

The Role of Spirituality and/or Religion for Queer Individuals Negotiating Homonegative  
Beliefs and Values in Coming Out

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A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
PhD in Educational Studies

at

Mount Saint Vincent University

Halifax, Nova Scotia

October 24, 2018

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## Abstract

This dissertation investigates how out individuals who are lesbian, gay, bisexual and queer who have been raised in a homonegative Christian faith and have experienced internal conflicts between their sexual identities and religious and/or spiritual identities learned homonegative beliefs and values, and how they negotiated those beliefs and values during their coming out processes. It also explores the role of spirituality and religion during the coming out process.

The data for this research were gathered through interviews with eight individuals who grew up in homonegative Christian environments and made the decision to come out as lesbian, gay, or queer. The dissertation draws upon transformative learning theory as a framework to analyze and discuss the learning processes involved in coming out. Queer theory, transformative learning theory, feminist theory and critical theory provide the framework for analyzing the participants' coming out narratives. Despite enormous pressures from their families, religious communities, peers, and the broader culture to conform to heterosexual norms, through a complex learning/unlearning process, participants disentangled themselves from oppressive values and beliefs, and began aligning their outer lives with their inner realities. The findings of this study demonstrated the learning processes and the specific intrinsic and extrinsic factors that facilitated and enabled those processes. This thesis explains how participants moved from uncritical acceptance of external authority to self-authorship.

This research will be useful to faith communities, families, friends, allies, and helping professionals, including educators to support queer members, and to queer communities to support the spirituality of their members. It will also be helpful to educators interested in

understanding issues related to identify conflict, particularly for lesbian, gay, bisexual and queer persons.

Key Words: queer theory, transformative learning theory, unlearning, spirituality, homonegative Christian religion.

## Acknowledgements

First and foremost, this thesis would not have been possible without the eight courageous participants who volunteered to tell their stories. To you, I extend my deepest gratitude.

I thank all of those who have provided support to me throughout this long journey. First of all, much gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Susie Brigham, who has been attentive and supportive to me during these long five years. Many thanks also to my committee members: Drs. Brenda Beagan, Terrah Keener and Ardra Cole for their input, advice and feedback.

I am grateful to my family members from the Wilkinson and Hattie clans who have been cheering me along the way. A note of appreciation also goes to my “Seester”, Lise Longmire, who has supported me, particularly in the wake of our mothers’ deaths, both of which occurred during the writing of this thesis. A shout out also goes to Jim “Jimbo” Longmire for his encouragement.

I would like to recognize the members of the Mount’s Women’s Studies Department who supported me in various ways, but particularly with grading support. Thanks also to Deans, Dr Brook Taylor and Dr Kim Kienapple, former President of the Mount, Dr. Ramona Lumpkin, and Vice-President Dr Elizabeth Church, who all assisted and encouraged me.

A round of applause is owed to a number of Mount colleagues who assisted and supported me in ways too numerous to mention: Dr Christine Doe, Pam Fancey, Dr Janice Keefe, Dr Sara King, Dr Eva Knoll, Scott MacPhail, Dr Krista Ritchie, Denyse Rodrigues, Jeanette Schlatman, and Dr Cornelia Schneider. Thanks also to Kim Brooks of Dalhousie University for organizing check-ins by Skype, Ruth Ann Brown, Stephanie Leslie and Stephanie Mason for formatting and editing assistance, and Daniel Demers and Terri Roberts for help with cross-checking references. To the following friends, my heartfelt thanks for your support: Eric

Arbuckle, Julianne and Tim Acker-Verney, Jane Gordon, Janet Guildford, Pattie LaCroix, Darrell Martin, Dwight Mossman, and Carm Robertson.

I want to honour the folks who assisted me during the early years of my coming out journey, which began over two decades ago. My deepest gratitude to: Donelda MacDonnell, Jeannie “McKirk” Kirk, Jacqueline and Job VanHartingsveldt, Sr. Marion Sheridan (Sisters of St. Martha), Sr. Maria Sutherland (Sisters of Charity), and Dr. Kathy Montgomery. I also honour the memory of Sr. Kathleen Dunn (Sisters of Charity) who provided me with affirming spiritual care during some very bleak times. Finally, I am deeply grateful to Bob Fougere and his husband Sam Wilson, two trailblazers in Nova Scotia’s history of queer activism to whom we all owe a debt of gratitude.

## Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to the memory of my mother, Nan Wilkinson Hattie (1925-2017). Despite having primary lateral sclerosis (PLS) for well over 30 years, she never surrendered to the disease, but persisted in living life to the fullest, pushing her physical and intellectual limits right to the end. Nan exemplified lifelong learning; she loved new challenges. She was a fiercely courageous, stubborn, and determined Scot—a true Braveheart who has left me deeply inspired.

I also dedicate this thesis to the memory of my dad, Jack Hattie. After I graduated with my master's degree, he told my mother that he hoped I would go on to do my PhD. He saw my potential long before I did. Though he passed away in 2002, I know he would be overjoyed to see this day come. Hugs to you, Daddy, wherever you are.

And finally, I dedicate this thesis to my goddaughter, Amber Hattie, who has inherited her great-grandmother's never-say-die attitude. The Force lives on in you.

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One of the reasons why so many in our community lack a sense of identity is because we have attempted to reject intrinsic parts of being human, parts essential to a sense of wholeness. Many gays and lesbians have attempted to reject their sexuality—a tragic and fruitless endeavor as ludicrous as waking up one day and deciding that one no longer needs to breathe, because someone, somewhere, decreed that breathing is an evil, sick, sinful, or immoral act. Many have also tried to shed their spirituality, an act equally ludicrous, for our spirituality is as innate a part of being human as breathing and as natural as our sexuality. To quote a saying common these days in spiritual circles: “We are spirits having a human experience.”

Christian de la Huerta, 1999

*Coming Out Spiritually: The Next Step*

## Chapter One: The Genesis of This Study

### Introduction

This doctoral research focuses on out lesbian, gay, bisexual or queer<sup>1</sup> individuals who have been raised in a homonegative<sup>2</sup> Christian faith and have experienced internal conflicts between their sexual identities<sup>3</sup> and religious and/or spiritual identities.<sup>4</sup> The research explores how research participants learn homonegative beliefs and values, and how they negotiate those beliefs and values during the coming out<sup>5</sup> processes. It also explores the role spirituality and/or religion played during the initial coming out process. Whereas religion is defined as “an established tradition that arises out of a group of people with common beliefs and practices concerning the sacred” (Koenig, 2009, p. 289), “spirituality” is defined as “a personal quest for understanding answers to ultimate questions about life, about meaning, and about relationship to the sacred or transcendent” (Koenig, 2011, p. 18). This research specifically explores: (1) How do religion and/or spirituality facilitate coming out processes? (2) How do they act as impediments?

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<sup>1</sup> For some people, the term *queer* carries a historically pejorative connotation. However, in recent years many within the queer community have reclaimed and redefined it as a term of empowerment, one that rejects the binary view of sexual orientation as only lesbian/gay or heterosexual. For this thesis, I will use the term queer rather than any of the existing initialisms (LGBT, LGBTQI, etc.) when referring to the participants as a group or queers as a collective, as the abbreviated short form is awkward, and as Terrah Keener has observed, reduces us to a letter, which is a marginalizing experience in and of itself (Personal Communication, April 25, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> I have used the term *homonegative* rather than *homophobic* to describe “negative attributions, fears, and discrimination against queer individuals, particularly that which is religiously-based” (Walker, 2013, p.113).

<sup>3</sup> How they think about themselves and their sexual preferences and communicate that to others (Yarhouse & Tan, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Identity comprises how individuals feel, what they call themselves, as well as their preferences regarding with whom they want to share their lives and have intimate relationships (American Psychological Association, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> Coming out is a process that involves acknowledging and disclosing, directly or indirectly, one’s sexual minority status (Dziengel, 2015). The American Psychological Association (APA) indicates that coming out is not just about acknowledging one’s own sexual orientation, but also accepting it (2011). Coming out is understood to be a lifelong process, and not a one-off event.

This study focuses on eight queer individuals aged 30 and over who had been living an out life for at least five years, lived in the Halifax Regional Municipality, identified as male, female, or genderqueer, self-identified as having had a deeply religious Christian upbringing, and also identified as having experienced conflict between their sexual and religious/spiritual identities. Most, if not all societies, privilege heterosexuality and consider it to be the norm (Buchanan, Dzelme, Harris, & Hecker, 2001). *Heteronormativity*—“the discursive and social practices that legitimize heterosexuality as the norm and make homosexuality and queerness invisible” (Grace, Hill, Johnson, & Lewis 2004, p. 320)—predominates. Heteronormativity presumes people to be heterosexual unless they prove, or are proven to be, otherwise (Peters, 2005). “Compulsory heterosexuality sets itself up as the original, the true, the authentic; the norm that determines the real” (Butler, 1993, p. 1), creating a need for people to demonstrate that they are not heterosexual—a process called *coming out*.

The decision to come out is a significant psychological step. Fear of consequences is the greatest obstacle to disclosing one’s sexual orientation (Wallqvist & Lindblom, 2015). Yet, many scholars argue that it is a critical part of sexual identity (Corrigan & Matthew, 2003; Heatherington & Lavner, 2008; Willoughby, Malik, & Lindahl, 2006). Coming out is an act of resistance which constitutes a challenge to hegemonic heterosexism. It is the *why* and *how* of coming out that was of interest in this research. This study explores the acquisition of dominant, heteronormative beliefs and values, and secondly, the negotiation of these beliefs and values in order to come out to one’s self and others. In particular, the research discusses the role of spirituality and/or religion in coming out. For some, religion and/or spirituality (R/S) becomes a core part of their identity, whereas for others, R/S identity varies throughout life, or may be

abandoned altogether (Barra et al., 1993). R/S identity can be in conflict<sup>6</sup> with other aspects of one's core identity, as is typically the case with queer sexual identity (Wood & Conley, 2014). Religious identities and sexual identities vary between individuals and within individuals over time. They may come into and out of conflict, which are processes of convergence and divergence that may be affected by learning about and connecting with spirituality, and/or learning about and connecting with queer culture.

The purpose of this study was to explore the *learning* involved in the ongoing processes of identity conflict and integration. It explores the *kinds of processes* involved in learning to negotiate homonegative beliefs and values. For example, did participants engage in internal questioning of homonegative Christian teachings over time? Did they pray to God for help? Did their questioning move from the personal, micro level to the macro level? This thesis reveals the nature of their negotiations.

The overarching research question for this study was: How do queer individuals who have been raised with a deeply religious Christian upbringing understand the learning experiences surrounding coming out in the context of homonegative beliefs and values?

The following sub-questions guided this exploration:

1. How did “out” adults who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or queer<sup>7</sup> with deeply religious Christian backgrounds/upbringing learn homonegative beliefs and values?

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<sup>6</sup> Rodriguez (2010) has defines “conflict” as ‘the tension that can arise between a gay or lesbian Christians’ sexual orientation and their religious beliefs’ (p. 9).

<sup>7</sup> I did not specifically recruit transgender individuals, because although there is a paucity of literature on coming out as transgender, it is generally understood that coming out as transgender differs significantly from coming out queer. Broadly speaking, as Zimman (2009) observes, “transgender people tend to orient more to issues of gender identity, rather than sexual orientation when providing accounts of their own identities” (p. 54).

2. How do lesbian, gay, bisexual and queer adults negotiate homonegative beliefs and values during coming out processes? How has learning facilitated this process?
3. How have spirituality and/or religion influenced their coming out processes? How have they provided support? How have they acted as impediments? How have their identities changed over time?
4. How did they question ideologies, and challenge power?

The findings of this study will be useful to faith communities, families, friends, allies and those in the helping professions, including educators, who seek to provide support to queer people, and to queer communities seeking to support the spirituality of their members. It will also be helpful to educators interested in understanding issues related to identify conflict, particularly for lesbian, gay, and queer persons.

### **The Genesis of this Study**

In 2010-11, I worked on a research project<sup>8</sup> conducted by Dr. Brenda Beagan in Halifax, Nova Scotia that explored lesbian, gay,<sup>9</sup> bisexual, transgender, two-spirit, and queer women's health. Though spirituality and sexuality were not the focus of the project, a number of the women interviewed—nine of 19—discussed spiritual health in significant detail. A journal article co-written with Beagan, based on the nine interviews explores how 11<sup>10</sup> queer women reconfigured potentially conflicting spiritual and sexual/gender identities.

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<sup>8</sup>Health Care Providers, LBTTQ Women and Health Care: A Research Study, led by Drs. Lisa Goldberg and Brenda Beagan.

<sup>9</sup> Some women preferred the less political-sounding “gay” as their identity term.

<sup>10</sup> The authors interviewed each other using the same interview guide, incorporating their own stories as data, and using the same analytic processes as were used with the first nine interviews.

In 2013-14, Beagan and I conducted a follow-up study<sup>11</sup>. We interviewed 35 people who identified as various genders about how they experience gender/sexual identity and religious/spiritual identity. Almost all of the 35 narratives contained lengthy descriptions of oppression, exclusion, and in some cases, outright abuse that participants had experienced within their religious traditions. During that year I was in the beginning stages of my doctoral program and the members of my class and I were discussing transformative learning theory (TL). As I studied TL, it occurred to me that many of the individuals in the research I had just been involved in followed many, if not all, of Mezirow's (1978) stages in coming out. I returned to the data and began using transformative learning theory to analyze how individuals who identified as queer reconfigured their self-identities and religious/spiritual identities during the coming out process. In the course of my analysis, I paid particular attention to the internal and external factors that enabled them to resolve significant states of internal conflict. What was not clear, however, was the role of religion and/or spirituality in that process. Through the process of writing and presenting a paper based on the previously mentioned data, I became increasingly interested in examining coming out stories as a lifelong learning process. In doing so, I could further explore how participants negotiated potentially disharmonious relationships between their sexual orientation and their religious beliefs and values, the degree to which they had been able to reconcile this disharmony, and the role of R/S in the learning processes. It was my deep curiosity related to these processes that shaped my doctoral research questions. However, it was also an interest in the religious and spiritual aspects of the learning journey that most drew my interest.

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<sup>11</sup> LBTQ Identity, Religion and Spirituality: Influences on Health and Well-Being

Coming out stories of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer individuals raised in homophobic Christian environments whose sexual identity conflicts with Christian beliefs and values, provide an opportunity to explore the learning and unlearning processes involved in negotiating identity conflicts. Drawing upon queer theory to explore issues related to identity, and TL theory to frame discussions related to learning and unlearning, my research uses coming out narratives to explore *learning as identity formation*. How do adult learners negotiate their sexual and Christian identities? What is the role of religion/spirituality in that process? This dissertation explores these questions.

### **Situating Myself in the Story**

This is a social science research study using an interpretive method, which focuses on understanding the way people interpret and make sense of their experiences in the world in which they live (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). With any interpretive method, especially one requiring reflexivity, the researcher must acknowledge their motivation for doing the research (see Creswell, 2003; Etherington, 2004) and their relationship, or situatedness, in relation to the research topic. As a feminist researcher, I understand that my work “is enmeshed in a web of psychological, social, and political conditions and influences” (Smith, 2015, p. 115). I am also a research insider (i.e., someone who studies a group to which they belong (Breen, 2007) in the queer community and have experienced the phenomenon under study—coming out of a Christian environment/denomination and having to renegotiate my sexuality and spirituality. Though I no longer belong to a Christian tradition or community, I once did for a significant period of time. There are advantages to belonging to the group under study, for instance, (a) having a greater understanding of the culture under inquiry; (b) not disrupting the flow of social interaction; and (c) having a familiarity with the culture can facilitate the interview process (Bonner & Tollhurst,

2002). In addition, as a former insider of a church and a former theology student, I have at least some understanding of the scriptural interpretations that shape the inner workings and politics of literalist Christian institutions. Having this knowledge going into the study saved valuable time (Unluer, 2012). This familiarity, however, can be disadvantageous, for instance, leading to unconscious bias and assumptions that cloud my ability to perceive or see certain information, and being a researcher within one's own community carries the potential for role duality and the challenges that come with trying to balance the insider roles, e.g., friend, acquaintance *and* researcher (Delyser, 2001). I must therefore acknowledge the "glasses" through which I see the research landscape. The following provides my backstory, which has shaped my research questions.

### **Identity**

I am an out, woman-identified white, queer, feminist who was born-and-raised in Canada; as a part-time instructor in Women's Studies, when I enter the classroom, I bring all of these identities with me and "perform" through them. Teacher educator Steven Turner contends that "who we are matters to our teaching every bit as much as what we teach and how we choose to teach it" (2010, p. 288). In addition, pedagogy "is about knowing and performing what you know" (Anderson, 2006, p. 368). All of my identities have been constructed through interactions in the world as a white, queer female living Nova Scotia in a democratic country. I came to identify as a feminist as a result of the persistent sexism and misogyny that I have experienced since childhood. I have embraced American scholar bell hooks' definition of feminism as "a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression" (2000, p. xiii). My feminism gave birth to my pedagogy. Ann Manicom (1992) has pointed out that feminist pedagogy is "not a

handy set of instructional techniques” (p. 365), but rather, a standpoint. A central goal of feminist pedagogy is to encourage students to become critical and creative learners.

In fostering critical and creative thinking, it is important that students are encouraged to engage freely in the discourse of the discipline and come to rely less on the authority of the instructor. Feminist pedagogy is often described as student-centred (as opposed to subject or teacher oriented). It is less hierarchical and emphasizes cooperation and community. (Shackelford, 1992, p.1)

Feminist pedagogy also embraces the notion of reflexivity. A reflexive pedagogy “considers what one knows, how one performs it, and its implications for others. Pedagogy is...shaped by our life experiences” (Anderson, 2006, p. 368). The feminist notion of reflexivity involves a “practice of observing and locating one's self as a knower within certain cultural and sociohistorical contexts” (Sinacore, Blaisure, Healy, & Brawer, 1999, p. 267). Schon (1987) has noted that, “The phenomena that [the practitioner] seeks to understand are partly of his own making; he is in the situation that he seeks to understand” (p. 73). It is my reflexive practice that has pushed me to understand the dynamics I have identified earlier in this review.

Feminist pedagogy grew out of, and is situated within, a much larger field of critical pedagogy that emerged through the work of Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, Peter MacLaren and Michael Apple.

Critical pedagogy refers to a constellation of educational theories, teaching, and learning practices that raise critical consciousness about oppressive social conditions. Critical pedagogy aims to reconfigure the “traditional” teacher-student relationship. Rather than the teacher being a vessel that pours out knowledge, students and teachers alike learn by sharing experiences through meaningful dialogue. (Anderson, 2006, p. 374)

As a feminist educator, my goal is not only to raise awareness and understanding about the oppressive systems in which we find ourselves, but to empower students to “*change* as well as to understand the world” (Lather, 1992, p. 2).

In addition to being a feminist educator, I am an *out queer* educator. There is a healthy body of literature about the experiences of queer educators. As Turner’s (2010) review of the literature has revealed, queer educators have written extensively about their queerness in relation to the classroom. Much has been written about whether or not to come out, and a significant amount of this literature has come from Canada. Canadian educator Blye Frank’s (1996) research indicates that “many queer teachers hide to work, to work to hide in classroom cultural spaces” (in Grace & Benson, 2000, p. 91) with the latter contending that the hiding, in and of itself, is problematic. Kevin Jennings (1994) argues that “as long as we remain silent and allow our enemies to define us, we will never be free. Only through telling our stories can we shatter the myths and expose the lies that allow bigots to portray us as a threatening ‘other’” (p. 13). Canadian Didi Khyatt (1999) has expressed her concerns about coming out in class, arguing that any attempts to capture the queer self in words are futile, giving the fluidity of that construct. She also points to the potential oppressiveness of this practice in the classroom, where students are obliged to listen. Moreover, she notes that there is no way of knowing how one’s narrative will be received and/or constructed by students, or of ensuring that one’s story will not be generalized to the entire queer community as being the norm. Finally, she highlights concerns for personal safety in an “indeterminate space” (p. 107).

I have often reflected on the fact that not only are the topics discussed in my Women’s Studies classes potentially controversial, e.g., reproductive rights, pornography, gender identity, sexual orientation, sex work, to name a few—but *I*, the instructor, am potentially a source of

controversy, simply by virtue of my embodiment. I take the feminist and phenomenological stance that I both *know* and *teach* through my body, a position that challenges the Cartesian notion that the world can only be known and experienced through the realm of the mental, and that knowledge is disembodied. Anderson (2006) has noted, that “feminism, critical race, and queer studies have rigorously grappled with issues of embodiment and social justice. These perspectives greatly enhance pedagogy and learning” (p. 367).

For almost 15 years of my early working life, I worked as a secretary at an evangelical<sup>12</sup> church that had roots in Pentecostalism. Though I had attended the United Church, a liberal Protestant church, with my family during my youth, by the age of 14 my family had stopped going to church regularly, only attending an occasional Christmas and Easter service. However, as a result of a life-changing spiritual experience, I returned to church at the age of 20, this time choosing an evangelical church, as I found the services much more dynamic and interesting than those I had experienced in the United Church. By the time I was 27, I was working full time as an administrative assistant to the lead minister of my church, a position I held until the age of 40.

Not long before I was hired, I had become aware that I was sexually attracted to women. Until then, I had never contemplated dating women, because having grown up in small towns and rural areas of Nova Scotia during the 1960s and ‘70s, I had never seen anyone else do so, even on television and in film; I was completely unaware that people of the same gender could, or did, date. By the time I experienced a same-gender attraction, I had had enough

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<sup>12</sup> The word *evangelical* comes from the Greek word *euangelion* meaning “gospel” or “good news.” Although there are many definitions of the term and debates about its meaning, according to the Oxford Dictionaries, evangelical “denotes a tradition within Protestant Christianity emphasizing the authority of the Bible, personal conversion, and the doctrine of salvation by faith in the Atonement” (<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/evangelical>, accessed June 17, 2018).

religious inculcation to understand that the Church considered homosexual acts to be sinful; my church taught that homosexuality is a sin; that homosexuals are not welcome in the Kingdom of God, and that “practicing homosexuals” are destined for hell. As a result of these teachings, my attraction to women became a constant source of anxiety, shame, and guilt. The thought of trying to reconcile my sexuality with my spiritual beliefs did not even cross my mind; I would be damned to hell if I did so. Instead, I buried myself in my faith through frenetic praying, church attendance, and at times, fasting. From time to time, I also sought help and counselling from the church leadership, and from the congregation in general (e.g., during public church services and in prayer meetings) and as a result, experienced on many occasions their attempts to cast out (exorcise) the “evil spirit of homosexuality” from me. By the time I had reached my late 30s, the constant internal conflict and turmoil had taken a toll. At age 38, having heard about Exodus International and other ministries offering “conversion” therapy<sup>13</sup>, I made plans to attend a weeklong retreat in British Columbia that offered to help Christians who were “struggling” with homosexual attractions. My church and I collaborated on the funding so I could attend. By the time I had returned from the retreat, however, I had realized that I would never be straight, a devastating moment of truth. I felt trapped, and the thought of living the remaining years of my life in constant pain and turmoil became too much to bear. I became despondent and began to seriously question my faith and myself.

At age 39, while still working for the church, I experienced my first same-gender relationship. In the midst of a crisis of faith and seeing no way forward within my current

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<sup>13</sup> Conversion therapy, also known as reparative therapy, “refers to any formal therapeutic attempt to change the sexual orientation of bisexual, gay and lesbian individuals to heterosexual” and “can include prayer or religious rites, modification of behaviours, and individual or group counselling” (Bright, 2004; Nicolosi, 1991 in Canadian Psychological Association, accessed July 5, 2018).

religious context, I resigned from my job in January of 2000, and left my church community and most of my friends. Wanting to avoid the church members, I sold many of my belongings to finance a move to a rural area, where I was able to live in solitude and sort through my thoughts. In the spring of that year, I decided to return to university. After doing some research, I discovered that Mount Saint Vincent University (MSVU) offered, in collaboration with Dalhousie University and Saint Mary's University, a master's degree in women and gender studies.<sup>14</sup> I also discovered that MSVU's Religious Studies Department offered some women-focused courses,<sup>15</sup> which were taught using a feminist lens. These stirred my desire to explore feminism, which seemed to be the antithesis of what I had been immersed in for almost 20 years.

In September of 2000, I moved to Halifax and began my master's degree at MSVU. There, for the first time in my life, I experienced the teaching of female professors, and indeed, an entire campus of predominantly female employees, including the president. I encountered feminist and queer theories and began the process of reflecting upon and trying to understand my life. I had not renounced my faith and was seeking a new way of understanding women's position within it, particularly my own. In my master's thesis (Hattie-Longmire, 2001) I explored women's leadership throughout church history and specifically,

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<sup>14</sup> Women's studies investigate "ways in which women's societal position can be transformed" (Mandell, 2010, p. ix). Though its focus has broadened, at the time, women's studies was "dedicated to the goals of serving the interest of all women, and of overcoming their subordination and oppression" (Code, 2000, p. 494).

<sup>15</sup> Two of which particularly caught my eye: "Women in the Christian Tradition" (RELS 2208), and "Women, Religion and Social Change" (RELS 3308), both taught by Dr. Randi Warne, a feminist scholar who explored the lives and leadership of women in Christianity.

the life and religious leadership of the founder of Pentecostalism in Newfoundland and Labrador, Alice Belle Garrigus.<sup>16</sup>

While studying and working in Halifax, I eventually met people who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, and transgender, and began connecting with a community of like-minded people, and with their help began the long, complex, and often fraught process of coming out to myself, and trying to reconcile my spiritual beliefs with my sexuality. Within a few years, I was actively engaged in social and political activism through the Nova Scotia Rainbow Action Project, a provincial political group that advocates on behalf of the queer community, and the now defunct Safe Harbour Metropolitan Community Church.<sup>17</sup>

In 2004, I was contracted to teach two distance courses—“Women in the Christian Tradition” and “Women, Religion and Social Change”—at MSVU, and in 2005, I taught my first university course on campus, an introductory Women’s Studies class. I have continued to teach Women’s Studies courses on a part-time basis every year since then.

Though initially I identified as gay,<sup>18</sup> after reading some queer theory (e.g., Wilchins, 2004; Bornstein, 2013) and meeting people in the local community who identified as queer, I began to increasingly question the categories and labels being imposed on the queer community by itself and others, and the effects of that labelling. In addition, though I had come out as gay, I was no longer considering “gay” as the core part of my identity. In fact, I often questioned whether I was gay enough to be a member of the queer community. The

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<sup>16</sup> Garrigus was a woman who had founded the Pentecostal movement in Newfoundland and Labrador. Though she had founded the movement, she was eventually sidelined by the male leaders she mentored. I chose to explore and make visible her work.

<sup>17</sup> A Christian church built and run by the LGBTQ community. It had lesbian or gay clergy, and an almost entirely queer congregation. The local chapter closed in the spring of 2011.

<sup>18</sup> “Lesbian” never felt appropriate because of the stigma associated with the term during the many years I worked in the church.

notion of “queer” felt more permeable and less immutable; it left the door open—to what, I do not know, but I felt more comfortable with that identity for myself.

I continue on the path of unlearning the internalized homophobic messages that dominated much of my early life, which are deeply ingrained. Some of this learning has occurred informally through attending social events in the local queer community. I also joined the local Metropolitan Community Church, Safe Harbour, to find an affirming congregation and a new spiritual lens through which to view my sexuality, life and experiences. I began to volunteer with a local queer theatre society and other queer art projects, and engaged in political activism with several queer advocacy groups. I watched shows such as the *L Word* (2004-09, Showtime), a television series that portrayed the lives of a group of lesbians, and viewed films that provided affirming role models. The informal learning about how others lived out their queerness, either in real life or in fictional representations, provided role models for me to consider as I attempted to construct my own queer identity, and a sense of belonging with a group of others who were on the same journey.

Unlearning homophobia has occurred formally in academic settings which have provided opportunities to study issues and themes related to queerness, and to interact with other academics, some of whom have become trusted mentors and colleagues. Over time, the combination of unlearning homophobia and learning new ways of thinking and being, the internalized homophobia I had learned throughout my earlier life loosened its grip and slowly began to let go.

I can point to the ways in which my spiritual life, particularly in the first four years’ post coming out, played in helping me unlearn and find a release from the self-loathing associated with internalized homophobia. I can identify most of the stages of TL theory in my

own learning processes, e.g., the disorienting dilemma of becoming aware of same-sex attraction and its misfit with my religious beliefs; the self-examination with fear, shame and guilt; the critical assessment of long-held religious beliefs; the searching for others with similar experiences and questions, and so on. I have often wondered about the experiences of others in the queer community who have left homophobic religious environments, which has ultimately led me to this research: How do queer individuals who have learned and internalized homonegative beliefs and values negotiate those beliefs and values during the coming out processes? Does religion and/or spirituality play a role in the process and if so, how?

### **The Research Context**

A public survey of 39 countries conducted by the Pew Research Centre (2013) found “broad acceptance” of homosexuality in North America, the European Union, much of Latin America. In contrast, it found widespread rejection in predominantly Muslim nations in Africa, parts of Asia and in Russia. The survey also found that acceptance of homosexuality is particularly widespread in countries where religion is less central to people’s lives, and these countries are among wealthiest in the world. The Global Attitudes Survey (2016) conducted by the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA, 2017), which surveyed publics in 53 countries globally (96, 331 respondents) revealed that on a global average 53% of respondents feel that being queer should not be a crime, 22% neither agreed nor disagreed with the proposal, and a quarter of populations felt that being queer should be a crime.

My study was conducted in Nova Scotia, Canada. Canada has a history of advanced human rights (Canadian Heritage, 2012a). Homosexuality was decriminalized by the federal government almost 50 years ago, in 1969 (Warner, 2002), and in 1995, the country’s Supreme

Court ruled that the Charter of Rights and Freedoms would be interpreted to prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation (Kinsman & Gentile, 2010). Over the next five years, discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation was prohibited in immigration, employment, military service, pensions, and income tax (Kinsman & Gentile, 2010). In 2005 Canada became the fourth nation in the world to legalize same-sex marriage (Larocque, Chodos, Waterhouse, & Blair, 2006). A Pew Research Survey of Canadian attitudes about homosexuality found that 80% of Canadians felt homosexuality should be accepted by society, up 10% from 2007. Attitudes in the United States are less favourable, with only 60 percent believing homosexuality should be accepted (Pew Research Centre, 2013).

Since all but one participant grew up in either Nova Scotia or New Brunswick, it is important to understand those religious and political contexts in relation to queer rights and activism. The Province of Nova Scotia also has a strong history of queer rights activism, with much of its early activism emanating from the Halifax Regional Municipality, the largest urban centre in the province, and the location of the study. Almost 400,000 people live in Halifax (Statistics Canada, 2011a). The first organized gay rights group in Nova Scotia, the Gay Alliance for Equality (GALE) formed in 1972, with the first public march and demonstration taking place in Halifax the following year (Metcalf, 2014). In 1995, the Nova Scotia Rainbow Action Project (NSRAP), a non-profit organization that “seeks equality for people of all sexual orientations and gender identities” (NSRAP, 2015, p. 1) was launched, and has been involved in numerous human rights cases involving same-sex marriage rights, and was a key player in bringing marriage equality to Nova Scotia. Before that, and far more significant to queer people, was NSRAP’s fight for human rights protection under the provincial Act. Until this step

was taken, it was not safe to advocate for more extensive rights such as marriage rights, pensions, and health care.

In more recent years, activism in the queer community in Nova Scotia has included the rights of transgender individuals. In December 2012, the Human Rights Act was amended to explicitly include gender identity and gender expression as prohibited grounds of discrimination and harassment (Canadian Press, 2015).

Halifax has an active queer community (Destination Halifax, 2015), one which the municipality openly and actively promotes through its main webpage. Halifax has the fourth largest Pride Festival in Canada (Halifax Pride, 2015), its own theatre festival,<sup>19</sup> and a queer centric bar, Menz & Mollyz, located on Gottingen Street. The city also has a long history of drag entertainment and pageants (Gayhalifax, 2015). More recently, Halifax became home to the Rainbow Refugee Association, a registered non-profit society that advocates on behalf of queer refugees in Halifax, and assists with resettlement (Rainbow Refugees, 2015). In sum, my study is situated in Halifax Regional Municipality, an urban area with a strong history of queer rights and opportunities to connect with community, and find social and other kinds of support.

New Brunswick, though having a smaller population than Nova Scotia, also has a history of queer activism. Northern Lambda Nord (NLN), which ran from 1980-2000, was one the earliest gay and lesbian non-profit organizations, and though based in northern Maine, membership included individuals from N.B. (Smith & Morris, 2010). Gaises Nor Gays, like NLN, focused on rural/Franco communities. Active mostly in the '90s, members held regular

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<sup>19</sup> Queer Acts Theatre Festival, <https://www.facebook.com/QUEER-ACTS-Theatre-Festival-229914747622/timeline/>

camping trips and nature outings. During the 1970s-1990s, Fredericton Lesbians and Gays (FLAG) organized some of the first gay dances in the city, and published a magazine called *FlagMag*. Activism in Moncton occurred through the Organization for Equality (D. Green, personal communication, September 4, 2017).

Like most other parts of Canada, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick are overwhelmingly Christian, with 75 percent (a larger proportion than the national average) identifying with a Christian denomination (Statistics Canada, 2011b). Approximately one-third of Nova Scotians are Roman Catholics, including many Mi'kmaq, although a significant number of Mi'kmaq also practice traditional Mi'kmaw religion (Robinson, 2005). The United Church is the largest Protestant denomination in the province, followed by the Anglican and Baptist churches. The first affirming church in Atlantic Canada, Safe Harbour, served the queer community in Halifax and beyond from 1991-2011. Founded under the umbrella of the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) Toronto, Safe Harbour had lesbian or gay clergy, and an almost entirely queer congregation (McKay, 2017). Spiritual outreach in New Brunswick occurred through groups such as Integrity Fredericton, and Sparrow, a gay Christian network (Dusty Green, personal communication, August 30, 2017).

The next chapter provides a review of the background literature that informs this research study.

## **Chapter Two: Background Literature**

### **Introduction**

In Chapter One, I explained the genesis of this study, noting my relationship to the research and describing the research context. This chapter discusses the relevant literature and framework used to guide this research study. It begins with a discussion of the terms used in the thesis, before moving into a section on the reasons people turn to religion. The benefits and harms of religious involvement are also discussed, as well as Christian ideologies on homosexuality. The chapter explores the ways in which ideology influences identity and helps maintain hegemony, before proceeding with an exploration of the central themes and issues in the literature related to queerness and the integration of sexuality and religion/spirituality; contextual factors affecting integration are also considered. Next is an overview of the research on school and university climate experiences of queer youth and young adults, including impacts on queer identity. The final section highlights the literature on transformative learning theory, including critiques that have been raised, and the literature on unlearning. The chapter concludes with a summary of current gaps in the literature.

### **Defining “Queer.”**

In this thesis, I will be using the term “queer” or “non-heterosexual” to refer to the research participants. “Queer” resists definition; Sullivan (2003) notes that ‘attempting to define what queer is ... would be a decidedly un-queer thing to do’ (p. 43). The term, which Walker (2009) has characterized as “intentionally ambiguous,” has been used “as an umbrella term for the indeterminate array of identities and differences that characterize persons in relation to sex, sexuality, gender, and expression” (Grace & Hill, 2004, p. 167). In use since the 1980s, “queer” has been adopted by some sexual minorities as a part of a movement to reclaim derogatory words

from the dominant and oppressive culture (Fuller, Chang, & Rubin, 2009; Lowe, 2009); it is also used to describe people whose sexuality and gender identity “resists social and culturally constructed norms” (Frank & Cannon, 2010). Halperin (1995) has defined queer as “whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant” (p. 62). Queer offers “a radical questioning of social and cultural norms, notions of gender, reproductive sexuality, and the family” (Smith, 1996, as cited in Sullivan, 2003). Fuller et al. (2009) have called queer a political statement of resistance. Others represent queer as a challenge to assimilationist politics of modern gay and lesbian political movements (Sullivan, 2003). Sullivan critiques these ideas and argues, “it may be more productive to think of queer as a verb (a set of actions), rather than as a noun (an identity, or even a nameable positionality formed in and through the practice of particular actions)” (p. 50).

### **Religion and Spirituality**

Globally, eight in 10 individuals identifies with a religious group (Pew Research, 2012). Christians account for 32 percent of this group, with approximately half being Catholic, and the remainder being Protestant (37%) and Eastern Orthodox (12%). In Canada, 67 percent of the population identifies as Christian, with almost 40 percent of those being Catholic, and 60 percent Protestant. The next largest group, at 24 percent, identify as having no affiliation, up from 16 percent in 2001 (Statistics Canada, 2011c).

The terms “religion” and ‘spirituality’ are closely related, and often considered one and the same (Hill & Pargament, 2003; Zinnbauer et al., 1997; Koenig, 2009). However, over time they are becoming increasingly distinct from one another (Hill et al., 2000; Pargament, 1999), are defined differently in research literature, and there are many definitions for both (Rousseau,

2014). Currently, there is no agreed-upon definition for either term (Moore, Kloos, & Rasmussen, 2001).

Religion is typically understood to involve “beliefs, practices, and rituals related to the sacred” (Koenig, 2009, p. 284), and is “rooted in an established tradition that arises out of a group of people with common beliefs and practices concerning the sacred” (Koenig, 2009, p. 284). It is also understood to be organized and conducted in a central place of worship (Zinnbauer et al., 1999). Koenig (2008) defines the sacred as “that which relates to the numinous (mystical, supernatural) or God, and in Eastern religious traditions, to Ultimate Truth or Reality” (p. 3). He adds that a religion typically has rules about how adherents should live their lives, and is often practiced in community with others, but not always (2008). Pargament (1997) has defined religion as “a search for significance in ways related to the sacred” (p. 32).

### **Spirituality**

Like the term religion, “spirituality,” which has its roots in religious contexts, has varied definitions. Traditionally, many people linked the two, using them interchangeably and suggesting that their spirituality occurred in relation to their religion. However, the term spirituality is increasingly favoured over the term religion, and the two terms are becoming increasingly polarized, “since many view [religion] as divisive and associated with war, conflict, and fanaticism” (Koenig, 2009, p. 284). Increasing numbers of people in countries of the West are identifying as “spiritual-but-not-religious,” partly in reaction to negative connotations increasingly attached to religion, but also because increasing numbers of people no longer associate with a particular religion (Koenig, 2009).

Spirituality, is chiefly distinguished from religion as being personal and self-defined rather than communal in nature. It is also “largely free of the rules, regulations, and

responsibilities associated with religion” (Koenig, 2009, p. 284). Spirituality is said to focus on “nature and being, and how beliefs, emotions, and practices relate to diverse life events like death, suffering, and injustice” (Zinnbauer et al., 1999); it is a personal quest for understanding answers to ultimate questions about life about meaning, and about relationship to the self, the sacred or transcendent (Koenig, 2001) and a search for wholeness (Blazer, 2009; Hill & Pargament, 2008). Spiritual experiences tend to be “universal, internal, spontaneous, ecumenical and private” (Burke, Chauvin, & Miranti, 2005, p. 6).

A study by Halkitis and colleagues (2009) exploring the religious and spiritual practices of 498 queer individuals, and the meanings they ascribed to spirituality, revealed some of the central themes evident in non-queer population. Definitions of spirituality were “largely in relational terms, (e.g., in terms of one’s relationship with God and with self)”, whereas definitions of religion were ‘largely in terms of communal worship and in terms of its negative influences in the lives of individuals and communities’ (p. 250). Zinnbauer et al. (1999) have also highlighted the association frequently made between religion with negative qualities such as dogmatism and cult-like, fundamentalist behaviour.

Tolliver and Tisdell (2006) conceptualize spirituality as “meaning making,” but they also add that spirituality involves ‘a sense of wholeness, healing, and the interconnectedness of all things’ (p. 38). Spirituality has been shown to enhance “outcomes such as academic performance, psychological well-being, leadership development, and satisfaction” (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011, p. 10). Tolliver and Tisdell (2006) have called for the recognition of the importance and role of spirituality in TL (p. 37). TL theory involves a shift that transforms frames of reference (Mezirow, 1997). Tolliver and Tisdell argue that spirituality can enhance the ability of learners “to come to a greater understanding of their core essence through

transformative learning experiences that help them reclaim their authenticity” (Tolliver & Tisdell, 2006, p. 38). A central concern of my study involves the role of spirituality in learning. Coming out is about “naming oneself as somebody out of the dominant system, which defines the social roles,” and as ‘an act of untying secrets and silence, and feeling free’ (Cleaver, 1995, cited in Ribas, 2004, p. 84). This study explores the learning involved in coming out in relation to spiritual/religious identity, and the role religion and/or spirituality (R/S) may have played in the learning processes.

Finally, it is important to note tensions in the literature related to defining religion and spirituality, with many scholars (see Hill, Pargament, Hood, McCullough, Swyers, Larson, & Zinnbauer, 2000) opposing the division between spirituality and religiosity because of the suggestion that one is negative (i.e., religiosity), and the other (i.e., spirituality) is positive. Some prefer to focus on the common denominator of these constructs, the concept of the sacred (Pargament, 1997).

## **Religion**

In 1986, Ellis wrote, “The conclusion seems inescapable that religiosity is, on almost every conceivable count, opposed to the normal goals of mental health” (p. 42). Since then, however, there has been a bevy of health research in particular, which has been more sympathetic to religion and willing to study, affirm, and promote the values and visions of religious traditions through research and practice (Koenig, 2009; Koenig, 2012). That research has revealed that people turn to religion to address a range of needs.

Religion has been described as five-dimensional (Stark & Glock, 1968 in Brandt, 2013) encompassing: beliefs, knowledge, experiences, practices (both private and public), and consequences. Frankl (2006, 1986) suggested that people find fulfillment only when their needs

for meaning and purpose are adequately addressed, and people often turn to religion to address these needs.

People also turn to religion as a means of coping with anxiety (Friedman & Rholes, 2008) and stress (Pargament, Koenig, & Perez, 2000); to cope with traumatic events (Koenig, 1998; Pargament, 2000) to help with matters related to self-control (see for example, Benson, 1992; Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2001); to find meaning in, and make sense of, suffering and loss (Murphy, Johnson, & Lohan, 2003; Mickley, Pargament, Brant, & Hipp, 1998; McIntosh et al., 1993; Pargament, 1997; Pargament et al., 1998; Strawbridge, Shema, Balfour, Higby, & Kaplan, 1998); to gain a sense of control over the overwhelming forces of nature (both internal and external); and to enact “social rules that facilitate communal living, cooperation, and mutual support” (Koenig, 2009, p. 283). For some, religion also provides a sense of connectedness, community and identity (e.g., Ellison & George, 1994; Krause, 2008).

The positive relationship between religious involvement and physical and mental health have been well documented (Pargament, 1997; Myers, 2000; Sherkat & Ellison, 1999). A review of almost 350 studies on physical health, and 850 on mental health that included variables related to physical and mental health, found that religious involvement and spirituality are positively correlated with better health outcomes (Koenig, 2000). Both religiousness and spirituality have also been positively associated with feelings of happiness and well-being (Koenig et al., 2001; Pargament, 2007; Pargament & Brant, 1998).

Many studies discuss the benefits of religious involvement; comparatively few have focused on how that involvement may be harmful (Mochon, Norton, & Ariely, 2011). Koenig (2009), who reviewed the research on the relationship between religion and (or) spirituality and mental health, found that while many who turn to religious life find “comfort, hope, and

meaning,” not all do, and in fact, for the emotionally vulnerable, “religious beliefs and doctrines may reinforce neurotic tendencies, enhance fears or guilt, and restrict life rather than enhance it”; that in such circumstances, “religious beliefs may be used in primitive and defensive ways to avoid making necessary life changes” (p. 289). Pargament (2002) has suggested that the value of religion depends on five criteria: “the kind of religion (i.e., that some forms are more helpful than others), the criteria of well-being, the person, the situation and social context, and the degree to which the various elements of religious life are well-integrated into the person’s life” (p. 169). A number of studies have linked intrinsic motivation (religious life based on personal values) to better mental health and lower levels of prejudice and extrinsic motivation (practicing one’s religion to please others or for social/personal gain) to prejudice (Donahue, 1985, in Pargament, 2002).

Pargament (2002) asserts that the efficacy of religion depends on several variables, one being variation in the kinds of religiousness. He goes on to discuss intrinsic (i.e., motivated to live their religion) versus extrinsic motivation (use their religion for personal or social gain, even at the expense of others). Ryan, Rigby, and King (1993) distinguish between people who “personally choose and value their religion” from those who participate in religious life “out of fear, guilt, or external pressure” (cited in Pargament, 2002, p. 170). Higher levels of internalization were linked with reduced levels of anxiety, depression, and social dysfunction and poorer self-esteem” (p. 171).

