

The Entanglement of Deep Learning

—

A Meta-Reflexive's Learning Journey
out of the Establishment Pedagogy
of Evangelical Christianity

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ABSTRACT

The Entanglement of Deep Learning: A Meta-Reflexive's Learning Journey out of the Establishment Pedagogy of Evangelical Christianity

(Under the direction of Dr. Donovan Plumb)

This study is an auto-ethnography of my personal learning journey that led to the dissolution of my Biblical worldview. My story explores the power of indoctrination by examining the complexity of deep learning present in establishment pedagogy of fundamentalist Evangelical Christianity. In a polarized political climate driven by absolutist beliefs, many of which that have religious underpinnings, such as: nationalism, racism, gender and climate change, evidenced-based knowledge, reasoning and/or debate have little efficacy towards transformative learning. In this work, I look at resistance to new knowledge through the lens of the church's establishment pedagogy and the way in which it fractures the identities of their followers. Consequently, new and contradictory knowledge not only creates cognitive dissonance, but it threatens one's sense of self in the world. Through sharing my story, I examine how the church's doctrine on atonement theology; specifically, the creation narrative as related to the limiting beliefs about gender, not only contributed to Othering, but also negatively impacted upon my crucial identity components and interfered with my learning. Fundamentalist Evangelical Christian teachings are historically embedded in Western culture and therefore strengthened, which reinforces identity fragmentation and Othering. This study explores two important questions: first, how are identity-bearing beliefs formed? Second, how is learning engaged

through a generative pedagogy to safely unravel beliefs and support one's sense of self in the world?

DEDICATION

To Telah

I was there to teach you, but you were the one that taught me. Thank you.

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I am grateful to the department of Lifelong Learning Department at Mount Saint Vincent University. I am particularly grateful to my advisor, Dr. Donovan Plumb and committee member, Dr. Ardra Cole. I appreciate your patience with me as my work has been a few years to complete. The length of time is indicative of being a subject of my own research and needing time to not only unravel from my Christian worldview, but to reemerge with a new sense of self. Through choosing an auto-ethnography to tell my story, I came to understand that my interest in the topic of transgender exclusion (and inclusion in the United Church of Canada) is connected to my upbringing in, and conformity to, the precepts and dogma in fundamentalist Evangelical Christianity. As a consequence, the focus of my work changed direction from a study on the exclusion of transgender people to a study on conformity as related to deep learning, belief formation and the intertwining of beliefs and identity. My work has been a source of therapy and a witness to my own transformational learning. I am deeply grateful for these insights.

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PREFACE

The Importance of Bias in Research

What Goes Out From Is About Me

I did not start this work with the intention of telling the story of my deconversion from fundamentalist Evangelical Christianity, but that is how it unfolded. It seems far away from when I began my research in 2014 on transgender inclusion. My research was inspired by my work with a transgender man incarcerated in a prison for federally sentenced women. However, as I reflected upon my interest in transgender exclusion, I realized that it was related to my own upbringing in fundamentalist Evangelical Christianity. I began to learn more about my previous worldview and how it not only contributes to Othering but holds the socio-cultural underpinnings that created it. The church's social construction of the gender binary is the basic classification system upon which the structures of society are built. The very existence of transgender people challenges the underpinnings, the structures, and the classification system that characterizes inequality and gender roles. On an agential scale, it challenges our belief systems that are deeply ingrained into our childhood brains. My research about transgender issues held up a mirror to the deep learning to which I was subject. It witnessed my conformity to being a "good Christian girl", the distortion of the objectified feminine as weak and submissive, and the repression of the masculine when it came to play but held a stronghold in the areas of my educational and employment goals. My research witnessed the dismantling of my fundamentalist Evangelical Christian beliefs that separated me not only from the "unsaved" Others but from natural aspects of my physical development, emotional needs and intellectual capacities. It witnessed a search for meaning that ventured towards atheism, humanitarianism, and landed with a spiritual oneness that focuses on the human capacity to love deeply, which includes all

aspects of the self. As such, my research witnessed and continues to witness the healing of my fragmented self and the “not so nice” projected aspects of the self that creates Othering. Such an emergence could only happen through the support of adult educators who teach through the lens of a generative pedagogy. In those classes, I was supported to explore other ideas that contrasted with my beliefs. I was encouraged to question and not to rely on answers. Although initially frustrating, it opened possibilities that I had never considered previously. A Synopsis - The Evolution of My Research Process

When I began this work, I was attending a local United Church and learned that the Church, as a whole, is a leader in transgender inclusion at all levels of ministry. I was new to the United Church, and I was captivated that a church with fundamentalist Evangelical roots were able to evolve from a closed system of conformity with essentialist notions of sex and gender to an open system welcoming diversity. I learned that the church that I was newly attending, Bedford United Church, became the first affirming church in Nova Scotia in 2006. I studied the educational process by which a United Church congregation interested in becoming a safe space for LGBTQ+ would have to undergo. I realized that I did not know much about the United Church of Canada (UCC) or progressive theology, so I decided to attend adult education classes held at the Bedford United Church where the topic of beliefs was explored and compared to their fundamentalist counterparts. As I started to learn about progressive Christianity, I found that evidence-based knowledge was the filter through which Christian beliefs were accepted or rejected. This intrigued me and I wondered again how a church could transition to such a degree to value science over the Bible as God’s holy inspired word. I discovered that the UCC’s progressive journey began early in the 20th Century with intellectual thought leaders in the presbyterian tradition who introduced higher criticism of the Bible, Darwinism, and

philosophical idealism into mainline church colleges (Flatt, 2008, p. 2). The de-evangelization and modernization of the UCC occurred over time marked with significant milestones such as the ordination of the woman minister in 1936 (Stebner, 2012, p. 40). It was in 1966, however, that the New Curricula that took Biblical criticism seriously was released and used as educational tool in church congregations. The backlash was substantial as the church was criticized for accepting scientific theories such as evolution and for referring to biblical stories as myth (Beardsall, p. 97). In 1988, 32nd General Council¹ approved a report entitled, *Toward a Christian Understanding of Sexual Orientations, Lifestyle and Ministry*. Its key recommendation: that sexual orientation should not be a barrier to participation in any aspect of church life (Trothen, 2012, p. 152). The UCC was the first mainline protestant church to take such a stand. Consequently, there was an emergence of conservative groups worried that other churches might follow suit. The UCC itself seemed like it might not survive as conservative groups from within reemerged and formed specifically in response to the 1988 decision (p. 152). The conservative groups that emerged within the UCC mirror the way fundamentalism itself emerged within Evangelicalism as a reaction to the secularization in society. The main purpose of fundamentalism was to maintain orthodoxy and reject evolution, modernism, and liberalism. It was a reaction to the advancement of women's roles, and the liberal Biblical scholarship that denied the doctrine of original sin and applied critical reason to the Bible (Neufeld Redekop, p. 53). Evangelicalism itself goes back to the Reformation in Europe in the 1500s and was transplanted to North America along with European immigration (p. 1). I use the term fundamentalist Evangelical Christianity throughout

¹ General Council decisions are UCC positions; however, considering the diversity of beliefs, not all members agree with the policies.

this work to refer to my experience growing up in a very closed worldview and to differentiate from Evangelicals who value higher learning.

Although the UCC continues to be divided, it survived and as such is likely the most progressive and inclusive church in Canada. The inclusive nature of the church encompasses a range of beliefs from fundamentalist to progressive, and even post-theism². Considering the history of the UCC and their transition to progressive Christianity, the inclusion of transgender people is not a radical move, but, rather, it is in keeping with their direction of becoming a more welcoming community. In order to do so they have had to challenge their founding beliefs, and as such it makes sense that they do not require parishioners to proclaim certain beliefs to be members. In 2009, the 40th General Council affirmed the participation and ministry of transgender people and encouraged all congregations to welcome trans people into membership, ministry, and full participation, including leadership (DesLisle et al, 2014, p 4). In 2012, the UCC acknowledged the distinction between gender identity and sexual orientation (p. 4). The UCC ordained the first transgender woman in 2012³ (The United Church of Canada, 2019).

As I was researching my thesis and learning about the history of the UCC, I was also being challenged on my own personal beliefs about God. A couple of years before attending the Bedford United Church, I left the Baptist church that I attended for several years as I no longer believed some of the basic doctrine of Atonement Theology such as heaven, hell and Satan. My beliefs were challenged when I enrolled in a local, progressive Evangelical Bible college. Soon

² Greta Vosper identifies herself as a minister, atheist and author. She is the minister of the West Hill United Church in Scarborough, ON.

³ Trans woman Cindy Bourgeois was ordained in 2012, however, Ruth Wood was the first to transition in 2010 while already in ministry in the UCC.

after, I decided to search for a progressive church (not really knowing what that was), and I ended up attending Bedford United Church. I was initially attracted to the church because they seemed to value diversity as they were open and accepting of all people regardless of their sexual orientation and gender identity. On two occasions, during my time there, the church welcomed transgender leaders to speak to the congregation on transgender issues. In general, the sermons carried a general theme of valuing diversity, unity and compassion.

As I continued to learn more about progressive Christianity, however, I became uncomfortable. Although I was glad to give up some beliefs, I was not ready to give them all up. I still believed in the deity of Christ, which included the virgin birth and his bodily resurrection. During sermons, I listened closely to the language used to describe these beliefs, but I soon realized that these were spoken only in metaphors. Jesus was referred to as a human brother and not the deity that I believed him to be. There was no talk about a personal relationship with Jesus and that was the cornerstone of my faith. As I look back, I know that I would not have attended the Bedford United Church if I knew more about progressive theology. It was too threatening to my identity because I was taught that Jesus was my identity. That is to say, I was who I was, a redeemed sinner, because he was who he was, the son of God who died for the sins of the world. The central doctrine of original sin sets the stage for God and Satan, along with angels and demons, as the objective forces battling for human souls (Winell, 1993, p. 6). Over the years, I attended many different fundamentalist Evangelical sects (Baptist, Pentecostal, Methodist, non-denominational) that all believed in Atonement Theology, Biblical literalism and errancy, and the creation narrative as God's holy design. These concepts provide believers with a complete approach to life, making it very difficult to incorporate new ideas and experiences. If there is something in the belief system that a person questioned, if it didn't seem to fit, then there was

something wrong with the individual, not the system (Redekop, 2012, p. 29). I was glad finally to be able to ask the questions without shame and fear of being judged. I was not getting the answers that I hoped would validate my beliefs, but I also found that there were no clear answers. Nobody was telling me what to believe.

The community at Bedford United Church valued me as a person and not for my beliefs. It was strangely liberating, but the disrobing of my beliefs left me raw. I experienced what John of the Cross referred to as the Dark Night of the Soul and it literally took me years to process my grief and to figure out who I was in the absence of my beliefs⁴. While the Dark Night of the Soul relates to a spiritual crisis, it can also be described as an identity crisis as I could no longer define myself by what I believed. Amid my dark night, I was drawn to the teachings of the UCC. They taught me that I was part of the greater whole and I began to consider that if God existed, he/she/they/it existed within me and around me, and within other humans, animals, plants, lifeforms, and the earth. If I were to see myself as interconnected with all life, who would I become? How would I emerge and live differently?

While I was attending Bedford United Church, I was also attending graduate school and enrolled in courses required as a prerequisite to this work. I was reading Paulo Freire, Mark Bracher, Etienne Wenger and Margaret Archer. I was learning about the establishment pedagogy, and I knew that I developed what Bracher referred to as an institutional identity as I was indoctrinated at a young age to take on the doctrine of Atonement Theology as the underlying narrative for my existence. While I experienced anxiety in the classroom as I knew that my belief

⁴ The Dark Night of the Soul is a poem written by 16th-Century Spanish mystic St. John of the Cross. The journey of the Dark Night represents a spiritual crisis in the realization that God is unknowable.

system was dismantling, I was engaged in the class discussions because I felt safe; albeit cautiously safe. When I expressed my ability to think beyond my beliefs, even though there were signs that I was clinging to them in other ways, I was not attacked but recognized for my efforts. I was acknowledged for my courage to insert my personal narrative into a theory that would disrupt it. In the past, when faced with knowledge that threatened my faith, I would learn the material and compartmentalize it in my mind, not only because the information was a threat to my belief system and therefore my identity, but because I did not feel safe to contrast it with my belief system in the classroom.

I will present to you my story starting with my indoctrination (the formation of my identity narrative) followed by the dismantling of it. I invite you to observe my story as one that interconnects with your story. Maybe you have experience interacting with fundamentalist Evangelicals and you have wondered why reason and/or debate on does not seem to resonate with them. I further invite you to think about your story. Maybe you relate to my story. Maybe you were raised in the church like I was, but you were able to walk away without losing yourself in the process. Maybe you were raised in a non-religious home but recognize the intertwinement of religious-cultural influences and belief formations in secular society that have influenced your life.

The three theorists that I call upon to analyze my own learning path agree that beliefs direct action and are therefore not as harmless as we think them to be. Consider the religious leaders who introduce legislative bills that can block the rights of transgender people to use the bathrooms of their preferred genders, or the current repeal of women's reproductive rights in some states in the U.S. Such convictions are harmful, divisive and create Othering. They also emerge from the Biblical creation narrative that prescribes gender and gender roles. Beliefs are

not easily changed, and people are desensitized to suffering of others. There is a need for compassion that can be fostered through higher learning. Authoritarian, establishment and even critical pedagogies continue to foster Othering and, in the process, further fragment student identities. In my own life, I experienced the harm of an establishment pedagogy, which is not unique to churches, but is also present in universities. Mark Bracher talks about a generative pedagogy, one where student identities are supported and enhanced. As I look back on my learning journey that freed me from the burden of my beliefs, I remember the adult educators who made me feel safe enough to settle into my seat. They invited me to think beyond my beliefs, and yet they did not pressure me to go to a place that I was not ready to go. Above all they valued me as a person. Eventually, I started to see myself as someone much larger than the underlying Biblical narrative that for so long had boxed me in.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

In 2010, when I first began learning about the social exclusion of transgender people, it was not in the news. I remember hearing about Chaz Bono who had just finished his long two-year transition and appeared on *Dancing with the Stars*, but at the time I knew very little about transgender identity. In 2014, actress and trans activist Laverne Cox was featured on the cover of Time Magazine. The accompanying article, *The Transgender Tipping Point*, is about her emergence as a leader for transgender rights. In the interview, she spoke about her own childhood experience of being bullied for being too feminine for her assigned male gender (Steinmetz, 2014). Her character on the Netflix Series *Orange is the New Black* (2013-2019) featured Sophia Burset, as a trans woman incarcerated in a women's prison. Other celebrities such as Janet Mock, Caitlyn Jenner and Jazz Jennings shared their transition with the public while other celebrities talked openly about supporting their transgender children. While these stories spoke of privilege, the media began to cover stories of the difficulties faced by less privileged transgender people such as the high rates of unemployment, homelessness, hate crimes and suicide all which fueled the ongoing political debate on transgender rights. Transgender people, who have been previously sexualized and pathologized, seemed to be finally gaining ground. However, the continued focus on transitioning and gender affirming surgeries (GAS) seemed to take away from the social issues. During my research, I too found myself drawn to stories about GAS and seeking out before and after pictures assessing the ability of someone to "pass" for their gender. I was caught up in the questions about what makes a woman a woman and a man a man. I watched talk shows where personal questions about external genitalia were

posed to transgender interviewees. Some people would answer, and others would refuse saying that the questions were inappropriate and intrusive. While these questions are intrusive, they are very telling of our social conditioning and deeper beliefs sex and gender. Historically, these beliefs have a religious foundation and have been embedded and networked within the structures of society. However, in an increasingly heterogeneous diverse and global world, social conditioning as related to gender and conformity continues to be challenged.

Through the ordination of transgender and gender queer clergy, the United Church of Canada has become a leader in challenging their own structural conditioning of gender and gender roles. As someone raised in fundamentalist Evangelical Christianity, this fascinated me and as my research progressed, my experience of indoctrination into the precepts of the Atonement Theology Creation Narrative began to surface. When I began this work, my belief system was under deconstruction in that there were some precepts such as homophobia, transphobia, damnation from which I was glad to be free. I became curious about the process of my learning that contributed to the deconstruction of these beliefs. In the past, I learned and compartmentalized any knowledge that was counterintuitive to my belief system, but as I encountered adult educators who taught through a generative pedagogy, I allowed the knowledge to penetrate and challenge me at the core of my being. At first it was liberating to let go of the beliefs that caused me anxiety since I was a young child. The local UCC that I attended became a haven for me. It was known to be a place of radical diversity where all were accepted. Moreover, it became a place where I was beginning to accept myself. I felt that there was a strong correlation between the acceptance of self and the acceptance of others.

The full acceptance of myself and others required the dismantling of my belief system as it excluded everyone who did not believe in the deity of Jesus. Even those in the fold continue to be

judged constantly as there was always the perception of perfection that can never be attained. The ground of my being shook when I allowed myself to question more of the beliefs that shaped my identity. Jesus as Saviour in my life fixed my identity as a sinner in need of his saving grace from the young age of four. In one of the courses for my master's degree, I was reading Mark Bracher's *Radical Pedagogy* and learned about the strong interconnection between beliefs and identity. I resonated with his work as I observed the deconstruction of who I knew myself to be. It was not a process of exchanging my beliefs for opposing knowledge, but instead, it involved the processing of my deep sense of loss and my new search for meaning. I knew that I did not want to become stuck in my grief and anger and so I began the slow process of working these harder emotions.

As my story emerged, it not only became an exercise in reflexivity, but it slowly became the focus of this work. The connecting thread between transgender exclusion and the deconstruction of my indoctrination is part of the larger tapestry of cultural beliefs that drive the action of Othering. The transformation of the UCC from fundamentalism to progressive Christianity provides hope of the acceptance of diversity that can occur on a macro scale. To understand what happens within the individual, my work maps out the trajectory of learning that led to the deconstruction of my beliefs. Evidence-based knowledge in and of itself did not lead to transformation, but rather, it was the fostering of a safe learning environment by adult educators who taught through the lens of a generative pedagogy. A generative pedagogy values the learner distinct from their beliefs.

To understand the indoctrination that I was subject to in my youth and my long journey out of Christianity, I draw upon the expertise of three theorists. Systems theorist, Stellan Ohlsson provided me with a deeper understanding of the complex interconnecting web of beliefs that strengthen a worldview. New knowledge is stored in the brain under two main categories: the

resident theory which coincides with the background theory or worldview and the contender theory which is antithetical

the guidance of educators who fostered a generative pedagogy. These educators valued me and did not judge me based on my beliefs. They invited dialogue and recognized my courage to step outside of my comfort zone.

The deconstruction of my beliefs did not happen overnight. It was not a matter of discarding beliefs or doctrines that no longer served me and taking on new knowledge, but instead it was like a bad break-up. It was the breaking of a trust once considered unshakable towards someone I loved and devoted my life to. In her book, *Christianity After Religion* (2010), Diana Butler Bass speaks of belief in God as a marriage vow - "I do" (p. 117). It was a pledge of faithfulness and loving service (p. 117). "Christianity was never intended to be a system of structure of belief in the modern sense; it originated as a disposition of the heart" (p. 119). So, belief in God is complex as it denotes trust, love and devotion so walking away is not so simple.

As one who identifies as to what Margaret Archer refers to as a meta-reflexive, raised in a dysfunctional home and indoctrinated with the dogma of fundamentalist Evangelical Christianity, it took years and the support of few adult educators for me to feel safe during the deconstruction of my worldview. I have chosen to use an auto-ethnography as the methodology to illustrate how my beliefs formed, defined my sense of self within a closed structured system, and deconstructed through the support of adult educators and mentors I encountered along the way. Using the theoretical framework of Ohlsson, Bracher and Archer, I can describe the strength of my beliefs and the liberating but painful process of their undoing and the re-emergence of my new sense of self in a more open system free of an absolutist worldview.

The church I grew up attending, and the fundamentalist Evangelical churches I attended for much of my adult life, not only excluded, but damned people if they stepped outside of the creation narrative. In the fundamentalist Evangelical Christianity, the creation narrative is the

basis for the gender binary, and it has been built into the pre-modern foundations for the nuclear family, political system, the legal system, schools, prisons, the economy, nationalism, health and welfare. Although the influence of the church has been significantly reduced from its once far reach of governance over these social structures, the latent beliefs that founded the structures have circumvented amendments and policies on inclusion so that the oppressive nature of the social structures remain (Woodhead in Loughlin, p 231). The difficult part of studying exclusion is identifying who is doing the including. On a macro-level, inclusion refers to structure, and, on a micro-level, it refers to the way in which agents participate and reify concepts on inclusion within those structures. As my own story began to emerge, I became more interested in the micro-level explorations of the foundational belief systems as they relate to fundamentalist Evangelical Christianity.

CHAPTER 2

My Method of Inquiry: Auto-Ethnography

It made sense to me that, since I wanted to understand the formation of my own beliefs and the subsequent learning processes underlying their dismantling, I would need to consider my own experience within the construct of fundamentalist Evangelical Christianity. I therefore decided on an auto-ethnography methodology to explore my experience of early indoctrination as well as my learning experiences as an adult that led to the deconstruction of my worldview. Autoethnography involves the “turning of the ethnographic gaze inward on the self (auto), while maintaining the outward gaze of ethnography, looking at the larger context where in self experiences occur” (Denzin, 1997, p. 227).

Auto-ethnography connects the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, political and social context. This form of inquiry features concrete action, emotion, embodiment, self-consciousness, and introspection (Ellis in Jones, 2005). By choosing auto-ethnography as my methodology, I became an observer of my experiences. I became intrigued when I saw the dismantling of my beliefs because there was a time when I thought that I would never leave my belief system. I now know that this was because my belief system was central to who I was as a human being. That is to say, I did not see myself as separate from it. I defined myself in relationship to what I believed. This kind of deep learning that intertwines our beliefs and beingness or what Mark Bracher refers to as identity-bearing beliefs fascinated me and so I became the subject of my own research. The theorists I called upon provided me with an understanding of the strength of absolutist beliefs. In brief, beliefs are more than a containment of accumulated ideas, experiences, values, assumptions, convictions, life lessons, facts, or accumulated knowledge. And while one’s beliefs are cultivated by all these things; they hold

strength when they are contained within one's identity. Therefore, one does not just believe in a worldview, but rather, they define their very existence based on their worldview. These kinds of beliefs hold emotions and are deeply felt in the body. They direct action and therefore shape personal and social identity. By choosing an auto-ethnography, I provide a cathartic account of what it was to identify so strongly with beliefs that on a deep and personal level, I could not relate to. My emotional struggle is quite evident as I tried to live up to the value system of my beliefs. Such a struggle provides an understanding for adult educators in terms of why people, who hold absolutist beliefs, get defensive when they are challenged on a topic and/or go to extreme measures, including violence, to live out their meaning. Violence does not come out of nothingness. It is conceived in an absolutist worldview. According to Stellan Ohlsson, beliefs direct action (2011, p. 329). Walking away from an entire system that defines you means not only failure and wasted years, but it means a loss of recognition in terms of identity validation. There is a heavy grief associated with a loss in meaning. It is not easily replaced. The dismantling is not just of a worldview, it is the dismantling of oneself.

My auto-ethnography captures my dismantling quite well. Ethnographer Tami Spry (2001) states that auto-ethnography is a self-narrative that critiques the situatedness of self with others in social, political, economic and cultural context (p. 10). My self-narrative specifically critiques my life in religious fundamentalism, acknowledging its' underpinnings, interconnections and influences.

Although I had many questions prior to my dismantling, I looked for answers within my belief system, not only to validate my belief system, but to validate the meaning for my very existence. Of course, this was unbeknownst to me at the time, but it explained my emotional dysregulation (confusion, fear, love, loss, grief, insecurity, defensiveness, disdain, and avoidance).

As beliefs direct action, my belief system informed my decisions and explained my behaviours including avoidance of situations where I would be challenged. Although challenge is a healthy part of one's life, in this case, questioning one's positions on certain topics is interpreted as a personal attack. In an absolutist belief system like fundamentalist Evangelical Christianity, identity-bearing beliefs that pertain to heteronormativity are not considered a choice, but rather, a mark of creation. As one created in God Q q 0.24 0 0 0.24 18.1417 587.9868cm BT 50 0 0 50 484.8918 8c. 772 -9

beliefs and the pedagogical entry points involved in the dismantling of my worldview. As it turns out, it is the practice of teaching that matters most as it allows the learner to feel safe enough to ask the questions. In my work, I assert that a generative pedagogy that puts the student's identity needs first is essential. Learners should not have to "believe" in knowledge concepts to validate the teacher's identity needs. However, if we look to our culture and consider the pedagogies in grade schools, churches, and universities that influence social identities, we can see the ways in which personal identities are fragmented. That is to say, when one is valued and recognized for being a good student, a born-again Christian, an ideal woman and/or a consumer, the need for recognition in these areas shape meaning and influence/interfere with the development of personal identity. Margaret Archer points out that social identity is a subset of personal identity thereby valuing the notion of agency and reflexive deliberation (2003, p. 120-21).

