, Step 6) continues to dump adrenaline and cortisol into your system. And that is the looping stress response system (Levine, 2010)."

"This all sounds really familiar." The stack of papers my assistant dropped off last night teeters on the buffet table behind her. The hours and hours of tape transcribed will take me weeks and weeks to read and unpack.

"Yeah, I'm just reassembling things we've already talked about, so we can apply the information practically in our lives."

Finally! She has left the Ivory Tower!

"What you want to know is how to break the cycle. Biologically, you have to kick-start your parasympathetic nervous system and there are two ways to do that. Basically, jump in at either end of the loop: in the mind or in the body. Convince your mind the danger is gone so it'll stop producing adrenaline and cortisol, and/or calm your body so it stops telling your mind there's a threat (Kabel, n.d.)."

"Uh-huh." *Do I sound convincing?*

"Remember the vagus nerve? Porges' research and theory? It's the go-between of the mind and the body. That's the key."

I can tell that something's happening behind the curtain.

"80% of the vagus nerve's fibers communicate from the body to the brain (Porges, 2017), which helps explain why integrity is hard to come by when using will power and talk therapy alone. Rehabilitation of the mind can be done through the body. It's not the only way, but 80% of the way. The state of the body has a great impact on

the quality of the mind. Which extends, then, to how we show up in the social world (Diamond & Cribbet, 2013)."

For a society that praises its members on the use of their minds, this will be a hard pill for us to swallow.

"Uhh, where's this nerve again?" *Has she noticed the pile behind her?*

"It exits the brainstem and travels to virtually every organ in our body (Porges, 2017). Now, think of the organs that get stimulated during fight and flight. Some are in the cardiovascular system, some in the respiratory, and others in the digestive system. The only one we have some conscious control over is the respiratory system; how we breath. So if we do specific breathing exercises, we'll stimulate the parasympathetic nervous system which will stimulate the vagus nerve.

"In the short-term, we can regulate ourselves in the moment. But if we do vagal exercises repeatedly over time, well then, you're setting yourself up for vagus nerve rehabilitation. Neurologists call that having a strong vagal tone. With that we can achieve system regulation! That means the undoing and healing of ACEs and insecure attachments and all that! And that reduces symptoms from IBS and anxiety, ADHD and Crohn's Disease (Breit et al., 2018). Everything we've been talking about! We've found the goblet of fire!"

"You must be a Potter fan."

Giggles ensue. "I dressed up as Hermione one year for Halloween, so I suppose that makes me a double fan."

"Okay, muggle-born, so just take deep breaths, then. That's all I have to remember, and I'll be okay?"

“Well, there’s an important detail here to follow. A quick inhale stimulates the sympathetic system, right? Quick breathing to fight or run away. Sooooo...”

“A long inhale?”

“Actually, a long exhale will do the trick. You could even hold the exhale out for a few counts too before taking a new breath.”

“Wait! Does that mean that if you’re feeling low, um, like sad or depressed, you could do some quick breathing to pick yourself back up?”

“Grasshopper, you are almost ready to leave the nest.”

“Grasshoppers do not have nests.”

“Hehe, figure of speech.” She glares at me, not because I’ve insulted her but because she is playing with me. Like sisters do.

“What you really want to do is improve your breathing in two ways. First is to deepen your inhalation, and then you want to have a longer exhalation in relation to your inhalation. So if you normally inhale for 3 counts, you’d want to increase, or deepen, that to 6 counts. And eventually lengthen your exhale to 8 counts. Getting that ratio will increase your vagal tone over time. And a strong vagal tone means a healthier body and mind (Kabel, n.d.; Porges, 2017; Schwartz, 2017; Watkins, 2012).”

“Simple as that?”

“Yeah, actually. You’ll bypass the mind’s interpretation of reality by communicating endocrinologically, with neuroception and not perception (Porges, 2017). It’s body-based healing that has major positive effects on the mind.

“Not only with that breathing technique but there’s also certain controlled movements and specific stretches that will massage your organs which in turn, as I’m

sure you've already probably guessed, will... dah dah dah daaa: stimulate your vagal tone! (Emerson & Hopper, 2011; Forbes, 2011; Gard et al., 2014; Mocanu et al., 2018; Thompson, 2014; Wells et al., 2016; van der Kolk et al., 2014).” *Her childlike enthusiasm is really disarming.*

“Moving and stretching, huh? I guess this is when yoga comes into the picture.”

“You guess correctly! Five minutes into a yoga class and you’ve already bent or twisted. Which is why yoga is so great at treating nervous system related issues (Emerson & Hopper, 2011; Forbes, 2011; Gard et al., 2014; Mocanu et al., 2018; Streeter et al., 2010; Thompson, 2014; van der Kolk et al., 2014). That’s why you typically leave in a better mood, because the massaging of organs and the breathing techniques used released hormones that brought your body into a rest and digest state (Sargunaraj et al., 1996; Streeter et al., 2010). The heart, kidneys, small intestine are all touched by the vagus nerve. So, the exercises in yoga and Tai Chi and Chi Gong that massage these organs produce positive results for your vagal tone and stress response system.”

“And the loop is interrupted.”

“And the loop is interrupted.”

“And you don’t need conscious thought.” *I’ve finally got it.*

“Here’s where it gets super important.” *I guess I don’t got it.* “Critical, actually. The perceptions of the mind can make bodywork incredibly challenging (Emerson & Hopper, 2011; Forbes, 2011; Thompson, 2014; van der Kolk et al., 2014). Bodywork on its own is stress-inducing; having to listen and direct bodily sensations can be super overwhelming. Being told by a stranger what to do with our bodies can consciously,

and/or involuntarily, trigger the stress response system. Despite really wanting to reap the benefits of body-based therapeutic approaches.

“In the mind, you might sense danger cuz of the beliefs you’ve constructed. You have deeply rooted beliefs about who you are, how you fit in and of what value you are to others. You have uniquely constructed feelings and perceptions. The mind can quickly end or derail your healing attempts in the hopes of protecting yourself (Connolly, 2011; Levine, 2010).

“Find a talk therapist who specialises in acceptance and commitment therapy, dialectical behavior therapy, or mindfulness-related cognitive therapy. Because it’ll be a combination of bodywork therapy and talk therapy that will give you your best chances (Boardman & Doraiswamy, 2015; Deblinger et al., 2017).”

“Okay, let’s set aside the mountain-size treatment plan you just suggested for a minute here. I’m just a bit skeptical of this idea that people need to move their bodies in specific ways, that emotions and all this internal stuff needing an outlet???” My words seem more distant now, as though they’ve been uttered by someone that I used to know. *Great, now I’ve got that song in my head.*

She hesitates slightly, and I know what’s to come won’t be straightforward. “I am going to do my best to answer but I must warn you that we have to make a choice between time and information. We can’t have both.”

I look at the clock and am reminded that this will be our last day together. Our last chance to share the same air and the same physical space. Without hesitation, I make claim to the information she has floating in her brain. I am so sure that what she has to say will be the pieces I am still looking for.

“Glennon Doyle (2017) gave a talk on Supersoul Sessions -.”

“Ooooh, I love Oprah!”

“Me too!”

“She’s such a Boss.”

“She is. Which is why she brought us Glennon. So Glennon’s therapist insisted she try yoga. She tells the story about going to a hot yoga class when she was in the depths of her pain and her one goal was to make it through the 90 minutes without running out the door. She didn’t do one stretch, she didn’t follow one sequence. She laid on her mat and survived the 90 minutes. She, in a room full of strangers, felt safe and contained enough to feel the accumulated fear and pain that she had been carrying around since her childhood. Feel. Not think. Just feel.”

“That sounds... horrifying.”

“It’s also pretty hardcore. She was a warrior fighting for her own life.”

“She hit rock bottom.”

“Yeah.”

“You had hit rock bottom.”

Her soft smile, a whole world behind it that I’ve come to know.

“What about those who don’t? What happens to them?”

“Inertia.”

All I can hear is the cool air passing through my nostrils, and I know I don’t want to know what I’m starting to know. Hands subtly clenching and unclenching is new for me, a change from the usual white knuckles that moments like this typically cause. And

before I can stop the tears, I hear that little girl on the purple comforter whispering... she's looking at me... she's whispering for me to stay.

I run my hands over the embroidery of the table cloth and am reminded of what it felt like when I slid my small hand inside my mother's. Like she had done with her mother. Generations of women repeating the same action.

"Glennon stayed on the mat because she chose to, and in that moment, she was capable of enduring the emotional state she was in. Emotional regulation from the top and the bottom (Forester, 2007; Froeliger et al., 2012; Gard et al., 2014; Mocanu et al., 2018; Siegel, 2018)."

My mind is a traffic jam of words and pictures. None of them taking the off-ramp into my mouth.

"I too cried each time I got on my mat, for probably the first 4 months. Each time. And I had already undergone a severely intense year of cognitive therapy."

"I see. Was that the first time you had tried yoga?" *I'm trying to push out of my mind the idea of this woman in neon spandex, 80's style. My mind is a strange place.*

"Of Kundalini, yes, though I had done a yoga class here and there over the years". I wonder why people do that: revisit what didn't catch on in the past.

"Kundalini is a yoga practice that emphasises removing any blockages so that energy can flow through the body, using mantras, breathing and movements. It involves chakras and organs and emotions – and since I was already fully engaged in the process of healing, kundalini became another resource for me to do just that. It was another intentional platform for resolution."

"It only worked in that way because you wanted it to?"

“Yes, that’s what I’m trying to say. I personalized the yoga sessions for my healing.”

“But how does yoga heal with intention? I’m sorry. I just don’t get it.”

“Nothing to apologise for. These are all valid questions.” Her kindness, though more familiar, is still at odds with how I understand strength to feel like.

“The first time I did Kundalini it was a workshop that dealt with the digestive system. It was 2 hours long, and I cried for about half that time. My yogi related emotions to organs, and she had this way of gently guiding me. She had a way to help me connect to my surroundings. And she paved a new way for me to understand and relate to myself. She used phrases like ‘if it feels right for you’ and said things like ‘you can imagine that’. I fear that I am not doing justice in my explanation but suffice to say that those 2 hours informed the course of my healing, and thus my life.”

“But why did you cry?”

We sit in silence as she considers her response. *Movies make me cry. A powerful song, maybe. But I can’t imagine crying while working out.*

“I suppose it was a release of secrets.

“That sounds dramatic,” she concedes, “and perhaps it ought to be, but when you become aware of things that have held you back and also become aware of things that can help you move forward, tears follow.” I am memorising her eyebrows, how they move effortlessly while she speaks. *It is uncommon for someone to speak with her eyebrows, right? How have I never noticed that about anyone else?*

“It’s the integration of the internal and the external... of the subconscious and the conscious. It’s what makes life feel easier to live.”