### **Christian Ideologies about Homosexuality**

Rodriguez’s (2010) review of the literature related to homosexuality and religion notes that the majority of the research has been conducted in Western contexts, in relation to Christianity, and with white participants, thus the existing literature reflects a lack of diversity.

Christian churches and organizations that tend to be most intolerant of homosexuality typically embrace a literalist (the Bible as God's word) stance and are most likely to be found in the conservative, or "fundamentalist" expressions of Christianity (Barton, 2010; Heerman et al., 2007; Levy, 2009). Those who consider biblical scripture as culture-bound, referred to as "modernist" (Moon, 2002), tend to be most welcoming of queer members. A distinction has been made between communities that are gay-positive, i.e., those that have adopted "gay-positive and Christian-positive messages to better serve the spiritual needs of queer individual," and 'gay-friendly' communities, meaning those that 'explicitly welcome queer individuals' (Brennan-Ing, Seidel, Larson, & Karpiak, 2009, p. 73). Some Protestant churches, such as the Episcopal Church, the United Church of Christ, and United Church of Canada welcome queer individuals, and ordain openly gay clergy (Heerman, Wiggins, & Rutter, 2007; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000).

### **Ideology and Hegemony**

Religion influences queer identity through ideological means. Given that this study explores the ways in which participants questioned religious beliefs, ideology is at the heart of this study. It is also at the heart of critical theory, feminist and queer theories, and TL, the theories framing the study (see Chapter Four). Critical theory considers ideologies to be "broadly accepted sets of values, beliefs, myths, explanations, and justifications that appear self-evidently true, empirically accurate, personally relevant, and morally desirable to a majority of the populace, but that actually work to maintain an unjust social and political order" (Brookfield, 2001, p. 14). This state of affairs is reproduced through the dissemination of dominant ideology, compelling people to accept it as normal, natural and inevitable. Through the mechanism of critical reflection, critical theory endeavors to reveal the dominant ideological state of affairs,

and ways in which it is maintained and reproduced, as a prelude to changing it. Ideology critique, defined as “the process by which people learn to recognize how uncritically accepted and unjust dominant ideologies are embedded in everyday situations and practices” (Brookfield, 2009, p. 293) must be at the heart of critical reflection and by extension, transformative learning. Central to ideological domination is the concept of hegemony “which explains how subjugated people are convinced to embrace dominant ideologies as always being in their own best interests” (Brookfield, 2009, p. 294). For the purpose of this study, the hegemonic knowledge in question “defines the acceptable and accepted in hetero-normative terms only” (Grace, 2001, p. 263).

How do deeply religious queer individuals who have internalized homophobic ideologies and values negotiate this hegemonic knowledge in order to come out? That question is at the heart of this study, and is connected to identity. Identity has been conceptualized in terms of the goals, values, and beliefs to which an individual commits (Waterman, 2004). Identity refers to one’s sense of “this is who I am” as well as the possible selves I could become (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Individuals start developing a religious/spiritual identity as they begin to formulate what their R/S means to them (Fowler, 1981). For some people, R/S becomes a core part of their identity, whereas for others, R/S identity varies throughout life and may be abandoned altogether (Barra et al., 1993). R/S identity can be in conflict with other aspects of identity, as is often the case with queer sexual identity (Wood & Conley, 2014). Anderton, Pender and Asner-Self’s (2011) review indicates that many queer Christians experience difficulties reconciling their sexual orientation due to homosexuality-as-sin ideology. Queer individuals who grow up in a homonegative religious environment tend to experience internalized homophobia (Barnes & Meyer, 2012; Harris, Cook, & Kashubeck-West, 2008; Kralovec, Fartacek, Fartacek, & Ploderl, 2012; Shilo & Savaya, 2012, in Gibbs & Goldbach,

2015). Internalized homophobia, also termed internalized heterosexism (Szymanski & Chung, 2003), can be defined as the “formation of self-hatred associated with a lifetime of experiencing negative stereotyping related to homosexuality” (Seegers, 2007, p.11). Meyer and Dean (1998) note that internalized homophobia leads to “a devaluation of the self, internal conflicts and poor self-regard” (p. 161). Religiosity, meaning “the level of religious dedication, belief, and religious activity” (Gibbs & Goldback, 2015, p. 473), strongly influences the identities of queer individuals, particularly those who are devoted to their religion (Bowers, Minichiello, & Plummer, 2010). There is a significant correlation between religiosity and homophobic attitudes (Rowatt, LaBouff, Johnson, Froese, & Tsang, 2009); high levels of religiosity among queer adults have been associated with higher rates of internalized homophobia (Barnes & Meyer, 2012, Kralovec et al., 2012; Shilo & Savaya, 2012, in Gibbs & Goldbach, 2015).

### **Reconciling (or Not) Sexuality and Religion/Spirituality**

Research related to the negotiation of intrapersonal conflict between homosexuality and Christian ideology is well established (Rodriguez, 2010; Anderton, Pender, & Asner-Self, 2011). Rodriguez’s (2010) review discusses the psychological theories related to gay and lesbian Christians, specifically Goffman’s (1963) theory of stigma, Festinger’s (1957) cognitive dissonance (Anderton et al., 2011), and Baumeister, Shapiro, and Tice’s (1985) theory of identity conflict (Rodriguez, 2010, p. 8). More recently, Anderton, Pender and Asner-Self (2011), who reviewed the literature regarding identity conflicts between religion and sexual orientation, provided a list to date of the studies that have explored strategies queer individuals may use to reconcile their religious beliefs and their sexuality. The majority of sociological research on queer individuals and Christianity over the past few decades has focused on the conflict between religion and sexuality, and how to resolve that conflict.

Most queer individuals begin grappling with their sexual identity as adolescents, although some begin earlier (Herdt & Boxer, 1993; Savin-Williams, 1998). It is also around adolescence when most religions try to shape and control emerging sexuality to ensure it conforms to the dominant religious ideology (Buchanan, Dzelme, Harris, & Hecker, 2001). The work of defining one's values and beliefs, including those related to religion or spirituality occurs during the late teens and early twenties, particularly for those in industrialized countries where young adults tend to postpone marriage and parenthood (Arnett, 2004 in Barry, Nelson, Davarya, & Urry, 2010). Though the literature on young adults and religious identity formation during the transition to adulthood is relatively small (Barry et al., 2010; Levenson, Aldwin, & D'Mello, 2005), it suggests that young adults (a) often feel a significant disconnect between their religiosity and spirituality (Arnett, 2004), and (b) tend to question religiosity as they engage in a deeper exploration of their spirituality. This process often results in a more complex understanding of themselves and their beliefs (Braskamp, 2008 in Barry et al., 2010). This exploratory work is supported by biological, cognitive, and psychosocial development experienced by those roughly 18-25 years of age (Sowell, Trauner, Gamst, & Jernigan, 2002; Steinberg, 2005 in Barry et al., 2010).

Attempting to reconcile one's religion and sexuality when the messages from the religious ideologies that are homonegative can be challenging. Queer individuals who wish to remain in their religion may continue to identify with their religious identity, while denying their sexuality (D'Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkington, 2001; Schuck & Liddle, 2001). They will particularly attempt to repress their sexuality if they fear retribution and/or abandonment by their religious communities (Ward, 2005). Same-sex attractions experienced while still in such an environment can lead to feelings of shame, confusion, anger, sadness, aloneness, anxiety,

inauthenticity, and the belief that one is sexually deviant (Levy & Reeves, 2011; Wolkomir, 2006). Queer individuals often feel betrayed by their bodies (Bowers et al., 2010; Coyle & Rafalin, 2000). Some who experience same-gender attractions rationalize them as evidence of unmet physical and emotional needs, mental illness, or weakness, or attribute them to negative life events such as early childhood abuse (Wolkomir, 2006).

Many queer individuals reject their religious identity in favour of their sexual identity. Hendrickson's (2007) quantitative study of 2,269 queer individuals in New Zealand revealed that they were "disaffiliating with Christianity at 2.37 times the rate of the general population since 1966" (p. 1). Those raised as Christians indicated their religion had been a source of difficulty rather than a source of support in their lives. Nonetheless, Hendrickson found that some queer individuals remained connected to their religious traditions, demonstrating their "resilience and unwillingness to abandon faith traditions that have in many instances abandoned them" (p. 9).

Schuck and Liddle (2001) found that nearly two-thirds of 66 queer individuals in their American study had experienced spiritual/sexual identity conflict as a result of religious teachings as well as congregational discrimination. They described feelings of shame, depression and suicidal ideation. The most damaging fallout for these individuals was feeling abandoned by God and by their religious communities. Yarhouse, Brooke, Pisano, and Tan's (2005), and Yarhouse and Tan's (2005) research with young adults who identify as Christian and experience same-sex attraction indicate that the cost of feeling rejected by one's religious community may have long-lasting effects if it occurs during adolescence.

### **Extrinsic/Intrinsic**

Rodriguez (2010) points out that queer Christians with deeply religious backgrounds experience conflicts related to sexual and religious identities from two sources: extrinsic (outside the individual) and intrinsic (within the individual). Extrinsic causes of conflict include: anti-homosexual doctrine, other queer individuals' negative perspectives and experiences, and religious beliefs of family and friends. Intrinsic sources of conflict include: fear of divine retribution, and strong beliefs that sexual and religious identities are incompatible.

Four approaches to resolving intrinsic conflict about sexual identity have been identified:

- 1) Deny sexual/gender identity,
- 2) Deny religious identity,
- 3) Compartmentalize the two, or
- 4) Integrate the two (Rodriguez & Ouellette 2000; Garcia, Gray-Stanley & Ramirez-Valles 2008; Ganzevoort, van der Laan & Olsman 2011).

Coming out is considered an essential component in queer identity formation and integration (Legate, 2012). Although researchers have agreed that it is difficult to clearly define what it means to come out (Morrow, 2006; Tanner & Lyness, 2003; Vaughan & Waehler, 2010), drawing upon Dziengel (2015), as noted on page two, I define "coming out" as queer as the acknowledgement and revelation of one's sexual minority status. There are many factors that influence whether or not a person comes out, and the degree to which they live an "out life" across all domains of their life. In addition to homophobic attitudes, these may include cultural influences (Adamczyk & Pitt, 2009 and Morrow, 2006, cited in Dzeingel, 2015), life experiences, geographic location, whether one resides in a rural or urban area, the broader social and political context, and available supports and resources (Garnets, Herek, & Levy, 2003, cited in Dzeingel, 2015).

A number of models of coming out have been proposed, most of which can be termed stage or progression models. Eliason and Schope (2007) reviewed these linear stage models and noted several themes that were common to them all:

1. Feelings of differentness: Youth begin to feel that they are different from their peers or that their behaviours or attractions are incongruent with their heterosexual identity.
2. Identity formation as developmental process: Stages later in the models are considered to be healthier or more advanced than earlier stages.
3. The need for disclosure: A coming out process is integral to living a healthy queer life.
4. The need for a stage of pride/cultural immersion: This stage is often characterized by what considered by some to be outrageous (unacceptable) behavior and a rejection of heterosexual society.
5. The need for identity integration/synthesis: This stage is often characterized by decreased anger against societal norms and increased emotional balance (pp. 13-14).

This stage model of coming out has been subject to a number of critiques. As Klein, Holtby, Cook, and Travers (2015) argue, the model “ignores situational variables (often related to social power) necessitating negotiation of identity, while suggesting a constant state of being out as morally superior” (p. 299). MacLean (2007) considers the model problematic for bisexuals whose “decision about whether to come out is influenced by several factors not often taken into account in sexual identity development models and coming out narratives” (p. 152), such as misunderstandings and stereotypes about bisexuality. Klein, Holtby, Cook, and Travers (2015) also critique the stage model discourse of coming out for “its assumption of a static and coherent final subject” (p. 300).

## **Integration**

As Andrew Yip's (2010) review of the literature indicates, identity reconciliation, defined as "the process by which allegedly "contradictory" pieces of a person's identity are brought into congruence with each other" (Fuist, 2017, p. 770) to create a "coherent" identity has been studied extensively (Crapo, 2005; Drumm, 2005; Ganzevoort, van der Laan & Olsman, 2011; Garcia, Gray-Stanley, & Ramirez-Valles, 2008; Lalich & McLaren, 2010; Loseke & Cavendish, 2001; Mahaffy, 1996; McQueeney, 2009; Minwalla, Rosser, Feldman, & Varga, 2005; O'Brien, 2004; Pitt, 2010; Ponticelli, 1999; Rodriguez, 2010; Thomas & Olson, 2012; Thumma, 2004; Walton, 2006; Wolkomir, 2006; Yip, 1997). The underlying assumption of this literature is that given the tendency of most religious organizations and institutions to denounce homosexuality, most queer individuals who have experienced such environments must engage in extensive work to reconcile the "incompatible aspects of their personal identity" (Fuist, 2017, p. 770). Shallenberger (1996, 1998) posits that reconciliation, or integration, begins when an individual "consciously acknowledges the inherent discrepancies between living a gay lifestyle and remaining actively involved in organized Christian religion" (in Rodrigues, 2009, p. 18). Integration is said to be complete when an individual incorporates "their religious beliefs and their homosexuality into a single, new, workable understanding of the self" (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000, p. 334); in other words, they "combine their two identities rather than keeping them in separate spheres of their life" and "have no self-imposed walls between their homosexuality and their religious beliefs" (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000, p. 334). Integration, it has been suggested, "creates a new, complex and yet coherent identity" (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000, p. 335). This study explores that integration processes in terms of the learning that may occur during and through coming out.

## **Be/Coming Out**

Dziengel (2015), who argues that the notion of “coming out” fails to “capture the ongoing stress of being out” and the continual need to disclose sexual identity throughout life (p. 307), proposes a “Be/Coming-Out” model based on an ecological systems approach, which “depicts the lived experience of sexual minority identity formation as an ongoing, daily process, as well as the duality of potential resiliency and ambiguity due to identifying as a sexual minority” (p. 306). This model acknowledges coming out as a daily, ongoing process, influenced by life events as well as “being in, or existing in dimensions of self, social, and society” (p. 307).

A study conducted by Levy and Reeves (2011) explored how gay, lesbian, and queer-identified individuals who were raised in Christian traditions resolve conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs. The 15 participants who each participated in an in-depth interview ranged in age from 19-43, identified as gay, lesbian or queer, and came from eight different Christian backgrounds, including Jehovah’s Witness, Catholic, Baptist, and Lutheran. The majority were white and had post-secondary education. Analysis of the interviews led the authors to make three conclusions:

1. Resolving the discord between sexual identity and religious beliefs is a five-stage process of internal conflict resolution.
2. Personal and contextual factors affect every aspect of the resolution process.
3. Faith development and sexual identity development are intertwined and fluid constructions (p. 53).

Growing older and more mature, or coping with a life-threatening illness, such as HIV/AIDS (Rodriguez, 1997; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000) have been shown to have a positive impact on integration. Developmental stages may also have an impact on integration. However, as a study by Savin-Williams (2001) indicates, due to the overall homophobic and heterosexist

impulses that prevail, queer people may have a different life trajectory compared to the majority of their heterosexual peers, dating later, forming partnerships later, and having families later.

Hattie and Beagan's (2015) study examined how 17 queer individuals from the East Coast of Canada, aged 28-65, all of whom had been raised in intensely Christian environments, reconfigured their sexual/gender identities and religious/spiritual identities during the "coming out" process. TL theory was used to explore the internal and external factors that enabled people to resolve significant states internal conflict. Participants experienced one or more disorienting dilemmas, which provoked self-examination. For most, critical assessment of assumptions led them to search for other queer individuals with whom they could share their experiences. For some, however, repression and denial hindered and delayed the process of self-examination. Eventually, however, critical analysis led to seeking shared experiences in queer community. Finding community was critical to considering and trying on new roles and identities, and new ways of thinking and being.

Many queer individuals eventually abandon their religion. However, the loss of R/S can result in profound emotional responses such as grief and anger (Barra et al., 1993, in Wood & Conley, 2014). A significant number of queer people in the United States and Canada have turned to other faith traditions, such as Buddhism and Earth-based spiritualities (Pagan and Wiccan spiritualities) because they "allowed queer individuals to have their sexual orientation affirmed while remaining spiritually connected" (Smith & Horne, 2007, p. 237). They are also considered appealing because they are not reliant on sacred texts that require interpretation and there is no intermediary, allowing practitioners to "maintain belief in direct, individual connection to a higher being" (Smith & Horne, 2007, p. 237). Smith and Horne (2007) conducted an internet survey of Canadian and American queer people in Pagan and Wiccan

spiritualities to determine if there were differences in conflict between sexual orientation and faith of those individuals who came out initially in a Judeo-Christian faith and later became Earth-spirited, and those who identified with an Earth-spirited faith at time of coming out and remained Earth-spirited. The study also investigated differences in resolution of the conflict over faith and sexual orientation, self-acceptance, and internalized homophobia. Those in the latter group (identifying as Earth-based at time of coming out and continuing to do so) had less difficulty integrating sexuality and spirituality. In Hattie and Beagan's study, several of the participants had turned to Earth-based traditions to meet their spiritual needs. More research is needed, however, to understand the experiences of queer individuals with Earth-based spiritualities (Smith & Horne, 2007) and the learning processes through which people change affiliations with different faith traditions or spiritual paths.

### **Contextual Factors Affecting Integration**

A study by Fuist (2017) involving queer folks from three congregations indicates that not all experience conflicts between their sexual identity and faith. Fuist's study suggests that different socio-temporal contexts "provide divergent resources for identity performances" (Fuist, 2017, p. 770). A number of studies have pointed to the role of culture in shaping identity performance. Martine Gross (2008), for instance, who studied queer Christians in France, noticed an important difference between French and American religious contexts and their differential impact on queer identity. Unlike its counterpart in America, the French Roman Catholic Church is deeply rooted in the country's religious and cultural heritage. To leave the Catholic Church for another religion means eschewing an elemental part of French heritage and identity, a trajectory few queer individuals in France are prepared to take. The majority keep a bond with the Catholic Church, though they may cease attending and maintain a critical stance toward it. Hall (2015)

discovered a similar dynamic in Poland, another European country deeply imbued with the Catholic faith (90% of the population is Catholic). For the 48 university-educated queer individuals Hall interviewed, most of whom had been raised in the Catholic faith, patterns of spiritual seeking beyond Catholicism depended on the scope of experiences interviewees had with other denominations while growing up. There was also a link between Polish queer individual willingness to challenge the dominant religious views on homosexuality and their geographical and social mobility. A study conducted by Siegers (2007) which explored the spiritual and religious experiences of 10 predominantly African American Christian men aged 33-62 who were HIV symptomatic, revealed that the men had accepted their sexuality, despite the beliefs of their congregations and families that homosexuality is sinful. Eight remained connected to their religious communities of origin but did not disclose their sexuality or HIV status. They believed God loved them and would not have created them gay if He did not approve. The Christian faith of their African American cultural heritage had enabled them to resist internalizing homophobia. In contrast, a study conducted by Garcia, Gray-Stanley, and Ramirez-Valles (2008) with 66 Latino American Catholic gay, lesbian and transgender individuals born in the U.S. or Mexico revealed that most had left their Catholic tradition to join other religions or spiritual groups perceived to be more welcoming; they engaged in extensive ideological revisions in order to reconcile their religious and queer identity.

### **Education and Queer Individuals.**

For the majority of queer students, school is not an inclusive learning environment. The First National Climate Survey on Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia in Canadian Schools revealed high levels of homophobia in Canadian schools; sixty-four percent queer students did

not feel safe in school (Taylor & Peter, 2011). Seventy percent of all students reported hearing, “that’s so gay” every day in school (Center for Addiction and Mental Health, 2004). These results are consistent with American studies (Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2009; Gay Lesbian Straight Educators Network [GLSEN], 2015). Queer students experience higher rates of social ostracizing, depression, drug use, and attempted suicide (Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2009). As a result, absenteeism is high, the drop-out rate amongst queer youth is three times the national average (Gold & Drucker, 2008). In addition, they are up to four times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers (Gold & Drucker, 2008).

Seidman (1996) describes heterosexuality as “a social and political organizing principle” (p. 9). Adrienne Rich, who coined the term “compulsory heterosexuality” in reference to a society that is ideologically framed by heterosexuality, argues that heterosexuality should be “recognized and studied as a political institution” (p.637). Compulsory heterosexuality can manifest in the school environment in many ways. Quinlan and Town’s (1999) work revealed heteronormative practices that schools actively engage in to maintain the status quo or validate compulsory heterosexuality include: maintenance of silence surrounding sexualities in general and homosexuality in particular, the pathologizing of (homo) sexuality, and the policing of gender boundaries to ensure that young men and women adhere to expected and appropriate gender behaviour (p. 510). There are indications that many faculties of education in Canada (Schneider & Dimito, 2008; Eyre, 1997; Grace & Wells, 2006) and the United States (Lugg, 2003; McGillivray & Jennings, 2008) do not address making schools safe for queer students in their course outlines.

While queer students are navigating hostile school environments, they are in the early stages of developing a sense of identity, including their gender and sexual identities (Cawthon,

Guthrie, & Cuyjet, 2011; Diaz, Kosciw, & Gretak, 2010). Studies indicate that queer students typically begin to understand same-sex attraction between sixth and 10th grade (Peterson & Rischar, 2004). In the midst of that identity construction enterprise, they are immersed in a school system that, like the broader society, positions heterosexuality as the “central gender and sexual category in the generation of power, authority, and social domination” (Hill, 1996, p. 275) and promoting the ‘ideological and political imperatives of the group in power’ (Jeltova & Fish, 2005, p. 21). “Knowledge” disseminated in schools reflects norms and perspectives of dominant culture (Wilkinson & Pearson, 2009; D’Augelli & Grossman, 2006; Burgess, 2005; Jeltova & Fish, 2005; Temple, 2005). Schools have been called “one of the major heterosexist institutions” (Temple, 2005, p.274). In such environments, queer students are “othered” and often bullied for being considered ‘different’; being Othered has significance within teaching and learning (Toynton, 2006). Queer students who choose not to come out in non-supportive and/or hostile environments exercise their right to self-marginalization. While self-marginalization has no impact on the inherent ability to learn, by distorting the relationship between learner and tutor and peer relationships with other learners, both the engagement of this ability to learn, and confidence in the existence of learning may be inhibited (Toynton, 2006, p. 183). Moreover, what does it mean to be the invisible “other” in educational environments where perceptions of self-worth and confidence are so critical? In addition, young adulthood, characterized by identity exploration and uncertainty in many areas of life (Arnett, 2000) is often associated with “depressive and anxious symptoms” (Borders, Guillen, & Myer, 2014). This period of life can present significant challenges to queer young adults experiencing sexual orientation uncertainty. It is not surprising that as mentioned previously, in the face of such pressures, queer youth often drop out.

Post-secondary institutions, which tend to have a liberalizing influence on attitudes toward queer students, may be more comfortable environments than school. Nonetheless, queer students are more likely to report experiencing harassment, to be the target of derogatory remarks, and to feel less comfortable with the campus climate than their heterosexual peers (Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Frazer, 2010).

### **Transformative Learning Theory**

The study draws on transformative learning theory, as the theory can be a particularly useful framework for exploring and understanding the experiences of queer individuals questioning their religious beliefs, values and assumptions as a precursor to coming out. The aim of transformative learning is to “help individuals challenge the current assumptions on which they act and, if they find them wanting, to change them...the hope of transformative learning is that better individuals will build a better world” (Christie, Carey, Robertson, & Grainger, 2015, p. 11). The notion of transformation—of the person, of society— fits with the critical, feminist, and queer theoretical underpinnings and practice.

TL was first articulated by Jack Mezirow (1975, 1978) after researching factors related to the success of women’s entry to community college programs in the 1970s, with the resulting conclusion that a key factor was perspective transformation. Mezirow (1991) defines perspective transformation as:

the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand and feel about our world; changing these structures of habitual expectation to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative perspective; and, finally, making choices or otherwise acting upon these new understandings. (p. 167)

TL was originally conceptualized by Mezirow (1981, 2000, 2012) begins with a *disorienting dilemma* or “life event crisis” (Malkki, 2012, p. 207) which a person cannot make sense of within their existing meaning frameworks. The dilemma acts as a catalyst for change, initiating a series of stages that lead to a reformulation of their worldview. The stages include:

Self-examination; critical assessment of assumptions; recognition that others have shared a similar discontent and transformation; exploration of new values, relationships and actions; development of a course of action; acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing the course of action; execution of the plan; development of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships; and a reintegration into one’s life on the basis of conditions dictated by one’s new perspective. (Mezirow, 2000, p. 22)

A disorienting dilemma may occur abruptly, triggered by a life crisis, such as the death of someone, serious illness, loss of employment (Brock, 2010), or may develop gradually as a growing sense of dissatisfaction with old meaning structures (Mezirow, 2011; 2000; Taylor, 2000; Brock, 2010; Dirkx & Mezirow, 2006; Howie & Bagnall, 2013). Cumulative or incremental transformations are said to be based on “a sequence of events or insights...resulting in a change in the personal frame of reference” (Howie & Bagnall, 2013; Mezirow, 2011), and leading to “a fundamental change in the way we see ourselves and the world in which we live” (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 318). A disorienting dilemma is generally understood to be a painful, disruptive experience, “especially when it involves subjective reframing” and is often “an intensely threatening emotional experience in which we have to become aware of both the assumptions undergirding our ideas and those supporting our emotional responses to the need to change” (Mezirow & Associates, 2000, p. 6).

The disorienting dilemma is followed by a process of self-examination, and critical reflection during which a person critically assesses “internalized role assumptions” and feels “a sense of alienation from traditional social expectations” (Cranton, 1994, p. 23). It is during this process that a person alters frames of reference and begins to form new meanings. Frames of reference have been defined by Mezirow (1997, p. 5) as “the structures of assumptions through which we understand our experiences” which “selectively shape and delimit expectations, perceptions, cognition, and feelings.” Frames of reference are learned in early life and by adulthood, people have a “coherent body of experience—associations, concepts, values, feelings, conditioned responses—frames of reference that define their life world” (Mezirow, 1997, p. 1) which they draw upon to help them make sense of their experiences. Since frames of reference are formed early in life, it can be difficult to accommodate new ideas, new paradigms, and new ways of doing things. Yet, argues Mezirow (1991), perspective transformation is critical to adult development: “Transformation can lead developmentally toward a more inclusive, differentiated, permeable, and integrated perspective and that, insofar as it is possible, we all naturally move toward such an orientation. This is what development means in adulthood” (p. 155). Becoming aware of and revising one’s assumptions is a critical aspect of TL; if basic assumptions remain unchallenged, “change will not take place” (Cranton, 1994, p. 739).

A number of theorists have built upon Mezirow’s work, including Brookfield (2000), Cranton (2006), Dirkx (2012), Daloz (2000), King, (2005), and Taylor and Cranton (2012), highlighting key factors that can influence the process of TL. Together, they have highlighted factors that influence a person’s inclination to learn:

the readiness of the learner, personality traits and learning styles; the cultural and socio-

economic background of the learner; the educator's ability and interest in fostering transformative learning in educational contexts; and the nature of time and change as they relate to adult development all impact the process of learning. No less important are emotional and social literacies: motivation, resilience, interpersonal effectiveness, critical thinking, and cultural awareness. (Polyzoi & Magro, 2015, p. 117)

Though TL has gained popularity in North America, it has also been the subject of a range of critiques (Taylor, 1997; 2007; Kitchenham, 2008). For one, Mezirow originally emphasized the rational, cognitive aspects of transformation, whereas “multiple studies refer to the significance of intuition (Brooks), affective learning (Clark, Scott, Sveinunggard), extrarational influences (Vogelsang), and the guiding force of feelings (Hunter, Taylor)” (Taylor, 2007, p. 48). The way in which TL has dealt with the role of relationships has also been flagged as problematic (Taylor, 2000; 2005), in particular, what is a transformative relationship and what makes it transformative (Carter, 2002, in Taylor, 2005)?

Questions about the role of context – cultural, historical, and social - and its impact on learning (Taylor, 2005) have been raised. Mezirow emphasized the individual and their agency, and failed to recognize the learner's positionality. He did, however, acknowledge:

The process of self-empowerment, acquiring greater control of one's life as a liberated learner, is of course, always limited by social, historical, and cultural conditions...our identity is formed in webs of affiliation within a shared life world. Human reality is intersubjective; our life histories and language are bound up with those of others. It is within the context of these relationships, governed by existing and changing cultural paradigms, that we become the persons we are. (2000, p. 27)

Questions have also been raised about characteristics that transcend context, such as “greater self-directedness, assertiveness, self-confidence and self-esteem, which support the emphasis of autonomy found in Mezirow’s (2000) interpretation of transformative learning” (Taylor, 2005, p. 184).

Mezirow has also been critiqued for not attending to the role of power relations in transformational learning. McDonald et al. (1999) have noted, for instance, that “cultural ideologies are self-perpetuating and do so in the interests of those in power, structuring systematic communication and action through inequality and injustice” (p. 6). Mezirow (1991, 1992, 1995) acknowledged that transformational learning is optimal within “ideal conditions of discourse...free of distortion and manipulation”, and while he admits that “discourse is susceptible to such pitfalls” (Mezirow, 1995 in McDonald et al., 1999, p. 5), he assumes those pitfalls are surmountable.

Finally, though it has been gaining some interest in European (Ileris, 2004; Malkki, 2010; Jarvis, 2012; Kokkos, 2012, West et al., 2013) and African (Vaughn, 2016; Nsteane, 2011; 2012) contexts, the majority of the literature on TL is situated in Western contexts (Taylor, 1997; Nsteane, 2011; Ntseane, 2012). Indeed, Mezirow’s (2000) conceptualization of a liberated/emancipated person as “free from unwarranted control of undesirable beliefs, unsupportable attitudes, and paucity of abilities, which can prevent one from taking charge of one’s life” (p. 26) is rooted much within a Western worldview and epistemological system, as is his stated goal of adult education: to foster “liberating conditions [for] making more autonomous and informed choices” and “a sense of self-empowerment” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 26). Inviting a learner whose cultural and philosophical worldview differs from the underlying presuppositions

and goals of TL poses an added layer of complexity and again, raises ethical issues vis-à-vis an educator imposing their worldview in non-Western contexts.

### **Unlearning**

Critical to this study is the concept of “unlearning.” I am interested in how participants let go of or abandoned beliefs and assumptions, particularly those about homosexuality, which prevented them from accepting their sexual selves. Unlearning first appeared within the field of organizational learning and focused on unlearning at the organizational level (Hedberg, Nystrom & Starbuck, 1976; Hedberg, 1981; Nystrom & Starbuck, 1984 in Pedler & Tsu, 2014). More recently, efforts have been made through a number of qualitative and quantitative studies to understand the relationship between organizational and individual unlearning (Becker, 2005; Becker, 2006; Becker, 2007; Becker, 2010; Becker & Delahaye, 2005; Delahaye & Becker, 2006; Tsang & Zahra, 2008; Hislop et al., 2013). Unlearning literature suggests a range of complex learning processes typically considered part of a cycle in which knowledge that has been gained, becomes obsolete and is discarded to make way for new knowledge (Hedberg, 1981, cited in Brook, Pedler, Abbot & Burgogne, 2016). It is also conceptualized as “giving up or abandoning” (Hislop, Bosley, Coombs, & Holland, 2014, p. 540) old ideas and behaviours to make way for new ones. Two theoretical models of this “giving up” process have been proposed: Hedberg’s (1981) model, which has been equated to “overwriting” old information, and a second model proposed by Klein (1989), the “parenthetic model” which suggests that new knowledge sits beside the old knowledge which can be recovered if an individual returns to the old context. This model also implies that old knowledge that is not used for some time will gradually degrade. The one point on which scholars agree is that unlearning is always closely linked with

the acquisition of new knowledge, meaning that unlearning is never undertaken unless new knowledge emerges that challenges current beliefs and values (Becker, 2007).

Given the close connection between learning and unlearning, some have questioned whether they are not one and the same (Becker, 2005). Yet the literature on unlearning suggests the process differs from learning in several ways. Unlearning is launched by a problem that produces disorder or chaos, rather than by new learning. Pedler & Tsu (2014) explain,

A struggle between needs for stability and continuity versus new learning (Friedlander, 1983, pp. 214-220) may lead to strenuous efforts to avoid the crises engendered by unlearning (Hedberg, 1981, p. 19)...the disorder implied by unlearning is something to be managed and controlled, but from a “radical unlearning” perspective (Chokr 2009; Hsu, 2013) it creates the conditions for alternative social realities. (p. 299)

This chaos/disorder theory may explain why unlearning has been described as a stage characterized by vulnerability (Macdonald, 2002; Hislop et al., 2014). It is the stage in which a person prepares to abandon the known for the unknown and unfamiliar. Pedler and Tsu (2014) suggest that unlearning can be much more complex than just abandoning old ideas, especially in the context of “intractable or wicked problems which prove unamenable to resolution under current states of knowledge” (p. 297). Drawing on Foucault, they also link unlearning with power relations, asserting that given “all knowledge is constituted within relations of power, any definition of a problem will have a political dimension; thus to unlearn an existing position is not just a technical task, but also a political and a moral one” (Pedler & Tsu, 2014, p. 297).

Organizational literature also links unlearning with biases, and particularly in relation to anti-racist and anti-colonial pedagogical strategies (see, for example, Duncan, 2002; Nadeau &

Young, 2006). The link between unlearning and internalized homophobia, however, has received little attention (Priestly, 2009). This study, then, contributes to the literature on unlearning (Hislop et al., 2014), and explicitly as it relates to abandoning internalized homophobia.

### **Summary and Gaps in the Literature**

This literature review reveals a number of gaps in the literature, and the critiques that have been raised with regards to the transformative learning process and outcome. It indicates that questions remain related to the ways in which context, both past and current, affect transformative learning. It also highlights the need for greater attention to culture in the transformative process, and notes the lack of emphasis on the nature and quality of transformation; is it always necessarily positive for the learner? Furthermore, what about the impact of power relations on learning? No one transforms in a vacuum, or apart from systems of power, and these may impact the transformative process. This thesis addresses these gaps in the literature.

The next chapter outlines the methodological framework used in this thesis.

## **Chapter Three: Methodology**

### **Introduction**

The focus of this study was to investigate how participants negotiated identity conflict and religion during their coming out processes. The goal of the study was to gain insight into (1) the struggles participants faced during their coming out processes, and (2) what helped them negotiate the challenges they experienced and why. Understanding their experiences will shed light on the ways in which one can create a learning environment that facilitates learning, particularly as relates to those negotiating identity conflict.

The study also explored self-described transformative learning moments, the nature of those moments, and how and when they occurred. As noted in the previous chapter, TL is about perspective transformation, a paradigm shift whereby a person critically examines prior interpretations and assumptions to form new meaning. The notion of a fundamental change in perspective or frame of reference (King, 2002) is at the heart of TL.

Following is a discussion about the methodological underpinnings of this qualitative research in which I situate myself in terms of my epistemology, ontology and axiology. My research relies on transcripts of interviews, and an analysis of those data in order to understand the meaning of participant actions (Schwandt, 2001).

#### **Why this Research?**

According to Schwandt (2007), ontology refers to the worldviews and assumptions in which researchers operate in their search for new knowledge (p. 190). My research questions arise from my worldview and my assumptions and are ultimately spiritual in nature. By spiritual, I mean “the diverse ways we answer the heart’s longing to be connected with the largeness of life—a longing that animates love and work, especially the work of teaching (Palmer, 1998, p.

5). Teaching, for me, is not centrally about earning a living, but about building a more equitable and just society; it is a vocation. I believe all human beings are connected and that whatever we do to ourselves, to others, and to the earth has an effect, for good or for ill. My values have no doubt been at least partially shaped by my Christian heritage, although my current spiritual values, beliefs and practices are no longer tied to a specific religion. Nonetheless, my spirituality shapes my approach to education. Like Brandenburg and De Wit (2011), I believe that the core goals of higher educational institutions (HEIs) are to “help us understand this world and to improve our dealing with it” (p. 5); to “make the world a better place through research, teaching/studying and social engagement” (p.5). These beliefs orient my teaching, research, and interactions with students.

Axiology refers to “how researchers act based on the research they produce, as well as the criteria of values and value judgments, especially in ethics” (Merriam-Webster, 1997, in Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 111). Values shape the inquiry process (Lincoln & Guba, 2011), determining:

choice of the problem, choice of paradigm to guide the problem, choice of theoretical framework, choice of major data-gathering and data-analytic methods, choice of context, treatment of values already resident within the context, and choice of format(s) for presenting findings. (p. 116)

My worldview and values are also shaped by my experiences. I am a 58-year-old, out queer woman who turned to feminism to understand the systemic sexism and homophobia I experienced within Christian circles for almost two decades. Through Women’s Studies courses, I came to understand the patriarchal and heteronormative systems in which I had grown up and still lived, and how these systems privilege some and not others. Both critical feminist theories

and queer theories recognize that “human nature operates in a world that is based on a struggle for power” which leads to “interactions of privilege and oppression that can be based on race or ethnicity, socioeconomic class, gender, mental or physical abilities, or sexual preference” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 102). While these interactions can involve overt and intentional discriminatory and even violent behaviour toward a person or persons of a marginalized group, they can also take the form of a daily, casual degradation, or “microaggressions.” Derald Wing Sue (2010) describes “microaggressions,” the “everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership” (p. 24). While microaggressions are generally discussed from the perspective of race, they can also be directed at queer people; for example, when two gay men who hold hands in public are told not to “flaunt their sexuality,” or when the term “gay” is used in reference to something one does not like or considers to be somehow negative.

I believe that “the knowledge that is produced [through research] can change existing oppressive structures and remove oppression through empowerment” (Merriam, 1991, in Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 103). This research was inspired, in the beginning, by witnessing the struggles of international students who were attempting to negotiate identity conflicts that arose when they encountered information that challenged long-held beliefs, especially those rooted in religion. I recognized a similar dynamic in the coming out stories of queer people who had been deeply inculcated in a religious tradition. Ultimately, my goal in conducting this research is to understand more deeply the nature of the participants’ struggles and challenges related to identity conflict.

Feminist philosopher of science Sandra Harding (1987) defines methodology as “a theory and analysis of how research should proceed” (p. 2), and Schwandt (2001) as an “analysis of assumptions, principles, and procedures in a particular approach to inquiry” (p. 161).

Methodology, according to MacGregor and Murnane (2010), refers to “the rationale and the philosophical assumptions that underlie any natural, social or human science study, whether articulated or not,” and to how “logic, reality, values and what counts as knowledge inform research” (p. 420). One’s choice of methodology is determined by one’s axiology, which is “the branch of philosophy dealing with ethics, aesthetics, and religion” (Lincoln & Guba, 2011, p. 116).

Given the nature of the research questions I wanted to explore and my own philosophical perspective, I employed a qualitative research design with a critical feminist perspective.

According to Lin (1998), qualitative post-positivistic work strives “to uncover the conscious and unconscious explanations people have for what they do or believe, or to capture and reproduce a particular time, culture, or place so that actions people take become intelligible” (p. 162, in MacGregor & Murnane, 2010, p. 420). The intent of post-positivistic varies but can include: seeking patterns and commonalities; discovering underlying structures; revealing beliefs, kinships and ways of living; placing experiences into words and narratives; and, uncovering ideologies and power relationships (MacGregor & Murnane, 2010, p. 422).

Post-positivistic research “generates hypotheses through inductive reasoning. Instead of trying to explain how something operates, scholars strive: (a) to understand why it or people operate in the manner that they do (interpretation); or (b) to reveal power relationships and structures (MacGregor & Murnane, 2010, p. 420). Since the participants in this research project are subject to a complex array of “power relationships and structures,” such as the political

structures that shape their rights as a sexual minority, and the religious structures infused with and shaped by patriarchal, heteronormative values, I am interested in how those structures impinged upon and influence their efforts to construct a gendered self. I was also interested in how my participants in turn, responded to those relationships and structures.

### **Narrative Research**

Narrative research is a set of approaches that focus on the written or spoken words or visual representations of individuals (Andrews, Squire, & Tamboukou, 2008). These approaches focus on the lives of individuals as told through their own stories. The emphasis in such approaches is on the story, typically both in terms of what is said, and how it is narrated. Narrative research can be considered both a research method in itself but also the phenomenon under study. The so-called “narrative turn” in research (Polkinghorne, 1988 cited in Goodson & Gill, 2011) refers to a shift that has occurred over the past few decades in history, literature, and social and human sciences toward affirming peoples’ stories as important sources of empirical knowledge (Hyvarinen, 2010). Narratives “incorporate temporality, a social context, complicating events, and an evaluative conclusion that together make a coherent story” (McAlpine, 2016, p. 33). Since the narrator—in this case, the participant—is actively engaged in constructing the narrative, a narrative shines a light on the process of identity construction (Riessman, 2008, cited in McAlpine, 2016).

Narrative research seeks to explore and understand a phenomenon through personal narratives and particular aspects of life experience. Narrative researchers “study stories or narratives or descriptions of a series of events” (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 4). Moreover, narrative researchers often analyze and interpret the stories that they gather and write by drawing from philosophical and theoretical ideas about the ways in which they think through and

construct their story. There are three main methodological stances (Elliott, 2005; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007)—sociocultural, literary, and naturalist, latter of which best represents the one underlying my research. A naturalist methodological stance focuses on “rich descriptions of the content of people’s stories about significant issues” (McAlpine, 2016, p. 35), with the data acting as a resource to ask: “What experiences has this person had? What do these experiences mean to him or her? What complicating actions and evaluative aspects are highlighted?” (McAlpine, 2016, p. 35).

Epistemological questions have been raised about narrative research. Epistemology looks at the validation of knowledge (i.e. fact as opposed to opinion). Questions have been posed by positivists as to the accuracy of stories, which are infused with and shaped by the narrator and his/her context. Like Guba and Lincoln (1985), I believe that our individual personal reality—the way we think life is and the part we are to play in it—is self-created. We put together our own personal reality through our interactions with ourselves and others (including for some, a Divine Other).

Personal narratives have played and continue to play a major role in feminist and queer research. Feminist research endeavours to give a voice to the voiceless and marginalized. “By listening to previously silenced voices, feminist researchers challenged social science knowledge about society, cultural, and history” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 254). In the tradition of Dorothy Smith (1987a, 1987b), personal narratives honour the belief that “knowledge resides in the ordinary thinking of people in everyday life” (Hamdan, 2009, p. 215). One of the goals of this research was, and is, to give voice to those whose stories are seldom heard, particularly in educational research (Creswell, 2008; Chase, 2005).

Not unrelated to the previous point, narrative research emphasizes relationships or collaboration between the researcher and others (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). It is in collaboration with the participant that the researcher attempts to understand and then interpret the stories shared by the participant. The researcher and participant share a relationship, one in which both researcher and participant learn from one another (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). This kind of participatory approach to research provides participants with the opportunity to reflect upon their stories, and add to, explain, provide further clarification of points, and so on. In my research, I interviewed each participant a second time, which enabled a dialogic, dialectic approach that is more like an ongoing conversation than a one-time, one-shot interview.

Epistemologically, I am interested in how individuals, through their actions, exercise agency to avoid, challenge or resist perceived practices and policies. While traditional epistemologists “evaluate sources of evidence and methods of inquiry, seeking criteria for justifying beliefs and knowledge claims, and ways of refuting skepticism” (Code, 2004, p.170), a feminist epistemology “is equally concerned with analyzing the nature and positioning of the knowers and the (gendered) politics of knowledge (Code, 2004, 170). As Code (2004) has pointed out, “authoritative knowledge is integral to feminist practices of developing informed analyses of social-political oppression and marginalization, and engaging in emancipatory projects” (p. 170). And, like others, we make little distinction between thinking, learning, and the formation of identity (Billett & Somerville, 2004).

Since narrative research is focused on in-depth understandings of meaning and meaning-making, it draws on ethnographic traditions of producing thick descriptions and uncovering emic (insider) perspectives, as well as interpretive phenomenology with its commitment to revealing the meanings embedded in common life practices through the stories people tell of their

experiences. In contrast to the positivist position that there is a distinction between the knower and the known, between a reality that “exists” and the researcher who is attempting to uncover it; the narrative paradigm asserts that the researcher and the phenomena she seeks to understand are inseparable (Spector-Mersel, 2010, p. 216).

### **Challenges and Considerations**

**Insider Status.** As noted in Chapter One, I am a research “insider” in the queer community and have experienced the phenomenon under study—coming out of a homonegative Christian environment/denomination, and having to renegotiate my sexuality and spirituality. Though there are advantages to belonging to the group under study, this familiarity can be disadvantageous, as has been previously stated. There was also a potential for role duality and the challenges that come with trying to balance the insider roles (Delyser, 2001). During the study, I came to realize just how small the queer community in Halifax really is. I often encountered research participants while out in the community. They were eager to enquire as to the status of the work. These encounters reinforced my sense of responsibility to the participants, as well as to the broader queer community and beyond.