A generative pedagogy supports student's identities. It invites students to engage in discourse and consider the possibilities of the course content regardless of beliefs. Student experiences, beliefs and opinions are respected, and they are valued for the mere act of showing up. As one subject to a generative pedagogy, my beliefs began to unravel as I received recognition for showing up, which really expanded my sense of self beyond my belief system. This is not to say that everyone subject to a generative pedagogy will respond in an open manner as there are all kinds of variables that impact upon a closed system. Some variables may include the depth of indoctrination, the amount of time questioning, and dominant mode of reflexive inquiry. I remember saying the sinner's prayer when I was four years old so my indoctrination started early. In my auto-ethnography, I describe five generative pedagogical entry points through which my learning was engaged and from which my worldview slowly began to crumble. One of the values of an auto-ethnography is to tell my story and then to let go. I hope the readers will bring

the same careful attention to the ways their own beliefs within closed systems have caused harm to themselves and to others (Jones, 2005, p. 765). “Autoethnographers argue that self-reflexive critique upon one’s positionality as researcher inspires readers to reflect critically upon their own life experience, their constructions of self, and their interactions with others within sociohistorical contexts” (Ellis & Bochner, 1996).

My pedagogical standpoint is to understand the harm of conforming to a closed belief system like fundamentalist Evangelical Christianity as well as the learning process that leads to liberation. I acknowledge that not all those raised in fundamentalist Evangelical Christianity experienced the harm that I have experienced and yet there are many who refer to their religious upbringing as a trauma. Further research in the form of a life history methodology to explore the differences in terms of identity, meaning and life direction when subject to indoctrination would be of value.

CHAPTER 3

Theoretical Framework

People will Work for a Living but Die for Recognition (Lee Oden)

In my work, I draw upon the research of three theorists; systems theorist, Stellan Ohlsson, Lacanian theorist, Mark Bracher, and critical realist, Margaret Archer, in a concerted effort to understand how beliefs, specifically, in this case, fundamentalist Evangelical Christianity, that impose a rigid worldview are formed, processed, and strengthened amid an increasingly diverse and global world. And while it is true that people are entitled to their beliefs, Ohlsson tells us that beliefs are not merely opinions expressed in discourse, but rather that they are consequential in that they guide action (Ohlsson, 2011, p. 329). Evangelical beliefs denote ethnicity, gender, and class within strict boundaries that consequently exclude people who do not fit the rigidly defined expectations. Bracher refers to the Establishment Pedagogy, which in the case of this work, represents the fundamentalist Evangelical church's expectations of their parishioners to internalize the tenets of the church. In doing so the parishioners ignore their own needs to take on an institutional-systemic identity structure wherein they not only internalize the church's dogma to guide their own lives, but also as a standard to judge what is right and wrong for others. Bracher further describes how believers alienate themselves in favour of the establishment by referencing Lacan's identity registers. Archer helps us to further understand the layered complexity of beliefs by distinguishing between embodied, practical and discursive knowledge. Her notion of reflexivity, a personal emergent power, explains the ways in which individuals process their beliefs and contradicting knowledge in accordance with their identity and social contexts.

While I do not claim to have a comprehensive mastery of Ohlsson, Bracher and Archer, together these theorists provide adult educators with an understanding of the complexity of beliefs and the reasons why people do not abandon them when presented with falsifying evidence. Moreover, their work informs us that transformative learning involves a disentanglement of identity and beliefs, which leaves students vulnerable. It is with this understanding that necessitates a generative pedagogy; a learning environment that supports, challenges and encourages students to explore new knowledge while at the same time valuing and validating the students as life-long learners. The transformation is one where learners go from disconnection to profound connectedness, sameness and participation with the core being of even those who are most different from and hostile to oneself (Bracher, 2006, p. 205).

Stellan Ohlsson – The Structure of Beliefs

Systems theorist, Stellan Ohlsson provides some insights into the complexities of belief formation. His theory of resubsumption contributes greatly to the area of adult education by suggesting an alternative to the normative theories of monotonic learning that have dominated cognitive research. Ohlsson argues that beliefs are not based on logic, fact, observations but rather what someone tells us. The degree of internalization of beliefs has to do with how much trust or admiration we have in the person who tells us. Although young children have curious minds, they are susceptible to indoctrination when they are taught a worldview with no option of any other manner of belief. The younger the child, the stronger the indoctrination will be. However, even as adults, we typically do not question or doubt what we are being told. That is to say, not many people test their beliefs and opinions on fact or observation. Truth, as evidence-based knowledge, Ohlsson relates, is left to the academics. He elaborates that human cognition

evolved as a function of survival and not truth. “Truth might be a moral good, but human cognition did not evolve to seek, establish or possess truth. Natural selection in a hunter-gatherer scenario optimizes survival, not amount of good” (Ohlsson, 2011, p. 333). Scholar Michael Tomasello supports this claim as he explains the evolutionary process of human cognition through cultural transmission, which enables individuals to save time, effort and even risk by exploiting existing knowledge and skills (Tomasello, 1999, p. 4). In essence, our beliefs contribute to the completion of life’s tasks in that they guide our behaviours (Ohlsson, p. 333).

The belief system is ... not directly tied to its truth but measures the extent to which it enables our cognitive processes to run with low cognitive load, fast task completion, frequent goal attainment and high satisfaction (p. 333).

“A belief or belief system does not have to be (objectively) true or consistent with evidence to have high cognitive utility” (p. 333). These beliefs that guide behaviours are often mistaken for truths because the outcomes meet the desired expectations of the individual. Said another way, “things worked out” so “it must be true.” However, the belief used to interpret the experience as successful also gives credit to the belief as truth. The circular reasoning is a logical fallacy under which many Evangelical Christians see their belief system as truth. For example, one may believe, “I prayed and got the job” instead of “I did well in the interview and got the job” or “I had a connection and got the job.” Although the latter two may be considerations, they are perceived to be blessings from God who is working behind the scenes on the believer’s behalf. If one credits God for all the good things happening in one’s life, one’s belief is based on goal completion, which Ohlsson identifies as having utility.

Ohlsson states that beliefs are strengthened and validated based on their cognitive utility (p. 333). This is contrary to cognitive theorists who assert that, once logic or evidence-based knowledge that falsifies beliefs are introduced, people will change their minds. However, debates with Evangelical Christians are often met with cliches and circular arguments that reference the Bible and that side-step the new information as nonsensical. Consider the experience of countering an Evangelical Christian's belief in a literal creation narrative with the theory of evolution or the ancient findings of paleontologists that refutes the young age of the earth. Instead of seriously considering the possibility of evolution, many Evangelical Christians see it as an attack by Satan. Creationist Ken Ham's popular book, *The Lie: Evolution 2012* (revised) has a serpent representing Satan gracing the cover. Teachers in the faith tell believers that God has blinded the eyes of unbelievers. "He has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts, so they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts..." (New International Version, 1983, John 12:40). What then is the point of entering into a debate about evolution if you believe that your deity has hidden the truth from unbelievers? When I was a Christian and questioned my young-earth creationist friends, I was told that the instruments used to measure the earth's age are incorrect and that in biblical times, the days were measured differently i.e., "one day is like 1000 years" (2 Peter 3:8). Evangelical Christians resist the idea of evolution because it questions the creation narrative. More importantly, it has been woven into their belief system as wrong.

In the premodern world, there was not much conflicting information to contrast the creation narrative. Any information that was conflicting such as magic or witchcraft was considered evil; much in the same way that evolution is considered evil or wrong today. In a more global and morphogenic society that holds many different views, the information or knowledge that conflicts one's worldview is compartmentalized in the mind. The different views

and/or new knowledge, even if it is evidence-based, does not replace one's beliefs. This is partially because beliefs about God are constantly reinforced and strengthened through peripheral beliefs. Peripheral beliefs have the power to spread dogma into all facets of society guiding behaviours in terms of how to act, teach, vote and exclude others. Consider the ways in which fundamentalist Evangelicalism opposes science (e.g., evolution, paleontology, stem cell research) (New Standard Version, 1983, Gen. 1:1); abortion; encourages the right to bear arms in the U.S.; informs nationalism and the erroneous concept of a Christian nation; enforces anti-immigration policies (Deut. 7:1-3, 3-4); forms apathetic attitudes towards climate change (Matt. 24:35); opposes vaccinations⁵, informs anti-feminist attitudes (I Cor. 14:34); lobbies against

within rituals and traditions such as going to church, prayer, community, Bible study, and overall guidelines for which they use to govern their lives. The precepts they use to govern their own lives also become a basis to judge between right and wrong. The idea that same-sex relationships and transgender identity are “wrong” or “immoral” is a common belief among fundamentalist Evangelicals and yet, these precepts are not outlined as such in the Bible. Instead, these peripheral beliefs are deduced from the biblical creation

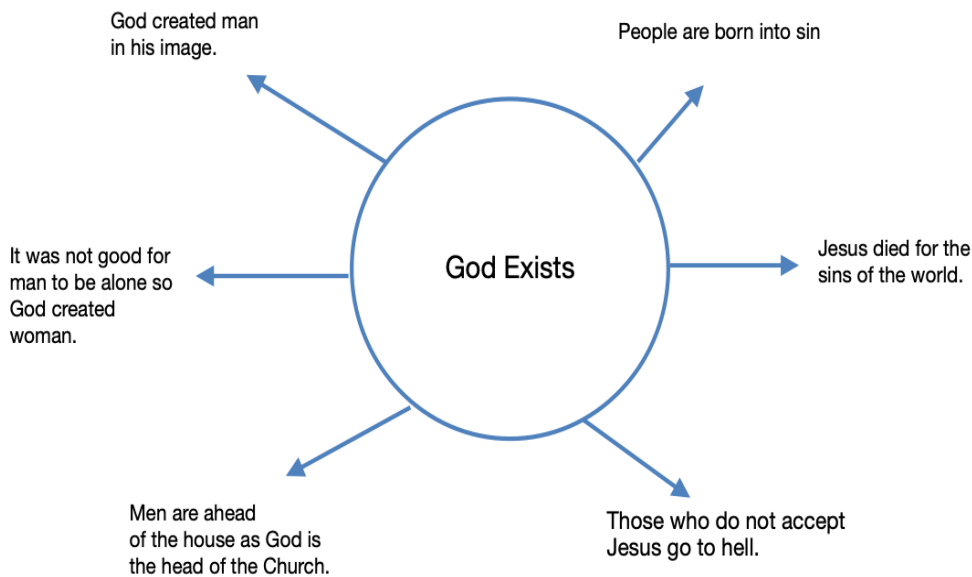


Figure 3.1. The Structure of Beliefs.

narrative. These heteronormative beliefs guide action as religious peripheral beliefs enter into political peripheral beliefs and try to control the bodies and sexual activities of the wider population. Figure 3.2 is an adaptation of Ohlson’s diagram illustrating a center-periphery structure of one belief system entering another belief system (2011, 338). My adaptation illustrates how religious beliefs influence political beliefs impacting a secular society.

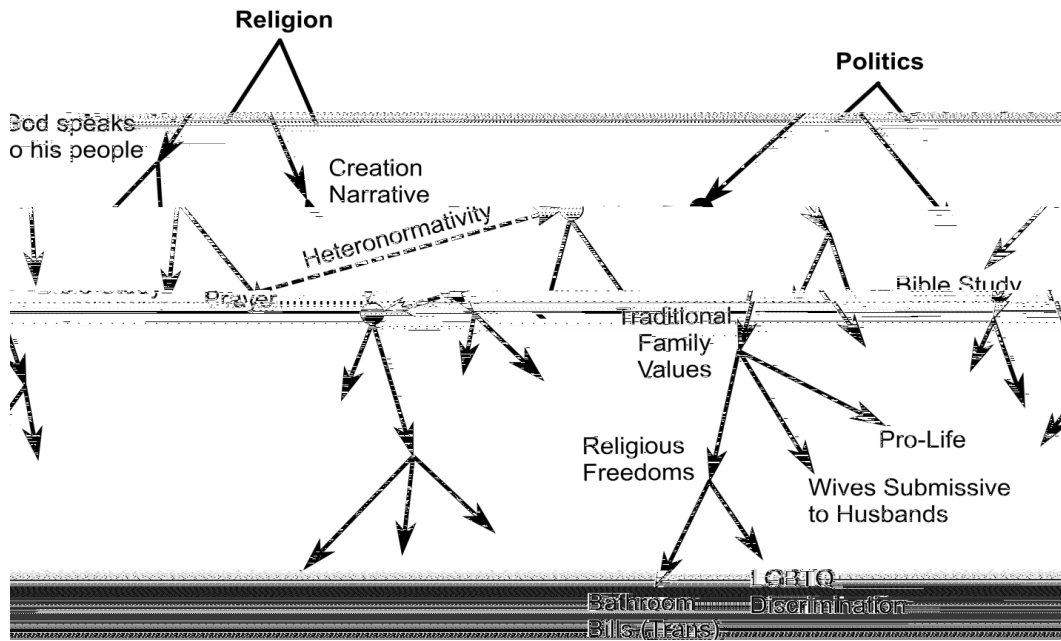


Figure 3.2: Religion and Politics - two hypothetical centre-periphery structures, representing a person's beliefs about religion and politics are entangled by sharing the concept of heteronormativity.

The impact of religious beliefs on politics has a devastating impact on women, visible minorities, and anyone outside of heteronormativity. Interestingly, however, religious peripheral beliefs seem to emerge through the political commitment of those in power to maintain the status quo in an increasingly changing world. As illustrated in 3.2, the dual arrow for heteronormativity indicates that religion influences politics but also that politics influences religion. In keeping with Ohlsson's theory, belief is more than the acceptance of ideas as truth but instead serves a purpose that is a benefit of the belief holder (2011, p. 333). This is evident in the way in which religious peripheral beliefs emerge over time to suit a political agenda. For example, although it is perceived that *Roe v. Wade* was the impetus for the formation of the Religious

Right, Evangelicals did not garner mass political engagement until the U.S. Government threatened to tax segregated institutions (Balmer, 2014). Instead of defending overtly racist reasons for their political agenda, Evangelicals cited religious freedom in the same way they do today to exclude same-sex marriage or transgender identity. It was not until five years after *Roe v. Wade*, that abortion, which used to be considered a “Catholic issue”, became the talking point to garner mass Evangelical voters. Subsequently, a pro-life stance became the litmus test to morality. The origin of the anti-abortion stance was therefore politically motivated and relate to power supporting Ohlsson’s notion of utility.

Regardless of the origins, however, a pro-life stance amongst fundamentalists became entangled in the biblical creation narrative as a peripheral belief to a core belief in God. In Evangelical circles today, it is assumed that a belief in God means that one is pro-life. In the same way, it also assumes that a belief in God means that one is against same-sex marriage and against the rights for transgender individuals. All of these peripheral beliefs have to do with sex; even in the case of gender identity which has nothing to do with sex, however, the church sexualizes transgender individuals, which is a way to not only dehumanize them, but to gain power over them. Christian morality itself is organized around sex confining it to heteronormative marriage. The church needs the gender binary as a way to sustain their heteronormative traditions. The gender binary declares that there are only two genders and that they are not only opposite but also complementary: a part of God’s design. The feminine defined as weak, nurturing and supportive is contained within a woman’s body, personality and role, while the masculine defined as strong, detached and protective is confined to man’s body, personality and role. The rigid definitions label individuals that deviate from these categories. For example, strong women are labelled as unruly and/or bitches while feminine men are considered sissies. Many of the

children who are bullied in school are those that fall outside of the gender spectrum. Many do their best to conform to the gender binary as a way not only to survive but to find acceptance and recognition. Yet, as our world becomes more diverse, some step out from the crowd into their own authenticity. The pushback is harsh, however, as parents pull their children out of schools that ridicule difference as some foul contagion. The hatred that motivates exclusion and bullying can even incite violence. Each year, on November 20, *The International Transgender Day of Remembrance* is held to memorialize those who have been murdered because of transphobia (see Appendix A). Most of the murdered are trans women of color. The more an identity contains intersections of race, gender, sexuality, religion and disabilities, the more marginalized and Othered one becomes. Political policies and other exercises of discrimination that accumulate under the banner of religious freedoms legitimize discrimination in the form of gender policing, bathroom bills, and even violence. If trans folk are not worthy of policies that protect them, violence is minimized. From a biblical perspective, one is hard-pressed to find scriptures that affirm these beliefs; however, by clinging to the creation narrative that supports patriarchal power, interpretations of scriptures that form beliefs can consolidate into oppressive political policies.

Goal attainment and satisfaction with the outcome are distinct from the belief holder's attitude towards the outcome. In fact, the outcome may in fact cause distress to the belief holder. Ohlsson states that the truth-value associated with the belief is distinct from the person's attitude towards the belief (Ohlsson, 2011, p. 332). For example, many fundamentalist Evangelicals do not like the idea of cutting contact with their gay teenagers, but some are taught to do so to send a message that they do not approve of their lifestyle. The idea that, as believers, they hold absolute truth that distinguishes right from wrong and good from evil carries with it the pressure

to control the behaviour of others. The notion of hell gives a sense of urgency as many parents try to control their children into conforming to the expectations of the church. In some cases, teens are excommunicated from the church and from home while parents pray fervently for them to conform. “Whoever spares the rod hates their children, but the one who loves their children is careful to discipline them (New International Version, 1983, Prov. 13:24). These beliefs guide behaviours that try to control and convert their children (and others) as seen in tough love and conversion therapies.

Fundamentalist Evangelicalism is a belief system that readily accepts that ministers are chosen and gifted to interpret the Bible and deliver divinely inspired sermons. In many of these churches, women are not ordained for ministry due to their gender, but instead take up supporting roles. A major peripheral belief is that their interpretation of the Bible is the absolute truth and that a critical and questioning mind is seen as doubt⁶. Doubt is built into the belief system as a rebellious act. Therefore, believers are not free to question for fear of being cast as unbelievers. Believers are not safe to explore knowledge that contradicts their belief system. Considering the lack of safety to express oneself, the utility would not seem so beneficial; however, the same belief system provides believers a promise of comfort, a personal relationship with Jesus, a sense of belonging, a belief that they are doing God’s will, an assurance of retaliation towards those who have hurt them, and a promise of an afterlife.

So, what is the process for conceptual change? Ohlsson rejects the notion that conceptual change is about transforming or restructuring knowledge. Rather, he views the change process as

⁶ Although different denominations within the Evangelical Christianity focus on different ideas, the beliefs around Atonement Theology (AT) and the Creation Narrative (which is part of AT) remains the same.

one of seeing a phenomenon from a new theoretical lens, a process he calls resubsumption (Ohlsson, 2011, p. 348). Cognitive conflict, which is required for conceptual change, involves the resident theory, which can be described as one's beliefs about something; the contender theory, known as new information; and, the background theory, which is the worldview or belief system that judges the new information (contender theory) as either compatible or conflicting is the resident belief (p. 340).

The peripheral beliefs that restrict the rights and freedoms, and marginalize difference are challenged in today's morphogenic and diverse society. Consequently, leaders of fundamentalist Evangelicalism teach parishioners that their worldview is the one and only objective truth. The peripheral beliefs against trans identities for example support the background theory of a literal biblical creation narrative, which determines gender and gender roles. For many believers, the peripheral-resident belief that sees trans identities as a sin against creation supports the background theory of the creation narrative. For conceptual change to occur, the resident belief comes into question and the contender theory takes its place. For example, a parent may refuse to believe that their child's trans identity is deviant. The parent may consider the contender belief that gender is different from biological sex. The gain in this sense is the relationship between the parent and child.

Letting go of one peripheral belief that goes against the church does not necessarily mean an unravelling of the background theory — creation narrative. Typically, when one peripheral belief goes, others may follow as often they are deduced from each other. For example, if the resident-peripheral belief that trans identity is sinful is replaced with the contender belief, "my child is good", other peripheral beliefs such as "God's design includes two genders" and "God is male" may come into question. Considering that our society is organized around the gender

binary, questioning it can lead to a multitude of issues fundamentally embedded in culture and society. As in my case, staying with the questions can eventually lead to questioning one's own conformity as well as their role in the exclusion of others. Like dominos falling over, no longer believing in these peripheral beliefs will eventually disband the background theory, the creation narrative, as untenable. The identity of the person transforms from believer to unbeliever leaving oneself free from having to defend the contradictions of the Bible with clichés and the mystery of God. As several peripheral beliefs disband, they are no longer able to support the core belief that God exists. The core belief itself may remain for some time but as the periphery beliefs fall away, this core belief can come to have no meaning, nor utility. The new peripheral contenders that enter in are more about what one no longer believes. The progressive churches are full of ex-Christians who define themselves by what they do not believe and many of them do not or no longer believe in God (King, 2012, p. 4). The process from belief to unbelief can be a long journey depending on how closely one identifies with their beliefs. In the case of an absolutist worldview as encompassed in fundamentalist Evangelical Christianity, one may experience profound loss. This Dark Night of the Soul is a spiritual term used to describe a spiritual identity crisis. It is a collapse a worldview and of a perceived meaning of life.

Ohlsson does a good job describing the complexity of belief formation and the ways in which the resident, contender and background theories are formed and stored in the mind, but he neglects the way in which humans interact with their belief system. As a systems theorist, Ohlsson does not discuss the way in which one experiences emotions when their resident belief is threatened or subsumed. While Ohlsson helps us to understand that beliefs are related to gain i.e., the way in which political interests influence religious dogma, he does not discuss the cost in terms of limitations that are placed upon the belief holder. For example, beliefs can limit people

because of the way in which they feel about themselves. The emotional suffering is therefore not about gain. His theory of resubsumption explains the process by which contextual change can occur; however, this change is never so neat and tidy. For example, there may not be a replacement belief. There may be an entrance of questions not previously entertained. There may be a period of not knowing what to believe. The individual may feel empty or lost. As I will assert by referring to Mark Bracher's work, utility is not only the gain of a belief system, but it is also strongly connected to identity and identity formation.

Mark Bracher – Beliefs Are Really Personal

In his book, *Radical Pedagogy: Identity, Generativity and Social Transformation* (2006), Mark Bracher argues that identity is central to both learning and the failure to learn (Bracher, p. 26). Since recognition is essential to identity formation, the motivation to learn anything is socially influenced. The recognition and support that one receives for being a good student, athlete or artist directs further learning and development in those areas. Bracher's work builds upon psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's three identity registers, the linguistic ("I am"), the affective-physiological ("I feel") and the imagistic-perceptual ("my body/my body image"), to illustrate the ways in which recognition both directs and interferes with learning. By dissecting identity into these three components, I will relate the way in which identity interferes with learning by illustrating how my Evangelical Christian beliefs that shaped identity were harmful in each area. To understand how this occurs, it is important to understand the church's teachings as an establishment pedagogy. An establishment pedagogy is a system of knowledge that contains prescribed ideals, values and morals that guides behaviours (Bracher, p. 90). The leaders of the church expect their parishioners to internalize the values found within the system of knowledge

(p. 89). In doing so, the parishioners take on the ideology as their identity, developing what Bracher refers to as an institutional or systemic identity structure (p. 67). The institutional or systemic identity structure is one that can form and self-regulate based on the ideology of the church (p. 67). This identity structure understands the interconnection between systems such as religion and politics and in keeping with Ohlsson, complex peripheral beliefs that are shared between them. Learning can therefore be enhanced when anything that impacts upon the church is of interest. In the same way, learning is limited and compartmentalized when it is perceived that an ideal or concept is a threat to the system and/or community (p. 67). It is well understood that the Evangelical community is a closed system excluding those who do not conform, but what is less understood is what happens to those who do conform?

The establishment pedagogy is similar to Paulo Freire's Banking Concept of learning whereby the learners are considered to be receptacles for the teacher's knowledge (Freire, 1970, p. 72). The preachers need empty vessels in which they can pour their knowledge thus creating a colony of believers (Freire, 1970, p. 73; Bracher, 2006, p. 90). Although the different sects of fundamentalist Evangelicalism focus on different aspects of beliefs (which divide them), all sects agree on the five-point statement of doctrine which are inerrancy of the Bible, deity of Christ, virgin birth, substitutionary atonement of Christ, and the physical resurrection of Jesus and his bodily return to earth (Redekop, 2012, p. 58). The fundamentalist Evangelical worldview is a subculture that colonizes believers into a closed and other-worldly system of belief. It is a worldview that provides all of the answers as related to the human condition as sinful, the state of the world as evil, and the need for a Saviour. The Evangelical worldview separates people out of greater culture. They see greater culture as their enemy and therefore immerse themselves in the

church subculture. “Fundamentalists become immersed in a sub-culture that became their only and complete identity” (p. 60).