The gravity, the implications.

"I think of who I was at age five, age fourteen, age twenty-five, and the me of last week. Always the same theme: I can do this. Today's me, well, she has a different idea. She thinks: I can do this better.

"We're all born with the capacity for handling stress. And then life unfolds (Emerson & Hopper, 2011). You could have been in an accident or experienced a natural disaster. You may have unfortunately suffered a medical trauma or a traumatic loss. It also didn't have to happen directly to you. If it turns out the stress is too much for you to handle... what I mean is that trauma is simply more stress than your system can naturally cope with."

OMG, I am a stat.

"Ah, we're all messed up. To one degree or another. This is great news. Awesome." I blurt out.

"I know, it's overwhelming." She is watching me come to terms and I'm glad to have her here with me.

"Yeah, cuz add in all the ACEs and we are talking about everyone on the planet. Relationships, what we know from attachment theory." I laugh as disbelief settles in.

"Just breathe. In this moment when your mind is firing off like fireworks, just breathe. If your mind wanders over to thoughts, try listening to your breath instead. Count the beats of your inhalations and exhalations. Just breathe."

I hate that I'm going along with this. I feel like such a hypocrite.

"What, so instead of thinking, I should breathe?"

“And when your stress response system is activated, move. Yoga, Tai Chi, Chi Gong. Dance, jump, sway. Squeeze your fingers, push the wall.”

We stare at each other. I’m thinking this all sounds too good to be true. *Is she thinking that she’s got me crossing to the other side?*

“People often experience mental difficulty in managing emotions and negotiating healthy friendships and intimate relationships. But changing your nervous system and beliefs depends on your capacity to experience emotions directly and deeply. I’m talking about the original four: joy, sadness, anger, and fear. If we can tolerate the sensations these emotions bring up in our bodies and not ignore them, distract ourselves, or morph them into something else, then we can truly heal from the residues of what has hurt us (Dale, 2014; Duan & Ho, 2018; Kok et al., 2013).

“If you can remember the past without your stress response system taking over, you’re on your path of recovery. If you can be in your body and manage your stress response, you’re on your path to recovery. The lessons we find in yoga will help us to accept and trust ourselves (Heleniak et al., 2016; Porges, 2017; van der Kolk, 2018; Wells et al., 2016), by developing the ability for self-awareness (Froeliger et al., 2012; Wells et al., 2016). Yoga is a safe space to attempt to do just that.”

“Yeah, I get it. Yoga is good for you.”

Two smiles; one of resignation, the other a smidge apologetic.

“So emotional regulation is a pretty important piece (Angeletti, 2016; Barnes et al., 2008; Fourure, 2014; Pervichko et al., 2014; Renna et al., 2018)” I conclude.

“I think it may be the piece.”

I roll my eyes. This woman has about five ‘the’ pieces already.

“At first it will contradict your instincts and impulses. You’ve lived aspects of a life for survival, and part of that survival plan was to suppress or ignore or distract. We learned, and for important reasons, that big feelings or certain displays of feelings aren’t acceptable. ‘Don’t get mad’, or ‘be nice’. These messages that we conformed to, after a while, leave a nasty trail. And then one day you’re ready to come back to your full, original self: angry, happy, scared, and sad.”

“The original four.”

“The original four.”

“How...”

“Like you just did. You breathe. You develop a tolerance for the moment because that’s exactly what it is, a moment. Which will eventually pass, the more present you stay.”

“Mmm.”

“Do you think your boyfriend could hold space for you?” She catches me off-guard. It’s immediately obvious to me that he would. He, unlike me, has always been in touch with his feelings and has wanted me to share more of that with him. But the question is: *Can I?*

“Going over our transcripts will help your academically-inclined mind prepare itself for this adventure.” *I suppose this is what it feels like to have a tribe.*

“I’ll consider it. Time to eat, no?” The rumbling of my stomach acts as the perfect book mark and we make our way into my kitchen.

“I came upon a meme and thought of you.” She’s rearranging the vase of flowers she insisted on bringing that’s now on my coffee table, having claimed the yellow of the sunflowers would perfectly complement the green in the woman’s hair. *Such a waste of money on something that’s going to die within a week.* “It said that ‘your enemy is your best teacher for developing patience and compassion’ (Dalai Lama, 2013). Here’s the issue that I have with that: Why do I have to be patient if my enemy is being a jerk?” I feel the pen give way. Through clenched teeth I blurt, “Don’t I have a right to express myself?”

She smiles a knowing smile, but I can’t seem to lessen my grip on the pen. Still, she says nothing, so I continue. “What you’re proposing isn’t fair. You’re essentially promoting that one gives up. You’re advocating that the one who screams the loudest gets the bullhorn. But they’re already loud. Patience and compassion aren’t always the right approach.” My heart is racing as the air manages to make its way through my clenched teeth. I am angry, and realise I am angry at her. “This regulating your emotions business sounds really good, but anger is real. And necessary. You can’t let people take advantage of you.”

I am feeling victorious. It all makes sense.

“Can you tune in and describe how your body feels right now?” We’ve done this exercise before, taking note of our internal state, and quite plainly I don’t want to. I like feeling powerful.

I quite enjoy the high I have right now and as I huff, I ask. “Why?” She nods, encouraging me to tune in. “There’s no need.” The words forceful, furthering my point. “I’ve done nothing wrong.”

“Ahhhh,” her hands in her lap are quite a contrast to my clenched fingers. “It isn’t about right or wrong. It’s about identifying the emotion flowing within.”

I roll my eyes and stand up, walk to the window. “Can we discuss something moral or sociological without it going to the self-help realm?” I say mockingly, the teenager in me coming up for air. *Can you have multiple personalities if they’re just versions of you from throughout your life?*

“Of course.”

There are people on the sidewalk below who seem to be directing their attention to someone across the street. A dancer has taken space in the park, and with each movement his multi-coloured kimono flows around him. I open the window and immediately recognize the piece the pianist is playing: Mozart, my boyfriend’s favourite composer. The amount of times this sonata has played in the background as we read on the couch goes beyond the fingers and toes on both of our bodies. I, who had never learned to play an instrument, never really developed quite the same affinity for classical music as he had, but I manage just fine. I take him hiking and he makes me listen to Mozart. Give and give; you don’t always have to take.

I can feel her beside me now but pride keeps my eyes front and center. *I cannot be the first to speak, I am not the one who needs to bridge the gap here.*

“A rainbow after the storm,” and she giggles, pressing her hand on the screen like a child. I am at odds, wanting to soften yet still my body stays firm.

“This is when I practice my breathing techniques and repeat *I will do my best*, and, *I trust us to get through this.*” I turn to look at her, simultaneously admiring and feeling irksome at her ‘teachable moment’. “I care for you and am protective of the time

we have together. So important I care for myself so that I can stay on track to meet our goals.” She turns away from me and sits back on the floor. I feel the air thinning as I come to realise that I need her and she does not need me in the same way, and I weaken at the weight of dependence. I hold onto the windowsill, faking strength, until I can’t anymore. “I’m sorry.”

She looks to me and the tears threaten to expose my shame. “What is it that you ultimately want? Why do you dedicate time and energy to be with me?” The softness in her voice assuages my reaction.

“I don’t understand. I... I’m not sure I can answer.”

“What was your main goal for meeting me? What is it that you think I can offer you?”

My feet are rooted beneath me though I am transported back to my childhood:

My favourite aunt has asked me to sit on my bed and she’s pacing my room. Our setting is what every 12-year-old girl’s room looked like at that time: a Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid poster my dad brought home one day to reward me: “Stellar report card, kid,” he had said. “You’re going places mom and I never even dreamed of.”; a poster of the newest hit show, Three’s Company; a Frisco Kid poster; and then stickers my teachers have given me on the last day of every school year, placed in the shape of a rainbow over the head of my bed: “Here you go, hun. I know you’d appreciate these. You always say your pleases and thank you’s, and that ought to be rewarded in children.”

My aunt is wringing her hands as though there's soap between her fingers and she's getting the oil from the nail salon where she works off her skin. Her brow is furrowed and I'm too scared to ask her what's wrong, so I just sit there, waiting.

"Honey, we won't be seeing each other anymore. I'm moving away." I can hear the faraway kitchen cupboards open and close, the patter of my mother's feet aimlessly moving about. My gaze moves from my bedroom door back to my aunt. I study her blond hair, how the wisps move haphazardly around her heart-shaped face, how the braid touches the middle of her back. She suddenly looks a lot older than my mom.

"OK, you're not saying anything. Listen hun," she moves until she's sitting next to me on the purple comforter, a hand-me-down from the give-and-take-box from the community center. "I can't stay in this town anymore. I need to go." And with those words my heart shattered, the pieces eventually glued back together to construct an unrecognizable mosaic inside my chest. Laughter, love and security were smashed into bits and then thrown into the air, and they landed without rhyme, without reason. A newly built heart that would beat and keep me alive, but that would until this very moment conceal the deepest loss I experienced.

And so, I cry. I let this woman before me stand in for my aunt and see the pain I endured in my youth. And as my body uncontrollably shakes, she takes my hands and brings me to the couch where she cradles me until my cheeks run dry.

After the moment's passed, I sit up, slower than I thought I would, and sheepishly thank her and apologise for derailing our chat.

"Have you ever cried like that with anyone?"

I shake my head.

"As a child?"

"My aunt. She had this way..."

"Of holding space for you."

I've never heard of 'holding space' for someone and *it sounds pretty woo-hoo.*

Nevertheless, tears make their unwanted appearance once more.

"And how do you feel now?"

"A bit tired, actually. Heavy, like my body is heavy."

"Yes. Good. That's alright."

She is becoming my senses' nucleus though I'll never say it aloud. *Even saying it to myself scares me a bit.*

"I think your parasympathetic system kicked on. What you're describing sounds an awful lot like what the body goes through after an adrenaline rush meets the passing of the mind's impasse."

I don't want to be a stat in the research.

"Oh, I doubt that. I think it's just been a while since I cried and I'm a bit numb from surprise." I smile. *And there's her smile again to let me know that she knows what I don't have the guts to say.*

"Well, perhaps you're right. I do have the brain on my mind, so I may be projecting." Her wink. I want to remember her like this always.

She pulls on the edge of her sweater's sleeve and rubs the material between her index and thumb, something that brings me back to a scene I watched play out almost every day during my childhood. I'd be sitting at the kitchen table finishing up breakfast when my mother would hand my father his lunch and adjust the lapels on his work shirt.

Every morning my mother would do this and each time, my father would huff and tell her he didn't have time for her fussing. She'd turn on her heels and I swear she wore a small smile. She never didn't adjust his lapels. And he never walked away before she had a chance to.

"Something came up for you, just now, right before the tears came." My eyes widen as I let go of my reverie. "A memory? An emotion? A feeling?" I nod. "If we were to exemplify the things we talked about, right now is when we'd start with mindfulness, so we could simply notice what happened.