**Researcher Reflexivity.** Because my aim was to understand how, at the micro level, queer individuals from deeply religious backgrounds negotiate societal biases and their own minority sexuality in order to come out, I draw on a narrative research methodology. Narrative qualitative approaches explore, through interview narratives and documents, the narratives focusing on a topic of one or more participants. Narrative inquiry is an interpretive approach which involves using storytelling methodology. Connolly and Clandinin (1990) observe that “a person is, at once, engaged in living, telling, retelling, and reliving stories (p. 4). In narrative inquiry, the story becomes an object of study, focusing on how individuals or groups make sense

of events and actions in their lives. This method is considered to be well suited to study subjectivity and the influence of culture and identity on the human experience. Participants' narratives help provide an understanding of how they attach meaning to their lived experiences of the phenomenon under study—in this case, coming out—within the context of the surrounding socio-political forces (Taminiaux, 1987).

Reflexivity, a vital part of qualitative research, “is the process of reflecting critically on the self as researcher, the ‘human as instrument’” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 124); it requires the inclusion of the researcher in the subject under study. A feminist notion of reflexivity involves a “practice of observing and locating one’s self as a knower within certain cultural and socio-historical contexts” (Sinacore et al., 1999, p. 267), and to “interrogate the social and political forces that inform or affect the production of knowledge” (Ristock & Pennell, 1996). The concept of reflexivity carries with it the assumption that researcher action, “whether it is the choice of method for data collection or the selection of data for analysis, allows for or constitutes the operation of power” (Alguinaldo, 2012, p. 767).

Reflexivity, “forces us to come to terms not only with our choice of research problem and with those with whom we engage in the research process, but with ourselves and with the multiple identities that represent the fluid self in the research setting” (Alcoff & Potter, 1993, in Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 124). I concur with Mazawi (2011), who states that as academics, we,

...need to turn [our] research tools inward, by critically unpacking the foundations of the higher education structures in which [we] work and by critically reflecting on [our] implication with state power. Such a critical engagement would help reclaim not only the

centrality of academic work in development but would also connect the academic workplace with community engagement and social transformation. (p. 5)

It is my reflexive practice that has pressed me to understand the dynamics that brought me to this research, and I continued to employ that same reflexive practice throughout the research process, excavating my own culture and assumptions, and re-examining my pedagogical underpinnings and approaches. I often discussed my research and my thoughts with colleagues/friends, as I did during its formative stages, and these discussions served to strengthen my reflexivity.

As Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) have highlighted, “lived and told stories and the talk about the stories are one of the ways that we fill our world with meaning and enlist one another’s assistance in building lives and communities” (p. 35). When we re-tell a story, we also craft it to communicate not so much what happened, but what we want the listener(s) to know about the story. Narrative inquiry holds that experience is expressed in “lived and told stories” (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 5). Bell (2003) observes that “we produce and communicate stories within a social context” (p. 4), meaning the stories are told within existing cultural frames of reference. She adds that “they also communicate cultural assumptions and habits of thinking that transcend the individual and idiosyncratic” (2003, p. 4). Stories weave personal narratives with broader hegemonic social context.

Connelly and Clandinin’s (2006) framework for narrative inquiry recognizes three “commonplaces” that the researcher needs to attend to when conducting narrative research: “temporality, sociality, and place” (p. 479). In other words, the researcher needs to explore, past, present, future, as well as issues of personal and social conditions, and the place where events

take place. All commonplaces need to be explored simultaneously when undertaking a narrative inquiry. To be more specific:

Temporal: “Events under study are in temporal transition” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 479), meaning events and people always have a past, present, and a future. In using narrative inquiry, it was important to try to understand the participants, the spaces they inhabit(ed), and events as in process, as always in transition and not static. Since, as Carr (1986) notes, “we are composing and constantly revising our autobiographies as we go along” (p. 76), as a narrative inquirer, one of my tasks was to attend to the temporality of my own and my participants’ lives, as well as to the temporality of places, things, and events. Social conditions refer to the milieu and conditions under which people’s experiences and events unfold. Social conditions are understood in terms of cultural, social, institutional and linguistic narratives. The social also includes the relationship between researcher’s and participants’ lives. Therefore, as a narrative researcher, I have been a part of the unfolding inquiry.

Place: Connolly and Clandinin (2006) define place as “the specific concrete, physical and topological boundaries of place or sequences of places where the inquiry and events take place” (p. 480). They discuss how identities are inextricably linked with experiences in a particular place or in places and with the stories we tell of these experiences.

For this study, I drew upon a critical methodological approach to explore the links between the participants’ personal experiences on a micro level, and praxis on a broader, macro level. Pairing feminist critical theory and narrative research was appropriate given that critical theory considers the role of ideology and uncovering assumptions that help perpetuate oppression, and that the stories I was mining dealt with participants’ experiences of conflict related to spiritual and sexual identities, which in turn pertain to the social and the learning. The

crux of my research question is how participants reconciled their spiritual/religious identity with sexuality (or not). Their stories provide both content and context.

## **Method**

### **Data Collection**

This research involved generating descriptions, through two, one-on-one interviews (see Interview Guide, Appendix B) with participants. One participant chose to complete one long interview due to personal scheduling constraints. The goal of the interview was to “draw out rich descriptions of lived experience. In other words, rather than explore how or why something is...to tell...what it feels like, what it reminds them of, and how they would describe it” (O’Leary, 2004, p. 124). However, because the study focused on individuals who experience daily homophobia, directly or indirectly, discussions of the findings as they related to context were informed by critical theory. The interview questions helped structure each interview and provided follow-up questions as needed, i.e., to prompt elaboration of details. Questions were not necessarily asked in order, but when they best fit with the flow of each participant’s story.

Prior to beginning each interview, a piece of flipchart paper and an assortment of coloured pencils and pens were provided on a table between the participant and the interviewer and participants were invited to time line their coming out processes, i.e., when they experienced their first same-gender attraction, when they came out for the first time to themselves, to others, and the learning that informed and/or occurred during those processes. Participants were also invited to indicate what was happening to their religious/spiritual identity as they were in the process of coming out. They were asked to reflect upon and discuss how they have negotiated their religious and/or spiritual identity in coming out, and in particular, how they may have drawn upon their spirituality and/or religion to support them in coming out.

It was thought that timeline drawings might enable participants to reflect upon their stories as they are relating them, and to engage the story with a depth that may not have happened without this activity. A representational activity like time line drawing can lead to richer data in sensitive topic, narrative interviews. It also provides the participant with a concrete reflective product to take with them as they leave the research interview. Timeline drawings can become an important tool in the narrative researcher's repertoire (Guenette & Marshall, 2009, p. 92).

In the end, only one participant, Julian (pseudonym), opted to do a time line drawing during each of his interviews. I, however, sometimes used the paper myself to draw quick sketches of a participant's timeline and to keep track, and in those cases, participants would often refer to my drawing to clarify a point or to reflect upon the sequence of events. I found it helpful to revisit my visuals as I was transcribing the audio files as they helped me recall the general tenor and flow of each interview. With the one participant who did do timeline drawings during each of his interviews, I took a photo of each drawing to capture the drawing, and offered it to the participant to keep.

During the second interview, the participants were invited to reflect upon their learning experiences in relation to coming out. The participant who had made a timeline drawing was shown the drawing and invited to reflect on the information shared in the previous interview, adding to the drawing if he wished. At the conclusion of this interview, I took another photo to capture the changes in the visual. Though the participant was given the opportunity to take this artefact, he chose to leave it with me. Once the audio recordings of the second interviews had been transcribed, a four to five-page summary with all identifying information removed, was

sent to the participant for verification of the details of their story. The participant was given a week to respond to respond with any questions, comments or corrections.

### **Ethics**

After completing a proposal defense, I submitted an application for ethics approval to the MSVU University Research Board to ensure ethical principles concerning information, consent, and confidentiality. Ethics approval was granted in August of 2016, and I began recruitment immediately.

### **Recruitment**

A recruitment advertisement was distributed inviting the participation of lesbian, gay, bisexual and queer individuals 30 years of age or older living in Halifax Regional Municipality. The age requirement was to ensure participants had been out long enough to be able to reflect on their experiences. Participants were recruited through notices distributed via queer email networks, list serves, websites and Facebook pages, WAYVES Magazine, and snowball sampling, and distributed to establishments and community sites known to be popular in the queer community. I self-disclosed my identity in the recruitment flyers, stating that I am a queer-identified woman from Halifax who is involved in the local queer community, as studies have indicated that self-disclosure can facilitate more trust as participants may feel that a queer researcher would better understand challenges they have faced in relation to their sexual orientation (Hash & Cramer, 2003).

### **Participant Criteria**

Participants had to be 30 years of age or older, identify as male, female or genderqueer, and indicate they had been living as an out lesbian, gay, bisexual or queer person for at least five years, enabling them to speak about their initial experiences of coming out, and their experiences

of coming out since that time. In addition, participants had to identify as having been raised with a deeply religious and homophobic Christian upbringing, and experienced conflict between their religion/spirituality and sexuality. To try to ensure a diversity of participants and a balance of genders, race, ethnicities and Christian backgrounds, I first targeted my initial recruitment only to networks that would enable me to focus on African Nova Scotian, Mi'kmaw, and immigrant communities. Recruitment notices were distributed through the Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre, the Nova Scotia Rainbow Action Project (NSRAP) which had organized "BlackOut 2.0", an event organized to help support queer African Nova Scotians, the Atlantic Wabanaki Two-Spirit Alliance, and the Rainbow Refugee Association of Nova Scotia. I waited for two weeks before proceeding with another recruitment drive; after receiving no responses, I then sent out the recruitment notice to the broader queer community through *Wayves Magazine*, an online publication that provides information to lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transgendered people in Atlantic Canada regarding the activities of their communities; through NSRAP and the Halifax Pride Committee to distribute the recruitment ad through their list serves and on their websites; via queer email networks, list serves, websites (such as Hal Gal) and Facebook pages, and snowball sampling. I also posted recruitment ads in establishments and at community sites known to be popular in the queer community, such as Just Us Café on Coburg Street, Menz and Mollyz Bar on Gottingen Street, and the Company House.

Given I had begun recruitment in early August, recruitment was slow. However, in September, recruitment picked up and by late September, I had interviewed six participants, none of whom had identified as being marginalized based on race or ethnicity. When the next two recruits volunteered, I advised them that I was hoping to include perspectives of those marginalized by race and ethnicity. When they indicated they did not identify with either of

these, I asked if I could get back to them in early October if I had received no further responses to my recruitment ads. They agreed, and when early October arrived and I had received no further responses, I contacted the other two volunteers and we proceeded with their interviews. The lack of diversity in terms of the participants is one of the limitations of this study.

### **Informed Consent**

Individuals who expressed interest in participating in an interview were contacted and screened to ensure they met the criteria outlined in the recruitment ad. Those who met the criteria were emailed an informed consent form that included detailed information about the purpose of the study and their participation in it, for their review. The consent form informed them that their participation was voluntary, and that they could terminate their participation at any time without explaining the reason for doing so. Participants were then contacted again in order to schedule an interview. I brought an informed consent form to each interview, reviewing with them that:

- a. Consent is given voluntarily.
- b. Consent can be withdrawn at any time.
- c. If a participant decided to withdraw consent, the participant could also request the withdrawal of their data, up to two weeks after an interview summary had been sent to them, after which data analysis would have proceeded too far to remove data.

### **Confidentiality**

Audio files and the digital photographs of the timeline were assigned an identification number and pseudonym. All electronic files have been stored in a password-protected folder on the “S” drive, a secure file storage site at Mount Saint Vincent University, to which only I have access. I transcribed all the audio recordings, removing identifying information. The consent forms containing the participants’ names, the file linking ID numbers and pseudonyms with real

names, along with contact information of participants have been kept in a locked file cabinet in my office, separate from the transcripts.

Once an interview had been transcribed, only one copy of the audio file was kept in the password-protected file on the university's S drive. Paper copies of the transcripts and the participant's timeline was stored in a locked file cabinet in my office.

All data from this research will be stored as described, at Mount Saint Vincent University for five years following the last publication. At that point, paper files will be shredded and electronic files deleted. While I will use data from this research study, including quotes from interviews and photographs of the timelines in presentations, reports, and publications, quotes, and photographs will be identified using pseudonyms, and I will ensure no participant is identifiable. The foregoing information is included in the informed consent form.

### **Debriefing**

Participants were provided an opportunity to debrief at the end of each interview. Within two weeks of completing the interviews, participants were emailed a four to five-page summary of their interview, in order to ensure I have accurately captured their narratives. Participants were then given two weeks to provide feedback, or to withdraw their data.

### **Risks**

The biggest risk was to participants' privacy. I took the following steps to protect their privacy: First, I conducted each interview myself, at a private location of the participant's choosing. Second, I transcribed all of the interviews. Third, I removed any identifying information from each interview, and assigned an ID number.

Responding to the research questions sometimes surfaced a depth of emotion. Several participants teared up while recounting their experiences. Having lived through similar

experiences, I was able to offer empathy and support during those moments. I also provided plenty of wrap-up time at the end of each interview to ensure participants had sufficiently debriefed before leaving the interview, and provided contact information for counselling and support services available in the local community for queer people (e.g., the Youth Project, Pride Health, university counselling services).

### **Benefits**

There were no direct benefits for participants. However, they all expressed gratitude for having an opportunity to share their story with me, and several indicated that the interviews had been a welcome opportunity to reflect on their coming out experiences. Their comments affirm, as has been stated by Lincoln (2005) that sharing stories can be empowering for individuals who are members of oppressed and marginalized populations, enabling and promoting “social justice, community, diversity, civic discourse, and caring” (Lincoln, 2005, p. 6). All participants valued the opportunity to share their stories and to have their experiences witnessed and affirmed (Miller, 2015).

### **Power-Sharing**

Participants were fully informed about the methods and goals of the study, were interviewed privately to ensure confidentiality, and were aware through the recruitment advertisement of my positionality as the researcher prior to giving consent for participation (Maxwell, 2013). Through reflective journaling and debriefing with my doctoral supervisor and other committee members also helped to provide an alternate perspective to my own. I recorded and transcribed each interview, and wrote a summary which was shared with the participant for confirmation of its accuracy. In addition, participants indicated that being able to do a second

interview enabled them to share thoughts and reflections that had emerged since the first interview, and almost all indicated that this was a gratifying experience.

### **Data Analysis**

Researchers use a diversity of ways to study oral accounts (e.g., see Pinnegar & Daynes, p. 5; Chase, 2005). With thematic analysis, findings are analyzed and organized first by theme. I chose to transcribe each interview myself, which enabled me to immerse myself in each participant's story. As I transcribed, if a theme seemed to emerge, I attached a comment box with the provisional theme; I also inserted other kinds of notes and questions that came to me during the transcription process. Once the transcripts were all complete, I combined each person's interviews into one document, as I found it easier to move through their interviews and work with the interview material. I then wrote a four to five page summary of each participant's story to "create coherence and temporal order" (Alguinaldo, 2012, p. 36), which helped me to see the stories as a whole, and in order of events. These summaries were emailed to the participants for feedback on the accuracy of the facts as they had related them to me, as well as the sequence of events. Two clarified, by email, a few facts and/or made a correction to the timeline of events. Being a visual and kinesthetic learner, I then made a timeline drawing of each coming out story, inserting moments of learning and unlearning, and the factors that participants said contributed to shifts in thinking. Doing this exercise revealed when there was a cluster of factors and/or events in play. In addition, the timelines revealed the positioning of "crescendo moments," i.e., a crisis or crises that helped propel them to come out, in relation to moments of learning and unlearning.

Once I had read through each interview three times and had a sense of the themes and issues, I created one large timeline on a sheet of flipchart paper with emerging themes and emerging trends. I began writing a preliminary draft of findings (in the winter), submitting them

to my supervisor, Dr. Susie Brigham for discussion, prior to the Christmas break, in 2016. The following sub-questions guided the organization of the findings:

1. How did “out” adults who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or queer with deeply religious Christian backgrounds/upbringing learn homonegative beliefs and values?
2. How do lesbian, gay, bisexual and queer adults negotiate homonegative beliefs and values during coming out processes? How has learning facilitated this?
3. How have spirituality and/or religion influenced their coming out processes? How have they provided support? How have they acted as impediments? How have their identities changed over time?
4. How did they question ideologies, and challenge power?

## Chapter Four: Theoretical Underpinnings

### Introduction

The theoretical framework for this study draws from three main theories: feminist theory, TL theory, and queer theory. Feminist theory is rooted in the tradition of critical theory. Unlike traditional social theories that seek only to understand and explain a social phenomenon, critical theory, which is historically associated with the Institute for Social Research (more commonly known as “the Frankfurt School”) has as its aim “emancipation from slavery”; “to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them” (Horkheimer, 1972, p. 244). It also proposes to “create a world which satisfies the needs and powers” of human beings (Horkheimer, 1972, p. 246), and considers itself a part a struggle for an ‘association of liberated human beings, in which everybody would have an equal chance of self-development’ (Horkheimer, p. 236). Critical theory presumes a dominant ideology, meaning, “the broadly accepted set of values, beliefs, myths, explanations, and justifications that appears self-evidently true, empirically accurate, personally relevant, and morally desirable to a majority of the populace...that maintain an unjust social and political order” (Brookfield, 2005, p. 30). Critical theory explores how adults learn to resist ideological manipulation (Brookfield, 2005); ideological manipulation that works effectively, ensures that an unequal, racist, sexist [*and I insert, homophobic*] society is able to reproduce itself with little resistance. The central function of ideology is to convince people that the world is naturally organized in a way that works in the best interests of everyone. Critical theory regards dominant ideology as inherently manipulative and duplicitous (Brookfield, 2005, pp. viii-ix). Understanding the function of ideology in maintaining hegemony has been a major focus of critical theory. Hegemony describes the unjust social order that people learn to accept as natural and in their own best interests (Brookfield, 2009). A hegemony does not need to be

enforced, as people learn to accept their circumstances as “normal” and political issues are masked and reduced to personal issues. Mass media is one of the resources used to maintain the hegemony of whatever class is in power. Hegemony “does not just passively exist as a form of dominance” but must be continually “renewed, defended and modified” (Williams, 1977, p. 112). It is also “continually resisted, limited, altered, and challenged by pressures not at all its own” (Williams, 1977, p. 112).

As Denzin and Lincoln (2011) observe, “Human nature operates in a world that is based on a struggle for power,” one that leads to “interactions of privilege and oppression that can be based on race or ethnicity, socioeconomic class, gender, mental or physical abilities, or *sexual preference* (italics added)” (p. 102). Brookfield (2005) argues that a critical theory of adult learning should reveal how adults learn to recognize hegemony in their beliefs and assumptions, and how they might contest it both individually and collectively in order to replace it with a system that is more just (p. 46). Resistance to hegemony can take many forms, including individual resistance and collective resistance, such as that which occurs through unions, movements for social change, collectives, and organizing online. My study explores how participants came to recognize the hegemony of *heterosexism* as “an ideological system that denies, denigrates and stigmatizes any non-heterosexual form of behaviour, identity, relation or community” (Auger & Krug, 2013, p. 10), and how they resisted it individually and collectively.

Power relations are at the heart of critical feminist theory. Brookfield (2005) conceptualizes power as “the resources, abilities, and allies adults can call upon to help them” (p. 48). Brookfield argues it is crucial to learn to recognize “the play of power in our lives and the ways it is used and abused” (p. 47). A “pedagogy of the oppressed” (Freire, 1970) makes oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed, so that their reflection will give

rise to their engagement in the struggle for their liberation (p. 48). Awareness raising through research and lifelong learning can contribute to both personal and social change. A critical theory of adult learning “should investigate how people learn to recognize the flow of power in their lives and communities, how they come to appreciate that power is inscribed in their everyday reasoning and actions, and how they try to redirect it to serve the interests of many rather than the few” (Brookfield, 2005, p. 47). However, unmasking power is challenging as it is embedded in what Foucault (1975) termed “regimes of truth” (in Brookfield, 2005, p.47). Adult education that is rooted in critical theory, such as was practiced in the Antigonish Movement<sup>20</sup>, helps the adult learner become aware of, appreciate and act upon their own power and agency to resist and challenge ways of living that “perpetuate economic, racial, and gender oppression” (Brookfield, 2005, p. ix). Creating a more just society, Brookfield (2015) argues, entails a series of *learning* tasks:

1. Learning to recognize and challenge ideology that attempts to portray the exploitation of many by a few as the natural state of affairs.
2. Learning to uncover and counter *hegemony*.
3. Learning to unmask *power*.
4. Learning to overcome alienation and thereby accept freedom.
5. Learning to pursue liberation.
6. Learning to reclaim reason.
7. Learning to practice democracy (p. 39).

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<sup>20</sup> “Directed from the Extension Department of St. Francis Xavier University, the Antigonish Movement involved large numbers of farmers, fishermen and coal miners in the organization of numerous forms of co-operative enterprise during the 1920s and 1930s” (Sacouman, 1978, p. 1).

This current study highlights the hegemony of heteronormative ideologies around sexuality and gender that infuse society, “holding up heterosexuality as the norm” (Smith, 2015, p. 35); Berlant and Warner (1998) explain that heteronormativity makes heterosexuality seem not only coherent but taken-for-granted. In relation to homophobic Christian institutions and organizations, rather than being a specific doctrine, heteronormativity manifests through, in particular, the construction of heterosexuality and heterosexual marriage as the ideal; as the only moral option. Heteronormativity seasons Christian discourse, practice and celebration. Churches that embrace a literalist approach to biblical exegesis dictate “what kind of bodies should be physically intimate and how people ought to embody gender” (Sumereau & Schrock, 2011, p. 99); they assert that “God made men and women so different that they should not act or look like each other” (Sumereau & Schrock, 2011, p. 100). Christian discourse assumes, centers, privileges, and rewards heterosexuality through teachings, practices and celebrations related to heterosexual marriage, by permitting and sanctioning sexual unions between men and women. Sex outside the bonds of heterosexual marriage is considered a “sin of the flesh” and a threat to marriage and the patriarchal family (Moon, 2004). Christian churches, institutions and organizations that consider the Bible to be word-for-word, the infallible word of God embrace the concept of dimorphic sexual difference (that there are only two sexes) and subscribe to the notion that males and females are essentially different (biological essentialism) but complementary. Those who challenge these assumptions by having same-gender sexual relations are subject to censure and exclusion (Weiss, 2008, cited in Fish & Karban, 2015).

My study attends to these kinds of learning. How/when do people recognize and challenge ideology? Do they learn to uncover and counter hegemony? Do they learn to pursue self-liberation and if so, how and why? What does “liberation” look like?

## **Transformative Learning Theory**

The study also draws on transformative learning theory, which describes how adult learners change the way they interpret their world. Mezirow (1996) has defined learning as “the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience in order to guide future action” (p. 162). According to Mezirow and Associates (2000), “learning occurs in one of four ways: by elaborating existing frames of reference, by learning new frames of reference, by transforming points of view, or by transforming habits of mind” (p. 19). Transformation involves critically examining assumptions to form new meaning. Mezirow (1991) distinguishes between introspection, which involves a person being aware of how they think, feel or behave but without testing the validity of prior learning (p. 107), and critical reflection, which involves “reflection on presuppositions” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 7). Critical reflection, which plays an essential role in TL, involves questioning the veracity of assumptions and beliefs that are based on prior experience.

The idea of a fundamental change in perspective or frame of reference (King, 2002) is at the heart of transformative learning. When an individual undergoes such a change, they have “transformed” their view of themselves, or of the world, or of how they interact with others and their environment. Perspective transformation is achieved through disorienting dilemmas, critical reflection, rational dialogue, and action, and begins to occur when an individual becomes aware of holding a limiting or distorted view (Cranton, 2006). A critical examination of this view leads to alternative views and consequently, a new perspective. A critical examination of a limiting view involves being willing to suspend or set it aside, and ultimately, let it go. Unlearning has been defined as ‘abandoning outdated, misleading, inefficient and useless knowledge’ (Klein, 2008, p. 80) and is considered vital to changing ‘rigid beliefs, standards, values and routines’

(Klein, 2008, p. 80). Unlearning is also said to be about a struggle between needs for stability and continuity versus new learning (Friedlander 1983, pp. 214–220). According to Hedberg (1981), strenuous efforts are often made to avoid the crises engendered by unlearning (p. 19), and when avoidance is no longer possible, a period of grieving often ensues. Grieving is “when an individual realizes that old patterns or ways of perceiving are no longer relevant”, moves “to adopt or establish new ways, and finally, integrates old and new patterns” (Imel, 1998, p. 3). Boyd and Myers (1988) have suggested that grieving is a major phase of a disorienting dilemma.

TL has evolved over time (Taylor, 2008), and now recognizes that transformation may be “epochal (involving dramatic or major changes) or incremental and may involve objective (task oriented) or subjective (self-reflective) reframing” (Mezirow, 2009, p. 23). It also recognizes that not everyone experiences a disorienting dilemma (Mezirow, Taylor and Associates, 2009), nor is the transformative process necessarily a rational, linear step by step process as suggested in Mezirow’s early model (Boyd, 1991; Grabove, 1997; Robertson, 1997). Life rarely takes predictable paths, and each person is unique in the way they experience change. In addition, while the early version of TL theory stressed the cognitive dimensions of transformation, more recent iterations of the theory give attention to the embodied and affective nature of transformation (English & Peters, 2012). Baumgartner (2001) asserts that “transformational learning is a complex process involving thoughts and feelings (p. 18); Dirkx (1998) emphasizes soul-based learning that is unconstrained by rational and cognitive learning; and Grabove (1997) asserts that the transformative learner “moves in and out of the cognitive and the intuitive, of the rational and the imaginative, of the subjective and the objective, of the personal and the social” (Grabove, 1997, p. 95).

Researchers have identified several factors that support transformative learning. Taylor (2009) has highlighted the influence of the learning *context* on transformative learning, Foley (1999) points to the role of one's social environment in learning, and Taylor (2009) and Cranton (2006) have brought attention to the role of a person's life experience in transformative learning. Taylor and Jarecke (2009) discuss the importance of learning experiences that move learners beyond their comfort zones, and Dirkx, (2000) notes the role of "image, symbol, ritual, fantasy, and imagination in transformation" (p. 1). Boyd (as cited in Imel, 1998) has flagged the role of the emotional and kinesthetic components as catalysts for change.

Mezirow asserts that the desired outcome of transformation is not autonomy, but a greater interdependent and compassionate relationship with other people. Thus, while acknowledging and attending to Mezirow's seminal work, I also draw upon extra-rational approaches to transform learning (Boyd & Myers, 1988; Dirkx, 2006), and the relational aspects of transformative learning (Boden, McGill, & Kippers, 2012; English & Peters, 2012), including the role of group support (Colley, 2007; Sands & Tennant, 2010) which have been discussed in more recent literature.

Irving and English (2011) have highlighted that while transformative learning theory has evolved significantly since Mezirow's early work, "little attention has been paid to women's experiences of transformative learning and to the issues of race, class and gender in this learning" (p. 1). English and Irving's (2007) review of Canadian literature on gender and learning revealed that "linkages between the theory and women's learning were few and far between" (2011, p. 2). Exploring how gender and other aspects of identity shape and inform the learning processes involved in coming out will help address this lacuna. I also draw on Belenky

and Stanton (2000), who introduced the notion of connected knowing which emphasizes “empathy and imagination” (p. 87) in exploring the participants’ learning processes.

### **Queer Theory**

This study also draws upon queer theory. Queer theory, which emerged in the 1990s as a field of critical theory in the late 1990s from the fields of women’s and queer studies, is “a function of resistance not only to the heterosexist norm but also to itself as it encompasses a multitude of differing and discordant communities and political projects” (Code, 2004, p. 415). The term “queer” though once an abusive term for a homosexual, has been used more recently as an umbrella term for marginalized sexual self-identifications, and at other times to describe a theoretical model which emerged from traditional lesbian and gay studies (Jagose, 1996). Like the term queer, queer theory is difficult to pin down.<sup>21</sup> Queer theorists have, in fact, been criticized for refusing to define it (Sullivan, 2003), and for their writing, which many find inaccessible (Barker & Scheele, 2016). Historically, queer theory is associated with the work of feminist theorists such as Eve Sedgwick (1990) and Annamarie Jagose (1996), and gender theorists Jack (formerly Judith) Halberstom (1998) and Judith Butler (1988).

There are multiple queer theories, some of which contradict each other (Barker & Scheele, 2016, p. 3). The goal of queer theory, broadly speaking, is to “eliminate all the forms of identity that facilitate the development of hierarchy” (Smith, 2013, p. 110). So whereas the 1960s gay and lesbian liberation movements sought to affirm a stable and positive identity (Nelson,

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<sup>21</sup> Queer has operated as a noun, (i.e., “a bunch of queers”), as an adjective (“queer community” or “queer sensibilities”) and as a verb, (e.g., “to queer something”) (Barker & Scheele, 2016, p 15). Queer theory tends to use “queer” as a verb: “We queer things when we resist ‘regimes of the normal’: the ‘normative’ ideals of aspiring to be normal in identity, behaviour, appearance, relationships, etc.” (Warner, 1999, cited in Barker & Scheele, 2016, p. 14); Sullivan (2003) has called it a “discipline that refuses to be disciplined” (p. v).

1999; Sullivan, 2003), queer theory draws upon the poststructuralist concept of unstable identities (Jagose, 1996), challenging the normative social ordering of identities and subjectivities, including the heterosexual/homosexual binary, and the privileging of heterosexuality (Browne & Nash, 2010).

Queer theory explores and challenges the way that heterosexuality is constructed as “normal” in society, and indeed, “denies the existence of a ‘normal’ sexuality and normal embodiment of any kind against which everything else stands as abnormal” (Smith, 2013, p. 118.) Queer theory, which is constantly seeking to break down norms and question the *status quo*, examines the ways that heterosexuality is discursively constructed as the norm, and considers identities as *acts*, not *facts* (Nelson, 1999). For the purpose of this research, queer theory offers an approach that questions all identities and dichotomous oppositions, such as hetero/homo, male/female, feminine/masculine, that are normalized and enforced within society. Queer theory is useful, in my study, as a conceptual lens through which to consider the ways in which heteronormativity shapes “institutions, structures of understandings, and practical orientations” (Berlant & Warner, 1998, p. 548).

Butler (1990) argues that gender is an imitation of an ideal or norm, and that one cannot distinguish between the original and the imitation. All gender identity, argues Butler, is performed or enacted. Queer theory holds that identities are not fixed and do not determine who we are; that both gender and sex are culturally determined and defined. In denying the notion of a fixed identity, queer theory challenges the notion of identity politics. Butler challenges, for instance, the notion that “women” (or any other group) are a group with common characteristics and understandings. According to Butler, there is nothing essentially either male or female biologically or culturally and that these labels are assigned. Butler introduced a concept that is

central to queer theory, the notion of *performativity*, i.e., that one performs sex and gender according to the rules connected to names such as “man,” “woman”, “girl”, “boy”, “daughter”, “son”, and so on. She argues that males and females are assigned certain qualities, characteristics and behaviours by a given society (Smith, 2015); that at birth, a human being is “thrown into culture...following all its rules and regulations that pertain to what that person’s sex is said to be by the humanly constructed science we call ‘biology’” (Smith, 2015, p. 95). According to Butler, gender is constructed through one’s own repetitive performance of gender, and there is no stable and coherent gender identity. Instead, gender is “a stylized repetition of acts” (Butler, 1988, p. 519) which are “internally discontinuous [so that] the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief” (Butler, 1988, p. 520). Performativity conveys the idea that gender is real “only to the extent that it is performed” (Butler, 1988, p. 527). Butler further argues that this strategy regulates and shapes gender relations, reinforcing a binary view of gender relations in which humans were divided into two distinct groups, women and men. Failure to perform hegemonically constructed gender norms has consequences:

Performing one’s gender wrong initiates a set of punishments both obvious and indirect, and performing it well provides the reassurance that there is an essentialism of gender identity after all. That this reassurance is so easily displaced by anxiety, that culture so readily punishes or marginalizes those who fail to perform the illusion of gender essentialism should be sign enough that on some level there is social knowledge that the truth or falsity of gender is only socially compelled and in no sense ontologically necessitated (p. 528).

This dynamic, Butler argued, failed to allow room for choice, difference or resistance (Butler, 1990). This idea of identity as not connected to an “essence”<sup>22</sup> but instead, a performance, is one of the key ideas in queer theory. From this perspective, our identities, gendered and otherwise, do not express some authentic inner “core” self, but are the *effect* (rather than the cause) of our performances (Gauntlett, 1998).

Using a “queer eye” to explore participant narratives enables an exploration of the ways in which participants learned the dominant norms in relation to sexuality and gender, and the learning involved in resisting and ultimately rejecting these dominant norms to come out.

### **Intersectionality and Difference**

Finally, in addition to queer theory, this study is also informed by the feminist theory of intersectionality, power and difference because “sexuality is always already intersecting with other vectors of identity and difference” (Lovaas, Elia, & Yep, 2006, p. 12). Introduced in the late 1980s by Kimberle Crenshaw (1989), intersectionality suggests that people have multiple social identity categories, such as race, class, sexuality, gender, ethnicity and other sociopolitical and cultural identities, and that those identities are interrelated. Intersectionality theory provides a framework for exploring how social groups who are at the intersections of multiple forms of discrimination (e.g., sexism, racism, and homophobia) are marginalized more than those confronted with single dimensions of discrimination. Intersectionality theory also recognizes that some identity categories provide access to unearned privilege, while others result in marginalization and discrimination (Robinson, 1999). Using an intersectional approach in this study enables an understanding of how sexuality is intersecting with gender and other “vectors of identity” in the participant narratives.

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<sup>22</sup> For instance, that there are innate, essential differences between men and women.

The next chapter provides a summarized profile for each participant to help the reader understand the analysis that follows in Chapters Six to Nine.

## Chapter Five: The Participants

### Introduction

This chapter begins by providing participant demographics and a brief profile of each individual. Following is a discussion of the various ways in which the participants defined the terms “religion” and “spirituality” followed by their reflections on the significance and meaning of their religious life, and how they had experienced their religious tradition and spirituality during their childhood, teen, and young adult years prior to coming out.

### Participant Profiles

Of the eight individuals who volunteered to be interviewed, four had been raised Roman Catholic (Buckley, Charleen, Maude, Julian), two had been raised in conservative evangelical traditions (Paul and Winter), and two (Elliot and Katie) had been raised in the United Church of Canada, a theologically liberal Protestant denomination.

“**Buckley**”. Buckley, a 39-year-old white male, was born and raised along with his three siblings in the Maritimes, in what he described as “a very white European settler Christian city.” Buckley’s parents were devout Catholics, and much of his early life was spent in church or engaging in religious and social activities related to his church. His religious activities included weekly attendance at mass and Sunday school, singing in the church choir, and when he became a teenager, attending youth group. At various points, Buckley also assisted during mass as an altar server, scripture reader, and communion server, and in his teens, participated in activities associated with the Catholic Charismatic Renewal (CCR)<sup>23</sup>. Though Buckley attended a secular

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<sup>23</sup> A spiritual movement in the Catholic Church that emerged in the mid-1960s in the United States that incorporates both Catholic belief and practice and charismatic practice. The CCR emphasizes a personal relationship with the Holy Spirit and the gifts of the spirit. CCR services, which are held separately from the Catholic mass, are similar to Pentecostal services and often include prayer for healing, speaking in tongues, and the prophetic.

school, his social life and identity were almost entirely rooted in his Catholic faith and practice. Buckley described himself as having “a strong belief” in God, often spent time reading his Bible, and “prayed fervently.” Given his devotion to his faith, and the fact that he did not date girls, it was generally assumed by members of his congregation that Buckley would eventually enter the priesthood. Largely in response to this social pressure, Buckley himself assumed he would be a priest and was actively planning to attend seminary during his undergraduate degree.

Buckley remembered being aware he was a “sissy” much earlier than he began to suspect he might be gay. He assumed he was a sissy because he did not like sports, spoke with “the kind of ‘s’ that gay men speak with” and liked music and “soft girlie things.” In addition, all of his friends were female. The earliest indication that he might be gay occurred in fourth grade, when Buckley experienced what he later came to understand as his first crush on a boy. It would not be until he was in high school that he first heard the word “gay” in relation to people who experienced same gender attraction. While he knew he experienced attraction to other guys, he did not identify himself as gay as he hoped he was going through a phase he would eventually outgrow, or that God would cause his sexuality to change. By grade 10, however, he was resigned to the fact that he was “probably gay” and that his sexual orientation would likely never change. At the same time, the teachings of his church about homosexuality and comments his parents had made from time to time had made him aware that being gay did not align with being a good Catholic, and certainly not with being a Catholic priest. Since his plan to be a priest was “way more fundamental” to him than being gay, he continued to plan for the priesthood. However, throughout his high school and undergraduate years, he tried to reconcile his sexuality with his religious goals. A sexual encounter in his second year of university, however, provoked a crisis when he realized he could no longer deny the truth of his sexual orientation. Over the

next year, he sought a way to come out to his family. However, it was not until his mother died during the third year of his undergraduate degree, that he began the process of coming out.

**“Charleen”.** 52-year-old Charleen immigrated to Canada in the late 1990s. Charleen and her brother were raised by a devout Catholic mother and a Catholic father who, though not particularly religious when his children were small, eventually became devout after having what Charleen termed “a religious awakening.” Charleen described her mother as “very traditional Catholic” in the Opus Dei<sup>24</sup> tradition, however, her mother had, for a brief period, participated in activities associated with the Catholic Charismatic Renewal. Finding the charismatic practices and beliefs “a bit too loose” she eventually reverted to a more structured and traditional practice. Charleen’s father, who had been drawn to the Charismatic Renewal after his spiritual awakening, ultimately became more moderate in his belief and practice.

Charleen attended a Catholic primary and secondary school, so most of her childhood and teen years were structured by the church in terms of her activities and her social life. However, she had cousins who were Protestants of various denominations (“mostly Anglican, Presbyterian, and Spiritual Baptist”) and some of her friends were Muslim and Hindu:

But for those who are not Catholic, we didn’t talk about religion. Again, it was their default and it was my default, and we were all friends within our [laughs], and I mean in [my country], let’s say on Eid, you know, I remember [a friend] bringing treats and being invited to her house for Eid. For Diwali, we would go to each of the houses, and again it was that celebration, but it didn’t have to interfere with our friendship or how we related.

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<sup>24</sup> A Catholic movement founded in Spain by Fr. Josemaria Escriva in 1928 that has spread worldwide. The goal of Opus Dei is to complement the work of the local church by supporting the spiritual formation of participants. See <http://opusdei.ca/en-ca/section/organization/>.

Charleen's family attended mass each week and participated in various other church-related activities such as praying the rosary, which Charleen often did with her mother. The family also participated in the religious observances related to the Catholic liturgical calendar such as Advent and Lent. At various points Charleen also attended Marian prayer groups<sup>25</sup> and took guitar lessons offered through Opus Dei. There were nuns living in a section of Charleen's school, and she was sometimes asked if she had considered religious life as a vocation: "And I did reflect on it seriously and I just thought, like I don't actually enjoy saying prayers. Like I mean I say the rosary, but it's not, my primary relationship with God is the quiet moments and the moments in nature, not in the mass or not in saying the rosary, so I thought okay, that's not my path."

Charleen began to question some of the church teachings around the age of 12. It was around the same time that she became aware of her attraction to other girls. However, she knew from an early age, due to the homophobia she witnessed in her family—particularly from her mother—that to be gay was not acceptable in her Catholic faith. For several years she hoped that her feelings were an aberration, a phase that would pass, but by 17, she knew this was not the case. This realization provoked a prolonged period of inner turmoil and depression. After graduation, Charleen studied for a year at a university in her home country. However, she eventually decided that the only way she could explore her sexuality and what it meant was to leave the small country in which she had grown up in order have anonymity. She made plans to transfer to a university in Canada.

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<sup>25</sup> A Marian prayer group is dedicated to Jesus Christ through a devotion to Mary, the mother of God (Medjugorje Centre Canada <http://medjugorjeca.org/prayer-group/> Accessed June 17, 2018).

In Canada, Charleen continued to go to Catholic services as she adjusted to life in a new culture. Though she had come to Canada to explore her sexuality, the anxiety she experienced about coming out prevented her from disclosing until almost the end of her undergraduate degree. During that final year, she joined a lesbian group off campus that she had become aware of, connected with a few lesbians she had met in residence and began the process of coming out. Though Charleen slowly began to let go of the Catholic Church, she continued to seek other spaces in which to nurture her spiritual life. She also maintained her prayer life throughout her coming out process.

**“Maude”.** Maude, a 52-year-old white female, was raised in a small town on the Prairies. The second oldest of four siblings, Maude was raised in the Roman Catholic faith in a community that was “very Christian.” Maude’s religious life and training were reinforced through her education at a Catholic school. Maude characterized her mother and her mother’s extended family as “extremely Catholic” people who were “constantly about prayer and penance.” They followed Catholic practices such as attending Sunday mass, praying novenas, and attending the rosary every week at the local convent. Maude’s mother hosted weekly “rosary nights” at their home. Staunchly pro-life, Maude’s mother had hung anti-abortion posters featuring a “picture of Jesus standing over all these dead bodies” in the family dining room. Maude’s mother’s family was so devout that when Maude’s aunt – her mother’s sister – married a non-Catholic, she was “completely rejected” from the family. Maude related that the impact of this rejection was so profound, her aunt’s grown children “still talk about being outsiders, 50 years later.”

Maude's father, in contrast to the rest of the family, was not a practicing Catholic. He had only converted to Catholicism so he could marry Maude's mother. The marriage relationship, however, had stagnated and the two were no longer sexually intimate.

Maude was aware she liked girls from the age of 6. Aware of and believing Catholic teachings that she would "burn in hell" if she expressed her sexuality, Maude often wished she had been born a boy—not because she wanted to be a boy, but because it would then be societally acceptable for her to like girls. Maude kept her sexuality a secret throughout her childhood and into her teens. She dated boys in order to fit in. After graduating high school, she left for the United States where she completed her undergraduate degree in a town she described as "redneck heaven." She continued to repress and remain silent about her sexuality. After graduating with her undergraduate degree, Maude returned home, where she got work. Maude described the years between ages 22 and 28 as full of increasing self-loathing. She often contemplated suicide. Eventually, things reached a crisis point and Maude, realizing she was not going to change, began the process of reconciling herself to her sexuality. She also began deconstructing and divesting herself of the religious beliefs and practices she could no longer accept. Maude sought and was able to find queer individuals, services and supports to help her in her coming out process. She began to explore relationships with women. The first family member to whom she came out was her oldest sister. About six months afterward, she left for graduate school in Ontario. In Ontario, Maude connected with a much larger queer community.

In 1993, Maude graduated with her MA. In 1995, the sister she had first come out to, outed her to her mother. After being outed to her mother and dealing with the aftermath, Maude "pretty much came out to everyone, came out at work, came out everywhere." She was 31.

**“Julian”.** Julian, a 34-year-old white male, grew up in rural Nova Scotia. Julian was raised in the Catholic faith by parents who, though not devout, felt it their duty to take their children to church until they were old enough to make their own decisions. At the age of 8, Julian became an altar server. In his 10th year, his parents stopped attending church and gave him the option of staying home or continuing to attend. Julian opted to continue and began accompanying his grandmother.

Though Julian initially attended a secular school, the school provided both Protestant and Catholic catechism classes. Julian chose to attend the Protestant catechism simply because the Protestant minister, an evangelical pastor, gave candy to the children who attended. Julian eventually went to a service at the pastor’s church. Finding the service to be “more lively” than those at his Catholic Church, which he described as “very dead” he began attending on a regular basis. Around this time, Julian was also seeking a greater sense of connection to God and his spiritual seeking ultimately led him to seek options beyond the Catholic Church for spiritual development.

By the time he was 15, Julian’s parents, concerned about with his sagging academic performance, removed Julian from public school and enrolled him in a Christian school attached to the evangelical church he was attending. Around the same time, Julian discovered yet another church in his area – Presbyterian—that was even livelier than the evangelical church. The services at this church lasted two to three hours and involved a full church orchestra. During the services, people would “work themselves into a musical state and then they’d all just lay on the floor and pray for each other.” He left the evangelical church he had been attending and began attending this church instead. Not long afterward, Julian discovered and began attending a Pentecostal Church in another community on Sunday evenings. There he first witnessed people

“rolling on floor” and speaking in tongues. He began attending the Presbyterian Church in the morning, and the Pentecostal service in the evening.

Julian’s involvement in the Protestant churches he attended included more than Sunday services. He eventually became involved in teaching Sunday school, helping to lead worship, and overseeing Vacation Bible School. He also went to conferences and mission trips. In explaining his busy church life, Julian said he immersed himself in church as “an escape” from difficulties that were happening at home with his family. His parents were abusing drugs making life at home chaotic. In fact, Julian himself had begun to abuse prescription drugs.

In Grade 11, the Christian school Julian was attending closed, and he returned to public school. He struggled in school, however, and eventually dropped out before graduation.