The leaders of the church manifest a desire for solidarity where they expect believers to mirror back the tenets of Christianity. As empty vessels receiving a prescribed dogma, believers are not to provide discourse as critical thinking is not welcomed (Bracher, 2006, p. 90). Instead, believers are to offer themselves as empty vessels or blank slates that can simply accept the new knowledge and mirror it back to the teacher (p. 90). Believers memorize scripture and narrate it back (Freire, 1970, p. 72) and because their beliefs depend on faith or magical thinking, they come up with cliches like “God is always good” when the answers to do not make sense to them. Children are to be seen and not heard, and parents are taught to live out and reinforce conformity to their children. In the process of this colonization, which is in fact a process of learning, new believers become alienated from their previous beliefs and values. Bracher refers to this as an emptying out (2006, pp. 92-93). However, in keeping with Ohlsson, an adult learner who is converted to Christianity would undergo bisociation as there is greater utility or gain in the new knowledge (Ohlsson, 2011, p. 354). The gain in this case could be a greater sense of community and/or the idea of having all their past wrongs redeemed. In addition, the fundamentalist Evangelical Christian beliefs may not be antithetical to one’s resident beliefs i.e., people are bad/sinners. If not indoctrinated as children, people come to Christianity for assorted reasons, which usually relate to a major life change and a hope for some kind of meaning. In terms of Ohlsson’s utility, the benefit is that they have found new meaning, but the cost is the renunciation of the self (Bracher, 2006, p. 92)⁷. If they are women, minorities, or part of the

⁷ It is quite probable that renunciation of the self is already a deeply held belief.

LGBTQ+ community, they are immediately devalued by the church and therefore they may limit themselves in their expression, roles and opportunities (p. 92). If they were indoctrinated as young children, their beliefs put them at odds with their own development and shame is instilled early. Believers are inevitably alienated, separated from crucial parts of their identity (p. 93). The establishment pedagogy impacts negatively upon individuals as their identity components are suppressed and severed from one another. The lack of integration between the three registers impairs learning. This next section looks closely at the identity components and the specific ways in which people are alienated from themselves in each area.

The Linguistic Register - "I am"

The linguistic register seems to have the most evident impact on learning as it involves master signifiers identity markers (Bracher, 2006, p. 17). The establishment pedagogy of fundamentalist Evangelical Christianity dictates that Jesus is the only "I am" and that for humans, who are identified as sinners, to be redeemed, they are to decrease for Him to increase. The decrease of the self is replaced by the perfection of Jesus which is deemed the only sacrifice for sin that is pleasing to God. Said another way, believers deny themselves by taking on a sinful identity and try to live up to the peripheral beliefs and practices that provide an external identity (I am a born-again Christian) which is their salvation. The church community

these guidelines as scripts (p. 28). Evangelical churches impose gender based behavioural scripts as outlined in their interpretation of the biblical creation narrative. Traditionally, Christianity is a patriarchal religion that places God at the head of the church and men at the head of their families. In some Evangelical churches, pursuing an education or becoming a working woman is largely discouraged even today. While it may sound old fashioned, the teaching of abstinence until marriage makes marriage the central focus for a secure future (Finch, 2019, p. 56). And while there are more opportunities for women in the Western world, this does not ring true for Evangelical cisgender women and girls who have been indoctrinated into a belief system that tells them that their value is within marriage to serve their husbands and raise their children. For those who do work outside of the home, they remain subordinate to their husbands, and they are still considered to be the primary care givers of their children. In fact, women have many more master signifiers indicating that they have more roles in society, but, in the Evangelical church, they are also to maintain and prioritize their traditional God-given roles. Although women have in many ways been liberated from traditional scripts and therefore have found identity in a broader context, the more conventional roles remain within a closed patriarchal structure and therefore continue to serve male power. As Evangelical women take on more master signifiers, they may conflict and create script confusion and therefore cognitive dissonance (e.g., I am a Christian and I am a feminist), which is an opportunity for further self-exploration through learning. Gender non-conforming people and gender queer people reject the master signifier of “I am girl” or “I am boy” and therefore are a threat to the church and the overall patriarchy. Children in the church as well as in the greater culture are expected to take on the gender scripts as assigned at birth even though these master signifiers may not resonate with them.

The Affective-Physiological Register - "I feel"

According to Bracher, the affective-physiological register has to do with the sensory information or feeling of being alive as it relates to the harmony one experiences between beliefs and identity (p. 31). Christians can induce vitality affects which include strong emotions and physical movement through engaging in rituals and ceremonies. Some rituals/ceremonies in Evangelical Christianity that induce these affects include prayer, communion, confirmation, baptism, choir singing, worship, singing/praise, sharing testimonies, spiritual dancing, being filled/slain with the Holy Spirit⁸, and speaking in tongues. These rituals are recognized by other believers and therefore validate one's identity as a Christian. The "I feel" component of identity is powerful as it relates to one's experience of God, which is interpreted as God's favour. Moreover, the experience of God felt in a church validates the messages delivered in the same church as truth. 'Religion and spiritual experience are often associated with Pentecostalism as it emphasizes the work of the Holy Spirit in and through religious ecstasy, miraculous gifts, and healing (Butler-Bass, 2010, p. 121). Some Pentecostals teach that speaking in tongues is evidence of salvation. As these experiences explained and shared in communities of validation, they powerfully reinforce beliefs.

At the same time, many of these same Christians experience emotional problems. In her book, *Leaving the Fold* (1993), Dr. Marlene Winell points out that the most common struggle is with depression because a person's normal joy in living is suppressed in order to be faithful (p. 95). She further states that fear and anxiety are also prevalent (p. 96). Fear is instilled within

⁸ Slain by the Holy Spirit is a term used by charismatic Christians to describe a form of prostration in which an individual falls to the floor while experiencing religious ecstasy. Believers attribute this behavior to the power of the Holy Spirit.

Christianity to revere God, but the underlying motivation has always been to control behaviours. Christians who stray away from their faith are referred to as backslidden. They are called down for giving into the desires of the flesh also known as worldly desires. Many of these Christians appear to have left their faith, but as it is a part of their identity, they carry around guilt for their lack of perfection. They are filled with anxiety as they fear the wrath of God upon them. The judgements, loss of support, and eternal safety and security raise anxiety. Their self-loathing may lead to indulgences and addiction to fill the aching void.

Finding identity solely in the church leaves the identities of believers precarious, especially when they are outside of their comfort zone. During such times, they become defensive to protect their vulnerabilities. Adult learners, especially Evangelical Christians, may feel unsafe or vulnerable when they are taught new ideas in classrooms of higher education. They may experience anxiety or fear that their professor and the other students will laugh at them and/or confront them. As a result, they may remain silent and/or close themselves off to learning. They may learn the material taught to them, but as Ohlsson indicates, if they do not have a buy in, they will store the information as contender theory. Incompatibility forces the mind to resolve conflict by choosing one knowledge representation over another (2011, p. 339). Ohlsson states that not all knowledge representations encode beliefs (p. 331). Alternatively, a believer may choose to revise the background theory, which is not an easy task since it is tied to identity. However, in doing so, two theories become compatible (p. 341). For example, in the case of a six-day creation, a fundamentalist Evangelical Christian may go from believing in a six-day creation to one who accepts the precepts of Intelligent Design. As such, cognitive dissonance concerning evolution is relieved as the knowledge representation of Intelligent Design is woven into the belief system.

Typically, fundamentalist Evangelical Christians will use biblical creation narrative and faith-based clichés to explain why the contender theory is wrong. In doing so, they reinforce their Evangelical identities. In worst-case scenarios, when people feel that they have the only correct information and that contender theory information is wrong or evil, they may believe it their God-given duty to express their anger in harmful ways such as inciting religious freedoms to discriminate against LGBTQ+ peoples or picketing abortion clinics and/or funerals. They may resort to violence citing the God of the Old Testament and/or the Jesus that overthrew the tables of the moneychangers as scripts for their behaviour.

The Imagistic-Perceptual Identity Register - "I perceive"

The imagistic-perceptual identity register has to do with the body and body image and is closely related to the affective-physiological identity register as it relates to the emotion of shame. In fundamentalist Evangelical Christian churches, the body is at the helm of the sinful identity. The concept of original sin as taught in the creation narrative teaches believers that they are born into sin and therefore they cannot trust their bodies or allow their minds to govern their bodies. Instead, believers are instructed to “put on” the identity of Christ.

For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin - (New International Version, 1983, Rom. 6:6).

People who have spent their developmental years reacting with fear to the teachings of Evangelicalism are conditioned to dissociate from their sinful bodies in order to become “holy” (Finch, 2019, p. 86). Historically, the church has been obsessed with controlling the body, especially women’s bodies, in relationship to sex, sexuality and reproduction. This control is

often judged against moral codes that approve or disapprove of dress, behaviour, and presentation. Disapproval is evidenced in campaigns against abortion, same-sex marriage and fighting against the rights for transgender people. It is also evident in abstinence purity campaigns sold to teenagers in Canada and the United States. Purity culture grew in prominence in the 1990s when the mega churches put money into propaganda such as the “true love waits” rings and used shame to persuade young people to abstain from sex. Girls are given the message to be pretty enough to attract a future husband but not sexy enough to be a stumbling block for him. The Bible verses used to reference women as stumbling blocks are Matthew 5:27, 28: “You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (New International Version, 1983). While these verses seem to speak to men’s behaviour, the onus has been placed on women to modify their dress and behaviour so that they are careful not to be a temptation. Women are often blamed for men’s behaviour towards them. The #metoo movement (2017) emerged to support women who are often revictimized when they speak out against rape, sexual abuse and sexual exploitation. The #metoo movement is a testament to the subconscious ways in which religion is the historical foundation for greater culture as the message that her clothing and curves are often to blame for his weak mind. In her book, *Pure* (2018), Linda Kay Klein tells her story as well as the stories of women who grew up in purity culture and were traumatized by the messages they received about their bodies. The fundamentalist Evangelical messages about sinful bodies not only induced feelings of shame but caused the belief within cis-girls and women that they were responsible for being violated by men. One woman who had been raped shared that her parents became distant, and she felt it was because “.... they viewed me as part of a sin that occurred, that I had caused it or had drawn it, or somehow had left myself vulnerable to it,

which is apparently just as bad (p. 96). Klein discusses Dr. Brene Brown's reference to Harvard-trained Dr. Shelley Uram, who calls importance to "small, quiet traumas" which she has found "often trigger the same brain-survival reactions" as larger traumas... (p. 15). Klein found that there was a correlation between PTSD-like experiences in association with people's sexuality, their bodies, and the church. I personally relate to Klein's research participant, Nicoletta when she says, "I participated

away by keeping the precepts of the faith and doing God's will. Girls are often told that if they wait to have sex when they are married that they will be blessed by God in terms of a fully satisfying sex life with their husbands whereas girls who have sex before marriage are considered to be damaged goods. And, so as young Christians seek to please God, they alienate their bodies and internalize the shame of their sexual thoughts. Instead of the promised amazing sex life, many newly married Christians suffer anxiety, sexual dysfunction, sexual shame, and disappointment. After years of being told that their bodies and minds are sinful, couples cannot just flip a switch on their wedding night (Klein, 2018, p. 141). Evangelical Christianity teaches disconnection and disembodiment from the self. The natural part of development is shamed and the guilt and anxiety that emerge take the form of suffering. "It may be your sin; it may be your psychosis; but it is certainly not the shaming system you find yourself in" (Finch, 2019, p. 51). Emotional suffering is glorified in the story of Jesus and his bodily anguish that saved the world (p. 52). "It was his torment, not his joy, that set us free" (Klein, 2018, p. 52). When Evangelical Christians judge themselves according to their suffering, they judge and validate the suffering of others.

By referencing Bracher's work, I illustrate how the establishment pedagogy of Evangelical Christianity disembodies believers from the physical aspect of their existence. The physical body otherwise referred to as "the flesh" by Evangelical leaders is not to be trusted. As such, the body becomes a conduit for shame, disgust, loathing and guilt. The patriarchal hierarchy favors men's bodies and excuses their behaviour while it objectifies women's bodies and blames them for the behaviour of men. There is no room difference and therefore trans bodies are considered deviant. As a way to deny themselves and escape pain, Evangelicals become raptured in ritual, ceremony, and spiritual experiences that transcend the body in an aim to find wholeness outside of

themselves. Identity itself is defined by the establishment pedagogy. Believers are instructed to put on the perfect robe of Jesus that covers up and hides their sins so that they can find identity in Him.

Margaret Archer – The Three Orders of Reality

Margaret Archer's work concerning the three orders of reality: the natural order, practical order, and social order also speaks to the complexity of belief formation emphasizing that beliefs are not just formed through discourse but that they have strong holds in somatic knowing and emotional motivations. According to Archer, identity is determined by the ways in which people prioritize their concerns in the three orders of reality. The natural order is associated with embodied knowledge, which is learning what the body can do in time and space, the experience and range of affective qualities, and what is needed for survival (2000, pp. 166-167). Babies cry when they are hungry and stop eating when they are full. Nature facilitates or resists our actions by providing us with feedback so that we find our balance when we learn to walk, bike, swim or climb a steep mountain (p. 163). As a runner, who has fallen a few times, the feedback is jarring and serves to remind me to pay attention to the uneven ground beneath my feet. Feedback is given through sensation, feeling, and emotion. If I push it too much, I get tired and know that I need to stop and rest. Embodied knowledge is gained by listening to feedback and adapting behaviours.

Like Bracher, Archer tells us that our deliberations are not purely cognitive but take into account the emotional life in terms of deciding what projects are worthy enough to pursue (Bracher, 2006; Archer, 2000). I pursue running because I feel good. It has its benefits such as fitness and heart health, but more importantly, it is my play. When I run, my body remembers

the happiness of being a kid playing outside with my friends. Archer tells us that memory is central to the notion of self-hood. Memory provides a continuity of consciousness which together with my embodiment makes me a particular human being (p. 137). As such, I identify myself as a runner. I develop projects such as good nutrition and a training plan to reach my ultimate concerns: to feel good and to be fit.

The practical order entails gaining knowledge through experience (p. 184). It is performative in relationship to material culture and it is understood through activity (p. 166). Religion originates in the practical order. Projects such as going to church, praying, responding to an alter call, and singing worship songs elicit emotions and enter us into a perceived relationship with the divine. Archer says that practical knowledge is pivotal in that it encodes up the body. These projects therefore create experiences that lay down the neural network for procedural memory encoded upon the body (p. 166). “Like all practical knowledge, it entails a ‘feel for’ the sacred, rather than propositional knowledge about it...” (p. 184).

Knowledge learned through the social order emerges through the interplay between the cultural system and the relationships that maintain the system. The socio-cultural structure represents different groups of thinkers within culture that provide discursive commentaries. The knowledge that emerges is referred to as discursive knowledge. Unlike embodied and practical knowledge, discursive knowledge has an objective existence and involves theories, beliefs, values, arguments (p. 173). Ohlsson tells us that beliefs are often acquired based on the of a person/group versus reason. As a child, I was taught the precepts of Atonement Theology by my mother and the church, and it became my worldview for most of my life.

Archer’s work on how knowledge is gained in the three orders of reality highlights the stronghold of religious beliefs, which she says, wants the whole of a person (p. 186). The

following story is an example of how the establishment pedagogy of fundamentalist Evangelical Christianity negatively impacted upon my embodied knowing by interpreting my experience as an encounter with the Holy Ghost. When I was about nine years old, I remember sitting in a church pew by myself listening to the preacher loudly proclaiming Satan's hold on the lives of young people. As I sat listening, I started to feel uncomfortably warm and broke out into a sweat. All the sudden, the preacher's words became faint, and my vision became blurry. I could

Christianity in that we cannot trust the *flesh* or the *deceitful heart*.⁹ What happens to us when we learn not to trust our bodies? What happens when we stop listening to its feedback? Do we keep eating when our bodies become full or keep working when our bodies are over-tired? Do we stay in dangerous and/or abusive situations because we don't recognize the body's feedback telling us to run? We stay in danger because we are told it is good for us and even godly. Sometimes, we freeze and our bodies collapse. Afterall, Satan is a mighty big monster for a nine-year-old to fight.

In my experience of sitting in church and listening to a sermon, I was told that it was the power of God upon me, and that is how I came to understand these sensations, emotions and experiences within my body. Religion impacts upon the natural order because its' aim is to transcend the sinful body. Pentecostal practices such as speaking in tongues and being 'filled with the Holy Spirit' (also known as being slain in the spirit) are powerful examples of transcending the body (2000, p. 185). The more routine aspects of practice such as prayer and reading the Bible are linked to bodily discipline (p. 185). The establishment pedagogy on the natural and practical orders perfectly misaligns the linguistic, affective and imagistic identity registers.

The deep level of learning helps adult educators understand why debate and/or reason alone are ineffective in transformational learning. Reason is discursive knowledge that emerges from propositional culture. While it challenges a person's worldview and can cause cognitive dissonance, it does not speak to one's engagement with, or the emotional connection to, their belief system. Since emotions are the basis of moving towards ultimate concerns, it becomes clear as to why people become defensive when a contender theory is presented as truth (2000, p. 186).

⁹In

In corollary, transformational learning is not smooth. Archer tells us that the impact of new knowledge is not direct and it is delayed (p. 182). “The initial effect of a new theory is to undermine the old theoretical bases underpinning established practices” (p. 182). Archer tells us that the new theory does not tell us what to do. As such, we do not have the practice or embodied experience of the new knowledge. In keeping with Ohlsson, the new behaviours or peripheral beliefs that give meaning to the core belief have not yet been developed. In the same way, the emotional connection has not been made. Archer tells us that no amount of knowledge can move us to do anything. It is the fact that humans are affective beings meaning that our emotions move us to action (p. 186). Emotions involve knowledge and are directed to an object. In the case of fundamentalist Evangelical Christianity, the object of affection is Jesus. Since believers are told that God loves them too, there is a perceived exchange of emotions making the connection to the belief system quite strong. The emotions are a complex cluster of love, joy, gratitude, and even fear towards Jesus.

Emotions are also a commentary upon our concerns in the three orders of reality. As reflexive beings, we monitor them, transmute them and elaborate upon them (2000, p. 195). For example, the guilt and shame that goes along with the sinner master signifier may motivate a believer to pray without ceasing. As fundamentalist Evangelical Christianity is an establishment pedagogy that denigrates the human as sinful, the emotional commentary assigns shame to the body (the natural order), guilt to performative inadequacy (the practical order) and low self-worth to the social order (discursive). At the same time, however, Evangelical practices can provide relief to these emotions in all three realms. Worship and ritual can instill emotions of ecstasy and physical well-being. The belief that the divine is working on one’s behalf can instill confidence and pride. Further to this, the belief that one holds truth can instill a sense of

superiority in relation to others. The external experiences and connection to a church community create emotions that satiate the internal sense of despair.

Archer tells us that everyone is a reflexive being meaning that we can deliberate about our circumstances and as such, determine our own personal courses of action in society. “Everyone has a domain of mental privacy from which they subjectively survey and evaluate their external circumstances, within which they savor their satisfactions or nurture their discontents, and through which they monitor their future doings” (2003, p. 167). The vehicle of all of this is the internal conversation (p. 167). However, not everyone deliberates in the same way. Through her research, Archer identifies four different types of reflexive modes: communicative, autonomous, meta-reflexive and fractured. Reflexive types are dependent upon natal histories, backgrounds and experiences. The modes of reflexivity are based on ideal types and although individuals may tend to experience different modes in different situations, individuals typically settle enduringly into one mode, and yet switches are possible and do occur through learning.

While it seems as if the establishment pedagogy of Evangelical Christianity shapes parishioners through the process of indoctrination and/or belief formation, Margaret Archer helps adult educators understand that believers are not passive recipients to systemic pedagogies nor are they reducible to the beliefs they carry (2000, p. 193). Her concept of reflexivity provides clarity in terms of how individuals mediate their social contexts to enact their ultimate concerns. “Agential subjectivity reflects upon societal objectivity.” That is to say, “we examine our social contexts, asking and answering ourselves (fallibly) about how we can best realize the concerns which we determine ourselves...” (2003, p. 133). Her work provides some clarity on the power of the person to navigate social and cultural structures. Although structural and cultural emergent properties impinge upon us by shaping social situations such that they have the capacity to

operate as constraints and entablements, Archer explains that the emergence of personal and social identities are properties and powers of the person that cannot be reduced to those of society (2003, pp. 119, 132). Through the reflexive process, agents consider their social positionality in terms of potentialities and liabilities and from there develop specific projects to navigate those same constraints and entablements. Projects are deliberately defined to realize concerns; and strategically adjusted into practice enabling agents to do (and be) what they care most about in society (2003, p. 133). A young fundamentalist Evangelical Christian attends Sunday school, youth groups, reads her Bible and prays as a way to have her personal identity and social identity recognized. Through practice of projects, the agents forge a lifestyle and as such realize a continuous sense of self. From this lens, we see how, through practice, that the continuous sense of self is subjected and defined through the three identity registers, however, it is through the constant interplay of agential reflexivity upon structure. In short, reflexivity is a process by which structure is mediated by agency (2003, p. 93). People are not reduced to their social identities because they are reflexive beings. Social identity, in corollary, is a subset of personal identity.

Communicative Reflexives

Perhaps the most common reflexive mode is that of the communicative reflexive. Communicative reflexives are those whose internal conversations require completion and confirmation from others before resulting in a course of action. They are told what to think and not how to think. Their ultimate concerns are vested in interpersonal relationships such as family and friends. Their main effect is to strengthen 'social integration' (Archer, 2003, p. 356). They do this by taking on the belief systems of their families, friends and their communities as a way to

find acceptance and identity. Although their internal conversation starts in the mind, it does not end there as they need to talk out their ideas to their trusted group (p. 167). Their pattern of reflexivity is referred to as “thought and talk” (p. 167). The trusted group (family, partner, friends, church) gives them confidence as they share and seek to solve their problems. Communicative reflexives have a lot of self-doubt and do not trust the mind. As children, they were told what they wanted and what to believe. Our greater culture teaches us that truth is externally referenced and Christianity teaches that the mind is sinful and therefore cannot be trusted. According to Ohlsson, children who are taught Christian precepts from a young age are more apt to stay with the belief system as it gets reinforced over the years. Questioning is not encouraged, and children are not taught to inquire on their own. This lack of confidence characterizes all of their decisions as communicative reflexives need feedback on what to do, how to act and who to be (p. 167). Since they do not trust their own needs and experiences, they are willing to stifle them to meet the expectations of their group. Cultural and social structures like the Evangelical church embody an establishment pedagogy wherein parishioners abandon their identity needs in favour of the creation narrative. The communicative reflexive is not distressed by their reflexive pattern. They become stressed, however, as they are forced to navigate and compartmentalize knowledge that challenges their beliefs.

Communicative reflexives were more common and supported in premodern society where there were more traditions and rituals in socio-cultural systems and within the structures such as marriage, which was retained and sanctioned through a common belief system (p. 56). Although more numerous in pre-modern times, this reflexive type continues to strive through the strength of like-minded community which is powerful forceful in keeping systems status quo. Communicative reflexives contribute to the social order and social stability and therefore

reinforce power systems. However, in today's increasingly diverse world, there is a struggle by the communicative reflexives to keep things the same. With the influx of more knowledge, there are more questions and more cognitive distortions. As per Ohlsson, communicative reflexives will store opposing knowledge and internally dispute it based on their faith beliefs, which continue to be validated by their peers. On the whole, this group contributes to stability in society and pushes back against change. Under the former U.S. presidency of Donald Trump, we witnessed the reflexive powers of his supporters who strongly identify with nationalistic pride. Their ultimate concerns are to keep their power and privilege. In a diverse world, the projects that they take on involve the exercise of religious freedoms which denies others their rights. The deportation of undocumented immigrants, the incarceration of immigrant children; the recent anti-abortion bills; transgender bathroom bills; refusal to serve same-sex couples; and organized climate change denial all result from peripheral beliefs that connect politics, nationalism and Christianity. The cross connections between religion and politics, and subsequent actions reinforce the core beliefs in Christian creation narrative.