"And then, once we had done that, we'd do something about it. In your case, you cried.

"I am really proud of you. You did it. You sat and honoured your experience."

My stomach clutches and I swallow hard. *Why am I fighting this?*

"It doesn't feel like I did anything noteworthy, really. All I did was cry."

"That's everything. You existed just as you were, at the simplest and least complex level." *I can't agree or object. No thoughts, no words come to mind.*

She glances at the flowers and smiles. "We're trying something new so we can be our basic selves."

I start to laugh, somewhat hysterically, as confusion takes over. *I have no idea what I'm doing! I could never recreate this sequence of events on my own!*

"Just take the time. I think we sometimes move from moment to moment without taking pause. And sometimes the pausing is all that we really need. And the newness of pausing helps bring in the newness of being, without needing to know what to do. Just take some time in-between."

Everything I have done with this woman is new. None of it familiar. And from deep within I feel myself wanting to hold onto her, cuz I don't think I can be like this without her. And that's when I recognise that I want to be this new me. And the tears wash my face once more.

"I'm not sure I can do this." It's the first time I acknowledge why I invited her here. She takes my hand, bringing my fingers to my tears. I instinctively wipe it away.

"You're never alone. Just remember to look up every once in a while."

"And notice the leaves on the trees," and I settle into the couch a little more.

"And the colourful doors on the houses."

I only notice now that our fingers are intertwined.

"And the helpers. Don't forget to look for the helpers. We're here."

As though there were a yoga mat under my feet, the tears welcome my secrets and it is in this moment that I am saved.

Chapter 6: Sometime in the future

She lays down on my desk a laminated cue card and turns to sit down on the couch in the corner of my office. I hold up my finger, knowing she won't think me rude while I end my phone call.

"What's this?" Although superfluous, I ask it all the same, a remnant of a social norm from childhood.

Never underestimate the power of contrary thoughts. They are the first sign that you are breaking through your old beliefs

- Jeffrey Allen, 2017, as cited in Nagy, Blog post

I smile freely from my captain's chair, enjoying the celebration of the journey.

"Turn it over."

And then it happens... One day you wake up and you're in this place, you're in this place where everything feels right. Your heart is calm. Your soul is lit. Your thoughts are positive. Your vision is clear. You're at peace, at peace with where you've been, at peace with what you've been through, at peace with where you're headed.

- Word Porn, 2018

"Word Porn? Really? You couldn't find a quote from a more reputably sounding source?"

"Haha, if I had we wouldn't have had this moment."

With the lightness of the laughter still floating in my chest, a sensation overcomes me, one that I recognize and name as gratitude.

"I have a friend who asks these two questions after any momentous event: What was the highlight? What was the worst thing that transpired." She places her hands over

her heart, over her mouth and then on her forehead. She drops them into her lap and looks to me for my concluding remarks from our time together. I sigh big, letting my shoulders rise and fall with exaggeration.

“The highlight was learning about attachment theory. I needed that like a witch needs her broomstick.”

She breaks the flow with her infectious laughter, a sound I have internally recorded, ready to playback at will.

I look at her and speak my truth. “The worst thing is realising how much I was hurting other people. That’s really hard to come to terms with.”

“You have demonstrated to me a grand mixture of doubt and curiosity, pride and shame, but all of these emotions and beliefs aren’t really binary, they coexist simultaneously. You aren’t these things, instead they breath inside of you. It will be your intentional consciousness that will be their gateway to your front stage.”

I contemplate the new course my life’s trajectory has taken, and I thank her. In the words of Oprah: prepare as well as you can and then let things happen as they do.

“I have one last parting gift.” She rises effortlessly from the couch and walks to me with open arms. I stand, welcoming the hug - five conversations in its making. As I hold my chin above her head I am forced to acknowledge that I love her. I attempt to move but we aren’t quite done. Her smell and tenderness offer me one last release, and I let the tears flow freely.

Both with wet cheeks, we say nothing. She does not turn back for one last glance at the door. And with her scent under my nose, I see she has left me something on the couch. A book. *Milk and Honey* by Rupi Kaur (2015), whose poems speak to the center

of every thought I've ever had. I don't know it yet, but this book will read as though I were the one who wrote it. I don't know it yet, but I will begin a correspondence with Rupi that will last our lifetimes. I don't know it yet, but I will know and breathe happiness.

Conclusion

A self that goes on changing is a self that goes on living.

-Virginia Woolf, 1974, *"The Humane Art"* in *The death of the moth and other essays*

From Above

Philosophizing can alter the structure of a person's lens, strengthening the cornea and iris to bring in light, bending the retina so it produces a new image for the brain, and in relation to this thesis, philosophizing can alter the Self. It can shift, renew, or reorganize the way in which we see and understand ourselves, the other, and the human experience. Gadamer's (1960/1998) work in hermeneutics has proven to be powerful in this respect, and where by *Bildung*, he is referring to self-formation: "The self-awareness of working consciousness contains all the elements that make up practical *Bildung*: the distancing from the immediacy of desire, of personal need and private interest, and the exacting demand of a universal" (p. 36). This has been my role as researcher in this thesis.

Yet, the integration of knowledge is a very subtle art. It's sneaky, in the way that water sliding through the cracks in the foundation of a home is sneaky. On one hand, you believe that your foundation is solid – it's made of concrete and by professionals. You don't question its stability. This sounds like, *I am who I am*. Then, one day, you decide to go down into the basement, which you rarely do because you don't doubt its solidity, only to find that water has seeped in and has decided to leave its mark, forever changing the quality and durability of your foundation. Depending on the damages, maybe you can patch it up. It'll take time and money and resources and help. This looks

like, *I'll attend the Ted Talks Women event and get some good ideas and inspiration.*

But maybe, just maybe, you need to break the foundation and rebuild.

What is needed to embark on a process of relational resilience?

I found answers, or perhaps more aptly, learned how to ask the 'right' questions (in a hermeneutic sense), by reading across various fields, travelling from the psychological (attachment theory, positive psychology, social conditioning), to the anthropological (Tomasselo, Fisher), to the philosophical (Sartre, Deleuze), to the biological (Spiegel, Tatkin, van der Kolk, Porges), to somatic experiencing (Ogden, Levine).

What is to be done with new information? How do we know how to incorporate it, to inform ourselves on how to move forward in new ways of being? How can we ensure that we are venturing (and will continue) into the new (into the 'alien')? Using the home's foundation as example, one must first have the idea to, and then go, down into the basement. This is the equivalent of recognizing (or confirming) one's past and positioning oneself in that space before moving into the horizon of possibilities (Gadamer, 1980). Subjectivity is essential for understanding other and awareness of new - it is a precursor for objectivity. Second, noticing the cracks and moving in response, whether covertly or overtly, demonstrates a hermeneutic awareness. This would be like remembering, *'I have a past and what about it do I remember?'* and *'how do my memories of my past influence my thoughts and actions of today – how do they inform the direction of my future?'* Third, much like filling a cracked foundation, new perspectives can be added to what already informs us. There is no 'fresh start', because our present and future are inextricably tied to our past. Past experiences, yes, but also

past perceptions. Gadamer (1980) writes, “it seems to me there can be no doubt that the great horizon of the past, out of which our culture and our present live, influences us in everything we want, hope for, or fear in the future” (p. 133). In a hermeneutic sense, moving through these three steps removes limitations that could have otherwise restricted the creation and development into new horizons. It supports the hermeneutic inquiry and a hermeneutic consciousness. As for the house, it strengthens its foundation, influencing its future solidity.

The investment in our future by looking at our past is what Andreas Huyssen terms “productive remembering” (as cited by Strong-Wilson, Mitchell, Allnutt, & Pithouse-Morgan, 2013, p.2). One ‘fixes’ (in the present) the cracked foundation (occurred in the past) in the hopes to eliminate any possible future structural problems (altered future). Strong-Wilson et al. (2013) discuss in their opening chapter that remembering can be an act done in the present “within a context of social change” (p. 3) for the future. Productive remembering, used in this context, can be an act in support of relational resilience. Experiences, as explained by Frigga Haug (2000), become the source for new questions, and how we “construct [ourselves] anew from history” (p. 157). Productive remembering has “the potential to change each individual’s agency and social action within a community and align it with their own values and purpose in life” (Goodson & Gill, 2011, p. 94).

Using “future oriented remembering” (Strong-Wilson et al., 2013, p. 4) in the name of social justice (and I interpret this to also mean: resilience) invites psychological and neurological perspectives to carefully contemplate how memories can be considered. Pierre Janet, one of the founding fathers of psychotherapy, coined the term

'subconscious' to explain the collection of automatically stored memories we accumulate that form the mental maps which guide subsequent interactions (van der Kolk & van der Hart, 1989). Triggered by our ideas and accompanied by emotions, Janet believed memory to be an action, "essentially it is the act of telling a story" (as cited by van der Kolk & van der Hart, 1995, p. 446), and that for most memories (he included a clause for traumatic memories in this idea), the individual has authority and authorship over the thinking and (re)telling of the memory. The versions of our lives that we tell ourselves, the collection of memories, becomes our narrative, and therein exists a flexibility. Once flexibility is introduced, the narrative memory starts to lose its power over the current experiences. According to Janet, this is our path to rehabilitation from a difficult past.

Daniel Siegel, a neuropsychiatrist who has extensively researched what he terms 'interpersonal neurobiology', speaks about the structure of memory as "complex and sensitive to both external and internal factors as it constructs the past, the present, and the anticipated future" (2001, p. 998). He explains that because of how neurons are wired in networks, a stored memory involves explicit (word, picture) and implicit elements (interpretation, conscious sense). It is both biological and social. And remembering is not simply a 'playback' of only the explicit elements. Because it is, in part, a social experience, recollection is profoundly influenced by the social interaction, in the past when the memory was first experienced, but also in the present when it is re-experienced. "Retrieval is thus a memory modifier" (2001, p. 1006).

The psychological and neurological implications of the malleability in the structure of memory can further act as a tool for relational resilience. In productive

remembering for social change, self-reflection via social interactions involves the co-construction of a narrative around the memory. The narrative reveals “how the mind integrates a massive amount of experience across the individual's lifetime” (Siegel, 2001, p. 1009) and that through new conversations (and the argument in this thesis is to have hermeneutic conversations and/or Socratic dialogues) we can explore how we *have*, and more importantly and empowering is how we *can*, link the past with the present as we anticipate and create our future life experiences.

How does this tie together? How can research utilize productive remembering as an act for social justice, within these psychological and neurobiological frameworks? With Gadamer's approach to meaning making within the relationship, the hermeneutic conversation sets the potential for relational resilience. It can act as the protective sealant one might put on the outside of the foundation, an extra preventative measure to stop future damaging infiltrations and demise.