Julian became aware of his sexuality around the age of 12. He recalled being attracted to the son of one of his ministers and being confused about his feelings. It was not until his mid-teens that he came to understand, through watching the television program *Queer as Folk*, that he was gay. At 15 he came out to his mother by giving her a VHS copy of the program. However, he did not understand the significance of his sexuality for his religious life.

At the age of 18, seeking a way to explore his sexuality, Julian left his rural community and travelled to Halifax. There, he stayed with a friend and his family, who were Christians. While there he began surreptitiously looking for information and community. For the first time, he had access to a computer and internet and began exploring online sites. He also sought help through the Youth Project (a support organization for queer youth) and there found out about Safe Harbour Metropolitan Community Church (MCC), which was doing outreach to the queer community. He attended a service, thinking he could do so anonymously. Unfortunately, someone at the service disclosed his attendance to his church community back home. They, in

turn, notified the family with whom he was staying. “Distraught” that he had attended “a gay church” the family laid hands on him and prayed for him to be healed. Confused and upset, Julian returned home. The church leaders, who requested a meeting with him, gave him an ultimatum: either be excommunicated, or willingly submit to an ex-gay ministry to be healed of his homosexuality. Fearful of rejection and hoping desperately to be healed, Julian complied. The church immediately sent him to an ex-gay ministry<sup>26</sup> in the United States, where he lived in residence with others who had come to be healed of their gayness.

After 9 months, realizing he could not change his sexual orientation, Julian left the ministry for San Francisco. Guilt-ridden, he soon returned. When the ministry, however, imposed a number of restrictions on him, he left for good. Returning to San Francisco, he attended a gay evangelical church and there met a gay Christian who invited him to a Bible Study. During one of the Bible Study meetings, Julian had an epiphany that God fully accepted and loved him as he was. He was 20 years old. Shortly after having this realization, he left San Francisco and headed back to Canada, eventually making his way home.

When the leadership of his home church learned that Julian had left the ex-gay ministry and returned home, they asked to meet with him. During the meeting, they berated him for leaving the ministry and condemned his homosexuality. This experience triggered a mental health crisis which ultimately led to a long period of severe mental health issues, compounded by drug addiction as he tried to deal with the anguish and confusion caused by his church

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<sup>26</sup> A Christian ministry designed to change someone’s sexual orientation from lesbian, gay, or bisexual to heterosexual. Ex-gay ministries are part of a broader religious movement aimed at “curing” queer individuals (Flentje, Heck & Cochrane, 2014).

community. Eventually, however, through a combination of mental health and addiction services, Julian began to stabilize and find sobriety.

**“Elliot”.** Elliot, a 53-year-old white male, was born and raised in New Brunswick. An only child, he spent most of his formative years in small towns until he was a teenager, when the family moved to a city in the province. He describes the region in which he grew up as “the Bible Belt” of New Brunswick.

Elliot’s father was Catholic, his mother Protestant. Elliot’s mother, whom he characterized as “quite staunch against the Roman Catholic Church” insisted that the family attend her church. Elliot’s religious life growing up included Sunday services, Sunday school and in his teens, youth group. Elliot’s mother’s animosity toward Catholicism alienated his father’s side of the family so deeply that Elliot rarely saw the members of his father’s family. His mother’s anti-Catholic sentiments also caused tension between his parents.

Elliot became aware of his attraction to other males in junior high. However, having already experienced ongoing bullying at school for being “different” he kept this realization to himself and concentrated on his studies. As a result, he spent much of his time alone just to avoid detection and harassment. His central goal was to survive school until he graduated and make his escape to university where he looked forward to living an anonymous gay life. Until he left home, Elliot’s only sources of information about what it meant to be gay were the town library and the gay porn he found in magazines at corner stores.

Elliot left home for university the fall immediately following his high school graduation. Once he was away from home, he began connecting with other gay men. It was over a decade, when he was in his 30s, before his parents discovered he was gay. They were devastated, but

after their initial emotional reaction, Elliot and his parents maintained silence about his gay life; he did not bring up the matter, and they did not ask.

Elliot had no difficulty divesting himself of his Christian faith. A science major, he dismissed Christian belief as “stupid” and said that he did not struggle with any guilt or shame in relation to his sexuality. “It was a cut and dry thing for me. It was almost like a mathematical equation. Like that and that does not equal that, so they’re wrong.”

**“Katie”.** Katie, 34-year-old white female was raised in a rural area of Nova Scotia. She is the youngest of three sisters. Her family belonged to the United Church of Canada. Katie was baptized as a young child and remembered going to Sunday church services “quite regularly” throughout her childhood. She and her siblings also attended Sunday school and Katie’s mother was a Sunday school teacher. Other than those activities, Katie’s only other involvement occurred when she was in a church play when she was in junior high school. She remembered spending “a lot of time prepping for that.” Katie also said her prayers every night, a practice she maintained until she was in university.

Once Katie and her sisters had entered their teen years, the family’s church attendance began declining, to the point where the family attended only on major Christian holidays such as Christmas and Easter. Though they spent much less time in church, they would still have discussions about their religious beliefs.

As Katie’s church attendance became more sporadic in junior high, she began to question some of her beliefs. Her sexuality also became an issue of concern. The coming out of Ellen DeGeneres in the late 1990s when Katie was in Grade 9 made a significant impact on her, causing her to reflect upon her own sexuality more deeply, and to wonder if she herself might be gay. However, she immediately “pushed that away” from her thinking. Her parents had

impressed upon her “from a young age” that “homosexuality is a sin in the bible” so she knew being gay would be considered “a bad thing.”

Graduating high school, Katie left home for university. There, she began trying to sort out both her religious beliefs and her sexuality. Within a few years, through connecting with other queer individuals both in person and online, she had “figured out” that she was gay. The thought of disclosing this realization to her family, however, caused a great deal of anxiety. She was most worried about her sisters, both of whom had left the United Church for more conservative churches – one Catholic and the other evangelical. At the same time, Katie was being “empowered” by public debates about same-sex marriage that were occurring in the media. While not all the media and public attention was positive, Katie came to realize that a growing segment of society was developing an affirmative stance toward homosexuality.

The ultimate catalyst to Katie’s coming out emerged in the form of an intimate relationship with a woman about whom she cared very deeply. Prior to this relationship, Katie had not had a significant relationship with a woman that called for disclosure. Now, however, things had changed. She chose to first tell her oldest sister. Her sister, however, refused to support her, stating that homosexuality was not “permitted.” Not long after disclosing to her sister, Katie told the remaining members of the family at a family gathering. This, according to Katie, went “terribly.” Her family members were all distraught and her parents tried to convince her that she could change. Katie resisted, however, and refused to end her relationship. Though Katie’s parents disapproved strongly of her relationship, they allowed her to continue visiting them. It would be three years, however, before Katie was invited to bring her partner to her parents’ home.

**“Paul”.** Paul, a 54-year-old white male, grew up in Nova Scotia. His childhood was spent in small towns, but when he was in junior high, the family moved to a suburban community of Halifax Regional Municipality. Paul was raised in a Protestant denomination rooted in Methodism<sup>27</sup> and the Holiness<sup>28</sup> movement. His childhood religious activities included weekly attendance at Sunday school, and morning and evening church services. He and his family also attended Wednesday evening prayer service, and when he became old enough, he attended youth group. Paul related that most of his social life revolved around the church. He was aware of being attracted to other boys from the age of seven. He remembered engaging in sexual play with another boy on a couple of occasions during his childhood. However, he knew homosexuality was considered a sin in his religious tradition, so from puberty he actively avoided close contact with other males to avoid experiencing sexual attraction. For the most part, his social life was restricted to the church.

Paul completed high school and went on to university. There, he met his future wife. They became engaged while Paul was still in university. In the months leading up to his marriage and while still a university student, he encountered gay pornography for the first time at a local corner store. His exposure to pornography caused him to experience intense inner turmoil, so much so that he attempted to break off his engagement. When his fiancée became upset, however, Paul backed off, unable to “make her unhappy.” He and his fiancée married about six months later. They went on to have two children. The reality of Paul’s sexuality, however, continued to haunt him. From time to time, his interactions with other men would shine a light

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<sup>27</sup> A group of Protestant denominations inspired by the life and teachings of the 18<sup>th</sup> century English preacher and theologian John Wesley.

<sup>28</sup> The Holiness movement emerged during the first half of the 19th century in the United States as “a renewal movement within American Methodism that has since become trans-denominational and international” (World Council of Churches, <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/church-families/holiness-churches>).

on his sexual desires. Nonetheless, Paul resisted his sexual urges and only had sex with his wife during their 25 years of marriage.

In 1994, Paul was diagnosed with a critical illness and began treatment. He continued to work. In 2005, about 5 years prior to coming out, Paul became aware of and began watching the program *Queer as Folk*. Through the program he had the opportunity to imagine what gay relationships might look like and to learn about some of the issues connected to being gay in society. By this time, Paul was also becoming aware of public debates and events related to gay and lesbian issues. Around the time that Paul began watching *Queer as Folk*, he also began to withdraw from his church. He turned instead to the internet to find information and to connect with other gay men online.

Paul's illness reached a critical point in 2010, the year prior to his coming out. Taking a leave from his work, he entered therapy. He began questioning his religious beliefs and ultimately rejected the notion that God would heal him, and that it was a sin to be gay. He made the decision to come out, first to his wife, and then to his children. By January of 2011, he had come out to his wife, and in May of the same year, and just prior to what would have been their 25<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary, he moved out.

**“Winter”.** Winter, a 31-year-old white female, was the daughter of two evangelical ministers. She described her family life as being lived very publicly before the congregation, in “kind of like in that bell jar of the pedestalized.” The family moved several times during her childhood and teens, as her parents ministered in congregations in New England and parts of Atlantic Canada. Winter's involvement in church as she was growing up was extensive. She, along with her family, attended two services each Sunday. It was not uncommon to see “everyone dancing in the spirit” and people “getting slain in the spirit” as they sought connection

with God through their worship. Sunday services frequently lasted far into the evening, and Winter joked that she spent Sunday evenings “sleeping under pews if it got too late.”

In her teen years, Winter’s involvement in church intensified, to the point where she was in church almost every day of the week – church twice on Sunday, children’s ministry on Tuesday, youth group on Thursday, and young adult meetings on Friday. In her early teens, she also took music lessons and began participating in the music ministry of the church. Except for her involvement in sports at school and the occasional activity held at another church, her entire social life revolved around her church. While she enjoyed participating in many of these activities, she also described moments of doubt, skepticism and resistance, and experienced constant worries that she would end up in hell. Nonetheless, fears of hell notwithstanding and despite the financial hardships the family sometimes experienced, she felt her childhood as a “pastor’s kid” had been “pretty good” and described feeling very loved by the people of the various congregations where her father had ministered.

By the time Winter reached puberty – ages 10-11 – she had begun to realize she was sexually attracted to other girls. Fully aware of the church’s stance on homosexuality, Winter experienced ongoing anxiety and engaged in constant efforts to “get rid of this thing” including dating guys. After graduating, she took a year off school. During that year, her father experienced mental health difficulties which eventually led to the disintegration of her parents’ marriage. In 2004, in her 19<sup>th</sup> year, Winter left home for university, eventually ending up in a town that had both a university and an evangelical church that was more liberal than the ones she had experienced growing up. These changes in her life provided an environment in which she began to engage in her own theological deconstruction. At the same time, her social life gradually opened up to include activities beyond her life in the church.

After finishing her undergraduate degree in 2009, not knowing what she wanted to do, Winter left the small university town where she was living and flew to Vancouver, where some of her university friends were living. There, she moved into an apartment that was not far from Vancouver's gay scene. For the first time in her life, Winter came into contact with life in the queer community. Within the year she had begun coming out to friends in Vancouver, and via email, phone and social networks to family and friends back home in Atlantic Canada. She also began taking tentative steps to date women.

The participant profiles help provide a foundation for understanding the narratives that follow. The next chapter explores the ways in which each participant defined the terms religion and spirituality, the themes that emerged in their narratives regarding the meaning religion had held for them, and the significance of their religious and/or spiritual life prior to coming out. Having this context is vital to understanding the challenges they experienced during the coming out process.

## Chapter Six: Participant Definitions of Religion and Spirituality

This chapter explores the ways in which the participants defined and conceptualized the terms “religion” and “spirituality” to provide insight into how each person understood those terms.

Several key themes are evident in participant definitions of religion, all of which are evident in research literature. First, all but Katie differentiated between religion and spirituality. She had “always” considered the two synonymous, defining them as “a belief in God.” The others, however, considered these terms two different constructs. Religion was defined both adjectivally in terms of its *nature* (e.g., organizational, institutional, communal), and in terms of *purpose* and *meaning*. Their comments and conceptualizations contain many of the themes apparent in the research literature.

Picking up on Zinnbauer et al.’s (1999) characterization of religion as organized and conducted in a central place of worship, four participants emphasized the organized, structural nature of religion in their definitions of religion. Paul described religion as “organizational” and “institutional” in nature; Charleen spoke of “a structured institution”; Elliot considered religion to be “establishment, institutions, gold and buildings”; for Julian, religion was an institution that was “very much man-made,” “very rigid” and “boxy”; and for Winter, religion was “a controlled system.”

In line with Koenig (2008; 2009), six participants spoke of religion as having rules - morals, norms, rules, regulations, and principles - that were held in common and adhered to by a group of people. Buckley, for instance, described religion as “the way that we attach that sense of reality to defined cultural norms.” Paul linked religion with what his church, “the organization”, expected of his “behaviour”. Winter characterized religion as “a lot of rules and

regulations” and a “controlled system”. Julian referred to religion as “a bunch of principles” and quoted a Bible verse to illustrate: “Thy word have I hidden in my heart that I might not sin against [God].” Charleen linked religion with “moral behavior [and] clear rules and clear rituals about how that relationship works and what behaviour comes out of that relationship.” Four of the participants - Winter, Julian, Paul and Maude - alluded to the potential for punishment should they transgress those rules, with Maude observing, “If you didn’t behave in a certain way, you would burn in hell or end up in purgatory or all those terrible things.”

Consistent with the literature, four of the participants’ definitions of religion highlighted the communal aspect of “beliefs, practices and rituals”, as has been noted by Koenig (2009). Buckley described his faith tradition, Catholicism, as a “tribe that people belong to that is...much more about a cultural entity and not really a definition of someone’s personal beliefs.” Similar to Pargament (1997), Paul referred to “a system of beliefs that comes out of common understanding about where we came from” and “man’s narrative about what they think the greater cosmos is all about.” Echoing Victor Frankel (1986), he conceptualized religion as “man’s search for meaning.” Charleen referred to rules, rituals and behaviours that are “shared among a community.”

The definitions of spirituality of the seven participants who considered religion and spirituality as two separate constructs, differed in two ways. First, there was a shift from the communal to the individual and personal. This shift is reflected in the literature (Zinnbauer et. al, 1999; Koenig, 2011). Julian defined spirituality as “more individual to who I am and to what I see the world to be, and how I fit into that”. Charleen spoke of “an individual relationship with god, goddesses, the being, the universe, I mean the indescribable in many ways” and “an individual point of view and an individual relationship with what is around us.” Characterizing

spirituality as “more of a personal, soul thing”, Elliot stated that while not everyone is religious, “all are spiritual”, and added that “everyone is born with, you know, knowing right from wrong”.

Unlike religion, spirituality was defined by several participants in terms of the absence of “rules, regulations, and responsibilities associated with religion” (Koenig, 2009, p. 284).

Charleen, for instance, characterized spirituality as something that was “negotiated on an ongoing basis”. Winter differentiated between religion, which she termed “legalistic”, implying judgement and condemnation, and spirituality, which she described as “more fluid”. Julian, who had defined religion as “boxy”, inferring the boxed in and confining nature of religion, linked spirituality with permeability: “Things can come in and come out, and it can flow and breathe.” He further explained that when he was religious he was more rule-oriented and rigid, whereas now he was internally motivated and flexible in his Christian beliefs.

Three of the participants, Winter, Maude and Elliot, distinguished between religion and spirituality by linking religion with the potential for harm. As noted previously, Maude grew up in the fear of “this mean, judging, punishing God...the powerful God who could hurt you”. She described her Catholic upbringing as “brutal”. Elliot believed that although all are born with an “innate understanding of right and wrong”, this capacity is sometimes altered by socialization “in the wrong way”, and that religion is, in effect, “bastardized” spirituality. Winter spoke of spirituality as being “safer” than religion, and went on to discuss “the abuse and manipulation” that she had experienced in the name of religion:

I mean when I think about spiritual abuse and manipulation, those are things that I started to uncover over time that you just don't know is happening right then and there, right? That it's going to have a huge effect on you psychologically and emotionally in the future.

The links these participants made between queerness, religion and harm is consistent with the findings of Halkitis et al (2009) and Zinnbauer et al (1999).

Each participant discussed in detail the nature of their religious lives, including beliefs and practices, and the meaning each held for them. Once again, their comments often coincide with the literature highlighted in Chapter Two. *Coping* was a central theme, but was closely linked with sense of identity and self-esteem, sense of connection, values/principles, and structure. Brandt and colleagues (2012) have suggested five elements are intertwined in coping strategies associated with religion: community, intimate relationship, rules, identity construction, and worldview. Each of these is evident in participant narratives. The communal and affiliative nature of religion addresses the need for community and intimate relationships; rules and prohibitions (commandments) help adherents to cope with the need for self-control, especially in relation to self-destructive impulses. Role models provided by religious traditions, either in terms of other adherents or through religious narratives, help to build the self, identity and self-esteem; explanations for the cosmos and religious worldview respond to the need for meaning-making. These five aspects are evident and intertwined in participant narratives relating to when, why and how they turned to their religion and, in some cases, private spiritual life to cope. Also intertwined are both positive and negative outcomes of their religious involvement, and contradictions they experienced.

As noted previously, people often turn to religion to cope with anxiety (Friedman & Rholes, 2008) and stress (Pargament, Koenig & Perez, 2000), and these themes appear frequently in terms of the reasons participants gave for turning to their religion in the past. Julian described his religion as something he “clung to” to help him cope with a dysfunctional home life. While he was in his early teens, his parents had gotten “heavily into drugs”, and religion

became his “escape”: “My family and my home life was crazy, so I started staying with some families, particularly one family in the church because it was like a safe place for me to go.”

Though Julian, himself, was abusing drugs, he continued to be deeply involved in his religious life and activities and continued believing that God was protecting and taking care of him. To illustrate, he quoted a favourite Bible verse, attributed to God that he had frequently drawn on in times of difficulty: “Fear not, for I am with you, I will hold you, you are my child.” Julian also turned to the church for the structured environment it provided, which gave him a sense of stability and certainty, “something that I needed when I was younger ‘cause it was very rigid”.

Maude spoke of turning to her religious life to cope with her sexual attractions. Having become aware in childhood that she liked girls, she prayed “all the time”, and the nature of her prayers reveals her confusion. On the one hand, she wanted God to change his views on homosexuality: “I didn’t want to become someone else, I just wanted to be able to like girls...I didn’t pray to be different.” Yet, at the same time, she prayed for forgiveness: “I just, I felt so horrible about who I was, and that I was this horrible person.”

When Katie first reflected on the role of religion in her early life, she fondly spoke of her experiences in Sunday school: “I loved being a part of Sunday school. I remember that very well, and just kind of that learning that happened there and I liked the people that were there with me, so when I think back to my childhood that’s definitely something that I look back fondly on.” She had also found it comforting to say nightly prayers: “Saying those prayers at night definitely gave me a lot of comfort, for sure. I did at that time believe in God and believed that, you know, He was taking care of my loved ones, and so I think I took great comfort in that.” In retrospect, however, she remembered having “a lot of unanswered questions” about why she prayed at night and why she found it so comforting.

Paul also remembered feeling a sense of comfort in relation to his religious life, but for him this comfort came from following the rules of his church:

I truly believed that if I followed all of the rules and did what the pastor was teaching or the Sunday school teacher or my parents, if I followed all of that, then I didn't need to worry about anything else. So there was a huge amount of comfort that came out of just following that.

Yet, despite his immersion in church life, Paul could not escape his attraction to males. When asked how he coped with this ongoing stress, he said he prayed, "every day, every day, every day" believing as a young man that God would answer his prayer:

I knew I had to marry a woman; I wanted kids, that's one thing I did have the drive for and there was only one way to do that, so I had to school myself, you know, somehow mold my thinking and my brain into planning for that. So in my prayer I said, 'God help me to become that person that you want me to be, the man that you want me to be.' It was a very innocent kind of, I just want to meet the right person, right?

There was, however, a "subtext" to his prayers, "which was, I don't want to be attracted to the same sex, I just want that to go away." And I still believed because pastor said, 'Just believe; if you just believe, then this too shall [come to pass],' right?

Like Charleen, Julian spoke of his religious life in terms of a sense of connectedness:

I think in the beginning religion very much gave me my first place that I actually felt loved, loved by something bigger than human... something that was greater than human that would love me and I would never be alone again. And so for me, I gripped on to it.

Julian also described having a spiritual life from an early age, which he sometimes experienced when not in a religious environment. He described sensing "something outside myself" with

which he had “conversations” from as young as three: ‘There was some form of connection that I really couldn’t, I knew there was something there before this, because it’s just like, if you spend any time in nature, there’s something there. I couldn’t tell what it was. But I could actually physically feel it.’”

In concert with Brandt’s (2013) assertion that “relationship to an attachment figure helps to answer the need for security and protection” (p. 300), Winter’s narrative indicates that her religious life gave her a sense of connection, from which she derived a sense of comfort and “protection”:

I look at my childhood and say it was pretty good, you know, and especially as a pastor’s kid, I mean everyone gave you a birthday card and \$5 and so it was like, oh, everyone loves me, you know, and there was definitely like a sense of community and a sense of protection, like the safety of knowing you do have people who are looking out for you, and you know, yeah that would be like one of the biggest things that sticks out for me. She also described times throughout her childhood and teen years when her family was “so poor,” when groceries were left at their house anonymously, and how comforted she felt to know that “there [were or would be] safety in that circle, right, and always that God will provide.” Echoing Koenig’s (2009) findings, Winter said she also turned to her religion when dealing with “things beyond myself and beyond my control. I can’t control everything and life is hard, yeah.” Believing the biblical teachings that infused her early life had also provided comfort and a sense of confidence that “like, wow, thank God I know the truth, eh, like, and I know everything [laugh].”

Some participants also drew upon their religious life to find—as indicated by Ellison and George (1994) and Krause (2008)—a sense of connectedness, community and identity. Charleen,

Julian, Winter, and Buckley all discussed the importance of their religion and religious life for providing a sense of connection both to God and to others. Charleen's religious life provided a sense of connection to God and nature, and an awareness of things to be grateful for:

... thinking that the world around me was created by God and feeling that connection especially in nature, that it was a sign of, and again very much His—there wasn't really a Her—a sign of His generosity and really feeling that connection quite deeply...there is a God and I am part of a religious experience sort of thing.

She also had positive memories associated with her Christian service and “good works” which gave her the sense that “yeah, that was part of God's work and that you did things as a way of getting closer to Him, and of being thankful or showing appreciation for what you were given by doing good works.” These were the things she enjoyed that had meaning for her.

Charleen's religious practice also provided a sense of connection to her mother: “I prayed mostly with my mom, and she liked to pray in traffic jams and things like that [laughs].” Praying with her mother, however, had “more to do with my relationship with her than it did with a relationship with God.” Charleen also remembered feeling a sense of connection to God and to herself on certain occasions in church: “I mean occasionally like what the priest said made a connection and I could feel that connection in myself and those felt more like prayerful moments for me, when I connected that way.” She told a story to illustrate one such occasion:

I remember I was about five or six, and [heard] the whole parable of Lazarus, about having the wounds and everybody sort of ignored him except the dogs that licked his wounds, and I remember thinking like wow, in that moment, the dogs were more an instrument of God than we could ever hope to be, and just really in that moment understanding something about how you live your life and not living by what other

people think you should, and not even by what would be considered human standards.

That maybe human standards are not all they're cracked up to be.

Charleen said that in that moment, she felt "a lot of love, like I had gotten something and this was important and although this was just a story, it had meaning for me, personally, on how I should live my life, and about not judging others on how they behaved." Charleen described the import of this memory: "It sustained me through a lot you know, just thinking, okay, you can be connected and you can have this and it's important."

Brandt (2013) has highlighted the connection between coping and identity construction, noting that "collective activities and affiliation help to answer the need for social integration (community aspect)" (2013, p. 300). Buckley's and Paul's narratives link affiliation with a sense of identity and self-esteem. Buckley, who described his family "very involved" in their Catholic faith and life, remembered that his relationship to the world was "through the church", which he described as "omnipresent in terms of like religious belief." In addition, his social life was "very much tied to the church" and "a broader sense of community." Drawing upon the Apostle's Creed, he explained that the sense of connection to a very old "tribe" he had experienced while in the Catholic Church had transcended time:

'I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Catholic Church and the communion of saints', the communion of saints is this idea that from time immemorial, and we have been going through these same rituals together and participating in communion—the bread and wine of communion—but more like communing together as a people who are on the same spiritual path, which I always thought was a source of comfort. Like to be kneeling and hearing something in Latin, hearing something in the language of the church and knowing that this has a relationship to people who were kneeling and hearing the same

thing and going through these same rituals, hundreds of years before I ever had to contemplate.

This sense of connection both to contemporaries and to those who had shared in this faith tradition in earlier times, had been “an important part” of Buckley’s social identity: “How I related in the world, being seen to be Catholic and being seen to be part of that group, was very important to me.”

The communal character of his former religious life had not only provided a sense of identity, it also enhanced Buckley’s self-esteem. He observed that being “very religious” was an “important part” of feeling good about himself. “I had a lot of anxiety”, he explained, “so it was a way of, I don’t know, reaffirming a strong sense of self, like really immersing myself in an identity that was very strong and that was very comforting and made me feel stronger in the world.” He said that when he prayed the rosary, he would think about the words he was saying, “but also think, this is good, you’re praying, and this is what you’re supposed to be doing and you’re the kind of person who does what you’re supposed to be doing and that’s good, so you can feel good about yourself.” He added that had he been asked at the time, he would have said, “I feel good because I’m experiencing the love of God.” Now, however, he has come to believe his religious practice ultimately was about “feeling good about myself.”

Paul also linked his religious practice to identity. For instance, Paul discussed how religion had helped him cope with his inability to fit dominant gender norm expectations, such as sport involvement. Unable to successfully perform the dominant form of masculinity that he saw in the world around him, Paul withdrew “into a comforting kind of church environment” where he engaged in another kind of performance: “I used to love the piano, I loved singing, that’s where I was successful, so there was a lot of comfort that came out of being successful there and

doing well there, because I certainly wasn't out on the ball field, and I certainly wasn't able to play with my peers." The positive feedback he received in church shaped his sense of identity "from an early age": "Church was where I found praise for the things that I could do, not for what was in my heart, because that was my secret, right?" In church, Paul tried to atone "for all of that badness" by creating a self that appeared "appropriate" to his church: "I could teach Sunday school, I could be on the church board, I could lead worship, I could be the pianist, I could be the soloist, I could do all these great things." However, the inauthenticity took a toll.

Reflecting back on his religious life, Paul felt that in the end, most of his religious activities had been "an opiate for pain":

I remember people talking about the opiate for the masses and it's true, it was just a revelation that over time it wasn't working for me. I was getting a drug, I was taking a drug—the identity, the accolades, you know, like it was nice to hear people leaving at the end of every church service, 'oh [name], you just made me cry this morning, you just made me weep.' I loved that. I [took it] hook, line and sinker.

Paul reasoned that if God was speaking through and ministering through him, he must be "okay": "If God is using me, if I'm a conduit that they can see God speaking through and hearing when I'm standing up there and singing, then I must be okay. God wouldn't use me if I wasn't okay to be his conduit." The performance aspect of his faith was his "only validation" that God accepted him; when he was performing, he was doing "great things" by helping people, and he had always wanted to be "a helper of people."

Another theme in three of the participant narratives about what religion had meant to them focuses on values and principles to guide one through life (see also Koenig, 2008). Elliot, who had been raised in a liberal Protestant tradition, observed that his religious upbringing had

“instilled the basic values of right and wrong, because the Bible does do that, it says what’s good and evil ... and you know, love everyone”, although the latter, he added, “rarely happens.” Thus, for him, the church had taught something that was a “basic human instinct” - “do unto others as you would have done unto you” – and few lived up to that teaching.

Winter, raised in the Pentecostal tradition, like Elliot felt her religious life had taught her values: “Like the values of doing good and being a servant, you know, and kind of doing things beyond yourself and being sacrificial, having a servant heart.” She spoke of admiring “people who are devoted in their lives to the church and to serving, who really have nothing”, including parents: “My Mom, insanely generous; Dad the same thing. I mean they really devote so much of their time, so much of their life has been giving to and serving people and yeah. So that definitely, I would say that’s a huge part of who I am.”

Likewise, Julian’s religious life had given him “principles to live by”: “I believe in something and I believe in the afterlife, but I don’t understand it...my religion is something that I adhere to ... it’s how I interpret what God is and how I follow God.”

### **Conclusion**

Participant definitions of religion and spirituality reveal themes already evident in the literature discussed in Chapter Two (Halkitis et al, 2009; Hill & Pargament, 2003; Koenig, 2008, 2009; Pargament, 1997; Zinnbauer et al., 1997). Seven of eight participants in my study linked religion with the communal, with rules and regulations, and with a human search for meaning. Three highlighted religion’s “negative influences in the lives of individuals and communities” (reference? p. 250). Also, consistent with the literature are their central reasons for turning to their religion: for coping with anxiety (Friedman & Rholes, 2008) and stress (Pargament, Koenig & Perez, 2000), meaning making (Frankl, 2006, 1986), guidance for living, and a sense of

connectedness, community and identity (Ellison & George, 1994; Krause, 2008). The notion of spirituality as flexible, fluid, permeable and negotiable, however, was novel. It suggests a more postmodern view of spirituality as something that is continually under construction, in negotiation with both extrinsic and intrinsic contexts and conditions.

The next chapter will explore the early learning experiences of participants, particularly as they relate to queerness and gender, and difference.

## Chapter Seven: Learning Ideology

### Introduction

This chapter explores the first question posed in this study: How did ‘out’ adults who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or queer with a deeply religious Christian upbringing learn homonegative beliefs and values? It begins by charting how and where participants encountered heteronormative, heterosexist and homophobic ideologies, both implicit and explicit. Next, I discuss how they responded to those ideologies. Throughout, the chapter situates participants’ experiences and responses within the research literature, concluding with a discussion of emergent themes and implications for learning. The chapter draws upon feminist theories related to the constructions of white femininity and masculinity to help explicate the ways participants negotiated the normative pressures of dominant discourses, and to help understand the impact of, in particular, gender differences in that process. The chapter also draws upon Butler (1988; 1990; 1993) in exploring how participants learned and responded to the dominant gender norms. What impact did those norms have upon their self-perceptions and identity?

### Learning Homophobic, Heterosexist Ideology

As noted in Chapter Two, though most queer people begin grappling with their sexual identity as adolescents, some begin that process earlier. Participants in this study experienced feeling different from their peers either in early childhood (ages 5-7) or around puberty. They did not necessarily understand the *nature* of that difference, however, and the meaning-making process sometimes took years. Although some learning occurred formally through religious instruction/preaching, most learning occurred informally, through pop culture, news media, the worldwide web, family members (especially parents), interactions with peers in school and university, and sexual relationships. While some of the learning occurred as a result of an

intentional seeking-out-of-information, most information arrived unsolicited from the social environment within church, school and family, and through the media. Regardless of where or how it came from, the information was overwhelmingly homophobic. An analysis of how participants learned ideologies about queerness reveals several common themes.

As has been suggested by Rodrigues (2010), conflicts related to sexual and religious identities came from the two sources: *extrinsic* (“coming from outside of the individual and more dependent on acceptance by others”) and *intrinsic* (“coming from within the individual and generally held as internalized moral ideals”) (p. 10). Extrinsic factors that played a role in transmitting, enforcing or enabling the transmission of heteronormative and homophobic ideologies, making heterosexuality the norm and therefore compulsory (Rich, 1986) include: anti-homosexual indoctrination that came through the church; reinforcement of that indoctrination by parents; homophobic pronouncements and behaviour of friends/peers; the media; pop culture/the arts; the absence of positive queer role models; and the absence of positive information about queerness. Intrinsic conflicts were related to the recognition of their difference from the heteronormative sexual attractions, interests, and behaviours that were promoted and reinforced on a regular basis, with resulting internalized homophobia.

### **Being Different**

Five participants first became conscious of gender ideology and its connection to sexuality when they noticed, and/or it was pointed out to them, that they were “different” from their peers. That difference was evident in their interests, behaviours and abilities, which diverged from the gender performances of their peers of the same gender. Martin (1995) has observed that children learn gender stereotypes “through direct exposure to adults' stereotypes” and those stereotypes “provide a standard against which children's behaviors are judged”

(Martin, 1995, p. 728). Children learn at an early age that “boys are expected to play with trucks, not dolls, and take on the “appropriate” role of firefighter, cowboy, or soldier in games” (Schope & Eliason, 2004, p. 74). Boys are also expected to display appropriate levels of “anti-femininity (avoid female jobs, activities, mannerisms)” (Schope & Eliason, 2004, p. 75). Paul, who had internalized this gender ideology as a young child, recognized he was different from other boys when he neither liked nor was “naturally” good at sports: “I wasn’t sport-minded, so I wasn’t out playing sports, but I would try and make an attempt, I’m gonna learn how to be a guy, I have to learn how to do that, ‘cause it’s not coming naturally. It seems like it’s natural to these guys, [but] it’s just not happening for me.”

Buckley had a similar experience. As a young boy, he had been labelled a “sissy”, an epithet with roots in the American boy culture of the mid 1800s (Grant, 2004). The term had come to be associated with “weakness, dependency, and helplessness” (Kimmel, 1996, p. 122), qualities that boys and men were to shun. Like Paul, Buckley did not like sports, and as noted previously, he found himself liking things that girls seemed to like and his friendships were with females. And though he was neither “really comfortable” nor “proud” being identified as a “sissy”, he could not remember a time when he was not conscious of identifying as one. He had effectively internalized and applied to himself the hetero-masculine standards that underpin homophobia.

Julian, Maude and Charleen also remembered feeling different, both in terms of their sexuality and their gender. Julian remembered wondering at the age of 12 why he was “obsessed” with another boy and Maude noticed as a young girl that she liked other girls. Charleen remembered feeling different from other girls when she failed to conform to dominant norms of femininity. Though she had been labelled as a “tomboy”, a term which refers to “a girl

who prefers the activities, toys, and usually attire of a boy” (Abate, 2011, p. 407), she herself never identified as such: “I enjoyed physical activity but I’m not a team sports person at all” she observed, “I’m not at all coordinated that way so I wouldn’t have been involved in sports.” However, she also “didn’t like dolls” and had “no interest in makeup or high heels or fashion”, preferring to spend her time reading and “walking, hiking, swimming”. Nevertheless, she was known as a tomboy amongst her peers, a label that didn’t draw attention from family or peers until she reached puberty. “It was fine to be a tomboy until a certain point”, she explained, “and then as a young woman you’re supposed to get very feminine.” She remembered that even though she had no interest in makeup and fashion, “all of a sudden, I was being told well, you have to, because this is sort of what’s in the realm of normal”. She recalled being confused: “What does it mean to be a woman who is *not* interested in fashion, clothes, make up or boys” and who “enjoyed the company of females” in the same way her female friends seemed to enjoy the company of males? She concluded she must be “un-normal.” In her early teens, when she learned that there was “a category” called “lesbian” she thought, “Who knows? Maybe that’s more reflective of me than so-called normalcy.”

### **Religious Indoctrination**

Religious contexts were another source of homophobic and heterosexist ideologies and norms. Indoctrination occurred both formally and informally. Three participants – Julian, Maude and Winter – recalled hearing homonegative ideology formally directly through religious instruction. Winter recalled hearing sermons about homosexuality that “clumped” homosexuals with “the drunkards and the murderers”, and contemptuous comments that her youth pastor made about homosexuality: “Sometimes he’d put on a very flamboyant lisp and kind of make fun of it, as if it wasn’t important enough to talk about.” She wished that instead of mocking homosexuals,

her youth pastor would actually talk about homosexuality in a meaningful way that would help her understand herself. Instead, he joked, his comments implying that “homosexuals” were “a bunch of messed up young men who are obsessed with sex”, revealing his assumption that all homosexuals are men. Winter recalled “not being okay” with the youth pastor’s comments and wondering, “Why are you making fun of people?” She described his behaviour as “bullying.”

Maude had also “absolutely” heard homophobic rhetoric in church teachings, and described its impact on her:

I knew I liked girls when I was about 6, 7, 8 years old, really young, so religion made life really hard because I really, really believed what I was told [in church] and we were told those people were horrible people and would burn in hell, and I believed that so it made my childhood horrible.

While Buckley couldn’t recall hearing anything homophobic during Catholic Mass, there was a general “cultural homophobia that just expressed itself in the context of the church” and was “always there”: “You know, people would sneer at the idea of someone who was effeminate.” He understood that effeminate men were equated with homosexuals and cast as “potentially dangerous”.

Charleen also could not recall any direct pronouncement that homosexuality was “against religion” but “had a feeling” and “it was really clear that this was not condoned by Catholicism”. As a result, she remembered thinking, “Oh my God, this is something that just cannot be part of my life, like this is terrible.”

### **Parents Reinforcing/Challenging Church Messages**

For all but one participant – Elliot – parents played a prominent role in reinforcing church teachings. Charleen recalled watching her mother cross to the other side of the road one day to

avoid encountering two (presumably) gay men who were coming towards them. Only six years old at the time, she didn't understand her mother's actions, however, her brother later explained, "To be a good Catholic means to not do that or be that, whatever *that* was, because I had no idea." When she was in her teens, her mother's reaction to the AIDS crisis of the 1980s had a profound and devastating impact as she emphasized God's hatred of homosexuals: "My mother was like yeah, that's God's answer to homosexuality, so I knew that there was a tremendous amount of hatred." Winter's mother likewise reinforced the homosexuality-as-sin ideology. She had wondered if her daughter "liked girls" but had not said anything, believing "that would give the devil a foothold"; instead, she prayed "against" her daughter being a lesbian. Then, when Winter was 15, her mother told her very bluntly: "You could come home pregnant, you could come home addicted to drugs, but if you told me you were a lesbian, that would break my heart." Devastated and terrified, Winter remembered running to her room and "falling on my hands and knees and begging God to just take it away."

Katie's parents also made it clear that that homosexuality was a sin: "My father was very against it and my mom as well, you know, and more so my mom would say, that's a sin in the bible, that's not right, so you know, I learned that from a young age." She also remembered her parents and others making fun of her school coach who "lived alone, wasn't married, had certain characteristics that people would attribute to homosexuality." Though Katie did not understand what the comments implied, it was clear to her that homosexuality "was a bad thing" and that "they were making fun of her".

Julian's relationship to hegemonic gender norms differed from other male participants, as his own family provided alternatives to hegemonic hetero-masculinity: "My dad was quite effeminate...none of the males in my family were hyper masculine, so I never had this, oh you

need to be in sports and you need to – I never had that.” In addition, his father did “most of the cleaning and the cooking and all those stereotypical [things], so I never seen a problem with it.” On the other hand, Julian recalled how his parents – who were abusing prescription drugs at the time - spoke disparagingly about a “local gay guy who was a hair stylist” who “drank heavily” and had “younger gay guys around him”: “They didn’t want that bad influence on their good little Christian boys,” he said. In addition, his mother cautioned him about “bisexual diseases” and “bringing diseases home to your family.”

Buckley’s parents also reinforced homo-negative church doctrine, though in a less uncompromising way. Buckley remembered his parents telling him that homosexuality was a sin, but coupled this injunction with a “love your neighbour” discourse:

My parents would say, ‘Being gay is a sin, but God makes people gay and that’s something that they gotta deal with.’ Like it wasn’t a huge, like everyone’s going to hell and fire and brimstone. It was sort of a ‘being gay is a sin, but try to be nice to everybody and work it out; do your best.’

Buckley’s parents were the only ones who tempered their “homosexuality as sin” rhetoric with a caveat to nonetheless, “love your neighbour”.

### **Learning through Pop Culture/Media/The Arts**

Information/ideology was also learned via various media outlets, including online resources or websites, television, magazines, and news media. For Paul, Elliot and Maude, who grew up in the 1960s and 70s, their earliest memories about sexual orientation were linked with television and negative portrayals of lesbians and gay men. Though Paul’s family was deeply immersed in their evangelical Christian church and somewhat isolated from popular culture, the

family did watch some television programs, including the comedy *All in the Family*. Paul's first exposure to a gay person on television occurred as a result of the show:

Archie Bunker was going off about fags, right? And Dad would comment, like a joke, but the joke sort of being that yeah, we need to do something about the fags, right? And I was very conscious that that was about me, and afraid. I just remember fear, like if anybody ever sees me sexually stimulated by something – that would be the end of the world.

Terrified, terrified!

Maude and Elliot, who were both in their early 50s, learned there were “homosexuals” through news media: “And of course in those days, in the 70s, they weren't positive messages, right?” recalled Maude. “We were always portrayed negatively.” Elliot recalled news coverage of aggressive, anti-homosexuality campaigns in the U.S. led by Anita Bryant, a television personality who was also an evangelical Christian.

Despite the negative bent in television and media coverage, the mere presence of queer characters indicated other queer people existed. When, in the 1990s, the first television personalities began coming out of the closet, new possibilities and alternative discourses about queerness began to emerge. Both Winter and Katie mentioned the impact of the public coming out of television star Ellen DeGeneres, which occurred when they were in their early teens. Katie recalled that while her parents were “appalled” at this event, she remembered “going out for a bike ride afterwards and thinking, I wonder if I'm like that, 'cause I felt like I could be.” For the first time, she wondered about the nature of her own sexuality.

Other forms of media, like theatre and literature, were also sources of learning about queer alternatives. Paul was deeply affected by his experiences with theatre when he was in

junior high. That year, he auditioned for a local theatre, which his father allowed, inadvertently opening the door to Paul's first exposure to "secular living and sexuality":

It was all out there, all in my face in the theatre, right? All of the people changing in the changing rooms, seeing men and women naked, and all the while I'm going through puberty, and I'm like, oh, all of these sights and sounds. And I'm performing on stage, working with professional performers and I'm like, okay, this is what I want to do.

Marnie,<sup>29</sup> a lesbian cast member took Paul "under her wing." That year was a watershed in Paul's learning about sexuality and his identity. On the final night of the show, at the cast party, which his parents attended, Paul declared to Marnie that he wanted to pursue a career in theatre: "What do you think?" he asked. He described her reaction:

And I can remember her looking at my parents and my parents were just terrified of that question, because even though Dad was giving me the opportunity, I knew that he would never put his stamp of approval on this lifestyle, there was no way. Poor Marnie said, 'This is not the life for him'.

On the one hand, Paul was devastated, having wanted Marnie to support him. On the other hand, Paul was relieved. "Because I'd just get in trouble. I would just have to let myself be who I am and that would be wrong." Respecting Marnie's opinion, Paul walked away from theatre, but he "often" thought back to that night:

I almost made it out, and I can remember year after year, growing up and getting married, having kids, teaching, all of those years of my work and my life thinking back to that moment. That was a critical turning point for me. That's where I shut myself down, that's where I said no, you can't be who you want to be...

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<sup>29</sup> Pseudonym

Buckley, who described himself as a “thinky” kid who loved to read, learned of queer alternatives through fiction, in particular, E.M. Forster’s *Maurice*, a novel of same-sex love between “two super repressed philosophy students” who were “unable to come to terms with it” which he read again and again:

I so identified with that and there was sort of yearning around that. And then this third character is introduced who is just unabashedly sexual and really doesn’t face all of that struggle of, how do I be this upper middle-class person and be gay? Then there’s this lower-class character who, they just fall into a relationship and end up leaving together. Though admittedly “not the happiest of stories”, *Maurice* provided a story of contrasting conclusions, a “story with queer people ... one of whom doesn’t go through that struggle.” It gave him an alternative narrative to the prevailing homonegative discourses reiterated through church and family.

### **Peers/Friends**

None of the participants had learned information about homosexuality through formal means in school classrooms. Those silences also spoke volumes. Where participants most heard messages about homosexuality was informally through interactions with their peers and friends. Charleen, who had begun to suspect she was lesbian around the age of 15, learned homophobic ideology at school through the way her peers talked about anyone they believed to be lesbian or gay. She recalled one incident, in particular, that caused her significant anxiety. It occurred in school, when a group of girls began conjecturing that one of their school mates was a lesbian:

...they said, yeah, she’s lesbian, and then somebody said, no, no, no, she’s not, and the other person said, yeah, she doesn’t hang out with boys at all, and then that person said

yeah, but Charleen doesn't either and she's not a lesbian, and I was like [eyes wide open indicating terror].

This exchange horrified Charleen, who was terrified of anyone discovering her attraction to other females.