Autonomous Reflexives

While many Evangelical Christians who maintain the status quo are an example of communicative reflexives, former U.S. President Donald Trump is an example of an autonomous reflexive. Autonomous reflexives are those who sustain self-contained internal conversations, leading directly to action. Unlike the communicative reflexives, practitioners do not need or want to be supplemented by external exchanges with other people. Their minds are private because, to these subjects, their lone inner dialogue is sufficient (2003, p. 210). Their self-sufficiency is often mistaken for arrogance, but according to Archer, they define their independence in a technical

rather than boastful manner although the latter, as in the case of Trump, may be present (p. 210). In keeping with their lone inner dialogue, they are not relational like the communicative reflexives because their backgrounds are typically characterized by contextual discontinuity in that their parents were likely distant and/or separated or divorced. In her book, *Too Much and Never Enough* 2020, Dr. Mary Trump, the niece of former President Trump, characterizes his childhood as one of privilege but also neglect as his mother was ill and his father, a real estate mogul of questionable business practices, was hard to please. According to Dr. Trump, young Donald Trump was able to gain recognition from his father by being just as ruthless as his father (Trump, 2020).

Work is the ultimate concern of the autonomous reflexive. Their projects reflect their ultimate concerns are transitional in that as planners, they can leave one context and enter another and therefore gain a lot of knowledge along the way. They may struggle with integrity since they exit and enter various contexts ascribing to belief systems and possibly rejecting the same later as a means to navigate their ultimate concerns. Former U.S. President Trump was able to easily navigate the beliefs of his Christian supporters by supporting the religious freedom bills (Peters and Woolley, June 5, 2020). The identity-bearing belief of autonomous reflexive lies within the structure of power that supports them. If money is the measure of their self-worth, they will work towards increasing their wealth and they will support the right to a neo-liberal capitalistic approach to profit. The Christian creation narrative that supports the status quo and power imbalances would likely be supported (as in Trump supporting the Religious Right) but would not necessarily be internalized to any degree other than to the degree that it supports the accumulation of wealth. Their internal conversations are about society. They reflect on society as subject on object. They are able to reflect upon their causal powers as their activation of

constraints and entanglements to achieve desirable outcomes (p. 252). Unlike the communicative reflexives, they trust their inner dialogue.

Meta-Reflexives

The meta-reflexives are those who are critically reflexive about their own internal conversations and critical too about effective action in society. Many of those who rally for the rights of others are meta-reflexives. Their internal dialogue is based on questions versus answers (Archer, 2003, p. 255). Similar to the autonomous reflexives, they experienced contextual discontinuity as children and were likely deprived of similars and familiars who could act as interlocutors and commentators, throwing them back upon their own mental resources to solve their own problems and formulate their own projects (pp. 257-258). Meta reflexives are idealists and are in search of a vocation where they can express themselves, becoming what Archer refers to as actors, those who create collective action. Many meta reflexives are in the helping professions (e.g., teachers, social workers, nurses, volunteers, politically engaged activists).

As subversives, meta-reflexives expect pushback against their projects, and they are fully aware of the cost. In most cases, they consider that it is worth it to continue and express themselves through their vocation. An instructive illustration of the impact that meta reflexives can have on social structures can be found in the progression of the UCC from a fundamentalist to progressive church. Throughout its recent history, the UCC has contained meta-reflexive leaders and members who have challenged absolutist beliefs as found in the doctrine and dogma of the creation narrative. A more critical pedagogy was therefore introduced into the mainstream church, which, although created instability, attracted believers who valued reason and questioned Atonement Theology. In the late nineteenth-century intellectual leaders believed that criticism,

Darwinism and philosophical idealism could be absorbed by the Evangelical tradition. These leaders helped introduce these ideas into the mainline church colleges, which eventually led to the displacement of Evangelicalism (Flatt, 2008, p. 2). A critical lens continues to inform messages from progressive UCC pulpits. A powerful example of the ways meta-reflexivity can set people on a transformative course is that of Gretta Vosper, an UCC ordained minister that came out as an atheist after the 2016 Charlie Hebdo shooting in Paris. Her public statement was that a belief in a supernatural God promoted hatred. Subsequently, she was subject to an internal review to assess her suitability to continue as a minister within the UCC. Vosper could have decided to use the word non-theist instead of atheist, but her conviction of atheists being flagged, imprisoned and killed in non-secular countries caused her to challenge the very system that sustained her (Vosper, September 25, 2016). Vosper is a good example of a meta-reflexive who navigates projects that go against the status quo. Her value driven ultimate concern put her ministry on the line. In 2018, she was granted the ability to continue in her ministry.

As meta-reflexives are contextually unsettled, they are drawn to resistant pedagogies such as critical and protest/hysteric pedagogies. Bracher indicates that a critical pedagogy equates identity with subject position, which is largely a function of socially determined factors and group identity (Bracher, 2006, p. 105). Teachers who teach hysteric/protest pedagogies seek out and confront students which constitutes a direct assault on student identities (p. 98). For example, a science professor may ridicule a student for holding Evangelical beliefs by outlining the bloody history of the Crusades. The student will protect their identity and may shut down and/or drop the class. Resistant pedagogies tend to demonize the Other who they believe to be responsible for group oppression (p. 97). Bracher notes that it is rare that we engender sympathy for murderers, rapists, child molesters, terrorists, or the perpetrators of genocide because they

represent “the most fully Other” of what we consider to be the most basic of human qualities (p. 99). Moreover, students whose identities are being trained and habituated to ignore these qualities within their own selves and to externalize them perpetuate the Other’s traumatization making them more likely to continue in their violent tendencies (p. 99). The next section describes a generative pedagogy; one where educators identify and integrate their more undesirable identity components. In processing their own traumas through self-compassion as well as compassion for the suffering of others, they realize that prisons are full of traumatized people.

A Generative Pedagogy: A generative pedagogy comes from a place of deep transformation within the educator. They are not just teaching concepts or passing on their beliefs to other people, but rather, they have done their inner work, which entails the integration of their identity components. Instead of operating through the lens of the ego, they operate from the lens of their wounds. Suffering can be an unknown and frightening territory because our culture does not support it, but instead offers the false promise of how not to suffer through pleasure, consumerism, substances, religion, and work. Consequently, our projects and ultimate concerns often lead us away from our pain. Our fragmented identity components are the result of the disconnect we have with our wounds.

The lens of the wound that contains suffering is also connected to elements of our darkness. The darkness represents parts of ourselves that we dislike as they do not conform to societal norms. These aspects may include a lack of discipline, a disregard for rules, a deep-seeded anger, imperfection, failure, poverty, anti-authority, longing, lust, hatred, distrust, and depression. Our disconnection to these traits means that they become projected and marginalized as society’s Other. These locked away parts of the self mirror the ways in which

society's Other are imprisoned, starved, pathologized, stigmatized, rejected, put away, not cared about, and left to die. On a macro scale, the binary of good and evil emerges. Law abiding citizens chase ultimate concerns that create identities that are recognized as good, while those in the criminal sub-culture are shaped (because they have little agency) and further shape themselves by the shadow components that validate themselves as bad.

For a generative pedagogy to occur, identity integration needs to occur so that the linguistic (I am), affective (I feel) and imagistic (I perceive) identity registers align. Bracher refers to this alignment by referencing Robert Kegan's interindividual identity structure which is characterized by altruism. In order to integrate our misaligned selves into an interindividual identity, we must accept and integrate our murderous and sadistic urges. There is the notion that doing so could activate such impulses. Bracher provides two reasons why this cannot occur: 1) the identity support would not be present to enact such impulses since most identity components for teachers/mentors are based on prosocial conditioning; and 2) in addition to recovering the aggressive and perverse impulses, it recovers the involuntary impulse to protect and care for others that develops from the infant's primal bond with the mother (p. 149). Therefore, integration gets us in touch with our primordial desire to care for the Other.

We come to realize that profound gratification and fulfillment occurs when our need/desire for the mOther [mother] is reciprocated in her need/desire for us, a need that we experience not only to be nursed meets our mother's need to nurse us, but also when our need/desire for loving recognition expresses itself in an intense or excited gaze, vocalization, or body motion that is responded to

by a mOther's [mother's] voice, gaze, or body language communicating her need to be needed by us. (pp.150-152)

I would add that integration of dark places and/or any guilt that arises from a personal history that lacked altruism needs the lens of self-compassion if it to be successful. Otherwise, further fragmentation may occur. A generative pedagogy is the deepest form of self-acceptance.

The more we are able to recognize, own, and integrate 1) our deepest need for recognition for our identity (which includes those others whom we experience as parts of our extended identity) in all their manifestations and 2) our most obscure and profound anger and rage at those who harm or threaten our identity (including its extensions into others) the more our own identity will take on the interindividual structure, in which our common humanity overrides our differences with all others, so that we spontaneously perceive even the most despised others - including murders, rapists, racists, serial killers, child molesters, terrorists, imperialists, and war-mongers, as well as students who may respond to our teaching with overt hostility, smug indifference, undisguised boredom chronic laziness, or manipulative flattery – as “us” rather than “them”. (p. 154)

Once one can accept and love all aspects of the self, there is a realization that we are all connected. Human connectedness incorporates the Other and extends to animals, plant life, the earth. An educator who lives out a generative pedagogy integrates and embodies all aspects of the self. Integration is a complex process that involves self-inquiry and identifies teaching practices that benefit student identity and those that do not. Bracher refers to such identification as self-

analysis based on a four-step psychoanalytic process outlined by Lacan as follows: rectification with the real (the need to be needed), the operation of transference, interpretation and working through. Rectification with the real is the realization that past pedagogical practices such as authoritarian, establishment, critical pedagogies cause harm to the students. When we reach this realization, we can then examine the ways in which those practices support our identity needs through transference or the ways in which expectations are placed onto the students. Interpretation is the identification of the difference ways strategies put into place to maintain identity support. The final step of working through is the development of a more integrated and complex identity; one that fully supports the student's identity development (p. 136).

The integration of identity components acknowledges the Other within and therefore serves to enhance and strengthen each type of reflexive mode. Communicative reflexives are able to network and gain information from their peers that would ideally represent the needs of the many, while the autonomous reflexives understand how to work within structures towards the strategies for success. The meta-reflexive are the strong evaluators in relationship to the circumstances (Archer, 2003, p. 288). Although it is uncommon for dominant modes to change, the integration of identity components can shift the ultimate concerns so that they align with the concept of oneness. All modes of reflexivity except that of the fractured reflexive (described below) are considered incapable of integrating their identity components.

Fractured Reflexives

According to Margaret Archer, a change in the dominant mode of reflexivity would be a rarity because the ultimate concerns are different for each mode and because the dominant modes are formed in childhood. A change in the dominant reflexive mode would benefit the

fractured reflexives the most because they do not have the ability to exert their personal powers to formulate projects and monitor both self and society in the pursuit of their designs (2003, p. 298). The internal conversation does not move the fractured reflexives towards their ultimate concerns in the same way that it does for the other three reflexive modes. Although the fractured reflexives do engage in an internal conversation, their self-talk does not provide them with a sense of guidance or purposeful courses of action, but instead it works to intensify their distress and disorientation. “They are too exclusively affective to be practically effective” (p. 299). They may suffer from mental health issues, but Archer warns that there is a broader phenomenon, whose origins cannot be identified reductively (p. 304). However, it is clear that, due to their disorientation, they do not have the ability to self-monitor and gain control over their lives. They are passive agents in that they do not take a stance towards society (p. 306). They are the impeded reflexives and life happens to them.

In consideration of the three orders of reality, many fractured reflexives never developed the skills to navigate social and cultural constraints. For example, many did not learn the skills associated with experiencing emotions associated with accomplishment. This may have occurred through the process of their agential backfiring on them (p. 311). In other words, they tried, and they failed. Subsequently, they may find the obstacles too hard. Their self-talk is typically negative about any projects or practices which may assist them (p. 313). Some reflexives live within their memories of trauma which keeps them immobilized and disoriented them from their ideals. As a way to escape, they may enter into the world of pretend (p. 315). Their imagination is like wishful thinking, and it does not lead to practical action. In the CODA at the end of this work, I share a story of a person close to me who lives in a pretend world. The inner conversation of such a person does not help or determine how to proceed instrumentally, the

“take things as they come” attitude prevails (p. 316). The inability or know-how of how to go forward is also indicative of a lack of self-knowledge as well as a lack of societal knowledge. (p. 317, 319).

Acher’s reflexive modes give us insights into the ways in which people consider themselves in relationship to their structural and cultural contexts. Her work on the three orders of reality illustrates the different ways people relate to what they have learned and what they come to believe. As such we know that learning is not purely cognitive and that beliefs are felt deeply and through practice become embodied. While reason, debate and new information may create cognitive dissonance, people are willing to live with their contradictions because beliefs have what Ohlsson refers to as utility, and provide what Archer refers to as ultimate concerns. Moreover, as Bracher posits, beliefs are connected to identity. Transformational learning away from fundamentalism is not easy or smooth because of the emotional connection towards, and perceived relationship with Jesus. In addition, new knowledge is not accepted as the resident theory until the agent develops projects to find meaning. The meaning is defined through the development of new peripheral beliefs. Leaving fundamentalist Evangelical Christianity but keeping a belief in God requires the dismantling of the former peripheral beliefs and the construction of new ones. All of this is to say that beliefs are layered, complex, emotive, interconnected and drive action. Beliefs are strong and within closed systems that drive Othering, beliefs are harmful. The typical fundamentalist, however, believes that their worldview is correct. They are not “bad” or intentionally exclusionary. They believe that they have the answers to help humanity. A generative pedagogy starts with educators and leaders who provide support to their students to engage their interindividual identity components. This is done by providing a safe environment for them to think beyond their closed belief system. The new knowledge itself is not

the driving force behind transformational learning, but rather it is through caring on the part of the educator that students feel valued and safe to explore.

Chapter 4

Setting the Stage: A Personal History

The next section tells my story of indoctrination within the closed belief system of fundamentalist Evangelical Christianity. The first section speaks of belief formation, so it is important to keep Ohlsson's work in mind. It also speaks of my struggle within a system in which I found my identity (i.e., master signifier: "I am a Christian"). As one who identifies as a predominately meta-reflexive, I had many questions about what I was learning, but the establishment pedagogy taught me that my questions were indicators of doubt, and that doubt was sin. This increased my shame and inability to feel safe within myself and within the church.

Growing up in a small Northern Ontario town in the 1970s, I never learned about or even heard of transgender people. Instead, I learned about the gender binary. Like many children in Western Culture during the 70s, I learned that girls were supposed to be feminine and boys, masculine. The boys that were considered too feminine were called fags or fagots and were targets for spitballs while the girls who were not feminine were labeled as butch or lesbian. The few I knew protected themselves by becoming bullies. The girls, like me, who did not meet the standard for pretty as portrayed by the media were typically ignored by the popular kids. As a child with red hair and freckles, it was hard to fit in. I was one of three redheads in my elementary high school. The other redheaded girl was in a grade lower than me. She seemed to be popular as she was always surrounded by friends. I thought that it was because of her straight hair and brown eyes. The boy who was in a grade higher had orange-red curly hair like I had, and he was always being bullied.

One time during recess, a group of about six older girls grabbed me roughly by the arms and started dragging me. I had no idea what was happening, but I knew it wasn't good. I tried

desperately to get away from them, but they held me tightly, their fingers digging into my arms as I dug my heels into the earth. Through the cloud of dust, I could see that I was being dragged towards the red-haired boy who was also being dragged by a group of boys towards me. I watched him struggle to get away from his captors as I continued to struggle but to no avail. In my periphery, I saw students standing and watching the whole spectacle unfold. When the group of kids had us face to face, they dropped and encircled us pointing and laughing. “Kiss”, “kiss” they screamed. Horrified, I scrambled ... tiny rocks embedded into my hands as I found my limbs and got to my feet. I ran so fast, tripping and almost spilling back into ground. Did that just happen to me? Please, no! My tears were hot and painful, making streaks of dirt on my dust-covered face. My friends wondered where I went as I ran around them and into the school to find the nearest washroom. As I looked into the bathroom mirror, my face red and hair frizzed from my sweat, I had just one wish. Mirror, mirror on the wall, take this mask and hideous hair and unveil for me the popular, blonde girl who is loved and adored.

Repulsed like the kids who teased me at recess, I really hated what I saw in the mirror, so I learned how to put on make-up and straighten my hair. I tried expensive creams to remove the freckles on my arms, but they didn't work so I wore long sleeves even during the hot summer months. I resented the amount of time I spent on my appearance, but it was necessary to perform my prescribed gender a little better and find acceptance amongst my peers. My efforts had some success as I was never teased like that again, but I lost my care-free spirit and earnest quest to play hard.

In her book, *Gender Trouble* 1990, Judith Butler makes a distinction between gender performativity which speaks to gender as emerging from cultural structures such as families, schools, and churches; and, performing gender which involves agency or individuals “performing

gender” (Butler, p. 240). When individuals perform gender, there is typically a standard to meet. The standard for girls was based on the social construction of beauty as seen in the media. I never doubted my gender as a girl, but I found the societal expectation of being a girl hard to live up to. As one of the few redheads in school, I felt different. I didn’t want to stand out but being one of the tallest girls in the class made that difficult. So, I shrunk my posture and I learned to calm my masculine energy. In doing so, I lost the ability to be care-free. I lost the joy of play, getting dirty and sweaty from swinging from

due to having seven little mouths to feed. She once described a social worker rubbing her hands together to keep warm during a home visit in February 1964. In April of that same year, the children were removed from my mother's care and separated into foster homes.

I was born after these events and while I did not see my mother's poverty and victimization, I witnessed the consequences of her trauma in her deteriorating mental health which included depression and manic episodes. My mother found great comfort in religion and put her hopes in a heavenly afterlife since her life on earth had been so cruel. She raised me to be a Christian and her method to deal with rebellion was to scare me into heaven. There was a lot of talk about God, Satan and punishment (hell fire). She believed, as her parents did, that children should be seen and not heard so I learned to keep my questions to myself. Questions were deemed to be a sign of rebellion. My mother sent me to church but because of her own self-perceived damnation, she did not feel good enough to enter through the church doors. Sunday mornings as I was getting ready for church, she would sit and listen to televangelists like Rex Humbard and the morally fallen Jimmy Swaggart. I remember her crying; guilt dripping from her eyes as she was reminded of her sinfulness, while my stepfather sat within earshot in an adjacent room chain-smoking cigarettes. My mother would write several televangelists asking them to pray for her and she would send them money every month in exchange for *free* books, which she would read several times from cover to cover. I dreaded Sunday mornings and although I did not want to go to church, I was actually glad to get out of the house.

I was four years old when my next-door neighbour, a lovely elderly widow, first took me to church just a couple of blocks away from my home. I remember her holding my hand as we walked a couple of blocks to the Pentecostal church. She was a lovely woman well into her seventies who lived alone in the house next to mine. I, along with other children in the

neighbourhood, used to visit her frequently. We would sit at her kitchen table, and she would provide yummy snacks while we played the game “pick up sticks”. She had several photos of children on her fridge, mine included who she prayed for each day. She took me to church for several years until it was determined that I was old enough to go by myself. Years later, I remember visiting her and she would tell me some funny stories of me embarrassing her at church. She said that one time I stood up on my seat to see Jesus after the minister announced, “Jesus is here”. Apparently, I asked her loudly, “Where is Jesus? I can’t see him! Show me Jesus!” She shushed me and pulled me back into my seat. However, she said that when the minister spoke of the Holy Ghost being among us, I seemed scared and would snuggle in close to her.

At a young age, I was indoctrinated with the tenets of Christian fundamentalism: that Jesus loved me and died for me because I was bad and that I needed the Holy Spirit to live in me so that I could be good. I was taught that the Holy Spirit would come into my life if I said the sinner’s prayer which goes something like this: “Thank you for dying for me Jesus. I acknowledge that I have broken God’s laws. Please forgive me and come into my heart and help me to live for you”. According to my mother, I prayed this prayer when I was four years old and in doing so, I was saved... saved from God’s judgment and an eternity in hell. To show my commitment to God, I was expected to read the Bible, pray every day, and follow the 10 commandments. My belief in the Christian God and the concept of Atonement Theology was developed and held together over the years by a series of core beliefs and practices.

Atheist and former Christian believer, Christian Sanchez (2009) known as Evid3nc3 on his YouTube channel borrows from Network Theory in the following Figure 4.1 to depict beliefs and core practices as nodes that make up a mega belief that God exists. Although some of the nodes may be weak or get knocked out, the network stands because it is held by a series of

interconnected beliefs. I deeply resonated with each node as integral to my belief in God. I see how the nodes interconnect and validate one another to strengthen the core belief. I see where I struggled deeply with some of the nodes (logical arguments, the Bible and

the Bible difficult to understand, especially in terms of how it applied to my life. Consequently, I often used themed Bible studies guides. I never read the Bible straight through cover to cover, but over the years, through readings, study guides, books and recordings, I covered most of it. My study was to support my identity as a Christian. I did not study it critically as I believed it to be holy, inerrant and God breathed as I was taught in Sunday school. I did not enjoy reading the Bible or engaging in Bible studies. I always came away feeling inadequate and disturbed by the violence. In one instance, I told a Christian friend that I had a hard time with the violent events as described in the Bible. She responded by ignoring my mention of violence, “the whole Bible is true or none of it is true”. I looked up to my friend who had just returned to Canada after completing her master's in divinity at a seminary in the Washington, D.C. I therefore put my doubts aside trusting in her knowledge even though she did not offer me any answers to my questions. On another occasion, I asked different Christian friend how it was God would strike down innocent people, especially babies and children. I was told not to worry about such things but to trust that God was in control and totally fair. I had many questions, but they were always met with clichés which stopped the conversation as well as any potential for any deep conversation or intellectual engagement.

Although I stuffed my questions, they burned within me, so I started searching out Christian apologists and read a few of their books in an effort find some answers and gain an understanding. Of course, the books always came at the recommendation of the church ministers. I was cautioned to stay away from anything that was not Christian. A couple of books that I read at the recommendation of clergy were *The Answers Book, Creation, Evolution and the Bible* (2006) by Ken Ham and *Evidence that Demands a Verdict* (1986) by Josh MacDowell. However, I found that they argued against science and cautioned Christians against scientific

leanings. Moreover, I found that most apologists were heavily biased by their beliefs and therefore their arguments were circular in nature. As such, I did not feel that I was learning anything. Over time, I became frustrated as I felt that my understanding and knowledge of the Bible had not progressed. I was often referred to the passage found in Isaiah 55:9: "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (New International Version). My belief in the Bible was based on faith and not reason and although that bothered me, I left my unanswered questions up to mysticism.

Creation

I believed that God created the heavens and the earth in six days and rested on the seventh (Genesis 1:1). I came to view the natural world as God's creation which I reasoned reflected his beauty. My time in nature therefore became a form of worshiping God for all his goodness. It stands to reason that I was deeply troubled when I learned about evolution in school, especially since I was taught that it was antithetical to creation and that all evolutionists were all atheists with agendas to discount the existence of God. As my basic studies in science unfolded, I became confused and searched for answers. I discuss this further under "Logical Arguments" below. In this section, I focus on the creation of humans and the essentialist notion that gender and sex are synonymous and what that meant to me regarding gender roles.

I was taught to believe that man was created in God's image and woman was created from the rib of man for the purpose of being his helper (Genesis: 2: 15-16). Man was given the earth to rule over:

Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock

and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground
(New International Version, Genesis 1:26).

In keeping with the helper role, I was further taught that the gender and gender roles were divinely ordained and that women were to submit to their husbands. The scripture verse used in fundamentalist churches and even marriage courses is Ephesians 5:22-24:

Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything (New International Version).

I had difficulty with this teaching that to me seemed to subject all women as housewives. It contradicted my mother's teachings which were a contradiction in themselves. My mother taught me that I should be a good Christian woman yet independent. Her notion of independence was for me to remain single, which meant sexless (since sex was sanctified only within the holy union of marriage). She considered that my virginity was an indicator of me being sinless and therefore pure. I remember her once having a conversation with someone about me saying, "She has not sinned yet". I can't remember who she was speaking to, but I was in ear shot and was completely mortified. She taught me that sex was dirty and that anyone could get married and have a *bunch of kids*, like she did. Of course, talking back or any kind of disobedience was also sinful and must be a sign that I lost my virginity; the greater sin. I know that my mother loved me and wanted the best for me. She wanted me to go to university and have a career and although she was not able to help me with my schoolwork due to her own lack of education, she made sure that I did my homework and got the help I needed. She constantly

told me that I was smart, and she praised my good grades. She refused to pass down her knowledge of cooking, sewing and knitting as she saw these as domestic crafts antithetical to the future that she was trying to shape for me. My mother resented her dependence on men because she lost so much. She lost her hopes, her dreams, her children and herself. She did not want that for me. She certainly did not want me to submit to a man. She strongly believed in me and my potential to become an independent woman. When I got my first career as a bank auditor, she was so proud of me but as I let her down with my lifestyle choices, she disowned twice. The first time she disowned me, I was 18 years old, and she found out that I had moved in with my boyfriend. She did not speak to me for five years. The second time that she disowned me, I was 28 years old and told her that I was pregnant. However, her silent treatment only lasted a year because she wanted to see her grandson. There is no question that my relationships with men suffered because of my internalized shame.