Setting the Stage

The thesis has been framed by inquiry into two research questions: (1) *What are we doing that interferes with 'healthy' human development?* and (2) *What can we do to rehabilitate ourselves as individuals and improve our society and contemporary culture?* In this conclusion, I return to these autobiographically-grounded questions that I elected to creatively explore through a fictional hermeneutic conversation and Socratic dialogue (of question and answer) between a narrator and a woman.

The thesis was informed by the conviction that we need to be asking different questions of each other. According to Gadamer (1960/1998), a problem of

understanding arises when we ask questions that separate us. Oftentimes, people engage in conversation to discuss, or debate, a topic that is of common interest, yet lose sight of the collaborative effort required in hermeneutic conversations. The emphasis needs to be placed on shared meaning making, and not only on effectively presenting a well-informed argument. The development of the narrator and woman's inter-communicative styles (the ways in which they related to each other) were met with the narrator breaking down her walls (which she thought had served her well in her past). In doing so, she began to let go of an ideology that segregated more than it had connected. By collaborating with the woman, she realized that though asking a question invites growth, the question asked also determines the direction and context of growth by either inviting possibility or restricting it. Knowledge is obtained by "considering opposites" (Gadamer, 1960/1998, p. 365), which is the basis of Socrates' teachings that knowledge is found in what one doesn't know. In considering possibilities (avoiding the binaries of 'this' OR 'that'), we might reach an agreement that knowledge is neither singularly defined nor finite. The hermeneutic conversations helped the narrator move through her confusion and let go of some long-held beliefs that were no longer congruent with her (budding) intuitive sense of self, and of how she would like to influence her future. She began to recognize the importance of Sartre's suggestion that in our otherness, we can find the opportunity to grow. The conversations between the narrator and her 'other' (the woman) perform this hermeneutic function. Because the narrator learned to ask different questions, rather than look for a script that she could make sense of and imitate, she demonstrated her 'readiness' and began to understand in new ways what is particular to her life that can impart new knowledge.

What the narrator ended up with is with a new sense of calmness even as she understood that the/a question will permanently need to be re-framed. This perspective that 'knowledge is always-changing' allowed her to be more comfortable with the naturally-occurring uncertainty of life. Here lies the flexibility Janet referred to, in that the narrator modified her definition of 'knowledge as fixed and universal' to 'knowledge as evolving and personalized' and with the introduction of flexibility, her "memories [prior mental constructs] lost their power over her current [and future] experiences" (van der Kolk & van der Hart, 1989, p. 448). Objectivity of self can be difficult for humans, which is why it can be valuable to see it as a skill to be learned/further developed. Learning such a skill requires openness and humility, both of which are also integral to the hermeneutic process.

But, how was the narrator able to perform these changes? Why was she able to 'bring down her walls' and learn to ask questions to expand her horizon of possibilities? What enabled her to grow with, and at times because, of the other woman?

The relationship (to an idea, to oneself, to 'other') can be the reinforcement of previous methods of relating, and/or the breeding ground for growth. Building on the psychological and neurobiological reasoning that humans are multisystem creatures that develop within multiple systems, the overlapping and influential ways we make meaning within contexts help explain how relationships can be profound spaces for evolution, whether the individual is consciously or subconsciously aware and/or involved. Attachment theory and interpersonal neurobiology, both widely incorporated in the thesis' hermeneutic conversations, explain in depth the strength and impact relationships have on the individual, the family and the larger society.

A factor that strongly impacts the quality of relationships is that of vulnerability. In her book *Daring Greatly* (2012), Brene Brown positions vulnerability as “the core of all emotions and feelings” (p. 33), and that vulnerability is not good nor bad; It acts as the gatekeeper to how we will experience our emotions and feelings. To extend this understanding by including Janet’s perspective that narrative memories are triggered by our emotions, the concern becomes that if we opt out of being vulnerable (either intentionally or unintentionally), we are in a sense opting out of knowing and being our ‘true’ selves. We limit how we respond when we’re confronted with uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure, which can lead us to creating ‘unhealthier’ relationships and thwarted versions of ourselves.

Brown’s extensive research on shame (2006) elucidated that humans develop their capacity for vulnerability because of, and with, each other. We need others who “will let us try on new ways of being without judgment and we need a hand to pull us up off the ground when we get knocked down” (2012, p. 53). This resonates with the basis of Bowlby’s work in that the two foundations in secure attachments are perceiving we have a secure base we can unconditionally belong to, and from which we can move away from to explore the world. Though the culture that raised me promoted independence, and at times revered it as a valued approach to being, humans need support, and striving for independence has had negative consequences. Brown’s research gives a proof that we find this support in the ‘other’. Brown found that “vulnerability begets vulnerability” (2012, p. 54), in so that the more it was practiced the more one connected to her emotions and feelings. She equally found that “courage is contagious” (2012, p. 54), in that a person’s level of vulnerability influenced the other

person/people in the relationship and is equally influenced by the other(s)' demonstrations of vulnerability.

Brown further emphasized that a critical aspect of vulnerability is trust. Trust “grows over time and requires work, attention, and full engagement... We need trust to be vulnerable and we need to be vulnerable in order to trust” (2012, p. 47). If we have disassociated from our core emotions and feelings, as Brown’s research (2006) on shame has concluded is possible, there is much work that needs to be done to repair what has interrupted ‘healthy’ human development. Her research offers promising insight in how we may answer both research questions.

Relationships that include vulnerability and trust can be rich spaces in which individuals can grow and learn. Writing from the narrator’s perspective gave me a platform from which I could play out the evolution of a character; a person who moved from separate as protection, to separate as together. It is important, at this point, to ask: How was she able to grow and learn? What allows a human to change? Is there something that precedes or influences the capacity for vulnerability and trust?

As it turns out, resilience seems to be what enables the development of any capacity. Resilience directs the aftermath of: a slip, a fall, or even a disaster. It is one’s ability to recover. It is, in essence, movement.

Resilience thus becomes another reason why the hermeneutic conversation can be a tool for new knowledge, in relation to productive remembering for social action. The dialogue between the narrator and the woman help the narrator “enhance the experience of well-being... [while facing] significant adversity” (Ungar, Ghazinoor, &

Richter, 2013, p. 348). Resilience, as found in the data, exists on both the personal and collective planes.

Deblinger, Pollio, Runyon, & Steer (2017) propose three main factors that speak to an individual's capacity for personal resiliency: a sense of mastery (optimistic on life and own competence, self-efficacy as related to problem-solving, adaptable including to criticism and learning from it); a sense of relatedness (trust in others, comfort with others, tolerance of differences in relationships), and emotional reactivity (inability to manage and tolerate emotional stimulation, emotions are easily triggered and are felt intensely).

Although personal resilience is a powerful factor in social situations, it seems that the quality of the hermeneutic conversation is mostly impacted by the social context within which it takes place. The relationship between the narrator and the woman, the narrator's readiness, and both of their backgrounds play significant roles in the execution of the hermeneutic experience, as it relates to the narrator's development of resilience.

Thus, looking at resiliency on the collective plane offers another empowering approach. Resiliency, though it is a capacity observed in an individual, is procured by, and with, the "multiple systems with which the individual interacts" (Ungar et al., 2013, p. 349). Unger et al. (2013) suggest eight aspects that influence resilience, as understood from an ecological perspective: relationships; a powerful identity; power and control; social justice; access to material resources; a sense of cohesion; belonging and spirituality; and cultural adherence (p. 351). Resiliency, therefore, is strongly mediated by context and culture, and will impact how individuals are able to "navigate and

negotiate for resources” (p. 359). The narrator’s capacity for resilience was limited in comparison to the woman’s at first, and she at times shut down and retreated from the conversation. We see this happen when she felt criticized or was criticizing herself, when she was overcome by her senses and was no longer able to think clearly, and when she feared the woman would not develop, or lose, interest in her. As the days went by, her capacity developed via their conversations.

The capacity for resilience, from developmental psychology and interpersonal neurobiology perspectives, is affected by our early relationships and early environment. The brain itself is a multisystem organ and the integration of its parts will be supported or impaired by the attachment style the child has with her primary caregiver (De Bellis, Keshevan, Shifflett, Iyengar, Beers, Hall, & Moritz, 2002; Teicher, 2007). One impairment is in “the hippocampus, which links widely separated implicit memory representations to each other to integrate explicit memory” (Siegel, 2015, p. 161). Thus, if the brain isn’t ‘well’ integrated, a person tends to move toward chaos, rigidity or both. As seen from these perspectives, integration is the basis for harmony and so it is the fundamental basis of health. Resilience, the capacity to move from having this ‘type of brain’ to a more integrated one, takes place when the productive remembering done in ‘healthy’ relationships allows us to “make sense of one’s life – resolving these overwhelming experiences – (and) is a process that can be seen... as an integrative process. We learn to live fully in the present while being able to access, in an open and inviting way, any experiences from our past, and link these to become the active author of our own life story” (Siegel, 2015, p. 162-163).

This thesis explores how the hermeneutic approach to knowledge can develop these elements of personal and relational resilience. Slowly, over time, the narrator confronts her views of herself and the world, in relation to theoretical ideas, the perspectives held by the woman, and because of the structure of their relationship. Instead of remembering as “bringing back the helplessness and shame of the past” (Krystal, 1995, p. 83), she employs productive remembering so she can “make peace” (Krystal, 1995, p. 83) with her life story, by re-framing her understandings in such a way that she alters her future experiences of herself and can, like Janet and Seigel (2015) suggest, “become the active author of (her) own life story” (p. 162-163).

Analysis: Insights and Exploration

In the framework of this academic thesis, how do I transition from generating/authoring a fictional conversation to now stepping back from the creative process to offer a separate analysis, pulling out its thematic contributions to research as to life itself? From a practical, methodological point of view, I began by reading and comparing the first and last chapters of the conversation, namely, Chapter 1: Monday and Chapter 6: Sometime in the Future, listening for differences found in the narrator’s character between the first and last days of her journey with the woman. I noted the effects of the hermeneutic conversation had on her ideas, beliefs, behaviors and overall sense of moving in the world. I then went back and reread the entire narrative (the conversation as a whole), taking note of junctures that seemed important, pulling out recurring ideas. Once I had generated a list of these, I reread the narrative a final time to confirm/disconfirm these themes, looking for evidence of my claims. This was the foundation of how I organized the following section.