Elliot learned about homosexuality through the bullying he experienced in school. He described being “spat on, called different names, stuff like that.” He neither acknowledged nor denied it, knowing “it was unsafe to do that at that point.” In high school, the bullying increased: “High school was the most horrific experience of my total life, you know, the school was 3000 students and you learned to take the abuse ‘cause you’re already singled out at that point, too.” His church youth group also helped to reinforce his sense of isolation and non-conformity:

I knew that there was going to be a time where even in the like church youth groups, all that kind of stuff, you were, if you were single, you had to have, you had to date, well I never did date, and I knew at some point it was going to be increasingly more and more uncomfortable, so one, you either had to isolate one's self or uh, get education and get out.

Buckley had come to understand in high school that “people connected gay with sissy” and was labelled gay “without really knowing what that meant in terms of sexuality.” He eventually came to understand that gay men were attracted to the same gender, and that a gay man “was a type of person to be in the world as opposed to, that's just something that you get mocked for, that people were out of the closet and living happy lives.” It was around the same time that he first started to identify, “oh, maybe that's me.”

The participant narratives reveal the ways in which hegemonic heteronormative ideologies were actively perpetuated, or as Williams (1977) has described, “renewed” and

“defended” (p. 112). They were reinforced continually through peer pressure, the church, parents, and the media; homosexuality was continually denigrated, stigmatized and constructed as “abnormal” and “unnatural” while in contrast, heterosexuality and dominant gender norms were presented as “normal” and “natural.” Boys came to understand what they should *not* be (i.e., effeminate, sissy, gay, and into “girlie things”), but also what they *should* be (into sports and girls). Girls should *not* be sporty tomboys (especially after puberty), and *should* like boys, fashion and make up. Implicit and explicit religious messages were reinforced by family, peers, and media. Fear of ridicule, rejection, bullying and violence helped reinforce gender ideologies and compulsory heterosexuality, provoking ongoing anxiety, stress and worry about being found out. Mass media channeled the ideologies within the broader society, but also informed participants that there were others like them, some of whom loved openly and happily as queer.

Despite the heterosexist pressures they all experienced, several had gotten glimpses of alternative ways of being. Paul had seen and met out lesbian and gay people in the theatre, Buckley had read an alternative storyline to the tragic, deviant gay male in the novel *Maurice*, and Katie had witnessed Ellen DeGeneres coming out on television. These alternative visions exemplify how hegemony is also “continually resisted, limited, altered, and challenged by pressures not at all its own” (Williams, 1977, p. 112).

### **Attraction to the same Gender**

Learning also came through the response of the body, and trying to make sense of those responses, when participants experienced sexual attraction to the same gender within the context of homophobia. This was a deeply confusing, and sometimes horrifying experience. For Paul recognizing at very young age (6-7) that he was attracted to boys, sexual attraction was a “dreadful”, shame-filled experience. He recalled, “trying to make friends with boys from the age

of 7 and not being able to escape attraction.” Winter’s experience of attraction to other girls in her teens, some of whom were friends, “devastated” her, and she recalled being “pissed” when they dated guys: “I would be so confused by that, like why? Why? I would be so confused.” Buckley recalled his first crush in Grade 4, when he found another boy “really cool”: “I wanted something with him...I just really wanted him to be my best friend, wanted to dress like he dressed and wanted to like all of the things that he liked.” Charleen’s first crush on a girl occurred when she noticed a girl who “did not look like the others”. “She had on jeans and a purple shirt with the sleeves rolled up”, Charleen related, “and the other young women she was walking with were all in skirts and dolled up, but my eyes were just drawn to her and I just thought, wow, she looks very interesting, I’d like to get to know her.” These body responses, these crushes and desires, were a distinct and profound way of learning that highlighted the limits of knowledge and teachings about the evils of homosexuality.

### **Responses to Homophobic Ideology**

Participants came to an awareness of their sexuality within a broader context of homophobia and heterosexism. Flowing through their narratives are many of the painful responses and emotions that have been identified by Levy and Reeves (2011) as well as Wolkomir (2006): shame, confusion, anger, sadness, aloneness, anxiety, inauthenticity, and the belief that they were sexually deviant. When Paul, Buckley, Winter, Charleen and Maude became aware of their sexual orientation, homophobia bade them to deny and repress it. Maude, who knew from age 6 that she was attracted to girls, kept this knowledge secret:

So here I am and I know I’m this person, but I’m not going to let other people know that I’m that person, so my whole life was pretending that I was not that person. I would purposely do things, like I dated boys in my teens only because that was a way to *pretend*

so people wouldn't know. Did not want to do that, EVER. I would just basically, in any way I could, try to present as if I was straight.

She recalled feeling "horrible" about who she was and confused: "I always thought I was a pretty decent person, a pretty good person, but I always had this other side, right?" She would continue to repress her sexuality all the way through her undergraduate degree.

Winter, who realized at puberty that she liked girls, repressed her sexuality throughout school, focusing her energies on "how to get rid of this thing." Like Maude, she dated boys throughout high school and continually prayed for God to change her. Katie also dated boys throughout high school, not because she was consciously presenting as straight, but because she "really enjoyed hanging out with them." However, she did not want them to touch her, and did not know what this *meant*; she did not yet understand why she was not sexually attracted to boys and had not yet experienced attraction to a female.

In their teens, all but Katie moved from recognition of their difference into a period of internal dialogue and rumination that led them to have a series of realizations about their sexuality. Buckley began this process in high school, when he learned for the first time that "there were people who were attracted to the same sex," became aware that these people were labelled "gay" and began to think, "maybe that's me." Until this point, he had framed his sexual attractions as "having lustful thoughts" and would deal with these by going to confession on a regular basis: "I had plenty of opportunity to be constantly aware that I had thoughts about sinful things." In Grade 10, however, his thinking shifted from, "I have gay thoughts" or "I had this weird dream about a guy, but what does that mean?" to "oh, *I'm a gay person*, and this is something that's always going to be the case – what does that mean?" This recognition produced guilt, shame and "a lot of anxiety." Buckley spoke of being "hyper conscious" that being gay did

not fit with the image of being a good Catholic, and this realization was made all the more stressful by his plans, and the plans of others who had been encouraging him, to be a priest. “All Catholic boys get this pressure”, he explained “especially ones who don’t date girls, so right up until the end of my first degree, there was a strong active plan to go into the seminary, but a lot of that was the social pressure from the people in the parish who all would whisper, oh look, Buckley is going to be a priest.”

Charleen, who began suspecting she was a lesbian in her mid-teens, remembered hoping “it would change or maybe go away.” By 17, however, she was “getting the sense that this is no passing phase” and became “very depressed”. “I just really felt like I’m fucked,” she related. However, she continued her religious life, remaining silent about her inner struggles. In her first year at a local university, the pressure to behave according to heteronormative standards became more intense, causing significant states of anguish and depression.

I just realized, man, I hate this and I mean it’s much less structured, so all of a sudden, it’s like oh my God, how do I form social relationships where now it’s not so routine and where it’s much more obvious, now, that I’m choosing the company of women over mixed company?

Charleen began contemplating leaving home.

Unable to escape attraction in his childhood and teens, Paul isolated himself from boys and immersed himself in his religious life. However, he described two important junctures in his life when critical decisions were made that effectively reinforced his closeted status. The first was his brief stint with a local theatre company when, as noted earlier, he “almost made it out.” The second critical moment came when he encountered other gay men, and also inadvertently, gay pornography, at university. Exhilarated and horrified at how both made him feel, he doubled

down on repressing his sexuality, terrified of God's judgement and of being found out. In the midst of these ongoing internal conflicts, he met and began dating a woman who would become his future wife. After they became engaged, he remembered a brief period of doubt:

We were standing on the street and I said, I think we need to take a break, I don't know if I can do this, never intimating what the problem would be, just trying to be honest with myself to say, I don't think this is right.

When his fiancée began to cry, Paul "almost crumbled" because he could not bear the thought of making her unhappy: "I couldn't disappoint her, but I remember thinking, I can't do this to this person." He also felt pressure, he said, to "be the man in this whole thing" and to repress his own needs in order to make her happy, "because her unhappiness was not acceptable." He elaborated:

I was that [close to] preventing the catastrophe that would come, right? But I couldn't do it because there was too much at stake. What if she asked me why? What if I had to be honest? 'Cause I'm an honest guy, I'd have to [tell her why], so that's another reason I couldn't explain that to anybody. The fear of *that* coming out in a conversation? No way.

Seeing no way out of his dilemma, he went forward with the engagement and married not long after graduating university.

Only Elliot did not experience a period of ruminating about his sexuality once he determined the nature of his sexual attractions. Having experienced ongoing bullying throughout school for being perceived as "different" his response was to hide and "act like anyone else."

This was no easy task:

The problem is when your peers or friends kind of say well, do you have a girlfriend? In church youth groups, you kind of hide that because it's supposed to be a non-sexual thing anyway. But the most dangerous part was going to school, high school. But you just go

and you come back and that was it. I never socialized outside of home. Just me, the dog and studies.

Unlike the other participants, Elliot did not experience the religious guilt experienced by most of the other participants because by his early teens, he had rejected a literalist reading of the Bible as “stupid”.

Julian had not experienced conflict about his sexuality until he heard his high school Sunday school teacher identify homosexuality as a sin: “They read this horrible book called *Bondage Breakers* and it was about smoking and homosexuality and pray the gay away.” It was at that moment that he suddenly realized, “oh my God, I like guys, this is talking about me.” This experience triggered intense anxiety and internal conflict. Rather than repressing his sexuality, however, he made arrangements to visit a friend in Halifax in hopes of locating other gay men: “I just wanted to be around people I identified with.” In the city, with access to the internet, a quick search of gay cruising sites made him realize, “Wow, there’s gay people, and they want to have sex, and I can watch porn now.” Julian also sought spiritual support through an affirming church, where he connected with an outreach to queer youth. His stay came abruptly to an end, however, when he was outed by a friend in the city to the leadership of his church back home. Julian described what ensued:

The church gave me an option of being excommunicated or going to an ex-gay ministry. I wanted to believe that they didn’t do it with malice, that they did that out of what they believed. That’s what they told me, that I was sinning and I needed to change, and that there was hope for me in Southern California. And because these families cared about me, it was the first time I felt cared about, and so of course I’m gonna go all the way to California and try this.

In conclusion, all but Katie (who did not begin to grapple with her sexuality until she was in university) responded to the awareness of their sexuality by assuming it was somehow abnormal, something they should never divulge to anyone else, but should suppress and repress. Julian did not at first see his sexuality as problematic until he heard homonegative teaching in church. Instead of repressing his sexuality, he took an exploratory trip to the city to look for support and information. After his church leadership found out about his activities, they pressured and shamed him into entering an ex-gay ministry in the United States in order for him to change his sexual orientation. Elliot, who had already abandoned religious belief, put his sexual life on hold and isolated himself until he could leave home and find a space to safely express it. The participant narratives point to a more nuanced response to recognizing their sexual orientation than is indicated in previous research (Rodriguez and Oulette, 2000; Garcia, Gray-Stanley and Ramirez-Valles, 2008; Ganzevoort, van der Laan and Olsman, 2011; Schoor, 2006), which tends to suggest people either deny their sexuality or their religion, or compartmentalize the two.

### **Discussion**

This chapter focuses on the participants' experiences during their youth. Their narratives indicate that they were affected by formal institutions (schools and churches), peer groups, families and neighbourhoods, the broader learning platforms of the internet and media, and their own internal struggles fueled by homophobia. Their experiences did not occur in a vacuum but were very much situated in broader socio-political context and power structures. In addition, the social and the personal were profoundly connected as the basis from which they learned about themselves and others in relation to normative ideologies. Butler (1993) states that gender and sexual identities are performed and reiterated under and through constraint, under and through

the force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of exclusion and even death controlling and impinging upon the shape of the production. The dynamic that Butler describes is evident in the discourses surrounding the participants that normalized and naturalized heteronormativity and pathologized difference as “abnormal” and “unnatural”.

**“It’s not in the curriculum.”**

What is striking, but not surprising about the participants’ narratives is the complete absence of formal education—negative or positive—about queerness in either school or university classrooms. Participants had no access there to alternative narratives that might counter the dominant, homophobic discourses. This kind of invisibility has been identified by Elliot Eisner (1979) as the “null curriculum,” which he defined as “the options students are not afforded, the perspectives they may never know about, much less be able to use, the concepts and skills that are not part of their intellectual repertoire” (p. 107). Eisner’s (1979) thesis was that “what schools do not teach may be as important as what they do teach” (p. 83). Eisner (1985) took this position “because ignorance is not simply a neutral void; it has important effects on the kinds of options one is able to consider, the alternatives one can examine, and the perspectives from which one can view a situation or problem” (in Flinders, Nodding & Thornton, 1986, p. 34). Silence amounts to an implicit condoning of discrimination that occurs when the topics are seen as too “taboo” to be discussed in a classroom setting.

Studies show that the lack of attention to sexual identity results in education environments permeated with heterosexism and homophobia, and the continued normalization of heterosexual identities (Ferfolja, 2007; Filax, 2006; Meyer, 2007; Prettyman, 2007). Shipley (2014) asserts that the “actual and symbolic denial that is a refusal to teach and therefore recognize sexual and gender diversity reinforces socially acceptable heteronormative identity

destinations for youth” (p. 199). The reinforcement of “appropriate” sexual and gender identities occurs through socialization, teaching, regulation, and the ongoing experiences of gender and sexual disciplining for “transgressions.” Schools are places where students are expected to follow gender and sexual norms; in this environment, the normative child, citizen, and family are reinforced and reaffirmed, through educational policies as well as through the performance of normativity among teachers and students (Gleason, 1999 cited in Shipley, 2014).

Though there was no official curriculum about queerness in the participants’ respective schools, there was a “hidden curriculum” (Jackson, 1968), “unwritten institutional demands for conformity to socially acceptable norms” (p. 20). This hidden curriculum “has the power to render the lives of students who are marginalized due to their sexual orientation or gender identity challenging to survive” (Zook, 2017, p. p. 1758). The hidden curriculum constructed heterosexuality as “normal”, in part, through the invisibility of anything else (Smith, 2013). School was unsafe for these participants, who were isolated in face of heteronorming and homophobic messages from peers (Ferfolja, 2007; Nixon & Givens, 2007; Prettyman, 2007). It was in this kind of environment that Buckley came to understand he was a “sissy” that Elliot was “spat on” and “called different names” and that Charleen endured anxiety provoking interactions with female friends. Quinland and Town (1999) have observed that in these kinds of educational environments, heteronormative practices are at work, maintaining the *status quo* and validating compulsory heterosexuality. Peers inserted heteronormative and homophobic views, punishing and marginalizing participants and enforcing heteronormative norms (Butler, 1988; Cramer, 2002; Evans & Broido, 2002; LaSala, Jenkins, Wheeler, & Fredriksen-Goldsen, 2008; Silverschanz, Cortina, Konik, & Magley, 2008) and a binary view of gender relations.

The silence surrounding sexualities in general and homosexuality in particular, the pathologizing of homosexuality, and the policing of gender boundaries ensured that as young men and women, participants adhered to *expected* gender behaviour deemed *natural* and *normal* (p. 510). Butler (1988) has argued that gender is real “only to the extent that it is performed” (p. 527). The participants’ failure to perform according to heteronormative norms, to behave like the other boys/girls, left them feeling “different” or, as Charleen put it, “un-normal” in relation to the ongoing performance of gender normativity by other students. The hyper-regulation of participants’ gender and sexual identities imposed immediate consequences for them as non-normative (or perceived as non-normative) sexual youth (Naugler, 2010; Søndergaard, 2012). The impact on their self-esteem was devastating: isolation, depression, ongoing anxiety, and nagging self-loathing. It is truly astounding that seven of the eight participants remained in school and went on to university.

### **Religion, Curated by Parents and the Media**

Heteronormative and heterosexist ideologies were perpetuated formally through the participants’ respective religious environments (Barton, 2010; Heerman et al., 2007; Levy, 2009). Church teachings reinforced a binary view of sex in which humans were divided into two distinct groups, boys/men and girls/women. With the exception of Elliot, homonegative messages were then curated and reinforced by parents and other family members, and it was this reinforcement that seemed to have the most significant and devastating impact. The comments of Winter’s mother exemplify Taylor and Tracey’s (2011) findings that some parents are “so terrified of their kids turning out gay that they would rather see them unhappy than see them unheterosexual” (p. 11). This may be intensified when parents firmly believe a child will ‘burn in hell for eternity’ if they are queer.

Heteronorming also occurred through media, particularly television, with Elliot and Maude citing news media, and Paul remembering his father's comments about "those fags" on the comedy *All in the Family*. Katie, Buckley, and Winter all made reference to television personality Ellen Degeneres, and Julian had encountered gay characters on sitcom *Will and Grace*. While some of the media exposure was positive, discussions about media content by parents was overwhelmingly negative, helping to reinforce hegemonic norms.

### **(Hetero)Femininities and Masculinities**

The narratives discussed in this chapter reveal the ways in which participants were constrained by heteronormative and heterosexist teachings related to femininity and masculinity that were perpetuated and reinforced through their social interactions, through media and pop culture, and particularly through the institutions of family, school and church. This inculcation began early in life. Gender norms dictated how participants ought to think, behave, feel, dress, the kinds of interests they should have, and even how, as normative males and females, they should communicate. The norms, as Butler (2004) has noted, "may or may not be explicit, and when they operate as the normalizing principle in social practice, they usually remain implicit, difficult to read, discernible most clearly and dramatically in the effects that they produce" (p. 41). It is important to note, however, that there were gendered differences in the norms and in how those norms were reinforced.

Cole and Zucker (2007) suggest that cultural practices and ideologies associated with (hetero)femininity "reflect a gendered system in which women are subordinate to men, and certain women attain a higher status than others through their successful performance of a prescribed set of normative feminine behaviours" (p. 1). Collins (2004) suggests this dominant form of (hetero)femininity includes five elements: beauty, demeanor, marriage and family

arrangements, sexuality, and (White) race (in Cole & Zucker, 2007, p. 1). Idealized femininity is designed to attract and please males; it is designed for the white male gaze. Feminine ideals are therefore frequently framed within discourses of heterosexual romance and marriage, and females are influenced and constrained by this ideal of femininity as they construct and perform their gender (Mahalik et al., 2005; Pyke & Johnson, 2003). It is not surprising, then, that all four females in this study understood from a young age that they were supposed to like and date boys. They were definitely *not* to act like boys, but they were also supposed to like boys. Having been labelled a tomboy, Charleen nevertheless understood that she was not to be “too” sporty. Ahlqvist, Halim, Greulich, Lurye, and Ruble (2013) note there are both benefits and drawbacks to being a tomboy. On the one hand, by identifying with boys and engaging in stereotypically male activities “tomboys may have increased exposure to instrumental activities, possibly resulting in greater gender flexibility” (p. 563). On the other hand, engaging in activities that are atypical for females can put them at risk for rejection by their peers.

Charleen’s narrative also highlights the pressure she felt to be “feminine” in a style similar to what Holland and Harpin (2015) refer to as the “girly-girl” model of femininity, defined as “hyper-feminine, passive and mostly sedentary, focusing on her appearance as a leisure activity” (p. 6). In order to measure up to this standard of femininity, Charleen was encouraged to wear dresses and was expected to be interested in fashion and make up, ostensibly to attract males. At the same time, she couldn’t be “too feminine” or she would be considered “too sluttish” by her peers, putting her reputation in jeopardy. She describes an incident when she was present for “a conversation like, you know, people start accusing other girls of being a lesbian, or that sort of thing, and I remember sitting with a group of people and they said, yeah, she’s lesbian”. Though these comments were not aimed specifically at her, she nonetheless

understood they *could* be about her and the vicarious nature of their comments were deeply distressing. Simmons (2002) has noted that girl-on-girl bullying tends to occur through name-calling, gossiping, character assassination, and banishment from social circles or activities, and female bullies often employ sexual slurs such as “slut”, “bitch” and “dyke” to publicly humiliate a girl (Eder et al., 1995 in Catanzaro, 2011). Gossiping about those not present is also a common pattern of bullying amongst girls (in Catanzaro, 2011). This and similar episodes of vicarious bullying – normative violence – horrified Charleen as she increasingly realized she did not fit the “feminine” models being affirmed and valued by her peers. Internalizing their comments, she began to see herself as “un-normal” and in the “category of lesbian which is totally negative and horrible”.

The male participants all describe pressures to conform to hegemonic, heterosexual masculinity. Connell (1995), who introduced the concept of “masculinities”, suggested a hierarchy of four masculinities: hegemonic, complicit, marginalized and subordinate. Though constructions of masculinity vary across time and place, hegemonic (hetero)masculinity is always synonymous with power. Hegemonic masculinity idealizes power, authority, and control, and emphasizes characteristics of independence, strength and stoicism (Connell, 2005). While this form of masculinity may not be most prevalent, it is nonetheless most valued and idealized. Among adolescents, ideal notions of masculinity include being a “jock” and projecting dominance and sexual prowess (e.g., Pascoe, 2003). Though Elliot, Paul, Buckley and Julian all indicated their awareness of this preferred version of masculinity, each responded differently to it. Connell (2005) suggests men who cannot attain dominant norms of (hetero)masculinity fall into three broad categories. *Complicit* masculinity embraces traditional white, Western and middle class notions of manhood as the family provider who is stoic and autonomous. Paul

exemplifies complicit masculinity. Though unable to be a jock, as a white male he could benefit from the norms associated with hegemonic masculinity by being “the man” for his wife, a family man through having and supporting his children, and a respectable “church guy” within his own social circles. In other words, he could pass as straight. The term “passing” has been used to describe “the process of being recognized by others as a member of a social identity group that is incongruent with one’s self-identity” (Fuller, Chang & Rubin, 2009, p. p. 128). Elliot likewise attempted to perform straight masculinity by emphasizing the “macho-istic” demeanor he had observed in his social environment and eschewed what he termed an “effeminate” version of gay maleness. As such, he exemplifies the gay man who does not perceive himself to be feminine and values traditional masculinity (Sanchez, Greenberg, Liu & Vilain, 2009).

Unlike Elliot and Paul, Buckley did not try to outwardly perform straightness. Having been identified early in his childhood as a “sissy”, he did not have access to this privilege. Instead, he resigned himself to his identity as a “sissy”, despite his self-confessed discomfort with that term. He exemplifies *subordinate* masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Taywaditep, 2001), and specifically the marginalized gay male who cannot pass as straight. Subordinate masculinity is linked with qualities, such as effeminacy and gayness, which are considered antithetical to those valued in hegemonic masculinity.

Julian, interestingly, does not exemplify either complicit or subordinate masculinity as he did not feel the need to conform to stereotypical norms for men. Having grown up with an “effeminate” father who did most of the household chores, as well as other male family members whom he also characterized as effeminate, he had had access to an alternative model of masculinity. As a result, he did not feel the pressure to perform dominant forms of masculinity. Positioning himself as “artistic”, he was able to take up space beyond the bounds of traditional gendered

expectations. He perhaps best fits the notion of a “protest” masculinity, i.e., “a gendered identity oriented toward a protest of the relations of production and the ideal type of hegemonic masculinity” (Walker, 2006, p. 5). A Google search of “protest masculinity” reveals images of pop culture icons such as Boy George and David Bowie, both noted for their androgyny. Thompson and Pleck (1995, cited in Sanchez et al, 2009) have suggested there are many masculinity ideologies between and across various cultural and ethnic groups, and that groups such as gay men may define masculinity differently and have different standards for men.

### **Fear of losing identity**

Rodriguez (2010) has suggested that three factors – the fear of divine retribution, the fear of others, and the belief that sexual and religious identities are incompatible – prevent people from coming out. The narratives of Buckley and Paul, however, reveal yet another factor that prevented them coming out: the fear of losing identity. Buckley, who self-identified as a good Catholic guy who was planning to be a priest and leader, ruminated about how to “replace, this [identity] that was falling apart”. In his undergraduate philosophy class, he discovered “there are lots of people in the world today who live good lives and do good things and make good contributions to the world” but “don’t have religion as part of their story, or part of their belief set.” He realized, “I can be a leader, I can be respected for what I think or whatever, but I don’t need the church to prop that up.” He could “relax” and let his Catholic identity fall apart “only when I had the idea that there was still an identity that would allow me to meet those goals, to be that person”.

Paul’s story is very similar. Identifying as the “pianist, soloist, the church guy” he described the terror he felt at the thought of losing that particular “church guy” identity: “If somebody found that out, that was devastating thinking to me. It would just crumble my whole

identity. How can you be a church guy, right?” Reflecting on his inner conflict, he described how it worked to keep him in the closet: “Religion and the comfort of the identity that I had there was powerful enough to supplant the learning, to prevent me from actually coming to, arriving at a place where I knew this is the truth.” Ironically, the comfort that Paul derived from performing the “church guy” and the affirmation that came with that performance, outweighed for almost three decades, the discomfort of being inauthentic to himself. Yet, unlike Buckley, when did not engage in constructing a “replacement” identity before he left his marriage and his church.

### **Repression of sexuality versus putting it on hold.**

Four participants—Maude, Paul, Julian, and Winter—initially responded to homophobic discourses by denying and repressing their sexual identity; there is no indication they anticipated that one day they may be able to act on their sexual attractions. This is in keeping with previous literature (Ganzevoort, van der Laan & Olsman, 2011; Garcia, Gray-Stanley & Ramirez-Valles, 2008; Rodriguez & Oulette, 2000; Schoor, 2006). Buckley and Charleen, however, took a different approach. Charleen *put sexuality on hold* until she could find a safe place to sort things out, and Buckley responded by engaging in a lengthy, *private dialectic* about how to resolve his internal conflict. Both of these approaches indicate options that are more provisional and contingent, and therefore differ from the four strategies identified in previous research (deny sexuality, deny spirituality, compartmentalize both, or fully integrate identities).

### **Conclusion**

Butler (1999) has stated that we are “trained within a set of social regulatory ideals” that instruct us to perform our gender in a socially acceptable, intelligible way (p. 54). Performing one’s gender well, Butler (1988) notes, “provides the reassurance that there is an essentialism of gender identity after all” (p.528). “That culture so readily punishes or marginalizes those who

fail to perform the illusion of gender essentialism” she goes on to say, “should be sign enough that on some level there is social knowledge that the truth or falsity of gender is only socially compelled” (p. 528):

This chapter makes visible how “the institution of compulsory heterosexuality and heterosexual identity...is maintained through the social repression of homosexuality” (Rich, 1980), at the same time relying on and reinforcing hetero-gender scripts. The chapter also indicates, as Butler (1988) has suggested, that rather than being “passively scripted on the body” and “determined by nature, language, the symbolic, or the overwhelming history of patriarchy”, gender is “put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure” (p. 531). The amount of effort participants put into repressing, rejecting, or subverting themselves, and into performing socially acceptable sexual and gender identities cannot be overemphasized. Butler (1999) suggests that it is through coercive power and force that “intelligible genders” or subjects, are created (p. 24). By “intelligible” she means the socially acceptable gender roles that people are pressured into performing, roles that are considered suitable to binary gender categories of masculine and feminine, and compulsory heterosexuality. As is evident in the participants’ narratives, only those with “intelligible genders” – those who maintain the heterosexual, male dominant relations among sex, gender and sexuality – are recognized and rewarded in society (Butler, 1999, p.23). Others experience a fragmented sense of self, internalized shame and oppression, and inauthentic self-presentation.

The participants’ narratives reveal how the hegemonic heteronormative paradigm was promoted by the mass media and pop culture, but particularly through the institutions of family, school and church. For seven participants, by far the most devastating impacts resulted directly from ideologies promoted by the church and reinforced by parents and family. Julian, in fact,

directly linked his mental health issues to the homonegative teachings of his church: “I wouldn’t have struggled at all”, he asserted, “if it wouldn’t have been a problem in the church.” The pervasive heteronormative and homophobic messaging, and invisibility of any positive representation of queerness lead to feelings of shame, confusion, anger, sadness, aloneness, anxiety, inauthenticity, and the belief that they were somehow abnormal (Levy & Reeves, 2011; Wolkomir, 2006). Maude, Winter, Charleen, Paul and Julian all experienced profound depression, with both Julian and Maude considering suicide. Only Elliot, who had dismissed the Bible as “stupid” during adolescence, did not experience a conflict with religious ideology.

Despite the participants’ ongoing exposure to homophobic and heterosexist ideology, and the resulting pain and anguish they experienced, this chapter nonetheless contains hints of agency – the questioning of certain received truths – that would eventually lead to resistance and rebellion. It reveals the ideological frameworks that guided each participant, indicating their provenance, and exploring how and why ideology informed their actions. Making a decision to come out would require questioning and being willing to abandon ideology – old ways of thinking that informed their actions and shaped their identity. If they were going to come out, their existing knowledge base would need to be challenged in order to trigger cognitive, affective and behavioral mechanisms associated with transformative learning, that is, the adoption of new frames of reference. They would also require motivation – incentive – to take this step, especially given the costs associated with the challenging the regulatory regimes designed to keep them in their place. The next chapter explores the period leading up to each participant’s decision to come out, including the intrinsic and extrinsic factors that provided incentive to question and abandon entrenched ideologies and the elements that made it possible for them to do so.

## Chapter Eight: Disorienting Dilemmas

### Introduction

Drawing on Mezirow's (1975, 1991) transformative learning theory (TL), this chapter explores how the eight participants in this study negotiated their self-identities and religious/spiritual identities in order to 'come out of the closet' as LGBTQ. The chapter focuses on the period prior to when they came out to themselves and to others, a consciousness-raising period leading to a fundamental shift in perspective. Taylor (2008) has noted that perspective transformations "occur either through a series of cumulative transformed meaning schemes<sup>30</sup> or as a result of an acute personal or social crisis" and that "these experiences are often stressful and painful, and can cause individuals to question the very core of existence" (p. 6). This chapter follows participants as they come face to face with one or more of these kinds of experiences – a disorienting dilemma, or a series of them – which they then attempt to resolve. It particularly details the critical reflection involved in this process. Mezirow states that, "reflection involves a critique of assumptions to determine whether the belief, often acquired through cultural assimilation in childhood, remains functional for us as adults" (Mezirow, 1991). Reflection is similar to problem solving and Mezirow talks about how we "*reflect* on the content of the problem, the *process* of problem-solving, or the *premise* of the problem" (Mezirow, 1991). Thus TL as conceptualized by Mezirow is fundamentally a rational, analytical process (Mezirow, 1997).

Mezirow proposed four ways of learning: refining or elaborating one's meaning schemes, learning new meaning schemes, transforming meaning schemes, and transforming meaning

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<sup>30</sup> Meaning schemes are "made up of specific knowledge, beliefs, value judgments, and feelings that constitute interpretations of experience" (Mezirow 1991, pp. 5-6).

perspectives (Mezirow, 1991). During the reflection phase, participants engaged in cognitive, emotional, and imaginative work of unlearning – giving up and abandoning (Hislop, Bosley, Coombs & Holland, 2014, p. 540) – ideas, ideologies, values and behaviours that were preventing them from coming out. Seven of Mezirow’s proposed phases appear in this contemplative period: the disorienting dilemma, a private period of self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame, a critical assessment of assumptions, recognition of one’s discontent, exploration of options, planning a course of action, and acquisition of knowledge and skills. During this reflective period, several of the participants engaged in an *imagined* exploration of potential new roles, relationships and action. Not all participants experienced all of the phases, and for most, the steps were recursive and circular in nature rather than linear.

The chapter begins with a summary of TL, first presented in Chapter Four, followed by an examination of the participants’ reflective processes, and a discussion of the intrinsic and extrinsic elements that hindered and facilitated their learning processes. As noted in Chapter Four, TL, which explains the process of “constructing and appropriating new and revised interpretations of the meaning of an experience in the world” (Taylor, 2008, p. 5), is a useful theoretical frame for exploring how and why the participants were able to change the way they viewed both their sexuality and their religious beliefs. The chapter particularly attends to unlearning, specifically as it relates to ideology, which occurs as a part of the participants’ reflective process; unlearning plays a critical role in these narratives and yet it is not given much attention in TL.

### **Transformative Learning Theory**

TL posits that adult learners have developed intrinsic frames of reference, which are unconscious filters and automatic thought processes used to understand the world (Mezirow,

2009, 2012). Frames of reference are the basis for habits of mind, which are broad, orienting ways to think, feel and act (Mezirow, 2009). Attitudes and beliefs informed by intrinsic frames of reference are expressed in habits of mind (Mezirow, 2009), which in turn, are extrinsically communicated as points of view. These three elements – frames of reference, habits of mind and points of view – are influenced by extrinsic and intrinsic factors (Mezirow, 2009, 2012). From a pedagogical perspective, frames of reference are extrinsically influenced by sociocultural factors, and intrinsically influenced by unconscious schemes that make meaning. A disorienting dilemma can be used to reflect on and criticize frames of reference by challenging habits of mind and points of view (Cranton & King, 2003). However, the process of thought, which depends on existing perceptions and constructs, often works to maintain the *status quo* versus a facilitating change. As Mezirow has observed, "approved ways of seeing and understanding, shaped by our language, culture, and personal experience, collaborate to set limits to our future learning" (Mezirow, 1991, 1). He further points out that people tend to filter new experiences through existing structures and in order to avoid anxiety, conform to peer pressure by reinforcing existing constructs. Central to a person's capacity to learn in a transformative way, then, is the person's motivation to risk the possibility of change. If change is to occur, challenging existing frameworks, or at least suspending them, becomes a necessary part of the learning process if new meaning is to be made. Thus, unlearning – critically examining one's constructs and being willing to set them aside to look at things from a different perspective – is a critical aspect of TL.

### **Prelude: A Critically Reflective Process**

The following details the period of time leading up to the crisis moment or moments – the disorienting dilemma – experienced by seven of the participants; for six of them, this period stretched into early adulthood, but in Paul's case, it persisted into his mid-40s.

Buckley's thought processes reflect what Mezirow (1991) characterized as the incremental disorienting dilemma as it took the form of a years-long series of intellectual and philosophical debates with himself. It was through that process that he began reflecting upon and divesting himself of (unlearning) ideologies associated with his Catholic frames of reference. Buckley had realized he was gay in high school, but did not consider coming out, believing his identity as a Catholic-who-was-going-to-be-a priest was "way more fundamental than being gay." However, he found himself troubled by ongoing doubts about the "problem of evil" in Christian doctrine: "If God is omnipresent and omnibenevolent and omniscient, how can there be evil in the world?" he wondered. As he grew into early adulthood, it became "harder and harder" to repress these doubts, especially in university philosophy classes, where his exposure to other ways of thinking, caused him to critically question his core assumptions; he was comforted to learn that there were "lots of people in history who have struggled with [those doubts]." Social interactions inside and beyond class with others who were questioning their beliefs supported Buckley's reflective process. He began trying on new ideas through what he called, "bubbles in my head of conversation" and on occasion, discussed these ideas with classmates. He recounted, for instance, how he and a fellow student concluded that it is possible for someone who eschews their Christian tradition to nonetheless find comfort in the "cultural context of their church" and "find the performativity of it very beautiful." At university, he also encountered people who were "smart and respectable" even though they were not religious; that a person could be a nonbeliever, yet be "intelligent" and "respectable" challenged his assumptions that only a religious person could be a "good person". Buckley's thought process eventually led him to abandon efforts to convince himself of his belief in God; however, he decided to maintain "the

performative aspects of being Catholic.” He recalled going to evening prayers after he had made this decision, relaxed in a new clarity:

I’m relaxing, like I’m just here because this is beautiful and I really immersing myself in this culture because it feels like me, and I don’t have to pretend that this is something that I believe because we’re all performing this together and that’s a really nice community thing.

With that issue settled in his mind, at least for the moment, Buckley began trying to figure out what to do with his sexuality, which he had realized was “probably not going to change.” For a while, he entertained the thought that he could just “be in the closet and never really have to act on any sexuality.” However, this prospect became increasingly untenable, especially in the face of his sexual attractions and that he was meeting “other gay people” at university who were out; he tried to imagine that reality for himself. After trying “every possible permutation” of how he could reconcile his sexuality and religion, he concluded that the two were “irreconcilable.” He then began to wonder, “Like, maybe there’s a way of being Catholic and also being openly gay.” But then he began questioning why he should change to please the Catholic Church. “Maybe”, he began to ponder, “Maybe we need to change the church and have it be more liberal.” This transformation occurred as a result of small shifts in a meaning schema that over time (in this case, years) lead Buckley to a shift in meaning perspective, and to what Buckley described as “the kind of crisis that I spent all those years trying to avoid. Once I sort of accepted them as irreconcilable things, then I had to really say, okay, so what do I do with that?”

Like Buckley, Winter’s disorienting dilemma was also incremental, and began first with a critical reflection on, and unlearning of, some central Christian beliefs she had believed since childhood. When she arrived at university, her life was already in a turmoil. Her parents had

separated and were in the middle of a bitter divorce. Winter was “very intensely trying to navigate” her feelings about their break up and found herself questioning her religious upbringing and her parents’ attempts to control her life. Away from home and church, and exposed to new ideas and information both inside and outside the classroom, she found her evangelical worldview severely challenged:

I remember intro Philosophy 101 going through Darwin, the Great Debate and evolution, and the idea of evolution and engaging with that and being like, what are you telling me right now? Like, wait a minute—evolution?? No!! Bang, bang! Hell no! No, way!

For the first time in her life she found herself questioning six-day creation theory,<sup>31</sup> which she had never dared to question previously. Her parents were horrified: “Christians love to debate within their strict parameters,” she explained, “but once you start breaking through that glass ceiling to anything else, then you know, it’s not okay.” Though she engaged in a theological deconstruction – unlearning – she did not consider the possibility of being both gay *and* Christian. “That would be an oxymoron”, she explained, “I would never put those two words together.”

University classes were not the only instigator of Winter’s critical reflections. She had begun attending a new church that was located near the university, which took a decidedly more liberal approach to biblical interpretation than she had experienced. It also avoided the authoritarian leadership style characteristic of her parents’ church:

It was a leadership that I had never experienced. It wasn’t a top-down, I’m-going-to-tell-you-what-to-believe. It was, let’s talk about some different options, and I had the choice to walk in that direction or not. It wasn’t [the pastor] telling me, ‘Now that I’ve told you

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<sup>31</sup> The theory that God made the heavens and the earth in six days.

an alternative way, you'll believe that', right? It was just very much presenting options, and I had never experienced.

Through a process she described as “very gradual” and “very gentle”, Winter began seeing a “much gentler approach to spirituality and to loving God and others.” She began letting go of a theology rooted in the fear of God, and began shifting to one that was “based on loving God and loving others...on taking care of one another and feeding the hungry and clothing the naked, practical ways of honouring one another.” This was a tremendous shift in her core assumptions and habits of mind. Winter related that because of these novel church experiences and the information she was learning in university, “things started to change.” Exposure to so much new information and new ways of doing things was “transformational.” She explained, “I mean, I didn't know that there was any other cheeses besides cheddar and Mozzarella until I was 21, if I could use a metaphor for how I had been living. I just didn't know anything beyond that.” Winter continued to struggle, though, with the internal conflict with her sexuality while in university, enduring “heartbreaking” crushes on straight women that she dared not discuss. Though she felt safe in her new church to explore questions about “God, the world and spirituality” she still believed “it would not be okay [to be a lesbian]” and refused to entertain the thought.

Katie's critical thinking also began in earnest once she was away from her home, church and family, and in university. Though she had begun wondering about her sexuality when she saw Ellen DeGeneres' coming out episode, she had “pushed that away” from her thinking. At university, she first began tackling matters related to her faith, and embarked on a deliberate attempt to read her Bible “from start to finish” in efforts to understand why she believed in God, and why she was “supposed to obey [the Bible]”. This process was facilitated by her Catholic

roommate who had begun deconstructing her own religious beliefs, and by the fact that for the first time in her life, she was encountering other lesbians: “I had learned that there were lesbians living on the same floor of my residence, so I was like, okay, they exist and they’re around.” When they invited her to hang out with them, however, she “totally shut that down” and avoided any other lesbians she encountered during her first year. In her second year, however, an exchange with her boyfriend, whom she had been dating since senior high, became an important catalyst of critical reflection about her sexuality. Frustrated that she was not interested in being with him sexually, he asked her bluntly one day if she was a lesbian:

And I was like ‘No, absolutely not!’ I was so hurt and so mortified and so scared that he actually picked up on this, and that was actually a huge eye opener, too, because he asked me this question because he obviously wasn’t getting the type of affection from me that he was wanting, so he was trying to figure out where I actually stood.

For the first time, she began to consider his question. By her third year of university, realizing “there’s clearly something up” and thinking “well, maybe there’s something to this question he asked me”, she broke up with him, and shortly after, joined an online dating site for lesbians.

Paul’s internal conflict about his sexuality as a Christian stretched from boyhood until he was in his mid-40s. His disorienting dilemmas also occurred incrementally. He described his internal processes, beginning with the first time he encountered gay pornography in a corner store when he was a 19-year-old university student:

Here’s this whole wall of pornography, hidden back around the corner in this corner store and I somehow got the guts to pick it up and I remember looking at it and thinking, I can’t even put in words that feeling of first time of really seeing what I knew I was

attracted to and the stirring and the whole response. For me it's just indelibly imprinted on my mind how good it felt and how bad it felt.

After graduating, Paul and his fiancé married and began having a family. However, as the years went by, he continued experiencing attraction to men and to homoerotic images that came into his mind or that he had seen in gay pornography. He explained how he rationalized these attractions: "I just thought you either were gay or you were straight, so I was calling myself straight with attractions." The attractions, however, "just got stronger and stronger":

I always use the analogy of this dam building up with the water pressure, and I can go back over the years and feel the pressure building up just so much over those years and there are little times, little experiences that I can think back to and something's really loosening, like something's really pounding away at this dam.

Fifteen years into Paul's marriage, the pressure of his repressed sexuality together with several other pressures converged, producing a crisis, one in a series of disorienting dilemmas he could not fix. For one, he had realized his marriage was failing; that he and his wife were both working long hours and "finding ways to not be around each other." In addition, his religious life, which had provided some solace in the past, had come to feel like a "duty." He started finding reasons not to go to church, not because he had an "active opposition" to being there, but because he no longer needed the recognition that he gotten from others: "All of a sudden I just don't need that anymore, in fact it's more of a burden to be there." While this was partly because people in the congregation looked to him to "solve their problems" it was also because the organizational nature of church annoyed him: "It turned me off so much that I just said, I can't reconcile that anymore." As he was distancing himself from his church, he began watching the television drama *Queer as Folk*, which he had stumbled upon: "I would make sure I would be

doing it in secret because I was so turned on to it, it was so graphic and so real, it made me aware of what [being gay] looks like and some of the issues that came out of the gay experience.” The show provided him with his first, albeit fictitious, role models, and for the first time, he began imagining what it might be like for him to be gay. In fact on one occasion when he was watching the show, he contemplated coming out to his wife, but quickly pushed the thought from his mind: “I could only say to myself, you gotta deal with this.”

Eventually, a serious health crisis brought all the stressors in his life to a head. Forced to take a leave from work to get treatment, over the course of that year, he began meeting with a therapist. There, in the safety of his therapy sessions, he talked about “the story, the years of conflict and unhappiness, searching, feeling condemned, feeling the fear.” Yet, the fear of being found out, of “not being able to keep the appearance of doing what is right” paralyzed him.

I was crying to God, ‘Where are you?’ But that’s all I could say. I couldn’t pray anymore.

I think I really related to, how does Jesus say it on the cross? You know, ‘Why have you forsaken me?’ Like it’s dark here, I don’t hear you or feel you or see you. I’m dying here, hello?

His sense of abandonment by God ultimately led to a crisis of faith:

I had to accept that God wasn’t talking to me because if he were, something would change, so I couldn’t believe that God was real. I just believed okay, God might have created the universe, looks like my body’s pretty complicated to replicate, maybe God created me, but he’s not really interacting with me.

This realization became a critical moment, the one that would launch him into taking action.

Charleen’s unlearning process included an important series of events that affected her views on the Catholic Church’s position on homosexuality. She began to question the church’s

stance when a relative of her father's became ill with AIDS in the midst of the 1980s epidemic when there was little information about the disease. He came home to die, turning to Charleen's father for support. Charleen's mother, however, "wanted nothing to do with him", fearful that the family would contract the disease. Her mother and father had heated arguments about this matter, and Charleen remembered asking herself, "What does this mean? Why so much hatred?"

Charleen's father insisted on caring for his relative, arguing that he was "a human being, he's sick, he's come home to die, we gotta show him kindness." Her father's approach deeply impressed Charleen, as she contrasted "the two extremes": her mother, "a stickler for rules, regulations" and her father, "being more like oh well, it depends and it's relative." That both could be acceptable within the same religion brought her to a conclusion: "Okay, so there's some strict laws around this, but there also seems to be a lot of ability to be grey and to have exceptions to the rule. Yes, stealing is a crime but if you're starving then it's okay." This experience also taught her that in the face of "a lot of fear and prejudice, there's also humanity and that's what's important."