When I was married years later, my then husband and I attended a Christian Marriage Retreat on the South Shore of Nova Scotia. Of course, the topic of wives submitting to their husbands came up throughout the retreat. The teaching is based on Ephesians 5:22-23. A few women voiced their discontent as did some husbands, mine included. The facilitator was prepared and defended the scripture by focusing on the verse that followed in Ephesians 5:25:

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless (New International Version).

He preached husbands loving their wives as Christ loved the church and since Christ died for the church, it seemed like submission was a small price to pay.

At the time, I was able to somewhat reconcile my unease with submission through this verse as I considered that if husbands loved their wives in the way in which Christ loved the church, marriages like these would be more like 50/50 in terms of power and decision-making. It seems odd to me now to consider that submission can be argued as a form of equality. These teachings reveal how steeped sexism, patriarchy, homophobia and transphobia are located deep within the creative narrative's gender binary.

Personal Relationship

I strongly believed that I had a personal relationship with Jesus. I believed that he died for me and that he was guiding my life through the power of the Holy Spirit so that I could live my life the way God intended me to live it. However, my struggle was that although I wanted to submit to God, I was not sure how to do so. I felt that I continually failed in the relationship, which contributed to my self-doubt and inadequacy at living the Christian life. And so, I joined Bible studies with the intent on learning how to improve as a Christian. There was one Bible study series that I was hopeful would help me in my quest. It was called Operation Timothy and was based on the letters that the Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy as seen in the New Testament (1 & 2 Timothy). These studies were designed with a mentorship in mind, and I was paired with a mature Christian woman. Note that a mature Christian is someone who is strong in the faith and lives in alignment with that faith. In our Bible Study, I learned that the Holy Spirit was something that carried us along: "...but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (New International Version, 2 Peter: 1:21). I further learned that there was

difference amongst Christians: “Christ is present in all Christians; Christ is prominent in some Christians; but in only a few Christians is Christ preeminent (Christian Business Men, 1985). So, my quest was to have Christ preeminent in my life. I wanted to be close to God; to sense his presence, and do good in the world like those in the Bible who were said to walk with God: “Can two walk together, except they be agreed?” (New International Version, Amos: 3:3, NIV).

The discipleship study instructed that the way to walk with God was to put Christ on the throne of my life. This meant total submission in that everything in my life was about God. “Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (New International Version, Matthew 16:24). Figure 4.2 illustrates a sense of harmony when Christ is on the throne of one's life. The dots represent interests such as hobbies, leisure, career, education, money, friends, possessions, and marriage/family which all seem to align. These same interests show discord when the self is on the throne.

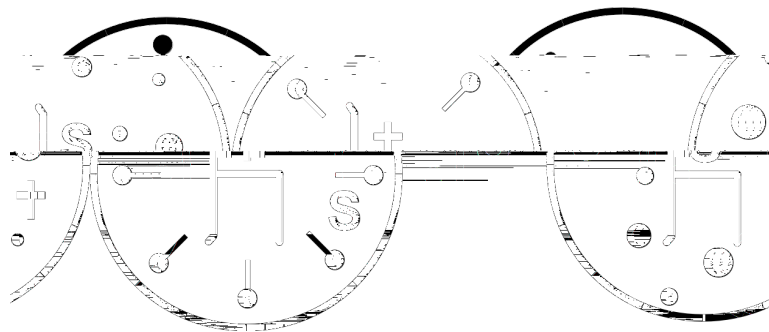


Figure 4.2 – Christ as Preeminent

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Most of the time, I felt that my life was filled with discord and not because I didn't like my life, but because I knew it was not Christ-centered. As much as I tried to align my interests in a way to reflect God's lead in my life, I continually failed. As a teen, I did not live a sheltered Christian life and I had other interests that were influenced by the media, music, school and friends. And although I wanted to be a good Christian, part of me silently rebelled against the rules as my parents used them to control me. Moreover, they did not follow the rules that they dictated to me. And so, I struggled with my relationship with Jesus. Internalizing my failure, I always felt guilty and believed that I was wasting the life God gave me.

Christians who dabble in the world are often referred to as worldly or backslidden Christians. I was a repeat offender. My pattern of going to church and then not going to church was driven by guilt and shame. It was like a revolving door slowly moving and then stopping, moving again, and then getting stuck. Like my mother, I didn't feel good enough or like I belonged. I always felt like I was on the periphery of the Christian life. I was trying to find my way to the center - the place where God would be pleased with me, but I always met a dead end. Bible study after Bible study, I tried to find the secret to living the Christian life. Jesus gave his life for me, but this was one big test that I continually failed. When I think about how raw I felt back then, it was like being the prey of a bird; alive and injured while slowly being picked apart.

Backslidden Christians are judged and watched by their families, Christian friends, and churches. Reinforced by their own inner torment, life can be confusing, and for some even unbearable. Trying to live the Christian life can be like trying to fit oneself into a small box by flattening and stuffing aspects of the self and in the process turning the self against itself. As I think of my internal struggle to deny myself, I have never had deny my sexual orientation or my gender identity. I can't imagine how LGBTQ+ Christians feel as they are forced to deny

themselves at such a deep level of their identity. Many LGBTQ+ Christian teens are forced to attend conversion therapy. Conversion therapy is a justification that supports denial of the self and sinful desires by putting Jesus on the throne of one's life. The struggle in the fundamentalist's relationship with Jesus is that you can never be yourself. I am reminded of the scripture passage, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30 NKJ).

Prayer

There is a scripture in the Bible that commands Christians to pray without ceasing: "Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (New International Version, 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18). As a Christian, my inner dialogue was that of prayer. I prayed when I was driving, walking, cooking, cleaning... almost every time I was alone and sometimes even when I was in a crowd. I continuously asked God for forgiveness and to grant me the fortitude to become a better Christian. I was taught that there were four different types of prayer: adoration, petition, intercession and thanksgiving. I always tried to follow this process in that I did not just ask for things without being thankful. I prayed for my family and friends. I prayed for their well-being and salvation. I would pray for people I had seen on the street. I would pray for sad situations in the world that needed God's attention. When I think back on my prayer life, it always seemed so desperate, but it was also comforting because I believed that God would answer my prayers. Of course, when the answers are "yes", "no" or "wait", God always answers.

I didn't pray for wealth or riches. I already considered that he had given me so much and I didn't want to seem demanding or ungrateful. The truth is that I was turned off by televangelists who preached a vending machine notion of God. I knew about their mansions and that their

money came from poor women like my mother sending in a few dollars in exchange for forgiveness and hope. I rebelled against prosperity preaching and considered that prayer was more about personal transformation. In many ways, prayer was a way for me to learn about myself in terms of my own selfishness and my need for control in my life. I considered that my likes, aspirations, goals, and identity were selfish and wrong because they did not necessarily align with advancing God's kingdom. And so defeated I would pray about my perceived failures, acknowledging them and giving them over to God.

Morality

As a child, I was taught that it was impossible to be good or moral outside of Christianity. Luke 18:19 “No one is good-except God alone” (New International Version). And that the only way to be good was to follow God's laws as found in the commandments (New International Version, Deuteronomy 5:4-21). The commandments seemed reasonable in that it is good not to lie, cheat, steal, and murder. It is good to honour our parents and not to be jealous of our neighbours. But I failed at some of the commandments as I understood them. For example, I lied to my friends about my dysfunctional family life. And as a teen, I figured I had several idols including musicians and movie stars. I thought about my teen crushes more than I did about God. And although these things are a normal part of development given our Western influences, they were framed by the church as worldly and therefore evil.

My parents reinforced their views about good and evil which manifested as rules about what I could and could not do. As a child, I was not allowed to play cards as they were considered the devil's bible where Jesus is cast as the joker, and the Queen, a lewd version of the Virgin Mary. Further to this, I was not allowed to go out for Halloween, known as devil's night in our

house. Of course, we still bought candy and I was made to give them out at the door. As a young teen, I was not allowed to go to movies or to dances for fear that I would succumb to Satan's snares. I resented the rules mainly because my home was not a Christian home. At least not in my view as my parents didn't go to church; we didn't pray together; and we didn't attend church camps like all the other Christian families I knew. Our home did not see the fruits of Christian living such as closeness and support. It seemed that anything Christian around my house was about what I could not do.

The rules lightened up for me once my mother left our family home. When I turned 14, I told my stepdad that I wanted to stop going to church. I attended the same Pentecostal church since I was a young child and yet I felt like an outsider mainly because my family did not attend with me. For years, I longed to be accepted there but when I was asked to get involved with the youth group referred to as Crusaders, I felt like a complete fraud. My other interests such as hanging out with my non-Christian friends did not align with Christ being on the throne of my life (Figure 5.2). Although my dad supported my mother in her decision to send me to church, he himself did not feel strongly about it. I was therefore able to stop going to church since my mother was no longer there to force me to go. Although I stopped going to church, my beliefs remained firm. I still carried the beliefs that I was a sinner and a back-slidden Christian. I hoped that Jesus would not return at such an inconvenient time.

The guilt, shame, and fear that I felt about not attending church was always at the back of my mind. There were times when I got older these emotions got the best of me and I would be off to find a church where I would attempt once again to live the Christian life. When I was 25 years old, I started going to church with my roommate who told me one day that she was a “backslidden” Christian. I found out about our faith or “lack of faith” in common one Sunday

morning as we laid on opposite couches nursing our hangovers while trying to find something to watch when she stopped on televangelist Tony Compolo, who was promoting his book, *The Kingdom of God is a Party* (1990) and *Carpe Deim* (1993). His message was appealing as he spoke about Christianity as being a fun party. I felt some hope rise in me. Maybe God's way was not so dull after all. And so, we started going to church, Christian concerts and events. My closet friend at the time, who had no religious background, also became a Christian after the three of us attended a play called, "Heaven's Gates, Hell's Flame". It's a play that depicts a plane crash and the afterlife showing those who were "saved" and those who perished. At the end of the play, there was an alter call of sorts. Many stood to their feet that night, including my friend, as a gesture of faith acknowledging their need of Jesus to save them from their own sinfulness. It was an exciting time for us as we got to meet some Christians our age. They seemed to have it all together. The three of us went from the weekend bar scene to church on Sundays, Bible Studies and Christian camp. It wasn't an abrupt 180. We still went out on weekends and sometimes went to church a little hungover.

We started attending a small Wesleyan church located in downtown Halifax.¹⁰ My roommate sometimes attended the church on her own and she knew a lot of the people there and so we followed her lead. The demographic was older and white. Most people had been attending for years. There were a few young people, and we attended some Bible studies that they hosted in their homes. When we started attending the church, the congregation was looking for a minister. I heard about some of the rumblings since a few people were not happy with the minister voted in. I learned that he had a history of drug abuse, but that was not the issue of discontent. I came

¹⁰ The building has since been transformed to a Buddhist Temple.

to learn that his wife was considered to be an adulteress because she had been married before and had two children from her marriage. In the eyes of some of the parishioners, a divorcee was the same as an adulteress. I felt bad for her, and I felt even more condemned as I considered that she was a better Christian than me. There were also rumblings that she did not play the piano and of course, that was a duty of every minister's wife! I knew this to be the case in the Pentecostal church that I attended as a child. The high morals and expectations placed upon the minister's wife seemed unfair to me. I gravitated towards her, and we developed a friendship. Her life seemed real to me.

The Wesleyan church preaches a lot on sanctification which is the process of becoming Christ-like in character and conduct. And so, I was back to seeking the preeminence of Christ in my life. I went to Bible studies with others my age but was disillusioned with some of the topics. During one study, we were discussing the body as God's holy temple when a person my age who lived as a Christian his entire life, wondered aloud if people who smoked cigarettes would get into heaven, The scripture that prompted his question was as follows:

Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person; for God's temple is sacred, and you together are that temple (New International Version, 1 Corinthians 3:16,17).

Since our transition from beer and cigarettes Saturday night to Sunday worship overlapped, my friends and I looked at each other knowingly and silently chuckled. We laughed afterward at the narrow-minded discussions and talked about the problem with such judgments in that if a cigarette could keep someone out of heaven, there was no hope for anyone. Was the

road to God so shallow? Was it so incredibly narrow? I shuddered as I remembered the verse my mother always quoted: “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it” (Matthew 7: 13, 14). The recurring theme that emerged once again was that Christianity was about fear and what I could not do.

Moreover, I also found that I was subject to even greater restrictions because of my gender. One summer the three of us packed up and attended Beulah Camp; a Wesleyan church camp located outside of Saint John, NB. Two of us decided to get baptized in the Saint John River while we were there. I was baptized twice before but because I experienced so much shame and self-doubt as a Christian, I wanted to be baptized again to be sure about my salvation. Fundamentalists view baptism as a commitment to new life in Jesus and full body immersion is done signifying death to the old self and birth to a new life in Jesus. It was very meaningful for me to get baptized with my friend and within a community that I cared about. I was however unsettled when people started congratulating me for my commitment to Christ. The old feelings of not being able to measure up began to stir. My friends and I enjoyed the campgrounds, sitting around the bonfire in the evenings and singing modern hymns. I was, however, disappointed that I could not go for a swim as swimming was against the rules. I figured that it had to do with bathing suits and women's bodies. I already knew that swimming was not allowed prior to arriving but being there and experiencing the restriction was another thing. My biggest disappointment and surprise came when my friends and I were walking along the grounds and upon a baseball game. Teams were looking for players and I wanted to join but came to find out that women were not allowed to play. I was completely dumbfounded as I watched the women in their supportive roles as encouraging spectators. I was frustrated finding it hard to believe that

none of the women had ever played mixed league, but as in the past, I buried my burning questions and turned my negative emotions inwards. As a result, I felt limited by my gender and self-conscious for being a girl.

The rules in the different fundamentalist churches that I attended over the years; Baptist, Pentecostal, Bible-believing non-denominational, and Wesleyan, varied but they all supported

before they have sex. I attended the Wesleyan Church for a couple of years, but when I started dating a non-Christian, the judgement was too much for me to bare when my friend, the minister's wife, had an intervention with me over dinner one night. She told me that I was on thin ice and that if Jesus were to return right now, I likely would not make it into heaven. I left the dinner full of shame, shaken and defeated. I stopped going to church.

When I was around 30 years old, I decided that I needed to go to church again. I had a two-year-old and a wonderful partner and decided that I wanted to raise my son in the church. My partner was not a Christian, but he was supportive and attended church with me. Once again, I tried to get it right and my motivation was my small son. I thought that if I were a better Christian, I could be better mother. I didn't know if the church would accept my small family since I was not married, however, the minister was very welcoming. I remember sitting in his office when he asked me if I was saved. I responded, "Oh yes, I've been saved many times". We spent the next hour talking about his view of salvation. I learned that he did not believe that one could lose their salvation as I was taught in the past. He gave me the analogy of sending his son to his room when he disciplined him for doing something wrong and not kicking him out of the house. I felt an incredible relief come over me. Room time was better than being homeless. He told me that like the prodigal son, I and my family (married or not) were welcome. An ex-lawyer, he approached all of his sermons with persuasive argument for God's grace. I remember thinking that I could listen to him speak about God's grace in his Scottish accent all day. He helped me think of God's goodness instead of his dread. I was deeply saddened when he and his family left the church to return to the states. In his goodbye message, it was clear that the theological differences in the church were not to his liking. The church, although it was called non-denominational, had a strong brethren history.

The brethren influence shaped the morning communion service that I sometimes attended each Sunday prior to the main service. After partaking in the Lord's Supper which consisted of bread and juice, there was an opportunity for pop-up gratitude testimonies. One Sunday, I was feeling grateful and wanted to share openly. Thankfully, I told my friend who was sitting beside me of my intention. I was halfway out of my seat when she pulled me back in a panic. She whispered loudly in my ear, "No, you can't speak as only the men are allowed to speak". I remember being completely shocked and embarrassed. How did I not notice that only the men got up to speak? There were plenty of women in attendance. I noticed that most of them wore head coverings¹¹, but at the time, I never connected that their head coverings were connected to their conduct which was to stay silent, be submissive and pray. "Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says" (New International Version, I Corinthians 14:34). A brethren practice, head coverings are considered a symbol of authority since the creation narrative is interpreted to mean that man is head over woman and Christ is head overall. The woman does not have a voice. I didn't understand any of these correlations at the time. My time in university studying sociology with a few classes in women's studies (now called gender studies) helped me to think deeply about the oppression of women. It was hard for me to think that my faith in God was oppressive and yet it was all around me. My cognitive dissonance set in, and I felt deeply upset that I could not speak. I was a Christian but here's the clincher, I also considered myself to be a feminist. As much as I tried, it was difficult to reconcile the two. It was more like an oxymoron. I was so tired of all of

¹¹ As a brethren practice, most of the women who wore head coverings wore lace circles that covered the tops of their heads. A few wore lace veils.

the contradictions in my life. After the minister and his wife left the church, I too left. Once again, I stopped going to church.

Logical Arguments

Indoctrinated at a young age, I grew up believing that human problems such as suffering, and difficulties were rooted in original sin. I believed that God sent the sacrificial lamb Jesus to die for our sins of the world and that whoever believed upon Him would be saved. This is the gospel message. Of course, I struggled with the idea of God sacrificing his son and the need for blood sacrifice. Over time, the story seemed to change from God sacrificing his son to God as incarnate sacrificing himself. Self-sacrifice for the sake of saving

saving

saving

Fundamentalism seemed to have all the answers, but the answers did not satisfy my questions. My foundation as a Christian was built solely on emotion and not reason. I struggled with the questions that I could not ask for fear that the Christian community would call me out as a non-Christian. I could not bare the thought of being called out because I loved God more than anything.

Consequently, I compartmentalized what I learned about evolution during my undergraduate degree. My attitude was that I would learn about what the professors referred to as our early ancestors, but I did not have to believe any of it. As it happened, I did well in the course. I found it interesting and wondered how scientists could be wrong considering the paleontological evidence. One of the positions that creationists like Ken Ham argue is that if evolution was true there would be in-between species and so therefore scientific conclusions were incorrect. They further argued that there was a problem with carbon-dating and therefore the earth was not as old as scientists believed. “If we depend on evidences outside the Bible to strengthen our faith, we can be shaken every time another argument comes along that seems to undermine the Bible” (Answers in Genesis, 2013, para. 5). I did some reading but became disillusioned because I could not wrap my brain around the

Other Christians

I looked up to other Christians considering them to have a connection with God that I had not yet attained. And because of that I was somewhat intimidated by them and never comfortable in their presence. I sensed that they knew that I was not quite sanctified, holy enough or as committed as I should be. So instead of close friends, my Christian friends were more like mentors to me. I did not trust myself or my questions and considered that my problem with Christianity was that I did not have enough faith. I thought that maybe my problem was that I did not pray long enough or hard enough. I did not spend enough time reading the Bible and I spent too much time listening to rock and roll and hanging out with non-Christian friends. In keeping with scholar Etienne Wenger's concept of community membership, I felt that I was on the periphery of the Christian life; participating but not involved in the reification of the community's precepts (Wenger, 1998, p. 65). I believed for this reason that God was not pleased with me.

For a period in the early nineties, my same two friends and I went to the Rock Church in Halifax. I remember feeling so disappointed when my friends started speaking in tongues but that I could not... For some reason, I had not received the gift. I later learned that my friends were faking it. One friend told me that a Christian guy she was dating told her to repeat the phrase, "Untie my bow-tie, who stole my Honda" quickly several times. My friends and I repeated the phrase and laughed until we cried... On a deeper level, however, I was completely shocked because the guy she was dating grew up in a Christian home. He was therefore supposed to be the real deal. He was lying? Faking the Holy Spirit? Surely that was a sin that I was not willing to go anywhere near as it was considered to be the unforgivable sin... "but whoever blasphemes against

the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; they are guilty of eternal sin” (New International Version, Mark 3:29).

As I continued my journey, I found that Christians were not so perfect after all. In the process, I became more comfortable with who I was but more disillusioned with who they were and the idea of sanctification. At the last fundamentalist church that I attended (2005-2009), I noticed major shift in the delivery of the gospel message in that most of the Christian leaders were not pretending to be perfect. Ministers were preaching about the lessons they have learned and focusing on the grace and mercy of God. And although they continued to preach on judgment, they seemed a bit humbler. As I was able to relate to these Christians, my friendships increased. I was starting to feel a sense of belonging. My then husband and I were attending church and weekly Bible studies and we had a circle of Christian friends. My son was going to youth group. It seemed that I was on my way to becoming the Christian that I always wanted to become. However, I was not as content as I thought I would be.

Applied Theory to the Formation of Beliefs

The network of interconnecting absolutist beliefs and practices based on the Atonement Theology creation narrative was the backdrop belief system through which I filtered new information. The information either supported the background theory and as such was stored in my brain as resident theory, or it was learned and filed as contender theory. As an active agent, I engaged with my belief system through prayer, bible reading, good behaviour (morality), and fellowship with other believers. My prayer life that took up a lot of my inner dialogue informed my sense of self in the world defining me as a sinner, giving credence to the fruits in my life to God’s favour strengthening my worldview as valid. I was after all recognized by my dysfunctional

in

yet loving family as a “good Christian girl”. My ultimate concern that followed me into adulthood was this very recognition that I could live up to the standard of perfection placed upon me by my parents and by the church. Archer would label me as a meta-reflexive, and I quite agree. As one who experienced contextual discontinuity, I could not rely on my family for it was my behaviour and not my voice that mattered to them. I could not run to my church community because I felt like an orphan judged alone amidst a sea of families. I could, however, talk to Jesus as I understood him to be the incarnation of God’s grace and mercy. Using my inner dialogue, a prayer, I considered the ways in which I could improve as a Christian. The various projects included my prayers, Bible studies, church attendance, mentorship from mature Christians, couple’s retreats, and joining Christian women’s circles. The latter hardly palatable as I considered myself to be too unworthy, unskilled in domestic tasks, and immature in their presence so I resorted to Bible studies with a mature Christian mentor on how to be a good Christian woman. The word mature in this context is interpreted by me to mean sanctified, set-apart, holy, and obedient. “Meta-reflexives

their

Christ

with

feminist. The last three caused me a lot of cognitive dissonance as I tried to reconcile them to the previous three in line with my Christian beliefs. I found that I had some success by referring to the writings of Christian feminists who all tended to focus on the women in the Bible. In terms of reconciling my goodness to my beliefs, it was always about the righteousness of Christ, which as a Christian I apparently had access to; however, this still stifled me as a person since I was not Christ. Dying to the self is what Christians are told to do and they try to do so through acts of submission (New International Version, Galatians 2:20, 5:24, Luke 9:23, 1 Peter 2:24, Romans 12:1). During the times when I had great difficulties with submission (when I found out that women could not speak during communion and when I could not swim or play baseball at the Christian camp), I experienced what Ohlsson would refer to as bisociation. Bisociation is a mental event in which two contexts intersect at the same time. When I was told I could not play baseball, swim, or speak during communion, I was faced with “me as a Christian woman” versus “me as a feminist”. Note that I could not use the term Christian feminist here as inwardly, I was opposed to the rules of the church in this regard. The background theory of Atonement Theology dictated to me during those times that my faith and feminism were incompatible. According to Ohlsson, when this happens, local coherence has been breached (2011, p. 353). At the time, I internalized this discrepancy wondering how it was that other women who I considered to be strong processed these discrepancies as related to their gender, the denial of masculine traits found in play and the weakening of the feminine which scripted to them to traditional roles in a modern society. My ponderings remained within me, yet I internalized my doubt. Figure 4.3 depicts the strength of my identity characterized by my main master signifier “I am sinner” on the right created in relationship to my core belief about God on the left.