Barone's (2007) explanation of a *constructed narrative*, which classifies as a qualitative research method, is that it demonstrates "the extent to which what has been created and experienced engenders some insight... and understanding can be promoted" (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 161). It allows the researcher to convey meanings that are not easily expressible and thus can be a context that examines profound experiences we have in life that are difficult to measure. Narratives become a method that invite evaluation, corroboration, validation, in as its relevance to a population which the researcher is interested in (Barone & Eisner, 2012). For researcher and reader, the narrative becomes the mean to "reason together" and to "open up possibilities" (p. 157). That through narratives, we deliberate, inquire and imagine a context of knowledge. Constructed narratives cause us to question our values, prompt new imagining of the ideal and the possible (Barone, 2001), and as suggested by Barone (2007) and Greene (1991), the narrative can stir action against the conventional, the seemingly unquestionable, the tried and true.

In Maxine Greene's book *Landscapes of Learning* (1978), she writes of fiction as an opportunity for the reader to emancipate from previously held beliefs, if the reader engages in the reflective act of the piece of literature. "Works have a special capacity to arouse us to wide-awakening in our own time and that kind of arousal is a necessity if there is to be transcendence" (p. 37). In the otherness of a constructed narrative, we experience a disequilibrium (Gadamer) that precedes developing the art of questioning. And that in learning how to ask 'right' questions, the reflection the reader does with the narrative thus carries with it the "power to subvert social norms" (Watson, 2008, p. 334). This ties back nicely to one reason I embarked on this autobiographically-sourced

research; my attempt at *productive remembering for social action* (Strong-Wilson et al., 2013).

In the process, it became clear to me that the narrator's story, the one that she tells in the course of the conversation, becomes her attempt to face her past and reclaim her life, and that she largely passes through three stages: remembering, mourning, and healing. These three stages of a story mapped in interesting ways onto the themes that I noted in re-reading. I therefore call these stages as follows, gathering the pertinent themes under them: a) remembering through relationships, b) mourning through vulnerability, and c) healing through resiliency. I expand on each below, reflecting as well on how the stages and themes respond to my research questions. And though the term 'stages' implies a sequential order, these are not mutually exclusive. A person can move freely, and at times be caught off guard at the fluidity of her movement, between remembering, mourning and healing. A person can also, at times, exist in more than one stage.

a) Remembering through Relationships

There were several fundamental ways in which the narrator's character evolved through her conversations with the other, with the woman. Comparisons between her behavior, reactions and thoughts in the first chapter and in the last provide compelling evidence that *we can change fundamental elements that make up and/or inform our personality*. This challenges the notion that 'we are who we are', and 'you can't teach an old dog new tricks'. It also acts to show how 'there's more than one way of being', and 'I don't have to be this way'. Her character, in the end, can be considered a mascot for Gadamer's 'expansion of one's horizon of understanding', Schon's idea of 'reflecting-in-

action' or Pierre Janet on 'narrative memories'. She, through the back-and-forths with the woman (and with her own mind), incorporated fresh ideas in such a way that, by the end, she managed to adapt herself to her present circumstances and influence a modified future (aka. productive remembering).

The importance here in having a relationship (an 'other') is because our memories, or the versions of our lives that we tell ourselves, can become incomplete or distorted. According to Janet, our path to rehabilitation from a difficult past lies in the process of confronting narrative memories and traumatic ones, though complications do arise in trying to make meaning of traumatic memories. Van der Kolk, a psychiatrist with a specialization in trauma, proposes that the more novel an experience, the more alertness is required. In this alertness is the seeds for change. So, even though our subconscious influences our current perceptions, affect states, and behaviours, we can create opportunities for growth by encountering knowledge and activities that not only rehabilitate what no longer serves us but also to give us new ways of being.

We inadvertently witness this evolution in the narrator. Her time with the woman, at least as seen in the fragment of their relationship that we are privy to when reading this narrative, was composed by hermeneutic conversations. Their talks consistently and frequently invited the narrator to reflect (via remembering) on how she situated herself in her life (as opposed to 'is situated in her life', which may direct growth in a different way). Together, they did this by becoming aware of, and of constructing an understanding of how she defined the many elements that made up or informed her personality: thought, ideologies, people, her past, her future, values, etc.

By adopting a relationship to our memories that involves an openness to new understanding, and by which I mean memories are malleable and how we use them is impacted by choice, and that by placing ourselves as the director of our memories, we are empowered to re-frame them and re-place them in our “life history, [in our] autobiography, and thereby in the whole of [our] personality” (van der Kolk & van der Hart, 1991, p. 450). These contemporary psychological and psychiatric approaches to treating post-traumatic symptoms were borne from Janet’s experiential research, whereby he worked ‘with’ his patients to integrate their traumatic memories into ‘their larger narrative’. The narrator became an autobiographical reconstructionist (Kuhn, 2000).

Our narrator demonstrated a typical perception people carry during those early stages of growth. We often begin with a strong sense that the answers are outside of ourselves. We seek experts, elders, those who have already carved their path to tell us how to do it. Evolution can happen with the right mentor, at the right time, but only when we ourselves are ‘ready’ to, and then we can accept and transition the ownership of answers to being anchored from within. The process, in a sense, is that although we may need others to inspire new questions, or reframe questions we think we’ve answered, the answers (the way information is assimilated) is done by making the process of transcendence/ transformation entirely personalized. In the narrative, the woman repeatedly prefaced before sharing what worked for her in her own journey of resilience and healing, that there is no one-size-fits all and her story isn’t transferable to the narrator. She guided the narrator to understand that using life stories (remembering) to inform the direction of the future is a multisystem process, and to not lose sight of

herself as one of those systems, nor forget that she is made up of multiple systems. The woman showed her to: *seek questions from 'others', look for the answers within.*

The narrator's evolution was also an example of how confidence and self-esteem take shape. There's a migration from thinking your way through a difficult situation to feeling/knowing how you want to proceed. It moves from an abstract and mental realm into one's natural way of moving through the day's moments. It's the belief that even when life's moments ask a novel question, we trust ourselves to respond with honesty, grace and authenticity. And by remembering her life stories whilst assimilating new knowledge, she was able to develop a sense of self that enabled a moving away and toward. She involved herself in the on-going construction of who she is and will be.

A related second theme to this stage is that: *relationships may be where we are broken but it can also be the place where we heal.* The narrator gives us bits and pieces of insight into her history, into some of her more important relationships: with her father, her aunt, and with a 'he' (her colleague and boyfriend). The tidbits about these three relationships give us of a general picture of how she came to be and who she is.

Homelife as a child was an environment shaped by poverty (hand me down comforter from the bin at school) and monitored through punishments and rewards (corporal punishments for bad behavior, stickers from teachers to reward politeness). We learn that her father didn't interact in personalized ways with his children. He acted as provider (put food on the table and clothes on her back) and as punisher (when you have 6 children, you don't have to stretch the imagination too much...). Order seemed to be of prime importance. A family rule around mealtime was to wait until her father's return from work before eating. Attachment theory would notice that the children were

expected to fall in line and adapt, leaving parts of the children's characters to be unmet, undeveloped and unwanted. Here, concepts of control and of power were engrained in the narrator's sense of understanding in people and in the overall structure of society.

The way in which the narrator described her relationship with her aunt gives the impression that her aunt was the one with whom she enjoyed some tenderness and joy. It turned out to be in this relationship where she experienced a significant and detrimental blow: Her aunt moves away, leaving her and their small town behind. Her aunt's departure leaves a residual feeling of rejection, and in her (stalled) mourning process, the narrator decided that the best way to avoid this pain in the future would be to create a life that is "one giant boundary" (p. 108).

Based on these two primary relationships, it can be concluded, from the perspective of attachment theory, that the narrator lacked a securely attached relationship with a caregiver by which she could develop a deep sense of safety, where she could express and celebrate joy, and experience and overcome challenges.

Instead, we meet an adult who excelled in her professional life (assistant professor at a university, ex editor-in-chief of the department's journal, presenter at conferences), but her personal relationship with 'him' presented major challenges. In the first chapter she questioned how long 'he' will stay with her: "*how long does it take a happy person to become infected with realism?*" (p. 10). As explained by Bowlby and Ainsworth and then later by Main and many others (in the field of developmental psychology), including Siegel and Tatkin (in the field of interpersonal neurobiology), adults who develop within insecure relationships with primary caregivers are said to be conditioned to repeat the same dynamics with their romantic partners. They will be

anxious or avoidant and will most likely match up with their opposite. In the narrator's case, she presented as avoidant and her boyfriend as anxious. She moved away while he looked for connection. Intimacy and closeness felt constricting and overwhelming to her, as depicted in the scene where she escapes from the room where he is receiving his award. Her lack of vulnerability, steadied by the concept of control, meant she was unable to express the overwhelming feeling of panic and anxiety: reasons she needed to 'have a cigarette'. This insight was wrapped in a seemingly aggressive argument, though it contained notes of self-protection and defensiveness (I won't be held captive; why didn't anyone come and get me?).

It is through her relationship (viz., hermeneutic conversation leading to an increased capacity for relational resilience) with the other/the woman that the narrator began to reflect and bring into her awareness the various ways in which observations, ideas and theories applied to her reality: She demonstrated how she had connected the dots by referencing a scene from a favourite movie, *Crimes and Misdemeanors*. She reasoned a cause for the demise of the woman's relationship with her ex. And, she began to experience, in new ways, the impact of remembering her aunt's goodbye, by mourning that loss in a new way with the woman. Through her relationship with the woman, her relationship to making meaning, and her relationship to productive remembering and Janet and van der Kolk's approaches to how to use memory, the narrator rewrote her narrative, in a sense she updated it, so that the act of remembering – the act of telling her story, even if only to herself – gave her a modified sense of herself and of the 'rules' of the social world, and thus opened up a different type of future.

Neurobiology reminds us that we cannot simply ‘think’ our way better (although remembering and reflecting are crucial in modifying one’s perspectives and understandings). Rather we also need to rewire our brains and nervous systems. One example is by continuously and repeatedly re-encoding our (explicit and implicit) memories, as described by Siegel in a previous section, to enable the old networks/neurons to dissipate and/or die. This will allow for a ‘different remembering’ (the explicit – the picture or word; the implicit - the mental construct associated). As the days moved forward, the narrator and the woman repeatedly ‘came back to the past’ and reflected on the implications the theories they were discussing were/could have, making new ties to the memories and rewriting her narrative with a new spin. Together, they developed a relationship to be a space where they (the interlocutors) engaged in meaning making, by assimilating research, while productively remembering. It was a space that enabled healing.