Nonetheless, Charleen had been deeply affected by the discourse of the "predatory lesbian", which kept her firmly in the closet throughout high school. After graduating from her all-girls school, the pressures to engage in heterosexual behaviour intensified: "There was more societal pressure to kind of demonstrate your heterosexuality, and I really started feeling like argh, this just isn't me, it isn't what I want." She considered various options, including talking to a priest, "just because that's who you go to, that's what people said" but then realized she already knew "what he's going to say." At one point, she considered telling some Catholic friends who she thought would understand, but again, quickly concluded, "They are also part of the church, so why would I even put them in that position? I had to remember what the whole

organization and institution is.” After completing a year of university in her home country, she decided education would be her only way out:

I knew that I needed to get out of [my country]. I just thought, okay, if I transferred to a campus that wasn't [in my country], that at least would be a way to explore, and then also if I could go to Canada that would also be an opportunity, so I just really focused on education as a way out, cause I thought, I need to explore this, I need to find out what [being a lesbian] means.

Once in Canada, however, Charleen once again found herself “not knowing the first step or how to speak to anyone or how to explore.” She summed up her university years as “a very long period of just [being] frozen, both by indecision and depression.” Finding being away from home and in Canada “overwhelming”, she continued to go to Catholic services as she adjusted to life in a new culture: “I just needed some sense of familiarity,” she explained. Wondering who she could trust with her dilemma, she at one point turned to university counselling services, thinking that even though they were not religious, “there was a chance that they'll be supportive.” This, however, turned out to be “the most horrible experience”. The counsellor failed to be culturally sensitive to her Catholic cultural roots and honour the primacy of her spirituality:

The counsellor basically mocked me. I think she thought that it was no big deal, and I felt really patronized, like ‘just go join a group, get to know people, just do it’. There was no cultural understanding of what [Catholicism] had meant for me, and what I was actually battling. It was just, ‘what’s your problem, there’s not a problem, sounds to me you’re the one being homophobic’, you know, sort of thing. So I just thought well, scratch that off the list.

The counsellor had also suggested that Charleen take a Women's Studies course, but having met a few Women's Studies students, Charleen decided against this step:

They were actually very judgmental, and I realized they were probably just dealing with their own insecurities and feeling that they needed to make a statement, but I ended up feeling judged, so I thought okay, that's not gonna be a safe place for me to explore anything at this time.

Unable to find a culturally sensitive, safe, supportive person with whom she could discuss her questions and conflict, Charleen ceased looking for help from others, and continued to seek solace and guidance through her spiritual life. "I would go to an empty church", she recounted, "just to sit and kind of feel like, okay, what's going on here? Am I doing the wrong thing? Am I doing the right thing? And always there was that calm, 'No, you're just not fitting in, and that's okay'." She continued this practice throughout her university degree, as she sought to reconcile her Catholic identity and point of view with her sexuality.

TL theory has recognized the importance of a culturally sensitive approach to transformative learning, meaning, "acknowledging and being accommodative of other ways of knowing, value systems and their understanding of reality" (Ntseane, 2011, p. 313). Cultural sensitivity has been defined as "the ability to correctly understand, respect and successfully deal with the people of other cultures" (Khan, 2007 in Ntseane, 2011, p. 313). In transformational learning, individuals consciously or subconsciously revert to their cultural beliefs and values to make sense of their reality. Sensitivity requires not only an awareness of a different culture, but of one's own attitudes and how they may affect others. In addition, effort may be required to understand specific cultural issues that are being experienced by a person of a different culture (Adams, 1995 in Ntseane, 2011).

Maude did not begin to shift her thinking about her sexuality and her religious beliefs until the late 1980s when she was in her mid-20s, and after she had finished her undergraduate degree. Until then, she described “a lot of years of believing that I was just awful and God was going to punish me if I [embraced] this lifestyle.” She noted the lack of information about queer people and at the time, only knew of one person, tennis star Martina Navratilova, being openly lesbian. However, as she approached her 30s having put her dating life and sexuality on hold for years, things came to a head: “I sure as hell wasn’t going to date boys, so was I gonna be single?” She described her life at the time: “Too unbearable, just too unbearable. It was bad. I was like, oh my god, I’m this horrible person.” Depressed, full of self-loathing, and seeing no way out of her situation, she contemplated suicide:

I remember driving down the road, it was the worst point in my life and I finally said you know what? I just have to either end this or I have to accept that’s just who I am. I was made this way and I just gotta get past this ‘cause this is going nowhere, and I said, that’s it, I just have to accept it.

Maude’s mental health crisis – her disorienting dilemma – became transformative, provoking her to ask critical questions about her beliefs. Her greatest concern was that she would lose her religious life and what that would mean for her: “I had so much faith, that it was really hard for me to let that go and, especially the whole feeling that I was gonna be punished for who I was.” When asked how she abandoned that belief, she told of making a decision: “This is just who I am, and I’ve got to stop this internal struggle constantly going on.” Her thinking then shifted to, “If I’m gonna burn in hell, I’ll burn in hell, we’ll deal with that” and then to, “I just don’t believe that I’m gonna be punished, because I’m not a bad person. I just couldn’t believe it anymore, I couldn’t accept that, and I just don’t believe that will happen.” Not long after coming

to these conclusions, Maude said she “stopped believing the Catholic Church”: “That’s when I let that go. And it was this big relief, when I let it go.” She then began planning how to move forward with her life, looking for resources to help her come out.

Maude exemplifies the personal crisis, in this case following a prolonged period of internal turmoil that finally ruptured into a full-blown mental health crisis; a major life event that triggered her engagement in a reflective process which, in turn, led to transformed perspective. As stated by Mezirow (1977), in situations of disjunction caused by life crisis, an individual's construction of reality may be transformed as a result of critically reflecting upon their experiences and planning new strategies of living as a result of their assessment of the situation (p. 157).

Julian also had what he called an “epiphany.” After nine months in an ex-gay ministry in the southern United States, Julian eventually rebelled against the ministry: “I had a moment where I said God, I can’t deal with this, I’m gonna be the biggest whore, I’m going to slut around, I’m gonna be a prostitute, I’m done with you.” He fled the ex-gay ministry, heading “right into San Francisco.” But he was no sooner there, when he had a spiritual experience during which he “heard an audible voice and it said, ‘Julian’ and I completely broke down sobbing.” Returning to the ex-gay ministry, they put him on “basically house arrest.” Eventually, someone who had left the ex-gay ministry emailed him, saying “Hey, if you want to leave, come to San Francisco, there’s a gay evangelical church.” Once again, Julian left, returning to San Francisco, where he located the “gay evangelical church.” One of the members of the church, who identified as a gay Christian, invited him to a Bible Study, and it was there that Julian had an epiphany:

And I remember at that Bible study, I had an ‘aha’ moment. Romans talks about intentional sin, “Do I sin that grace may abound, no.” So for me it was like I had that moment when, I [realized] I don’t think I ever intentionally sin with being gay. I’m not intentionally sinning, so if I’m not intentionally sinning, then it’s who I am. And I had that moment of realizing, I’m gay and God loves me.

After Julian had an “aha” moment at the Bible Study in San Francisco, he decided it was time to return home. On the bus going home, he reflected that this was his “turning point” and that his choices were either to “go back to my past and be Catholic and beat myself, or go to a new life in the future. So I got off that bus a new person.” However, his resolve would be shattered after he returned home by his church leaders. Asking to meet with him, they told Julian he was “a horrible person and I did the church wrong.” Overwhelmed with the pain of their condemnation, Julian once again turned to drugs and alcohol to self-medicate. For the next few years, he was in and out of mental health and addiction services, trying to address the pain of rejection from a community – and faith tradition – that had been so much part of his identity.

Julian’s narrative reveals the cost of challenging and resisting the dominant heteronormative and heterosexist ideologies promulgated by the church. He found himself subject to violence and even more repression, exemplifying how institutionalized, normative heterosexuality regulates those within its boundaries as well as marginalizing and sanctioning those outside them.

Once Elliot had concluded he was gay, he tried to determine “which gay, which part of the gay spectrum” he identified with, but found the stereotypes of gay males confused him. “[Gay males] were thought to be effeminate and of course no one would even have thought twice about me being gay because I was not effeminate, or at least I didn’t think I was.” Elliot looked

for and found information about being gay through “the usual, classic magazine store where you put the books inside the books and the magazine inside the magazine and see what the world is out there ... I mean it’s all pornography at that point, male pornography.” He also found information through libraries, which he termed “the saviour of gay people.” When asked how he found the information, he responded, “Well I mean, you just try to find the gay section and you skirt around it observing, and then you try to find moments when there’s no one around and you dabble and look.” Through these furtive exercises in self-directed learning, he was able to cobble together some sense of what it meant to be gay, and was reassured to discover that he was not “the only one.” In addition, even though he was negatively affected by Anita Bryant’s 1970s homophobic, the vociferous and widespread protests that it sparked across the United States indicated that there were large gay communities “in San Francisco and all these other places,” which also let him know his ‘discontent’ was shared by others. Even though Elliott’s critical reflection period seems relatively painless, compared with others, it is worth noting that he engaged in extensive independent, hidden searching to find messages with which to challenge the Christian frames of references with which he had been raised.

### **What Helped the Critically Reflective Process?**

#### **Novel Information.**

A number of extrinsic factors appear to have facilitated the process of abandoning beliefs, values and actions that had kept participants “stuck” helping them reframe their experiences. As novel information came to them through formal and informal learning, through relationships, and through pop culture, the arts, the media, they began, slowly but surely, to entertain fresh ways of thinking about themselves, their religious beliefs, and their sexuality, and ultimately, to imagine

other ways of thinking and being. This exposure to additional information slowly challenged and eventually overtook old schemas and worldviews.

New information also came through role models and played a critical part in the unlearning process. Role models included fictional characters in literature (for Buckley), but also on television programs such as *Queer as Folk*, *Will and Grace*, *The Ellen Show*, *Rosie O'Donnell*, in the news media, people they met online (for Katie, Julian, Paul, Winter), and eventually, queer people they encountered in their lives. Pop culture, in the form of popular television programs reflected the broader social changes at work in the North American socio-political and legal contexts, providing much-needed positive role models and counterpoints to the negative discourses that dominated their immediate contexts. The ever-increasing visibility of queer culture provided more evidence that participants were not alone, that their “discontent” was shared by others, and that there were options for new roles, i.e., that it was possible to come out and live out. Buckley highlighted the significance of this visibility:

One thing that helped me unlearn was knowing other people had done it, both knowing that there were gay people, not necessarily role models, not just a conceptual boogeyman, but this is a real living, breathing person with faults and nice things and whatever...when I was grasping for, is there a way of being in the world where you can be openly gay, what does that mean? And to have people like [Ellen Degeneres] really bravely tackling that was important.

### **Extra Rational Elements of TL Theory**

Beyond Mezirow's TL theory which emphasizes rational, cognitive learning, the participant narratives highlight *extra rational* elements in the transformative process. Knowledge came through bodies as discussed earlier, as well as through imagination (Green, 2004), emotion

(Lawrence, 2009), and private meditations, indicating that critical reflection is “not only rational activity but also calls for creative and emotive capabilities” (Kreber, 2004, cited in Taylor & Cranton, 2012, p. 330). Malkki (2010, p. 43) asserts that “emotions...have been shown to be inextricable factors within the process of reflection (see also Brookfield, 1994; Jokikokko, 2009; Taylor, 1997, 2000, 2007, 2008). Emotions played a critical role in the participants’ learning processes. As much as affective states such as fear, guilt, shame, confusion and depression kept participants stuck, they also helped pushed participants toward resolving their internal conflicts. Emotion has been linked to critical reflection, in that “purely objective reasoning cannot determine what to notice, what to attend to, and what to inquire about” (van Woerkom, 2010, p. 248); emotions “focus attention and provide guidance and motivation for action” (Taylor & Cranton, 2013, p. 37). The emotions generated by the participants’ internal conflicts acted as an ongoing prod, causing them to circle around and ruminate about how to resolve their disorienting dilemmas. Emotions were “a fundamental part of self-examination, assessing assumptions and critically reflecting” (Priestly, 2009, p. 297). English and Irving (2012) have suggested that “naming and working with emotion can be key to facilitating ... learning (p. 252).

At the same time, the taxing nature of emotional states cannot be over-emphasized; the emotional work of critical reflection was arduous and draining, so much so that several participants – Paul, Maude, Charleen and Julian – were pushed emotionally to the brink of a mental health crisis, a reality which TL does not typically recognize and account for in the learning process.

### **Contradictions.**

The early stages of the participants’ critical assessment and reflection, which are characterized by contradiction, confusion and questions in relation to Christian world views, are

potential sites of change. Psychologist Jean Piaget (1978 in Perry & Kolb, 2003) posited three types of accommodations that may occur when learners encounter contradictions: (1) ignore the contradictions and adhere to their initial scheme or idea; (2) waver, holding both theories simultaneously, or deal with the contradiction by making each theory hold for separate, specific cases; or (3) construct a new, more encompassing notion that explains and resolves the prior contradiction. According to Piaget, a learner constructs contradictions only after searching for similarities between experiences and attempting to align each experience with their current schemes. He suggests learners first ignore contradictions, and then waver between the initial theory and new theory until they reach a stage of *bifurcation* [italics mine] and begin to discard and reorganize, thereby resolving or at least lessening a cognitive dissonance. This process is evident in, for instance, Buckley's story when he meets non-religious people who are nonetheless "good" people; Julian's "aha" moment in the Bible Study where he encountered an alternative and affirming interpretation of biblical passages; and Paul and Katie's stories when they encounter information via television and online that pushed them beyond bifurcation to discarding old beliefs. These kinds of critical encounters helped lessen their cognitive dissonance.

### **Spirituality: A Holding Environment.**

One of the questions posed in this thesis is the role of religion and/or spirituality in the learning process. Miller (2002) has noted, "From a spiritual perspective, learning does not just involve the intellect; instead, it includes every aspect of our being including the physical, emotional, aesthetic, and spiritual" (p. 97). Attention to spirituality may be another overlooked aspect of transformational learning, possibly one that alleviates the emotional crises referred to above. It is evident that in the initial phases of coming out, spiritual communion with a deity

served as a much-needed “holding environment” (Kegan, 1982, p. 43) for Charleen, Winter and Julian. Kegan suggests that a holding environment serves two functions: providing safety and security in their current stage of development and encouraging movement to the next stage.

Kegan likened a holding environment to an “evolutionary bridge, a context for crossing over” (1982, p. 43) from one order of consciousness to another, more developed order. Julian, Charleen and Winter were the only three individuals who indicated they maintained a spiritual communion of some kind throughout the coming out process. This would indicate, as has been suggested by Halkitis et al. (2009), that spirituality may provide marginalized populations an amplified capacity to “to achieve transcendent relationships with human communities and with the divine” (p. 261). Richards, Rector and Tjeltveit (1999, cited in Pargament, 2001) argue that for a person who is coming out, “core spiritual values may be especially influential in promoting coping, healing, and change” (p. 168). When spirituality and (oppressive) religion are intertwined this may be more complicated.

### **What Hindered Reflection?**

#### **Power Relations and Positionality.**

Consistent with all of these narratives is a fear of the consequences of resisting the dominant heteronormative discourses and norms. Winter and Maude were most fearful of hell and damnation; Buckley worried about losing his self and public image as a good Catholic boy who was going to be a priest; Paul was “terrified” of anyone finding out he was attracted to males and of the shame that would ensue; Katie was worried about “having people seeing me as a sinner”. Elliot’s energy was spent in avoiding physical and verbal abuse; Julian was afraid of losing the “love” and acceptance of his church and community; Charleen was horrified at the notion of being a “predatory lesbian.” Their narratives throw into high relief the pervasiveness of

homophobic discourse and the ways in which it structured and constrained their lives. Given that all knowledge is constituted within relations of power, “any definition of a problem (such as coming out) will have a political dimension”, and “to unlearn an existing position is not just a technical task, but also a political and a moral one” (Pedler & Tsu, 2014, p. 297).

One of the critiques of TL is its failure to recognize power, to account for the fact that “cultural ideologies are self-perpetuating [operating] in the interests of those in power, structuring systematic communication and action through inequality and injustice” (McDonald et al, 1999, p. 6). Taylor and Cranton (2012) have highlighted the tendency of TL to emphasize the “individual at the expense of role of context and social location” (p. 564). Due to their marginalization, the participants experienced life differently than their non-marginalized counterparts, and therefore also constructed the meaning of matters related to their gender and sexuality differently. Recognizing their vulnerable position, they also could not speak about their dilemmas, which exemplifies Johnson-Bailey’s (2012) assertion that “language and therefore dialogue does not easily reside with the powerless” (cited in Taylor, Cranton and Associates, p. 266). Lacking the safety necessary to engage in the kinds of dialogue suggested by TL, participants conducted their critical assessment and reflection privately, in dialogues or “thought bubbles” (Buckley) with themselves, with imagined others (e.g., Paul with his wife), and with God. In fact, imagination was a central vehicle through which participants were able to explore and “try on” another point of view. Buckley and Charleen spoke at length about this process and how they allowed themselves ways of thinking and being that were stigmatized in their religious environment.

### **Oppression, Trauma and Violence.**

The impact of oppression, trauma, and violence on participants as they attempted to negotiate homophobic ideology and the conflicts between their Christian world views and their sexuality cannot be over emphasized. Emotional and physical abuse, and/or the constant fear of both, exerted enormous pressures on these individuals, intensifying their affective experiences. Oppression and the affective states they engendered, such as fear, guilt, shame, and confusion, significantly hindered their ability to move beyond their dilemmas. Their experiences speak to the potential challenges of working with learners who are struggling and in the midst of a crisis. Their narratives also challenge the rational, linear assumptions and expectations of Mezirow's theory, and the notion that learners all arrive on a level playing field. Oppression and the emotional states that it triggered in participants seriously affected their ability to resolve intrapsychic conflicts. In addition, oppression prevented them from reaching out for help, except for Charleen, who tentatively approached the campus counsellor. Unfortunately, the failure of the counsellor to offer spiritually and culturally sensitive counselling only added to Charleen's oppression. A counsellor who recognized and worked with Charleen's spirituality and attachment to her Catholic faith and culture may have helped her move through her intrapsychic conflict.

In addition, context – both the one in which the participants had come to adulthood, and the context in which they engaged in critical reflection – shaped their internal deliberations. The childhood contexts set up the ideological conditions and the concerns they were later negotiating as learners, affecting each one and their learning processes differently. For instance, even though Buckley, Julian, Charleen and Maude were all raised in the Catholic Church, there were key differences in what aspects had been emphasized by their parents and therefore the issues that

most concerned them. For instance, Buckley's parents had been concerned about maintaining their image in community as good Catholics and Buckley was most concerned with maintaining his image and identity as a respectable person; he engaged in a lengthy reflective process.

Maude, on the other hand, was inhibited from reflective thinking by the ever-present fear of God and hell as taught through her church and emphasized by her mother. Ideology, in this case, functioned like an invisible and internalized panopticon from which she could not escape. Only a mental health crisis ultimately trumped her fear of God and hell; it could have just as easily killed her. Maude explained why her religious beliefs had such power:

There's negativity in society and there's negativity because of your religion, but they're so different. Negativity by society you can go, "Fuck them!", but religion is different.

When you're brought up really religious, internally you really hang on to that as the truth.

When the religion says you're bad, you really are bad. You'll believe it from organized religion, and I believed what the Catholic Church was telling me because it was so ingrained in everything we did growing up.

A critical step in coming out for the participants involved leaving the environments in which they had grown up, environments marked by "coercion and distorting self-deception" (Mezirow, 1991, p. 77) of homophobic ideologies. Only when participants gained some distance from their church and family contexts did their critical reflections begin in earnest. Though of course, homophobia was present in the broader society, it was not as immediately and personally present, nor carry such potentially devastating consequences.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has focused on the stage of learning during which participants were preparing to give up, and then abandoning long-held frames of reference; when they were

preparing to leave the known for the unknown. Pedler and Tsu (2014) note that this stage is much more complex than just abandoning old ideas, especially in the context of “intractable or wicked problems which prove unamenable to resolution under current states of knowledge” (p. 297). The vulnerability involved in opening one’s self up to change, especially for those who may be *already emotionally vulnerable*, as is the case of systemic oppression, adds a whole other layer to adult learning, a layer that TL does not address. The participants were negotiating not only their position as “Others” in the society, but also their own “self-Othering”; how do these dynamics influence transformative learning? These considerations point to a learning process that can be extremely “dis-orderly” and disorder is a factor that must be considered in the learning process, especially in light of the intense emotion and mental turmoil disorienting dilemmas may provoke. On the other hand, it is this very disorder that helped create the conditions for alternative personal and social realities (p. 299). The next chapter discusses and explores the participants’ coming-out stories.

## Chapter Nine: Living the New Perspective

### Introduction

This chapter discusses participants' initial coming out experiences. It reveals how the participants began putting the new perspectives discussed in Chapter Seven into practice. TL means to “negotiate and *act* [emphasis mine] on our own purposes, values, feelings, and meanings rather than those we have uncritically assimilated from others” (Mezirow 2000, p. 8); it emphasizes the importance of “not only *seeing*, but *living* the new perspective” (Baumgartner, 2001, p. 17). It is a critical moment in the participants' narratives, for as King (2005) has noted, “when learners step into action they are poised on a precipice of risk” (p. 109).

TL also entails a shift from an uncritical acceptance of external authority to being guided by one's own authority. Robert Kegan (1994) referred to this capacity as “self-authorship”, which he defined as:

an internal personal identity, a self-authorship that can coordinate, integrate, act upon, or invent values, beliefs, convictions, generalizations, ideals, abstractions, interpersonal loyalties, and intrapersonal states. It is no longer authored by them, it authors them and thereby achieves a personal authority. (p. 185)

A person with the capacity to self-author is able to “step back enough from the social environment to generate an internal ‘seat of judgment’ or personal authority that evaluates and makes choices about external expectations” (Kegan & Lahey, 2009, p. 17). Self-authorship involves making meaning of oneself, one's social relations and the world, versus those aspects being defined by external expectations. Baxter-Magolda (2008, 2009) has identified three elements of self-authorship: 1) *trusting the internal voice* – the realization that although we cannot control reality, we can manage our reactions to external realities; 2) *building an internal*

*foundation*, when a person “consciously sets about creating a philosophy or framework—an internal foundation—to guide their reactions to reality” (2009, p. 326); and 3) *securing internal commitments*, when a person shifts from constructing their internal commitments to actually *living them*. This chapter focuses on the latter – living internal commitments — as revealed in the participants’ narratives. This is a critical juncture when their developing ideologies came up against the hegemonic, heterosexist, homophobic, and patriarchal norms in their social environments. The chapter will answer the following questions: What were their strategies? How did they cope?

The chapter begins by exploring how participants first came out to themselves, and then disclosed for the first time to a safe ally, whether face-to-face or online. The narratives related to coming out to family members are discussed later in this chapter as none of these disclosures were affirming and participants were much less able to control the circumstances under which they disclosed. These were emotionally charged, traumatic experiences.

The following narratives help shed light on the ways in which participants prepared to disclose their stigmatized sexual minority identity and the nature of those disclosures/conversations. Evident throughout the narratives is participants’ thinking and planning about how they were going to come out, and the resources and supports they accessed as they attempted to do so and with the least collateral damage. These coming-out conversations, especially those involving parents, reveal the very real risks inherent in coming out as a sexual minority in a homophobic context. Indeed, a central theme in this chapter is trauma.

### **Defining “Coming Out”**

Rust (2003) defines coming out as “the process by which individuals come to recognize that they have romantic or sexual feelings toward members of their own gender, adopt lesbian or

gay (or bisexual) identities, and then share these identities with others” (Rust, 2003, p. 227). Dzeingel (2015) emphasizes the power relations implicated in coming out, that is, disclosing one’s sexual minority status to a heteronormative society that consciously or unconsciously privileges heterosexuality and discriminates against queer people. Thus, the context in which the participants attempted to live their “new perspective” and identity had a significant impact on their decision to do so, and the processes they employed.

During their coming out narratives, each of the participants described the circumstances under which they first acknowledged to themselves that they were queer. Only after coming out to themselves did they then proceed to come out to others. None first came out to a family member. In the coming out segments of the narratives, phases 5 through 8 of Mezirow’s TL are evident, i.e., exploration of new roles, relationships, and actions; planning a course of action; gaining knowledge and skills for implementing plans; and a provisional trying of new roles. As is the case with the reflective stage of their process, the phases are not necessarily in order specified by Mezirow (2000), nor did all participants experience all phases.

### **Coming out to Self and an Ally**

**Buckley.** Buckley’s first sexual experience with another gay male became one of two “crescendo moments” that led to his coming out. After having what he described as “a really sketchy hookup in circumstances that are not classy whatsoever”, he “freaked out” and fled. Though he was mortified that his first sexual encounter was with a stranger, and that there was “nothing good about it”, it was a pivotal moment: “I remember at that moment, just feeling the anxiety and the need to run and knowing that this is not anything that I can deny, like you gotta have a moment of truth here, this is not going away.” Part of his anxiety, he said, was related to his crumbling sense of identity as “this good person in the world”:

I realized that this other irreconcilable thing is just not going to go away, and suddenly this is just dissolving. This other good boy image that was so important and that's going to the seminary just started to fall apart.

Despite this realization, Buckley continued to go “back and forth” over the next few years, trying to convince himself “that it was okay for that [image] to fall apart and trying desperately to scotch tape it back together.” He also tried to devise a narrative that would either entail coming out, or abandoning the church, but “couldn't be brave enough to do that and kept trying to keep that church image” of himself together. It took another crescendo moment – the sudden, unexpected death of a close family member – to move him beyond this stage, when it triggered two realizations:

First of all, life is too short to live with this anxiety forever, and secondly, now I won't have to explain this whole crumbling structure to anyone, people will give me permission, people will understand if I don't go to church anymore after this. They'll say it was due to my [family member's] tragic death and they'll think I had some fight with God or whatever.

After attending the funeral Mass for his deceased family member, he began withdrawing from his church. He stopped attending Mass, and within that year had ceased all of his other church-related activities: “I was on the parish council, stopped doing that, I was head of the youth group, just stopped.” Buckley related that no one at his home church, or within his family, questioned him about why he no longer attended church; they just assumed “something traumatic happened” and he was having a crisis of faith. Having left his church, Buckley began coming out to close friends at university that same year.

**Winter.** After graduating with her university degree, the stresses and pressure of being in the closet throughout university had Winter considering how she might come out. She knew her church community, though more liberal than the one in which she had grown up, would not be “safe” or “supportive” to her coming out, and the realization combined with poor job prospects in the town where she was living brought her to a decision. On a “whim” and knowing she had some university friends there, she booked a plane ticket for Vancouver where she hoped to resolve her inner conflict. After arriving, she looked for an apartment and soon found one, that just happened to be the epicenter of Vancouver’s queer community. For the first time in her life, Winter was confronted with a large population of queer people: “I was like holy shit, what’s going on?” Connecting with her university friends, some of whom were, like her, questioning their Christian beliefs, Winter nevertheless turned to her Christian faith for comfort and answers to her inner conflict. One evening, she attended an interdenominational chapel service that she had learned was being held for Christian university students; the service proved to be transformative. The guest speaker happened to be an out gay Christian, and during the service, he announced:

‘I am same-gender attracted’ and talked about his own spiritual journey and acceptance in the community. And I remember just being in that chapel, my heart just started pounding, and I was like oh, he just said that, he just said that out loud to everyone.

As the first person Winter had ever encountered who had integrated his sexuality and Christian belief, he became a powerful role model. After listening to him on just that one occasion, Winter began actively imagining and planning how she, herself, might come out, and to whom. These disclosures are detailed later in this chapter.

**Katie.** Once Katie had decided to explore the possibility that she was a lesbian, she joined an online lesbian group, some of whom lived outside the province. The online group provided a safe, anonymous space where she was able to open up and share what she was going through and how she felt:

I remember there was a person in Quebec who really helped me through that [time], just by typing messages to me, and there was no intent of ever meeting that person, and because it was really low risk, I knew I would never have to meet this person and I could just explain exactly how I was feeling and how scared I was to tell my family, so that was a place of support.

She also joined an online dating site, through which she began taking her first tentative steps in dating, as well as a local sports team, “half of whom were lesbians.” The lesbian members of the sports team proved to be “a huge help” and “instrumental” in helping Katie come out. She formed a particularly strong bond with an older team member who had had a difficult time coming out to her religious family: “We bonded over the struggle with their beliefs and how they see us.” With the help of the lesbians on her team, and the people she encountered online, Katie was able to “figure out officially” her lesbian identity. Her struggle with guilt continued, however, and she recalled feeling “not so good about being a lesbian.” She explained, “When I was with women I felt great about it, but then when I was alone with it, it was really hard.” She was also worried about how her family or community members might respond if they knew she was a lesbian. She avoided community events in her home town because she “didn’t want to see anybody from high school.” When she became aware that one of her sisters had heard rumors that Katie was a lesbian, she recalled feeling “really self-conscious” and was fearful of her sister discovering the truth: “I definitely had internalized homophobia,” she recalled. She was also still

wrestling with her faith and continued to do so throughout the first few years of her undergraduate degree. Though she had begun distancing herself from her church, she was “definitely a believer in God and Christianity” and still had concerns about God’s judgement.

**Paul.** Paul’s shift in thinking was triggered by a realization that God was not going to change his sexuality, which initiated his action-planning. He described the steps he took to accept his sexuality and to find the information and resources he needed to come out. First, he entered therapy, and after several sessions, came out to himself and his therapist. Next, he began connecting with “real [gay] people” anonymously online: “I was scrounging, I wanted to know more, and I was doing that research [because] the internet was becoming so much more accessible at the time.” With the help of his therapist and people he met online he explored ways of coming out, and tried to prepare for all of the possible outcomes, including rejection by family members:

I had to analyze that in advance of the decision to come out and I knew that even if I lost all of those relationships, I had to somehow do it, so I weighed that out in advance and I hoped it wouldn’t be as bad as I thought it would be.

He also sought the input of a counsellor who had experience counselling wives of gay men, and a gay man with a religious background whom Paul had found online who had experienced exiting a heterosexual marriage. With these two individuals, Paul sorted through his issues as he prepared himself to disclose his sexual orientation to his wife and children.

**Charleen.** After much internal deliberation and spiritual seeking, toward the end of her university program, Charleen eventually realized that the majority of her anxiety, depression, and inner turmoil resulted from her interactions with other people. “When I was alone with God” she explained, “everything was fine and I was calm.” She came to distinguish between her religion

and God, concluding that while “religion’s not okay with me, God’s okay with me.” Having settled that it was not God who rejected her, she still put off coming out until she neared the end of her undergraduate degree. After a “very long period of being frozen both by indecision and depression”, she came to a moment of decision, knowing she would soon leave the university:

If you go back [home] and you’ve done nothing about this, like I knew what it’s like to live not knowing and not exploring and not being myself, and it was untenable to go forward like that because it felt like hell.

Telling herself, “you gotta do something, you’ve got this little window of opportunity, so just do something, see where the chips fall, just take the plunge.” To avoid being the focus of gossip and to maintain some sense of privacy, which was critical to her, Charleen chose to begin her early explorations of queerness through an off-campus lesbian group she had heard about: “I think I went to a little wine and cheese or something, but then I connected up with other people and then I started just hanging out, you know, going to movies [with lesbians], and being able to feel comfortable, like here I am hanging out with lesbians [laugh].” The group consisted of mostly older lesbians, however there were a few in their 20s, and she soon formed friendships with these women and took her first tentative steps in coming out to them. The group proved to be a good fit for her because it was a “diverse group” of lesbians and she didn’t feel the pressure to fit any of the prevailing lesbian stereotypes; there were no “unspoken expectations of how you should behave in a gendered way and there wasn’t that set of expectations placed on me.” When she first came out, Charleen identified herself as bisexual, a strategy she said helped her “transition” to her lesbian identity “because I could do the continuum thing, that everyone’s on a continuum so it’s not just me that’s bi, it’s the whole world that’s bi [laugh].”

**Elliot.** Elliot described coming out to himself as a “process of elimination”, which occurred in his early teens: “It was like I know I don’t want that, I know I don’t want that, that leaves one thing.” However, he struggled to figure out “what kind of gay” he was. He explained:

At that time period in the 60’s, 70’s or 80’s it was very much, everyone was thought to be effeminate and all that kind of stuff and of course no one would even have thought twice about me being gay because I was not effeminate, or at least I didn’t think I was.

The fall after he graduated from high school, he left home for university. He described his life at this time as “a flower opening up”: “The world was at my feet, cause I went from high school to university and that was like night and day, it was like my god, it’s like there’s light at the end of the tunnel. Everything lifted, it was bright sunshine.” When asked to explain why university differed from high school, he explained, “The peers in high school, they seemed to be there always looking at you, and you’re in a group. When you’re in university, everyone’s ignoring everyone else, you’re an individual, you’re on your own.” Soon after he arrived at university, Elliot discovered there was a local gay bar, and it was there that for the first time in his life, he was able to find other gay men. Elliot asserted that he never learned how to be gay, but said he “knew that the effeminate version wasn’t really what I wanted to be and that could be because I was socialized in New Brunswick to be macho-istic, so that’s the only way my mind feels comfortable.”

**Maude.** Maude came out to herself not long after finishing her undergraduate degree, and while still in her home city. After experiencing the mental health crisis described in Chapter Seven, she began looking for support in the local queer community. Looking through the telephone book, she discovered a local help line and called them. They provided information about “different potlucks, surprise, surprise [laugh], and they talked about different

organizations.” However, it was through a friend that she discovered there was a local club in her city where lesbians met and socialized on a regular basis, and she began “hanging out” with them. Being with like-minded women helped her come to an acceptance of her sexuality and she began identifying as a lesbian.

**Julian.** Julian had originally come out to himself in his early teens, long before he recognized the church’s “negativity” toward homosexuality. The television show *Queer as Folk* was “instrumental”, he related, in helping him come to an early sense of both gender and sexual identity, and to explore ideas of what “being gay could look like”.

As much I didn’t want to accept that I was more the Emma character, I was. Cause I was like, I’m more masculine than that cause I can grow facial hair. Like sometimes I have warped ideas about what masculinity is cause I never really had any masculinity in my life, but those were my role models, the Queer as Folk people, and so I had all of these characters in my life.

While in high school, Julian came out to a close friend: “I was with a girl in grade 12 and I said [whispering] I’m gay, I think, and she goes, [gasp] we can be like Will and Grace and move in together! [laugh].” He added, however, that he was “a lot more feminine and identified more feminine” than the character of Jack: “Like I was that kid that wore bright yellow pants with black underwear so you could see the underwear, but I wasn’t gay, I was just artistic [laugh].” Julian was careful, however, to not disclose his sexual orientation or gender identity to anyone at his church, having discerned the church’s stance on such matters.

## Strategies

There were several common themes in the participants' stories related to the strategies they used in coming out. A key theme was the need for safety, i.e., safe people to whom they could disclose and safe spaces. This meant finding mentors and finding places where they could begin having such conversations. Eventually, by strengthening themselves through strategies such as seeking counselling, finding and drawing upon community, withdrawing from harmful environments (i.e., leaving church communities and home), the participants learned to nourish and protect their emerging queer identities.

Winter explained that having encountered a gay Christian for the first time in Vancouver, she began rehearsing various coming out scenarios, rehearsing in her imagination the various kinds of conversations she might have and with whom: "I had been thinking about what it could look like, right, cause you kind of picture every scenario, you picture the conversation that you have with this person and that person, and how it's gonna go a million different ways." Eventually, she decided to confide in a friend who she considered to be her "dearest, sweetest, loving, inclusive" Christian friend and with whom she felt "safe" because her friend sometimes said "radical things." She arranged to meet her friend one evening, and while at dinner, disclosed she was "same-gender attracted." Winter explained her choice of terminology: "I couldn't at that point say 'I'm a lesbian' cause it was scary words, right? Same-gender attracted was a safe phrase that felt safer and less permanent, like a label ... 'cause it didn't seem as harsh and overwhelming as 'lesbian' or 'gay'." Winter was "blown away" by her friend's response. "That is awesome", she said, "I love you, and wow, you are so brave." Winter also recalled the words of another Christian friend who supported her during this initial coming out phase: "Do you ever think that maybe God is actually really stoked for you and happy that you're living your truth?"

This question had a profound effect on Winter. She related that until that moment, she had never entertained that thought: “I was like, God being happy? It’s a good identifier of how the conversations started to change.” This conversation proved to be transformational, marking a shift in her perspective and how she felt about herself; the internal conversations she had with herself and the shame and guilt that had been dogging her began to diminish.

After coming out to her friend, Winter started telling, one by one, friends and family that she felt she should tell “before they heard it from anyone else.” Soon after this initial coming out, she began going online to dating sites and “sharing and meeting people and exploring what’s out there” and discovering “where the lesbians hang.” She also sought dating advice: “I was like, ‘okay dudes, what do I do?’ I hadn’t even held hands with a girl, like I didn’t know what the hell I was doing.” Through interacting online with women who had “similarities or commonalities” Winter learned how others had come out to their families and what their experiences had been like. She also experienced her first date with a woman: “The first gal that I dated, I called her a seasoned lesbian [laugh], cause she had way more experience than me, so she just kind of showed me a lot which was great, yeah.” Winter explained that these early, exploratory experiences helped her “figure myself out in the world.”

Maude related that in those early days, she “used to be able to spot a lesbian so easy” because at the time, lesbians tended to dress with a distinctly butch aesthetic that was easily identifiable. Maude recalled observing the lesbians at the club and wondering, “What am I supposed to wear? What am I supposed to be like?” and began dressing like and patterning herself after them. Within six months of coming out in the local lesbian community, Maude moved to Toronto for graduate school, and there nurtured her lesbian social life and identity. She described those years: “It was pretty awesome, yeah [laugh]. It was, um, it was a different world,

which it was fascinating. I didn't really know a lot about the queer community, so that was kind of fun to learn."

### **Coming out to Family**

One of the most challenging experiences related to coming out was telling family members. Maude's comments capture the kinds of sentiments expressed by all of the participants in this regard:

I really was terrified to tell my mother because she's so religious and she has this thing about blaming herself for everything, that it would be her fault, so that was one of the main reasons I was keeping it secret. And don't forget back in those days [mid-1990s], you still had to be quite afraid, and maybe you still do. You know, you sure as hell weren't going to walk down the streets of [city] holding hands with another girl if you wanted to not fear for your life.

None of the participants had positive experiences when they told parents and other family members; in fact, most were traumatic situations. Katie, who had "figured out" she was a lesbian with the help of her online support group, delayed coming out to her family because she was "really scared of what everybody would think of me." She explained that she often went home to visit, and the church was a focal point of her small community where many events took place, and her family, particularly her mother, was still very involved. "I'm pretty sure it was that fear of – I mean there were other factors at play, but definitely that was one piece of it. Like how is everybody in the community going to perceive me?" She was particularly concerned because both of her sisters had become even more conservative and religious in their adult life, one having converted to Catholicism, and the other to a fundamentalist stream of Christianity. Katie had heard her fundamentalist sister "be very homophobic based on religious beliefs" and her

Catholic sister “the same thing, using religion to just make comments in general about homosexuality.” Katie’s decision to come out to her family was prompted by a relationship with a woman that proved to be her first serious relationship. As she spent more and more time with her girlfriend, she spent less time with her family, and felt compelled to explain her absence. When she found herself telling her mother, with whom she had heretofore had a close relationship, a series of “little white lies” about what she was doing and with whom, the deception made her increasingly uncomfortable. She soon realized she would have to tell her family because the lying was “eating me up inside.” In addition, she realized her relationship with her girlfriend may be long term and that she would need to, at some point, disclose. Because they had had a close relationship, she decided to disclose first to her Catholic sister, however, things went “terribly”:

She flipped out and you know, that’s when religion came up and this ‘I can’t support you, I don’t believe in this, you know the church that [my husband] and I go to doesn’t [believe in this].’ So she talked about Catholicism and it’s not allowed and not permitted, so my trial run on somebody I felt safe enough to tell because we had such a close relationship went horribly.

Her sister also tried to convince Katie that she was “just confused” and told her she had a Catholic friend who had once thought she was a lesbian, only to have realized, after having therapy, that “that probably wasn’t the case.” After this devastating experience, Katie assumed her sister would disclose to the rest of the family. When this did not happen, Katie realized she would have to tell them. Katie recalled the reaction of her parents: “My mom was in tears and could not stop almost hyperventilating, unable to breathe, blaming herself, what did I do wrong, you know. My Dad, in the meantime, was ‘how could you do this to your mother?’” Katie’s

youngest sister, in contrast, tried to be more supportive: “I don’t agree with this”, she told Katie, “It goes against everything that I believe, but I still love you and I support you.” Katie related that during this entire period of coming out, no one considered how she was feeling in the midst of such emotional trauma: “It was all about everybody else and how they were feeling. It was, it was so terrible. I kind of blocked a lot of it out, to be honest, ‘cause it was just so painful.”

Though her family did not “banish” her from their home, they forbade her to bring her partner to their house. In addition, a week later, her parents attempted what Katie termed “an intervention”:

It was just me and them sitting together and them trying to convince me of how wrong all of this was, so you know there was talk about how it’s against our beliefs, and Mom was like, ‘I was never raised to believe that this is okay’, and so that was a difficult experience, too, because there was nobody else there, it was just me and them and I didn’t have a vehicle so I couldn’t leave and was stuck in this environment that was really scary.

They also tried to convince Katie that this was a phase in her life, something she would outgrow. As a result of these experiences, Katie sought the help of a counsellor: “I think I partially went to counselling to see if they were right – maybe I could be kind of counselled out of this, but at the same time I never did think that I was not a lesbian.” Therapy was short-lived, though, as the counsellor, perceiving Katie to be “pretty self-assured”, told her that she was on the right path, indicating she did not need help.

Buckley’s coming out began with disclosure to close friends and then he began seeking information and resources. “I read a lot, bought every book that I could,” he recalled. After graduating with his undergraduate degree, he moved to a large city to continue his education and there spent “a lot of time in queer bookstores just sort of absorbing information”. He also

accessed a couple of student support groups at the university he was attending, but did not find them very helpful; instead, he continued his identity work internally: “Building an identity in my head, familiarizing myself with the idea that there are gay people who can be admired and live open lives and who don’t need to feel shame about that, *that* I got from books and academics more than real life interactions.” As he was doing this work, he tried to imagine how to come out to his family. Eventually, he made the decision to tell his father:

We had a really nice conversation that was as supportive as I could ever expect it to be and then he said, ‘I just need you to know that I still, like I believe that gay people will go to hell’, [laugh] and I said ‘yeah, I know that you believe that but we probably don’t need to talk about that’, so and that’s where it’s been left today.

When Charleen was struggling to come out, her biggest concern was how her mother would react: “I thought a lot about what it would mean for my parents and what would it mean for my mother because it so matters for her and bringing shame on the family and you know, what would people say, cause I always intended to return to [my country].” It was no surprise to Charleen that when she came out to her mother, her mother’s central concern was that her daughter would end up in hell:

For her, heaven and hell are real things, she believes in [them], and she’s been aiming for heaven, and then all of a sudden, her daughter is apparently aiming for hell, so she’s troubled that after she dies and goes to heaven, there I am gonna be in hell [laugh]. And I mean I laugh about it but I know for her, that’s her reality, right?

Though Charleen had been out for over two decades, her mother continued to hold this belief.

As noted previously, Maude was also most concerned most about her mother, and described being “terrified” to tell her. In the end, however, her mother found out when Maude’s

sister outed her during an argument: “My sister said to my mom, ‘well at least I’m not gay like Maude’. Maude’s mother “struggled” with this news, and refused to tell other members of the family “for a long time.” She also stopped going to church for “a number of years” because the church refused to accept Maude: “I think she really had a tough time with that,” recalled Maude.

Even to this day, she still doesn’t know how to process it, but she’s almost 80 and it’s hard for her. She doesn’t know how to deal with it...it took her a while to really get her head around it, to really understand, you know, to figure out her religion and how to deal with this in all of that.

Maude related a conversation that she had had with her mother several years previously which, though humorous, indicated she blamed herself for her daughter’s sexuality:

My mother said, ‘Maude, do you think it was the broccoli?’ I said, ‘what do you mean?’ She said, ‘well I ate a lot of broccoli when I was pregnant, do you think it was the broccoli?’ I started laughing, I said ‘Mom, I don’t think it was the broccoli, and you know what? I’m pretty happy just the way I am, so don’t worry about it.’ But she still had to find a way for it to be her fault, right? She just couldn’t quite let that go.

Elliot never got the chance to come out to his parents and had decided not to disclose to them: “I believe everyone has their own mind and can see things”, he said, “And I never believed it should be an issue so I never told them.” However, when he was around 30 years of age, they found out from someone else and confronted him. He succinctly characterized this encounter as “a big dramatic boo-hoo session” and described how “shocked” they were that he was gay because he was not “effeminate”. He noted that after this emotional event, he never again discussed any aspect of his personal life with his parents, keeping his relationships, interests, friends and sexual partners - anything to do with his gayness - to himself.