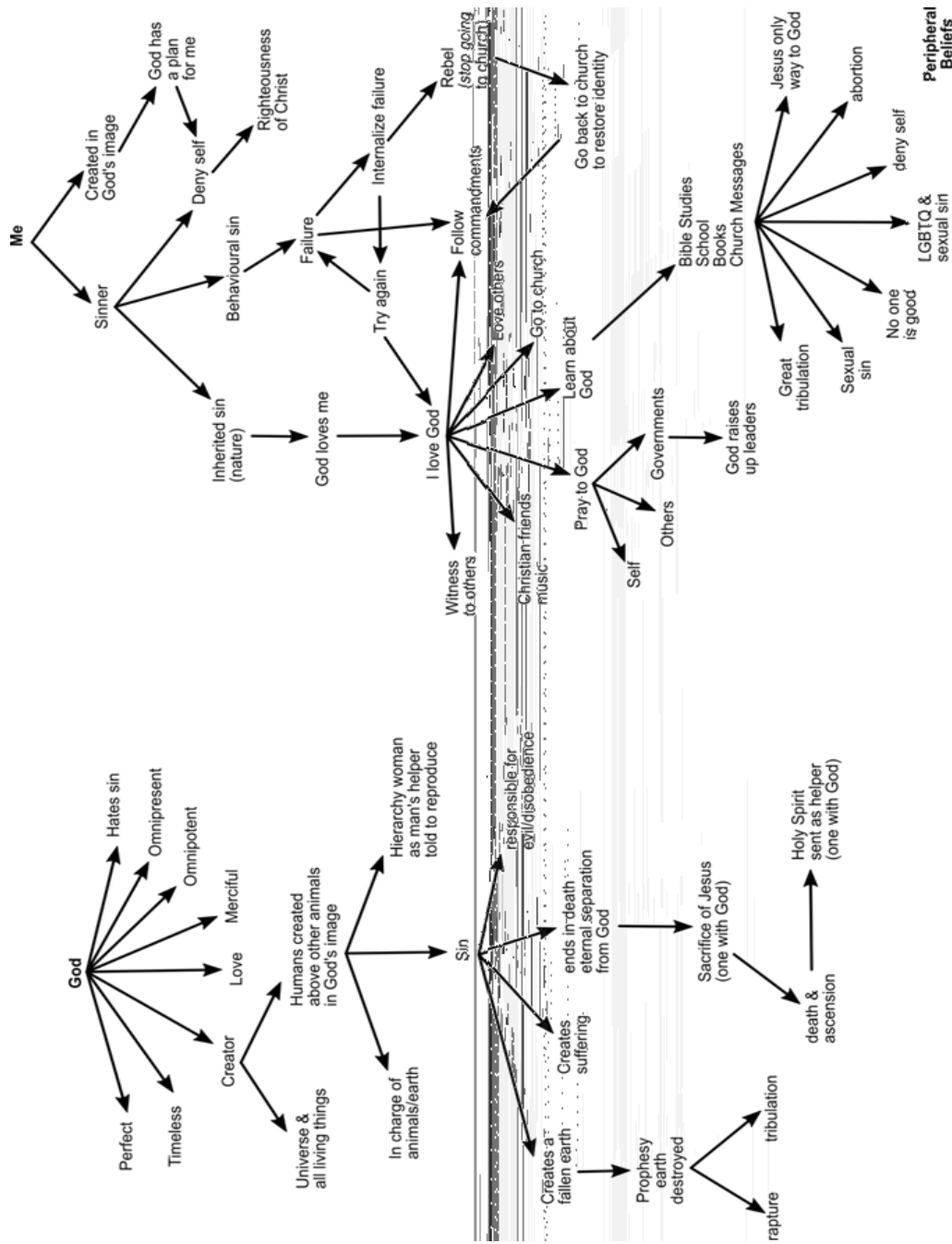


Figure 4.3 – Identity Bearing Beliefs

Figure 4.3 is an adaption of Ohlsson's diagram, depicting two center-periphery belief structures: my beliefs about God and how those beliefs, in keeping with Bracher's establishment pedagogy, influenced my beliefs about me (Ohlsson, 2011, 338; Bracher, 2006, p. 90).

The backdrop theory of atonement theology on the left developed my resident theory on the right. That is to say, the establishment pedagogy of the fundamentalist Evangelical Christianity told me who I was in relationship to the background theory, which encapsulates the creation narrative. The peripheral beliefs provided utility as it was through engagement with them that I was able to take on projects such as going to church and reading the Bible so that I could attain my ultimate concern, which was to become a better Christian. Although the establishment pedagogy shaped by my belief system, I was not a passive agent. I was an active agent navigating the contradictions and burying my cognitive dissonance.

In speaking about identity-bearing beliefs, Mark Bracher refers to master signifiers such as “Christian”, “Sinner”, “Woman”, “Intelligent” in that they are the pillars that provide us with meaning. According to Bracher, the linguistic register from which master signifiers emerge has the most impact on learning (2006, p. 17). The validation and recognition that we get from others for embodying these master signifiers reinforces our identities. In his book *Human Cognition*, Michael Tomasello speaks about the social being wherein language is a form of cognition: “It is a cognition packaged for purposes of interpersonal communication (Langacker in Tomasello, p. 150). These identities are then formed through language created through the necessity of our social interaction. “The process of acquiring these symbolic conventions leads human beings to conceptualize things in some ways that they would not do otherwise...” (p. 150). Identity is conceptualized through the use of master signifiers. Based on recognition; our beliefs are the product of how we see ourselves through the eyes of others:

Our identity depends, “first, on the integrity and status of the master signifiers and, second, on our assurance that we actually embody these signifiers.

Anything that reduces the status of a master signifier or our claim to the signifier weakens our sense of self and triggers efforts to reinforce our identity...” (Bracher, 2006, p. 17).

My master signifier as Christian and sinner were in response to my beliefs about God. As my auto-ethnography reveals, I struggled with the peripheral beliefs that excluded people and justified war. These peripheral beliefs were part-and-parcel to my core beliefs meaning that for the core beliefs to be true, the peripheral beliefs were true too. I tried to negotiate these beliefs, but the submission of women, anti-abortion, and homophobia were deeply troubling to me. The tensions that I experienced with the peripheral beliefs were stressful as there is no negotiation within a closed absolutist belief system. My identity as a good Christian was therefore threatened by my unbelief.

I wondered why religion was given a premium on absolute certainty when nothing else seemed to work that way. It was very difficult for me to identify with something outside of myself so completely and yet failed to embody my ideal. My questions had no place in my belief system, and I was to give all rationale up to magical thinking. My curiosity was not allowed and with that there was no inner delight or creative spark. All of the glory was external to my being. I was not allowed to think for myself. The verse found in I Corinthians 1:25 (New International Version), “For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom...” deems critical thinking as a waste of time. When I took on the master signifier of feminist in my undergraduate studies, my

discontent grew¹². Not only did I struggle with the peripheral beliefs that abortion and same-sex union were wrong, but it was also difficult for me to reconcile to a patriarchal religion that sees women as subservient to men. I lived within contradictions of a webbed mass of disheveled beliefs formed from an ancient patriarchal religion that asked too much of me. Many have asked me why I did not just walk away if I struggled so much with the belief system.

To answer this question, the reader is invited to consider the role of emotions as the glue that holds beliefs to one's identity. Consider why one stays with their partner even though it may not be a good fit. Evangelical Christianity supposes a relationship of even greater value; one with a loving creator who sacrificed himself for you because of your sinfulness. Is there any greater value than one lay down their life for another? Consider emotions such as love, gratitude, happiness combined to emotions of fear, guilt and shame. In fundamentalist Evangelical Christianity, the fear, guilt and shame relate to the identity of the believer, while love, gratitude and happiness can only be achieved through a relationship with Jesus. The problem here is that fear, guilt and shame never dissipate from one's being. It was a constant surrender of my life for the life of my beliefs. The surrendering involved projects which included behaviours such as going to church, worship, Bible study, fellowship although preached as the right thing to do were attempts by me to not only find belonging, but to feel the emotions of belonging. The severity of content and discontent are determined by a measure of acceptance, belonging and love.

¹² Considering the way my mother raised me to be independent of men (in stark contrast to the church), the precepts of feminism were already present in my psyche. In this sense, it was easy for me to take on the master signifier of feminism. In doing so, it became more conscious to my sense of being in the world. It also caused me to have more tensions in my belief system and increased my cognitive dissonance.

According to Bracher, the affective-psychological register can be stronger than the linguistic register. For example, I can call myself a Christian and that may guide my projects to reach my ultimate concern of belonging, but if I am not emotionally invested, it is easier to walk away. I may still call myself a Christian and go to church at Christmas and Easter, but tradition is not the same as a relationship. So, when considering the strength of a belief system, one must consider the emotional investment into that system. Indoctrinated from a young age, my emotional investment was significant. Archer says that emotions are emergent commentaries upon our ultimate concerns. That is to say, as reflexive beings our inner conversation constantly reviews, monitors, and transmutes our emotions (2000, p. 195). Similarly, scholar Margaret Nussbaum argues that emotions are cognitive thoughts that evaluate and judge what is valued and held most dear contributing to one's well-being. Therefore, scholars need to pay attention to emotions as not merely affect, but in terms of reason (Cates, 2003).

My transformative learning journey out of Christianity is a credit to the adult educators who provided an environment where I felt emotionally safe to explore my belief system. Not all of the educators were aware of the growing curiosity that was occurring within me. They did not have access to my inner world, but it was their approach with a generative learning pedagogy that gave me the courage to explore the contender theories presented to me further. The next three sessions outline the process of my learning

CHAPTER 5

The Unraveling – The Process of My Unbelief

The unravelling of my beliefs did not occur all at once. It was not a simple matter of not believing in God anymore. That would have been too devastating. Instead, it was a slow process of disconnecting the safer peripheral beliefs from my core belief. Learning in safe non-threatening environments allowed me the agency to question.

Learning at Grace College

A pivotal point when the unraveling of my belief system began was when I decided that to go to Bible College in 2007. At the time, I was attending Baptist church in Lower Sackville, N.S., for approximately two years, when I came across a poster promoting a Bible College in a local Christian bookstore. The fees and schedule for class times seemed doable and so I registered right away. I thought that if I could immerse myself in godly things, maybe I would learn how to become the person God intended me to be. My foundation, however, was about to be shaken. Instead of learning how to be a better Christian, I learned to question all that I had been previously taught about God, the Bible, creation, and salvation. Although Grace College did not advertise as liberal, they did not take a literal view of the Bible and therefore were not Evangelical fundamentalists. Interestingly, my fellow students, all eight of them, were all Christian fundamentalists. Some were not open to the teachings and dropped out due to their own convictions and others on the advice of their pastors. In the end, there were only two of us who completed the program. I was open to the teachings as the dialogue validated my previously forbidden questions. Intrigued and intellectually stimulated, the process of critical thinking began to chip away at some key peripheral beliefs. No longer looking inward at my previously

perceived failures, I was looking critically at my beliefs with the support of other Christians. Consequently, I was liberated from Biblical literalism and self-doubt. My questions no longer signified a lack of faith; but were welcomed and engaged. I had permission to think critically without being accused of unbelief. I was therefore slowly able to tease out my belief system from my identity. Grace College was the beginning of my transformational learning journey.

Grace College was a non-accredited Christian College located in Halifax, N.S. that ran for approximately 10 years (1999-2009). The classes were held in the church buildings of various denominations throughout the Halifax Regional Municipality. All new students were required to take the Foundational Program; a yearlong course introducing students to theology. The college was purposely small and run by three individuals; the founder, a retired professor of religious studies from Saint Mary's University; his wife, the coordinator and a spiritual mentor to the students; and, a Seventh Day Adventist minister who studied Hebrew and Greek as it applied to the interpretation of the Bible. Aside from the Foundational Program, the college offered a two-year course on the Old Testament which was a prerequisite for the one-year course on the New Testament. However, after I completed the Foundational Program, I registered for the New Testament course as the Old Testament was not available. As it turned out, the school closed, and I was unable to take the Old Testament course. I did, however, attend a monthly study group that consisted of a small group of Grace College alumni.

The churches that we visited during the Foundational Program included the following denominations: Mennonite, Baptist, Pentecostal, Non-denominational (student campus), Lutheran, Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, and the Salvation Army. Interestingly, the United Church of Canada (UCC) was not included in the lineup of churches we visited. So, although Grace College challenged fundamentalism, their beliefs were not as liberal as

the UCC. Among the churches attended, the differences between the various denominations were noted, however, the focus was on the unifying beliefs such as God's grace; a theme the college emphasized throughout our study of theology. No doubt that each of the churches we attended was more liberal than some of their more conservative counterparts. On Friday evenings, we heard from the minister of the church we were visiting, and he would speak to us about tradition, customs and beliefs of the particular denomination. On Saturday, we were able to use a classroom in the church building for our coursework.

The coursework challenged the fundamentalist views about the Bible such as a literal interpretation, punishment, hell, Satan, the six-day creation narrative, the rapture/tribulation, and the necessity of repentant salvation. One of our first assignments was to read assigned books of the Bible in the way they were written as letters, poems and stories and to forgo any preexisting, attached meanings to the readings that we may have been taught in church. I found this practice of observation difficult because the previously taught sermons that I grew up hearing were ingrained within the scriptures. I felt as if I were taking a fine-toothed comb and teasing away the prescribed fundamentalist meaning from each sentence. It was difficult to look at the same verses with a different lens and to possibly find a different meaning, but dialogue with the students and teachers helped untangle some of those previously held interpretations. Over time, I was finally free to question the Bible. Moreover, I was free from the idea that God was trying to tell me something through the words that I was reading. I was looking objectively at the Bible for the first time. It felt strangely liberating.

The problem with interpretation was further discussed in the context of biblical translations. One of our teachers, a liberal Seventh Day Adventist studied Aramaic and Greek and spoke to us about the problematic translations of the Bible; specifically, the New

International Version (NIV). In particular, I learned that the word “punishment” was used significantly more in the NIV than other translations. According to our teacher who had completed his own in-depth punishment study, the word punishment has 62 references in the King James Version (KJV), but the NIV nearly triples that with 170 appearances of punishment words. I learned that there were many Hebrew and Greek words behind the English translations that were questionably translated to punishment words. As a class, we examined these words and other possible meanings. For example, instead of the word punish, the words “to correct”, “to warn”, “to protect” and “to judge” could have been used in some of the particular texts. As we considered word substitutions, the meaning of various texts were transformed.

Moreover, this exercise led to further study and critique of atonement theology which emphasizes human punishment with the doctrine of original sin, the existence of Satan, and the concept hell. Original sin also known as ancestral sin and is the notion that people are born into sin based on Adam and Eve's decision to disobey God. Original sin differs from behavioural or overt sins such as the breaking of the ten commandments. Difficult questions such as why good people go to hell are often explained with original sin in that no matter how well people behave, they are doomed if they do not accept Jesus as their Lord and Saviour. In contrast, people who do harmful things need only say the sinner's prayer to gain access to heaven. Fundamentalist Christians often use the verse found in John 14:6 as follows: “Jesus answered, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me'” (NIV). Figure 5.1 is taken from a Christian gospel track, *The Four Spiritual Laws* (1965) authored by Bill Bright. Figure 6.1 illustrates that the only way to God is through Jesus.

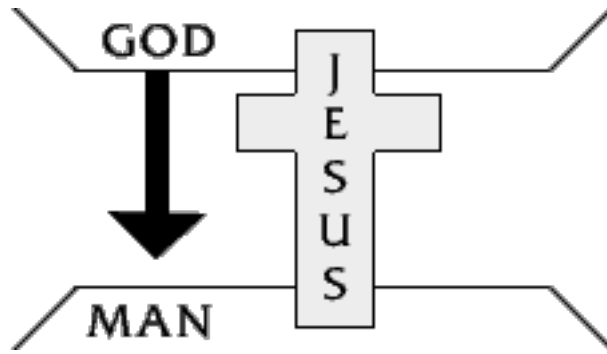


Figure 5.1 – Jesus is the only Way to God

Grace College questioned the necessity of the sinner's prayer and focused on the grace of God extended to all people regardless of their beliefs. Instead of people seeking out Jesus, he was expressed as God's love in human relationships. Grace College likened themselves to the early church who they claimed walked along side people to help them overcome compulsions and live in true freedom. However, as the Christian church grew with Emperor Constantine's conversion, newcomers were absorbed into the Church in large numbers. As a consequence, they were simply taught the 10 Commandments, the Lord's Prayer and the Apostle's Creed. Grace College taught that the doctrines and dogma were barriers to freedom. And although they believed in God's law, they perceived it under the umbrella of his grace. I found this teaching to be quite meaningful as it seemed to me that most people; myself included, focused on God's law versus his love and grace. I still had difficulties reconciling God's law and God's grace as they seemed contradictory to me, but I also observed the facilitator's struggle in this area. I was frustrated in my studies but relieved that no one was feeding me absolute answers.

It was clear that the facilitator's beliefs included evolution, but they were careful not to push their ideas onto the students. They introduced doubt into some main themes of Christian

fundamentalism. They questioned the concept of a young earth; the existence of Satan; and the eternal suffering of non-believers. The class discussed the problem of evil in the world but cast doubt regarding a satanic source or embodiment. Gehenna, the Hebrew term for hell, locates it as a place historically outside of the ancient walls of Rome where garbage as well of the bodies of those who had been crucified were burned. In terms of a modern-day concept of hell, it was discussed as a metaphor for a purifying process; one where the selfish nature is burned away which can be a painful process that brings forth renewal and growth.

The hell study was the most memorable and what I valued most from my course. Unfortunately, most of my peers did not feel the same way. After the hell study weekend, several students dropped out and some on the advice of their pastors. I remember that the resistance of some of my fellow students concerned the lack of justice towards those who had harmed them and their loved ones. According to the facilitators, they lost students every year when the topic of hell was broached. The facilitators speculated that the concept of Satan and hell were so deeply ingrained into the participants' understanding of God and justice that the discourse was too threatening to their belief system.

I was aware that my own belief system was breaking down but at this point, I embraced it. As the concept of God was becoming less defined, my questions although left unanswered were validated. I was more than ready to discard the God of wrath, punishment and anger. Punishment was at the very core of Atonement Theology, and I was letting go of beliefs that held me captive within the binaries of good and evil; saved and unsaved; heaven and hell; God and Satan; and damnation and eternity. I understood that these polar opposites create divisions between people and offered up the Other as the enemy.

I knew that Christianity had a dark history of creating and destroying their enemy and although I learned about the atrocities such as the Christian Crusades and the Salem Witch Trials, I considered that they were events of the past where the powerful wielded Christianity to their political advantage. At the time, I did not consider history as an evolving conduit for exclusionary and harmful beliefs passed down from one generation to the next. I was ignorant to the religious lobby and their creation of the deviant Other through selected scriptures. As I continued learning, history came alive.

I never understood why Christians were instructed to pray for Israel. For a time during my Christian journey, I tried to understand the scriptures that were considered to be end-time prophesies. Other Christians referred me to Hal Lindsey's book, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970) and the *Left Behind* series (1995) by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins for a better understanding of the scriptures. I was amazed by these books which linked current events and natural disasters to a dying earth, the rise of the anti-Christ, the great tribulation, and the rapture of believers. I could hardly take these books and their b-movies seriously as they seemed to me to be the unfolding of some horror flick. And yet, my favourite Christian musicians were singing the same song; their lyrics running through my head: "I wish we'd all been ready, the Son has come, and you've been left behind.... Two men walking up a hill, one disappears, and one is left standing still... there's no time to change your mind, how could you have been so blind..." (Larry Norman). In church, I heard sermons based on Matthew 24: 42-44:

Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and you would not

have let his house be broken into. So you must be ready because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him (New International Version).

As a child, I was terrified and I did not know what it meant to be ready, but I knew I had to be different from the me that I was. Yet, as I grew older, I became disillusioned with apocalyptic writers and their predictions of who they considered the anti-Christ to be. I doubted them and their use of the Bible as some kind of code that only they could understand. My studies at Grace College validated my doubt about apocalyptic prophecies. Moreover, I learned about how these prophecies were manufactured through Christian Zionism. Christian Zionists are fundamentalist Evangelicals who focus on end time prophecies.

My final paper for the Foundational Program explored the ways in which Christian Zionism creates the Other and promotes war in the Middle East. Christian Zionists prophesize the return of Jesus based on their observation of the political unrest in the Middle East. According to Christian Zionists, an important indicator of Jesus' return is the return of Jewish people to Israel. There are several scriptures that Zionists use to support their prophecies. For example, "Do not be afraid, for I am with you; I will bring your children from the East and gather you from the West. I will say to the North, 'Give them up! And to South, 'Do not hold them back.' Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the ends of the earth..." (New International Version, Isaiah 43:5-6,21). As I researched my paper, I found that the Zionists themselves were politically strong in the Republican party. Known as the Armageddon Lobby, they interfered with Israeli-Palestinian 'peace process'. How can there be peace when a war is expected? How can there be peace if Christians believe that people will be destroyed? "Gaza will be abandoned, and

Ashkelon left in ruins” (New International Version, Zephaniah 2:4). The immense suffering of the Palestinian people is legitimized as their ultimate destruction is prophesied. And so too the legitimization expands to the suffering of Muslims around the world.

As my studies progressed, I became more and more disillusioned with my church. I found that I could no longer sing some hymns that referred to Zionism or the return of Christ. The church that I attended was careful with the more controversial sermons but from time to time their convictions would reach the pulpit. One Sunday, when a minister announced that he would be preaching a four-week series on end-time prophecies, I decided not to attend. I no longer believed in the return of Christ; at least not the way it had been interpreted. As time went on, I realized that it was not just the controversial sermons that caused me to shift in my seat; but rather, it was all the sermons... the atmosphere, the judgments, the harm and the authoritarian nature of the teaching.

Learning at MSVU

All the while my faith was being challenged; I was also in university studying adult education. One of the first theorists on adult education that resonated with me was the late Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), he described the banking concept of education where the teacher gives information to the student in the same way one makes a deposit to the bank. “Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiques and makes deposits which the student quickly patiently receive, memorize and repeat” (p. 72). Although church ministers and preachers are not teachers in the formal sense, they like parents and mentors fill the role influencing the subject to either be receptacles or thinkers.

As I studied at university, I reflected on my history of learning within the church. The Bible memory verses that every good Christian should know by heart and my trust in the idea that these preachers knew something that I could never know because they were the messengers of God: "...the teacher confuses the authority of knowledge with his or her own professional authority, which she and he sets in opposition to the freedom of the students" (Freire, 1970, p. 73). And I the object of the information struggled to understand how the teachings were relevant to my life: "the teacher chooses the program content, and the students (who were not consulted) adapt to it..." (p. 73). And yet it was hard to adapt to the teachings when my life experiences and interests did not line up with them. Objects do not speak their turmoil. Instead, they are silent and blame themselves for their doubt. Harmful emotions like guilt, shame, fear and even love hold them to the God they are told to believe. Students are given the answers while their questions are silenced, and their very existence is framed as sinful. The more resistant the student, the more they are disciplined: "the teacher disciplines and the students are disciplined" (p. 73). I studied in silent amazement as I reflected upon my own experience of learning in the church.

And so, I left the church, my family in tow. My then husband, supportive of my decision, missed his friends only to find out later that Jesus was their only common thread. Although saddened by the conditional aspect of Christian friendships, I was not surprised relating back to the scripture that tells believers not to be yoked together with other believers (New International Version, 2 Corinthians 6:14). When our church friends found out that we were going to the UCC, they figured that we lost our faith. My son, 16 at the time, did not object to leaving. In fact, several months earlier leading up to my decision to leave, my son witnessed the leader of his youth group lose his faith. Prior to the youth leader stepping down from his position in the

church, my son picked up on the subtleties wherein the youth leader led discussions on doubt and inclusion of other religions. I wonder about my son's learning as he witnessed his youth leader and his mother walk away from the church. He told me later that his experience with religion influenced his decision to study philosophy in university.

In 2010, I decided to do a master's degree in Lifelong Learning. At the time I was working as a correctional officer in a woman's prison, and I was interested in competing for a position as a correctional program officer so I could facilitate programs to those subject to federal custody and supervision. My initial motivation to enroll in higher learning was to gain an understanding into the ways in which people learn so that I could better help those in my classroom should I get the position. I did not expect that my Christian beliefs, those that remained, would be challenged along the way.

My belief in the creation narrative was challenged when our class studied *The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition* (1999) by Michael Tomasello. Our in-class discussions explored non-human primates as our ancestors. While this was uncomfortable for me given my belief system in the creation narrative, I was also intrigued. Although I no longer believed in a six-day creation, I believed that humans were created separately from other primates. It was deeply ingrained in my psyche that humans were created in God's image; distinct and favoured by God. Consequently, other primates and animals have a lower status to humans, and therefore the concept of evolution is perceived as an insult to many Christians. I decided to write one of my blog assignments which I entitled *The Uncanny Valley* (2011) on Wilma, the first model of a Neanderthal based in part on ancient DNA evidence. Rereading my blog as I write this, I see the discomfort in my words as I wrestled with the theory of evolution. I also see my acceptance of Wilma as I reconciled my belief in creation to science by referring organizations like the

BioLogos Foundation, a group of Christians who are made up of professional scientists, philosophers, educators, theologians, biblical scholars, and pastors who work to unite the central themes of religion and science by emphasizing the compatibility of the Christian faith with scientific discoveries about the origins of the universe and life.