Another neurobiological example is that relationships are spaces filled with situations that call for emotional regulation. *Can you help me regulate? Can I help you? Can I regulate with you? Can you with me?* The moments after the endocrine, neurological, psychological, and behavioral systems have been activated and the stress-response system is engaged become an intimate and vulnerable and caring juncture for the relationship (DiCorcia & Tronick, 2011). The sequence of events consistently happens, and to varying degrees of intensity: Homeostasis – moment of stress – attempt at ‘matching’ – and then, what happens? Do you, together, attain successful reparation or unsuccessful? Press repeat, over and over and over again. How does the ‘couple’ finish the sequence? The goal isn’t to avoid stress in a

relationship, which is an impossible and unrealistic feat. It is, according to Dicorcia & Tronick (2011), how you repair. Sensitivity, attempting again and again - even after mismatching, and timing are the ways that a person in a relationship helps and is helped to emotionally regulate. Sensitivity speaks to noticing the stress-response system has been triggered and making contact. Matching is how the two communicate (send and receive information). Timing is if the attempt to match is too early, too late or in the middle (the optimal time). In the narrative, the narrator experienced stressful moments during each day with the woman. White knuckles, hyperventilating, holding her breath, averting her gaze, blank expressions, not answering, rubbing her eyes, moving away. These are the ways in which her stress presented itself to the woman. The woman, at each juncture, made attempts to meet her and match up. Sometimes it was successful and at times it wasn't. But she kept attempting. Regulated her own emotions so she could maintain their homeostasis. Little by little the narrator developed skills to recover from stress. In large part, due to her relationship with the woman, her capacity to repair increased and impacted her life in ways she couldn't foresee.

b) Mourning through Vulnerability

Brown's definition (2012) of vulnerability as a direct line to experiencing one's emotions and feelings proves to be an important starting point in the process of mourning. When I think of vulnerability in this sense, I think of visibility. An increased capacity for vulnerability means I can see myself and I can be seen. I'd like to consider, here, how we may apply this approach to answer the research questions. Using the theoretical research presented in the thesis as a framework, a person's capacity for vulnerability, meaning how capable she is to feel, think about and experience the

difficult emotions and feelings that accompany the memories and autobiographical narratives she developed with an 'unhealthy' past, or with certain moments/events, was impacted by primary attachment bonds, by how the nervous system was (or was not) integrated, the mental constructs she socially and culturally constructed, and it will influence the quality of life and health in subsequent years.

If this is the case, then, how can we rehabilitate? How can we become more comfortable with emotions?

The narrative suggests that developing the capacity for vulnerability will allow for a mourning process, and this can gravely impact the potential for personal transformation and one's involvement in more widely spread social action. It can be a juncture where an individual can improve her society and culture.

Zembylas (2009) writes and teaches about the collective mourning of socially experienced traumas. He suggests that mourning through vulnerability encapsulates a collective "attention to the work of mourning as a force of social transformation" (p. 87). Working through mourning (not linearly nor mutually exclusively performed) invites a lessening of the intensity of emotions (in the conscious and the subconscious). And when we mourn with other(s) we integrate a new way of knowing in that emotions make up all humans, and that our common capacity for vulnerability is a unifying factor. This can be a way in which we can move from 'otherness as separate' to 'otherness as the same'. And that relating in this way presents an opportunity to develop vulnerability. To review, recognizing that (and how) we are all connected is a basis for empathy (also an important element for societal and contemporary cultural rehabilitation). Mourning then, as described by Zembylas (2009), is a form of truth-recovery as necessary for a

transition, yet full justice and retribution are impossible. It is performed in the name of the process and not of the end.

Here in lies a hurdle to mourning with others / to being vulnerable with others. Does one need to be capable of vulnerability before mourning with other(s) or will vulnerability be developed while mourning with other(s)? My argument, that I hope the narrator highlights, is that the act of seeking and attaining guidance is a highly vulnerable act in which we expose ourselves to potential ridicule and rejection. Just as it can be a breeding ground for growth and self-discovery, conversations that involve sharing of the internal (be it ideas, feelings, personal anecdotes), can equally be a harmful and dangerous environment to put oneself in.

So, how did the narrator come to divulge her 'internal' to the woman? Perhaps here is when we see the impact of the hermeneutic conversation as a safe space.

As part of this process, this as a theme that comes through in the narrator's narrative, *people become more vulnerable and intimate by building trust in oneself and in others. Conversely, as we successfully try out vulnerability, we reinforce the idea/belief that we are trustworthy, and we can trust others.* The narrator demonstrated this in the way she became more comfortable with physical affection, when she let go of the fear that the 'other' didn't actually want to be with her, and when she became more familiar with gratitude. Where, in the first chapter, she was uncomfortable when being touched and resisted sitting together on the couch, in the last she extended their hug, relished in the somatic release it offered her. Where, in the first instance, wide boundaries were important and necessary, as seen when she was irked by *him* answering her phone 'for' her, by the last she appreciated the inspirational quotes

offered by the woman, done in 'her' interest. It seemed to help her reframe her relationship to the idea of control, and of being controlled. This, it turns out, is a side-effect of becoming more at ease with the 'presence' of core emotions.

Vulnerability can be an elusive capacity to develop although through each meeting with the woman, the narrator had many chances for practice (during which she failed and at times succeeded). Each time she asked a question aloud that brought up feelings of regret, she co-constructed moments for change. These junctures become a time for mindfulness. They mark the proverbial forks-in-the-road, the moments when we press *pause* and try our hand at neutral self-observation. The woman brought this strategy to the narrator's attention and by Chapter 5: Friday, the narrator demonstrated the beginnings of being in the moment. It was marked when, thinking of her aunt, she acknowledged and felt the sadness her absence brought up. By weathering that moment of uncertainty, she was able to build trust in herself and dispel old assumptions. She became more comfortable and skilled at weathering uncertainty. Likewise, she built trust that the woman was someone trustworthy. She lived experiences, time and time again, of expressing emotions and receiving unconditional support and encouragement from the woman. In those moments, a new possible outcome was invited. This developed the narrator's hermeneutic consciousness and her horizon for understanding. Her increased capacity for vulnerability offered new ways for the narrator to move differently in her world (personal and social). By changing expectations and beliefs in this area, they planted a seed and began to invite questioning of other expectations and beliefs she may have had. 'If I'm wrong about this, and can grow, what else should I

address?’ It also situated the possibility for growth to be anchored from within, ‘I was able to handle this, I can also handle other things that come up’.

In this way, *phronesis* and the use of role models is supported as important aspects of taking necessary steps to answer the second research question, *what can we do to rehabilitate ourselves as individuals and thus improve our society and contemporary culture?*

Hermeneutic conversations are themselves rife with vulnerability, as seen in this narrative. They require the exposure of one’s internal self to self and/or the other. Only once this act occurs do we invite the possibility for confronting what’s been taken for granted, of the invisible behind-the-scenes of our personalities. Bringing into awareness our ideas, feelings, beliefs, and bodily sensations allows for reinforcement or transcendence, whichever is needed. In doing so, the risks invite the possibility of growth, yes, but also of rejection. In redefining our relationship with rejection, we can sustain an openness to ‘what it can also be’, creating a hermeneutic consciousness which, we might recall, consists in expanding our understanding, that knowledge exists in the past, present and the future, in different forms and possibilities. Trust in self and other, as an element of and for vulnerability, is a fundamental element within any hermeneutic experience.

Another theme found in this narrative is that *a binary belief system causes humans (and ideas) to be plotted at one end or the other*. I am good or bad, helpful or selfish, competitive or compliant. Binary systems often suggest and involve comparison and competition, impacting the capacity for vulnerability. They encompass a ‘this or that’ and an ‘us versus them’ mentality which immediately sets a tone for

defensiveness, debating for the sake of proving who is right or wrong, and striving to develop a systematic method for evaluating moments, things and people. *Could formal education also be guilty of this?* Innate to this system is the orientation for classification. Using properties to identify what/who/where/when/why, although has merit, can be attached to a certain practical outcome and philosophical tone. For individuals, a binary belief system has the possibility to create a pervasive ideology of otherness, and not in a hermeneutically sound way. It can set one up for finite possibilities, which in turn limits growth. We become set against the other (and what is possible), and conversations instead are used to determine individual worth (how do I compare to you, how do you compare to me).

As already proposed, conversations carry with them an inherent level of risk at changing/influencing the dynamics between the interlocuters, simply by asking questions (or answering them), and if one adheres strongly to a binary belief system, it will quickly be made evident. By challenging a belief or perspective, there comes the risk of reducing any trust and appreciation already held between the participants (even if only perceived by one participant). We see this almost destructive sequence of events between the narrator and the woman. Those junctures, however, became opportunities for self-reflection-in-action and for an in-action-revision-of-being (Schön, 1992). The women, together, negotiated ways to navigate those moments of uncertainty, while guiding themselves with the mutual dedication to co-constructing knowledge and understandings.

The delicacy of the Socratic dialogue then is partially contingent on attachment theory and its implications on how relationships impact the progression (or

lack of it) of meaningful topics, essentially ‘how safe I feel with you (and myself) will affect the development of my knowledge, including how I come to know myself’. In a secure relationship, the individuals are separate yet respected beings, and with that comes separate ideas, feelings, goals, experiences etc. The secure relationship is a safe space in which individuals can discuss. The narrative, in showing the progression of the relationship between the narrator and the woman, suggests that a hermeneutic conversation is built like a secure relationship, (as long as one interlocuter functions in this framework, and the other is ‘open to it and on her way’). Insecurely attached people may prove to have more difficulties, because of the emotional dysregulation that occurred, and which continues to colour expectations (from self, other and of the relationship), skills and behaviours (in the art of the hermeneutic conversation).

Hermeneutic conversations and Socratic dialogue are thus ways of relating that (help) move away, or at least strongly challenge, the binary belief system. Let’s consider another way in which binary belief systems may have inadvertently interfered with healthy human development.

A binary belief system seems to be related to the scarcity perspective, described by Cannon, Goldsmith and Roux (2019) as thinking/believing there is a discrepancy between what is available and what is/will be needed (example of scarce resources could be food, money, time, love, jobs). One way of managing is to employ ‘scarcity-reduction’ by using our personal resources to attain what we believe we need or will need before it runs out. Another method is to employ ‘control-resolution’, when we divert our resources to where we believe to have more control and security.

Cannon et al.'s discussion (2019) on why individuals are more likely to pick one method over the other provided similar ideas as presented in this thesis. An individual's mental constructs, her assumptions and beliefs on how much (or how little) she can affect the situation will be the major deciding factor. This, I think, describes well how we come to make decisions in all areas of life. I'd like to apply how Janet and Siegel contribute to this orientation.

Given Janet's and Siegel's input on how people's life stories are biologically and socially written/wired, our perceptions and actions in any given situation (in regards to scarcity or other phenomena), is impacted by emotions; In the sense of: how aware am I of the emotions I am feeling? How are my emotions impacting my thoughts and actions? and, Are my thoughts (emotionally informed mental constructs) and actions the best representations of who I am and who I want to be? Our awareness (or lack thereof) of our emotions speaks to our capacity for vulnerability. The questions then are: If I could be more vulnerable right now, what kind of belief system would I exercise? Is my capacity for vulnerability stalling the process of mourning, fated to repeat 'old' pain? and, Does my belief system allow me to work through the process of mourning?