Within months of beginning therapy, Paul came out to his wife, telling her about his lifelong conflict. His wife first reacted by insisting they get counselling and wanted “more time to process together”. Paul, however, had already decided the marriage was over: “You can’t counsel this out of me, if that’s what you’re talking about,” he told her. Not long after this conversation, Paul moved out. They agreed to tell their by then grown children together and their parents, but Paul recalled the anguish he felt for his wife. He told her, “You’re the most important woman in the world to me, you’re the mother of my children, I love you, but I can’t love you enough, can’t love you the right way.” He recalled that it was in that moment, though, “for the first time in my life, I loved myself.”

He described the first few years subsequent to his coming out: “After I was coming out there was so much of a, of a rush, so much of an awareness of breathing, like I felt like I was breathing, talking, starting to talk with men intimately. It was just all so novel, so exciting.” Within the first year, he experienced his first serious relationship with a man, and for the first time in his life, fell in love. Paul described having sex with this man as “a spiritual experience because I could not believe how intensely different it was than anything I had ever known before that.” Sex with a woman, he explained, had seemed “unnatural and contrived”, something that he had “forced” himself to do: “Like I had to fragment my mind. I was splitting pieces away. I wasn’t really having a great time...it was always working hard to make things better, you know? But I loved [her] so part of the trying was to say oh, okay, that felt okay.” Sex with the first man he had ever loved, on the other hand, was “natural” and “made sense.” He recalled having a “spiritual awareness that this is what it was supposed to be, this is what’s right for you. To think that I can have a spiritual experience in the love and sex, that was an interesting transition.” It was the first time that he remembered not hating himself or his sexuality, and felt no “discomfort

and shame and fear of sexuality, which is all I had ever known before.” As a result of these sexual experiences with the first man he loved, and experiencing sexual life as spiritual, he integrated his sexuality with his full self.

While removed from her family, church and friends and living in Vancouver, Winter began creating her new life with support from her peer group. After she began coming out, and word got back to her spiritual mentors, she began getting emails from them warning her, “You keep going this way, you’re gonna ruin everything.” Winter came out to each of her parents during a phone call, but did not elaborate on those discussions. She did relate, however, that her mother told Winter her coming out “was the death of her dreams for me.” Her mother’s anguish was ongoing and obvious in comments she made to her daughter on a regular basis. Winter recalled, for instance, how happy her mother was when her first relationship with a woman ended:

I told Mom that it was over and her being stoked about it pissed me off so much. You know, her being like ‘oh, well, this wasn’t the lifestyle for you’. Like ‘no Mom, no! We tried to make it work, it didn’t work, that doesn’t mean that I’m gonna start dating men now, you know’. But [she responded], ‘oh, I just felt it wasn’t right’.

Winter decided to restrict her contact with her mother for a while after her mother told her that her same-sex relationships were “of the devil.” So adamant was her mother about her views, that Winter doubted she would ever change her views.

Julian first came out to his mother at age 15 by giving her a set of DVDs from the television show *Queer as Folk*. He related that at first his mother cried but then asked him which of the characters he most identified with on the show. However, this was prior to the events that took place after he was outed in Halifax were traumatic and threw him into emotional and mental

turmoil. At some point during that time, he came out to both of his parents as gay, only to discover that by this time, not only his mother but his father also knew he was gay and had accepted that fact. Julian, however, in response to pressure from the church leadership, advised his parents that he would be going to an ex-gay ministry for help. Though his parents were “confused” at this turn of events, they did not intervene. The traumatic experiences with his home church and the ex-gay ministry were followed by years of struggle with drug and alcohol addiction as Julian tried to mask the pain caused by the rejection and condemnation of his church. Yet, during his sometimes-life-threatening experiences with prescription drugs and the turmoil of his early 20s, Julian continued to dialogue with God, the one constant in his life and the only person he was certain still loved him. Eventually, realizing he needed to distance himself from his church and community in order to get help, he moved back to Halifax where he was able to find supports and resources, including other Christians who were living out queer lives. There, he slowly began a journey of recovery and integration.

### **Discussion: Coming out through the Lens of TL**

**Communicating Sexual Identities.** Little attention has been given to the conversations involved in coming out (Manning, 2014, 2015). By examining 258 coming out narratives from 130 individuals, Manning developed a typology of lesbian, gay, or bisexual coming out conversations that includes seven types,<sup>32</sup> three of which are evident in the participant narratives:

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<sup>32</sup> They are the: (1) pre-planned conversation; (2) emergent conversation that unfolds as a natural progression of a conversation; (3) coaxed conversation; (4) confrontational conversation, in which a person is demanded to come out “after collected information of some sort that would suggest to an individual or individuals that someone they know might be LGB” (Manning, 2015, p. 131); (5) romantic/sexual conversation in which “all instances of coming out are implicitly asserted” and are ‘asserted through revealing attraction or desire to another person’ (p. 132); (6) educational/activist conversation in which a person “comes out solely for educational and/or activist purposes” (p. 133); and (7) the mediated conversation.

the pre-planned conversation, the confrontational conversation, and the mediated conversation. The pre-planned conversation, when the person coming out decides in advance that they are going to reveal their sexual orientation to a person or group of people and initiates that interaction (Manning, 2015), is evident in the narratives of Winter, Paul, Buckley, Charleen and Katie. These conversations varied in terms of their outcome, depending on the audience. Conversations with people other than parents appear to be harmonious, whereas the conversations with parents and other family members were difficult, emotional events.

Elliot's and Julian's narratives exemplify the confrontational conversation, when the person is confronted by someone who has learned information that suggests the person they are confronting is queer; these conversations were emotionally charged events. In Manning's (2015) research, confrontational conversations were most often initiated by a parent or parents.

Four of the participants – Julian, Paul, Katie and Winter – engaged in what Manning terms a mediated conversation, one that “happens through... channels such as letters, telephone conversations, or through the use of the internet” (p. 134). Despite the reliance of queer communities on the internet vis-à-vis coming out, little is known about coming out conversations that happen in online spaces or the specific ways in which online forums are used (Miller, 2016), but there is growing scholarly interest in these disclosures (Bond, Hefner & Drogos, 2009; Gray, 2009; Craig & McEnroy, 2014; Miller, 2016). The four participants who used the internet while coming out identified two central purposes: 1) to gain much-needed information and resources, and 2) to find community. Paul, who recalled “scrounging” for information, began liaising with “experts” online who “understood these issues for men who had been married coming out”. He paid a therapist for sessions that took place by Skype, consulted another counsellor who worked with spouses of gay men, and engaged in “long email interchanges” with a gay male who had a

similar religious background and who told Paul his own story of coming out of a marriage to a woman. Katie went online to seek information after her boyfriend asked her if she was a lesbian: “I ended up going on an online dating site because I had been thinking well maybe there’s something to this question that he asked me, so I met some girls that way and figured it out.” As noted above, an online community of women was critical to finding support, as was a community of lesbians on a local sports team. Julian, Katie and Winter also used the internet to seek dating opportunities. Winter felt safe in online sites to ask open questions about how to proceed as a novice lesbian. The relative anonymity afforded by cyberspace enhanced disinhibition, enabling them to find much-needed information and community. The internet allowed them control over choice of audience, and over initiating and ending conversations. Online relationships were also low-risk, as the participants had no prior relationship to the individuals with whom they connected, and therefore nothing to lose by coming out. For Katie, Winter, and Paul, the disinhibition of the online experience helped to reduce inhibition offline, enabling them to look for face-to-face interactions with other queer individuals.

All of these stories reflect Miller’s (2016) finding that online forums enable queer individuals to engage in “storytelling, identity quests, validation, information seeking, community seeking, community building, and advice provision” (p. 621). Their experiences point to the utility and importance of such forums for those with “concealable and culturally devalued identities” (McKenna & Bargh, 1998, p. 681) who struggle to find others similar to themselves:

Because of the potentially embarrassing nature of the self-aspect, it is not easy to make the first move and disclose this aspect to others to find those who are similar. There are real risks to one's important close relationships at home and at work in such self-

disclosure (Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993, pp. 73-88; Pennebaker, 1990, chap. 9). Therefore, the individual feels isolated and different and is barred from the benefits of sharing with similar others. (McKenna & Bargh, 1998, p. 681)

Those with marginalized-concealable identities are therefore more apt to use online groups than those with visible stigmas or mainstream identities (McKenna & Bargh, 1998). Online, queer people can find a safe space where “communication is supportive, informative, and possibly life-saving” (Miller, 2016, p. 604). This kind of environment proved to be transformative for Katie, Paul, and Winter as there they found affirmation and support. From a TL perspective, participants discovered online “an excellent medium for the development of a caring community” that “set the stage for engaging them in articulating, reviewing, and revising meaning perspectives” (Terry & Faulk, 2012, p. 138), but perhaps more to the point, provided a safe space in which they could craft and give expression to their emerging queer identities.

**Transforming within Oppressive Circumstances.** A context of crisis is “a situation in which the learner is enduring extreme material, learning, or spiritual poverty such that the demands outside the educational activity are numerous and consuming” (Kilgore & Bloom, 2002, p. 124). Coming into and expressing their stigmatized identities was a fraught process marked by anxiety and trauma as they came up against hegemonic heterosexist beliefs and values of the dominant group. Much cognitive, emotional, spiritual and physical labour was expended in strategizing coming out – especially to family – and trying to find the path of least resistance.

Kilgore and Bloom (2002) have pointed out that people tend to transform meaning perspectives only when they are compelled to do so “under the catalyst of extreme personal duress” (p. 125), in other words. Illeris (2014) explains that there is a protective aspect to resistance to change – *identity defense*:

We cannot take in all learning possibilities, nor even consciously decide which to take in and which to refuse...a very strong part of this defensive system is the identity defense, which actually protects us against too much TL that could result in some kind of instability. This must be accepted, understood and respected. (p. 584)

The narratives of Paul, Buckley and Charleen exemplify the protective mechanism identified by Kilgore and Bloom. In the midst of their disorienting dilemmas, both Paul, the “good church guy”, and Buckley, the “good Catholic priest-in-the-making”, wrestled with how to negotiate their respective identities. Identity defense also appears to be an element of Charleen’s story; her attempts to get help from a counsellor was thwarted, at least in part, by the counsellor’s failure to understand, accept and respect Charleen’s Catholic identity and faith. Assuming that Charleen had happily left her church behind and had no connection to it, she advised her to “just” connect with some other lesbians and “oh, take a Women’s Studies course”. She failed to recognize the importance of Charleen’s spiritual life and connection to Catholicism and that “just doing those things” – finding other lesbians and joining a Women’s Studies course - would not help her. As Charleen explained, she needed “somebody that understood where I was coming from and who I was, and not that you were once this and now you’re this. I needed something that felt more organic.”

These narratives point to the importance of acknowledging, understanding and respecting a learner’s various identities, as well as appreciating the involvement of those identities in the learning process.

Another element of the narratives involves the *length of time* involved in shifting away from dominant ideologies toward their own self-constructed narratives. For most of

the participants, the homophobic and heterosexist norms in which they were negotiating their identities hindered their integration process, lengthening the time it took for them to unlearn and let go of harmful ideologies. Their experiences point to the importance of recognizing and appreciating the self-protective elements that can lengthen the time it takes to transform one's meaning perspectives in situations of extreme duress.

**Relationships.** All but Elliot spoke of meeting people who played a role in enabling them to integrate. Some were face-to-face, some were online, and for three, relationship with deity played a critical, supportive role. Winter spoke of a friend who invited her to ponder whether God might be excited for her coming out. For Charleen, Winter and Julian, their spiritual lives and conversations with God provided a private and safe cocoon in which they tentatively questioned received truths/ideologies.

For three of the male participants, sexual relationships/encounters facilitated embodied, experiential learning and played a critical role in helping them question ideology and move toward integrating their sexuality. Buckley's first sexual encounter brought him to a realization he could no longer deny; Paul and Julian both describe sexual encounters that facilitated their acceptance of their sexuality and integration of that aspect of their identity. Their experiences echo sexual identity development models, which indicate that sexual behaviour helps sexual minority males understand and identify their attractions and personal identity. Dube (2000) clarifies that, "It is not sexual behavior [that] causes individuals to identify as gay; rather, sexual behavior confirms their suspicions that they are not heterosexual and helps construe their attractions and behavior into a personal identity" (p. 123). Their bodies and their bodily experiences during sexual acts helped move these men further along the path to integrating their sexuality. In contrast, only one of the four women, Winter, even alluded to sex, and that was in a

passing comment about “a seasoned lesbian” who “just kind of showed me a lot.” Their experiences stand in contrast to literature on adult education which emphasizes the centrality of women’s bodies in learning (e.g., Clark, 2001; Michelson, 1998; Barnacle; 2009). Clark (2001), for instance, notes the “renewed legitimization of the body” that has occurred as a result of the second wave women’s movement. Since then, feminist scholars have been theorizing the body as “foundational for women’s conceptualization of the self and the construction of knowledge” (p. 85).

The female participants’ narratives highlight the role of a supportive group of lesbian/queer women during the early stages of coming out. Studies on TL have cited the critical role of relationships in women’s transformative experiences (English & Irving, in Taylor & Cranton, 2012). Interestingly, of the men, only Paul spoke extensively about having a supportive network of men who helped him throughout his coming out process.

**Religion: A Cost-Benefit Analysis.** The narratives of Winter, Julian, Paul, Katie, Buckley and Charleen all indicated that at various times they derived “comfort, hope, and meaning” through their religious lives; on the other hand, their religion also worked to “enhance fears or guilt, and restrict life rather than enhance it” (Koenig, 2002, p. 289), impeding them from “making necessary life changes” (Koenig, 2002, p. 289). Throughout their private deliberations, there is evidence of an ongoing cost-benefit analysis in relation to their religious lives. Was their religious life benefitting them, and if so, at what cost? One of Paul’s comments in relation to why he waited so long for God to change him indicates this kind of analysis: “How many times do you have to believe and ask and nothing changes, that you start to say, what the hell, like what? Seriously?” He concluded that the comfort he derived from his identity as a good Christian man who was valued for his musical abilities had been “powerful enough to supplant

learning and prevent me from actually arriving at a place where I knew this is the truth. How could you substitute the truth that you know for yourself with all of the trappings of religion? That's powerful stuff."

Winter reflected on the bittersweet nature of her own experiences within her religious tradition: "It's weird to think how it was so safe and yet the messed-up thinking that's kind of intertwined in all that, right? Like, if you can get people feeling shame and feeling badly about themselves, then you have an in on making them come and do whatever the heck you want." Similarly, Katie observed that the Christian values she had learned, "some of them are really good", and the "comfort and support" she received within her church community had been positive elements of her religious life. Yet, concerns about how her religious community would perceive her hindered her coming out. "I probably would have come out three years earlier", she observed, "I was probably ready to do it."

Tolliver and Tisdell (2006) suggest that spirituality can enhance the ability of learners "to come to a greater understanding of their core essence through transformative learning experiences that help them reclaim their authenticity" (p. 38). A private spiritual life that each had cultivated from childhood eventually enabled Julian, Charleen, and Winter to uncouple institutionalized religion from their spirituality and move beyond it to embrace their sexual and spiritual identities. In fact, they were the only individuals who continued with their religious and spiritual lives during the coming out process. In reference to counselling queer individuals, Richards, Rector and Tjeltveit (in Pargament, 2001, p. 168) have noted that a counselee's "core spiritual values may be especially influential in promoting clients' coping, healing, and change." This would seem to be the case for these three individuals.

**Problematics of Coming Out Discourses.** Many coming out discourses valorize the act of coming out, casting it as the primary way to challenge homophobic prejudice and attacks against sexual identity minorities, and to enhance the well-being of those in the queer community (e.g., Bridgewater, 1997; Harbeck, 1992; Williams, 1997). Yet, for these participants, coming into and expressing their stigmatized identities was an emotional process marked by anxiety and trauma.

King (2005) has noted that “as [adult learners] wrestle with issues of purpose and meaning, they challenge the core elements of themselves...critical questioning can bring with it self-doubt, fear, anger or happiness” (p. 106). For most participants, that process was marked by fear of the unknown, and ultimately, fears of rejection and loss. Much cognitive and emotional work was expended in strategizing each coming out and trying to find the path of least resistance.

The difficult coming out conversations with family members, in particular, point to the potential long-term emotional and psychological damage that can occur in such situations. Rasmussen (2004) has problematized the coming out imperative on several grounds. For one, casting those who come out as morally superior to those who do not come out ignores the fact that “people’s ability to continuously negotiate their identity is necessarily mediated by varying circulations of power relating to age, family background, economic position, and race” (p. 147). In addition, privileging coming out infers that those who choose not to do so are somehow abdicating their social responsibility and must be in some way ashamed of their sexual identity, and/or dishonest, further oppressing queers who are already marginalized within the dominant culture. Finally, theorists such as Michel Foucault and Judith Butler argue that coming out discourse implies essentialist notions of identity as something that is stable, and that coming out

forces a person into an already established identity category, thereby strengthening the regulation of sexual categories, and contributing to their reconstitution.

Nonetheless, research indicates that those who disclose their sexual orientation can benefit in a number of ways, including enhanced self-esteem (Henry, 2013); greater sense of purpose and meaning in life (Savin-Williams, 1989); reduced levels of anxiety, and enhanced emotional relief (Monroe, 2000); emotional well-being (Thoits, 2000); increased life and work satisfaction (Griffith & Hebl, 2002; LaSala, 2000); enhanced coping and resilience (Rhoads, 1995); and lower levels of internalized homophobia (Savin-Williams, 1990; Shidlo, 1994). Of course there is not was to move beyond correlations to ascertain causality. It may well be that people with strong emotional well-being or self-esteem are more likely to come out, rather than the other way around.

The terminology used in coming out is also of significance as it signals the participants' negotiation of dominant, homophobic discourses. Both Winter and Charleen at first eschewed the term "lesbian" which they had internalized as a pejorative term. Charleen initially told herself she was bisexual as it seemed less radical, and implied she was on a sexuality continuum along with everyone else. Winter first came out as "same-gender attracted" because that term "felt safer and less permanent." Paul too considered himself "straight with attractions". The use of transitional language may be an important aspect of identity transformation for queer adults.

This reality has implications for the learning process. Adult development theory has focused on privileged learners of the dominant culture; knowledge about queer adults and how they experience learning within the dominant, heterosexist culture is scant. Considering the participants' experiences from the perspective of TL, their socio-cultural context is critical to the learning experience as it shaped their epistemological perspectives – ways of making meaning

(Belenky et al, 1997). Those perspectives in turn influenced their unlearning (reflective process) and learning.

### **Conclusion**

In coming out, the participants began integrating and asserting their own emerging philosophies, values and identities; they pursued “liberation” and ultimately identity integration. But what is the nature of that liberation? Through all of their negotiations, the power relations in which participants were situated impinged on their decision-making and shaped their experiences and identities. When disclosing to parents, the full weight of religiously motivated homophobic ideology came to bear. These disclosures were emotional, traumatic events and point out the cost of embracing a perspective – however “transformed” it may be – that positions one in direct opposition to dominant ideologies.

Coming out as queer is not a neutral act: “Being called, or calling oneself gay involves registration in a binary, asymmetric system — hetero vs gay — in which the second term is subordinate and devalued; it is equivalent to an insult” (Benozzo, Pizzorno, Bell, & Koro-Ljungberg, 2015, p. 297). Since coming out is an ongoing, never-ending assertion of one’s membership in a “subordinate and devalued” group, can one ever really arrive at liberation? Moreover, underlying the coming out process is the assumption that one’s identity is “under the control of the individual, that human beings have an authentic sexual and psychological self which can exist outside of social control and cultural pressure” (Dow, 2001, p. 135). Yet, as the participants’ narratives indicate, as soon as they disclosed they became subject to “social control and cultural pressure” of their heteronormative environment. Grosz’s (2005) theory of “becoming” highlights the harmful experiences that occur in the process of *becoming different* [italics mine]. “Becoming” she suggests, “is the operation of self-differentiation, the elaboration

of a difference within a thing, a quality or a system that emerges or actualizes only in duration; becomings undo the stabilities of identity, knowledge, location and being (Grosz, 2005, in Shipley, 2013, p. 4). In the process of divesting themselves of a heterosexual performance, participants had to risk becoming *unbecoming* and *illegitimate* by heterosexual and heteronormative standards. The extra layer of religious homonegativity only served to intensify the risks and penalties in their coming out processes.

From a transformative learning perspective, for these individuals coming out was not merely a cognitive exercise, but involved “all the dimensions of learning and mental processes: the cognitive, the emotional, and the social as well as the environmental and societal situatedness of this totality” (Illeris, 2004, 2007). Thus, although Mezirow maintains that meaning perspectives and habits of mind remain the central target of change in transformative learning, it would seem that for the participants in this study, *identity* – who they perceived themselves to be and the meaning they attached to that identity – appears to be the locus of transformation.

The next chapter will consider the losses entailed in disclosing, the degree to which participants felt they had integrated their sexual and religious/spiritual lives and resolved internal conflicts after coming out, and the ways in which coming out may have led them to challenge power.

## Chapter Ten: Reintegration

### Introduction

Drawing on Mezirow's ninth and tenth phases – developing confidence and competence in new roles and relationships, and reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective – this chapter explores the degree to which participants felt they had integrated their sexuality, and the nature of their religious/spiritual lives in the process.

Mezirow's final two stages involve building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships, and ultimately, “a reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective” (2000, p. 22). Rodrigues and Ouellette (2000) have suggested that integration occurs for queer individuals from religious backgrounds when they incorporate “their religious beliefs and their homosexuality into a single, new, workable understanding of the self” (p. 334) and when they have “no self-imposed walls between their homosexuality and their religious beliefs” (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000, p. 334).

This phase of the participants' stories involved “post traumatic growth”, which Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) define as “positive psychological change experienced as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life circumstances” (p.1). Shields (2013) notes that not everyone experiences growth as a direct result of trauma, but for those who do, “it is the individual's struggle with the new reality in the aftermath of trauma that is crucial in determining the extent to which posttraumatic growth occurs” (Wortman, 2004, p. 90). For these participants, the new reality involved the cost of feeling rejected by family members and faith communities. They were still struggling with issues related to rejection – or at best, strong disapproval – even though they had all been out for at least five years and in Elliot's case, for over two decades. Three central themes are apparent in their discussions about issues that continued to trouble them, with

the first two being linked: 1) issues with family 2) grief related to losses, and 3) internalized homophobia.

Most participants had lingering relational issues. Winter's unfinished business revolved around her mother, who was still trying to figure out what "caused" her daughter's homosexuality. Her mother cycled in and out of depression about her daughter's sexual orientation and about Winter's relationship with her partner, whom she was planning to marry:

My mom has a quarterly breakdown, right? And I just never know what she's gonna say, cause one day she's like, 'I just love you and [your partner], she's got so much depth', and she'll recognize the humanness and the beauty in the person that I love and me, and then other times she'll be like, 'I just hope that you'll marry a man', and I'm like Jesus, oh my God, Mom! You have to give up that hope and let me be who I'm going to be.

One of Winter's central concerns was that her mother might eventually lose her own faith and she worried about the impact that loss may have on her mother's mental health: "I don't think she could bounce back and reconstruct her theology at this point because she has devoted her whole life to this." As a result of these concerns, Winter engaged in ongoing efforts to manage her mother's emotional wellbeing by "giving her some peace" which she did by reminding her of the importance of their relationship. Ultimately, however, Winter anticipated "a lifetime of navigating those conversations" and doubted there would ever be a resolution: "I'm just gonna believe differently than my family for my whole life, and I don't think they'll be totally affirming or totally stoked, and it just sucks."

Charleen's mother was also "deeply conflicted" about her daughter's sexuality and for a long time, Charleen had felt responsible for her mother's feelings. More recently, however, she had come to view her mother's conflict as her mother's own issue, though she felt "sad" that her

sexual orientation troubled her mother: “In terms of that whole feeling that your parents can be proud of you or stuff like that, it still rankles a bit,” she explained.

Katie also wrestled with issues related to her family. Though she felt they had made “strides” toward accepting her sexual orientation, they continued to say things that indicated deep-seated homophobia. At such times, Katie would think to herself, “Wouldn’t it just be so much easier if I could change [my sexual orientation]?” However, she would quickly realize, “I’d be so unhappy.” She was particularly troubled by things her family members had said when she had first come out to them, things, she said, she could “never, ever forget.” She wanted to revisit that conversation with them and ask them to “clarify” some of their statements: “The ball is probably in my court to tell them okay, you said this, this, and this on that day, can we go back and talk about that because I would like to know that you think it’s not true.”

Elliot’s concerns related to the fact that entire parts of his life had been “walled off” from his parents for decades. He commented that this compartmentalization had “probably” diminished their relationship, rendering it “less meaningful” than it might otherwise be, but could see no other solution. “I don’t feel comfortable with them knowing about, seeing my lifestyle,” he explained, and reasoned that they had been “brought up a certain way” and would not change their views. He suspected that if he had come out years ago, “they probably would have eased into it”, but then commented, “I’m perfectly happy with a kind of the male compartmentalization of things.” However, as he reflected further on his relationship with his parents, he added: “I do have a lot of walls built up, and that’s what I feel sorry about.”

Though he had been out for over a decade, Julian sometimes wanted to return to his home church to “tell everybody off for what they did”, having come to view the church’s treatment of him as religious abuse. However, he had decided that this issue was “God’s shit, something he

needs to work it out with them.” He explained that his unresolved issues were not with God, but with the institution of religion, which he described as “very much man-made.” His disenchantment with institutionalized religion had been heightened by the challenges he and his partner had had in trying to find a church they both liked and that would accept them as an out gay couple. He and his partner both preferred churches that were evangelical, but these churches all took a stance against homosexuality. In fact, they had recently been spurned by a church, and though his partner still attended, Julian refused to return: “I get a very bad taste in my mouth. I haven’t said ‘Fuck you, Christians’ but basically, that’s my sentiment.” In the absence of a welcoming church community, he and several other queer individuals who had been rejected by their faith communities had begun meeting on a regular basis to, as Julian put it, “work through in a loving manner what Christ would have us do.”

As is evident in the previous testimonies, grief and loss are also common themes. Boyd and Myers (1988, cited in Imel, 1998) consider grieving to be one of the central components of the transformative learning process; it is when an individual realizes that old ways of perceiving and doing are no longer relevant and moves to adopt new ways. It is only through grieving that an individual moves on to adopt or establish new ways, and finally integrates old and new patterns. As is already evident, much of the grieving involved the loss or diminishment of valued relationships. However, other losses are apparent.

Winter grieved that so much of her teens and early 20s had been spent navigating her sexuality and coming out that she had missed out on experiences that her non-queer friends seemed to take for granted. She felt she was “a little bit further behind” than her peers in accomplishing certain relational and career milestones as a result of the preoccupation with her inner conflict. Her comments echo the observations of Savin-Williams (2001) who suggests that

due to heteronormativity and heterosexism, queer people may have a different life trajectory compared to the majority of their heterosexual peers, dating later, forming partnerships later, and having families later. Struggling with anxiety and depression, Winter had recently returned to therapy to determine

... how [being queer] has fucked me up and what I can do to make it better and be a stable individual. It's changed everything and I'm a little bit envious of people who can come out and still pursue whatever they were going to pursue. That really hasn't been the case for me.

Like Julian, she was also processing a recent rejection by a church she and her partner had begun attending, believing it to be an affirming church. They had come out to people in the church from the beginning, but when Winter was invited to play in the church band during worship services some members of the congregation complained to church leadership. The worship leader asked to meet with her and advised her that as an out lesbian, she would not be permitted to engage in public ministry at the church. Hurt and angry, Winter and her partner asked to meet with church leadership:

We said we want to be a part of this conversation and we're happy to be here if you want to talk to us, but it just became so exhausting, meeting after meeting and nothing coming of it, so now I'm back to square one. Nothing was going to change, and I just couldn't be in that space anymore. I guess there was just that shred of hope that I could choose where I wanted to worship and so, yeah, eventually I'll start looking again but I'm just, just [long pause], so we're just doing the things we want to do on Sundays and not thinking about going to church right now.

Paul's sense of loss revolved around his former wife and in-laws and his own family: "I cannot begin to describe how much I care for the mother of my children", he said, "how much I care for my children, how much I care for my sisters, their families, my father. These relationships have all changed significantly." His wife, devastated by Paul's disclosure, proceeded to completely exclude him from her life: "A lot of walls have been erected because you've been with this woman for 25 years and she can't see this coming, so it's going take her forever to think that she can be okay with how I did this, or her family", he explained. "I lost all of those relationships, and they were important to me."

Buckley, who had left Catholicism and now identified as atheist, described himself as "much more integrated" and no longer "bifurcated" or "compartmentalized." "I give myself permission to be real", he explained, "I don't feel anymore the mental pressure to shut down certain intellectual paths." Nonetheless, he had mixed feelings about the loss of his Catholic faith, life and practice:

The loss of ritual and the loss of that sense of the communion, of being part of the same path of people hundreds of years before and people who will be on this path hundreds of years after, feeling like you have a place in that tradition, I think [that] is much harder to create outside the environment of religion.

At times, he even found himself longing for a Catholic Mass:

You know, sometimes when I travel to a foreign country I really want to go to a church service that's not even in my language and is completely removed from pangs of guilt or shame, just to get my toes back in it and to feel a little bit of it again. I feel like there's still some beauty there that hasn't gone away. It's just, it doesn't mean the same thing to

me anymore, but it still has its sense of aesthetic appeal, I guess. Yeah, I guess I feel mixed about it, yeah.

At the same time, he had recently become aware on a deeper level just how damaging his religious upbringing had been: “It took a long time to really understand the more ingrained feelings of shame and guilt and anxiety that had their source there,” he observed.

Katie’s sense of loss was similar to Buckley’s. She questioned how she “went so long” believing in God until she came out, and now found herself an atheist: “I don’t believe in God anymore and that is an unsettling feeling”, she explained, “to know that you’ve devoted so much of your time to believing in something and then not believing in it. Like there’s a void, there.” She had also found people’s reaction to her atheism “unsettling because there’s also a stigma attached to not believing in anything, right?”

As noted previously, Elliot regretted the emotional walls he had built between himself and his parents, but he also regretted shutting out his high school friends. Knowing he was gay he had forfeited the possibility of close, meaningful friendships throughout high school and observed that if he had been out in school, he might have had “more consistent straight friends.” Any friendships he did have were “essentially dropped” after he left home because he feared “they might find out [about my sexual identity] and there might be a negative impression.” As a result, Elliot had no friendships from his youth.

Four participants still struggled with self-esteem issues. Winter described an ongoing, cyclical pattern of accepting who she was one moment, and “being bummed out by it” the next. She had returned to therapy partly as a result of this issue. Maude also continued to struggle with internalized homophobia, which she felt was at the root of her low self-esteem. She commented that internalized homophobia had negatively affected all of her intimate relationships. She also

wrestled with “very, real social anxiety issues” that she felt could be traced back to her childhood: “It’s that whole struggle of how I felt about myself at that time. But I work on it, I do have to work on it.” Katie’s ongoing issues with deeply rooted homophobia emerged “from time to time” when she would find herself thinking, “Well, maybe I could be straight.” These thoughts mostly surfaced when she was around her family of origin, but they also came to her attention when she was with her partner in a public space:

There are times when she wants to reach for my hand [in public] and I’ll pull it back instinctually and I’ll be like whoa, why did I do that, I feel really awful and there’s no reason why I should have done that. It doesn’t happen always, it just depends on how comfortable I am or aware of my surroundings.

Internalized homophobia also surfaced sometimes at work. Katie described the anxiety she felt when co-workers would ask if she had a husband or children: “My stomach would just – instead of answering with pride, no, this is my situation, it took me about a year to tell them, ‘by the way, I have a partner and she’s a she’”. These kinds of scenarios, when she was not certain how people would respond to her disclosure, gave her “a scary feeling.”

Elliot, who had recently retired, was “very relieved” to leave his work life behind. He thought that since he no longer had to be guarded around co-workers, he would be able to relax and lower the emotional wall he had built around himself. Instead, this wall, which he described as “moveable”, remained, adjusting itself according to the context: “When you go to Provincetown,<sup>33</sup> there’s no wall,” he explained. “When you’re in Halifax, there’s half a wall, when you’re in Toronto, on Church Street, there’s maybe a quarter of a wall or no wall. San

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<sup>33</sup> A town in Massachusetts that is a welcoming community largely built around and by the gay and lesbian community.

Francisco, there's no wall and you can do what you want." Though he felt less vulnerable since retirement, the wall, he discovered, was still there: "How do I break that down?" he asked, "That's the biggest point now, because you feel comfortable with the wall. The wall has flowers on it, but it's still a wall. Which way to go?"

Buckley remarked that if he had been asked 10 years ago whether he felt his sexuality had been integrated into his life, he "may have been more confident" than he currently was. He explained that while he had "stripped away" Catholic ideology early in his intellectual evolution, he had recently returned to therapy in efforts to understand "deeper, underlying stuff" that he found was affecting his mental health "on a regular basis." He had come to realize that his ongoing struggles with anxiety were rooted in his Catholic upbringing, and that the "fight or flight responses" he experienced were rooted in a deep sense of shame. Buckley suspected that his emotional work might never be "a finished project." "You know", he said, "my gravestone will say, 'work in progress'".

### **Elements of Integration**

While participants had experienced losses in coming out, they also spoke of gains. Paul expressed a sense of gratitude for his reformulated spirituality: "I count the blessings. And I didn't have that practice before, so that's a spiritual practice. I used to do it when somebody reminded me, oh you should do that. Now I do it because it restores my soul, it restores my feeling of wholeness." As he talked about his life, post coming-out, he used words such as "completion," "wholeness", "gratitude", and "being at one with the universe". The integration of this new version of spirituality into his life had come from a pivotal realization: "I didn't have to hate myself about sexuality or feel discomfort and shame and fear of sexuality, which I had only ever known before." In fact, even sex had become a "spiritual experience": "It is the feeling of

wholeness, of true oneness with somebody you love, and wow, I never believed that it could feel like that. I have a transcendence around that that I had never known before.” And his spirituality, he explained, was now “integrated into minute by minute lived experiences,” instead of being compartmentalized to his life in the church. He had also realized, post coming out, that his identity was no longer tied to the church: “I started to realize that all of that opium that I needed from the church, from religion, it’s gone. It evaporated. I’m actually happy to breathe on my own. I’m happy to interact with my friends and live my life. It was so liberating; I just can’t even tell you.” Paul’s conceptualization of God had also changed. “I don’t care what He thinks”, he explained, “And I don’t need to know if [God created me] or not. I just need to know that if he did, I was special enough for him to make me in whatever way I am, and therefore he *does* love me, whereas I didn’t have that thinking before.” With this reconceptualization of God had come a positive shift in his self-esteem. Whereas prior to coming out he considered himself “a zero minus, minus, minus sinner that had rebelled against God and therefore was going to hell,” he no longer felt this way: “My spirituality is more around being okay – to feel okay in the presence of whoever made me.”

After coming out, Maude’s sexuality and spirituality were no longer “at odds” and she attested to being “really at peace” with both aspects of her life. The resolution of her internal crisis was due in part to her rejection of the Christian construct of hell as “organized religious crap.” After coming out she had explored the writings of Eckhart Tolle, such as *The New Earth*, which had helped shape her current spiritual life and beliefs. Art, music, guitar playing, and drawing, had also helped her to “mentally separate” herself from religious beliefs that had limited and constrained her. Watching a range of queer-themed films and meeting other queer

people had helped her lay to rest negative ideologies, stereotypes and attributions related to queerness that she had grown up with:

You're meeting other gay people who are positive, you're hearing about other role models who are positive role models, and it starts to take away a lot of that negative talk, right? Like no, wait now, we're not so terrible, you know, we're not these awful people, and you start to dismiss those stories and all of that stuff that you learned, but it takes a long time. Like sure, they're not all bad, and neither am I. I'm not so terrible.

After a long and fraught process, Julian had resolved the conflict between his sexuality and spirituality, and this integration had been facilitated in part by sexual experiences he had had with men who, like him, were also Christian. He described one important sexual encounter during which he experienced a strong connection to God:

I was speaking in tongues which is a spiritual thing for me, the highest thing I can do with God and it's happening during sex and [thought] if God didn't want me to do this, why would I be doing it while I'm having gay sex? And it just, it kind of all worked itself out.

This experience helped him accept his sexuality and himself as “good.” Part of Julian’s reintegration also involved no longer “blindly following what people tell me to do”. Adopting a critical historical<sup>34</sup> approach to scripture led to a reinterpretation of “clobber<sup>35</sup> passages” to incorporate a pro-gay stance. Julian explained that this revisionist approach to Bible interpretation, coupled with a more “adaptable” spirituality, had helped him stabilize his life.

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<sup>34</sup> The historical-critical method of studying scripture seeks to understand the scripture’s original meaning in its original context.

<sup>35</sup> Passages of scripture that are traditionally understood to condemn homosexuals.

Though Christianity was still central to his spiritual life, his spirituality expanded to include a collection of practices that he had personally selected for himself:

I enjoy meditation now, which I would have [originally] thought is pagan. I do different arts and crafts to relax. Different things come into my [spirituality] now and some things stay and some things go and I try just to adapt. It's more adaptable today than it ever would have been, it's not so black and white, it's more just grey.

Julian's spiritual life was affirmed and supported by his Christian partner who was also out: "I have someone in my life now that tells me to go to the mirror every single day and tell myself I love myself at least 15 times." Though he and his partner had been unable to find a church in which they fully felt comfortable and were welcomed by church leadership, they had met other, like-minded queer Christians with whom they regularly met and worshipped in the privacy of their homes.

Charleen's reintegration was facilitated, in part, by a relationship with a heterosexual woman she had met while in university. Having become "completely smitten" with her, she had had to find a way to let her feelings go and "separate the attraction from friendship". Having dealt with the situation and moved on helped to dispel the notion of "that lesbians are predators that prey on unsuspecting straight women":

I was like, okay, I'm a lesbian, I'm friends with [name], I want the best for her, and that's okay. I mean it was heart-breaking but [I realized] love means wanting the best for the person that you've fallen in love with and sometimes it's a good thing for you because unrequited love means having to see them leave the dance with somebody else.

Charleen said that that experience taught her that "being lesbian...means the same thing as it does for straight folk, so that was an important relationship for maturing." A shift in her religious

beliefs had also helped her reintegrate by shifting her feelings about homosexuality: “If homosexuality is about love, and God is love then how could it be wrong?” Religion, she realized, was about “something deeper than rules and regulations”:

It’s about how we live our lives in a meaningful way, and if my feeling towards women, and my attractions have meaning and if it’s truly a part of my life, then it has to be okay.

Religion and what I knew about Catholicism growing up, it really was something that had meaning for every part of your life, and if this was organic and true then it has to be just part of life. So in that way it helped me integrate my sexuality.

### **Worth It?**

Each participant was asked if it had been worth it to go through the coming out process, especially given the challenges and losses they experienced. Seven responded in the affirmative.

Winter stated without hesitation that coming out had saved her life:

To just have that weight, that secret for 25 years, I couldn’t really imagine living with it any more. I’m not sure that I could even picture a future in that case, right? It feels like I didn’t have a choice because it was kind of like a survival thing. What has come from it has been incredible, the relationships and what I know now ... yeah.

Maude also felt it had “absolutely” been worth it: “Because it’s who I am and I’m very happy just to be who I am. I wouldn’t change it.” It had also been worth it because she no longer had to “live a lie”: “I always felt I was pretending to be somebody I wasn’t and it felt so wrong...I felt much worse about myself that way than when I came out.” She also felt the experience had been “awesome” because of what she had learned in the process: “I didn’t really know a lot about the queer community, so that was kind of fun to learn.”

Charleen wished she had made the commitment to come out “a lot earlier” and that she had not remained “in that frozen, cold feet stage” for as long as she did. When asked what she felt had hindered her coming out, she responded, “Lack of community. I was in limbo, to use another Catholic term, because there weren’t any role models and I didn’t know what it meant to be lesbian. There was no one.” For her, the central quest had been to discover, “Who am I and how do I be true to myself?” The realization that she didn’t need to adhere to any of the stereotypes of lesbians in that process came slowly, in “bits and pieces.”

Buckley described having “horrible moments” of imagining what his life would have been like if he had not come out:

Coming out and leaving the church are intertwined, and it’s difficult to tell them as separate stories. If I hadn’t, I might very well be a priest right now, living this really sad life and having sexual impulses that are manifesting in ways that I don’t even want to start thinking about. Like, how fucked up that could all be?

He added that although his life was not “perfect”, it was “good” and he was happier than he would be if he had not left the Catholic Church:

Giving myself permission to accept what I believe and not find ways around it was exactly like coming out, such a relief. It was a weight literally being lifted off my shoulders. Like, I’m on the verge of tears thinking about how much pressure it relieved in my life. If for the last 20 years I had still continued, I don’t know if I’d be here. I mean, if I hadn’t done something tragic, I would have certainly come close. So has it been worth it? Like gangbusters, yes.

Katie said she was “absolutely so much happier now” though she said her coming out experiences with her family still deeply affect her: “They still play on my mind and are with me

every day”, she said. Yet, it had been “really worth it”: “I’m really happy and I feel like I can just be myself now, so I wouldn’t change it. I mean, if I could change it I would make it a lot smoother [laugh].”

Like the others, Julian said he “wouldn’t go back” in the closet, and observed that any “temporary discomfort” that he currently experiences in his out life did not compare to the challenges he experienced prior to disclosing:

The experience of my life has brought me to where I am today and I’m grateful. Now going through the ex-gay ministry and doing all of their stuff, was that hard? Yes, it was fucking hell, but those experiences were worth every bit, just the growing, the knowing of myself, the believing in myself, and the knowing that God loves me no matter what anybody else tells me.

For Paul, coming out had “of course been worth it.” Reflecting back on the decision to come out and the intervening years, he observed that despite the losses he had incurred, things were “much better”:

If I could measure success in any way, it’s that I gave my children the gift of speaking truth. They have readjusted their expectations for themselves accordingly, and have made changes, radical changes in their own lives. They are just being who they are, and I think I’ve given them permission to do that. I think they’re thankful for that.

He also felt his relationships with his children had improved: “They just see me as a totally different human being. I was angry, I just wasn’t a happy camper. Now they say, ‘oh, now we get it, no wonder you were wrapped up tight as a fiddle!’ Yeah, it was hard for them growing up.”

When asked if he felt coming out had been worthwhile, Elliot took a different stance than the other participants. Coming out, he said, was as a practice he “didn’t believe in” and did not feel was “necessary”:

...because like I said, I know what’s right and I know what’s wrong, who I am and who my parents are, and it’s fine. I never really told my parents because I didn’t believe it was necessary and they’re my parents, they should always like me, you know. Yeah, to me it’s not an issue, shouldn’t be an issue, so there’s no reason for me to bring it up. If it’s brought up, I’m not gonna deny it. I mean, you don’t bring things up.

### **Coming Out: Changes Over Time**

One of the questions this thesis explores is how the participants’ sense of identity may have changed over time. The participants identified the shifts they experienced in their self-identity. Paul related that an important part of his identity was centered in his professional life; that it had been important for him to be “proud” of his work and know that he was “making a difference.” As he was first coming out, he put his professional life “on the sidelines,” as he explored his gayness: “I had to reconstruct the new me. The reconstruction would have looked like all of a sudden falling off a deep cliff because it was all about fun and party and recuperating on the weekend.” When the partying took a toll on his physical health, however, he realized he had to “settle down” and revert to “old practices” of working hard at his profession. He explained that it was his work life that ultimately helped him to “re-ground.” Having been out for five years, he had come to a point where his gayness was no longer central to his life. “Gayness doesn’t identify me. That is not the essential me.” Paul explained that while in the early stages, coming out was “almost always on the tip of my tongue”, now he rarely discussed that part of his

life: “I probably have settled into, I just happen to be gay. You know, it’s not front and centre in my thinking and in my brain anymore.”

Julian’s identity shifts involved his sexuality and his gender. He explained that he had first identified as gay, and “for the longest time” as female: “I never had words for that, it was a feeling”, he observed, “I just wanted to be in dresses.” At the time of the interview, though, he identified as “gender queer” and “non-binary.” He elaborated:

Fuck, I’d be okay today with having sex with someone who had a vagina who identified more as queer masculine, but they’d have to have facial hair. However, at one time I was like no, no, no, but today I’m not so stuck in the binary. I think queer would be the best label for me now. It’s more rainbow blurred than the gays versus the lesbians.