I remember feeling nervous about writing my blog. I wondered if my professor and the other students would read it and judge me. I heard that higher education was often associated with atheism, and I wondered if my professor was an atheist. I was a good student, but what would he think of me after reading my blog entry? To my surprise, he applauded my courage for stepping out of my comfort zone to examine my belief system and for being open to the information that I was learning. He told me that many students would not take this step as the information is a threat to their Christian (and/or other religious) identity. I quietly exhaled a large sigh of relief as I realized that I was safe in his classroom. I was safe to learn, explore and wrestle with my ponderings. For much of my life, I longed to work out my cognitive dissonance but never had the safe space to explore my questions and other world views. In doing so, I was no less a Christian and no less a graduate student.

As our classroom discussions centered on our bonobo ancestors and other primates, the professor's words struck me: "when they open their eyes, they see the world as we do". I considered the beauty of primates; their uniqueness; their cooperation with one another; their ability to use tools. I no longer perceived human origins as distinct from the animal world. The process of genetic variation made sense to me. The path of learning and the evolution of the brain meant that humans have learned their way into a cultural context. In his book, Tomasello speaks about cultural transmission whereby practices and artifacts are used perhaps without change for many generations and then later modified by another group (1999, p. 5). In the same

way, I came to understand religion as a social construct; a combination of both artifacts and practices that were modified as seen in the new learning communities that I had studied in along the way. The unraveling of my beliefs was transformational. I still held onto the concept of God as being independent of religion, but I no longer believed the Bible over reason, or that evolution was an attack on God. The dissolution of my beliefs due to the acquisition of new knowledge is illustrated in Figure 5.2.



Figure 5.2 – Learning and Beliefs

The perforated circles represent a willingness to open myself to a different worldview. In doing so, I found that I no longer needed to struggle with logical arguments (which to me have always been circular in nature). Moreover, my struggle with the church's view on morality dissipated. The Christian Right's preoccupation with abortion, same sex marriage and as of late, bathroom bills that discriminate against transgender people are held together by the creation narrative and a literal view of the Bible. I began to see how the creation narrative influenced gender politics contributing to patriarchy and sexism. In addition, the idea that God made two genders in his image in charge of all creation has led to environmental degradation and the horrific treatment of animals.

According to Mezirow, transformative learning happens when one is disillusioned and fragmented. This leaves opportunity for what he refers to as pedagogical entry points (Mezirow, 2009). I struggled with my beliefs and needed a safe place to engage in discourse and thankfully that was afforded to me. Grace College considered my previous experiences and beliefs and provided a safe space to engage in dialogue. I was relieved to find that there were other Christians who challenged me and supported me. In my university classroom, there was no direct talk about Christianity, but we engaged the dialogue that challenged and engaged me. During one class the professor played an interview with Bishop John Shelby Spong. Bishop Spong was discussing his book, *Eternal Life* (2010) and raised many questions to an afterlife as taught in fundamentalist churches. Bishop Spong made a statement saying something to the effect that if this life was all there was and that if he were to die right now, he would be content with the life he lived. I was intrigued to hear a bishop speak in such a way so later that night, I listened to the interview again. I then proceeded to learn more about Bishop Spong's liberal views on Christianity. My beliefs were continued to unravel.

Figure 5.3 depicts the erosion of my beliefs. The faded circles are old beliefs that no longer supported my larger belief in God and the Christian worldview. Note that most of the interconnecting lines are absent. I continued to hold to my personal relationship with Jesus. The Other Christians in Figure 6.3 represent more liberal Christians.

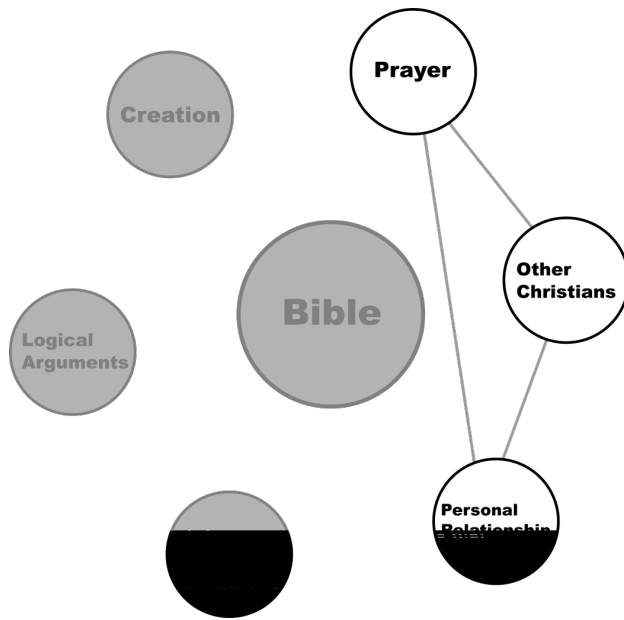


Figure 5.3 – Dissolution of Beliefs

This is my adaptation based on my experience of deconversion. The original diagram is Figure 4.1 is credited to Christian Sanchez, June 19, 2009 (YouTube).

So, what was it about the learning communities that helped me to critically question everything I believed about God? My teachers at Grace College and a professor that I studied under in university presented information for discussion. They respected my beliefs, but also challenged me to think beyond them. It was difficult to let go of my beliefs but as I've described it was more difficult for me to hold onto them. The teachers facilitated the learning process well in that they did not give me the answers or even their strong opinions. They left the answers up to me. I found this to be initially frustrating, but I soon found out that there were no absolute answers, only more questions. Upon realizing this, my old worldview deconstructed. My deconstruction was deeply personal and the teachers at Grace College and the professor at

MSVU did not know what was going on inside of me. However, they provided a safe and engaging space for learning to occur.

The Progressive Church

After leaving fundamentalism, I was interested in attending a progressive Christian church that valued diversity. I had read some books on progressive Christianity, and I was impressed by their positions on same-sex relationships and gender identity as well as their advocacy for social justice. I did not have a clear understanding of what they believed in, but I was drawn to their message to include and help others. I searched for local progressive Christian churches online and saw that one was located not far from where I lived. However, I was a bit hesitant, as it was a United Church, and I had some preconceived notions that they were “not Christian enough”. Even Grace College did not include the United Church in their circuit of churches to visit and study. I continued to search for other progressive churches within the Christian faith, but I kept coming back to the United Church. There was one only minutes from my house.

On the homepage of the Bedford United Church’s website [://bedforded.ca](http://bedforded.ca) / was an affirming statement, “We are an Affirming Ministry of the United Church of Canada”. Upon further online inquiry, I found that the organization, Affirm United is an independent body of the UCC but made up of united church members who work to educate independent congregations towards the full inclusion of LGBTQ+ individuals. BUC has been an affirming ministry since 2006 (Affirm, n.d.). The Affirm United logo illustrated in Figure 5.4 unites the cross and Pride Rainbow is on the BUC’s website homepage.

Figure 5.4 - Affirm United Logo

One of the requirements of an affirming ministry is to create a vision statement of inclusivity. The BUC inclusivity statement is as follows:

We the people of Bedford United Church declare publicly our commitment to creating a community where all people are welcome regardless of age, gender, race, sexual orientation, gender identity, differing abilities, ethnic background or economic circumstances.

All persons are welcome to take part in every aspect of church life including membership, leadership, celebrating life passages and marriage.

We celebrate the richness that diversity brings to our church, even as it challenges us. We pray for God's spirit to guide us as we work for reconciliation and justice for all persons in both church and society.

Although I was hesitant about attending a United

that I was looking for different kind of gospel; one concerned with people's lived experiences versus their eternal destiny.

Bedford United Church is located at 1200 Bedford Hwy only a 10-minute drive from my house. It was a Sunday morning in November 2011 when I first attended BUC. It was hard to find a parking spot as the church's parking lot was completely full and all the spots along Sullivan's Hill, the side street across from BUC, were taken. Circling around back to the Bedford Hwy, I seen that a public lot across the highway was filling up, but I managed to get a spot there.

The first thing I noticed walking up Sullivan's Hill towards the main church entrance was a large Gay Pride Flag flapping in the wind. I had never attended a gay positive church before, and I felt somehow relieved to be entering one. Relieved because it never felt right to exclude people because of who they love and/or how they express themselves. Filled with anticipation for what was next, I quickened my step. As I entered the narthex of the church, two greeters warmly welcomed me and pointed me in the direction of coffee and treats located on the tables to our left. As I helped myself to some green tea, I observed people socializing and exchanging pleasantries. To my right was the entrance to the inner church sanctuary where I could hear the choir practicing. Just prior to entering the sanctuary, I noticed a display table shrouded in colours of the gay pride rainbow. I stopped for a few minutes to peruse the reading material dedicated to LGBTQ+ issues. When I entered the sanctuary, I noticed the sound and music technicians at the back setting up and testing their equipment with someone at the front. On the walls of the sanctuary leading toward the front of the church, I noticed large pieces of fabric artwork — some depicting the gay pride rainbow colours. I sat on the right side of the sanctuary about mid-way back. The church pews filled up and I guessed there were about 300 or more people in attendance.

The church service followed a format not too different from the traditional ones that I was used to but there were some differences. The worship team led the congregation in worship songs that I did not know but I was able to follow along as the words projected across the screen. The prayers that followed were of thanksgiving, blessings (offering) and supplication. I was familiar with the Lord's Prayer but taken back somewhat when the minister said, "in the name of our brother, Jesus" instead of "in the name of Jesus". After the worship, bible reading, and the collection, the children were called to the front of the

When I attended BUC, David Hart was the lead pastor. I did not meet him right away as he was on vacation when my family first attended, but when he returned, I was impressed that he noticed us right away amongst the many parishioners. He invited us to a welcoming dinner for newcomers hosted by a family who were long-time members of the church. We were embraced immediately by the minister and others in the congregation. This was in contrast to my previous church in that the ministers did not know us, which I figure was because we were not active volunteers in the church. On the few occasions that I did volunteer, I noticed that the male clergy were not comfortable to be alone in the company of women.

As we continued to attend Sunday mornings, I started to notice more differences between BUC and the Evangelical churches that I previously attended. For example, everyone regardless of their beliefs or involvement in the church was welcomed to partake in the Lord's Supper otherwise known as Holy Communion or Eucharist. The minister delivered an inclusive message of breaking bread together and the importance of community. It was a breath of fresh air to me that everyone was welcomed to the table. In my previous experience, the decision to partake was based on the presence of sins in one's life. Often, I would let the plate pass me by as I felt unworthy. Other times, I would partake so that I would not be judged by my peers sitting close by who would notice my non-participation. Either way, my experience of The Lord's Supper whether I participated or not was always associated with guilt and shame.

My first experience of communion was when I was around eight or nine years old. I went with a friend and her family to the Catholic Church that they attended each week. During the service, I remember being so confused and self-conscious about whether I should sit, kneel or stand that I ended up getting it all wrong. I was happy when my friend suggested we break away from the corrective eye of her parents and get in line for the Holy Eucharist. And so, we ran ahead

and partook of the bread. Soon after, I was even more confused to see my friend's parents running up to me asking if I had eaten the wafer. They were so upset when they found out that I; an unbaptized, unconfirmed, non-Catholic had eaten the Lord's body. Frightened by their reactions, I felt condemned to a life of doom so much so that I cried all the way home. When my friend's mother told my parents of my horrible sin, my mother went into a tailspin causing me to cry all the more, while my stepfather, a Catholic dissenter, called bullshit and comforted my tears. He promised that I would never have to go back to the Catholic Church again and I never did. Although the protestant churches did not require baptism or confirmation to partake in the Lord's Supper, they did require the testimony of one's salvation and my struggle with my eternal security often causes me hesitation. At BUC, however, partaking of the Lord's Supper was not about being good enough. It was not about eternal security. It was about being accepted into a community without anyone knowing anything about me.

As I listened to the weekly messages at BUC, I did not hear the words "saved" or "sinner", "hell", "damnation", or the kinder "eternal separation from God". In fact, there was very little talk about an afterlife. Instead, the focus was on love, social justice, gratitude, inclusion, and advocacy for the poor. I was happy to attend a church that cared about social justice issues and challenged parishioners to be engaged in the political process. For the very first time in my life, I finally felt that my interests and education were aligned with my faith.

The biggest difference I noticed about attending BUC was that I did not feel the guilt, shame and overall inadequate feelings that I typically experienced after leaving an Evangelical service. Instead, I felt connected to a healthy community and positive support. They did not seem concerned about my sins. Instead, they seemed interested in my well-being. David Hart used common Sanskrit words like *shanti*, which means peace and *namaste*, which means the spirit in

me honours the spirit in you. I knew these terms because I frequented

the

terms

the website and eagerly awaited its arrival. As I followed the practice, I found that Christian music and worship replaced any mention of inner guidance or Hindu Deities. The yoga poses were therefore an outward expression of worship to God.

In fundamentalist Evangelical Christianity, yoga and meditation like any other belief systems outside of Christianity are not only frowned upon but considered wrong or even evil. The yogic philosophy is that the path to peace is to focus inward to the self or true essence which in turn radiates goodness outwardly. The Evangelical philosophy is that peace is found external to the self in the deity of Jesus, who in turn, radiates goodness inwards and saves you from the sinful self.

In many Evangelical circles, yoga is considered sinful as it guides participants inward to trust and follow their hearts. Fundamentalist Evangelical Christianity teaches that the heart is deceitful, and that the self cannot be trusted. As a young teen, I remember watching a video at a youth group gathering that depicted people lying down in meditation as they asked their

compassion, self-love and self-acceptance, all of which were cultivated within my yoga community. I wondered the threat of such empowerment in Evangelical circles. My practice of yoga along with my earlier Grace College studies and my graduate work at university all helped me to leave fundamentalism. When I attended BUC, my yoga practice was not only validated but it was incorporated into my vision of God, a unifying and loving force within the world. My vision of God was becoming eclectic expanding into something which I considered to be much bigger and better, and I was excited to see it unfold.

As I reflected on the idea of self-love, I realized that the Evangelical Christianity's concept of it was that we could only love ourselves because Jesus loves us and saved us from our sins. But continually being identified as a sinner, even though one saved by grace, makes it difficult to love the self. Although Christians are told that God loves them, the sins of humanity (past, present and future) have caused him to sacrifice his son. Christians are therefore taught to deny the self and cultivate an identity in Jesus. It is only through forgiveness that the message of love is taught. When the church teaches their congregation that they are responsible for the crucifixion of Christ, it is pretty difficult to focus on self-love. The focus is either on Jesus or on judgments but there is never any glory in the self. At the time, I wondered how it was that the BUC; a seemingly Christian church, was able to reconcile God to yoga.

BUC's Adult Learning Classes

After a few months of attending BUC, I attended two adult learning classes and soon found that their beliefs were very different from Evangelical Christianity I understood. The first class that I attended was called: "BUC 101: Our Theology and Our Values". This was a small group of about 10 participants and led by two facilitators: David Hart, and another longtime

member of the church. For a span of three weeks, the course ran for two hours one night per week. The facilitators led us in discussion about their idea of God, the person of Jesus, and their approach to the Bible. Instead of the old man in the sky, God was described as a great spirit embodied within all creation. In turn, creation was described as an evolutionary process not only directed by God but containing God. That is to say, God is considered to be located internally within all life, and externally as a connecting and unifying force in the world. The concept of divine was therefore attributed to all life within the universe including the universe itself. The divinity of Jesus was not because he was born of a virgin, but because he was part of creation lending the concept of divinity to all beings. Jesus was however described as someone who from a young age was spiritually gifted in the same way that some young children are described as musically and/or mathematically gifted today. The Bible was not considered the literal word of God but was rather appreciated for its metaphors, poetry and stories that described people's experiences with the divine. I remember the facilitator asking me what the "book of Ginger" would read like if it were part of the collection of Bible stories. I thought it a strange question at the time but reflected that it would be full of questions, gratitude, failures, complaints, and contradictions... all so intensely human.

I was fascinated with these concepts, but I had not fully grasped them until I took another adult learning course called *Living the Questions*. The course designed after a book by the same name, *Living the Questions: The Wisdom of Progressive Christianity* (2012), authored by David M. Felten and Jeff Procter-Murphy. The classes lasted several weeks and were facilitated by one of BUC's ministers and her husband. They showed short videos of leaders from various denominations speaking about the problems with Evangelical fundamentalism. After we watched the clips, we would break off into small groups and have discussions. In my small group, I

remember sharing my experience of Christianity. The others in my group also shared their experiences. Some had similar experiences to me while others were raised in the UCC. I was surprised to meet people who described their agnostic views. As we shared, I again noticed that no one was telling me what to believe. And yet, their descriptions of God as an impersonal energy began to trouble me. Although I heard the concept before, I now questioned the impact of impersonal energy in the world. It sounded distant and ineffective to me. I remember feeling uneasy

phoenix who rises out of the ashes to symbolize the death of the old and the creation of something new.

BUC's stance on the resurrection became clear to me one night while I was at a Living the Questions class. During a break, I got a cup of tea and decided to check out some of the books on a side table. I signed out two written by the late Jesus Scholar Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for The First Time* (1994) and *The Heart of Christianity* (1989). Borg was referenced quite a bit in the videos we were watching, and I figured I would learn more about progressive Christianity by reading his books. As I perused the book table further, I read the back cover of a book which argued against the bodily resurrection of Jesus. As I read, I felt a stirring of anxiety rise up within me and I could hear my heartbeat get louder. I slowly put the book back on the table and quietly took my seat as break neared its end. I was uneasy now. I didn't want to not believe in the deity of Jesus. He was the cornerstone to my faith. The reason I was a Christian. The reason I went to church. But as the class began and the discussions continued, I realized again that no one was forcing me to believe or not believe anything.

After some time and as I continued to challenge my old beliefs, I came to see Jesus as a person and while it was difficult to let go of my perceived relationship with him, I began to appreciate his humanity. In fact, as I considered his humanity, my struggle with being a good enough Christian began to subside. Jesus was not perfect. I began to see him as a person with imperfections who stood up to the oppressive establishment of his time. I began to see him as a revolutionary against the establishment of the state and of the church. His death then took on a whole different meaning.

Membership

Once I completed the church led courses, David Hart asked me if I would become a member and preside for one month out of the year. I said yes to both opportunities. I was glad to be a part of such an incredible community led by a leader who fostered adult learning and growth in his congregation. There was a small ceremony for the memberships. I think there were about four or five of us at the time who were called up to the front of the church. David introduced each of us and welcomed us to the community as he put a small wooden cross around our necks. However, I was quite taken back when he introduced me as someone from a different faith tradition. As I continued to learn about the UCC and progressive Christianity, I realized that he was right. Although through a shared history, there were many similarities between progressive Christianity and Evangelical Christianity such as the symbols and language, the meanings were very different.

I presided three times over a three-year period during the month of June. In the summer, from June-August, there is only one service versus two. For the remainder of the year, there is an early service at 9am and later service at 11am. The services are similar in terms of the message, but the music and pace seem to be faster during the 9am service. It seems that more young families attend the earlier service. As a presider, I was the first on stage to welcome the congregation, introduce the topic, and say the opening prayer. Intermittently throughout the service, I returned to the front to give thanks over the offering, highlight the announcements and upcoming events, and at the end of the service, I said that blessing and extinguished the candles. As a presider, I found that I was given a lot of freedom. I could write my own prayers and pick which version of the Lord's Prayer I wanted the congregation to follow. I found it interesting that after every service, people would tell me what a great job I did but some would also comment on

the version of the Lord's Prayer I selected that morning. One man said, "Thank you for using the traditional prayer. I don't hear it so much anymore and it was really nice to hear today", while another woman approached me and said, "We don't use the traditional prayer anymore. Did you not see the modern version?" One of the congregation members, Carolyn Crowell wrote the modern version of the Lord's Prayer as follows:

God of love and life

Holy is your name.

Let the fullness of your grace be

Within us and around us;

We pray for food, shelter and safety today

for ourselves and for all your creation everywhere.

Let us forgive the offences of others

as we are forgiven our own offences.

May our hearts be open to courage and strength

in our times of trial

And may we always be compassionate.

My experience facilitating the service particularly as it concerned the Lord's Prayer told me that the beliefs within the church varied from traditional to progressive. Although my beliefs about God evolved, I still did not know much about progressive Christianity. In her Ph.D. dissertation, Rebekka King, found that progressive Christians defined themselves

scientific or liberal worldview, those elements of the Christian story and related practices are rejected” (2012, p. 3).

Learning and Collapse - The painful part.

My unraveling hit a brick wall when in 2013, I attended a progressive Christianity conference held at Saint Mary's University in Halifax, N.S. I was excited to learn more about progressive Christianity and took copious notes as guest speakers, Gretta Vosper and Bruce Sanguin took the stage. Gretta Vosper was the first speaker. As I listened to her, she talked about the sad state of the world, but she never once mentioned God. I was confused. I heard rumblings at the book table that she was an atheist and that her message was no different from a secular humanist. I was super confused. How could a minister not believe in God? But then as we had group discussions at our tables, I found that many of those in my discussion group held similar views. Although some seemed unsure and identified as agnostic; others were clearly atheists. It was then I wondered if progressive Christianity the same as post-theism.

As I sat there, I sensed an emotional stirring within me. What if there is no God? I had never allowed myself to ask this question before. I finally gave myself permission to ask the question and linger in the thought, “there is no God”. As I did, a lump formed in my throat, and I could feel my emotions rising. I remember feeling completely lost and hopeless. If there is no God to help us, there is no hope. I felt sad for the world... everything seemed so pointless. I excused myself from the table and went to the back of the room where the book table was located. I figured that since there were not many people at the table I could regain my composure, and I could give author Gloria Neufelf Redekop a break from tending the books. As I approached Gloria, she noticed that something was upsetting me and asked me if I was okay. When I started

to speak, I broke down into tears. It was difficult for me to talk through my tears, but she understood me. Interestingly enough, Gloria's research for her book, *Bad Girls and Boys Go To Hell (or not)* (2012) is about the loss and grief that Christians experience when they leave fundamental evangelism. Gloria assured me that not all progressive Christians are atheists. I bought a copy of her book and in the front of it, she wrote: "Celebrate your freedom from fundamentalism and take joy in the God/Great Spirit/Mystery within and around you! And be well, Gloria NR".

A few months later, I stopped going to church. Although I missed the community, I started to grow disillusioned with progressive Christianity. I was confused and I felt a stirring anger within me. Everything I believed, loved, and struggled with my whole life had been dismantled. I felt anger towards the fundamentalist Evangelical church, and I started to see progressive Christianity as a watered-down version of the real thing. Even my practice of yoga even became difficult

Although it may sound dramatic, as my beliefs dismantled, it was not only the loss of my identity, but the death of who I knew myself to be. And so, as I died to God, I was liberated to re-emerge, but who was I?

Applied Theory to the Dissolution of My Beliefs

The dissolution of my beliefs involves five main pedagogical entry points, which can be best described as opportunities for learning wherein I challenged my closed belief system. Interestingly, a person with a closed belief system does not typically entertain these types of pedagogical openings because as Bracher informs us that some students will resist becoming involved in certain types of knowledge coded as antithetical to one of their identity-bearing signifiers (2006, p. 19). Grace College was a liberal Bible college. In fact, I think that the leaders referred to themselves as Evangelical. The school still taught that the Bible was God's Holy inspired Word, however they questioned the larger fundamentalist teachings that emerged from the translations and interpretations of Biblical texts, specifically in relationship to God's wrath. As such, concepts of hell, eternal torment for unbelievers, punishment, Satan, evil and Armageddon were under scrutiny. Although the concept of sin remained, homophobia along with the interpretations of Leviticus¹³ were challenged. Through the learning process, I took a critical look at the Bible for the very first time. Grace College was the first place that I was able to freely question my beliefs with the encouragement of other Evangelical Christians. For so long, I explored within my faith system to ask these questions. My experience of being able to question

¹³ We did not study the book of Leviticus in depth as that was a separate course. There was however discussion that the laws were misinterpreted, and some were favoured while others were ignored. It was taught that the book of Leviticus represents the Old Covenant laws while the teachings of Jesus represented a new covenant of grace.

within an Evangelical community was safe because I was still within my belief system. My identity therefore was not challenged. I also took comfort with the fact that the founder of Grace College was a retired professor from Saint Mary's University. I knew that I would now be able to marry the intellectual part of me to my faith. My master signifier of being a 'good student' and a "Christian" were both supported, and as such, they were starting to align. The conflict between my belief system and my knowledge of reality was beginning to lessen. My questions were encouraged, and I was challenged to ask more questions. As I did, my feelings of shame connected to doubt began to dissipate. The focus of the teachings was on God's grace. The facilitators encouraged me to see that God just might be pleased with me. My experience of learning at Grace College challenged some major peripheral beliefs and as such, I found that I could no longer attend the Baptist church that I attended for six years.