Janet and Siegel also, in terms of mental constructs in relation to self-perception, bring us back/again to productive remembering for social action. In recollecting ideas to inform a choice needed to be made, we can take this opportunity for self-reflection in the moment, to assess if the 'remembering' is aligned, or needs realignment, when considering the social justice we are attuning ourselves to. It may be concluded that to make a different choice, one must work through what it is that no longer serves her.

Based on the theoretical literature incorporated into this thesis, I propose that human beings demonstrate a range of traits throughout a life, and even in a singular experience. A person isn't completely good or completely bad, always nice or always mean. Positive psychology, as discussed in the narrative, invites flexibility in how we understand ourselves and how we can present ourselves. It opens a horizon of possibilities, thus offering an approach to addressing the research questions. Also, when we aren't privy to the reasoning behind the 'trait' (even our own – our subconscious links between our multiple systems), we can fall victim to making wrong assumptions about ourselves and the 'other'.

The narrator exemplified how a binary system can be detrimental to the healthy development of a human being. She did so both in her manner and in specific things she said. For example, in Chapter 2: Tuesday she asked the question: "If our perceptions are most likely unmatched by others, why is it so instinctive to defend them?" Like many others, she saw the otherness in people as a criticism to her being who she was. In binary systems, there seems to be an idea of a preferred, narrow way of being and that people are in constant conflict to bring the other person closer to herself or to go closer to the other. A slight adjustment in perspective would allow for the horizon of self to be open, thus widening what is valuable, and could include everyone's way of being as valuable. (This excludes being in ways that are hurtful or harmful and was not directly discussed in the thesis).

As time passed, the narrator did begin to internalise that other ideas, like people, despite showing how they are different from her, are not necessarily attached to a value. She began to think and behave in ways that fostered inclusivity. Thereby in

accepting differences, she in turn accepted herself. It is an orientation that fosters collaboration, equality, interdependence and secure attachments.

Hermeneutic conversations with someone who sees the human experience as fluid and has expansive ways of understanding (much like in the narrative), can begin to invite new questions, like: How might a binary approach force people to repress certain parts of themselves? In which ways does having a binary belief system separate (and isolate) people? These types of questions can offer a critical lens through which to examine and answer the two research questions: *what are we doing that interferes with 'healthy' human development?* and *what can we do to rehabilitate ourselves as individuals and thus improve our society and contemporary culture?*

By bringing in attachment theory (the effects the affectional bond with primary caregivers has on relationships), neuroscience and endocrinology (the impact these relationships have on future health and wellness, as seen by the Adverse Childhood Experiences study [ACE study]) and interpersonal neurobiology (how we co-emotionally regulate, how our relational experiences wire our stress-response system), along with insights and conclusions from writers and auto/ethnographic and auto/biographical researchers, we can arrive at a well-rounded approach to understanding how humans develop in healthy and unhealthy ways, and are thus empowered to make changes.

Assimilating the importance of productive remembering as an integral part of the mourning process, then, can be understood to be a radical act in the name of social action. Remembering, and the speech acts that surround it, will direct a person toward

'healthy' growth if and when vulnerability frames to way, and if it has a purpose for healing that leads it.

I'd like to offer up quickly, as an attempt to put the previous sections into a personal context, my experience at this juncture in my own journey. In becoming deeply connected to my emotions and reframing my understanding of my childhood and adult lifestyle using the theories in the thesis, I suffered greatly. This suffering differed from the type of suffering I had been enmeshed with prior. This new suffering marked the release of my 'old' connection to my life stories, as well as being faced with entering an unknown way to be. Re-becoming is not easy work, nor is it quick. Letting go of a long-held version of my personal identity and reforming all the ways that identity had been interwoven in my environment may have been the most challenging works thus far, and its unfamiliarity made it doubly difficult. But by working through mourning in this way (which I used to refer to as 'haphazardly traveling on a double helix'), I found myself like how I wrote the narrator's juncture: ready to create. Excited and petrified to do just that.

c) Healing through Resiliency

Our narrator, through in-depth hermeneutic conversations that confronted her 'being', came to know herself in new ways; 'the her in her past', 'the her in the present', and started the imagining process of 'the her she could become'. The final theme up for discussion is "*your emotional biography becomes your physical biology*" (Nakazawa, 2015, p. 25), and '*the state of the body has a great impact on the quality of the mind*'. This theme speaks to how an individual can (or continue to) break biological-biographical patterns and revise her present and future. It is here that I will put theory into practice by using this theme to address the second research question. Interestingly,

when doing this research, I found this piece to be missing from a lot of the literature that spoke of and about conventional treatments in psychology. It struck me to be the missing link for holistic rehabilitation.

Although the narrator was not described to have visible or obvious health ailments or diseases, focus was put on exploring the impact of her ‘emotional biography’ had on her relational health. This story (their hermeneutic conversations) makes the argument that the environmental circumstances that are present while an individual is biologically maturing impact the individual’s ability to emotionally regulate, the structure of her stress-response system, and how her nervous system is integrated. The research, from these biological perspectives, asserts that homeostasis, which is the optimal state of functioning for an organism, is when it and its internal systems are well integrated and thus function as they were meant to. As seen, when we are in disequilibrium, when our systems are not well integrated, our relationships are negatively impacted (relationships include all elements an individual interacts with – social, mental, biological in the internal and to the external). We have looked at many possible ways we may have interfered with healthy development – how we may have interfered with the integration of our systems. Thus, in attempting to answer the second research question, here, I will offer an important (and biological) way to rehabilitate and bring ourselves back to homeostasis.

Chapter 3: Wednesday is where the narrative presented and unpacked how emotional biography can impact physical biology. The inclusion of attachment theory and subsequent research inspired by it spoke to how the affectional bond between child and primary caregiver informs the child’s emotional regulation capabilities and sets the

base line for the child's stress response system. The results of the ACE study, and the subsequent research it inspired, brought forth specific links between children's adversities and the ways in which those become imbedded into and affect the integration of the nervous system, and how those are (later) expressed as biological symptoms and illnesses. As an example of this link, we read that for the woman, the impact of her childhood adversities presented as eczema, interrupted sleep patterns, and an eating disorder.

In the case of the narrator, the story attempted to make links between the adversities from her childhood and her current ability for homeostasis (emotional regulation) and took notice of its effects on the relational difficulties in her adult life. A person's ability to emotionally regulate, in turn, helps determine the quality (success) of an intra/interpersonal relationship by how the individual(s) and the couple (inter)act in times of stress. It will affect how a person deals with all times of stress, across her life.

By combining the claims made by attachment theory, the ACE study, positive psychology, and the meditative effects on the nervous system we can understand the link between mind and body as a self-feeding loop, where the systems take turns reinforcing the other. As the woman highlights in the opening chapter, a human is like a root beer float; you can try to separate (near impossible) and treat a part, but a "holistic approach to growth is the only way to go" (p. 15). To interrupt the continuous communication between the biological systems, a well-tailored plan must be applied.

Oftentimes, knowing the cause also reveals the treatment. For example, if an insecure relational bond interfered with an individual's healthy development, then a solution would be to help the individual create a secure relationship. The research

shows there in lies a method for rehabilitation, but it is limited in how effectively it addresses the healing of the nervous system. Instead, we need the kind of treatment plan that attempts to rehabilitate both the biography and the biology – both the mind and the body. Chapter 5: Thursday addressed and unpacked strategies to heal both biological trauma and reinstate integration (breathing techniques, yoga, tai chi, qi gong, dancing, squeezing her fingers), and rehabilitate mental constructs and belief systems to make more rehabilitation possible. In doing both, the individual is moving towards relational resilience and improving her society and contemporary culture. As an approach, somatic experiencing has shown itself to be strongly effective.

Results of the ACE study and the research it inspired show how chronic stress is stored in the body. This knowledge alone is stress-inducing and can certainly seem like, (going back to the analogy in the opening of this chapter), the cracks in the foundation are too far gone to save the whole house. But, what if you had a compound you could add to the epoxy you were using to fill the cracks with? What if somatic healing was the compound that helped all the other ideas presented in this thesis?

We can take guidance from Stephen Porges' polyvagal theory, along with Peter Levine's somatic experiencing, and Pat Ogden's sensorimotor psychotherapy research and treatments using body-based therapies. There are other somatic approaches also, some are referred to in the thesis, like breathing techniques, yoga, tai chi, qi gong, meditation, chanting, etc. to make the argument that "somatic integration is a critical piece to fully heal" (p. 77) and including it as part of a therapy approach aimed at mental constructions (i.e., psychology and sociology) will help restore homeostasis. What somatic experiencing attempts to do is to stop the overly sensitized and heightened

signalling to and from the systems and offer the body a way to release the stored effects of adversities (otherwise known as stored chronic stress). They theorize that in systems that are not well integrated, for example one's that have a small capacity to emotionally regulate, biological energy gets trapped in the body. In Peter Levine's book *In an Unspoken Voice: How the Body Releases Trauma and Restores Goodness* (2010), he talks of the nine building blocks the therapists who train with him learn as a treatment using somatic experiencing. At step seven, they attempt at discharge by transforming potential energy (stored) into kinetic energy (released). In his approach, individuals pass through cycles of moving stored energy into the muscles and then releasing through shaking and trembling. Until there's none left.

Is this the last piece of healing through resiliency? Have we saved the whole house?

Here is where all things come (back) together, and it becomes difficult to untangle the web into a linear line. Development of the multisystem organism in multiple systems, aka a human being in a social context, is holistic. It becomes near impossible to sequentially explain or evaluate which system impacted which and in what way. Furthermore, development varies from person to person, making theories and treatment approaches difficult to universalize. As mentioned earlier, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to rehabilitation. We cannot predict which theory or treatment to use, or when to use it, nor for how long it will be needed. What I am proposing under this section is to focus on the idea that: healing is done through resilience. You can learn all the theories and do all the exercises, but if you haven't developed (or aren't developing) the capacity

for resilience, you may find it challenging to heal, or falsely think you are. Resiliency carries over through all systems and perhaps is one's potential for healing.

Earlier in the chapter I discussed resilience as experienced on both the personal plane and the collective plane. It can be assumed, after reading the narrative, that the narrator had previously attained a level of personal resilience that had helped her build a successful professional life, independence in finance and living, and maintain romantic relationships. It was her budding relationship with the woman that proved to be an important juncture at which the narrator expanded her *collective resiliency*. In that space, she began to unlearn her avoidant tendencies and learned secure ways of relating (to herself and to the woman). The woman, being attuned to the narrator's rhythm (all the while remaining authentic to herself), did her best to act as both a secure base and a springboard for discovery. By returning every day and spending hours with the narrator, the woman helped the narrator develop a sense of 'importance to other' and of 'positive relational consistency', thus creating an idea (which in time has the potential to evolve into a belief) that others can be reliable and dependable. This rewrite of mental constructs and the practicing of emotionally co-regulating were made possible by her capacity for resiliency, and consequently increased her capacity for resiliency. That is the impact of the collective plane – relationships can be playgrounds and breeding grounds for the development of resiliency.