As a result, he had stopped coming out, partly because he felt it should not be necessary: “If I have to tell you I’m gay” he explained, “and you can’t realize it, either you just really can’t tell, or two, you don’t deserve to know.” He also questioned the practice of labelling and reducing himself to a label: “I’m gay, but about two months ago I was going through this whole crisis of labels, and it’s not like I need to come out because I’m Julian and everything else is secondary. I’m my body and everything else is secondary, I’m spiritual and everything else is secondary. And I think has a lot to do with where I am in my life.”

Since coming out, Buckley identified as a gay man and an atheist “in a strong sense of the word”, although he noted that Catholicism was still “an important part” of his identity. He joked that he was still a “Catholic-other-than-the-believing-in-God part.” He also noted that though his “religious shell” had “crumbled”, it was still important to him that he be seen as “a leader” and a “problem solver who others look up to.” He traced this need back to the course plotted in his earlier life to be a priest: “That programming is still fucking me up in different ways”, he

laughed. In terms of coming out, Buckley assumed he was easily identifiable as gay and rarely felt the need to self-identify. “I get really surprised when sometimes people still don’t read that [I’m gay]. I’m like really? There’s still people in the world who don’t immediately know when I open my mouth?” Though he finds himself having to come out from time to time, what has changed is that he no longer seeks the approval of others in relation to his sexuality: “I don’t think I need their approval anymore. And I wouldn’t have come out at all if I was still in the place where I couldn’t cope with the judgement of others.”

In contrast, Charleen noted that since people “assume” heterosexuality, she found she “constantly” had to “reassert” her lesbian identity and that her partner is a woman. She found that coming out had gotten easier in some ways, but harder in others: “Cause now, one it’s so not a new thing to me that it feels kind of stupid to say it, and then because society has changed where for some people it’s no big deal, so yeah, it kind of feels stupid coming out, but you know that for some people it is a big deal so you still need to.” In terms of shifts to her identity, Charleen observed that while she had early on identified as “bi”, that had only been to herself, and she now identified as lesbian.

For Maude coming out had become “so much easier”. “Pfft, I don’t care what people think”, she said, “I really don’t. And people are pretty good. You know, I come out at work, sitting at the table with [colleagues] and someone who’s new [at work] will say, ‘how come you moved here?’ And I will just say, ‘my partner was from here, we came out here,’ and most of them don’t even blink an eye. Like it’s so different. I have no problem coming out.” Winter reflected on how wearying ongoing disclosure of her sexual orientation could be: “Even now, like you’re just constantly coming out, there’s no one-time-fits-all, ‘I’m attracted to the same-

gender' cake that everyone gets a slice of. It's a constant thing. And initially, it was very draining and so of course I would try to kind of pace myself."

Katie handled coming out "differently" than she did when she first came out. She was "less scared" and found her workplace to be "generally pretty accepting." Nonetheless, she still encountered those who were not so accepting from time to time: "You don't know how someone's going to take it, like if your partner is there and you say well this is my partner. But it is a lot easier now, a lot easier ... because I don't care as much what people think of me anymore [laugh] – not as important!" She felt that growing older and having rejected her religion had made coming out easier: "If you're not involved with that then it doesn't really matter", she said. Yet, after a moment of reflection, she added that a shift in Canadian society toward more acceptance had, in some ways, made coming out more difficult: "It's not a new thing to me and it feels kind of stupid to say it and then because society has changed and for some people it's no big deal, so it kind of feels stupid coming out to somebody for whom you know it's not a big deal. But you know that for [other] people it is a big deal so you still need to do it, so it just feels weird."

### **Pro-Social Activism**

Williams and Allen (2015) point out that "trauma survivors sometimes emerge as leaders in prosocial causes related to their previous negative or traumatic experiences" (p. 86). Six of the participants indicated that they had engaged in some kinds of activism, although not all framed it as such. Maude, Paul, Charleen, and Julian had all initially engaged in activism post coming out, but eventually withdrew due to the demands of their day to day lives and personal reasons unique to each one.

Maude, encouraged by a close friend who was politically active, became “very, very active” in the early 1990s, attending “a lot of the protests in Toronto.” Over time, however, her activism had declined, partly because she did not feel there was “much need” now that so many advances in queer rights in Canada, but also because her work, which was very demanding, left her “exhausted.” She was, however, in the process of getting involved with an initiative at her workplace that would help provide supports to members of the local transgender community.

Like Maude, Paul had engaged in activism within the first few years of coming out. He then withdrew from activism, realizing, “Oh my God, I’m working myself to death.” He also opted to be cautious due to his workplace position and the pressures that came with it. “I can’t be embedded politically”, he explained, “There’s just too much conflict.” Thus, concerns about potential impacts of political activism on his work life, and the demands of his work, constrained his activism.

Charleen related that the activism she had engaged in the early years of her “out” life was strongly linked to a sense of her own agency, which had been enhanced by coming out: “[Coming out] meant taking control and sort of being in control of my own life, which has been important.” Describing herself as a “quiet introvert”, she explained that people often assumed she was “going with the flow.” Coming out had helped her become more assertive and to have a fresh appreciation for the importance of activism: “I don’t think I’d be where I am now without the battles that [others] fought on my behalf.” As a result, she did from time to time “happily support” others who are doing public protests when they need “numbers.” For the most part, however, she found activism “draining” and noted, “This is just not how I want to spend my days,” she said.

Julian had been engaged in activism in the late 1990s and early 2000, when he had been involved in outreach to queer youth. He was currently involved in queer outreach that he did not consider “activism”, but rather “just being human and creating space for people.” This work involved bringing conservative Christian ministers in training together with queer Christians as a way to dispel stereotypes and build understanding. He had also recently supported some local protestors by making sandwiches for them. Julian preferred to frame these kinds of activities as part of his spiritual “vocation.” Political activism, on the other hand, he preferred to avoid, and commented wryly, “I just want to be one of those people who pays their taxes.”

Buckley had also become involved in queer rights after coming out, landing on the “front lines” of the movement. Of all the participants, he had been most engaged and for a long period of time. More recently, however, he was coming to grips with his own privilege within the queer community. He explained that when he first came out, he thought he had an understanding of racism and sexism because of his own history of oppression as a gay man and because of his “blue collar” upbringing. The realization of the privilege he enjoyed as an able-bodied white man, however, came “very late in life.” At the time of the interview, he was trying to determine how he how could best contribute to queer rights without oppressing those from marginalized groups.

Katie, who had grown up in a politically conservative family, did not consider herself an “activist”. However, since coming out she had experienced a shift in her thinking about activism. She explained that in the early years after she had first come out, she did not attend Pride Parades, taking the stance, “I don’t need to do that, that’s not important.” Now, however, she considered these events “important” and “regularly” attends events during Pride Week. In addition, she had begun educating herself on issues facing transgender people after an encounter

with some individuals who assumed that as a member of the queer community, she “must know everything about trans issues.” She now feels a responsibility to understand “what other members of the community are going through” and to help educate others. In addition, she supports “policies, political movements and parties that are queer-friendly.”

At the time of her final interview, Winter was pondering how she might contribute in terms of activism. She considered telling her story to be a first step. She related that when she attended educational events in the queer community, she felt she “should be writing or speaking or involved” and that telling her story “could help”. “There is something that has changed in me that feels like it will affect my future,” she concluded.

Elliot eschewed political activism, per se, feeling it was neither worth it nor “proper” to confront or argue with “straight people.” He hoped his activism was evident in the way he lived and tried to avoid conflict: “Sometimes you have to flow with the stream [and] you can’t go against the current, but you have to know when to get off the current and go down the other stream.” His position was also influenced by teachings on pacifism that he had heard while still in his church. “We were taught to be pacifists and I think that’s a great teaching. It’s like, ‘do unto others’, let people see what you do and don’t throw it in their faces. Don’t tell anyone what to do, just do your life’s job.”

### **Discussion**

Despite overwhelming homophobia, the people who graciously gave up their stories for this thesis negotiated and let go of—unlearned—a series of ideological and identity-based perspectives in order to come out. They also persisted in constructing affirmative subject positions as lesbian, gay, or queer identifying individuals. At the heart of their transformation is a shift away from deference to an external authority—whether God, parents, or religious leaders—

to self-authorship. Self-authorship was first coined by Kegan (1994) to describe a shift in meaning making *capacity*, “from uncritically accepting values, beliefs, interpersonal loyalties and intrapersonal states from external authorities to forming those elements internally” (Baxter Magolda, 2008, pp. 270-71). A self-authoring person is “the coordinator of defining her/his beliefs, identity and social relations while critically considering the perspectives of external others” (Baxter Magolda, 2008, p. 271). A person who self-authors has shifted from “following formulas” (i.e., allowing others to define one and dictate one’s plans and path) to trusting their own internal voice, or what Mezirow (1997) terms, “autonomous thinking”, which he considered the “cardinal goal of adult education” (p. 5). “In contemporary societies”, he observed, “we must learn to make our own interpretations rather than act on the purposes, beliefs, judgements, and feelings of others.... transformative learning develops autonomous thinking” (p. 5).

Several of the participants articulated such a shift. Paul, for instance, noted that he was no longer “as conscious of obeying the rules” and “more apt to say wait now, does this make sense?”; Julian asserted that he was no longer “okay with just blindly following whatever people tell me to do”; Katie testified, “I don’t care as much what people think of me anymore”; Charleen conceptualized coming out as “taking control and being in control of my own life”; and Maude said she “no longer cared what people think.” In essence, each participant rejected other people’s (including God’s) narratives about them and took charge of their own narrative and self-identification. They began developing their own spiritual beliefs and their own beliefs about Christianity. They began naming themselves, their experiences and their feelings.

### **Post-Traumatic Growth**

The literature on PTG indicates that the “confusing aftermath of trauma, where fundamental assumptions are severely challenged, can be fertile ground for unexpected outcomes

that can be observed in survivors” (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004, p. 1). The participants had all come out at least five years prior to their interviews for this study and had settled into an “out” life. Of the seven who had chosen to come out, and continued to do so, all indicated the process had been worth it and that their lives were better off for having taken that step. The elements that appear to have supported the participants’ post-traumatic growth (i.e., elements of integration) have been highlighted in the work of Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004): personality characteristics, the management of distressing emotions, amount of support, disclosure of experiences, cognitive processing of experiences, and narrative development. It would appear that for the participants in this study, those processes have been iterative. In addition, the participants indicate the benefits of PTG: “an increased appreciation for life in general, more meaningful interpersonal relationships, an increased sense of personal strength, changed priorities, and a richer existential and spiritual life” (Tedeschi & Calhoun, p. 1). Yet, in the participants’ accounts of how they had fared in the intervening years since coming out, experiences of trauma, loss and grief still linger.

### **Telling the Story: Part of the Transformation?**

Rossiter and Clark (2007), who provide an overview of narrative learning and narrative knowing, state that “our lives are steeped in stories” (p.20) and note that the concept of a “storied life” suggests that each person’s identity is an “unfolding story” (p. 44). This thesis contains various aspects of the participants’ stories, both about themselves as individuals, and about the organizations and systems in which they found themselves – church, family, work, and school. As they recounted their stories, the participants engaged in a very specific form of identity construction – of self-authorship – and they also engaged in reflection on, and making meaning of, their experiences.

Buckley, who found recounting his coming out narrative both “fascinating” and “really eye-opening”, commented on how being interviewed had helped him make sense of his experiences:

The opportunity to see some of that narrative and to put the pieces together, even like the simple timing things of what happened when, I don’t think that ever really concretized until we just sort of talked it out, and I feel like it’s forced me to tighten up that narrative a little bit and make it make sense to me, which has been very helpful.

Paul had also found it helpful to tell his story. He appreciated the opportunity to analyze his own learning process:

You settle into life in your new self and it can become kind of predictable... humdrum everyday existence, which is not always unlike what you knew before, however there’s a self-awareness that’s very much there. I don’t have as many opportunities to really talk through it as much, so I still have things that I’m thinking about, conundrums, questions that are still coming to my mind in day-to-day life.

He added that during the first few years of coming out, he had regularly told his story because it was “a new story, so you talk and talk”, but that he had stopped talking, feeling “nobody wants to hear me talk anymore.” Thus, volunteering to be interviewed had given him an opportunity that he had not had for quite some time to reflect back on his experiences once again: “I’m still putting things together,” he explained, “And what occurred to me was [what a] wonderful, valuable process it is for me personally. But I feel like I’m also contributing to something.”

Katie observed that participating in the first interview had caused her to realize she still had “unresolved questions about God”, and had since come to a different

understanding of the circumstances surrounding the abandonment of her faith: “I see more clearly now, after our [first] discussion,” she explained, “that it was a way for me to distance myself from what anyone else with Christian beliefs would think about me.” She added that if she no longer believed homophobic Christian ideology, what others believed about her “doesn’t apply to my life.” From a TL perspective, Nohl (2009) has suggested that this kind of reflection upon, and acknowledgement and appreciation of, one’s transformative experience is itself a critical aspect of transformative learning. Indeed, Taylor and Cranton (2013) have questioned whether learning has been truly transformative until it has been reflected upon.

### **Unlearning: Overwriting or Parenthetic?**

As earlier mentioned, two theoretical models of the unlearning process have been suggested: the “overwriting” version suggested by Hedberg (1981), and Klein’s (1989) “parenthetic” model, which posits that the new knowledge that’s been acquired sits beside the old knowledge that has not been extinguished but instead, gradually degrades over time. Some of the participants’ narratives – particularly those of Katie, Winter, Charleen, Maude and Julian – exemplify the parenthetic model as the old, homophobic ideas and values – old narratives – “sat beside” the new knowledge they enacted and embodied in coming out. For instance, Katie would question if her life would be easier if she were straight when exposed to homophobic incidents with her family. Buckley had recently returned to therapy to understand how “deeper, underlying stuff”, i.e., the old narratives, were affecting his mental health. Elliot’s “moveable wall” persisted to assert itself in his life despite his wishes to the contrary. Their experiences point to the participants’ ongoing situatedness in the overall systems of power that privilege heterosexuality; that “all knowledge is constituted within relations of power” and that “to unlearn

an existing position is not just a technical task, but also a political and a moral one” (Pedler & Tsu, 2014, p. 297).

### **Post-Coming Out and Pro-Social Causes**

The participants’ accounts of their involvement with activism reveal a range of approaches and factors affecting activism. For one, the constraints of their work lives impinged on the activism of Paul and Maude, although Maude also felt the “need” for activism had declined with the growth in queer rights in Canada. Buckley, affected by the shifting focus and goals of activism, recent challenges to the queer community by people of colour, and a growing awareness of his privilege as a white male, had paused his activism to reflect on where and how he might be most useful in current queer movements. Charleen, whose activism was inspired by a desire to honour earlier generations of queers who had sacrificed for the rights she currently enjoyed, “happily” stepped up “from time to time” to support others advocating for a need, but otherwise found activism “draining”. Julian, who had been involved in queer activism in his early out life, now eschewed activism, preferring to “pay taxes” like everyone else. Katie and Winter were in the early stages of deciding how best to involve themselves in supporting the queer community. Thus, while all but Elliot had engaged in some form of activism since coming out, stage of life, the constraints of day-to-day living, shifting emphases and needs in the queer movement, and fatigue all affected the participants’ involvement in pro-social causes.

### **Conclusion**

The participants’ stories indicate that reintegration, post-coming out, was a complex and demanding process, one that was made all the more complicated by the ongoing web of power relations in which they were, and are, located. Though vestiges of their early training in life had degraded and lost its power over them, it nonetheless persisted in a manner suggestive of Klein’s

(1989) “parenthetic” model, and from time to time, the participants cycled back to make meaning of their past in light of their current lives.

In terms of activism, the narratives point to the challenges involving in attempting advocacy when a person, themselves, is a member of a minority. Members of the queer community have higher rates of mental health disorders compared to non-queer counterparts (Meyer, 2003; Kosciw, Greyack, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2009; Szymanski, Kashubeck-West, & Myer, 2005), which can be attributed to their minority status within a context of stigma, prejudice, and discrimination (Herek, 2007; Meyer, 2003). When queerness intersects with other marginalized identities, minority stress is enhanced exponentially. At the same time, activists often experience a heightened sense of responsibility for others who may be experiencing similar forms of discrimination. What are the implications for mental health of this sense of responsibility? Nonetheless, several of the older participants who had been involved in advocacy earlier in their queer lives – Paul, Charleen, Maude and Julian – had all taken a considered step back from the activism, in part to attend to their own needs.

And finally, none of the participants regretted having come out and integrated their queerness into their overall lives. To quote Buckley, that step had been “like gang busters”, well worth the challenges and suffering it had entailed. Assuming responsibility for their own respective narratives and for naming their experience had been a positive experience, despite the residual losses and grief.

The final chapter of this thesis highlights insights gained from this study, discusses the implications, and points to suggestions for action and future research.

## **Chapter Eleven: Conclusion and Next Steps**

Transformative learning theory has proven useful in identifying some of the processes involved in coming out and negotiating conflicts between queer identities and Christian identities: the disorienting dilemma(s); self-examination, critical assessment of assumptions; recognition that others have shared similar transformations; exploration of new roles or actions; development of a plan for action; the acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing the plan; tryout of the plan; development of competence and self-confidence in new roles; and reintegration into life on the basis of new perspectives (Mezirow, 1995). However, as other critics have noted, TL is predicated on assumptions about the agency of the learner and an ideal, supportive learning environment, and does not give adequate attention to the central element that structured the learning processes of these participants – *power relations*. It is power relations that necessitated unlearning of heteronorming ideologies, which in turn triggered the grieving that seven of the participants experienced in letting go identities, beliefs, values and practices learned under the dominant systems of power. Indeed, there would be no need for anyone to come out were it not for the dominant, heteronormative state of affairs. It is because of the existing social and political environment that integration necessitates “unlearning *hegemonic knowledge* that defines the acceptable and accepted in hetero-normative terms only” (Grace, 2001, p. 263).

### **Learning and Trauma**

A search for literature on transformative learning under conditions of oppression, crisis and trauma, such as those experienced by the participants of this study, revealed a small but emerging field of literature. TL has been employed to facilitate change in developing regions where traumatic events and social trauma have required healing, social justice, and social change (Belenky & Stanton, 2000; Bloom, 1998; Brookfield, 2000; Daloz, 2000; Mezirow et al., 2009;

Cox & John, 2016; John, 2016). Their work raised questions about attempting TL in contexts where disorientation has become normalized and where both teachers and learners may be constrained by fear and trauma. Moreover, though, what are the implications, and indeed, ethical dilemmas of inviting learners who are already traumatized to engage in a TL process that initiates even more instability? At the same time, as John (2016) asserts, “Understanding how a context of fear and trauma may impede pedagogical action and limit freedom to examine ways of thinking, are important considerations in the ongoing development of [TL]” (p. 270).

In that respect, this thesis contributes to the literature. At the same time, the seven participants who grew up in Canada came out within a democratic country with increasingly supportive human rights legislation and an emerging queer rights movement – in other words, a context of relative privilege. This positioning created possibilities and opportunities that are not accessible to queers in many other jurisdictions around the world. These contextual realities also had implications for learners and their learning.

Also, in relation to trauma, Williams and Allen (2015) point out that while “trauma survivors sometimes emerge as leaders in prosocial causes related to their previous negative or traumatic experiences, little is known about this transition and limited guidance is available for survivors who hope to make prosocial contributions” (p. 86). Having access to such guidance may have helped Paul and Maude avoid the burnout they experienced as a result of their activism, and might help individuals such as Katie and Winter, who were trying to determine the how best to support the queer community. Finally, further research on the topic of trauma survivors and prosocial engagement may reveal that kinds of considerations a trauma survivor should take into account before launching into activism, in particular, their own vulnerability, and the kinds of supports they might need.

## Queer Learners

This thesis points to potential challenges that may affect queer learners. Queerness and the accompanying stigma positions them in relation to what was/is considered “normal” in society, vis-a-vis the heteronormative constraints they faced in constructing their self-identities, and in how they internalized their resulting stigmatized identities (Toynnton, 2006).

What are the implications for queers in educational contexts? Canadian educator, André Grace, has called for a “critically progressive and strategic public counter-pedagogy, coupled with cultural work” which includes “an engagement in a dangerous but potentially transformative process of humanization so sexual minorities can become full citizens in a just society” (2016, p. 52). For this strategy to be successful, educators need “to attend to historical, political, ideological, representational and ethical elements as they shape critically progressive and strategic public counter-pedagogy and cultural work that resist dominant political and cultural practices disenfranchising and damaging sexual minorities” (Grace, 2016, p. 52). Drawing on the work of Giroux, he asserts that it is “attention to these elements in contesting homophobia that helps collaborators to build deeper knowledge of ‘the specificity of contexts in which power is operationalized, domination expresses itself, and resistance works in multiple and productive ways” (p. 79). Building social, cultural, and political knowledge about sexual minorities and their issues and concerns can be achieved through engaging in lifelong learning as critical action. Even the youngest participants had little formal education about queerness, and informal learning was largely negative. Media and pop culture, as well as the internet were and are key resources, and point to ways these may be drawn upon in lifelong learning.

### **Spirituality and Learning**

For most of these individuals, religious belief was the ‘elephant in the room’ that needed to be addressed before they could move on to accept themselves and their sexuality. Religion was a key source of oppression, shame, humiliation and repression. Yet, religious belief and spirituality also supported some participants to change direction and move toward what had previously been considered unacceptable; it helped them transform their meaning perspectives. It is important for adult educators to acknowledge human spirituality, to engage the spiritual in assisting learners to answer their deepest questions (Gillen & English, 2000, p. 88). Spirituality, whether expressed through a religious identity or not, has been increasingly recognized as an important source of coping and an intrinsic source of motivation, including for learning (Pargament, Koenig, & Perez, 2000; Koenig, 2009). To provide culturally competent, pedagogical interventions, adult educators need to recognize the role of religion, spirituality and culture in the lives of many learners. For instance, Winter, Charleen and Julian focused on God or love, distinguishing between religious institutions and the spirit of their faith tradition. Paul and Maude focused on a spirituality that was uniquely personal, one they constructed apart from their religious tradition. Julian found queer Christians through alternative groups. How might spirituality be a resource for coping and strength, even within the context of an oppressive religion? This question requires further exploration.

### **Epistle to the Church**

In recent months in Atlantic Canada, it has come to the attention of the general public that “retreats” offering to help queer people “overcome” and find “healing” for their same-sex attractions are still being offered by various Christian groups in Canada. Conversion and related therapies have been widely condemned by medical and psychological associations, and in 2013,

the ex-gay movement experienced a significant challenge when the largest organization in the movement, Exodus International, shut down its “cure” ministry and issued an apology to the gay community for “years of undue judgment by the organization and the Christian Church as a whole” (Merritt, 2015). Nonetheless, there are still therapists, churches and ministries that persist in offering counselling designed to help queers resist and/or “overcome” their same-sex attractions. In this unfortunate state of affairs, there is an important role for affirming ministers, priests, spiritual care providers, social workers, educators, psychotherapists and psychiatrists to play in reducing or eliminating the potential harms such organizations may inflict on queer people. In addition, efforts must be made to educate the broader society on the damaging consequences of therapies and ministries that purport to heal non-heterosexual people.

### **Spirituality and Counselling**

This study indicates that religious/spiritual life may be a potential support to queer people who identify as religious/spiritual. Far too often, spirituality is named as a component of overall health, but given little to no attention by health care providers. My own story of redemption occurred thanks to the care and concern of individual Catholic sisters, two of whom provided psychotherapy and a third who provided me with spiritual care. Though I have never been a Catholic, I had accessed the services of a social worker who happened to be a Catholic sister, through a local Family Service association because it was the only service I could afford. After a few sessions, however, I appreciated her understanding of why my religion was so important to me, and that she did not try and influence me to leave the church; she was also very progressive in her views. When I came out, lost the support of my church community and decided to leave my small town for Halifax, at my request, the sister made two referrals to other Catholic sisters, one for counselling and the other for spiritual care. I was still feeling very vulnerable and wanted

help from someone who would appreciate and respect my spiritual needs. The help these sisters provided was invaluable and I felt very safe receiving their support.

Attending to the religious and/or spiritual in the lives of queer people struggling with identity conflicts may open potential avenues for support. Dahl and Galliher (2009) have suggested that the goals of culturally competent counselors, in assisting queer clients, should be to a) understand sexual identity development in conjunction with religious and spiritual identity formation; (b) empower them by normalizing the range of sexual expression and identity; (c) learn helpful methods of working through tension and conflict; (d) help clients to investigate spiritual and religious backgrounds; and (e) locate supportive social networks that understand the complexities of spiritual and sexual integration (pp. 108–109). At the same time, it is important to understand that Christian communities vary, and that the benefits and challenges queer people face depends on the type of religious background they have experienced. Some clients may avoid that a counselor that, as Charleen stated, has “no cultural understanding” of what religion and/or spirituality means to them. It may be helpful for mental health practitioners to, as Richards and Bergin (1997) have suggested, “assess spirituality, religiosity, religious problem-solving style, orthodoxy, spiritual identity, God image, and value–lifestyle congruence” (as cited in Ulrich et al., 2000, p. 20); an understanding of a client’s values and the nature of their religious life and beliefs may help guide a practitioner. Conversely, a disregard for the religious teachings and values of a client’s religious/spiritual life may provoke anxiety and stress for the client, ultimately jeopardizing, as it did for Charleen, the client-practitioner therapeutic relationship.

Additionally, it is evident that for people like Julian, Charleen, and Winter, spirituality can help shape their emerging queer identities. It may be useful for counsellors to help queer

clients access spiritual resources to support their healing and growth (Richards, Rector, & Tjeltveit, 1999, cited in Pargament, 2002). Mental health professionals should provide a safe space to ask questions about god, spirituality and the meaning of life, a space that enables a client to understand and determine their own beliefs in relation to the sexual standards set forth by their church.

Finally, practitioners need to be aware of their own personal beliefs and biases, and be prepared that some clients may opt for a celibate life or choose to participate, as Julian did, in ministries and services that are non-affirming (Goodwill, 2000). It is also important to recognize, as indicated by the participants' narratives, that religious experiences can be both positive and negative, "bitter and sweet" (Pargament, 2002).

### **Creating Spiritual Spaces in Queer Places**

Religion is a fraught topic for many queer people, specifically because so many have been rejected by their faith traditions. Being able to share experiences, especially painful ones, can be affirming. Many of the participants in this study appreciated the opportunity to reflect on their coming out journey, as difficult as those journeys had been. When queer people share their experiences it not only breaks the silence within our communities; it also reveals and challenges the homonegativity within religious environments.

Having a space and place to tell one's coming out stories may be particularly important for those coming out of deeply religious, homophobic environments.

### **Final Thoughts on TL Theory**

Though TL theory has been useful in helping me structure and analyze the coming out stories featured in this thesis, it has nonetheless failed to address a number of facilitative elements evident in the participants' learning processes. Some of the shortcomings of the theory,

with its emphasis on the rational and cognitive aspects of learning, have already been soundly critiqued in the literature on TL, as noted in Chapter Two; that TL is cyclical and iterative versus linear; that critical thinking involves a higher level of cognitive development than many achieve; that affective, soulful, intuitive, and imaginative dimensions should be equally valued; that more attention should be given to the role of spirituality in learning; that the body can be instrumental in learning.

In my study, the affective domain was a key element in most of the participants' narratives, providing valuable insights and ultimately serving as a motive for change. Bodies were also a source of learning and insight, as was spirituality<sup>36</sup>, which enabled several of the participants to negotiate their disorienting dilemmas. The participants' stories also point to the fact that transformation is neither linear nor singular, but rather cyclical and iterative in nature.

It is power relations, however, that figures most prominently in these narratives, creating the conditions in which the participants were unlearning and learning, and ultimately contributing to their vulnerability. As such, these stories raise concerns about the very real emotional risks involved in engaging students who are already vulnerable, for whatever reason, in a so-called "disorienting dilemma" for the sake of "social change". It is important for educators to be aware that disorienting dilemmas may lead, in the worst-case scenario, to further trauma and possibly suicidality as a RESULT OF the process of transformation and of trying on new identities. These stories also serve as a reminder that changes in habits of mind may take years, and possibly decades, and at some points, maybe beyond their own awareness.

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<sup>36</sup> Some TL literature takes up spirituality, e.g., Tolliver, & Tisdell (2002; 2006) and Tisdell (2001; 2003; 2008).

Finally, the participants' experiences serve as a reminder that identity changes may happen at various rates, depending on the supports available or lack thereof, and that deeply held beliefs and views may serve as a self-protective mechanism, providing solace and comfort in times of disorientation and transformation.

### **Future Research**

As has been noted, a substantial amount of work has gone into exploring the experiences of queer people affected by homonegative religious ideology and environments. It may be useful, however, to shift attention from the oppressed to the oppressors; to study "their values, their culture, their ideologies, their addictions, their motives and their delusions" (Newman, 1996, cited in Priestly, 2009, p. 297). It is not queers who are in need of reform and "conversion"; it is Christian churches and those who rely on Christian ideologies to bolster homophobia and hate. A lot of hurt and harm would have been avoided if the participants' religious communities, particularly the church leadership, had embraced and supported these individuals during the coming out process.

The families of those who have come out constitute another group requiring investigation. Katie observed that "it would be interesting to do this interview with my family because they definitely went through some transformative learning process [and] they came to accept me". She felt their experiences with her "may have helped them see other people who are gay in a different way, too". Thus, consulting religious (or formerly religious) family members who have struggled with their child's or sibling's non-normative sexuality and yet have shifted in their attitudes toward acceptance, may shed light on the factors that both hindered and facilitated their change of heart.

Another area of future research involves the impact of queerness over the life course. Queerness negatively affected the participants' ability to be socially engaged in school, and shaped and constrained their goals. As indicated previously in this thesis, participants delayed participating in activities that might reveal their sexual orientation; they spent significant time and energy in performing according to heteronormative expectations and assumptions. Maude recounted being "really scared as a kid", wondering how she was going to support herself as an adult, knowing marriage would not be an option: "You know, back in the day, my friends were still getting married as a solution to their lifelong planning, and I knew that wasn't going to happen, or only in a nightmare." Winter spoke of feeling like she was on a different trajectory compared to her peers. On the other hand, leaving home, entering post-secondary study, these were occasions that afforded increased opportunity for transformation. Some participants stated clearly that their relationships to sexuality and spirituality were again shifting. More research is needed to understand how queerness and religion/spirituality affect queer people over the life course.

### **Conclusion: Where to next?**

It is my hope that this research will help create a broader awareness and dialogue with others, especially religious leaders, educators, and mental health/spiritual care practitioners, about the profound impact of homonegative discourse, both within churches and in society in general. It is also hoped that dissemination to queer communities will open up more welcoming spaces for discussion about religion and spirituality. To that end, I plan to present my findings at academic conferences and university classes that are pertinent to this subject matter and will continue publishing papers based on the findings of this thesis. I plan to present my research to the local queer community, as I have already done several times on the issue of queerness and

spirituality. In particular, however, I hope to present my research to the church politic to whomever is willing to listen, including churches, seminaries, and spiritual care professionals. I plan to contact the Canadian Association of Spiritual Care, which oversees the education, certification of spiritual care professionals, in hopes that I can present at their annual conference. I will be setting up a website for the purpose of featuring papers and other materials that may be of importance to academics and the public in general. Finally, I would like to make this research available to publications such as *Christianity Today*, which reach a broad range of the Christian community.

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doi:10.1080/00918369.2016.1267462

## Appendix A: Informed Consent



**Project Title:** The Role of Spirituality and/or Religion for LGBTQ Individuals Negotiating Homonegative Beliefs and Values in Coming Out

**Researcher:** Brenda Hattie-Longmire, Mount Saint Vincent University, Halifax, NS B3M 2J6; Tel: XXX-XXXX, [Brenda.hattie@msvu.ca](mailto:Brenda.hattie@msvu.ca)

**Funded by:** N/A

### **Introduction**

I invite you to participate in a research study I am conducting as part of the requirements of my doctoral program at Mount Saint Vincent University. Whether or not you participate in this research is entirely your choice. There will be no negative consequences if you decide not to participate in this research. The following provides details about the study, what you will be asked to do, and about any benefit, risks, inconvenience or discomfort you might experience. You should discuss any questions or concerns you have about the study with me, or with my PhD Supervisor, Dr. Susie Brigham, also of Mount Saint Vincent University. If you have any questions later, please do feel free to contact me, or Dr. Brigham.

### **Purpose and Description of the Research**

This research focuses on out lesbian, gay, bisexual or queer (LGBQ) individuals who have been raised in a homophobic Christian denomination and have experienced internal conflicts between their sexual identities and religious and/or spiritual identities. The purpose of the research is to explore how they learned homophobic beliefs and values, and how they learned to negotiate those beliefs and values in coming out. The research will also explore the role of

spirituality and/or religion in coming out. How did they help with coming out? How did they impede coming out?

### **Who May Participate in this Research?**

You may take part in this study if you:

- Self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or gender queer.
- Are 18 years of age or older.
- Were raised in the Christian tradition.
- Experienced conflict between your religious/spiritual identity and sexual identity.
- Live in Halifax Regional Municipality.

### **What Will I Be Asked to Do?**

If you agree to participate, I will contact you to arrange a face-to-face interview at the location of your choosing. The interview will take about 2 hours and will be audio recorded. You will also be provided with a large piece of blank news print paper and invited to timeline your coming out story. This timeline will provide the interviewer with a visual of your coming out story.

You may stop the interview at any time, or choose not to answer any questions. You may contact me any time up to a month after your interview to withdraw from the study. After that, it will be impossible to remove your information from my analyses. Simply contact me and ask to have your interview deleted, and your timeline destroyed.

I will transcribe the audio recording and remove any identifying information. I will then read the transcript repeatedly and create a four to five-page summary of your interview. To ensure I have accurately captured your narrative, I will send you the summary, with your permission. You will then have two weeks to send me any feedback. With your permission, a

follow-up interview may be requested if information from the first interview needs to be clarified or more clearly understood.

### **Risks**

The biggest risk is to your privacy. I will take the following steps to protect your privacy. First, I will conduct the interview myself, at a location of your choosing. However, it should be a private, quiet place where no one will overhear the interview. Second, I will be transcribing (typing up) the interview myself, so only I will hear and read your transcript. In addition, I will ensure I remove any identifying information from each interview.

Talking about identity can be emotional, particularly for members of marginalized communities. I will be asking you about the learning processes that occurred leading up to coming out, and the learning and unlearning you experienced as you began to live life as an out LGBTQ person. I will be asking about your sexuality and spirituality and the ways in which you have tried to reconcile those are in your life, the challenges you may have experienced, and may still be experiencing, during that process, and the ways in which you have attempted to address those challenges. As a result, you may experience some difficult emotions during the interview. Following are a list of supportive resources available to LGBTQ individuals in HRM.

### **Counselling and Support Services for LGBTQ Individuals**

The Youth Project  
2281 Brunswick St., Halifax  
Sheena Jamieson, BSW. Phone: (902) 429-5429  
Email: [youthproject@youthproject.ns.ca](mailto:youthproject@youthproject.ns.ca)

PrideHealth Coordinator: Colton MacDonnell  
Tel: 902-473-1433 Email: [prideHealth@cdha.nshealth.ca](mailto:prideHealth@cdha.nshealth.ca)

*University Counselling Services*

1. Dalhousie: Joanne Mills, 902-494-2081.
2. St. Mary's University: Ashleigh Dempsey, 902-420-5615.
3. Mount Saint Vincent University: Carrie Campbell, 902-457-6567.
4. Nova Scotia College of Art and Design: Christina Warren, 902-494 8130.

*Other Resources (these are also available after hours)*

Mobile Crisis Intervention 429-8167

QEII 473-2043

24/7 referral service dial 211 or visit [www.ns.211.ca](http://www.ns.211.ca)

**Benefits**

There are no direct benefits to you. However, your narratives will shed light on a group that has been socially marginalized and the ways in which LGBTQ individuals have negotiated the coming out process. It will also advance the understanding of adult educators, academics, and those involved in the health care and helping professions, including spiritual care providers, regarding the challenges experienced by LGBTQ individuals during the coming out process, but also the internal and external factors that facilitate coming out. More broadly speaking, your contributions can help bring social and policy changes that will benefit LGBTQ individuals.

**How Your Information Will Be Protected**

Audio files will be assigned an ID# and pseudonym. All electronic files will be stored in a password-protected folder on a secure file storage site at Mount Saint Vincent University, to which only I will have access. I will transcribe the audio recordings, removing identifying information and password-protecting each transcript. The consent form, which has your name on it, and the file linking ID#s and pseudonyms with real names, along with your contact information will be locked in a file cabinet in my office, separate from your transcript. Once I have transcribed your interview, only one copy of the audio file will be kept in the password-protected file on the university's secure file storage site. Paper copies of the transcripts will be stored in a locked file cabinet in my office.

I will retain the data from this research study in the password-protected folder on the secure file storage site at Mount Saint Vincent University for 5 years following the last publication. At that point, paper files will be shredded, and electronic files deleted.

I will use data from this research study, including quotes from interviews and photos of the timeline, in presentations, reports, and publications. The quotes will be identified using pseudonyms, and I will ensure no participant is identifiable, while still capturing the learning narratives.

### **Withdrawal**

As stated previously, you may stop the interview at any time, or choose not to answer any questions. You may contact me up to one month after your interview to withdraw from the study. Simply let me know that you would like me to delete your interview.

### **Questions or Concerns**

I am happy to respond to any questions for concerns about participating in this study. Please contact me, Brenda Hattie-Longmire at XXX-XXXX or [brenda.hattie@msvu.ca](mailto:brenda.hattie@msvu.ca). If you have any ethical concerns about your participation in this research, you may also contact Brenda Gagne, Research Ethics Coordinator, at 902-457-6350, or [brenda.gagne@msvu.ca](mailto:brenda.gagne@msvu.ca).

**The Role of Spirituality and/or Religion for LGBTQ Individuals Negotiating Homonegative Beliefs and Values in Coming Out**

I have read the description of this study. I have been given opportunity to discuss it and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

I understand that I have been asked to take part in a 2-hour, in-person, one-on-one interview at a location acceptable to me. I understand that during the interview I will be asked to time-line my story on a piece of 8.5" x 11" paper, to provide a visual representation of the story. I understand the researcher will take a photo of the time-line for reference during analysis, but that I will keep the time-line. I understand that the researcher may use the photo in presentations and publications. I understand the photo will not identify me.

I understand I may be requested to participate in a follow-up interview to clarify information provided in the interview, or to provide greater understanding of the information provided in the initial interview.

I understand my interview will be recorded and direct quotes of things I say may be used in reports, presentations and publications. I understand that such quotes will not identify me.

I agree to take part in this study. My participation is voluntary, and I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time, and may withdraw any information I have provided until 1 month after my interview is completed.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

May I send you a summary of your interview, for you to confirm its accuracy?

\_\_\_No      \_\_\_Yes – Where should I send it?

\_\_\_\_\_  
Would you like to be sent study results as they become available?

No       Yes – Where should I send them?

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### **Appendix B: Screening Tool**

Hello \_\_\_\_\_:

Thanks for your interest in my research. As the recruitment ad states, I am looking for people who self-identify their sexual orientation as gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer or some variation of those. Does that fit for you?

I am also looking for people 30 years older or older. Are you 30 or older?

Could you tell me which of these age ranges fits for you: 30-39, 40-49, 50-59, 60 or over?

Do you identify as male, female, or genderqueer?

*If I need to turn down a participant:*

Thank you for your interest in this research project. Unfortunately, you don't meet the criteria (or) I have received expressions of interests from a number of people already, so at this point I am trying to ensure I have a range of participants from different backgrounds, age groups and sexes. I am seeking more [females/males] [people in their 40s or 50s] [people who identify as being from marginalized communities.] If you know of anyone else that would fit these categories, I would really appreciate it if you would pass on the recruitment criteria.

Thanks again for your interest in my research!

## Appendix C: Interview Guide

### 1. *Definitions & Meanings*

Before discussing religion and/or spirituality in your life, I think it's important that I understand what those mean to you. How would you define religion? Spirituality? What does "spirituality" mean to you? What does "religion" mean to you?

### 2. *Religious Upbringing*

I'd like to understand your religious life before you began coming out. Could you describe your **religious life** growing up and what it involved? (Probes: Kinds of religious activities? How often?). What did your religious life mean to you growing up? (Probes: How important and why? What role(s) did it play in your life?). What did you like/not like about your religious upbringing? (Probes: In what ways was it helpful/unhelpful to you?) What about spirituality? You defined spirituality as (use participant's words). Would you say you were spiritual growing up? If so, when did you first become aware of it, and how did your spirituality function in your life? What did it mean to you? What role did it play? Ways in which it was helpful/unhelpful to you? I will inquire about participants' experiences with other Christian denominations, or other religions, as well as their geographic and social mobility during the years when they were growing up.

### 3. *Learning about Religion and Queerness*

- What did you learn about queerness growing up? (Probe: Sources of information?)
- How were you affected by what you learned?
- Did you ever question the religious ideologies about queerness? If so, how and why? What gave you the ability to do that (Probe: Did your parents encourage you to question things? Personality? Questioned other matters related to religion as well?)

When did you notice yourself beginning to question these ideologies [age], and what do you think gave rise to these questions? Did you question aloud, and if so, how did others respond to your questions?

4. *Sexuality*

How and when did you first become aware of your **sexuality**? How did you feel about being attracted to someone of the same gender (may use “same sex” if that language is more familiar to participant)? How did you relate to your sexuality (what did you think of it)? What did being LGBTQ mean to you before you began coming out? Why? How did you respond to your sexuality/ same-gender attractions? (Probe: deny/repress them? Compartmentalize? Pray they would go away? Question the teachings of your religion? If so, how and why?) How did you *cope* with the conflict between your religious belief and sexuality (probes: prayer, meditation, fasting, avoidance?) What, if anything, were you saying to God about your sexuality? Did you ever talk to any other person about your sexuality? If so, who and why? How did telling the person affect you and your thoughts about your sexuality?

5. *Coming out...*

I would like to understand the **processes** involved in changing your mind about how you viewed your sexuality. Could you walk me through that process and timeline that for me as you go along (on the newsprint I have brought with me), so you can chart your age and the factors influencing your decisions to come out? What kinds of things (information, events, relationships, including online and LGBTQ community, people in helping professions, pop culture) have influenced you, facilitating your coming out? What did you encounter along that way that caused a shift in how you thought about your

sexuality? Talk about the role of religion/spirituality in coming out, both in terms of support or impediment to coming out. How have you related to your religion/spirituality during coming out? (Probes: avoid religious services, prayer, etc.? Pray for help?). What effect did (whatever approach they have taken) these approaches have for you? (Impede, support?) I've come upon a writer (Dziengel, 2015) who argues that the term "coming out" fails to 'capture the ongoing stress of *being out* and repeatedly making choices regarding disclosing their sexual identity throughout their life span' (p. 307). He argues for the term "becoming out," which depicts the lived experience of sexual minority identity formation as an ongoing, daily process. What are your thoughts on this? What has helped/enabled/ you to come out? (Probe for cultural background, geographic location including urban/rural, social mobility, life events, developmental stages, availability of supports and resources). I want to talk about the broader socio—political context [meaning your awareness of what was going on in the broader society around human rights, in particular LGBTQ rights] surrounding your coming out, especially when you came out for the first time. What role has that played in your coming out? You've been coming out for X number of years. Can you talk about how that process has changed (if you think it has) over time? What do you think has caused these changes? How did you identify when you first began coming out? Has that changed over time and if so, in what ways and why? How do you now identify, both in terms of your sexuality and religious/spiritual identity?

6. *Current Religious/Spiritual Life*

Since you began coming out, what is the nature and meaning of religiosity/spirituality for you? (Probe: What does your religious/spiritual life consist of

now. Do you have some kind of practice? Community to which you belong? Rituals you do?) Have you maintained connections to their religious traditions, and if so, what the nature of that connection? For example, certain rituals, music, traditions you still keep, prayer? Still believe in God/Jesus? How do you feel about the faith tradition in which you grew up?

7. *Integration*

How would you describe the relationship between your religious/spirituality and sexuality? (Probe: Are they reconciled, incorporated into one identity? Does it matter to you?). I want to give you the opportunity to talk about what I will call “unfinished business” in relation to our discussion today. On a scale of 1-10, how integrated would you say your sexuality and spirituality are currently? What, if anything, has yet to be resolved and why? Why do you think it is not yet resolved? How do you see it being resolved (using the participant’s words)? [By this time, the participant may have named the larger systems of oppression that keep homophobic beliefs and practices in power. If so...I will ask...]

8. *From Personal to Political—Mapping the Connections*

Coming out involves personally challenging social, and in this case, religious norms. How has coming out affected you? [Probe: Political life and views? How has coming out led to you getting involved in activism, e.g., participating in groups that are working for LGBT rights, programs and services, working for political parties due to your desire to promote LGBT rights? Has your activism changed over time? What do you think has caused these changes? Where do you think you are currently in your journey, politically? Spiritually?

*Wrapping up...*

As you look back over the time that you've been coming out, and living out, what has coming out meant for you? Has it been worth it? Anything you would have done differently? Is there anything else you'd like to add?