My second pedagogical entry point occurred when I decided to go to graduate school. I was a little more uncomfortable discussing primates and non-human primates as cultural origins as the knowledge was antithetical to my belief base. The knowledge was therefore threatening to my identity. However, given the way in which the material was taught; through a generative pedagogy, I felt supported to explore the topic in more depth than I had in the past. No one asked me what I believed, and no one mocked creation narratives. As such, I did not have a need to defend myself and my curiosity grew. In addition, since my learning experience at Grace College, my belief system was no longer closed or strictly defined. Consequently, I felt that I now had permission to ask questions. As I sat in class and flipped through a beautiful hardcover book that had pictures and descriptions of non-human primates that our professor brought into class one day, I trusted the science. Ohlsson's resubsumption theory postulates that my belief system was now interacting with the new knowledge, and therefore I needed to consider the ways in

which they would merge and formulate new meaning. I experienced what Ohlsson would refer to as the propagation of truth, a point change throughout the belief base (2011, p. 353). Prior to writing my blog on Wilma, I searched for information on evolutionary creation and found the BioLogos Foundation; a group of scholars that emphasize the compatibility of creation and science. As I continued my reading, the concept of Intelligent design became a part of my belief base. In this way, I was amending my background theory and thus my resident theory so that the new knowledge could merge with the resident theory. In the past, the new knowledge would have been stored as contender theory.

My third pedagogical entry point occurred within the three years that I attended a progressive United Church. I started attending while in my second year of graduate studies and so I often considered what I was learning at church compared to what I was learning in university. The church that I was attending valued science, while my professor at university acknowledged the mystery in life. As such, I realized that I had left my closed belief system and found myself in an open one where questions were valued. Like my experience at university, my beliefs continued to be challenged but unlike my experience at Grace College, these ones were not so easy for me to give up. Although I had modified my background theory to one of Intelligent Design, it allowed me to keep some key peripheral beliefs: the virgin birth, the bodily resurrection of Jesus, and the deity of Christ. As I explored the adult education classes and listened closely to the metaphors being used, I realized that not everyone held to these beliefs. Eventually my key peripheral beliefs were replaced with the concept that God inhabited all life. The teaching that God inhabited all life was a lot more inclusive than the Atonement Theology that teaches that a separation between sinful humans and God. Their sermons on social justice and radical inclusions aligned with the concept of Oneness. Ohlsson refers to the

transformational learning that I experienced at the United Church as resubsumption theory characterized by competitive evaluation (2011, p. 353). Competitive evaluation is a measure of the utility of the contender theory in comparison to the resident theory (p. 353). I came to realize that the contender theory was based on love, acceptance, and social justice and this aligned with my beliefs around social justice. Ohlsson tells us that it is the success of the contender theory and not the failures of the resident theory that drives the shift between the two theories (p. 353). This was certainly the case in my transformation.

My fourth pedagogical entry point occurred was when I decided to attend the Progressive Christianity Conference held at Saint Mary's University in Halifax, N.S. in 2013. It was there that my core belief in God started to dismantle. It did not involve the long process of negotiating peripheral beliefs, which made God a lot more palatable. Instead, it was a direct assault to my worldview or as Ohlsson calls it, the background theory. And so, in keeping with Bracher's notion of identity-bearing beliefs, I experienced an existential crisis. My identity was very much connected to my belief in God. Up until that point, my learning transformation shape-shifted me from that of a guilt-ridden sinner to one that saw the goodness of God in all creation, but now I was now at a standstill. I could not negotiate my core belief. It was either there or it was not there. As I write this, I wonder why I did not just stop and hold to my progressive beliefs up until then. Maybe it was because the speaker (Gretta Vosper) made a lot of sense to me and as such, my beliefs no longer held a solution or as Ohlsson refers to it, utility. In keeping with Archer, any projects to reach my ultimate concerns seemed pointless. Said another way, prayers to an impersonal God seemed ineffective to me. Ohlsson would refer to my learning experience as resubsumption through a local breach in coherence.

In conclusion, the strength of identity-bearing beliefs, especially those formed in childhood, are incredibly powerful. I can only be grateful for the contextual discontinuity endured in my childhood as it helped me to question my forebears, and as such propelled me to question and seek meaning in my life. As a meta-reflexive, my story is one of inner struggle as I tried to align my experiences to beliefs that denied them. I did not like my beliefs, but as Ohlsson tells us, liking them is not necessary. Archer explains that religious beliefs are in the realm of practical knowledge that encodes upon embodied knowledge through which personal experiences become a testament of our belief interpretations. It is therefore not hard to understand why propositional or scholarly knowledge that is perceived to be antithetical to the belief interpretations would be categorized as contender knowledge. Beliefs do not hold truth, but they hold ultimate concerns that include meaning and identity. I developed projects (church, prayer, Bible reading) to maintain my identity until the underlying meaning, or my belief in God, was no more. However, this did not lead to collapse because I had the identity support of educators who taught through a generative pedagogy. By the time, I got to the Progressive Christianity conference, I had integrated parts of myself that had been repressed. For example, I had the ability to ask questions and walk away from the church without the burden of fear and guilt. I still had to sit with the loss of God and that took me a great deal of time. Maybe it is related to the stages of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance) because losing a religion can be like losing a relationship. And while this was my somewhat sad reality for a time, it was also good since I was able to explore my inner landscape and honour my feelings, something previously denied to me within the closed belief system of fundamentalist Evangelical Christianity.

Therefore, my grief did not mean utter collapse because up until that time, my transformational learning journey allowed me to disentangle from my closed belief system. As per Bracher's identity registers, I was able to consider who I was outside of fundamentalist Evangelical Christianity and even more so, outside of a belief in God. I was able to rid myself of the shame and guilt built into fundamentalist teachings as I set forth to understand love apart from fear. I made friends with my female-gendered body that for so long had been shamed, objectified, and vilified in the patriarchal religion of fundamentalist Evangelical Christianity that is further embedded and reinforced within the socio-cultural structures. Moreover, in the process of inner inquiry, I found the Othered parts of myself that were never allowed to surface. Carl Jung refers to these parts as the shadow. I understood why I struggled with my former peripheral beliefs that excluded, controlled, and punished people. I knew deep down that given a different set of circumstances or what Archer refers to as constraints and entablements, that I contained within me, different ways to emerge and be in the world. As such, I now identify with what I learned at BUC... that we are one humanity having different embodied experiences.

CHAPTER 6

Conclusion

Whether one believes in the Bible or not, it is the bedrock of Western culture and values. The creation narrative which is the teaching that God made only two genders; man in his image and woman as man's helper, sets the stage for patriarchy, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia. The stories of Old Testament wars that favour one group over another, as well as the teaching of a future Armageddon promotes fear, hate and racism. Finally, the idea that humans are at the apex of creation and that there will be a new earth, meaning our current earth will pass away, leads to environmental degradation. Scholarly critique of the Bible is important, but reason does little to convince believers that their beliefs are harmful. While there is the notion that beliefs are not harmful, Ohlsson, Bracher and Archer tell us that beliefs drive action. Bracher and Archer tell us that beliefs are connected to identity. As such, we know that Evangelicals engage in their belief system by developing projects to reach their ultimate concerns and this includes preserving their Christian identity. Some projects create constraints for those who are perceived be a threat to the creation narrative. Examples include the protesting the protection and rights of transgender and gender non-conforming people. In June 2017, Bill C-16, the bill that provides legal protections against discrimination and hate crimes against transgender people, was written into the Criminal Code and the Canadian Charter of Rights. While these rights are needed, debate continues around the legislative use of pronouns and use of public washrooms while some parents continue to protest transgender children in the classroom. While not all of these parents, or those who protest, are Evangelical, the roots of their identity-bearing beliefs stem from fundamentalist and Evangelical teachings. Our pre-modern history is alive within our cultural heritage and is bound within our socio-systemic structures. What is seen as normal or natural

such as the essentialist notion of gender is the deep learning of fundamentalist Evangelical concepts within our Western history. We live in a culture steeped in the gender binary.

Transgender protections not only challenge the two-gender system by which we organize society, it also challenges patriarchy and as such, gender roles and the oppression of women. However, as protective measures are introduced into patriarchal systems, the concept of inclusion continues to sustain the power differential.

Instead of inclusion, the United Church of Canada took on the concept of radical acceptance challenging their fundamentalist and Evangelical history and risking their survival in the process. Their slow restructure allowed them to remain as they laid the foundation for a new theological framework. The United Church of Canada was the first church within the Christian tradition to ordain women, perform same sex marriages and ordain those in the LGBTQ+ communities. The United Church that I attended was progressive; their services characterized by messages of compassion and social justice, while they offered adult learning classes that challenged fundamentalist beliefs to all that were interested. Compassion, community and acceptance of others characterized the services more important than beliefs. As such, no one set of beliefs were evident. Transgender leaders were guest speakers on three occasions when I attended the church. My auto-ethnography is an example of how indoctrination into the establishment pedagogy of Evangelical Christianity fractures identity formation through the process of self-alienation. Crucial identity components such as physical, emotional, intellectual, and sexual developments, are repressed though the process of shaming. The concept of original sin (sin of the flesh) means that Evangelicals can never escape the sinner identity no matter how “good” they behave. Good behaviour means taking on the precepts of Christianity, or putting Christ on the Throne, which requires the repression of the “bad” self. The repression of the “bad”

creates pathologies that relate to sex and sexuality as it distorts genders into rigid categories. As natural development occurs and “unwanted feelings” arise, emotions such as fear, guilt and shame emerge. However, the concept of a personal Saviour provides Christians with feelings of forgiveness and love that has nothing to do with them but everything to do with their belief that Jesus died for them. As Jesus sacrificed himself for the church, Christians are recognized for sacrificing their wants/needs/desires/selfhood for Jesus. Believers continue to deny and judge the “sinful” aspects of the self by projecting their disdain, specifically as it pertains to morality, onto the Other.

My story is a personal example of how indoctrination of religious beliefs form identity-bearing beliefs causing harm not just to others, through judgements and exclusion, but also to me. When I was a Christian and held to my beliefs, I did not consider myself to be judgmental; however, on a subconscious level, I judged others in the same way I had been taught to judge myself. The church uses various forms of manipulation to convince their parishioners to deny themselves and conform to the absolutist belief systems taught in the church: fear manipulations (i.e., hell), guilt manipulations (i.e., Christ’s died for you) and mystical manipulations (i.e., denigration of self) are all very powerful on the human psyche. The group pressure on the power of God’s word as authority leads to thought control (p. 64 - 79). The closed system of logic rests on circular reasoning, cliches and pat answers. “The belief system is brilliantly constructed to provide

to conform, deny and hate themselves to find such love. However, conforming to a belief system is conditional and self-denial and self-hate makes one incapable of intimacy and loving unconditionally for what is on the inside emerges to the outside world. That is to say, the only manifestation of inner judgement is judgement towards others. And while inner hate may manifest itself a little more subtly, it manifests in the creation and marginalization of the Other.

As a meta-reflexive who was taught that my questions revealed doubt and therefore sin, I turned my questions inward and tried to find answers within the realms of my belief system. It was my good fortune that I happened to attend a liberal Bible College and learn to value the questions I had buried deep within me. In doing so, I began to dismantle some peripheral beliefs that I had difficulty with such as hell, the concept of sin, and the submission of women to their husbands. As such, I left the Baptist church and attended a progressive united church that taught that all life belonged to the family of God. During my graduate studies, I took classes with a professor that took notice when I stretched myself to think beyond my belief system. My learning experiences at these institutions were facilitated by educators who taught through the lens of a generative pedagogy. Under such teaching, I felt supported to grow. I did not feel the need to believe what I was being taught, but I felt myself get curious about the content because I felt safe to do so. As my questions emerged, my belief system had no choice but to be shaken. Stepping out takes courage, but the support I received in each of the above contexts made it possible. I would like to say that the liberation came freely and smoothly, but there was a cost. No longer settled in answers or the comfort of a relationship with the divine, I experienced deep grief. There was no replacement belief system or contender theory that settled in to give me comfort... My questions did not bring answers, but rather slowly dismantled a worldview that I held sacred.

The theorists that I used in this study: Ohlsson, Bracher and Archer helped me to understand how my identity became fragmented through indoctrination and the formulation of a fundamentalist Evangelical worldview. It was through the dysfunction of my family unit that I knew I could not trust my fore-bearers and developed a meta-reflexive way of thinking that values questions and ideas. Although my questions were repressed within my belief system, I developed ultimate concerns to search for answers and greater understanding towards a deeper meaning in life. The deeper meaning led to self-analysis, which involved the integration of my identity components. Instead of denying my emotions, I learned to feel them. Instead of hating my body, I learned to seek its' wisdom in incredible awe for its inner workings. Instead of seeking ways to define myself through labels or master signifiers, I question how I can serve. In my role as an adult educator to those incarcerated, I ask the question, how I can support the identity needs of those coming out of prison. While this might be considered a slippery slope to some because their identity is that of a criminal, they have a much larger identity that has been repressed by toxic masculinity. It is my glimmer of hope that I can help my program participants to see their value as humans.

The self-analysis towards a generative pedagogy is a process of self-healing. In order for the identity registers to integrate, there is an act of self-acceptance and self-love. The dissolution of the Other within means full acceptance of the self. Self-love is cliché in our over-indulgent Western culture and can become snared in consumerism for ways in which to feel good. However, self-love is none of that and I am not sure that I can define it is all too often cloaked in mystery. For me, the process of self-love involved self-acceptance, self-forgiveness, feeling fully, self-discipline, showing up for myself, and self-compassion. To quote Ghandi, if we want change in the world, we need to be the change. I take the liberty to add to his quote 'for what is on the inside

has a ripple effect impacting the world in which we live? Love is not talked about very much in academia. It has been hi-jacked and distorted by Hollywood and romance novels. In her book, *all about love* (2000) scholar, bell hooks dispels the myth of love and challenges us to view love as a verb. Through her reading of *The Road Less Traveled* by M. Scott Peck, she valued his definition of love as

CODA

Robert's Story

A Synchronicity

Born in January 1964, my sister Clare is only a year and a bit older than me. We didn't grow up together. She was taken from her birth home when she was only three months old. She was one of my seven siblings who were separated and placed into foster care in 1964. When I came along a year and a bit later, my mother's situation had changed. She had left her abusive husband and when I was four years old, she met my stepfather. As a result, my parents were able to provide me with love and all the necessities of life. I learned about my mother's secret when I was 16 years old. At the time, I didn't connect my mother's loss with her many mental health issues. As a typical teen, I was only concerned about myself. Raised as an only child, I wanted to meet my siblings.

I travelled to Nova Scotia to meet Clare when I was 18 years old. Her mental health issues were quite evident in our first meeting. When we spoke, she never looked at me but instead would stare at the floor or the wall. As I got to know her better, I found out that her self-worth was very low. Interacting with people seemed painful for her. She was always worried about what others thought of her and feared that her own feelings of worthlessness would be validated. The rumors that she was raised in a poor and abusive household were considered to be the blame for her mental health issues. Another one of our biological sisters, Abby, got to meet Clare when she was 12 years old. Abby who was 16 at the time said that Clare was forced to wear her older foster brother's clothes that were too big. Abby said that Clare's pants were held up by belted twine wrapped around her waist a couple of times.

When I learned more about Clare's situation, I was determined to help her, and the opportunity presented itself when my request for a job transfer was granted. At 23 years old, I packed up my Toronto apartment and moved to Halifax, N.S. with the hopes of connecting with my sister. When I arrived, I picked her up from the small community in rural N.S. where she grew up. Financially, I was able to support her while she took various upgrading courses. Unfortunately, things didn't end well. I travelled a lot with my work, and she needed more support for her mental health needs. Once while I was away working, Clare ended up leaving. I later heard that she was living in a group home.

Over the years, I've been in and out of her life. Each time we connected, it seemed that she had a new mental health diagnosis. She has been diagnosed with borderline personality disorder, schizoid personality disorder, anxiety disorder, depression, schizophrenia, emetophobia (fear of nausea and vomiting), and complicated grief disorder. She is on a variety of medications, but they don't seem to be improving her quality of life. However, I was told that if she were not on them, she would be much worse than she is now.

A couple of years ago, she had a major psychotic episode at my house. After trying to get her help, I found out that she no longer had a psychologist or a psychiatrist. When I enquired, I was told that after she missed several appointments, they closed her file. As a result, she has not had a medication review for years. In the last few months, I have been able to make appointments for Clare to see a psychologist who later referred her to a psychiatrist. Thankfully, I have a supportive employer and I've been able to take time of work to get her to her appointments. Clare had her second meeting with a new psychiatrist who reviewed and made some changes to her medications.

Aside from therapy sessions and a medication review, my other goal for Clare has been to set up on social media so she could feel connected with her family and friends. She doesn't have a computer or the internet at home and most recently, she had her telephone disconnected as she ran her bill up to over \$400.00 on three different occasions. The housing authority that pays her housing and utilities refused to pay her third phone bill. Clare explained to me that she was calling long distance to connect with her foster siblings over concern for her foster mother who had lost her sight and was placed in a nursing home. Clare has not seen her foster family in many years as transportation and car sickness (nausea) are an issue for her.

After her last psychiatrist appointment, we went to the library, and I helped her to get set up on email and social media. Clare was fascinated by Facebook and excited to be connected with family and friends. I noticed that she was especially drawn to a profile picture of a distant cousin identifies as a trans male. The picture showed our cousin, a trans male, with facial hair. Clare was curious asking me various questions about our cousin and about transitioning in general. She then told me the story of a fellow classmate who transitioned to female when she was in high school. Clare told me that she felt so bad for her because she was bullied and eventually had to leave her small rural community for a larger city.

After Clare practiced signing in and out of Facebook and Gmail a few times, we had lunch at Pavia located on the main floor of the library. I noticed that Clare was not eating and that she was shaking. "I'm really nervous", she said. "I've never told anyone this before. You might not like me anymore." I knew from her earlier response to our cousin's transition what was coming, and I reassured her that whatever she had to tell me was okay. She said, "I'm really... you know... a guy". She then told me that she felt like a boy since she was four years old. She told me stories of having to wear girl's clothes and dresses to church. She said, "I hated wearing a dress to church

and I took it off as soon as I got home”. She continued, “I used to put on my foster brother’s clothes and run outside to play”. She told me that she preferred her older brother’s hand-me-down clothes to that of her girl clothes even though her brother’s clothes were too big. “I couldn’t tell anybody that I was a boy... well when I did, I got in trouble.” My sister was sitting across the table telling me her story; a story that was like many of the stories I read while I was researching for my thesis.

Clare had all kinds of questions about being transgender and I was able to answer her. I told her that she would need to tell her doctor and ask for a referral to a psychologist who specializes in gender identity. I told her that I would go with her if she wanted the additional support. She was very pleased and happy. “Are you sure you won’t mind having a brother, she joked.” I told her that, I was positive. “My new name will be Robert, after Robert Young from the 1970s television series, Marcus Welby, MD.” I knew my sister had a fascination with Robert Young as she had framed pictures of him throughout her apartment. Over the years, she would become obsessed with various male actors. I always figured that these fascinations with male actors were crushes. I asked her if Robert Young was her new crush and she responded, “Oh no, I just want to be him”.

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I've never talked to my sister about my original research on trans inclusion. In fact, she was not familiar with the term transgender. So, is it a coincidence that I found out that my sister is transgender after I completed my research on transgender inclusion? Carl Jung coined the term synchronicity to refer to two meaningful coincidences with no causal relationship. As a self-proclaimed mystic, he talked about the collective unconscious in that everything is connected and working together. Could it be that the Universe has been preparing me to help someone close to me? Someone who is already isolated with very few support systems in place. This certainly lines up with a progressive theology of the Spirit working within the realms of radical inclusiveness and compassion. Or could it be that there are more people than we realize suffering with gender identity issues, but are being misdiagnosed?

I didn't recognize my brother for who *he* was until he told me, and I have studied this topic for the past several years. However, I know that the important lesson is not in identifying transgender people, but instead it is about being open and being accepting of trans people without judgment. My brother felt safe confiding in me when he observed that I was accepting of our distant cousin. He also felt comfortable asking me questions about gender identity and transitioning options such as hormones and surgery. This opened the door for him to confide in me about something he has feared and kept silent for over 45 years.

I have referred to my brother by the feminine pseudonym Clare and I have used feminine pronouns throughout this narrative as a way to allow his story to unfold as a way to illustrate my perspective. As someone who has seen him as a very ill and insecure woman that suffered self-loathing with several mental health diagnoses, I have now come to view him very differently. I now see his mental health issues as the direct product of him not aligning with his assigned gender. Since coming out to me, he has come out to his doctor, friends, family and on social media. He has also chosen his new name. He has a long road ahead of him, but he tells me that he feels free. He is now working on a film about his life so that he can help other trans folk.

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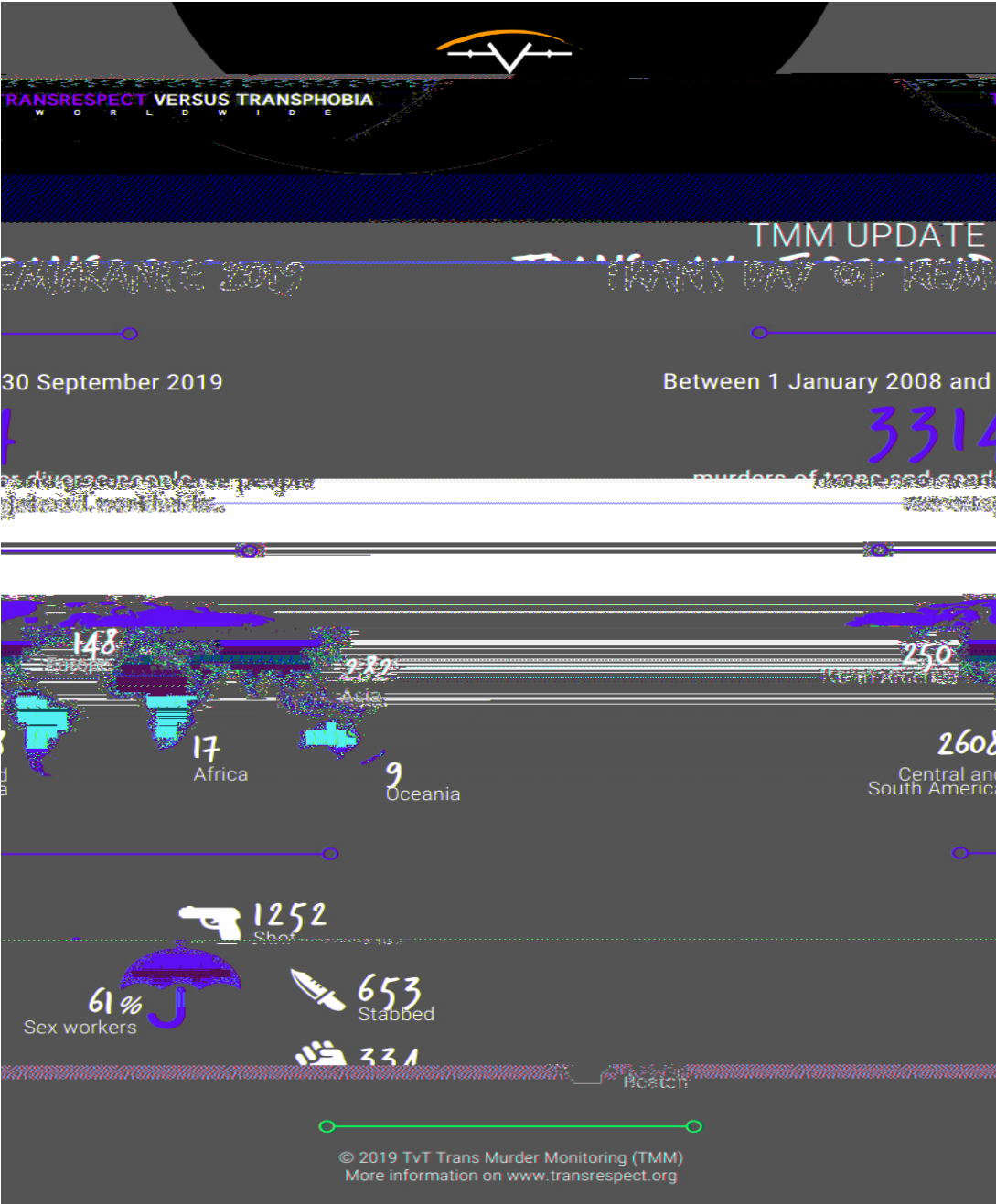
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APPENDIX A



Every year on November 20, we remember the trans lives lost through violence. This poster illustrates that between January 1, 2008, and September 30, 2019, there were 3314 murders of trans and gender diverse people around the world. Many of the victims are trans women of colour. Sixty one percent of these women worked in the sex trade.