But I do wonder, how dependent is relational resiliency (collective resiliency) on the individual's capacity for vulnerability and ability to trust?

Although, at first, the narrator observed the woman's warmth from afar, and in the beginning she was adamantly opposed to physical expression of togetherness

(hugs, casual resting of hand on arm, laughing together, eye contact), she 'softened' as the days went by – as their conversations helped her move towards intimacy and reciprocity. Through the development of the narrator's personal and collective resiliency, the woman was able to, using an interrelation neuroscience framework, do several things that aided in the narrator's ability to emotionally regulate and heal her stress-response system. The woman made continuous observations on the narrator's physical state and offered ways of responding to those physical states (breathing techniques, yoga, tai chi, qi gong, dancing, squeezing her fingers), and at times modeled her own style of moderating her physical states. And when the narrator became expressively upset, she remained calm and later brought into their conversations the practices of mindfulness and meditation. This demonstrated that when a person can lessen their arousal state, otherwise known as their stress response system, they are neurologically better able to stay connected with another person. These are the stepping blocks to becoming comfortable with intimacy in a relationship. It allowed for a give-and-take, a mutual interdependence, that up until then the narrator never knew how to make possible. With the woman's help, she moved into new spaces of relating to herself and to the woman. And when we read about her in the final chapter (*sometime in the future*), the narrator outwardly expressed gratitude and joy, emotions and feelings that never felt safe before.

Because of this, we can assume that her romantic relationship had taken (or was in the process of taking) a similar turn of direction. In Chapter 5: Thursday, the woman asks her if her boyfriend could "hold space for you" (p. 148). In that moment, she began to conceive of the possibility of healing *within* that relationship; that "he, unlike me, has

always been in touch with his feelings and has wanted me to share more of that with him” (p. 148). The proposal made in this thesis is that though relational resiliency is indeed dependent on the individual’s capacity for vulnerability and ability to trust, her capacity’s growth or stability is fully dependent on the relationship within which she acts in. And it will have a ripple effect, finding its way into how she engages in her other relationships.

Healing through resilience means developing a personal capacity for vulnerability and trust through relationships. As I came to trust my ability to be resilient (which for me meant being resourceful in my approaches to bouncing-back from stress or/and adversity), I developed a love affair with it. I became my own nurturer and cheerleader. Mistakes are no longer viewed as failures, having moved away from a binary belief system. I now relish the celebration of getting back up, and have learned to enjoy, or at least appreciate, those moments. Because I am on an endless journey of being / becoming who I am, I get to reap the benefits by defining what ‘living my best life’ looks, sounds, and feels like.

Healing through resilience, when considering the second research question, and remembering that healing is not sequential, may be a most crucial framework towards rehabilitating ourselves and improving our society and contemporary culture. One doesn’t need to be prolific at the start of the journey, nor does she have to be once in the middle. As we’ve seen, it’s a part of a larger network.

Is resiliency the horizon of consciousness without the fear of uncertainty? Could resiliency then be what allows us to keep going back into the basement, ready to handle whatever we find, secure in knowing we have or can locate the resources we need?

In the end, we've seen that it's just one piece of the puzzle, albeit it's a piece that may be essential for overall integration.

Implications for Education and Educational Research

There are questions that arose from this thesis that, unfortunately, could not be well addressed. Although I touched upon the theoretical understanding and evaluation of language in the introduction as an important angle for social understanding and healing, it would be something to further develop. Not only in the ways I mentioned in the introduction, but also with the intention to explore in depth the implications in how educational circles influence and are influenced by what Searle (1995) meant by language-independent-thought and language-dependent-thought. Teaching in classrooms is strongly built upon the use of speech; It is how we presume to send information, have it processed, and request the demonstration of assimilation. Language, because of its cultural and social associations, is innately an imperfect, and non-universal tool. Therefore, this question can be an important lens to use during critical reflection of the privilege that types of language (the preferred and/or ill-favoured) used provides, and how the cultural and political use of language in a classroom (by the education system, the teacher herself and the student(s)) affects the teaching/learning of the curriculum and in the development of (individual and collective) identity.

A second tangent worth exploring would be to examine fundamental and pervasive values and principles that inform a society, and then to correlate the ways in which they inform the culture of the people. Looking specifically at the education system, the health system, the legal system, the welfare system, could provide said

input. After a macro examination, examine how it affects the family. *In which ways are the systems of the society influencing parental values and behaviours?* It would be equally rigorous to ask and research the reverse. *How are the attachment styles in our families influencing the systems in our society? How does the way in which we socially relate impact the larger systems we move within and between?*

In addition, this discussion did not include the concept of privilege and its implications on how we construct knowledge related to the theories incorporated in the thesis. For example, is there a pattern of attachment bonds and the scarcity mentality? Should researchers who are studying relational resiliency be recovering from it themselves? How do we ensure, as educators, as researchers, that educational research is done to give voice to the marginalized? When looking from the top-down, in terms of attempting to answer my second research question, does privilege affect how we collectively use productive remembering for social action?

Another area to explore is that given the suggestion to use an infinite horizon of being as a tool for healthy personal development and social accord, *are there ways of being that are harmful to reaching these ends? Are there ways of being that a society should not accept?* We do have laws and social norms and conventions. The purpose in this exploration would be to evaluate which laws and norms and conventions are effective at eliminating harmful and hurtful behavior and which create or contribute to those behaviours, or cause others. It also begs the philosophical question of *who decides what is harmful and hurtful? What scientific perspectives need to be included in this analysis? Is this something that is better done from the bottom-up or from the top-down? Can participatory action research, and other arts-based methods, be effective*

ways that build-in inclusivity and round out empowerment and voice? I also wonder that if children are raised in secure households, secure educational settings, and in secure cultures would we even have to ask these questions? Would people, whose nervous systems are properly integrated as healthy, have robust stress-response systems and can easily emotionally regulate ever be capable of being harmful to self and other?

Lastly, there is a very important consideration in a treatment plan that was not included in this thesis. The use of pharmaceuticals as an integrated element of an approach for personal and relational resilience should be examined and incorporated. It is important to consider if and how drugs, when selected with care by a professional with a holistic orientation to treatment, can be a crucial step in an individual's ability to integrate her systems, and develop an ability for homeostasis.

My Final Thoughts

I found my way to the teaching profession by way of John Holt. The way in which he presented the children's experiences in the classroom resonated with me powerfully enough that I switched my field of study. He equally helped me formulate my mission statement for being a teacher: *I can create a 'better' classroom experience for my students.*

Fast-forward a few years and you would find me sitting in the staffroom, overhearing a conversation between five teachers discussing their thoughts and suggestions on how to 'deal' with a student. One student – five teachers. One student, yet what stood out to me the most was that there were **five** different reasonings; Five different interpretations of this one student and five different plans of intervention. It was

unavoidable that I followed that up with the realization that the explicit and implicit power dynamic of teacher-student relationships impacts a child's classroom experience (and what I came to 'better' understand through this thesis is that in a larger way, the dynamic informs the student's general development, and direction of a future). This moment, the links I made, followed me until graduate school, and became the seeds of this thesis.

Gadamer (1960/1998) and Barone (2007) might say that the hermeneutic conversation in this constructed narrative invited the power of collaborative spaces, where the two women enacted informal learning in a systematic fashion for personal development and for the contemporary cultural progress of the systems they move within. Our narrator, over time, was able to increase her personal and collective resiliency and her capacity for intra/inter-connectedness. In part by relating old and new ideas with restructured approaches and internalizing new methods of engaging with 'the situation' by shifting perspectives and beliefs and skills. As in hermeneutic conversations, narratives are 'an engagement with other', and that with the woman, the narrator was open to follow where the topics moved their conversation and to see what came up. In doing so, she allowed for an evolution for being in her life. Together they employed memory-work and reflexive studying, in the same way the thesis incorporated *productive remembering and (for) social action* (Strong-Wilson et al., 2013).

When our readiness to expand our current framework of/for understanding enters our awareness, we can begin by reaching for what lies outside of our toolkits. This thesis went into fields of philosophy, psychology, neurology and somatic experiencing to make meaning of the research questions. As this thesis explored, hermeneutic

conversations include elements of ‘understanding self’ to ‘understanding other’ to ‘understand self/us’, and as such they can be effective tools to integrate past, present and future. The participant(s) then re-develop(s) a set of lenses, mental constructs (Searle, Bartlett, Janet, van der Kolk), neurobiological and psychological re-experiencing (memories, narrative, emotional regulation, stress-response system), attachment style sensitivity (Bowlby, Ainsworth, Main, Siegel, Tatkin) to intentionally impact what Sartre and Aristotle propose as the human experience; One is come to be known through his conscious and subconscious selves, which were informed by everything that person experienced. And this becomes his truth (Sartre, 2007). As a member of the collective human experience, therein lies a responsibility of intentional self-reflection for self-development as an act of *phronesis*, that we are and act for the good of humanity (Aristotle, 1999).

It isn’t enough to only think better, as proposed by theories uncovered by writing this thesis. You must teach your body how to move better. They go together - the mind and the body. You may very well treat the cut, but if you fail to address the hangnail on the opposite foot, you will continue scratching yourself. I discovered in the process of researching this thesis, being guided by what my conversation with the theories brought up, that somatic-based therapy is a promising approach for relational resilience. This thesis is my seeds in action. It is a hermeneutic conversation fifteen years in the making, or perhaps, it’s been a lifetime. Any way you look at it, my experience in the staffroom all those years ago is the memory I used to ask questions ‘rightly’ and reach this milestone.

My Final, Final Thoughts

There is a comical paradox in writing how the contents of this thesis and the process of writing it has impacted me. Reflecting-in-action on who I was, am, and project to be by using my bias to express myself and ask your bias to capture me in the way I intended, all the while so much of that is still unknown to me. *How do I capture 42 years in the making using a medium that is, naturally, limited?*

Perhaps, then, this is a place to tell you a story instead. Near the end of the editing process, as I was readying my two daughters for bed, my eldest asked me if I was going to sit on the couch and watch a show after I had tucked them in, what had been my normal routine. After telling her that I was going to sit at the computer and work on my thesis she became agitated. She paced back and forth, a downward gaze, brow furrowed.

“Mommy?”

“Yes?”

“Thank you.”

“For what, baby?”

“Thank you for everything you do for us. For working so hard and doing your thesis and playing with us. Thank you.”

“Oh, you’re welcome, honey.”

I know that I have changed the course of my life by changing how I show up for it. And it seems like I may not be the only one who noticed.

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